

The New Diplomacy: Utilizing Innovative Communication Concepts that Recognize Resource Constraints
A Report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy
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Introduction

From the time governments were organized until very recently, diplomacy involved conveying a message to another government, usually delivered by a government official to a representative of a foreign government, and the response of foreign government officials. The information revolution that occurred in the last half of the 20th century dramatically expanded this paradigm.

To effectively tell America's story to the world and conduct diplomacy, the U.S. Department of State also must change the way it communicates. By continuing to embrace innovative technology and novel – but effective – thinking, the Department can harness the power wielded by diverse audiences.

The Department of State's Office of E-Diplomacy sponsored a fact-finding trip by U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy to examine three inventive diplomatic tactics that enhance the Department's outreach. These three concepts, which utilize new media and recognize resource constraints, are referred to as:

American Presence Posts, which use a single American officer in an important region to further commercial and public diplomacy goals;

American Corners, which provide, without American personnel, a public diplomacy outpost – library, discussion forum, program venue and Internet access – available for the use of the local population in a host country; and

Virtual Consulates, which use the power of the Internet to communicate with local publics and Americans in a locally branded product that may be able to handle up to 50 percent of a physical consulate's workload.

In today's world, a wide array of significant foreign citizens – journalists, students, and businesspeople – shape relations among nations through their influence on the public discourse. In rapidly expanding numbers, we all are – no matter in which country we reside – gaining information from the Internet, television, and other forms of mass media.

Citizens in foreign countries no longer must rely on their government for information. To effectively advance the American agenda, the U.S. Government must find the means to engage all sectors of foreign society by diverse means.

If implemented in a large scale and coordinated effort tailored to host country needs and capabilities, the Advisory Commission believes American Corners, American Presence Posts, and Virtual Consulates together can form key building blocks of a "New Diplomacy" that informs and influences foreign audiences in their homes, places of business, and venues of leisure. Through the power of technology and innovative concepts, direct communication is now possible with the populations we must engage.

American Presence Posts

The American Presence Post (APP) revolves around a single Foreign Service Officer posted in a major city or region. This piece of the “New Diplomacy” requires the most significant output of resources and Embassy dedication. Former U.S. Ambassador to France Felix Rohatyn originated the American Presence Post concept in 1997 to handle consular and American citizen services, U.S. commercial promotion, and public diplomacy.

There are currently five APPs in France (Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Rennes, and Toulouse), one in Turkey (Izmir) and one in Canada (Winnipeg).

The Commission believes the concept is a useful way to give visibility to the United States with an official American voice. However, to carry out this model effectively, the post must have the proper focus, support, and resources from the U.S. Embassy in the host country.

The vast amount of security required to have an American officer in place does not allow for a functional public diplomacy venue. The Foreign Service Officer must serve as a mobile representative to businesses, media organizations, civic groups, and educational institutions.



Foreign Service Officer Scott Edelman (right) shows a delegation the American Presence Post in Izmir, Turkey.

At the post reviewed by the Commission in Izmir, Turkey, one Foreign Service Officer required two Foreign Service National employees as support staff, a driver, and two security personnel supplied by the Embassy in Ankara. The Turkish government provided a personal bodyguard and numerous police officers as protective measures. Additionally, in Izmir, a U.S. Commercial Service post, funded by the Department of Commerce, also is present. However, the Foreign Service Nationals hired at this site only work at

promoting American trade in Turkey.

The Commissioners found the American Presence Post to be a useful and viable form of public diplomacy and reporting. However, the mission seemed to be handicapped in its public diplomacy and commercial services mandate by the vast security force required and the need to conduct citizen services. Consequently, the Commission recommends that before an American Presence Post is initiated, the Embassy must be aware of the significant resources, in addition to the Foreign Service Officer, this venture could require.

In cities or regions where an American Presence Post may be considered, the Commission first recommends implementation of a Virtual Consulate and American Corner. If the region still requires a Foreign Service Officer, the Commission suggests that this individual work in a residence/office environment that is separate from the American Corner. At the Ambassador’s discretion, the officer should focus solely on public diplomacy, reporting, and commercial interests. In a very vast and populated region, it could be quite helpful to have an on-the-record American spokesperson to communicate with local populations.

To improve and expand the American Presence Post concept, the Commission recommends:

The Ambassador must designate one or two clear objectives for the post. It is impossible for one American officer to carry out effective American citizen services, public diplomacy, and commercial interests. It is critical that the post have a clear reporting structure to the Embassy to ensure that a separate bureaucracy is not created.

