

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: THE INTERNET, THE BATTLE FOR IDEAS & US FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Internet and new media technologies are playing a growing role in transforming US public diplomacy programs, as part of broader efforts to counter the "Grand Narrative" of radical Islamic extremism. The Internet is at the heart of "digital diplomacy," communicating ideas, promoting policies and fostering debate and discussion aimed at undermining support for Al-Qaeda and crafting a credible alternative narrative. Programmes such as Public Diplomacy 2.0 are becoming increasingly important as the US seeks both to revitalize its tools of soft power and reach out and engage the "youth generation" of the Muslim world. The paper examines the way in which Al-Qaeda has created a virtual battlespace that is growing in importance as Western military forces seek to dominate the physical battlespace. It explores how US policymakers have begun to grasp the importance of fusing soft power, public diplomacy and information strategies, an approach at the heart of the technologically-savvy Obama Administration. It advances the argument that the Internet and social media is emerging as a key lever of US power and influence, alongside traditional "hard" levers of state power but concludes by arguing that to be truly effective the administration's strategy must be backed up by much broader and deep-seated shifts in US foreign policy.

Keywords: Al Qaeda; digital diplomacy; internet; Obama; public diplomacy; soft power

How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world's leading communications society?

- Richard Holbrooke¹

We are in the midst of a war, and more than half of that struggle takes place on an information battlefield; we are in an information war for the hearts and minds of all Muslims.

- Ayman al-Zawahiri²

1. The Digital Age

On 11 September 2001 (9/11), millions around the world watched, stunned, as Al-Qaeda terrorists launched a spectacular attack on the United States, crashing airliners into high-profile targets in New York and Washington DC. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York were played out in "real-time," captured live on major US news networks and instantaneously broadcast around the world, but they were largely organized and planned in cyberspace. Members of Al-Qaeda communicated through Yahoo e-mail and chat rooms prior to the attacks and conducted online research about the possible use of crop dusters. Images of the attacks, taken on hand-held recorders, digital cameras and mobile phones instantly found their way onto the Internet, spawning a virtual community dedicated to pondering and probing the causes and meaning of what had happened. Three years later, in April 2004, at the height of the Bush Administration's "War on Terror," photographs of US soldiers abusing detainees held at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison were disseminated via the Internet. Although similar incidents had already occurred at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and Guantanamo, it was not until members of the US military attached photos taken inside Abu Ghraib to emails that such incidents became the centre of an international storm of protest. In June 2005, Abu Musab Zarqawi, leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, unleashed an electronic jihad campaign, posting a 46-minute

1 Richard Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out," The Washington Post, October 2001, B07.

2 Ayman al-Zawahiri, cited in Glenn E. Robinson, "Jihadi Information Strategy," in John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer, Information Strategy and Warfare (Routledge: New York & Abingdon, 2007).

video entitled "All Religion will be for Allah" on the Internet, beginning regular Internet news broadcasts and posting images of beheadings online. Zarqawi's campaign helped fuel the insurgency in Iraq, further complicating US military efforts to defeat the insurgents. In June 2009, the US State Department contacted the social networking service Twitter and urged it to delay a planned upgrade that would have cut daytime service to Iranians. The request came in the midst of protests following the disputed Iranian elections, many of them coordinated via Twitter and Facebook in what was termed the "Twitter Revolution".

Such incidents highlight the extraordinary impact that the Internet is having on US foreign policy – and international relations more broadly, what Audrey Kurth Cronin has described as the 21st century's "levee en masse:"

A mass networked mobilization that emerges from cyber-space with a direct impact on physical reality. Individually accessible, ordinary networked communications such as personal computers, DVDs, videotapes, and cell phones are altering the nature of human social interaction, thus also affecting the shape and outcome of domestic and international conflict.³

In a globalized international environment, ideas have become weapons and the Internet the principal means of delivery. As Western military forces have struggled to defeat the Taliban and Al-Qaeda on the battlefield, a growing discourse has emerged on the importance of non-kinetic means of fighting radical Islamic terrorism and failing states. Concepts of soft power, public diplomacy and information strategy are viewed as crucial tools for countering radicalism, particularly as states like the US and UK search for more nuanced ways to counter Al-Qaeda's global reach. Moreover, the election of Barack Obama has done much to revitalize soft power approaches to US foreign policy. The concept of soft power was coined by the Harvard academic Joseph Nye in 1990⁴ and further explored in his 2002 study *The Paradox of*

3 Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Cyber-Mobilization: The New Levee en Masse," *Parameters*, Summer 2006, 77.

4 See Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1990.

American Power. Nye defined soft power as the ability to set the agenda in world politics by persuading others to want what you want, enticing and attracting them through the force of one's values, beliefs and ideas, rather than coercing them through the use of military or economic power. Nye noted how the US had harnessed soft power during the Cold War through its role in creating international institutions, fostering cultural and academic exchanges, and public diplomacy, but he argued that changes in world politics with the end of the Cold War had made it more important.⁵

At the centre of Nye's thesis was the information revolution and the Internet, which he argued would pose a major challenge to traditional notions of state sovereignty. Nye maintained that while

cyberspace would not replace geographical space and will not abolish state sovereignty...it will co-exist with them and greatly complicate what it means to be a sovereign state or a powerful country. As Americans shape foreign policy for the global information age, we will have to become more aware of the importance of the ways that information technology creates new communications, empowers individuals and nonstate actors, and increases the role of soft power.⁶

The art of soft power in the modern world is the fusing of traditional tools of diplomacy and negotiation with the ability to harness the power and potential inherent in the new and emerging technologies that globalization has wrought. Technological developments have long had a profound impact on the conduct of international relations. The invention of the telegraph helped to catalyze mass movements in the late 19th century against slavery and colonial rule, while during the two World Wars, propaganda strategies and "strategic communications" proliferated, fuelled by emerging radio and telephone technologies. Electronic warfare also featured in WWII, with the jamming of airborne and ground-based radars, and radio

5 See Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6 Ibid., 62.

and television helped generate and sustain Cold War protest movements.⁷ But it was the onset of the globalized “information age,” with its rapid advances in information technologies and communications, that transformed the way states and non-state actors communicate most profoundly. The late 20th century saw the emergence of a networked world, a global village of imagined communities that began to challenge traditional notions of power and influence in world affairs.

If the 20th Century was the “American Century,” one in which the American Leviathan exhibited an untrammelled military, economic and cultural hegemony, then the 21st Century is likely to be the Digital Age, where states will have to compete in “netwars” and against “networks”, an age of digital diplomacy and social activism, of websites, blogs and “tweets.” The end of the American Century and the advent of the Digital Age was dramatically ushered in on 9/11, an event that brought home the stark reality that the walls of the American Imperium could indeed be breached. The enemy was not a state, but a group of hijackers whose campaign of death and destruction was coordinated not in the machinery of government but in cyberspace. The attacks of 9/11 heralded a new kind of conflict, one between nations and networks, in which America’s military might would not, contrary to the predictions of the Bush Administration, destroy the enemy. Arquilla and Ronfeldt have termed this development “netwar”: conflict waged by networks of nonstate actors in which “numerous dispersed small groups using the latest communications technologies could act conjointly across great distances.”⁸ As the authors note, netwar does not take place *only* in cyberspace, but cyberspace is a crucial – and indeed central – component of netwar.⁹

In the weeks and months after 9/11 it became apparent that there were two battlefields in the “War on Terror” declared by the

7 See Arquilla and Borer, *Information Strategy and Warfare*, 2-7.

8 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 2001), 2. See also Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *In Athena’s Camp: preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 1997).

9 *Ibid.*, 11.

