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Engaging Foreign Audiences at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) ^[1]

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As part of my duties of outreach coordinator, since 2004 I participate at local forums hosted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). In Los Angeles, USCIS conducts two regular monthly meetings: the Adjudications Information Forum (AIF) and the Naturalization Advisory Committee (NAC). Advocates attending these meetings are members of community-based, faith-based and ethnic-based organizations; ESL teachers; volunteers; members of expats associations and NGO employees like myself.

At these meetings, local USCIS supervisors opened their doors and gathered around stakeholders, listened to their concerns, answered their questions and informed them of developments in immigration policies and procedures. Being an immigrant struggling in a puzzling system it was quite contradictory that I could be there, sitting in the same room with (maybe) the same officers that one day had once denied my case, but at the same time I felt privileged to be able to receive this information first hand, so I listened carefully, learned from their updates and got to understand better their policies. I was not the only foreigner in the room, as the participants at these meetings often served as a link to different diasporas (Korean, Guatemalan, Mexican, etc). These different groups communicate with their members in the United States and they communicate with their families abroad. I doubt that the positive impact generated by this openness was being formally evaluated, even when it clearly helped improving the public image of the United States (which since 9/11 was being heavily criticized for its treatment to immigrants).

This type of engagements is very common now, given the transparency of the Obama administration through the Open Government Initiative. But back in 2004, it was rare, especially at a time where the government's priorities had shifted and the agency had been reorganized to become part of a new department charged with securing the homeland. Today, across the country many local offices host similar forums. The Office of Public Engagement (OPE) coordinates and directs agency-wide dialogue with external stakeholders. Who are the *stakeholders*? With almost 38 million foreign-born  living in the United States today, we can imagine that foreign citizens living in the United States will take part of this discussion. National stakeholder meetings have increased in the last 3 years and have become specialized to cover diverse topics like fee waivers or Haitian TPS. OPE has actively reached out to more groups, hoping to engage with them. Proof of this direction is that USCIS opened a special space for Spanish-speaking stakeholders, first through its website in Spanish and now has a special engagement conducted all in Spanish called Enlace (*link*). Today, USCIS engages actively with foreign audiences, which has made the agency undertake more public diplomacy tasks -maybe unwittingly- as these engagements present an opportunity for the

U.S. government to promote their foreign policies, specifically those related to immigration.

OPE is not the only one of the programs conducting public diplomacy at USCIS. The Office of Citizenship is also committed to the mutual understanding with foreign audiences, and to facilitate integration of new communities in the United States in 2010 launched a Request for Proposals for funding to ethnic-based Community organizations, reflecting the importance of these groups. \$8.1 million were distributed through the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program to groups like Boat People, SOS (serving the Vietnamese diasporas), Minnesota Literacy Council (representing the Hmong, Ethiopian, and Somali), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and others, to provide "citizenship education and naturalization application preparation services to approximately 25,000 permanent residents from more than 70 countries." This program will be repeated for FY2011 and it sends a clear message to the foreign audiences: we will help you integrate, we want YOU! The more members of these foreign groups that become naturalized U.S. citizens, the more likely is that those countries sympathize with the United States and its foreign policies. A welcoming and friendly country has a lot of soft power.

Director Alejandro (Ali) Mayorkas assumed USCIS's directorate in 2009 and since, the agency has become more customer-oriented than ever. Openness, transparency and quality are at the core of USCIS functions. Participation of a diverse base of stakeholders has contributed to the better image of the agency and of the country abroad. Are these efforts being coordinated with the much bigger role in public Diplomacy division at USCIS.



Immigrants arriving at

Galveston island (TX), inspected by Immigration officers, circa 1900 (Image from *Forgotten Gateways* exhibit)

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