

POLICY BRIEF

LOWY INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

NOVEMBER 2010

FERGUS HANSON
Research Fellow
Tel: +61 2 8238 9120
fhanson@lowyinstitute.org

A DIGITAL DFAT: JOINING THE 21ST CENTURY

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) needs to keep pace with technological advancements that could increase efficiency, improve internal and external communication, and facilitate information exchange and gathering. Without e-diplomacy DFAT will be cut off from important audiences and find it increasingly hard to communicate its messages and coordinate Australian foreign policy across government.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

A root and branch e-diplomacy overhaul is needed if DFAT is to stay relevant and keep pace with other benchmark foreign ministries. Additional resources and sustained political and departmental leadership are required to drive a substantial cultural shift. With new resources, a well-staffed e-diplomacy unit should be established with a mandate flexible enough to encourage continuous innovation and the integration of e-diplomacy into departmental practice. Inadequate Australian [post websites](#) should be replaced as a priority, taking a whole-of-nation approach with their successors. A wide array of promising technological innovations already developed by the US, UK and Canadian foreign ministries should be rolled out. Overly restrictive departmental media guidelines should be reformed and the temptation to over-regulate the use of social media tools should be avoided to maximise their impact.



LOWY INSTITUTE FOR
INTERNATIONAL POLICY
31 Bligh Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Tel: +61 2 8238 9000
Fax: +61 2 8238 9005
www.lowyinstitute.org

The Lowy Institute for International Policy is an independent international policy think tank. Its mandate ranges across all the dimensions of international policy debate in Australia — economic, political and strategic — and it is not limited to a particular geographic region. Its two core tasks are to:

- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia’s international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate.
- promote discussion of Australia’s role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Policy Briefs are designed to address a particular, current policy issue and to suggest solutions. They are deliberately prescriptive, specifically addressing two questions: What is the problem? What should be done?

The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author’s own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

'...[the authors](#) are... right to argue that the web is the most radical force of our time. And they are surely also right to predict that it has only just begun to work its magic.'

The Economist

Introduction

Appropriately for an area undergoing such rapid change, the definition of e-diplomacy is still being [debated](#). For the purposes of this report, it is defined as the use of the web and ICT to help carry out diplomatic objectives. A review of e-diplomacy and its use by the US State Department, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT) reveals many advantages DFAT could accrue through its more comprehensive adoption.

While there is a tendency to associate e-diplomacy with social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, these form only one (limited) aspect of e-diplomacy. In this policy brief, e-diplomacy will be examined from three perspectives: its use in enhancing internal communication, external communication and public diplomacy. It is the first two categories in particular where the business case for e-diplomacy is strongest. Its potential to improve efficiencies, facilitate information exchanges and remotely reach across borders are valuable in their own right, but particularly so given Australia's geographic isolation, DFAT's [low](#) tooth to tail ratio (diplomats posted overseas versus those based in Canberra), chronic [underfunding](#) of foreign affairs and Australia's ambition to be an active middle power.

E-diplomacy is not a boutique extra and will be increasingly central to how foreign ministries operate in the 21st century. Without e-diplomacy DFAT will face a number of challenges. It will cut itself off from important audiences (unlike benchmark foreign ministries it does not communicate in the blogosphere), as more Australians travel further afield it will be harder to reach them via traditional media and communication of other messages will be restricted. The development of foreign policy will be constrained by a limited ability to consult, and coordination across government and with foreign governments will be sub-optimal.

As other diplomatic allies develop common coordination platforms DFAT could also be excluded if it chooses not to participate. Adoption of e-diplomacy platforms is at some point inevitable, but delay in their adoption means the development of staff skilled in their use will also be postponed. Most importantly, without these tools DFAT is hamstrung in its ability to advance Australian interests.

The three overseas foreign ministries examined for this study have rolled out a number of e-diplomacy platforms and are experimenting with others. While e-diplomacy is still in its infancy, there are already a number of promising platforms that offer significant benefits to DFAT. The pace of change is so fast, however, that foreign ministries must constantly adapt to new advances and will need to undertake periodic consolidations of redundant or inactive platforms.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

DFAT and e-diplomacy

On [24 April 1995](#), DFAT launched its initial web presence. However, perhaps as a result of sustained [under-resourcing](#), it has only more recently moved beyond the use of website technology.