The Embassy must not market the concept as a “mini-consulate” for host populations and American citizens. This will inevitably lead to dissatisfaction with the limited services the post provides.

The American officer must have connectivity with the Department of State’s computer network. The sole officer in each region is still a part of the Embassy team. He/she must be supported as such and given the proper equipment and access to accomplish the goals set forth. (At the post reviewed, the Foreign Service Officer relied on an e-mail address branded as Yahoo.com).

The American officer must have significant language training and capabilities. To serve as an official spokesperson to local business and civic groups and media organizations, the officer must be very skilled in the language of the region. The officer also must be able to serve in an environment without support staff.

With the right Foreign Service Officer in place, the American Presence Post can have a significant value in the “New Diplomacy.” However, without the proper care, each post could develop into a personality driven enterprise. To achieve productivity, each post must have the proper officer, clear objectives, and support of the Embassy. It appears that the American Presence Post could be effective with a singular goal of commercial services or public diplomacy.

American Corners

The American Corner concept offers the United States a physical public diplomacy outpost – Internet access, a small reference collection, and discussion forum – sponsored by a host country’s municipal or national government. The U.S. Government only is required to fund the equipment and materials used.

This idea is very valuable because the host country pays for the staff and the rent of the facility. Security is minimal because no American staff is present. Easy public access is achieved by using local entities – libraries, universities, Chambers of Commerce – to house the Corners.



From left, Commissioner Jay Snyder; Nis City Councilor Nebojsa Rancic; Librarian Nina Lazarevic; and Commissioner Tre’ Evers meet at the American Corner in Nis, Serbia.

American Corners are often co-located with Internet Access and Training Program centers, as is the case in Chelyabinsk, Russia. The Centers also serve as a program platform, providing a venue for American speakers, educational advising sessions, and English teaching. They are popular as gathering places for the alumni of U.S. Government exchange programs. The American Corners in Russia have incorporated themselves as a non-profit organization and can solicit private funding to enhance their scope and reach.

With the phase-out of the very prominent United States Information Service (USIS) libraries in the 1990s, and the increase in security required at each American Embassy and Consulate, the American Corners can bring a personal presence to American diplomacy that has waned in recent years.



The former USIS Library occupied a prominent location in the city center of Belgrade, Serbia.

U.S. Ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro William Montgomery and U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow have fully utilized the public diplomacy potential of American Corners in their respective countries by lending full support to the concept, attending openings, and encouraging the media to cover events at the Corners. This has fostered a rich membership base and following, which regularly uses the Corners to learn about the English language, and American history and culture. The Corners also provide opportunities to find public and private scholarships and grants to American educational institutions.

The Commission believes the content and the programming of the American Corners is extremely worthwhile. However, the model can be honed even further to help communicate a positive American message on current issues facing host populations.

To improve upon this already valuable model, the Commission recommends that the American Corners concept:

Implement a standard survey to gauge the usage of products offered. By surveying current users and potential customers of American Corners, the State Department can determine what products are most utilized and what types of programs could be added or modified to increase interest.

Expand Internet Access. Many nations' populations are Internet savvy but lack the resources to gain regular entrée. Through the Internet, American Corners can serve as their gateway to the world. The American Corner can attract a vast array of the customers by supplying additional computers and Internet accounts.

Utilize each location as an outpost to discuss American society and foreign policy with host populations. To increase interest in the American Corner and directly expand an American message, the State Department's International Information Programs and Educational and Cultural Affairs bureaus should help facilitate town hall style meetings with prominent Americans, who may already be on speaking tours. These events will draw regular citizens and media attention to each of the Corners.

Expand multi-media content through private sector donations. The Department should actively engage the technology, entertainment, and media industries to donate Internet access, technology, and print and video products that positively portray the United States.

Serve as a hub for Digital Video Conferences. By adding digital video conference capabilities, the American Corners can sponsor speeches and discussions by officials and prominent citizens on American life and foreign policy.

Work in conjunction with the Virtual Consulate model. Every American Corner also should have a Virtual Consulate. All start up screens at all Internet access points in the Corner should include this gateway to American services and information.

The American Corner is a way to provide an outpost for public diplomacy in areas that have not been previously targeted or are underrepresented. American Corners can help provide the tangible materials that are necessary for the “New Diplomacy” to be functional.

There are now close to 50 American Corners around the world, most in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Commission believes this concept should be tested in “hot spots” throughout the globe.

