

Nov 04, 2016 by [Tori Horton](#)

The U.S. Department of State Social Networking Progress Report ^[1]

The U.S. State Department has been working for several years to play a more active role in online communications.

In 2006, Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes recognized a need to be active in online communities where public opinions were being influenced. She created a "rapid response team" to monitor sites with potential misinformation (particularly Arabic newscasts) and to suggest talking points as well as provide counter information where possible. As reported in the *Washington Post*, Hughes believed she was laying the foundation for "dramatically different 21st-century diplomacy." She also saw the transition into new media as a slow and gradual shift. Following Hughes, James Glassman appeared more comfortable leading the State Department into new territories and even participated in a Second Life discussion with Egyptian journalists. Still, an overall collaborative effort among the State Department to push information out and engage with emerging social networks was lacking.

With the election of President Obama came new expectations for online social accountability as the Obama administration committed itself to "creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government." In this memorandum on January 21, 2009, Obama calls for transparency, participation and collaboration. Overnight, the floodgates of information were opened within the State Department, and a push to become active on social network platforms was initiated. While current Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale has been less visible, her boss, Secretary Hillary Clinton, certainly has not.

The U.S. State Department can now be found on Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. It is possible to text Secretary of State Clinton from within the United States and from abroad with questions or comments. Selected texts are posted to a community forum where Clinton responds. Or follow the Secretary's travels through an interactive map.

Additionally, the State Department hosts their own blog called Dipnote and a number of other services on the main www.state.gov site, including a subscriber's newsletter, RSS feed on a range of topics and a video and photo gallery. Much of the content is similar from one outlet to another, but the point is — it is now available in so many different networks. Equally amazing is the number of people who actually care.

Take for example Dipnote on Twitter. Currently, Dipnote on Twitter has 7,386 followers, a number that has almost doubled since May 13, when it reported 4,330. There is an average of 46 new followers per day, and perhaps as a result of David Herbert's scathing article back in February critiquing the government for being in the space but not utilizing the social functions that make it useful, they now also follow 5,011 users.

On her blog, Ozzities, Christine McNab recently wrote of her shock when she commented on

an increasing number of Clinton posts and then received a response from Dipnote in return. While it certainly is not perfect, the U.S. Department of State is engaging where possible. (As an important side-note, Twitter use at large has skyrocketed during the last year, however retention rate is estimated to only be around 40 percent. And while State Department numbers appear promising, it is the active participation of members that ultimately contributes to a strong network more than listed followers.)

Thus far then, the U.S. State Department has made dramatic strides in a short amount of time to capitalize on lessons learned during experimentation with new technology under past leadership. Since January 2009, they have organized a cohesive strategy that currently pushes State generated content across multiple platforms and have begun taking comments and attempting to respond and engage.

The actual dialogue occurring in these spaces, however, is still lacking in both content and engagement. For example, since February 20, there have been a mere 31 discussion posts created on the Facebook page. The majority of those posts focus on Clinton and her travels or are single posts by one author. In all there were roughly three meaningful discussions, and only one received a response from the State Department acknowledging a student visas issue and providing an alternative solution. What is still lacking on these platforms is dialogue or collaboration among invested world citizens discussing relevant issues on an ongoing basis.

While the U.S. State Department has become expert in crafting a message and getting information out to a wide public, more thought should be taken to once more move the conversation forward. Now they must include listening carefully to concerns and responding to issues raised in these newly networked societies, either with sound reasoning and explanation or with collaborative policy changes that reflect a true partnership. As President Obama stated in his recent trip to Accra, Ghana: "The true sign of success is ... whether we are partners in building the capacity for transformational change." When the U.S. State Department makes itself available to citizens worldwide by providing a space for online feedback through social networks, it must also become more accountable to both American and foreign citizens through increased transparency and policy explanation that cites sources as well as bias.

To paraphrase what Shawn Powers recently stated in his recent CPD Blog post, "PD Legitimacy in the Age of Transparency," the best way for the State Department to achieve credibility is through transparency — and the first place this should happen is on new media and social networking sites.
