

## **DFAT must capitalise on benefits of social media**

Fergus Hanson  
Canberra Times  
3 June 2011  
P. 17

In hot eastern Afghanistan runs the latest untampered pay cheque express to a local police officer. Your average pay day? Not quite. This one is delivered via mobile phone as part of a US-sponsored e-diplomacy initiative aimed at countering widespread corruption. The next stop for this technology is the Democratic Republic of Congo, highlighting how far the digital revolution has reached and the extent of the innovation currently under way in a handful of leading foreign ministries.

New digital platforms are offering impressive opportunities to foreign, defence and aid agencies. As recently as 2000 there were fewer than one billion mobile phones in the world but just 10 years later that figure had jumped to over five billion, with around one billion of these being smart phones able to access the web. As the staggering numbers suggest, the potential of these platforms is not just limited to the rich world. As an article in *The Economist* recently highlighted, the uses for mobile phones in the developing world are extensive, including checking market prices, learning English, transferring money, verifying the authenticity of medicines, and accessing translation services. A handful of foreign ministries have realised the enormous potential of these platforms for their own work and have been industriously developing and adapting new technologies to serve their needs.

Australia's own Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has recently begun the transition to e-diplomacy, but by comparison with some of the foreign ministries Australia often likes to judge itself by, there is a long way to go. On the positive side, Australia has an e-diplomat foreign minister who has a Twitter following approaching one million, providing him with enormous reach. Just the other week he sent this Tweet: "A bit of spare time before I jump on the plane home via China tweet me your foreign affairs Q's will do my best to answer. KRudd". There followed a flood of questions and an impressive flow of replies covering everything from relations with the EU, Fiji and the Vatican to soft power and e-diplomacy. On the latter the Minister pointed to the launch of DFAT's first permanent Twitter account last month as well as the "Australians helping Japan" web portal as evidence change was under way, but acknowledged there was "More to do".

That sentiment seemed to be echoed by a Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade that held hearings this week ostensibly on DFAT's Annual Report, but which took the opportunity to also look at the department's slow uptake of social media and other digital platforms. A DFAT Twitter account and newly launched YouTube channel are just the beginning of a much bigger shift that needs to occur. These platforms are useful auxiliary communications tools but Australian missions across the world need to be given a much freer hand to use country-specific social media where they can add value to DFAT's work. Single diplomats in the US State Department reach hundreds of thousands of people on a daily basis using these tools. Others diplomats host platforms, such as blogs, that bring together key opinion-shapers on niche, but important international issues and allow them to steer the agenda.

Australia is selling itself short by opting out of these tools. It is also often forgotten that e-diplomacy is a lot more than social media. Foreign ministries in the US, UK and Canada have developed a whole suite of new internal communications tools in order to adapt to the difficult challenge of coordinating a country's foreign policy when almost every arm of government now has at least some international role. For DFAT to adapt to what the former Director of Policy Planning at the US State Department, Anne-Marie Slaughter has called "a new world order", there needs to be greater emphasis on e-diplomacy.

The first step should be the creation of an e-diplomacy office that draws together the disparate sections that currently touch on this area, like the website section. There is also a need for Australia's chief e-diplomat to champion its adoption across the department more forcefully and if he can swing it, reverse the destructive long-term trend of stripping DFAT of resources.

*Fergus Hanson is a research fellow and director of polling at the Lowy Institute for International Policy. He is the author of the Lowy policy brief A digital DFAT: Joining the 21st Century.*