The Department maintains a headquarters [website](#) as well as rudimentary [generic websites](#) for posts abroad (these are due to be replaced in mid 2011). It is only now seeking to add video and audio capabilities to its websites – the most basic of tools for organisations with a public communications role. The DFAT-developed [Imagine Australia](#) website for the year of Australian culture in China is more promising.

DFAT has begun to experiment with some mainstream social media technologies, with the Embassy in Chile making six [tweets](#) during the February 2010 earthquake as part of its consular outreach. Twitter and Facebook were used for consular purposes during the World Cup in South Africa, in the lead-up to the canonisation of Mary MacKillop and for the Commonwealth Games. A Chinese social media platform is also being considered for the year of Australian culture in China. However, there is still a tendency to identify the utility of a social media dimension at the last minute or part way through an event, rather than seeing it as integral from the start (a trend identified in [Australia's Diplomatic Deficit](#) across Australian public diplomacy).

Internally, DFAT maintains an intranet service and has plans to include an internal wiki, which is currently being trialed in parts of the department (as are internal blogs). Staff also

have access to an internal instant messaging facility. Blackberries have been made available to around 600 staff, iPhone trials are underway and video conferencing is available at a small number of overseas posts with co-hosted facilities with AusTrade available at around another 30. Unclassified email is now available remotely.

More broadly, [Govdex](#), 'a secure, private web-based space' hosted by the Department of Finance is available for cross government coordination and was used by DFAT for the Shanghai Expo and to coordinate APEC policy.

In terms of staffing, DFAT's website team has a Director and three staff (and is looking to add two more). Posts are responsible for updating their websites and Twitter/Facebook presence. However, currently no one in DFAT has overarching responsibility for e-diplomacy or mainstreaming its use across the department, meaning knowledge in this space is fragmented.

While it is still difficult to predict which platforms will ultimately prove most effective, and for which purposes they might best be used, there are a number of e-diplomacy tools that already offer clear advantages for DFAT. These fall into three broad categories and some of the best examples are set out below.

Internal communication

E-diplomacy offers a range of promising technologies to enhance internal communication and information sharing within DFAT and across Australia's overseas diplomatic network. Examining the practices of

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

benchmark e-diplomacy foreign ministries, these include the following:

An internal wiki: The US, UK and Canadian foreign ministries all have active internal wikis. The vast bulk of usage occurs on the unclassified system where wikis offer most benefits (although classified versions exist). At a basic level they are all similar to [Wikipedia](#) except they are only accessible by foreign service employees and contractors, all of whom are able to edit and post articles. The State Department's wiki, [Diplopedia](#), has over 12,000 articles, 151,000 page edits and 45,000 weekly page views. The Canadian wiki has over 5,500 articles and had received over 2.5 million page views and over 470,000 page edits. In all three cases staff post articles and edit posts on a voluntary basis.

In smaller foreign ministries like Australia's there would seem little point in recreating a version of Wikipedia on an internal wiki. However, there are a large number of advantages that a flexible wiki platform – one that is open to and can be edited by all staff – offers DFAT.

Deskpedia: This State Department platform exists within Diplopedia and started as a blog. It has now become a one-stop shop for new desk officers. Each employee can set out, and freely update, their roles, duties, contacts and other relevant information.

While it is still in its infancy, it would allow all staff to consolidate their duty statements, contacts and any position-specific knowledge in a single location. This is critical in a knowledge-based organisation like DFAT where formal face-to-face handovers at post are

rare and handover notes are meagre or absent. The Deskpedia pages are not only helpful for individual officers and those taking over from them, but also to those considering applying for that particular job or trying to identify the current occupant of a position.

Meeting tools: Wikis offer a useful platform for hosting meetings and consolidating meeting materials. DFAIT experimented by hosting a policy jam on its wiki in advance of an executive leadership conference (the UK conducted a similar experiment). This allowed all members of the executive to participate in policy discussions over a three-week period in the lead-up to the conference, including those unable to attend in person. While reportedly somewhat labour-intensive, and subject to some cultural resistance, a wiki used for at least some significant meetings offers a number of advantages, including live-moderated discussion that can roll over different time zones, separate discussion threads and the ability to upload agendas, conference papers, background reading and video messages. This material is then readily available, consolidated and retrievable.

