

Chapter 12

Technology and communications

12.1 International literature on public diplomacy highlights developments in communication systems as a major consideration for today's foreign ministries. Commentators refer to the vast array of communication channels now widely available including a host of new information technologies such as mobile phones, especially text messaging, video games, and the internet.¹ They recognise that over the past decade communications technology has evolved dramatically—some describe the rapid rate of advancement as 'a communication revolution'.² According to Joshua S. Fouts, Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California:

This transformation of the global information culture has deep and fundamental implications for politics and public diplomacy—dampening (or reversing) the effectiveness of traditional public diplomacy campaigns while opening up new opportunities that are not on the radar of public affairs people doing 'business as usual'.³

12.2 To be effective, public diplomacy must keep pace with these changes. The U.S. Public Diplomacy Council stated:

Public diplomacy professionals must develop new programs to take advantage of new technologies. Broadcasting should be made more interactive, engaging audiences rather than simply talking at them. The ubiquity of cell phones and wireless technology in much of the world suggests that programs should increase use of that technology to provide information. The Internet is still largely an untapped resource for innovative public diplomacy.⁴

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- 1 Jay Wang, 'Public diplomacy and global business', *The Journal of Business Strategy*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2006. and Philip Fiske de Gouveia, Foreign Policy Centre, The 2006 Madrid Conference on Public Diplomacy, p. 4 of 28, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documents/276.asp> (accessed 23 January 2007); Jan Petersen, 'Norwegian public diplomacy, Speech, Nordic Heritage Museum, Seattle, 2004.
 - 2 See for example, Joshua S. Fouts, Director, Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, 'Rethinking Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century: A Toolbox for Engaging the Hearts and Minds of the Open Source Generation', Prepared for presentation at the APSA Political Communication Conference on International Communication and Conflict, 31 August 2005, p. 3.
 - 3 Joshua S. Fouts, Director, Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, 'Rethinking Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century: A Toolbox for Engaging the Hearts and Minds of the Open Source Generation', Prepared for presentation at the APSA Political Communication Conference on International Communication and Conflict, 31 August 2005, p. 3.
 - 4 Public Diplomacy Council, *A Report of the Public Diplomacy Council: A Call for Action on Public Diplomacy*, January 2005, p. 7.

12.3 Philip Fiske de Gouveia noted the dramatic shift in the use of technology which presents the western world, in particular, with both enormous challenges and opportunities:

The fact is that al-Jazeera is emblematic of a hugely important phenomenon: the rise of developing world media. Communications and media are no longer dominated by the West in the way they were 10 or 15 years ago—and that is not just the case in the Arab world...In the late 1970s and early 1980s sociologists talked about the coming of a New World Information Order in which the Rich North would no longer dominate the poor South in media and communications terms: the end of so-called Cultural and Media Imperialism. It is happening today. We are seeing, for example, entrepreneurs all round the world launching functioning, good-quality, local television channels on shoestring budgets. Cities in the developing world can afford to have their own dedicated TV news channel. This trend is going to continue to influence and reshape the landscape in which Public Diplomacy is conducted.⁵

12.4 This chapter looks at the recent advances in information technology and the implications for Australia's public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy in Australia and new technologies

12.5 In 2005, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Alexander Downer MP, cited the spread of powerful and affordable communications technology as a major great force in world affairs. He noted how it has accelerated and broadened the dissemination of all kinds of information.

For countless millions around the world, it has been a liberating and hugely empowering development.

For all but the most autarchic and isolationist of governments, it is no longer possible to deny populations direct and instant access to knowledge of global developments.

The internet, in particular, has enabled broader and deeper links between people irrespective of distance and sovereignty.

It has opened up new and expanding avenues of non-governmental associations.

...new technologies have facilitated ways for groups of people to make their views heard nationally and globally, and to shape policy directly and quickly.⁶

5 Philip Fiske de Gouveia, Foreign Policy Centre, The 2006 Madrid Conference on Public Diplomacy, p. 6 of 28, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documents/276.asp> (accessed 23 January 2007).

6 The Hon Alexander Downer MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Speech, 'Biennial Sir Arthur Tange Lecture in Australian Diplomacy', 8 August 2005.

12.6 Although recognised as an important element of effective diplomacy, the use of modern telecommunications was not covered in depth during the inquiry. Some witnesses did mention the need 'to explore ways of using more effectively electronic web based media—blogs, satellite hook-ups, teleconferencing'. According to Mr Freeman, DFAT has not had the capacity to use such advances in technology for the last 10 years or so—'not very effectively, anyway'.⁷ Asialink also noted changing technology which in its view is 'revolutionising global connectivity and engagement, particularly between young generations'.⁸ It recognised the potential that advances in technology offer Australia's public diplomacy, especially how modern technology enables 'communities and colleagues to communicate faster, reducing obstacles of distance, language and time-zones, and engaging sections of the community more vigorously than mediums past'. Asialink stated:

Given Australia's geographic isolation, new technologies could provide an innovative way to leverage our public diplomacy efforts through new media and delivery systems such as blogs, interactive digital channels, wireless technologies which enable users to access web content via their mobile phones, podcasting etc.

