

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

The Dipnote Blog: The State Department's Tentative Step into Global Online Dialogue ^[1]

This September, the United States Department of State launched its own blog – Dipnote. The blog is described as an “alternative source to mainstream media for U.S. foreign policy information” and an “opportunity for participants to discuss important foreign policy issues with senior Department officials.” Seems pretty ambitious. If anything, this belated foray into the blogosphere is a necessary if not crucial step towards making the State Department more relevant to its U.S. constituents, and providing a means for foreign publics to voice their opinions directly to somebody in the U.S. government.

Reaction to the new blogsite was swift in the foreign policy blog community. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most common critique was aimed at the name - “Dipnote.” There was also criticism over the design, which features small white text against an austere black background. Between the name, site design, and overall functionality – the site leaves something to be desired. But in a time where the State Department has taken relentless criticism over its attempts at public diplomacy, the blog has the potential to be a positive development as far as advocates of dialogue-based public diplomacy are concerned. Indeed, [Steve Corman and Kris Acheson offer their own initial analysis](#) of Dipnote as a site for public dialogue. As part of their study, they look at the comments attached to each blog post. They observe that most of the commentators seem to indicate that they want dialogue.

More importantly, Corman and Acheson provide a good theoretical construct for what to expect from “dialogue.” They say the blog exhibits signs that conversations within the comments field are constructive and collaborative – the comments are responsive to each other; while meaning is developed within the context of the conversation. In other words, people are listening to each other – even when the comment field gets polemical. And, there is some indication that State is listening to the comment field. Corman and Acheson note that one comment question regarding who should possess nuclear weapons turned into a “question of the week” comment post. This post had the highest number of comments outside the inaugural post.

But has Dipnote emerged as a virtual agora for international public argument; a productive public sphere regarding foreign policy? And, does it reflect a legitimate conduit between foreign publics and U.S. foreign policy-makers? Or is it simply another conduit for talking point diplomacy – a poor stand-in for constructive, dialogue-oriented public diplomacy? Sure, some critics on its first day observed that this was yet another outlet for propaganda. But perhaps it is a bit early to judge the potential of Dipnote.

The comments section is telling. Posts on controversial questions draw the most attention from both domestic and foreign audiences. While short postings from Karen Hughes or updates on official diplomatic activities yield scant interest, provocative topics like “Should the United States play a role in the creation of a Palestinian State?” or a discussion of how to

convince nations to stop the violence in Burma draw in the most respondents. These kinds of posts are not only a way to invite more participation in the foreign policy conversation; they are a means for the State Department to gauge global public opinion in a way that moves beyond polling. Polemical posts, reasoned arguments, and impassioned responses show the logic of how controversial issues are understood, what counts as evidence, and how arguments are put together into a coherent world view. In other words, reading the arguments could give the public diplomacy wing of the State Department some clues as to how to respond to its critics, where to intervene rhetorically, and understand the logic of opposition to U.S. policies. Insights from arguments in the comment field are a window into how to be rhetorically responsive, rather than tone-deaf to global opinion. Does this mean articulate State Department bloggers will shoulder the burden of public diplomacy? Of course not. But world-views and forms of reasoning found in the comments field can be a valuable insight to public diplomacy and, in theory, policy formation.

One thing Dipnote does highlight is the issue of constituency and target audience. Who is reading Dipnote, and more importantly, who is providing comments? A quick check of the comments since the site's inception notes that out of 588 total comments (as of October 14, 2007), roughly 170 are contributed from outside the United States. Many of the comments express gratitude for the access and information provided by the site. Perhaps Dipnote is a welcome source for information on foreign affairs that is often so lacking in mainstream media. And, Dipnote could provide some healthy exposure to life outside the United States, the bubble of U.S. news coverage, and the rhetorically truncated world-view of the Bush administration's talking points.

But wait, doesn't this violate the Smith-Mundt Act, which forbids the United States government from propagandizing its own people? Not according to [Mountainrunner's research](#) – which suggests that Dipnote is likely under the purview of State Department's Public Affairs division. And, given the propensity of U.S. journalists to "index" their reporting of foreign affairs to strictly government sources, I hardly think the U.S. is in yet more danger of propagandizing itself through a blog. If anything, in order for the U.S. public to be part of the greater community of public diplomacy – they need to be informed citizens who are aware of the mechanisms of U.S. foreign policy, let alone their impact on the world.

Given that the overwhelming majority of postings are from U.S. citizens (and without looking at Dipnote's server logs) it is clear that the site can provide an important service for its domestic audience, by offering direct access and information about the workings of U.S. foreign policy. Assuming the State Department embraces the feedback potential of online dialogue, this could also extend to a more rigorous engagement with other foreign policy blogs and the online academic community of policy experts. In other words, the blog has the potential for expanding what is already a tenuous concept – the domestic constituency for U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should recognize the platform provided by this site for demonstrating that the U.S. government listens to foreign audiences. Many foreign audiences are already primed to view communication from the U.S. as hypocritical or propagandistic. Yet in this blog, there is an opportunity to demonstrate the value of the free exchange of opinion. State department bloggers actually do respond in the comments field, which humanizes (somewhat) the "machine" of U.S. foreign policy. Of course, I do not suggest that the blog is so much flak for the obvious physical consequences of U.S. foreign policy. Yet I don't think it is "lipstick on a pig" either. At least not yet. Dipnote is a tool that needs to be used to its fullest potential. This means not using the site as a mouthpiece for official policy

statements, not being afraid of engaging controversial issues, and showing some kind of response – that someone in the U.S. government is actually listening to the outside world, and that its opinions matter.
