Submission No 3

Review of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2009 - 2010

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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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To: The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Sub: Review of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2009-2010

From: Prakash Mirchandani, Managing Director, Media Gurus.

Australia's public diplomacy and e-diplomacy

Key points:

1) Diplomatic missions should be seen in a totally different light - as resources that can use public diplomacy to connect directly with citizens and influential networks in host countries, to promote Australia's international and regional interests. The emphasis on bilateral engagement by posts should be reviewed.

2) DFAT should post staff overseas for periods that are long enough – perhaps up to of eight years - to enable them to master the language and culture of the countries to which they are sent.

3) This would enable DFAT to position diplomats as 'nodes of trust', who engage much more profoundly and with a much wider cross-section of the host populations than they do at the moment.

4) The department needs to ensure it has access to linguists and cultural experts in specific areas who can, with fluency and knowledge, engage in debates on New Media websites

5) DFAT needs to create 'clusters' of experts in New Media technologies, combined with subject matter specialists and strategic communicators who can be directed to any particular issue. *These clusters do not need to be geographically co-located*.

6) A key task of these clusters would be to identify and engage with current and emerging nodes of trust in countries and areas of direct interest.

7) Former senior executives (military, political, public service) should be enlisted to reinforce such teams with their knowledge of the culture and language of specific audiences.

8) Diplomatic missions should also tap into public-private partnerships with a host of Australian private sector companies and organisations who have networks that are parallel to and, in some cases, more credible than those of government.

9) Training in New Media techniques and strategic communication should be mandated at all levels of the Australian Public Service.

10) All senior officers involved in policy or strategic activities that have potential public impacts should be given in-depth presentations on how New Media technologies can be harnessed effectively.

11) These senior officers should also have access to New Media mentors – specialist communications advisers who can translate emerging technologies and New Media issues

12) Government should also take a more creative approach to the teaching of languages in the schools curriculum, to provide the bedrock of expertise for the next generation of leaders and diplomats, who will already be what are termed 'digital natives', expert in the internet and social media practices of tomorrow.

13) A whole new way of evaluating public diplomacy needs to be created – one which examines outcomes as opposed to outputs.

14) The current tender for a satellite television channel (The Australia Network) should be reviewed for more imaginative and effective alternatives.

Our Credentials

•   Media Gurus specialises in the delivery of public diplomacy, public advocacy and strategic communications training and consultancies to Federal Government departments and agencies.

•   We have in the past conducted public diplomacy workshops for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and have written a public advocacy handbook for DFAT which was released for departmental use late in 2006.

•   We also run strategic communications workshops and consultancies for a range of other government clients as well as, in the recent past, for SES officers through the Australian Public Service Commission.

•   Media Gurus' Managing Director, Prakash Mirchandani, is a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. He is also a visiting lecturer to the Australian Defence College on Strategic Communications. His area of research is on the impact of new media technologies on Public diplomacy, strategic communication and national security. His recent paper "Reporting War, Waging Peace: The Impact of new media technologies" published by the SDSC, can be viewed at:
http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sdsc/papers/Reporting_War_Waging_Peace_Paper.pdf

Mr Mirchandani has worked in several countries as a journalist and foreign correspondent, including India, the United Kingdom and Australia, with the BBC and the ABC. As a working journalist and through his training activities for government, Mr Mirchandani has developed a unique insight into government public diplomacy programs not only in Australia, but internationally.

In addition, as the first Head of News for the Australia Television Service into Asia Mr Mirchandani was able to observe at first hand the impact of Australia's image in parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia's public diplomacy and e-diplomacy

DFAT's latest (2009-2010) annual report claims the department spends nearly $65.9 million on public diplomacy. However, our understanding is that this figure includes administered items, grants and one-off payments for events such as Expos and the like. Furthermore the annual contract payments to the ABC to deliver the Australia Network Asia-Pacific Television network costs the department around $20 million.

In fact the department's operational budget for its small public diplomacy Branch is probably around $5 million.

The reality is that of a highly conservative and risk-averse organisation caught in the paradigm of the past, where public diplomacy is measured more in *outputs* than in *outcomes*.

When the department claims in its latest Annual Report that it responded to 8745 inquiries from domestic and foreign media outlets, it begs the question as to the *outcomes* of those inquiries. What sort of media resulted from this interaction? Was there a strategic basis in dealing with the response, which furthered Australia's national interests?

How much influence did Australia exert and extend as a result of these inquiries?

Indeed, how many of the inquiries were from international media, as opposed to the vigorous pursuit of the domestic media which seems to dominate the activities of the Parliamentary and Media Branch.

The Annual Report and the department are silent on this matter.

