

21st Century Tradecraft in Moscow

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President Obama has emphasized the importance of communicating directly with societies, and not just governments, as a necessary means for pursuing our Administration's foreign policy objectives around the world. The same is true in Russia. Given how much time Russians spend online, social media offers an especially exciting new tool for this kind of communication.

For me personally, communicating with anyone on Facebook, Twitter or through a blog was a completely novel idea when I first arrived in Moscow to serve as the US Ambassador to the Russian Federation in January 2012. I had a Facebook account, but had only a dozen friends and used it sparingly. I had never seen a tweet and had never blogged. But after arriving here, I dived right in, following instructions and encouragement from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to embrace 21st Century Diplomacy and empowered by a few tutorials from then Secretary Clinton's Senior Advisor for Innovation Alec Ross.

A little more than a year later, I have over 44,000 Twitter followers, nearly 10,000 Facebook friends and subscribers, and a large and active readership of my blog which runs on LiveJournal. Last month, one Russian rating agency ranked me as the sixth most quoted blogger in all of Russia. Some analyses of my most popular tweets show that we are able to reach a half a million people or more in a 24-hour cycle. In parallel, over the last year, followers and subscribers of our Embassy Facebook and Twitter platforms have grown exponentially. Obviously, we still use traditional media to communicate our messages to the Russian people. I even got up the courage last fall to appear on the *Evening Urgant* show with Ivan Urgant, Russia's closest equivalent to the David Letterman show with a nightly viewership of approximately two million. Email also should not be dismissed. At Embassy Moscow, we have developed an email mailing list of nearly 25,000 people, whom we send our most important messages. But social media has now become an integral component of almost every public diplomacy activity we do at the Embassy.

What to Say?

Some of the advantages of these platforms are obvious. Most importantly, Facebook and Twitter give me the opportunity to provide information about the United States and our Administration's foreign policy directly to Russian citizens whenever I want. Social media is an easy way to get out information, to correct the record, without having to organize a formal press conference. Many of my tweets have been picked up in the print and broadcast media, demonstrating what an effective tool Twitter can be to get our voice into a policy debate in a most efficient and speedy manner.

Given how many misperceptions about our Administration and factual errors about life in the United States that we encounter every day, these instruments are extremely efficient in conveying basic factual information. I think of myself sometimes as a librarian,

searching the web to find and then tweet out information about US-Russian relations, President Obama's foreign policy goals in other parts of the world, and American society more generally. I often find myself tweeting out phrases from one of the President's speeches, posting a State Department statement on a foreign policy issue, or providing statistical data on the number of visas issued to Russians or the level of trade between our two countries. I also write about life in the United States to try to dispel some of the myths that exist in Russia and to pique Russians' interest in American life and culture. This often involves highlighting cultural events that the United States is sponsoring in Russia, but also covering my own typical American interests such as basketball, my home state of Montana, or my intellectual curiosity about the development of the Silicon Valley. I want to publicize facts and correct misinformation rather than simply giving my opinion.

If all I did on Twitter was reissue press statements, however, I know that my number of followers would hover in the teens. So in addition, I also communicate personal perspectives on issues pertaining to US-Russia relations. For instance, in February, I posted a blog on American adoptions of Russian children.¹ The blog generated lots of interest, and sparked lots of chatter on many social media platforms as well as in the traditional media.

A third stream of information that I communicate is about me personally. I was coached to do so, because the lines between public and private are often blurred in social media. And there is no question that this kind of information generates the greatest number of likes on Facebook and the greatest numbers of questions from my Twitter followers. (I didn't know I was so interesting!) At US Embassy Moscow, we also believe that providing basic information about my personal background and interests offers yet another mechanism to transmit information about America and our way of life. My story—kid grows up in a small mining town in Montana but eventually becomes a Rhodes Scholar, Stanford professor, White House official and US Ambassador to Russia—is a typical American story, providing lots of narrative nuggets for our messaging.

The trick, of course, is finding the right balance. Does it serve our foreign policy interests to tell my almost 10,000 Facebook friends that I am heading off to coach my son's basketball team? Do my readers need to know that I like Led Zeppelin or that I really loved a Moscow Conservatory concert? I am not sure. Having worked three years at the White House, I have observed how the strategic communications team there wrestled with these questions with President Obama. I often find myself saying if it is ok for the President, then it is ok for me. (The President also coached his daughter's basketball team and the whole world knows it!) But finding the correct balance between the public and the professional on social media is one of the hardest challenges of using these new tools most effectively. Unlike some active and popular social media users, I do not tweet about my every move. I also do not tweet about every meeting I have with government officials as some diplomatic tasks are best pursued privately. I also generally try to keep my children out of our social media activities. And yet, being a father is one of the most important components of who I am, so censoring out family activities projects a false portrait of me. These are the dilemmas.

¹ See <http://m-mcfaul.livejournal.com/13432.html>.

Another dilemma for me is to post a photo or not. Our experience shows that posts with photos, including photos of me, generate much more interest than posts without photos. I personally find this somewhat anti-intellectual, and I cannot stand seeing photos of myself! Getting this balance right—print versus other media forms—is also a new challenge of our current public diplomacy era.

With Whom and How to Interact?

Social media allows me to interact with people in all of Russia's nine time zones, not just government officials and not just those in Moscow. The people I interact with are varied: some from the regional governments throughout Russia, but also many Russians from all walks of life who are interested in engaging with Americans. There is no question that social media has allowed me to interact with Russians who would not traditionally be able to meet a US Ambassador. I try hard to demonstrate my interest in interacting with everyone.

I also learned quickly that you cannot just broadcast on Facebook or especially Twitter. You have to interact. If you don't do it yourself, your followers quickly figure it out (when I have too many tweets in perfect Russian, people begin to get suspicious that it's not me.). Twitter is also very fast. You have to respond, engage, answer questions quickly or else the conversation moves on. Interaction in a foreign language is tricky, especially in 140 characters and especially with all the complicated slang that one encounters on Russian Twitter and Facebook. I have made mistakes.

One also has to learn when not to engage. For instance, one way to build your Twitter numbers is to interact with people who have the largest numbers of followers. In Russia, as I suspect is true everywhere, those people tend to be television celebrities, sports figures, or movie stars. Too much interaction with this group can make an ambassador look frivolous. One also cannot refute every crazy tweet or react to every vulgar insult. Deciding when it serves our foreign policy to respond and when it does not is a hard process. Though I find myself in Twitter debates and interactions with Russian government officials from time to time, one needs to know the limits to such exchanges. Some things are best said privately.

Engaging interactively in a foreign language also takes a tremendous amount of time. On average, I spend a few hours each evening on social media. To avoid spending too much time on social media, I deliberately do my social media work after my traditional diplomacy duties are complete for the day. You also have to spend some time reading the Twitter and Facebook feeds to get a sense of what is interesting for Russian social media users. As I have learned more about the content and styles of interaction on these platforms in Russia, I have adjusted my messaging.

Social Media is the Future

We are pioneers in social media diplomacy, forging ahead on a new frontier where norms are ill-defined and conventions are being challenged. But I have no doubt that social media will continue to develop as an indispensable tool of every embassy around the world and every government around the world. We cannot stop technology. So we have to figure out ways to harness it in the service of our foreign policy interests and open and more transparent government. To date, neither the State Department nor anyone else has spelled out a set of rules or norms for how to navigate this new arena of public diplomacy. So in the absence of well-defined training programs or social media handbooks, we all have to learn by trial and error. I find the task both challenging, but exhilarating.²

² Ambassador McFaul welcomes your feedback. He can be found on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/#!/mcfaul> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/amb.mcfaul>.