

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

My Culture + Your Culture =? ^[1]

In the last couple of years the U.S. Department of State has stepped boldly into the world of new technology. In his brief tenure as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy James Glassman seemed eager to try all manner of Web 2.0 approaches to engage the global public. Some efforts have been praised, as with the contributions of State Department diplomats to blogs in the Middle East. Others have raised eye-brows, like Deputy Assistant Secretary Coleen Graffy's excursions into the realm of Twitter. Perhaps the boldest initiative was to move the Department of State directly into the social networking business with the launch, in October 2008, of connect.state.gov, a website to serve the needs of people presently participating in exchanges from or to the USA or simply with an interest in exchanges. In a few short months the site has drawn nearly 9,000 members from 170 countries. As part of the campaign to draw attention to the site the Department of State launched an on-line video competition challenging young people around the world to create a three minute video around the theme of "My culture + Your Culture =?" which also spoke to the intended purpose of the site to use the net to build international understanding. The software company Adobe co-sponsored the contest and distinguished alumni of state exchange programs acted as judges. The results of that competition have just been announced, and the winning videos may be viewed at <http://exchanges.state.gov/news/ovc.html> or <http://connect.state.gov/page/my-culture-your-culture-video> (for members).

Viewing the four winners' work is a reminder of the ability of the web to unlock powerful user-created material, and at a cost which is a fraction of a corporate video commission. The winning videos are inventive and make their necessary point with wit and freshness. They include a micro documentary about a friendship between an American exchange student and a Frisbee-obsessed Chinese student in Nanjing, which is framed by a delightful animation of a blossoming tree. The tree flowers as the video runs. There is also a terrifyingly erudite lecture from a fourteen-year-old from Nebraska on the international roots of America's favorite sports, with graphics worthy of a Super Bowl ad. An Indian student created a video to his own song about inter-cultural understanding, and perhaps most remarkably of all, a sixteen year old from Brazil delivered a visual allegory of the virtues of mixture: human colors. His own narration would not have disgraced Gandhi.

The objective of competitions such as this is to draw forth persuasive materials which will work so well that users will transform them into 'memes' and pass them from person to person virally across the web. Such materials have enhanced credibility because they come from peers rather than corporate 'creatives'. Time will tell whether any of these videos achieves 'escape velocity' and breaks beyond the confines of the State Department site into wider recognition on You-Tube, but they deserve a wider audience than the pool of 9,000 members of the exchanges connect site.

The value of this and similar excursions into Web 2.0 is in their ability to transform the process of public diplomacy. They have the potential to lift web-based public diplomacy above the

crude role of simply delivering advocacy messages or finished cultural products. Through Web 2.0 cyber-diplomacy can create a new and instantly accessible space for exchanges, and for that most fundamental of public diplomacy tasks, listening. Of course for the listening to have a real effect it has to somehow be transmitted into the policy-making process. Perhaps a generation for whom connecting internationally on-line is second nature will insist on this from their governments. One can only hope.