Bush Administration. The first was the familiar domain of the physical battlefield, and President Bush left no-one in any doubt of his intentions for Al-Qaeda when he announced that the US military would “smoke them out and get them running.”¹⁰ Yet whilst the American military and its allies began pounding the mountains and villages of Afghanistan, another battlefield was emerging, a virtual one, where Al-Qaeda and its affiliates were able to circumvent America’s bombs and bullets, and promote their “Grand Narrative” to an audience of millions. According to the US Army’s Counterinsurgency Manual, ‘FM 3-24’, such narratives are

organizational scheme expressed in story form. Narratives are central to representing identity, particularly the collective identity of religious sects, ethnic groupings, and tribal elements...Insurgent organizations like Al Qaeda use narratives very effectively in developing legitimating ideologies. In the Al Qaeda narrative, for example, Osama bin Laden depicts himself as a man purified in the mountains of Afghanistan who is gathering and inspiring followers and punishing infidels. In the collective imagination of Bin Laden and his followers, they are agents of Islamic history who will reverse the decline of the umma [Muslim community] and bring about its inevitable triumph over Western imperialism. For them, Islam can be renewed both politically and theologically only through jihad [holy war] as they define it.¹¹

It is within this ideological domain that Al-Qaeda’s true centre of gravity lies. Despite the early military successes in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ability of the enemy to resist conventional Western military supremacy has led to a renewed emphasis on information strategies as a means of countering Al-Qaeda. Information strategy is, according to Arquilla, a “still-forming phenomenon...the good information strategist must be the master of a whole host of skills: properly understanding one’s

10 See Brian Knowlton, “Terror in America / We’re Going to Smoke Them Out: President Airs His Anger,” The New York Times, September 19, 2001, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/news/19iht-t4_30.html

11 US Army Field Manual FM 3-24, Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006, 1-14, available at <http://www.usgcoin.org/library/doctrine/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>, accessed 29th March, 2010.

own information flows while disrupting the enemy's; crafting persuasive messages that shore up the will of one's own people and allies while demoralizing one's opponents; and, of course, deceiving the enemy at the right time, in the right way."¹²

2. Al-Qaeda's "Information War"

As Marc Sageman notes, "the Internet has enabled a new wave of terrorist wannabes, who now constitute the main -- but not the entire -- threat to the West."¹³ Since 9/11 Al-Qaeda has become increasingly adept at waging what Ayman al-Zawahiri describes as an "information war," developing a growing number of websites and blogs espousing radical ideas, and unleashing a wave of online pictures, videos and sermons all designed to perpetuate Al-Qaeda's "Grand Narrative." Al-Qaeda is a truly globalized phenomenon, both a reaction to globalization, but also very much a product of it. The number of websites devoted to jihadist themes has exploded since 9/11, increasing from approximately 12 in 1998 to more than 4,700 by 2005¹⁴. In 2008 the FBI estimated there was somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 radical websites existing on the web,¹⁵ and it has also been estimated that the Internet is responsible for around 80% of the recruitment of youth for jihad operations.¹⁶ Terrorist groups have also become more sophisticated in their use of the Internet; prior to 9/11 they would communicate via email, but in recent

12 Arquilla and Borer, 1.

13 See Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, "Does Osama Still Call the Shots? Debating the containment of Al-Qaeda's Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64460/marc-sageman-and-bruce-hoffman/does-osama-still-call-the-shots>, accessed December 29, 2009. See also Elaine Sciolino and Eric Schmitt, "A Not Very Private Feud Over Terrorism," *New York Times*, June 8, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/weekinreview/08sciolino.html>, accessed December 29, 2009.

14 See Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Penguin, 2008), 56

15 See Christina L. Madden, "Typing TERROR in a Crowded Chat," *Policy Innovation*, February 5, 2008, available at <http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/briefings/data/000029>, accessed 2 January, 2010.

16 Cited in Bobbitt, 56.

years they have learnt to encrypt messages by embedding invisible codes.¹⁷

The Internet has thus become a powerful propaganda tool, with Al-Qaeda constituting what Nye and others have termed an "imagined community," that is able to survive and prosper even as Western military forces seek to disrupt their physical bases in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁸ Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman also describes the Internet as a "virtual sanctuary" for groups like Al-Qaeda. Its main website, www.alneda.com, proved vital to Al-Qaeda's capacity to continue functioning after it was forced to flee Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom.¹⁹ In this context the Internet has become an increasingly vital virtual safe-haven for terrorist groups, effectively constituting their "new base".²⁰ The new generation of terrorists have become technologically-savvy, with an expanded tool kit not limited to "simply the guns and bombs they always have used. Now those weapons include the Minicam and videotape; editing suite and attendant production facilities, professionally produced and mass-marketed CD-ROMS and DVDs; and most critically the laptop and desktop computers, CD burners and email accounts; and Internet and WWW access that have defined the information revolution today."²¹ It is 21st century conflict waged as theatre, a drama in which the key operatives function as movie producers, writing and re-writing the script and carefully stage managing its production and performance.

While the essential character of terrorism might remain unchanged, there is much that is new and distinct about groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah. In the '70s and '80s terrorist groups and organisations such as the IRA, ETA, the PLO

17 See Timothy L. Thomas, 'Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of 'Cyberplanning,'" *Parameters*, Spring 2003, 112-123.

18 *Ibid.* 58.

19 Cited in Bruce Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists," Testimony presented to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, May 4, 2006, 7, available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf, accessed January 3, 2010.

20 Cited in Gordon Corera, "A web wise terror network," *BBC News*, 6 October, 2004, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/3716908.stm, accessed 2 January, 2010.

21 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2006), 197.

and the German Red Army Faction relied on the more traditional mass media to communicate their message, utilizing underground newspapers and clandestine radio stations, as well as mainstream television. The emergence of the Internet, however, provided groups like Al-Qaeda, Hamas and others, with the ability to "spread a message globally at a fraction of what it used to cost, and at the speed of light."²² The decentralized and largely unregulated nature of the Internet has proven to be a powerful democratic tool, opening up avenues of communication and participation to anyone with a computer. From Georgia and the Ukraine to Iran, the Internet has allowed social activist and democratic protest movements to flourish, but it remains a double-edged sword that can be readily exploited by terrorists, hackers and criminals. Indeed, the laptop has become as much the weapon of choice for groups like Al-Qaeda as the suicide bomber and figureheads like Osama Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have adroitly merged new technologies with traditional tribal cultures; videos of Bin Laden in a cave exhorting his followers to action, posted on the Internet just a few hours after US airstrikes commenced over Afghanistan, have become iconic images, a potent symbol of Al-Qaeda's ability to undermine the world's most powerful nation.

Such images are not simply iconic or symbolic, however; as Audrey Kurth Cronin notes, Al-Qaeda's cyber-mobilization is a powerful enabler, "effecting an underground uprising whose remarkable effects are being played out on the battlefield every day."²³ Abu Musab al-Suri, a senior Al-Qaeda thinker and a key figure behind Al-Qaeda's Internet movement has spoken of opening the "minds of the people"²⁴ which has been achieved not only by the sensationalist online video postings of al-Zawahiri and Zarqawi, but by jihadi web forums and blogs. Al-Qaeda's use of the Internet has become increasingly sophisticated in recent

22 Frank G. Hoffman, "The psychological element of counterinsurgency warfare," available at <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&requesttimeout=500&folder=2914&paper=2988>, accessed December 21, 2009.

