

Nov 04, 2016 by [Meg Young](#)

Listening to the Public in Diplomacy ^[1]

On July 19th [Avaaz.org](#) and [Chatham House](#) hosted Britain's new Foreign Secretary, David Miliband as he gave his first speech on "[A New Diplomacy](#)." Mr. Miliband is one of the youngest ministers in Britain's history. He is the first to keep a [blog](#), and he has an avatar in Second Life. He is an individual "hooked-in" to the virtual world, someone who seems to intuitively understand the value of new media and its power to connect people and affect change. So perhaps it should not be surprising that he chose to give his first major speech in such a unique setting, via web-cast while taking questions submitted on-line.

The groups co-hosting the event also represented something of a unique partnership. [Avaaz.org](#) is an "on-line global activist network" of some 1.2 million members that was founded six months ago while its co-host, Chatham House, founded in 1920, represents an elite "cross-section of the most influential internationally orientated individuals in business and public life." Together these influential groups represent where public diplomacy has been (seeking to influence the elites to create a trickle down effect in public opinion) and where it might be going (direct interactions with foreign publics by government leaders to impact public opinion).

By selecting this setting for his speech the Foreign Secretary seems to be demonstrating a respect for global public opinion on par with his respect for British elite opinion. This sense of respect was reinforced when Mr. Miliband agreed to take questions and comments from [Avaaz.org](#) members from around the world and accepted a "book of global public opinion" containing advice, warnings and words of encouragement from thousands of [Avaaz.org](#) members.

The [Avaaz.org](#) press release asserts that

"This opening is just a beginning, but it speaks volumes about how global public opinion is becoming the new superpower, and about how leaders like Miliband are engaging with it"

It is debatable whether global public opinion is a superpower yet or will be in the near future, but it is certainly developing the capacity to directly impact, and influence world leaders. By providing the tools for motivated individuals to connect to make their voices heard, places like [Avaaz.org](#) offer space for the public to speak back to governments on issues of international importance and be heard.

While it is regularly said that public diplomacy is a two-way street and that governments must listen as well as seek to influence foreign publics, the truth is there have not been many effective ways for foreign publics to speak back to governments. [Avaaz.org](#) seems to be

offering a voice and leaders like David Miliband seem to be listening.

Global activism sites such as Avaaz.org have the capacity to make the public more than simply the object of public diplomacy.
