

Nov 04, 2016 by [Craig Hayden](#)

The State Department's Digital Outreach Program: A New Critical Perspective ^[1]

If there is one constant in discussion about public diplomacy in the United States these days, it is policy *criticism*. Such criticism has been a booming industry since the early days of the Bush administration – as U.S. popularity abroad continues to plummet. This is not to say, however, that the stewards of public diplomacy have ignored their charge. The now familiar Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television supposedly beam models of pluralistic, democratic news culture to the Middle East. At the same time, Karen Hughes has traveled the world on "listening tours," distributed sewing machines to the Philippines, and promoted the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King to China. And the U.S. still maintains a considerable investment in exchange programs. So what gives? Is it so unreasonable to expect that it will take some time for these programs to "work?"

A February 18 Austin American-Statesman interview with Karen Hughes highlights why criticism may be so pervasive but also raises a question about expectations for public diplomacy. The interview outlines a series of small initiatives, actions, and appearances by Hughes to demonstrate how the State Department is trying to repair the U.S. image overseas. She says, "There's an information explosion, and we're competing for attention and credibility in the midst of that explosion." Recognition of this global media environment has prompted her to respond with some interesting tactics. She's armed exchange students with camcorders to share their experiences on YouTube, and she continues to monitor depictions of the United States in Arab media through her Rapid Response program. The question remains – is this enough?

Jim Hightower's [March 23 review](#) of Hughes's statements scathingly dismisses her new policy initiatives as simply PR. He basically argues that Hughes's "PR" cannot address the immense proportion of foreign audiences holding negative opinions of the United States. He seizes on Hughes saying that she has a small number of State Department employees blogging in Arabic to defend the image of the United States in Arab online forums. This is part of what she has called her "digital outreach" program. Hughes claims that her team is:

[A]ctively going on the Arabic blogs and responding to misinformation and disinformation and propaganda and rumors with facts. And we're very above board that it's the digital outreach team of the State Department.

Responding to misinformation has long been used to justify public diplomacy efforts, but this project hints at a new strategic focus. To clarify this strategy of engaging Arab online audiences, the State Department's Jeremy Curtin [told the Washington Times](#) on March 9 that:

"The first step of success is to be there and have people respond. ... The second step is to engage in a conversation. We try to adopt an informal tone, and we are

careful what we say."

Curtin's comment on the digital outreach program reflects a clear grasp of the profound rhetorical obstacles facing U.S. public diplomacy and its campaign to repair the U.S. image. The United States has to be present in the places where audiences develop ideas and opinions, and it has to be willing to talk about as opposed to *declare* its message. This is a paradigmatic shift; it acknowledges the centrality of media technology in the lives of foreign publics. International communication policy has to reflect how messages are themselves competitive, and also dependent on the flow of persuasive messages through the hierarchy of media framing. The media ecology has changed how information strategy works for public diplomacy planners. As RS Zaharna noted, it's not about "information battle" anymore, but about "networks" and "bridges."

But sometimes it's hard to shake the Cold War information policy mindset. For some, it's about scale and scope, rather than connection and argument. Hightower is convinced that the effort is too minimal compared to what the rest of U.S. foreign policy has done to hinder public diplomacy. Hightower says:

Our undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs operation is fighting an entire world of Arabic rage with five bloggers? That's like trying to fight a forest fire with a squirt gun!

To respond to this statement, I want to return to Curtin's remarks, which I think portend a more significant development. Of course the State Department could use more bloggers, just like the U.S. could use a larger exchange program. The key to both kinds of public diplomacy is their capacity to facilitate direct conversation and contact. I think that more strategic emphasis – meaning institutional transformation – is still in its early stages for U.S. public diplomacy. Despite Hughes's announcements, it's pretty clear by now that U.S. foreign policy doesn't include public diplomacy at a strategic, fundamental level. (How can we forget President Bush declaring he doesn't "govern by focus group?") Public diplomacy may not get much more attention until the next administration. Until that time, what kind of criticism is constructive?

It would be much more helpful if the U.S. had a clearer sense of the arguments being made in these blog forums, as well as the instances where U.S. bloggers choose to intervene to forward propositions or correct "misunderstandings." My concern here is qualitative, rather than quantitative – because until the U.S. fields an armada of bloggers, I'm not sure we can speculate on how any U.S. message is diffused along the networks of blog cross-referencing. Curtin rightly focuses instead on how the U.S. should engage in the act of conversation. At this point, constructive criticism needs to deal with tangibles as well as what an ideal public diplomacy strategy would look like.

In addition to asking about the content U.S. bloggers are producing in Arabic – I would ask more general questions about U.S. understanding of the media "infrastructure." Given the State Department's limited capacity to enter the Arab "conversation," does it know what venues are critical to public opinion formation? More importantly, does the U.S. know how various media outlets (television, radio, the Internet) inform each other, or how media frames traverse these outlets? Also, what roles do these media forms play in sustaining an Arab sense of self, community, and identification with the larger Arab world? Whether in the United States, Europe, or the Arab world – people turn to media for various reasons (such as to mitigate ambiguity, enforce social ties, and facilitate life goals). Understanding this

communication landscape might help target information interventions, better allocate resources, and move current U.S. public diplomacy towards a more proactive communication stance.

So, what can we expect from U.S. public diplomacy? Karen Hughes has described her recent efforts with the proverb, "planting a tree under whose shade you would not sit." This answer does two things. I think it serves to diminish expectations, while diverting attention away from the fact that public diplomacy has been under-prioritized. That said, I also think her phrase captures the inherent difficulty of public diplomacy programs – whether it's international broadcasting, exchange programs, or some form of cultural diplomacy. Public diplomacy, ideally conceived, is not deceptive propaganda, but a lengthy process of building the ground for mutual understanding of national policies and culture. It's not an advertisement to induce immediate compliance, but a slow accretion of cues around which audiences form their lens of perception towards the United States.

Right now, the U.S. is playing "catch-up" in the information war with jihadists. This mentality has understandably resulted in a "reactive" public diplomacy tactic. Jihadists, however, are a "disaggregated" ideological enemy, that the U.S. risks emboldening if it strives to react to them alone. The current Rapid Response program is a valuable open source monitoring unit, but it also needs to inform more thoughtful and long-term strategies of engagement with larger (and complex) foreign publics. Such strategies are probably going to start with some small initiatives like the Digital Outreach program. To co-opt an expression from President Bush, public diplomacy is "hard work." It involves serious institutional realignment, significant contextual knowledge of communication and culture, and has few obvious short-term benefits. I think future criticism should recognize these difficulties, and work to imagine new possibilities that incorporate the novel terrain of communication forms and their relationship to critical audiences. Rather than pile on yet another set of bland recommendations or sweeping indictments of obviously unpopular security strategies – critics need to focus their arguments. The public diplomacy community needs work-able solutions in the short term, coupled with long-term conceptions for how it can grow in future administrations.