Under its heading of "International Public diplomacy" the Department points to "rebuilding Australia's image in India following attacks on Indian students in Australia" as its single greatest diplomacy challenge of the year. It boasts of leading an Interdepartmental Committee to coordinate a whole of government public diplomacy strategy for India.

Yet the details of this strategy, or its efficacy to date, remain opaque. There is no evidence that the department has engaged with Key Influencers and Third Party advocates in the Indian subcontinent to enlist their support.

One of the Key Influencers in the early stages in the wake of the murder of Indian student Nitin Garg was iconic Indian Film personality Amitabh Bachchan. Mr Bachchan declined an honorary degree from the Queensland University of Technology. Mr Bachchan is one of the most significant influence leaders in India today. There is no evidence of the Department having approached him.

Indeed, the whole issue of Indian students also highlights DFAT's tentative approach to the world of social media, which the Department has yet to engage. The rest of the world is far ahead of Australia in this use of new technologies.......

When a 28 year old US state department official Jared Cohen telephones the 33 year old entrepreneur who runs the website Twitter, and persuades him to postpone a maintenance

shutdown so that news, pictures and messages from protests in Iran can reach the outside world, we are on the edge of a new paradigm of public diplomacy.[1]

When the United Nations launches an investigation as a result of mobile phone videos posted on the internet, which leads to the departure of an African dictator, we see the global impact that social media can play in international affairs.

When Greenpeace and other worldwide activist organisations can stand up to powerful business interests in India and force the government to abandon support for an industrial plant in a sensitive tribal area, we are seeing internet lobbying in action, which bypasses state-to-state dialogue.

When the Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao becomes the world's first Departmental head to enter into an active Twitter dialogue with citizens both at home and abroad, we are seeing innovation and boldness from former bastions of conservatism.

Already, we are seeing new usages of this technology to tear down the veils of government secrecy and to inspire uprisings in disenfranchised youth in the Middle East.

And when we see China announce a breathtaking expansion of both its newsgathering and internet television broadcasting services, and its rival India acquiring assets such as Virgin radio, buying a share in Bloomberg television and joint venturing with Stephen Spielberg, we are witnessing the rise of a form of soft power, which it behoves this country to stand up and pay attention to.

Half of humanity is under 30. Within the next decade Chinese will overtake North Americans as the largest users of the Internet. Indians will be the second largest community online. The predominant languages forecast for the net during this time are Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, Hindi and Portuguese.

When we look ahead, the future in terms of influence and new media, particularly in our region, becomes even more fascinating. As of the 30 June 2010, 825 million people in Asia were online. By 2012, Asian web surfers, including about 490 million Chinese, will outnumber North Americans by 3 to 1 and Indians will become the second largest group online

Three key elements emerge from studying these internet audiences :

The first is their acceptance of the concept of the 'image as truth'.

They are quick to separate and identify the real from propaganda, and once the truth of the image is accepted, they flash it worldwide through their own networks – faster than any network of multinational or multilingual satellite television programs can do.

For example, the pictures from protests in Tehran, enabled by Twitter and YouTube, showed Iranian militia gunning down a 28 year old bystander, Neda Agha Soltan, making her the first Internet martyr, and causing the Iranian government to tone down the violence.

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[1] Parts of this submission are taken from the author's presentation to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute titled: "Digital Diplomacy – 21st Century Statecraft and Australia"available at:
http://www.aspi.org.au/events/recentEventDetail.aspx?eid=441

At the same time, other Twitter messages brought out hundreds of thousands of residents of Tehran onto their rooftops, nightly to shout out "Allah O Akbar" in protest.

In the military sphere, as we have seen in Afghanistan, cellphone images have forced changes in the rules of engagement, highlighted the death of civilians, and led to the resignation of Germany's head of armed forces and its deputy foreign minister when they tried to cover up results of a German called airstrike, pictures of which were already circulating on the internet. Since then we have seen several instances of videos hitting the internet with their power to cause government policies to stumble.

The second element is the emergence of what I call new 'nodes of trust'.

In the past, most of what we learned came from mainstream media. When looking at sources of information, journalists (and as a result, their audiences) relied on official communiqués or briefings as one such node. In addition, journalists conducted their own interviews (although often through interpreters) with significant players, in countries where English was not widely spoken. In the past, these were essentially their main 'reliable sources' in trying to find the truth behind claims from either side of a conflict. This was also the comfort-zone by which Governments exerted influence through mainstream media.

New Media technologies have changed this concept of the node of trust – it can now be an individual, a website such as Wikileaks, a network such as Al Qaeda, a blog such as that of Ahmed Rashid from Lahore, an Internet TV channel such as Al Jazeera - which people turn to for information. From a cubicle in midtown Manhattan, a Nigerian publishes staggering examples of his country's government corruption online—information that would get him killed back home. Philip Omoyele Sowore a 39-year-old political dissident from Nigeria now in exile in New York, has created a website that has been referred as "Africa's WikiLeaks".