Remote access: Wikis provide remote access to unclassified information relied on by diplomats on a day-to-day basis. For example, around 50 US missions have uploaded to Diplopedia unclassified CVs of key contacts they meet on a regular basis, allowing easy remote access, for instance via Blackberry in the car on the way to a meeting with a visiting official.

Communities and internal blogs: All three foreign ministries have developed a series

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

of internal blogs on different topics and themes, which are open to all interested staff. Where there is a specific interest group, this is an excellent platform for staff to informally exchange information on the latest developments in a subject area (such as a noteworthy report they have come across) or to seek advice on a particular issue. Examples of current State Department communities include: China in Africa, Smart power in Africa, Blue skies in Beijing, Taiwan media review, China labour review and Embassy Vatican. The Embassy Vatican blog is a good example of how blogs can be used effectively by small posts. With limited demand for reporting from many small missions, a blog offers a platform to provide additional news on mission activities and/or background reading that is not suitable for more formal reporting by diplomatic cable.

In some cases, the creation of blogs can be perceived as subversive. But this is an indication of the transparency transition foreign ministries will need to undertake. For example, locally employed US State Department staff formed a dedicated blog to swap notes between missions on pay, conditions and State Department management, a process that may raise some concerns among managers but viewed differently is an ideal way to gain insight into staffing concerns.

Internal blogs can be used as a staff management tool in large overseas posts or in large home-based divisions to keep staff abreast of mission/division specific developments or policies, to share news or to deal with routine administrative issues, and as a motivational tool. (The US Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico engaged visa officers at post via a blog asking them to propose special projects of

interest to them, to break them out of their routine processing work). The UK Permanent Under Secretary blogs internally every Monday morning as a way of reaching a large and scattered network of employees.

Internal blogs also provide a platform for coordination in crisis situations, especially when staff already possess Blackberries or equivalent smart phones. During the outbreak of H1N1, the US Deputy Chief of Mission in Mexico used an internal blog to provide updates to US missions across Mexico, which staff could access remotely from home (minimising infection risks). This platform could also be used by heads of mission and staff to give and receive instructions in other crises, such as when staff are spread over wide geographic areas or in disaster situations such as after attacks on embassies.

Yet another possibility is for better collaboration between posts that work closely together. For example, the FCO is looking at the potential for internal collaboration tools to allow its missions in the Nordic and Baltic countries to better coordinate with each other given significant common and overlapping activities. This could be helpful in DFAT's case in an environment where small posts, with a tiny number of Australia-based staff, form an increasing proportion of diplomatic missions.

Staffing profiles: The State Department is about to launch a new platform called 'Corridor', and the Canadian Foreign Ministry already has a similar platform called 'Connections', analogous to [LinkedIn](#).

While these are still in their infancy (only 700 of 6,000 people in the Canadian foreign

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

ministry have uploaded profiles) and their search functions need refining, they offer significant potential for coordinating human resources. For example, if all staff uploaded basic profiles with their language skills, core knowledge areas, location and contact details, Human Resources could in a crisis situation easily contact all employees who speak the language or have the skill sets relevant to the crisis at hand in any location. The same capability would also be available to staff needing quickly to find a colleague who could help translate a certain document, had expertise in a specific area or shared a common professional interest.

While Communities and Corridor/Connections are currently separate from the internal wikis, one way of consolidating the growing number of platforms would be to merge every platform into the wiki, including the existing Intranet, post reports and cable systems (perhaps fire-walling some areas like cable access). For instance, Corridor and Connections could easily be rolled into a refined version of Deskpedia.

Sentiment analysis: Using the internet to gauge opinion and track the take-up and response to government communications is still an emerging field, but it promises such far-reaching benefits to the conduct of foreign policy that DFAT should be following its development closely. The US, UK and Canada had all used some form of sentiment analysis technology (see [Radian 6](#), for example) to track messages or issues. (The DFAT Passports Office has trialled sentiment tracking and analysis and it was used to inform policy in response to the Indian student [crisis](#).)

The practical utility of this analysis is reportedly still limited, but this technology should, in future, be able to provide foreign ministries with the capability to track the effectiveness of their public diplomacy messages as well as sentiment on specific issues in target audiences around the world. More advanced providers working in the intelligence field offer the prospect of identifying the opinions of leaders on specific issues in almost any space as well as a number of other services.

