

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

The Challenges of YouTube Diplomacy ^[1]

Ten years ago, the *Innocence of Muslims* controversy would not have happened. YouTube did not exist, and without this means of reaching a global audience the offensive snippets of the “film” would never have been seen.

The excerpts from the purported movie, which apparently no one has ever seen in its entirety, are hate speech, pure and simple – Constitutionally protected, but existing for no purpose other than to disparage a religion and its 1.6 billion adherents. Condemning this video and its producers (“perpetrators” might be a better word) must be done, but those responsible for foreign policy should also carefully consider the realities of YouTube diplomacy.

Much like the content of Twitter and Facebook, the videos appearing on YouTube are so vast in number that even aside from free speech issues they are impossible to police until after a controversy has arisen. YouTube is the world’s third most popular website, trailing only Google and Facebook. More than 72 hours of video are uploaded every minute, and in 2011 YouTube videos were viewed by more than a trillion visitors. There are plenty of “Look at my cute cat” videos, but plenty of politically-charged garbage is also available.

In olden times – a decade or more ago – diplomacy was mostly government to government, with diplomats talking only to other diplomats. In his 1939 classic *Diplomacy*, British diplomat Harold Nicolson wrote that among his colleagues “it would have been regarded as an act of unthinkable vulgarity to appeal to the common people upon any issue of international policy.” Today, in the new era of public diplomacy, appealing to “the common people,” more felicitously referred to as “the public,” is essential because there are so many information sources that individuals can tap into on their own. The competition for attention is fierce; with hundreds of millions of people addicted to social media, governments must adapt their messaging to electronic venues that are beyond their direct control.

The response to *Innocence of Muslims* is reminiscent of the explosive reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy of 2006, when caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed led to Internet-fueled anger and violent incidents in the Muslim world in which more than two dozen people were killed. Those disturbances ended after a short time, and the current demonstrations will do so as well. But it is important to recognize the clash of cultures that exists and that is not going to vanish anytime soon. In most Muslim countries, the content of *Innocence of Muslims* violates the law. In much of the West, it is protected by free speech provisions that are keystones of national norms. These differences cannot be reconciled; the best that can be hoped for is a kind of cultural détente.

Particularly in Arab countries, where years of tensions and frustrations make hair-trigger responses common, the task for public diplomacy by the United States is exceedingly complex and is made more so by the borderless reach of social media. Diplomats must be as determined as are the troublemakers, maintaining a steady stream of information that is presented in ways that can compete effectively for audience. The U.S. State Department

recognizes this and delivers high-quality public diplomacy programs, but much remains to be done. Given that online sites are increasingly turned to as substitutes for traditional broadcast channels, the State Department's YouTube channel, for example, should offer timely, carefully designed content, not merely archival material.

What is so frustrating about the *Innocence of Muslims* case is that a few loopy hate-mongers can be perceived – even if by a relatively small number of people – as representatives of the United States. That illustrates both the power and the weakness of social media, and it underscores the challenges of YouTube diplomacy.