23 Cronin, 85.

24 Cited in Jarrett M. Brachman, "High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda's Use of New Technology," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 30: 2, Summer 2006, 159.

years and the “virtual warfare” they have perpetuated has, as Stephen Ulph notes, served to compensate

for the loss of Afghanistan as a major training arena in both the ideological and tactical senses... Jihadi web forums include da'wa (Islamic preaching), news from the front lines, official declarations from jihadist groups, audio-visual productions and photo essays on jihad, and a general text distribution section. All forums include general discussion sub-categories where highly detailed experiences mingle with material often of a banal nature. But the most interesting categories are the 'Jihadi cells' and 'electronic jihad' sections. In the first of these are found the detailed exchanges of participants requesting or providing specific information on military technology, requests for supplies or funding, or enquiries on how to join a cell on the front line. The 'electronic jihad' section hosts the cyber war and gives up to the minute instructions or warnings of website penetration, suggestions for targets or timing of attacks, with detailed advice on method.²⁵

Jihadi computer programmers have created stand-alone web browsing software, similar to Internet Explorer, which searches only particular sites, while Al-Qaeda's online library provides over 3,000 books and monographs from *jihadi* thinkers which can be downloaded onto mobile phones.²⁶ Jihadi training manuals and CD-ROMS have allowed insurgent groups in Iraq and Afghanistan to perfect techniques on the military battlefield that are inflicting mounting casualties on coalition forces, while the latest software is used to embarrass the enemy and extol the virtues of those who, like the “Baghdad Sniper” or the “Sniper of Fallujah”, humiliate coalition forces.

Websites like Al Battar, an online magazine published by Al-Qaeda, contain hugely detailed information on how to kidnap VIPs, conduct surveillance and fire rocket propelled grenades. Described as a “virtual training camp”, Al Battar claims to be a

25 Stephen Ulph, “A Guide to Jihad on the Web,” Terrorism Focus Volume 2, Issue 7, available at http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=169&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=238&no_cache=1, accessed December 29, 2009.

26 See Brachman, 152-153.

gift to the youth of Islam whose hearts burn in support of the religion by means of Jihad for the sake of Allah. . . .The basic idea is to spread military culture among the youth with the aim of filling the vacuum that the enemies of the religion have been seeking to expand for a long time. Allah willing, the magazine will be simple and easy, and in it, my Muslim brother, you will find basic lessons in the framework of a military training program, beginning with programs for sports training, through types of light weapons and guerilla group actions in the cities and mountains, and [including] important points in security and intelligence, so that you will be able ... to fulfill the religious obligation that Allah has set upon you.²⁷

One jihadist website contained instructions on how to use mobile phones as detonators for explosives, as was the case in the 2005 Madrid train bombings, while Al-Qaeda's "Encyclopaedia of Jihad," a lengthy volume that gives detailed guidance on training, communications and tactics, has also been distributed over the Internet.²⁸ Radical Islamic video games are being designed to reach out to a younger generation of Muslims, all extolling the virtues of killing American military forces, Jews or other "infidels", in the name of establishing a global Islamic caliphate. As Jarrett Brachman has argued "Al-Qaeda's harnessing of technology has been a calculated strategic move—the goal being to catalyze awareness of the need for Muslims to 'resist' and open new ways for them to participate in that resistance."²⁹ According to Hoffman, Al-Qaeda is unique among terrorist groups because its "leadership seems to have intuitively grasped the enormous communicative potential of the Internet and sought to harness this power both to further the movement's strategic aims and facilitate its tactical operations."³⁰

It is against this virtual backdrop that US and Western policymakers are seeking to craft new strategies to win the "information war." In December 2009, US President Barack

27 See "Al-Qaeda's Online Training Camp," Jihad Watch available at <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2004/01/Al-Qaedas-online-training-camp.html>, accessed January 2, 2010.

28 See Corera, "A web wise terror network."

29 Brachman, 155-158.

30 Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists," 5.

Obama announced – after a lengthy deliberation – the deployment of 35,000 additional US military forces to Afghanistan in an effort to bring the full weight of America’s military power to bear on an increasingly resistant Taliban. With Al-Qaeda and the Taliban continuing to prove a thorn in America’s side in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a military “surge”, similar to the one deployed in Iraq in 2007, is widely seen as a last-ditch effort to salvage an 8-year war that has served to expose the limits of US military might. Much less heralded has been the Obama Administration’s emphasis on “digital diplomacy,” using the Internet to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideology and promote US values and beliefs. While the increase in US forces is seen as vital to creating a secure and stable space that will allow for the eventual withdrawal of coalition forces, such a strategy will do little to defeat Al-Qaeda in the virtual battlespace, where it will continue to exist, disseminating its radical ideology and message, even as its foot soldiers are being killed in the Hindu Kush.

3. “The Internet is Killing Us”

In the words of one US government observer referring to radical Islamic web sites, “Never in history has there been an opportunity where propaganda is so effective.”³¹ Yet, remarkably, the most powerful nation in the world has thus far been outwitted in the “information war” being waged by Al-Qaeda. As Richard Holbrooke, former Clinton official and Obama’s envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, asked: “How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world’s leading communications society?”³² In 2004, images of US soldiers abusing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad were posted on the Internet. Originally sent as email attachments, the images unleashed a storm of controversy, fuelling anti-American sentiment and emboldening the insurgency in Iraq. In response to questioning from the US House Armed Services Committee on the treatment of Iraqi prisoners, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated:

31 Cited in Hoffman, “The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists,” 5.

32 Richard Holbrooke, “Get the Message Out,” The Washington Post, October 2001, B07

We're functioning...with peacetime constraints, with legal requirements on a wartime situation in the Information Age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had – not even arrived in the Pentagon.....there's some other process that we haven't discovered yet that needs to be modernized to the twenty-first century, that needs to recognise the existence, in this case, of digital cameras. And trying to figure out what that is before it, too, causes something like this...this is my nightmare.³³

David Schmidtchen observes that in the case of Abu Ghraib, "Twenty-first century networked digital technology simply short-circuited twentieth century organizational practice and the actions of a few soldiers undermined US government policy over Iraq."³⁴ In September 2009, another flurry of emails and photographs exposed the lewd behaviour of US embassy guards in Kabul prompting one member of the Commission on Wartime Contracting, an independent panel set up to investigate and monitor contractors working in Iraq and Afghanistan, to comment that the "Internet is killing us."³⁵ Such incidents serve to illustrate that not only are al-Zawahiri and his cohorts using the Internet to propagate their message, but that Western policymakers can easily lose control over their own message with dramatic consequences. As Holbrooke has argued, the problem for the US is "the initial failure of our own message and the inadequacy of our messengers...The battle of ideas therefore is as important as any other aspect of the struggle we are now engaged in."³⁶

When it comes to the Internet and new media technologies, US policymakers have failed, thus far, to harness their power and potential in the service of US public diplomacy and soft power. Yet in the domestic sphere, US politicians have deployed the

33 Cited in David Schmidtchen, *The Rise of the Strategic Private: Technology, Control and Change in A Network Enabled Military* (Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, 2006), 8.

34 *Ibid.*, 8.

35 See "Embassy Scandal: A New Abu Ghraib?" *MotherJones*, available at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2009/09/embassy-scandal-new-abu-ghraib>, accessed December 14, 2009.

36 Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out."

