

DFAT the dinosaur needs to find Facebook friends

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Last week Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd set out his vision for the future of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He said he was "acutely conscious of a core fact: we now have 18 per cent fewer staff abroad than we did in 1996".

That was a recognition of underfunding, but also perhaps a sign that things need to be done differently. And there are other, more efficient ways to do things. In leading foreign ministries the digital age is producing dramatic change. Every day a single American diplomat communicates with more than a quarter of a million Indonesians using Facebook.

Australia's diplomatic service, by contrast, doesn't even use social media in Indonesia.

In fact, when it comes to using new digital tools to help achieve Australian foreign policy goals, or e-diplomacy, Australia has fallen a long way behind.

E-diplomacy is changing the way the ancient art of diplomacy is conducted. It is increasing efficiencies and enabling governments to reach audiences that until recently were beyond their grasp. Unfortunately, years of under-resourcing has meant DFAT has not kept up.

Unsurprisingly, death by a thousand cuts has consequences. Exhibit A are Australian embassy websites. Take a look. Seriously. Page view data shows that most people who come to these sites are looking for visa and migration information. They are the people we are trying to attract to spend their tourist dollars, get an Australian education or come as skilled migrants, yet the only message these sites send is that we have yet to get our heads around computing Down Under.

Websites are not the only area where Australia is falling behind leading foreign ministries such as those in the US, Britain and Canada. Some of the most promising new digital platforms are being used to improve communication and information gathering, both internally and externally.

Internal blogs are a good example and have been used to bring together area experts to share information and discuss recent developments, no matter which countries the individuals are based in. They are also good tools for management: Britain's permanent undersecretary blogs every Monday morning to communicate with his vast network of staff.

These tools also allow remote access, which can be valuable in emergencies. The US deputy head of mission in Mexico, for example, used an internal blog to communicate with staff members across Mexico during the outbreak of H1N1, which meant they didn't have to risk infection by coming into the office.

E-diplomacy offers many ways to improve a foreign ministry's communication with other governments and the wider community. Cloud computing, or web-based processing, was used by the US State Department and Mexican Foreign Ministry to develop common protocols in emergency situations, allowing both governments to co-operate and update procedures on a rolling basis.

E-diplomacy also allows governments to draw together diaspora networks. Connect2Canada, the Canadian diaspora networking site in the US, is a good example of one effort in this area and has a membership of 47,000 US-based Canadian expatriates. Members can choose to subscribe to a range of information updates. The site has links to a large number of Canadian expatriate groups and communities in the US.

Digital tools would also allow DFAT to play in spaces it is cut off from at present. Take the blogosphere, for example. The US, Britain and Canada have all entered this space. The US maintains nine full-time Arabic-language bloggers, two Farsi bloggers and two Urdu bloggers while the British Foreign Office also has two full-time Farsi bloggers.

It's hard to gauge the effect these bloggers are having. However, it is likely that as the blogosphere becomes increasingly important DFAT will have to start engaging in this space (for example in Indonesia, China and India).

DFAT also needs to start looking more seriously at social media. As one official put it, with more than 500 million active users, Facebook is equivalent to the world's third largest country.

The State Department operates 230 Facebook accounts, 80 Twitter feeds and 55 YouTube channels and has 40 Flickr sites. And the story of e-diplomacy doesn't end here. Other governments are experimenting with dozens of other innovations and the pace of change is rapid.

E-diplomacy is no longer an optional extra and increasingly it will be fundamental to how foreign ministries do their job.

So what could DFAT do to catch up? For a start it will need new funding to establish an e-diplomacy unit able to roll out new digital platforms and mainstream e-diplomacy across the department. It also will need to adjust its risk tolerance: digital diplomacy will not work if it is hamstrung by mountains of cautious bureaucratic rules.

E-diplomacy is disrupting old ways of achieving foreign policy goals. DFAT needs to catch up.

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