It is the evolution of these nodes of trust in the future that Governments will need to monitor and engage with, if they are to successfully influence target audiences. And we need to be mindful that in the future these nodes of trust will be dominant in languages other than English – in Mandarin, in Hindi, in Russian and so on. And the core element of this engagement is the reliance on truth as opposed to spin, when projecting a message. This is probably the hardest thing for Governments to do. As the father of the concept of Soft Power, Joseph Nye put it a few months ago: "Reputation has always mattered in world politics, but credibility has become crucial because of a paradox of plenty. When information is plentiful, the scarce resource is attention. Under the new conditions, a soft sell may, more than ever, prove more effective than a hard sell."

The third and very fundamental nature of this audience is its drive to be participatory –

Audiences now seek dialogue and to enter a discussion with the authors of policy, be they government departments or private think tanks. Authorities (particularly those involved in armed conflict) are finding it harder, or well-nigh impossible to control messages in the social media sphere.

Instead of viewing the New Media technologies as an opportunity to build relationships with and reach new audiences, they nervously try to impose more controls and censorship. It remains to be

seen how effective controls and censorship will be in preventing the spread of knowledge people want to see and hear.

Admittedly, any change in bureaucracy will need to be led at the political level. U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton provided the top cover for the 28 year old Jared Cohen, the official who phoned Twitter in relation to the Iran protests. Jared Cohen along with his 33-year-old colleague Alex Ross were appointed by her as her first senior advisers for innovation. They created the concept of 'technical delegations' - joint government and industry groups of experts, who travelled the world under State Department auspices, to try and provide good governance, using new media.

According to the US State Department officials, while traditional forms of diplomacy still dominate, 21st-century statecraft is not mere corporate rebranding — swapping tweets for broadcasts. But It represents a shift in form and in strategy — a way to amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop technical-based policy solutions and encourage cyberactivism.

Diplomacy may now include such open-ended efforts as the short-message-service (S.M.S.) social-networking program the State Department set up in Pakistan. It stresses the political power of viral videos and the potential for mobile phones to become widespread public tools for education, banking and election monitoring (where volunteers used S.M.S. to report on voting irregularities). When are we going to see Australian innovation used in this manner by DFAT?

In India, the change has been led by its Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao. In line with the changing times the Indian External Affairs Ministry has removed the ban on social network sites. The foreign ministry has been the pioneer among central ministries in using Twitter and Facebook for outreach activities. There are now three senior officials of MEA on Twitter, beginning with Rao.

The recent Libya evacuation has shown first-hand the power of Twitter usage by the Indian government, with the ministry and foreign secretary continuously updating information on the situation. It was also the conduit for several people stuck in Libya to get in touch with the government for eventual evacuation. The ministry has plans to get its allied organisations on Twitter, especially the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA).

The learning to draw from this is that large PR and media sections of the Australian government simply focus their attention on traditional media – this is a space where very few are now listening or engaged.

In Australia government public diplomacy is characterised more by opportunities lost, than challenges which have been met.

Until the recent election, there was the announcement of Building Brand Australia - a $20 million program to "provide an overarching, strategic approach to positioning Australia in the global marketplace."The challenge to building an Australia 'brand' in the new social media environment is that there is no place in it for interactivity, the core element of new media. Brand Australia should be jettisoned in favour of the more 'soft power' or 'smart power' approach which the US State Department describes as the hallmarks of 21st Century Statecraft.

But other than that, there is little that can be described as a global public diplomacy strategy, and certainly none that involves new and social media.

A 2009 report by the Lowy Institute noted: 'Australia's public diplomacy often takes the form of a disconnected series of activities such as cultural events and trade expos intended to cultivate favourable, if vague, impressions of Australia and to promote the nation as an attractive destination for tourism, investment and migration – rather than to pursue specific international policy goals.'

Describing Australia's public diplomacy efforts as 'lacklustre, poorly integrated and untargeted', the panel recommended that the DFAT should facilitate links between Australian non-governmental organisations and their overseas counterparts, and that New Media should be used to network government agencies, interested businesses, think tanks and NGOs.

My view is that parallel with this, there should be a new approach to traditional diplomacy – focussing on the development of language expertise with a view to long-term postings in countries to position diplomats as 'nodes of trust', who engage with a much wider cross-section of the host populations than they do at the moment.

In terms of broader public diplomacy activities, governments need to ensure they have access to linguists and cultural experts in key areas who can, with fluency and knowledge, engage in debates on New Media websites. We use language skills in this country for gathering intelligence, rather than the equally important role of exerting influence.