Internet most effectively as a vital tool in waging and winning US election campaigns. In 2008, Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's campaign manager in the 2004 campaign, mused "It's the Network, Stupid!" as Barack Obama employed highly effective networked campaign warfare to outwit his opponents. Obama established lists for volunteers of local voters and recruited Chris Hughes, co-founder of Facebook, to help develop his technologies and put them at center of the campaign. Obama's campaign posted candidate speeches and multimedia material such as YouTube videos and songs on the campaign website, regularly sent out text-messages and had web links for small tasks voters could do from home, such as donating, making calls, writing letters and organising house-parties.³⁷ Obama, like many politicians, had also experienced the Internet's capacity to inflict negative publicity. In 2005, a right-wing commentator, Peggy Noonan, wrote a highly critical piece on Obama following an article he had written for TIME magazine on Abraham Lincoln, in which he expressed empathy with Lincoln's rise from poverty. The piece hit the Internet and became a favourite of right-wing websites who used it to denounce Obama's arrogance. For Obama, the episode "hinted at a more subtle and corrosive aspect of modern media – how a particular narrative, repeated over and over again and hurled through cyberspace at the speed of light, eventually becomes a hard particle of reality."³⁸

4. Digital Diplomacy

Obama's presidency and his appreciation of the power of the Internet to communicate ideas and shape narratives has led to a renewed interest in "digital diplomacy," the use of the Internet to promote US values, ideas and beliefs. Obama is America's first "digital President," an individual who not only used cyberspace effectively to get into the White House, but who understands that the effective application of America's soft power requires the harnessing of these new technologies. Both during the campaign and in his first year in office, Obama has exhibited a steely

37 See David Talbot, "How Obama Really Did It," *Technology Review*, September/October 2008, 78-83.

38 Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (Canongate Books: Edinburgh, 2008), 124.

determination to revitalize America's soft power and public diplomacy, and develop more effective information strategies to co-exist alongside the use of American military might, in stark contrast to his immediate Republican and Democrat predecessors. The Bush Administration paid little attention to concepts of soft power or public diplomacy; Donald Rumsfeld once famously declared he did not even know what soft power meant.³⁹ Bush exhibited a blind faith in the power of the US military to bomb Al-Qaeda out of existence. In the early years of the "War on Terror" waged by the Bush Administration, US military force reigned supreme, with Bush himself describing the US military as the "the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever seen."⁴⁰

In the aftermath of 9/11, as the US military began operations in Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke lamented that America's public diplomacy programs were mired in a Cold War paradigm, and that "the American public information campaign is a confused mess. Despite our nation's overwhelming supremacy in modern communications, our government primarily communicates with the Muslim world through pathetically outdated or inappropriate technologies and a bureaucratic structure that is not remotely up to the task."⁴¹ The bastion of US public diplomacy during the Cold War was the US Information Agency (USIA) established in 1953 with the principal mission being to combat Soviet propaganda and the spread of communism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War in 1991, the USIA was marginalized and its resources slashed. It was finally abolished in 1999 as part of a post-Cold War bureaucratic reorganisation, and US public diplomacy efforts became the domain of the State Department. Although intended to provide for greater coordination and unity of effort in US public diplomacy, the reforms of the 1990s have been widely criticised, with many calling for the USIA or another similar body to be reborn. Carnes Lord has observed that "there is still no real evidence that the State Department has either the vision

39 See Joseph S. Nye, Jr, "Think Again: Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, February 2006, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3393&page=0, accessed June 4, 2009.

40 Cited in Tom Engelhardt ed., *The World According to TomDispatch: America in the New Age of Empire* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), xv.

41 Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out."

or the will to conduct effective public diplomacy."⁴² Lord also notes the organizational culture of the State Department since the end of the Cold War has ensured public diplomacy is understaffed and underfunded, with US public diplomacy efforts lacking leadership. The Clinton administration did not accord public diplomacy a high priority, but 9/11 prompted a flurry of renewed interest in the subject. The Bush Administration signalled its intentions by appointing former marketing executive Charlotte Beers as Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, a position created by the organizational reforms of the 1990s. Beers, however, lacked foreign policy expertise and according to Carnes Lord, Secretary of State Colin Powell apparently took little interest in the subject.⁴³

In the weeks and months following 9/11, the US State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) produced a pamphlet entitled *The Network of Terrorism*, intended to convey the horrors of the 9/11 attacks to foreign publics and persuade them of the importance of a broad international coalition against Al-Qaeda. The pamphlet was placed on IIP's website, allowing foreign embassies and media to download sections of the document.⁴⁴ The State Department also established an Office of eDiplomacy but the most notable developments were the establishment in 2004 of Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language radio network, and its TV equivalent, Al Hurra. Although some \$12 million was spent on "rebranding" the United States after 9/11, such efforts continued to be undercut by the militaristic policies of the Bush Administration. With America mired in Iraq and a growing chorus of anti-American sentiment around the world, Bush was forced to admit in 2005 that "We're behind when it comes to selling our own story and telling people the truth about America."⁴⁵ In 2006 Donald Rumsfeld echoed Bush's comments when he commented "I would say we probably

42 Carnes Lord, "Reorganizing for public diplomacy," in Arquilla and Borer, 117.

43 Ibid., 118.

44 See Christopher Ross, "Public Diplomacy Comes of Age," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2002, 77.

45 Cited in Tony Smith, *A Pact With the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), xxiii.

deserve a D or a D-plus as a country as to how well we're doing in the battle of ideas that's taking place in the world...I'm not going to suggest its easy, but we have not found the formula as a country for countering the extremists' message."⁴⁶

Part of the Bush Administration's difficulties lay in the message and ideas it was trying to "sell". The Bush Doctrine and National Security of Strategy of 2002 had set out the Administration's "Grand Strategy," rooted in 4 key assumptions: 1) that the principal threat to US national security was a potential nexus between terrorists, rogue states and WMD; 2) that deterrence was no longer useful and future threats had to be prevented from emerging; 3) that democracies were inherently peaceful and that it was a time of great opportunity to promote democracy and 4) that the US would work with others where possible, but alone if necessary. It was these assumptions that underpinned the 2003 Iraq war that divided the international community so profoundly and fuelled anti-American sentiment around the world. For all the arguments about the threat posed by Saddam's supposed WMD, a far grander ambition lay behind the NSS and the 2003 Iraq War: a desire to remake the region in America's image, based on a belief that spreading democracy would extinguish the fires of religious fanaticism. As Tony Smith argues, the goal of the Bush Administration was nothing less than "to make history by radically altering the political and social organization of a major region of the world," the most ambitious and controversial democratization agenda any US President had sought to undertake. Although democracy promotion and liberal internationalism are deeply rooted in America's foreign policy traditions, the Bush Doctrine was "a manifest case of imperial hubris," that sought not to promote democracy, but impose it, and in the process entrench America's global supremacy.⁴⁷ Fanning the flames of discontent still further was the Bush Administration's belief that it was legitimate to act outside of international laws and institutions when they threatened to

46 Ibid. xxiii.

47 Ibid., xi- xxi

constrain America's freedom of action.⁴⁸ Along with the invasion of Iraq, events at Bagram Air Base, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha and elsewhere inflamed Arab and Muslim opinion and helped fuel a growing backlash against the United States and its allies. Far from being seen as a benevolent hegemon, America was seen by many as a rogue state, a Pax Americana seeking to reorder the world in its own image.⁴⁹

It was within this context that Beers's successor Karen Hughes established a program called Public Diplomacy 2.0 that sought to embrace social networking sites and other web tools to win the "war of ideas". As part of the program the State Department's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau established its own Facebook page, while a 10-person Digital Outreach Team (DOT) was established on blogs and websites in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and other languages. The DOT was designed to help counter ideological support for terrorism on Arabic-language blogs and websites by posting online comments with the purpose of creating "engaging, informal personas for its online discussions instead of simply making dry policy pronouncements. It contrasts objective facts and analysis with the often emotional, conspiracy laden arguments of U.S. critics in hopes that online readers will take a fresh look at their opinions of the U.S."⁵⁰ In 2007, the State Department established its own official blog, DipNote, while blogs and exchanges have also included posts on the blog of the media adviser to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In August 2008, the DOT participated in an online exchange with Ali Akbar Javanfekr, the Iranian president's media adviser, on Javanfekr's blog, with the entire transcript of the blog subsequently published in Iran.⁵¹ Colleen Graffy, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of

48 See Phillipe Sands, *Torture Team: Deception, Cruelty and the Compromise of Law*, London: Allen Lane, 2008.

49 For more on the debate over America's status as a "rogue state" see William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*; Noam Chomsky, *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in Global Affairs*, Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*

50 See "Digital Outreach Team," <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/116709.pdf>. See also Colleen Graffy, "The Rise of Public Diplomacy 2.0," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Fall 2009, No. 17, available at <http://www.securityaffairs.org/issues/2009/17/graffy.php>, accessed January 2, 2009.

