

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Public Diplomacy and Egypt's Real-time Revolution ^[1]

As events in Egypt move forward, the United States has appeared to be a befuddled bystander, reacting slowly and with a muted voice that cannot be heard above the din of those demanding freedom.

The essence of public diplomacy is direct contact with diverse publics around the world. The pace of this outreach cannot be determined by governments alone. Rather, it is dictated largely by new media that move at the speed of events themselves. U.S. public diplomacy is mired in archaic practices dating to the days when a superpower could proceed at a tempo of its own choosing and could deal primarily with governments, addressing the public only as an afterthought.

Reports from the streets of Egypt indicate substantial anti-American feeling, ranging from disappointment to anger. The United States has propped up Hosni Mubarak for decades with money and silence in the face of his repressive actions. Even the tear gas canisters used by Egyptian security forces are labeled "Made in U.S.A." Now that Mubarak's regime is stumbling toward its end, the Obama administration is viewed as being too cautious, unwilling to accept that it bet on a bad horse.

Lessons abound for the future of U.S. public diplomacy. As the speed of global news flows – through social media as well as conventional news organizations – public diplomacy must move apace. Outreach to people in the streets must be simultaneous with, not trailing, the conventional diplomatic minuet in which governments engage. In Egypt, this needed to happen quickly, before the government shut down the Internet and mobile telephone service.

Further, there must be more sophisticated appreciation and use of the media that people rely on. In today's Arab world, that means Al Jazeera, not the U.S. government's Al Hurra; it means Twitter as well as official White House briefings.

Particularly striking during the past several weeks' events in the Middle East has been the U.S. government's total disregard of its own revolutionary heritage. The United States was born because its people's resentment of oppressive rule turned to action. If a bit of that spirit could infuse the American message to the Arab world, U.S. public diplomacy might finally gain some traction there.
