

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

The Medium Is the (Personal) Message, but Is DC Getting the Message? ^[1]

We are being told how very "personal" communication is to become, with carefully-coiffed 60-second video messages containing content just for you or me, downloaded to our picture cell phones, or personal digital assistants, PDAs -- the instruments, not the individuals.

One might wonder where U.S. public diplomacy fits into all this? Right now, it doesn't appear to be a good fit overall.

Video technology may very well change the name of public diplomacy to personal diplomacy, where a foreign service officer of the not-too-distant future will need to get his or her message across in a crisp 60-second voice-over video, sent as an e-mail attachment to someone's pocket.

Technology is unquestionably altering business models fashioned by commercial and government communicators on both sides of the Atlantic -- and the Pacific. At a recent conference in London on broadcasting and the so-called new media, it was noted that time shifting can increase the audience of TV programs by millions of viewers. For example, the use of digital or personal video recorders could increase the number of viewers watching the popular CBS series "CSI" from 25 million viewers each week to 37 million, according to David Poltrack, executive vice president for Research and Planning at CBS. We are in an "age of media personalization," said another conference speaker.

Radio is also benefiting from increased audiences, through the Internet. At that London conference, the BBC reported that time shifting using the on-demand BBC Radio Player increased its audience for radio programs by 70 percent in January 2005, because listeners could tune in when they wanted, on the Internet, to listen to programs. According to the BBC, its radio Internet audience jumped by seven million in January.

Here in the U.S., the Voice of America reported 3,893,607 visitors to its Web site in the first quarter this year, a 16% increase over last year.

And in the Middle East, Radio Sawa, the U.S. government's mostly music radio station for the Arabic-speaking Middle East, and a service specifically for Iraq, shows 11,841,038 page turns on its Web site in March, 2005, up over ten-fold since last year.

And al Jazeera online is both a resource for news updates and for video news clips that can be downloaded and screened. That's in contrast to the Web site of the Saudi government-financed al Arabiya, which lists programs that may be viewed on satellite TV, but not over the Internet.

That's also in contrast to the Web site of the U.S. government-funded Alhurra television, which consists of a brief single web page with no video that can be viewed or downloaded for later

review. Alhurra news director Moufac Harb explained last fall that the reason was his channel had not purchased the worldwide usage rights to show video on the Internet from the news agencies that supply its news footage, Reuters TV News, which has its own Internet service and the Associated Press TV News, which has a subscriber-only Web site.

The United Nations uses Associated Press TV for a daily transmission of video stories to global partners and other broadcasters through the AP global video wire.

And among NGO's, the World Bank has built an excellent Web site featuring numerous videos of the Bank's global initiatives.

Here's a glimpse of the world to come: The BBC recently started using camera cell phones that can record and send video. With these new cell phones, BBC TV has been able to obtain exclusive video coverage of several news events in the UK and France. The hybrid phones were developed especially for the BBC, and are not yet commercially available to others.

In the U.S., the State Department is one agency that uses its Internet site effectively for the display of video clips available to global broadcasters. Television and radio stations around the world use these video stories and audio clips every day. Stories are also accessible through the State Department's marketing contractor.

Like many international broadcasters, State Department TV transmits its video stories over the Internet by FTP rather than by costly satellites, sending video right to desktops in newsrooms around the world. This also makes it possible for TV reporters to transmit their stories in the field by computer to their newsroom desktops where it is edited, and re-transmitted for broadcast.

Major international news distributors, including APTV, have also moved away from paying for satellites to use this system.

Which brings us back to the next logical step, in which yesterday's secondary delivery source to the consumer, namely TV and radio stations, and newspaper as well, are not the players they once were.

Take Japan: cell phone users are now reading books on their tiny phone screens, whenever they "have a moment." And in South Korea, video-on-demand (VOD) cell phones have been used for three years for content including music videos and sports, which can be downloaded overnight when phones are not in use. Companies in Asia and Europe such as Packet Video and Emblaze were among the pioneers of cell phone streaming video.

The US entered the mobile TV market much later, in 2003, where mobiTV and Sprint TV have teamed up to provide service, that will include carriage of the Fox News Channel. Cingular, too, is in the hunt, as well as Verizon Wireless, which has agreements with content providers including Showtime, the Movie Channel and Discovery Networks.

Next year, Qualcomm is planning to build a broadcast-to-phone network, which would involve CNN, ESPN, and Court TV. And Earthlink is entering the ring as well.

Among content producers, Sesame Workshop is planning the production of 10 short clips where its Big Bird and other stars are to be featured via mobile phones, and National Geographic's famous photographic collection will be available as "wallpaper" for mobile

phones.

But in official Washington, the exception may be the State Department's public diplomacy effort, employing the latest Internet technologies to communicate directly with audiences abroad. You might have a better chance of hearing the ocean on a cell phone before you are exposed to creative content from other parts of the U.S. government.