51 See http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/entries/public_diplomacy_bloggers_call/, accessed December 22, 2009.

State for public diplomacy, has argued that the emergence of Public Diplomacy 2.0 is evidence that the US is "finally moving from a nostalgic longing for a recreation of the old USIA to its reincarnation in a new-look State Department where policy and public diplomacy are merged and the use of new technology second nature."⁵²

Despite such innovations, by the end of the Bush years the US was continuing to massively under-fund its soft power capabilities and resources. Even Robert Gates, Bush's Secretary of Defense who was retained by Obama, has lamented the dearth of funding for soft power, claiming that "America's civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long, relative to what we spend on the military." The result, he noted, has been the "creeping militarization of some aspects of America's foreign policy," and he has warned that "over the long term, we cannot kill or capture our way to victory."⁵³ Although increased funding for soft power resources and programs like Public Diplomacy 2.0 is needed, it will not overcome the fundamental problem afflicting US public and digital diplomacy programs that became evident during the Bush years. The "listening tour" that Hughes embarked on in 2005 which sought to reach out to the Arab and Islamic world betrayed the administration's cultural ignorance and insensitivity, and was, according to R Zaharna, widely perceived as a failure, demonstrating little understanding of how the US and its policies are perceived in the world.⁵⁴ The problem for Hughes and the administration was twofold: a hostile audience that was unreceptive to the aggressive marketing of the US, and policies that sat at odds with the "friendly" image the administration as trying to craft. As Zaharna has noted,

U.S. public diplomacy appeared to have little understanding or appreciation for the intended audiences. The Muslim world, along with Islam, was viewed as a broad, monolithic

52 Graffy, "The Rise of Public Diplomacy 2.0."

53 See William Matthews, "Can Obama Get Results From Soft Power"? January 19, 2009, DefenseNews, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3907876&c=FEA&s=SPE>

54 R. S. Zaharna, "Obama, U.S., Public Diplomacy and the Islamic World," World Politics Review, 16 March 2009, 2.

mass, unfamiliar and undefined. By using religion as the lowest common denominator to identify its target audience, U.S. public diplomacy inadvertently united 1.3 billion people, who happened to be of a particular faith, in a shared fate and renewed sense of identity. Similarly, and equally ironically, U.S. public diplomacy's drive to promote American culture and values may have inadvertently fueled an awakening across the Islamic world to protect and promote their own cultures and values.⁵⁵

5. Obama's Whiz-Kids and 21st Century Statecraft

With the coming to power of an administration that seems to have embraced concepts of soft power and public diplomacy, there are signs that the US is beginning to more effectively leverage new media technologies – although many of the problems that plagued the Bush Administration's efforts remain, not least audiences in the Arab and Islamic world that remain cynical and sceptical about America's policies and motivations. In 2009 Hillary Clinton, Obama's Secretary of State, launched the State Department's "21st century statecraft" initiative, using YouTube and text-messaging to engage American citizens. Alec Ross, Clinton's Senior Adviser on Innovation and Jared Cohen, a member of Clinton's Policy Planning Staff, are pioneering the State Department's technology-enabled approach to diplomacy. Cohen, brought into the State Department by Condoleezza Rice, has rapidly established himself as a specialist in the use of technology to advance and promote US interests worldwide. It was Cohen who intervened in June 2009 to request that the social networking site Twitter postpone a maintenance operation scheduled for the days following the Iranian presidential election, in order to allow those protesting to continue the "Twitter Revolution," using the network to plan anti-government protests. Although the Twitter outreach was important, it was also heavily symbolic, and Obama was widely criticized for having done little else to support Iran's burgeoning protest movement.⁵⁶

55 Zaharna, 3.

56 See for example Helle C. Dale, "The Iranian Elections and Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Tale of Untapped Potential," Heritage Foundation WebMemo 2497, June 19, 2009.

Despite the lacklustre efforts to support the protest movement in Iran, Nancy Scola argues that “together with an informal but growing band of like-minded staffers, Cohen and Ross are shaping a rebooted technology-assisted diplomacy that is laying the groundwork for human-to-human engagement.”⁵⁷ Ross and Cohen’s initiatives have included improving the DipNote blog and translating Obama’s speeches and online “tweets” into dozens of languages. They have also helped establish a Virtual Student Foreign Service, which allows tech-savvy students in the US to work with US embassies around the world in building American web and social networking presence. In April 2009 Cohen led a delegation of social media developers to Baghdad, and efforts are increasing to “wire up” more remote parts of the world, promoting communications infrastructure such as the SEACOM undersea fibre optic cable linking East Africa to Europe and Asia. Obama’s Cairo speech that called for greater respect for, and engagement with, the Muslim world was a classic example of how the administration is using social media technologies to promote its message and construct an alternative narrative to that offered by groups like Al-Qaeda. The speech was instantaneously wired around the world, via social networking sites, podcasts, and a live Webcast on the White House’s Web site. Updates via text message reached 20,000 non-US citizens in over 200 countries around the world, with the texts being available in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and eight other languages. In addition, translated versions of the speech were available to download on YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, and the South Asian social networking site Orkut. The White House used Facebook to conduct an international discussion on the event, while responses to the speech submitted via text messages were compiled and later posted on America.gov.⁵⁸

Following the Haitian earthquake, Hillary Clinton identified communication technologies as playing a critical role in the US response effort. Not only did the US help set up a text “HAITI” campaign allowing Americans to donate funds to the relief effort via mobile phone, raising over \$40 million, but interactive maps

57 Scola, “The Next Diplomatic Cable.”

58 See Dale, “The Iranian Elections and Public Diplomacy 2.0.”

were established to help aid workers identify needs and target resources.⁵⁹ In November 2009, Clinton also launched the Civil Society 2.0 initiative in Morocco, which aims to offer training and advice to local NGOs around the world on how to use the Internet and social media more effectively. In Afghanistan, both the State Department and Pentagon are working with the private sector to expand mobile-phone banking in Afghanistan, as a means of facilitating the payment of police and security forces, something that has already been done with some success in Africa.⁶⁰ Both Ross and Cohen see mobile phones as critical tools to facilitate education, banking and election monitoring, and have sought to export the program in Afghanistan to the Congo. For Ross and Cohen, digital diplomacy is the future of US foreign policy; Ross has even gone so far as to claim "if Paul Revere were alive today, he wouldn't have taken a Midnight ride from Boston to Lexington, he would have just used Twitter."⁶¹

Such bold claims aside, Ross and Cohen are driving efforts to target the "youth generation" that has formed the bulwark of democratic protest movements in countries like Iran – and to which Al-Qaeda is increasingly is looking for its next generation of recruits. For Cohen

there is this global youth identity that exists...because young people are the lowest common denominator, that's our avenue for engagement. Young people in these societies are extremely accessible, with the technology boom they are extremely reachable, they are open and willing to interact with other people and they're craving knowledge and craving alternatives in the absence of educational opportunities on the one hand, and social recreational opportunities on the other. The digital age is our opportunity...this is the very first generation socialised into societies with a high prevalence of

59 See Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on Internet Freedom," The Newseum, Washington DC, January 21, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>, accessed January 27, 2010.