External communication

E-diplomacy tools offer excellent opportunities to improve communication across government departments, to facilitate inter-government coordination and to liaise with external stakeholders.

Cross-government and intra-government wikis/websites: ‘See Britain’ is a UK-developed closed-group wiki that brings together a number of non-FCO partners to support preparations for hosting the Olympic Games in 2012. Similarly, the government of Canada developed [GCPedia](#), a closed wiki to encourage collaboration and knowledge exchange across government. The Canadians also used web-based platforms for the [G20](#) and [G8](#) summits. These sorts of platforms, bringing in external partners, are in their infancy but offer significant potential.

DFAT would have a number of uses for isolated, closed-group wikis. They would allow it to:

- better coordinate with other departments and support interdepartmental committees

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

([Govdex](#) appears to be a good start but needs wider promotion);

- coordinate with diplomatic partners at post, for example the CANZ Group;
- bring together ad hoc groups of experts (academic, industry, government, think tank, NGO) to discuss specific issues;
- bring together and communicate with key stakeholders, for example, with industry during free-trade negotiations or NGOs during human rights consultations;
- harness the know-how of retired DFAT officers by allowing them to participate in closed wikis or communities (DFAIT is looking at an initiative along these lines).

Cloud computing: This technology offers foreign ministries a similar platform to wikis, with the advantage they can be hosted by an external, neutral third party. This was used by the State Department and Mexican Foreign Ministry to develop common protocols in emergency situations. While the protocols are held only quasi-securely, it offers a useful means for both governments to cooperate and update procedures on a rolling basis.

Diaspora platforms: E-diplomacy offers a good way of drawing together diaspora networks by providing them with meaningful connection tools and information. [Connect2Canada](#), the Canadian diaspora networking site in the United States, is a good example of one effort in this area and has a membership of 47,000 US-based Canadian expatriates. Signing up is straightforward and members can choose to subscribe to a range of information updates. The site also has links to a large number of Canadian expatriate groups and communities across the United States. ([Advance](#) offers another Australian example).

Government - think tank - academic communities: DFAT could broaden and improve on the Communities platform discussed above by inviting some external stakeholders (think tankers, academics and area experts) to engage in discussions and exchange news on the latest developments in their subject areas. The FCO currently has the ability to invite non-FCO employees to join a designated part of their wiki.

Websites: Websites are the public face of foreign ministries. In July 2010 the main DFAT website had 428,703 unique visitors. The top five most visited post websites (by unique visitors) in July were London, Beijing, Washington, New Delhi and Manila, with between 25,341 and 10,831 unique visitors.

Since websites are the public's primary interaction with the foreign ministry, it is essential they are of the highest quality, constantly refined to incorporate technical advances, and designed with visitor requirements in mind. Besides the home page, visa and migration pages were the most visited for the main DFAT website and all the top ten post websites.

Given the importance of migration, tourism and education to Australia's economy, all DFAT websites need to be customised with this demand in mind and with a view to promoting related products and services (education, working holidays, travel providers, tourist information etc).¹ Posts in large source countries for particular exports (for example, India for education) should put a dominant

¹ This assumes those seeking this information are foreign nationals not Australians.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

emphasis on promoting this sector. Once posts are provided with decent websites, incentives (competitions were used in some benchmark cases) should be created to encourage innovation in their use among missions.

Websites offer the potential to coordinate across government. France has a whole-of-government information portal for its international activities, some of it closed to the public, called [Latitude France](#). The State Department has developed a government human rights website (still to be launched) which would draw together the agencies dealing with human rights issues and their associated datasets. This sort of platform might have some applications in Australia, particularly for public diplomacy, and in specific areas like human rights.

Websites have also been used to create what the State Department calls Virtual Presence Posts, for example in [Somalia](#), where it does not maintain a physical US diplomatic presence. It currently operates [62](#) of these, with another 39 planned. These need to be accompanied by real-world engagement if they are to work effectively, and there is the prospect that other e-diplomacy tools might make them more dynamic in future. For the moment they appear to be of limited utility for DFAT.