For example, communication technology is now integrated into teaching and learning in all Australian schools and in many schools across Asia. This provides multiple opportunities to connect school students and their teachers in Australia and Asia using new technologies. Mutual knowledge and understanding can be substantially enhanced through Australian government investment in international electronic curriculum projects focused on shared interests including climate, identity, migration, youth culture, family etc. Priority countries could be identified—eg trade priorities including China, India and Japan and Islamic countries including Indonesia and Pakistan.⁹

12.7 The International Public Affairs Network also drew attention to new technology and the opportunities it presents for Australia's public diplomacy:

The advent of the Internet has been one of the most powerful changes in mass communication technology since the invention of movable type. It is an ongoing communication revolution arguably more significant than the introduction of radio or television. It has unprecedented low-cost global audience reach, capacity for two-way communication and enormous constantly growing traffic in virtually instantaneous information exchange.

The Internet is highly significant for the practice of public relations and therefore for public diplomacy. It has broken what used to be the mass media monopoly on cost-effective mass audience reach.¹⁰

7 *Committee Hansard*, 11 April 2007, p. 38.

8 *Submission 8*, p. 2. See also *Submission 15*, p. 7.

9 *Submission 8*, p. 7.

10 *Submission 27*, p. 18.

12.8 It linked the importance of embracing these new technologies and incorporating them into the work of public diplomacy with the need for DFAT to have communications experts:

New media and communication technology are among the factors non-specialists are least capable of understanding and exploiting. The general public took years to understand computers were more than electric typewriters or heavy duty calculators. It took even longer to achieve wide understanding that amateurs never would use new tools, like computerised desktop publishing, presentations and digital photography and video, as well as professionals.¹¹

12.9 In response to a question about Australia's public diplomacy and the use of modern technology, Dr Strahan informed the committee that DFAT had implemented a lot of new technology features in its work. He advised the committee that:

Our website uses advanced technology for the delivery and presentation of a wide range of devices and browsers. We now use streamed audio and video. We have some web content which is selectively available as audio. We use RSS feeds for key material, which allows subscribers to get very quickly updated information such as our travel advisories. We use XML, which is a file format which allows the sharing of information across a lot of different formats. Of course, we now use videoconferencing. For the Shanghai Expo project I recently did a briefing for the Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai with a video link, which is of course a very good and effective way of reaching out to some stakeholders on the other side of the world. We also have an internet review, which we will carry out in coming months, whereby we will take another good look at how our internet site works and what sorts of tools we can use.¹²

12.10 The committee notes the views expressed by overseas commentators on public diplomacy and of witnesses to this inquiry that highlight the critical importance of keeping in touch with developments in technology and applying the latest advances to the work of public diplomacy.

Radio Australia and Australia Network

12.11 If Radio Australia and Australia Network are to continue to make a valuable contribution to Australia's public diplomacy, they must meet the challenges presented by rapidly changing technology. Radio Australia is developing interactive websites with new language series to attract new audiences in countries such as Vietnam 'where shortwave broadcasting has declined but 'access to the RA website has grown ten-fold in recent months'¹³ Mr Jean-Gabriel Manguy, Head, Radio Australia, informed the committee that 'online offers a distribution capacity that was not there 10 years ago'.

11 *Submission 27*, p. 18.

12 *Committee Hansard*, 15 May 2007, p. 53.

13 *Submission 22*, p. 6 of 23.

He indicated that the total number of 'accesses' to Radio Australia's website in 2006 totalled 18 million and that half of these were from China.

12.12 The committee recognises the work being done by Radio Australia and Australia Network to present Australia to the rest of the world particularly in the Asia Pacific region. The ABC's submission did note, however, that 'unlike its competitors, Radio Australia does not have the resources to respond to a range of needs and expectations from its Asia partners'.¹⁴

12.13 The committee urges the government to continue to support Radio Australia and Australia Network especially in light of the increasing competition in the region and to ensure that Radio Australia remains well funded.

Conclusion

12.14 In the highly competitive field of public diplomacy, Australia needs to make sure that those responsible for managing and delivering public diplomacy programs are taking full advantage of advances in technology to reach the global audience. It is an area of rapid transformation. If Australia is to hold its own in competition with other countries, it must be at the forefront of developments in technology and have the experts able to exploit them. Australia's public diplomacy practitioners need to be constantly alert to developments in technology and to know how to use them to best effect in their work. This need emphasises the importance of having highly skilled and qualified communicators who monitor the latest advances in technology, are able to think creatively in how to apply them to public diplomacy and to educate others in their use.

Recommendation 16

12.15 The committee recommends that DFAT explore the application of innovative technologies to enhance the delivery of its public diplomacy programs.

12.16 The committee has considered a number of aspects of Australia's public diplomacy and looked at particular public diplomacy programs. The committee in the following chapter examines the mechanisms DFAT uses to measure the success or otherwise of its public diplomacy programs.

14 *Submission 22*, p. 6 of 23.