60 See "Afghanistan Central Bank and U.S. Advance Afghan Mobile Banking," USAID, available at <http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Article.736.aspx>, accessed January 27, 2010.

61 Alec Ross, "U.S. Diplomacy in the Age of Facebook and Twitter: An Address on 21st Century Statecraft," The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, December 17, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/c/remarks/135352.htm>, accessed January 4, 2010.

satellite TVs, mobile phones and Internet...they don't use the technologies so much to get information as much as to basically create alternatives and spaces for interactions and basic freedoms that they don't necessarily have in their societies. This is the most emancipated group of young people that we have ever seen in our lifetime...the digital opening that is provided for them gives them a space for them to create alternatives for themselves.⁶²

But despite the progress made by the Obama Administration, it is also increasingly cognizant of the limitations of the Internet as a tool of US public diplomacy and foreign policy. It is certainly not a panacea; Internet penetration in the Middle East stands at 17%, lower than the global average.⁶³ Iran and Syria, leading state sponsors of terrorism, are among the countries least connected to the Internet, while the censorship of Google by countries such as China has also exposed the problems inherent in harnessing cyberspace to reach out to others.⁶⁴ Clinton recently made clear the Obama Administration's commitment to Internet freedom in a speech in Washington in which she asserted "Countries that restrict free access to information or violate the basic rights of Internet users risk walling themselves off from the progress of the next century."⁶⁵ For some, the Internet is now "a pawn in an international public policy debate that could create rifts between nations so deep they lay the foundations for future wars."⁶⁶ China responded to Clinton's criticisms with allegations of "information imperialism" and warnings that her remarks were considered "harmful to China-US relations."⁶⁷

62 Jared Cohen, "Children of Jihad on BBC Morning Show," YouTube, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqksHJfOECI>, accessed January 4, 2010.

63 See Kenneth Payne, "Winning the Battle of Ideas: Propaganda, Ideology and Terror," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 32, 2009, 114.

64 As little as 10% of Iran's population and 6% of Syria's population have access.

65 Clinton, "Remarks on Internet Freedom". See also Jane McCartney, "China set to ignore Google demands for end to censorship," *Times Online*, January 14, 2010, available at http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/the_web/article6987377.ece, accessed January 14, 2010.

66 Aleks Krotoski, "Democratic, but dangerous too: how the web changed our world," *The Observer*, January 24, 2010, 28.

67 "China condemns 'groundless' US criticism of web control," *BBC News*, January 22, 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8474011.stm>, accessed January 27, 2010.

Moreover, as the US becomes increasingly dependent on the internet, it also exposes itself to the inherent risks it brings. Evgeny Morozov, an ardent critic of digital diplomacy, has accused Obama's whiz-kids of sweeping the dangers of Facebook and Twitter under the carpet, pointing out they empower America's adversaries as well as pro-Western groups. Cohen responded to Morozov's criticism by criticizing his calls for a more cautious approach, stating "What the Evgeny Morozov's of the world don't understand is that whether anybody likes it or not, the private sector is pumping out innovation like crazy...The 21st century is a terrible time to be a control freak."⁶⁸ Yet, there is little doubt the Internet has very real national security risks that cannot be ignored. Russia's cyber attack on Estonia in 2007, which blocked the web sites of a number of banks as well as the Prime Minister's own website, and a further one against Georgia during the 2008 conflict, fuelled debate over the potential for cyberwar.⁶⁹ A CSIS report claims there were 33 "significant" cyber events in the US between May 2006 – August 2009 affecting government agencies, defense and high tech programs, or economic crimes with losses of more than a million dollars, including reported North Korean attacks against South Korean and US government websites.⁷⁰ In January 2008 the Bush Administration published the Comprehensive National Cyber Security Initiative, designed to protect government agencies and departments from attacks and anticipate future threats. In May 2009, following a major review of America's digital infrastructure, Obama described America's digital networks as a "national strategic asset," and appointed Howard Schmit to the new position of Cyber Coordinator, tasked with coordinating cyber

68 See Jesse Lichtenstein, 'Digital Diplomacy,' The New York Times, July 12, 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/magazine/18web2-0-t.html>

69 See for example Kertu Ruus, "Cyber War I: Estonia Attacked from Russia," European Affairs, Winter/Spring 2008, available at <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/Winter/Spring-2008/cyber-war-i-estonia-attacked-from-russia.html>; Greg Bruno, "The Evolution of Cyber Warfare," Council on Foreign Relations, February 27, 2008, available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/15577/evolution_of_cyber_warfare.html; "FBI: U.S. facing 'cybergeddon,'" Homeland Security Newswire, January 7, 2009, available at <http://homelandsecuritynewswire.com/fbi-us-facing-cybergeddon>

70 "Significant Cyber Events Since 2006," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, June 12, 2009, available at http://csis.org/files/publication/090717_cyber_events_since_2006.pdf

security policy across the federal government.⁷¹ In 2009, the Pentagon also established the first ever Cyber Command designed to protect the US military's networks and launch offensive cyber attacks against potential enemies. Richard Clarke, the Former Special Adviser on Cybersecurity to President Bush, has argued that "No nation is as dependent on cyber systems and networks for the operation of its infrastructure, economy and military as the United States. Yet, few national governments have less control over what goes on in its cyberspace than Washington. And these major lapses in our defense present a threat we ignore at extremely high cost." For Clarke, the US has yet to develop an effective cyber defense strategy, with the new Cyber Command focused mainly on protecting the Defense Department, leaving the Department of Homeland Security to focus on private-sector infrastructure, which at present, it is ill-equipped to do.⁷² Whether the appointment of Obama's Cyber Coordinator will result in a more comprehensive approach and an effective cyber strategy remains to be seen, but there is little doubt that doing so will be vital to ensuring the United States does not find its growing reliance on cyberspace undermined by hackers, criminals and terrorist networks.

6. Blogs and Bullets

Given the potential for America's enemies to launch cyber attacks, promote jihadi propaganda and stifle Internet freedom, new media technologies are certainly not, as Clinton noted, an "unmitigated blessing,"⁷³ and America's increasing reliance on the Internet as a central tool of its foreign policy is fraught with dangers. Digital diplomacy and the use of social media technology is no magic bullet, but in a world that, as Ross notes, has "gone

71 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on securing our nation's cyber infrastructure," May 29, 2009, The White House, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-Securing-Our-Nations-Cyber-Infrastructure/, accessed January 27, 2010.

72 Richard Clarke, "War from Cyberspace," The National Interest Online, December 22, 2009, available at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=22340>, accessed January 28, 2010.

73 Clinton, "Remarks on Internet Freedom."

past the tipping point of global connectedness,"⁷⁴ it is not whether but how the US embraces it that will be key. While digital diplomacy is being pioneered by the State Department, the Pentagon has also become increasingly cognizant of the importance of information strategies and new media technologies. General David Petraeus, architect of the "surge" strategy in Iraq and now CENTCOM Commander, has played a key role in pioneering strategic communications and "Information Operations" (IO). For Petraeus, the heart of strategic communications is being "first with the truth – even on bad days," presenting a compelling and truthful message about US operations in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in an effort to convince locals that their interests lie with the US, and not insurgent and terrorist groups.⁷⁵ In June 2009, Richard Holbrooke, Obama's Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan and a long-time advocate of more a more robust propaganda strategy to counter Al-Qaeda, claimed before the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs that

Under General Petraeus' and my leadership, we are implementing a new integrated civilian-military strategic communications effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This effort will focus on three simultaneous goals: redefining our message; connecting to the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan on the ground in new ways through cell phones, radio, and other means; and identifying and supporting key communicators who are able, through local narratives, to counter extremists' propaganda and present a positive alternative.⁷⁶

A recent report entitled "*Blogs and Bullets*" by the US Army War College has also observed – remarkably – that "Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and blogs have become as important to the strategic outcome of military operations as bullets, troops and air power."