Recruitment: E-diplomacy tools have allowed the State Department to initiate a [virtual student foreign service](#) program. Last year 70 posts signed up for it, engaging 85 students who worked on specific research projects remotely. The program produced mixed results, and success depended on intern and post engagement. However, it offers the opportunity to engage future potential recruits and because

it is a virtual internship does not disadvantage lower-income individuals as much as traditional internships. The program has produced modest, if interesting projects like [this](#) online Facebook discussion forum set up by a virtual intern 'in' Shenyang, China, designed 'to generate a lively conversation with "Everyday Diplomats" in China and the U.S.'.

Public diplomacy

Although e-diplomacy is often associated with public diplomacy, this is the area where its advantages are, so far, most mixed and applications most fluid. With that caveat, there is no doubt that any credible public diplomacy strategy or campaign needs an e-diplomacy dimension and this will only become more the case, as the online world increases its dominance. The following section discusses some of e-diplomacy's applications for public diplomacy.

Social media

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Digg, Flickr and Twingly offer DFAT officials the potential to extend their reach well beyond the few dozen or hundreds of contacts they can maintain through their regular duties, to the thousands or hundreds of thousands.

The State Department has been active in encouraging the take-up of social media tools. It [operates](#) 230 Facebook accounts, 80 Twitter feeds and 55 YouTube channels and has 40 Flickr sites. The FCO operates 55 Facebook accounts (with over 50,000 followers), 57 Twitter feeds (with over 66,000 followers) and has more than 80 Flickr accounts.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

The utility and impact of these tools is still debatable and depends highly on the skill of the individuals running them (as well as the freedom they are given by their organisations for public engagement). Communicating in the local language is also far more effective if trying to reach locals. Some accounts have enormous followings (like the US Embassy in Jakarta's [Facebook](#), which has around 290,000 fans and a dedicated employee whose job is to update the account in Bahasa Indonesia). Others have smaller followings like the FCO's [Facebook](#) in Indonesia, which has closer to 1,000 fans and is written in English. The US Embassy in Jakarta has also worked on making the virtual experience of Facebook real, for example, by running very popular Facebook competitions to attend actual Embassy events.

A key message from all three foreign ministries was the vital importance of being country-specific in the selection of social media tools, use of local language and keeping up to date. This includes switching platforms when an old one becomes outdated and closing down inactive or boring accounts – particularly when staff literate in social media are replaced by those more technically challenged. Several officials mentioned conducting scoping studies in key countries to ascertain which platforms were most popular in a given country before deciding which ones to embrace at each post.

The number of people signing up to embassy social media accounts varies widely, as does the quality of information being transmitted, but there are a number of reasons why DFAT should start using this technology:

- Social media would allow DFAT to engage with the public and interest groups in an

interactive way that is otherwise impossible. For example, the UK Secretary of State, William Hague, uses Twitter to conduct [Q&A sessions](#) with the public.

- Even though the platforms will change, social media are here to stay. As one official put it, with over [500 million](#) active users, Facebook is equivalent to the world's third largest 'country'. DFAT needs to start developing the skills of staff in this field. Not everyone is good at social media and DFAT should start identifying those staff who are, and provide them with the opportunities to develop their skills online. It should also start experimenting with the best social media platforms for its purposes.

- Social media, while often difficult to make interesting when practised by governments, do offer the opportunity to engage key niche audiences and to market key Australian exports. For example, Australian embassies could usefully provide a social media feed targeting prospective overseas students that provides closing dates for university applications, timelines for applying for visas, information on scholarships and application times, working holidaymaker programs etc. It could also be used to help answer questions virtually (see Telstra's [Twitter](#) feed as an analogous example).

- Social media, if done well, offer a good platform to disseminate foreign policy messages. This will become an increasingly competitive space as other foreign ministries adopt, and become fluent in the use of, social media. At present DFAT is absent from this space.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

- Social media are a good means of information gathering. Few policy officers in DFAT could now do their job properly without linking in to the key social media networks in their areas of expertise (reading the feeds from politicians, foreign officials, think tanks, area experts, government departments etc). The flip side of this is that other key professionals in this space are already using these tools and will likely pick up and become followers of DFAT news feeds provided over social media, expanding its opportunity to influence.
- Social media are also an important tool for monitoring public reactions to DFAT's work. For example, FCO monitoring of social media during the Icelandic ash cloud consular crisis revealed some public confusion about what the FCO was advising people to do, which allowed it to correct its public messaging. DFAT could do this as well as actively enter into the social media debate, for example via [Twitter](#).
- Platforms like [Flickr](#) offer an easy and time-efficient means of promulgating positive foreign ministry images into the public domain, especially if they are free.
- Social media offer the potential to engage alumni networks and harness them at post (for example, Australian scholarship recipients). The FCO has done this with [Chevening scholarship](#) recipients. This has also made it cheaper and easier to communicate with this group.
- Platforms like iTunes offer an easy way to disseminate podcasts of speeches, something with which the FCO is [experimenting](#).

