

Considering YouTube Diplomacy

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PHILIP SEIB, OCT 2 2012

Ten years ago, the Innocence of Muslims controversy would not have happened. YouTube did not exist, and without this means of reaching a global audience the offensive snippets of the “film” would never have been seen.

The excerpts from the purported movie, which apparently no one has ever seen in its entirety, are hate speech, pure and simple – Constitutionally protected in the United States, but existing for no purpose other than to disparage a religion and its 1.6 billion adherents. This video and its producers (“perpetrators” might be a better word) deserve condemnation, as President Barack Obama set forth at the United Nations: “A crude and disgusting video sparked outrage throughout the Muslim world. Now, I have made it clear that the United States government had nothing to do with this video, and I believe its message must be rejected by all who respect our common humanity.” Obama also made clear why this video was protected speech and not illegal under American law. It was not “because we support hateful speech, but because our founders understood that without such protections, the capacity of each individual to express their own views and practice their own faith may be threatened. We do so because in a diverse society, efforts to restrict speech can quickly become a tool to silence critics and oppress minorities.”[1]

This was an eloquent response as the crisis was winding down, and it helped clarify a fundamental American principle that much of the world does not understand. Nevertheless, for the longer run those responsible for foreign policy should carefully consider the realities of YouTube diplomacy as an everyday facet of international relations. New media provide almost everyone, regardless of motivation, with easy, instantaneous access to much of the planet.

Like the content of Twitter and Facebook, the videos appearing on YouTube are so vast in number that even aside from free speech issues they are impossible to police until after a controversy has arisen. YouTube is the world’s third most popular website, trailing only Google and Facebook. More than 72 hours of video are uploaded every minute, and in 2011 YouTube videos were viewed by more than a trillion visitors.[2] There are many “Look at my cute cat” videos, but plenty of politically-charged messages are also available.

In olden times – a decade or more ago – diplomacy was mostly government to government, with diplomats talking only to other diplomats. In his 1939 classic *Diplomacy*, British diplomat Harold Nicolson wrote that among his colleagues “it would have been regarded as an act of unthinkable vulgarity to appeal to the common people upon any issue of international policy.”[3] In the new era of public diplomacy, appealing to “the common people,” now more felicitously referred to as “the public,” is essential because there are so many information sources that individuals can tap into on their own. Governments have lost their hegemonic dominance over the flow of information and individuals are empowered by their ability to seek knowledge independently. The competition for attention is fierce; with hundreds of millions of people addicted to social media, governments must adapt their messaging – initiatives and responses – to electronic venues that operate beyond their direct control.

The uproar elicited by *Innocence of Muslims* was reminiscent of the explosive reaction during the Danish cartoon controversy of 2006, when caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed led to Internet-fueled anger and violent incidents in the Muslim world during which more than two dozen people were killed. Those disturbances ended after a short time, as did these more recent ones. But it is important to recognize the clash of cultures that exists and that is not going to vanish anytime soon.

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In much of the West, as noted by President Obama, even most hateful messages are protected by free speech provisions that are keystones of national law and norms. In most Muslim countries, the content of *Innocence of Muslims* violates the law. Egypt's president Mohamed Morsi underscored this in his speech to the United Nations. "Egypt respects freedom of expression," said Morsi, but "not a freedom of expression that targets a specific religion or a specific culture."^[4]

The differences underscored by Obama and Morsi cannot be reconciled. The best that can be hoped for is a kind of cultural détente. Particularly in Arab countries, where years of tensions and frustrations make hair-trigger responses common, the task for public diplomacy by the United States is exceedingly complex and is made more so by the borderless reach of social media. Diplomats must be as determined as are the troublemakers, maintaining a steady stream of information that is presented in ways that can compete effectively for audience. The U.S. State Department recognizes this, but, like foreign ministries throughout the world, is still feeling its way toward consistent systemic use of social media.

Given that online sites are increasingly turned to by members of the public (especially younger members) as substitutes for traditional broadcasting venues, the State Department's YouTube channel, for example, should offer timely, carefully designed messages. The content need not be elaborate or lengthy; directly addressing an issue is what is crucial. In the aftermath of the *Innocence of Muslims* controversy, this two-minute video briefly but clearly articulated the American position on free speech. This was available with subtitles in Arabic, Urdu, Chinese, and other languages.

Did this resolve the issues sparked by the original hateful speech? Of course not, but it pushed back against the mindless violence triggered by a mindless video. The worst thing a government can do in such circumstances is to remain silent. It must make itself heard among the chorus (or cacophony) of diverse, amplified voices.

In the end, what is so frustrating about the *Innocence of Muslims* case is that a few loopy hate-mongers can be perceived – even if by a relatively small number of people – as representatives of a government and its people. Underlying the reaction in this instance was a willingness to believe the worst about Americans. That will test those designing U.S. public diplomacy, and it underscores the challenges of YouTube diplomacy that nations everywhere must address.

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[1] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>.

[2] http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics.

[3] Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Second Edition) (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 168-169.

[4] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/egypts-president-morsi-tells-un-insults-to-muhammad-unacceptable/2012/09/26/fef14e46-07f3-11e2-858a-5311df86ab04_story.html.

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