74 Ross, 'U.S. Diplomacy in the Age of Facebook and Twitter: An Address on 21st Century Statecraft.'

75 See "What I learned in Iraq, and how it applies to Afghanistan," The Christian Science Monitor, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/0422/petraeus-what-i-learned-in-iraq-and-how-it-applies-to-afghanistan>, accessed January 27, 2010.

76 Cited in John Brown, "Strategic Communications and the Graveyard of Empire," available at <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&folder=3132&paper=3150>, accessed December 22, 2009.

The report describes new media as a “warfighting enabler” and today’s generation of soldier, sailor, airman and marine as “digital natives,” but led by a generation of “digital immigrants” deeply ingrained in the schools of conventional combat and kinetic means of warfighting.⁷⁷

In many respects, the Pentagon has been ahead of the State Department in its recognition of the importance of new media. As early as 2003, the Pentagon, under the leadership of Donald Rumsfeld, wrote an “Information Operations Roadmap,” which called for the military to be able to conduct information operations and electronic warfare. The report noted that

Effectively communicating US Government intentions and capabilities is an important means of combating the plans of our adversaries. The ability to rapidly disseminate information to diverse audiences to directly influence their decision-making is an increasingly powerful means of deterring aggression. Additionally, it undermines both senior leadership and popular support for employing terrorist or using weapons of mass destruction.⁷⁸

It argued that Psychological Operations (Psyops) personnel should utilize a range of technologies to disseminate propaganda in enemy territory, including unmanned aerial vehicles, miniaturized, scatterable public address systems, wireless devices, cellular phones and the Internet, and called for the US military to “Fight the net” as it would an enemy weapons system.⁷⁹ In recent years the US military has come to recognise that the centre of gravity in the current operational environment is public opinion, and not Kandahar, Helmand, Tora Bora or elsewhere. In 2008, the Pentagon launched an IO initiative involving the setting up of a global network of foreign-language

77 Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *Bullets and Blogs: New media and the warfighter*, Center for Strategic Leadership, US Army War College, 2009, ix, available at http://www.csl.army.mil/usacsl/publications/Bullets_Blogs_new_Media_warfighterWeb_20_Oct_09.pdf, accessed December 19, 2009.

78 *Information Operations Roadmap*, US Department of Defense, October 2009, 3-4, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/27_01_06_psyops.pdf, accessed December 19, 2009.

79 See Adam Brooks, “US Plans to fight the net revealed,” BBC News, January 27, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4655196.stm>, accessed December 19, 2009.

news websites, including an Arabic site for Iraqis, Mawtani.com. It has also begin hiring local journalists to write current events stories and other content designed to advance US interests and counter enemy propaganda.

The Iraqi site builds on previous Pentagon-sponsored native-language news websites in Africa and the Balkans, the purpose of which is to "control the message." Michael Vickers, Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of special operations and stabilization efforts, has commented "It's important to & engage these foreign audiences and inform. Our adversaries use the Internet to great advantage, so we have the responsibility of countering (their messages) with accurate, truthful information, and these websites are a good vehicle." The websites are part of the Pentagon's "Trans Regional Web Initiative," which is establishing news websites to be run by the Pentagon's regional military commands. Based on the premise that "Youngsters on the street are into the World Wide Web — that's how they communicate, how they learn what's going on in the world, how they stay informed..." the Pentagon believes that "We have to be involved in that in order to communicate effectively."⁸⁰ The task for the military today, according to the Blogs & Bullets report, is not to "remove the message" by taking down enemy websites or blocking radio and satellite TV transmissions, but to "respond to the message." Military bloggers are being encouraged to shape the narrative by telling their story to those back home, while for hostile audiences, third party validators – messengers trusted by their home audiences, independent of the US military but generally supportive of US positions and policies – are seen as "force multipliers," enhancing US strategic communication efforts.⁸¹

80 See Peter Eisler, "Pentagon launches foreign news websites," USA Today, April 30, 2008, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2008-04-30-sites_N.htm, accessed December 19, 2009.

81 Collings and Rohozinski, *Bullets and Blogs*, 4. For a discussion of the impact of military blogs see also Major Elizabeth L. Robbins, "Muddy Boots OI: The Rise of the Soldier Blogs," *Military Review*, 87: 5, Sep/Oct 2007, 109-118.

7. Words and Deeds

Despite the various efforts of the State Department and Pentagon to harness new media technologies and put them at the centre of US foreign and defense policy, the challenges facing the US and its allies remain daunting. This reality was starkly reinforced when Obama's Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale sat down with a Pakistani journalist in a hotel in Karachi in August 2009, as part of Obama's strategy to convince the people of Pakistan the US is "their friend". Following a presentation by McHale on building bridges between America and the Muslim world, the Pakistani journalist is reported to have responded: "You should know that we hate all Americans. From the bottom of our souls, we hate you."⁸² No amount of digital diplomacy, blogging or tweeting is likely to undo decades of hostile anti-Americanism or convert the hard-line radical terrorist into a Western-loving peacemaker. As Ross himself has admitted, you cannot "just sprinkle the Internet on a foreign policy challenge and get a good outcome."⁸³ It will take more than Clinton's admonitions to students at Barnard College to "get busy on the Internet," following the sentencing of two TV reporters in a North Korean labour camp, to counter terrorist propaganda on the Internet; and it will take more than simply allowing Americans to text \$5 donations to refugees in Pakistan's Swat Valley.⁸⁴ Such efforts will be futile if US policy and strategy does not match the rhetoric and narratives being disseminated through cyberspace. While investing energy and resources into public diplomacy and information strategies is critical in providing an alternative narrative to that propagated by Al-Qaeda and radical Islamists, words will only resonate if backed up by deeds. As Patrick Porter notes, "messages and images are not free-floating commodities. They rely on actions for their currency. Statements of good intentions have limited value if they clash with behaviour."⁸⁵

82 Cited in James K. Glassman, "It's Not About Us," *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2009, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/01/its_not_about_us, accessed January 3, 2010.

83 Cited in Lichenstein, 'Digital Diplomacy.'

84 See Scola, "The Next Diplomatic Cable."

85 Patrick Porter, "Long wars and long telegrams: containing Al-Qaeda," *International Affairs*, 85: 2, 2009, 292.

Hostility towards the United States from terrorist groups, as well as public opinion in some Arab and Western nations, stems from a complex array of factors, including long-standing support for Israel, the US military presence in the Middle East, its enormous cultural reach and influence, and military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. To be truly effective the efforts of both the State Department and the Pentagon must be backed up by much broader and deep-seated shifts in US foreign policy. The Obama Administration has gone some way towards doing this, but the structural impediments to substantive policy change in US foreign policy run deep, and it is likely to take more than a year or two before the efforts of Obama and his administration begin to demonstrate tangible results. As Owen Barron notes, in the US political system “the synthesis of public diplomacy and communication with policy revision is a tricky marriage and one that tends to result in more incremental, minor changes instead of large shifts in policy.”⁸⁶ The promotion of democracy and other Western liberal values all too often sits at odds with US support for repressive regimes. For all the rhetoric about a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian question, the limits of Obama’s approach were harshly exposed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s resistance to administration demands for it to stop construction of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as by Hamas’ continued use of missiles, in spite of Obama’s condemnation.

For narratives to be credible, they have to be believable. The Bush administration’s digital diplomacy efforts failed largely because US actions and the rhetoric coming from the administration were at odds with the message the State Department was trying to craft. President Obama has gone some way to closing this gap between words and deeds. With his African heritage and Indonesian upbringing, Obama certainly has a very different worldview from his predecessor, one grounded in greater respect for, and sensitivity towards, other cultures.⁸⁷ As

86 Owen Barron, “A New Approach: Engaging the Muslim World Through Public Diplomacy,” *Harvard International Review*, Winter 2007, 33.