Virtual Consulate Program

The Virtual Consulate is an innovative product, which uses a locally branded Internet Web site with customized content. For example, the site in Tyumen, Russia, has the web address of <http://usa.tyumen.ru>.



Slava Syrokomskiy, a Foreign Service National employee of the consulate in Yekaterinburg, Russia, unveils the Virtual Consulate for Chelyabinsk, Russia.

By creating a unique product for each municipality or region, the Virtual Consulate program provides a localized feel and relevance in the target community.

The concept, launched by Tom Niblock, the former U.S. Consulate General of Yekaterinburg, Russia, has the potential to stream germane and time sensitive information to audiences in major cities and remote regions where the United States has no physical presence. Additionally, initial anecdotal evidence from Russia suggests that a virtual consulate may be able to perform up to 50 percent of the work of an actual consulate and do it in a timely and cost effective manner.

The Virtual Consulate offers information in English that can help American business people gain an understanding of a region or metropolitan area for commercial purposes. The Virtual Consulate can help to foster alliances, linkages, and partnerships between Americans and host country citizens, thereby creating direct diplomacy.

The Virtual Consulate is probably the most flexible and agile instrument in the “New Diplomacy” toolbox. The concept is primarily valuable in countries with significant Internet access and computer literacy rates. The Commission believes the Virtual Consulate offers tremendous potential in terms of communication with host country populations that have Internet access and understanding. With the inevitable increase in Internet use among foreign populations – Russia has just reached 10 percent – it only makes sense to invest heavily in this concept for the future.

To help expand the potential of this concept, the Commission recommends that the Virtual Consulate embrace:

Online vetting and queuing for visa applications and scheduling of mandatory interviews. Although the Virtual Consulates already feature visa information and a printable application, the technology on the sites must be expanded to allow for citizens to apply for a visa and set up an appointment for the mandatory in-person interview. In the long term, this will ease the burdens of the consular staff and provide some immediate satisfaction for local populations.

The implementation of a best practices criterion for roll out. Initial Virtual Consulate sites should be selected based on population density, Internet literacy, and identified American interests.

Regular updates and online events from U.S. officials to drive traffic to the site and magnify America’s message. Officials can communicate with the local populations from their remote offices. An Ambassador can easily host an online town hall meeting or write an online opinion piece on a pressing U.S. matter. This will help to inform the local populations and keep the content fresh on the sites. The Department also should regularly feed important information and news stories already developed in host country languages from the International Information Programs bureau.

A comprehensive database that allows users to obtain regular information and invitations to events sponsored or endorsed by the U.S. Government. Additionally, these individuals should be imported into the American Embassy’s contact database.

Internet access kiosks and portals throughout a target region to expand the reach of the Virtual Consulate in areas with limited computer access. The Department of State could fund these portals with corporate sponsorships as a legitimate means of public diplomacy.

Furthering the goal of universality of representation by serving as “Virtual Embassies” in countries with no American diplomatic presence. The Virtual Consulate easily could be transformed into a “Virtual Embassy” in nations like Andorra, the Seychelles, and Equatorial New Guinea where the United States does not have a physical mission.

While the updating of Web pages can be accomplished remotely, for success the Virtual Consulate does require regular support and nurturing from Embassy or Consulate staff in periodic visits to the focus city. These visits help to raise awareness and add legitimacy to the sites.

As Internet accessibility increases, host country citizens will begin to see the Virtual Consulates as one-stop-shopping for all news, information, and services brought to them by the United States government. With a mere \$10,000 in start up costs, this robust model can handle many tasks performed by a Consulate. Only the issuing of visas requires a fixed location and stationary staff. The Virtual Consulate, with a host of Internet kiosks throughout a region, can be viewed as a gateway for the “New Diplomacy” throughout many areas of the world.

Conclusion

The information revolution has expanded the diplomacy paradigm. The “New Diplomacy” is now central to every Embassy’s work. A strategy of Virtual Consulates, American Corners, and American Presence Posts can be tailored in a bold initiative to directly communicate with citizens throughout the world.

Each of these concepts should be combined in a comprehensive three-stage public diplomacy plan. The Commission believes that each concept is complementary to one another. However, all concepts may not be relevant to every nation. Implementation should be left up to the discretion of the Ambassador and the Public Affairs Officer.

There are more than 350 cities in the world with more than 1 million residents. The United States is represented in only half of these locations with a physical presence. There are even more medium and small cities with a combined greater population. The Department of State must find the means to communicate with all populations. The “New Diplomacy” provides the initial building blocks for a cost effective and potentially far reaching public diplomacy effort.

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