

A New Arena for the Competition of Ideas

Jeremy F. Curtin

Acting Coordinator for the Bureau of International Information Programs



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U.S. Department of State

“Just as our diplomatic institutions must adapt so that we can reach out to others, we also need a different and more comprehensive approach to public information efforts that can help people around the world learn about and understand America. The war on terrorism is not a clash of civilizations. ... This is a struggle of ideas, and this is an area where America must excel.” President George W. Bush, 2003

After September 11, 2001, U.S. public diplomacy information programs have faced a challenge of new urgency and intensity—countering a message of ideological extremism that, surprisingly to most people in the West, struck a responsive cord among many in the Middle East and elsewhere. We face this challenge on a battleground of ideas shaped by technologies that did not exist in the previous ideological struggle during the Cold War. New technologies, especially satellite television and the Internet, have taken the 24-hour news cycle global and created a very complex and dynamic information environment in which being heard and understood is much more difficult than in the past. With direction from Under Secretary Karen Hughes and working with others in the State Department and the interagency community, we in the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) have added cyberspace to our traditional mission of information outreach exemplified by the U.S. Speaker

Program, print publications, and our bureau’s USINFO Web site, itself a relatively new information platform.

IIP is finding its way in this new arena, developing capabilities for international dialogue in Webchats, Webcasts, and blogs, and exploring whether such emerging phenomena as the virtual world of Second Life hold promise for engaging foreign publics on issues of policy, society, and values. Our flagship initiative in cyberspace is the IIP Digital Outreach Team, a still-small unit of Foreign Service Officers, Arabic-language specialists, and analysts who monitor Arabic blogs and discussion forums, offering the U.S. perspective—in Arabic—on front-line issues like Iraq, Iran, terrorism, and the Middle East peace process.

A Counter-Voice to Distortions

The Digital Outreach Team offers a counter-voice to the distortions and lies that characterize so much of even mainstream Arabic discussion on the Internet. The defining characteristic of the team is that it seeks to generate



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Journalists in Lahore, Pakistan, participate in an IIP-sponsored Webchat related to the September 2006 eJournal USA, “Rebuilding and Resilience: Five Years After 9/11.”

dialogue, employing an informal, credible voice, speaking knowledgeably. Credibility is key, an essential but extremely difficult goal to achieve over the Internet. In public diplomacy, we talk about taking the message “the last three feet,” in Edward R. Murrow’s construction, the final distance crossed through personal contacts and relationships of trust built between our diplomats and their interlocutors in the field, “one person talking to another.” In cyberspace, we need to find other ways to connect, so that the U.S point of view is at least present in the conversation.

The Digital Outreach Team is IIP’s primary initial effort to connect in the new global information environment, characterized by speed and a tremendous cacophony of voices, serious and silly, important and trivial, competing for public attention. We plan to expand the capability of the Digital Outreach Team and develop new mechanisms, including a counter-terrorism information center that will monitor, analyze, and engage on the Internet and in other media more comprehensively and rapidly than we can now manage.

Still Crossing the Last Three Feet

If IIP has focused with increased urgency on the public diplomacy challenges of emerging technologies, we have not abandoned our traditional programs. Important as the Internet and electronic outreach are in many parts of the world—including the Middle East, where statistics on low Internet penetration might indicate otherwise—much of the world is a long way from being wired, as our public affairs officers serving in those areas can well attest. In many countries, including some of critical importance in the ideological struggle, the last three feet may still be crossed literally when an officer or a Foreign Service National employee from the host country walks across the street to hand a newspaper editor the text of a speech or a fact sheet on a U.S. initiative.

IIP continues to support our colleagues in areas where technology has yet to emerge. We are strengthening key programs like the U.S Speaker Program—with a new Strategic Speaker Initiative—the monthly electronic publication *eJournal USA* on current policy priorities, print publications, and even the venerable poster show, all ways of delivering information that, we realize, remain of value to many embassies. We are revamping and enhancing our main public Web site, USINFO, both as a global outreach tool and as an information source for embassies. And we are developing our internal Web site, INFOCENTRAL, the place embassies



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Acting Coordinator of the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) Jeremy Curtin listens to Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy in September 2006.

and U.S. military commands overseas increasingly turn to for policy background and key messages important to their own information outreach efforts.

IIP is adapting to the technological and political challenges of the 21st century information environment and the post-9/11 world. During the Cold War, the Voice of America and a handful of other western short-wave radio stations could dominate the information stream into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Even during the first Gulf War in 1990-91, if people in the Middle East wanted a view of events other than that offered by their own state media, they turned to CNN or a very few other international broadcasters in English. Today, those same audiences have a multitude of information sources, particularly satellite TV and the Internet, that offer a myriad of opinions, facts, and misinformation in Arabic and any number of other languages. The competition of ideas is fiercer and more crowded than ever before. In this competition, the United States needs to deploy all the instruments of public diplomacy we can muster, from educational and professional exchanges to direct radio and television broadcasting. Information outreach, increasingly through the channels of high technology, is a primary instrument of public diplomacy. IIP is committed to ensuring that the latest technologies are deployed to greatest effect, serving our foreign policy priorities and national interests everywhere in the world. ■

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