Blogs and bloggers: Foreign ministries currently use three types of blogs:

1. Internal blogs and communities, discussed above.
2. Publically accessible blogs maintained by headquarters or posts (for example, [DipNote](#), the official blog of the State Department and the UK First Secretary Simon Shercliff's [blog](#) from Washington). The State Department has 72 active blogs and the FCO has around 50, many in local languages. The following these blogs attract varies, as does their quality. Blogs take a considerable amount of time to maintain and require fresh, original content to remain interesting – all of which are hard for busy diplomats to do successfully. This category of blog, in most cases, comprises the least promising form of engagement, although they can be used effectively in some niche areas to bring together important discrete audiences and by doing so influence debates. The arms control [blog](#) of the UK Ambassador in Geneva, John Duncan, is a good example. Another was the US embassy in Japan's replacement of a regular email digest with a blog, which saved time by removing the administrative burden of keeping large numbers of email addresses up to date. One official mentioned a blog in China, read by officials in the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which allowed the embassy to convey messages difficult to broach in person.
3. Influential external blogs. The US, UK and Canada had all experimented with, or were actively engaged in, blogging in important areas of the blogosphere. The US maintains

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

nine full-time Arabic-language bloggers, two Farsi bloggers and two Urdu bloggers (the Pentagon also maintains a team of bloggers). These bloggers all write with bylines identifying them as State Department officials and actively enter into blog debates in comment threads and by providing blogs themselves. The Canadians also experimented with blogging in this way but operated on a policy of only entering debates on points of fact. The FCO has two full-time Farsi bloggers, with bylines identifying them as FCO employees. It is hard to gauge the impact a handful of bloggers can have, however, it is likely that as the blogosphere becomes increasingly important DFAT will have to start engaging in this space (for example, in Indonesia, China and India). And at least in times of consular emergencies DFAT could usefully monitor and enter the blogosphere debate to provide advice and correct misunderstandings.

Consular

[Nearly](#) five per cent of Australians live overseas, around six million travel abroad each year and they are travelling to increasingly exotic locations where DFAT's presence is limited or non-existent. The increasing strain this consular workload is putting on DFAT's ability to perform other tasks and younger Australians' familiarity with, and use of, social media means digital communication offers enormous advantages to DFAT.

DFAT has so far mainly used social media for this purpose, but its use could be substantially expanded. E-diplomacy would allow DFAT to reach distressed Australians across the globe, to listen and respond to misunderstandings among

the Australian public during crisis situations and offers it a better way of communicating with its own staff in the field. It is also the obvious way to broadcast messages to Australians travelling in remote areas (the FCO has found a missing citizen using Twitter).

Mobile technology

The State Department in particular has experimented with a wide range of mobile phone-based tools. These platforms have significant potential. Some of the most promising uses were:

- Fundraising for disasters. The State Department has enabled members of the public to use text messaging to donate to humanitarian crises. For example by texting [‘SWAT’](#) to 50555 members of the public could donate \$10 to Pakistani flood victims with all funds raised going to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). This would create public relations benefits for DFAT both at home and internationally as well as providing much-needed assistance.
- SMS alerts could be used by DFAT in a wide range of situations. For example, Australians travelling overseas could register their mobile phone numbers with DFAT to receive alerts in emergencies (the current [Smartraveller procedure](#) for registration is too onerous), text alerts could be used to survey attendees at DFAT public diplomacy events or to remind them of event times.
- Mobile technology has a number of development/military applications. The US Government is trialing efforts to [pay](#) Afghan police officers via mobile phone, thus reducing potential for graft. [In Mexico](#) an attempt was

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

made to develop a free short code so that members of the public could text in if they witnessed a crime.

- Phone apps could also be developed by DFAT to help disseminate its product and messages.

