CPD | USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School

International Advocacy in the Digital Age

Workshop in Brief

April 2015

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy (CPD) hosted a private workshop on April 16, 2015 in Los Angeles to examine government's international advocacy efforts in the evolving digital environment. The intent for the workshop was two-fold: first, for participating diplomats to share insights from their attempts to merge the traditional and the digital in recent advocacy campaigns; and second, to explore how best to evaluate the success or failure of such campaigns. In the first session, representatives from four foreign ministries discussed their approaches to campaign design and the digital aspects of their projects. They also shared concerns and questions about the evaluation methods used to measure their impact and to inform their decision-making. The second session of the workshop was led by USC-based academic scholars who discussed various research and evaluation methods and techniques for social impact projects. Here is a summary of the workshop's key discussion points and takeaways.

DEFINING THE AUDIENCE

- **Audience selection should be based on specific and well-defined objectives.** One cannot define an advocacy campaign's target audience if the overarching strategic goal of the campaign is not clear. Target audiences can be selected based on short-term or long-term objectives and local context.
- **Complement user demographics with user behavior data.** In traditional communication strategies, the target audience was selected primarily based on demographics such as age, gender, location, etc. What the internet and digital space offers goes beyond demographics. With web analytics, one can study user behaviors (e.g., clicks, shares, posts), which offer more insights about the user than mere demographics.
- **Map existing audiences.** This can help detect key influencers and opinion leaders. Also, starting with an already established network can help identify best practices, third-party validators, and test potential campaign messages.

METRICS OLD AND NEW

- **First, identify specific objectives.** Objectives, audience and outcomes for a campaign must be clearly identified before considering metrics. Research and evaluation are integral parts of strategic planning. Define goals and measurement tools realistically to get an accurate return on investment.
- **A combination of qualitative and quantitative metrics is essential.** Move beyond anecdotes, and systematically track performance and impact metrics through both qualitative and quantitative methods.

- **Develop a set of standard methods.** This should be done over time to guide evaluation plans for measuring immediate, long-term, and amplified impact. It can also be helpful in figuring out the right survey or interview questions. Consider previous or similar projects when developing methods.
- **Integrate traditional and new media metrics.** Develop multichannel metrics, looking at online reach and social media engagement metrics as well as offline impact indicators. Developing a system to capture data and to apply methods for longitudinal analysis is also essential.

RETHINKING MEDIA RELATIONS

- **Understanding news media's priorities and agendas remains important.** Media outlets often have set agendas. By being aware of a given news outlet's priorities, one can pitch the content in a way that is appealing to the media while reflecting the project's goals. Connections and networks continue to be crucial when working with the media.
- **Attract journalists' attention through creative storytelling on social media.** Try to create compelling content and creative formats (e.g., memes and graphics) that can go viral and catch the eye of journalists.
- **Know where your target audience gets their news.** With today's abundance of information sources, mainstream media are no longer the sole source of news for many people. Identify alternative media outlets by considering context, topic, and target audience. If a story of interest does not attract the attention of the target media, paid media and paid posts are an option.

ADAPTING INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

- **Establish an organized but flexible campaign network.** Ideally, each node of a campaign network will follow the strategy identified by headquarters, while also having the freedom to contextualize and localize the strategy. Each node should also monitor, evaluate, and report back on progress.

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- **Leadership must buy in.** A project won't move forward if headquarters is not supportive and open to change. The campaign networks' reports and feedback should be embraced to inform future decision-making and to re-adjust the strategy as necessary.

- **Provide adequate training.** As an organization explores new messaging platforms, staffers must be thoroughly trained so that they are adept and comfortable using the platform.
- **Invest in building digital campaign capability.** Strategic digital campaigns require more than simply creating a Twitter or Facebook profile; they cost money to conceive and to execute. Organizations must invest sufficient resources in order to do it well; resources should be allocated accordingly.

STRETCHING YOUR RESEARCH DOLLARS

- **Work with academic institutions.** Conducting research and evaluation can be expensive, especially when an institution has limited personnel. Take advantage of academic institutions' resources, both in terms of knowledge and technology. Academic institutions also benefit from participating in real-life projects—everybody wins.
- **Use secondary data.** Instead of starting from scratch, incorporate secondary data into your research. Many times, especially when analyzing online activities, the data is already available for free. But be careful to use such data discerningly. Develop personnel's basic research literacy and data sensitivity is a first step.

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