Diplomatic missions should be seen in a totally different light - as resources that can use public diplomacy to connect directly with the citizens and influential networks in their host The basic core and maintenance of the bilateral relationship can safely be left to just a few diplomats.

Diplomatic missions should also tap into public-private partnerships with a host of Australian private sector companies and organisations who have networks that are parallel to and, in some cases, more credible than those of governments. A smart harnessing of present and retired executives to provide access to the 'human terrain' of countries we wish to engage with would pay dividends. It would avoid the panic reactions when consular or other matters suddenly arise, such as the accusations of racist attacks against Indian students in Melbourne in 2009. This is because the nodes of trust would already be in place to provide balance in any such debates.

Governments should post staff overseas for periods that are long enough – perhaps up to eight years - to enable them to master the language and culture of the countries to which they are sent. This would enable them to create enduring spheres of influence by establishing and strengthening networks of trust.

Training in New Media techniques and strategic communication should be mandated at all levels of the Australian Public Service and the military. In the APS, the training should range from graduate entry right through to the newly formed National Security College.

All senior officers involved in policy or strategic activities that have potential public impacts should be given in-depth presentations on how New Media technologies can be harnessed effectively (and the potential pitfalls if they are not).

These senior officers should also have access to New Media mentors – specialist communications advisers who can translate emerging technologies and New Media issues into forms that will allow for swift decision-making.

Agencies need to look to creating 'clusters' of experts in New Media technologies, combined with subject matter specialists and strategic communicators who can be directed to any particular issue. These experts could work together through an intranet and need not be constrained by geographic location.

A key task of these clusters would be to identify and engage with current and emerging nodes of trust in countries and areas of direct interest. All team members should have a sound knowledge of what the new technologies can achieve and a deep knowledge of their target audiences, including fluency in relevant languages.

Former leaders (military, political, public service) should be enlisted to reinforce such teams with their knowledge of the audiences. The attitude should be that the new media environment is "not a fortress to defend, but rather a field to manoeuvre within."

Government should also take a more creative approach to the teaching of languages in the schools curriculum, to provide the bedrock of expertise for the next generation of leaders and diplomats, who will already be what are termed 'digital natives', expert in the internet and social media practices of tomorrow.

I would like to turn to the Australia Network, a $20 million a year taxpayer sponsored international satellite channel, currently run by the ABC and up for re-tender this year. There is a vigorous bid by the ABC, championed by its managing director, to re-capture the tender as a spearhead for Australia's public diplomacy. There is an equally vigorous counter-challenge by Sky News to wrest the annual $20 million for Mr Murdoch's coffers.

Neither of the bidders has reflected on the changes in internet television technology – that satellite TV is an expensive hobby, which has already been overtaken by internet delivery. That successful international broadcasting is not about the English language or trumpeting the transmitting country's message, but the most successful programs are COLLABORATIVE ones, transmitted in the target country's language and frequently hosted by target country presenters.

Here is an alternative suggestion: for $20 million, you can produce 200 documentary programs of 50 minutes each. How about setting up an expert panel of both Australian and Regional eminent media executives to oversee this money. The panel would invite top documentary makers from relevant countries to come and make documentaries on Australia free of charge – on any subject and in their own regional languages, with no editorial censorship. They would be shot and edited by Australians, giving a much needed shot in the arm to a flagging industry. Copyright would vest with Australia. These documentaries would then be aired on regional television channels in local languages, because of the stature of the film makers. They would be also aired in English on an Australian internet TV channel, would be an exemplar of our democracy and openness to scrutiny. The internet channel would then provide a multilingual forum for engaging with regional audiences, and we would truly accomplish the aims which Brand Australia has set itself out to do.

And finally we need to explore how the department evaluates its public diplomacy efforts. Rather than the current enumeration of outputs (activities, events, media releases etc.) it needs to look at a much more sophisticated way of keeping a pulse on its influence.

Some examples:

How many influential institutions, think tanks, non-traditional audiences have Australia's diplomatic posts addressed in the host language?

In what ways did these interactions influence the audience? Was there support for Australian initiatives in letters to editors, in engagement on websites, in active support by way of funds or other commitments?

In India for example, how many websites and social media forums have reflected the Australian view and actively promoted Australia as a safe destination? And in which languages other than English have these occurred?

In which forums have international audiences participated to support the Australian view on everything from climate change to the initial proposal for a no-fly zone over Libya?

There are many more qualitative ways in evaluating influence, than the ones currently being undertaken. A review of the most recent 'Post PD reports' would almost certainly highlight how cautious and conservative DAFT's public diplomacy efforts are.

India and China are already moving to take advantage of opportunities in the region. If we do not follow with our own innovative approaches Australia could end up being described as the planet earth was described in the book 'The hitchhikers guide to the galaxy': 'mostly harmless'.