Hardware and software

Many e-diplomacy tools are free (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr accounts for example). Even software platforms for internal wikis are free – the foreign ministries reviewed all used [MediaWiki](#). Some managers said there was a cultural preference from engineers to either develop the technology in house or buy proprietary software, but this was redundant when excellent free software already existed. Use of free software was also a good way to ‘disrupt’ this culture.

Having the right hardware is critical if foreign ministries are going to enter the world of e-diplomacy. Blackberries or equivalent smart phones are essential for key front-line staff (the Canadians had issued some 4,500 Blackberries to staff).

Having desktop internet access (with all social media accessible) is an obvious essential as is utilising video conferencing facilities.

All unclassified e-diplomacy platforms (wikis, communities etc) should be accessible on the e-diplomacy hardware (Blackberries, ipads etc).

Staffing and structure

E-diplomacy is going to be increasingly essential for achieving diplomatic objectives. It should be firmly integrated into all departmental activities and an appropriately

staffed e-diplomacy branch established to be a repository of expertise and to work closely with line areas and posts. At present DFAT has no e-diplomacy unit and the website section sits under the Public Diplomacy Branch. By contrast, the State Department’s Office of E-diplomacy has about 30 staff.

To mainstream e-diplomacy across DFAT and its activities will also likely require a modest restructure – perhaps bringing those responsible for communications, websites and technical issues all under the remit of the e-diplomacy branch.

Given sustained under-resourcing of foreign affairs, new resources will be needed.

Recommendations

1) Provide additional funding and establish an e-diplomacy branch within DFAT. This should be staffed by a mix of policy and technical experts and have a mandate to take a reasonable level of risk with the platforms it develops and with which it experiments. This will likely require recruiting people with specialist journalistic, social media and programming expertise (DFAT advised that it has already employed some people with expertise in this area in the past year). Other related areas should be brought under its leadership (communications, website and technical). This office should be tasked with:

- Developing and rolling out all e-diplomacy platforms.
- Mainstreaming e-diplomacy across the department.

POLICY BRIEF

A DIGITAL DFAT

- Developing e-diplomacy guidelines for staff that encourage innovation and provide significant latitude for experimentation.
- Educating the department on best-practice use of e-diplomacy tools and encouraging department-wide digital innovation.
- Training staff, especially Heads of Mission, in the use and utility of e-diplomacy tools.
- Monitoring and, if necessary, closing inactive or inane social media platforms.
- Progressively consolidating e-diplomacy platforms as new ones are rolled out and old ones superseded.
- Taking the lead on e-diplomacy campaigns – that is, promulgating priority departmental messages using e-diplomacy tools – and assisting with e-diplomacy strategies for regular departmental communications.
- Taking the lead on e-diplomacy consular initiatives.
- Providing Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries with a Dashboard so they can see their online activity (used by the FCO).
- Train post web editors and encourage better use of websites by posts.
- Develop consistent labeling and branding across e-diplomacy platforms.
- Establish digital coordination mechanisms across relevant government agencies and departments as well as with external stakeholders.

2) DFAT needs to increase its risk appetite and be ready to back its staff when controversies surrounding new media arise. To use e-diplomacy effectively requires acceptance of higher risk, for example, a small [controversy](#) erupted over a British Ambassador's blog post commenting on Ayatollah Fadlallah. This needs to be put in context: the FCO has posted over

[4,000 blogs](#) over three years and estimates these have resulted in just three controversies.

The media will love a slip but DFAT and its ministers need to step in behind staff when this occurs, clearly drawing the relevant distinction between the status of a staff member's personal tweets, blogs etc and official government policy. In fact, if controversies do not arise periodically it is reasonable to assume the tools are not being used effectively. DFAT will be far more successful with its use of social media if it errs on the side of modest risk.

3) Review [restrictive](#) DFAT media guidelines with a view to making it much easier for staff to engage online.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fergus Hanson has a Masters in International Law from the University of Sydney. His published thesis focused on regional stability in the Pacific. He worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) from 2004 to 2007. From 2005 to 2007 he served at the Australian Embassy in The Hague where he was responsible for Australia's relations with five international legal organisations and domestic political issues.

Prior to joining DFAT he was a fellow at Cambridge University's Lauterpacht Research Centre for International Law. Fergus has also studied at Uppsala University. Fergus is the Director of Lowy polling and a visiting Vasey Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Pacific Forum.

LOWY INSTITUTE

FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

WWW.LOWYINSTITUTE.ORG