87 For more on how Obama’s background has shaped his world view see David Remnick, *The Bridge*, London: Picador, 2010; Carl Pederson, *Obama’s America*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Zarharna notes, the message the Obama Administration is sending through its digital and public diplomacy programs is “one of open hands rather than clenched fists.”⁸⁸ Despite the legal difficulties Obama has encountered in closing Guantanamo Bay, the administration’s outlawing of torture techniques pursued by the Bush Administration and its emphasis on due process and the rule of law has gone some way to giving substance to Obama’s pledge that “we reject as false the gap between our safety and our ideals.” On the other hand, however, the continued use of military force in Afghanistan and the administration’s stepping up of the predator drone program threaten to undermine the narrative the administration is trying to promote. Balancing such narratives with the requirements of national security is no easy task and Obama is treading a delicate path between his desire to change America’s image and the realities of a dangerous and unstable world. Despite pursuing a policy of constructive engagement with Iran, Obama’s efforts have thus far been met with an iron fist, while Obama’s cautious response to the Iranian election protests would hardly have encouraged the “youth generation” the administration’s whiz-kids are trying to reach out to.

There is a further problem for the advocates of digital diplomacy. Not only do words need to be backed up by shifts in policy and approach, but there also needs to be a demand for the narratives they are trying to create. As Evgeny Morozov has argued, “By shifting their outreach campaigns to Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, the government may be trying to do the impossible, i.e. to plant carefully worded and controlled messages on platforms that sprang up precisely to avoid the kind of influence that the State Department seeks to exert via them.” Morozov remains skeptical, as do many others, as to the actual impact such efforts will have, suggesting that simply increasing the number of staffers sat at their computers tweeting and blogging away, “obfuscates the real problem, which is the lack of demand for these ideas in the first place, especially after the Iraq debacle. One of the goals of Public Diplomacy 2.0 should then be to create and then augment this demand rather than to infinitely grow the supply side of the

equation.”⁸⁹ The very values that the US seeks to export and promote through Public Diplomacy 2.0 – democracy, individualism and free-market capitalism – are often those which arouse such hostility in the audiences they are trying to reach. During the Cold War such values were aspired to by millions living behind the Iron Curtain, but their projection into the Arab and Muslim world has fuelled resentment and anger, with the United States all too often guilty of assuming that the values that underpin the American Creed are universal ones, readily exportable to the rest of the world. The ubiquity of American culture and the secular, commercial and material values that underpin Western societies, coupled with often aggressive, militarized policies, have meant that American exceptionalism no longer has the allure it once had in many quarters of the world. As the Indonesian defense minister, Juwono Sudarsono, protested to Donald Rumsfeld in 2006, “The United States is overbearing and over-present and overwhelming in many nations and cultures.”⁹⁰ This is something Obama intuitively understands. Rhetorically, he remains wedded to the American exceptionalist discourse, proclaiming like others before him that America is the “last, best hope on earth.” There are indications, however, that Obama understands the limits to America’s power and reach in an increasingly “post-American world”. “Respect” and “listening” have thus far been the buzzwords of the administration’s effort public diplomacy efforts, and there has been a clear emphasis in Public Diplomacy 2.0 on “engagement” rather than “controlling” the narrative. Unlike the Bush administration, the Obama administration appears to grasp that the social networking technologies at the heart of these programs facilitate multidirectional conversations, not one-way attempts to “control” the message. The very nature of the Internet mitigates against such control; the proponents of digital diplomacy intuitively understand that “You do not actually control the message, and if

89 Evgeny Morozov, “The future of Public Diplomacy 2.0.”, *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2009, available at http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/06/09/the_future_of_public_diplomacy_20, accessed January 3, 2010.

90 Cited in Nathan Gardels and Mike Medavoy, *American Idol After Iraq*, Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, Sussex, 2009, 61.

you believe you control the message, It merely means you no longer understand what's going on."⁹¹

8. Conclusion

The coming to power of the Obama administration heralded a much needed reinvigoration of America's public diplomacy and a recognition that the Internet and social media should be at the forefront of efforts to craft an alternative narrative to that propagated by Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamists. Obama's Whiz-kids have taken to heart the notion that "it is not whose Army wins, but whose story wins."⁹² However, the challenge for the administration remains coordinating, both within the US machinery of government and with allies, a more intensive and focused effort on crafting a message that will appeal to the disaffected youth of the Muslim world and elsewhere. The US must also ensure that its public diplomacy efforts work in sync with its foreign and defense policies and that words are backed by meaningful and appropriate actions, so that the US "story" does not, once again, become part of the problem. As Zaharna notes, "...the most daunting hurdle for U.S. public diplomacy is not developing innovative ways to reach out to the Muslim world, but rather, reconciling inconsistencies between U.S. foreign policy and U.S. public diplomacy."⁹³ Given the challenges the US faces, recommendations to re-create a separate institution dedicated to public diplomacy must be taken seriously, one that can coordinate the myriad of information operations being carried out and with particular emphasis on the use of the Internet and social media technologies. Such an institution should "be charged with monitoring, analysis, exposure, and countering of adversary propaganda and disinformation activities – an occasional USIA function in the past, mostly in wartime, but now arguably required on a sustained basis."⁹⁴

91 See Lichtenstein, 'Digital Diplomacy.'

92 See "US Faces Challenges and Weaknesses in Foreign Perceptions," Voice of America, March 5, 2010, available at <http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/US-Faces-Challenges-and-Weaknesses-In-Foreign-Perceptions-86582372.html>, accessed March 9, 2010.

93 Zaharna, 6.

94 Lord, "Reorganizing for Public Diplomacy," 122-123. See also Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists," 20.

It is ultimately in the strength and appeal of the message, rather than the sheer volume of tweets, blogs and texts, that the US will begin to shape – and not control – the narrative in a more favourable manner. It is clear that since coming to office in January 2009, Barack Obama is committed to changing the very idea of America around the world. Instead of lecturing to others about the superiority of American values, the Obama administration is seeking to craft an alternative message that presents the United States as a benign force for good in the world, one power amongst many, rather than a bullying hegemon dictating to, and dominating, others. The US State Department – as part of the 21st Century Statecraft initiative – is using new media technologies to engage in “digital conversations” with those who have often felt alienated and bullied by grand assertions that “freedom” is the answer to the world’s problems. While the Internet is no “magic bullet,” it does have an important role to play in a world that is increasingly wired up, in which new and emerging technologies are transforming global communications. As Anne-Marie Slaughter, Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department has argued, “The emerging networked world of the twenty-first century, however, exists above the state, below the state, and through the state. In this world, the state with the most connections will be the central player, able to set the global agenda and unlock innovation and sustainable growth.”⁹⁵ Digital diplomacy is only likely to grow in importance as a key lever of state power and a vital tool of US foreign policy, one cog in a large wheel that sits alongside the more traditional “hard” levers of state power. Digital diplomacy is an important innovation but it does have its limits: it will not prevent terrorist attacks nor will it eliminate deep-seated and hostile anti-Americanism, the causes of which are many and varied. But if used appropriately, the Internet and social networking technologies can play an important part in reaching out and engaging those who perceive America to be part of the problem, rather than the solution, and can help foster a debate

95 Anne-Marie Slaughter, ‘America’s Edge: Power in the Networked Century,’ *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63722/anne-marie-slaughter/americas-edge>

and a discourse that discredits the message of radical Islamist extremists, while shaping a compelling and credible alternative.

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