

Revolution@State

Fergus Hanson

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It is often assumed the US Department of State is a Luddite holdout. Books, like the recently published, "State of Disrepair," bemoan its old-fashioned ways. But in the field of technological innovation, or ediplomacy, that analysis misses the mark.

The Office of eDiplomacy is the epicenter of a remarkable innovation drive at State. For anyone familiar with the bureaucratic culture of foreign ministries, it is an unsettling place. A recent audit by the Office of the Inspector General, described it as "a small, agile incubator" and reported that "in a story the inspectors encountered several times, eDiplomacy was commended by a senior official at the White House as 'the go-to group' for the Open Government initiative and for making the department "one of the most responsive' of the Federal agencies."

Established 10 years ago in response to a string of information failings, including the 1998 attacks on US embassies in East Africa and 9/11, the office now has 40 full-time employees working on ediplomacy initiatives. It's become the bureaucratic equivalent of the Googleplex, with a director who sits in a cubicle with the rest of his staff whizzing about talking about "passion projects." The scene recalls the manner in which Andy Grove ran Intel during his time as CEO.

The office has a giant Philodendron that is jokingly named after a major IT company because its tentacles extend everywhere, but the analogy could be just as easily applied to the office's ambitions for State. Because what it is seeking to do is overhaul the way the State Department goes about its business.

The office has been at the center of some surprising innovations for a government bureaucracy. A recent example is the \$2 million annual innovation fund that has been set up to crowd source technological innovations from the staff.

Another is the Virtual Student Foreign Service that is looking at new ways to harness the talent of non-resident interns by assigning tasks to a virtual pool of them.

However, most of the office's work has been focused around an ambitious agenda of knowledge management. While foreign ministries often cite staff knowledge as their core resource, they have traditionally been hamstrung in their ability to efficiently marshal this expertise, especially across vast geographic networks. The Office of eDiplomacy has tried to change this through the roll-out of new digital tools such as an internal wiki, an intra-agency blogging platform, a professional networking site that has plans to play a major role in improving human resource outcomes and a search tool that has opened up millions of State Department documents to officers around the world.

Perhaps most intriguing about this effort is the extent to which it has spread. There are now 25 separate eDiplomacy nodes at State Department headquarters that collectively employ more than 150 full-time personnel. And at US diplomatic missions abroad there are another 900 people who use eDiplomacy (predominantly social media) to some extent.

The most high profile use of ediplomacy is public diplomacy with State's embrace of social media. It is striking, especially when compared with other foreign ministries. The department now operates over 600 Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube channels that collectively reach over 8 million people directly. By comparison, a foreign ministry like Australia's has only a single Twitter feed that reaches fewer than 7,000 people.

However, social media is just one of many uses of ediplomacy. Internet freedom efforts, for example, have received more than \$70 million in Congressional funding since 2008. This money has been used to develop technologies to help activists in authoritarian countries circumvent government firewalls as well as keep their websites up when they fall victim to cyber attack.

Another nascent area for ediplomacy is disaster response. In the wake of several recent crises, from the Haiti earthquake to the tsunami in Japan, the power of connection technologies to improve the effectiveness of disaster response has looked promising. OpenStreetMap, for example, was used to rapidly improve the quality of maps of Haiti with a view to helping first responders. At the same time,

the Haitian diaspora worked to translate text messages from survivors trapped in the rubble and then feed them back to rescue workers. Meanwhile back at State, a free short code was established that let individuals make \$10 donations to Haiti using their cell phones, an initiative that raised tens of millions of dollars.

These projects are not all successful and they are certainly not without their teething and implementation problems, but they do suggest a surprising level of innovation and initiative from one of the United States' oldest arms of government.

Fergus Hanson is a visiting fellow in ediplomacy at the Brookings Institution and the author of the report [Revolution@State: The Spread of Ediplomacy](#).