CDDRL
WORKING PAPERS

Number 120
January 2011

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of the US Digital Outreach
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Working Paper of the Program on Good Governance and Political Reform in the Arab World at CDDRL and of the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford

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Public Diplomacy 2.0:

An Exploratory Case Study of the US Digital Outreach Team[1]

Lina Khatib, William Dutton, and Michael Thelwall[2]

6 January 2011

Abstract

The internet is enabling new approaches to public diplomacy. The Digital Outreach Team at the US Department of State is one such initiative, aiming to engage directly with citizens in the Middle East through posting messages about US foreign policy on popular Arabic, Urdu, and Persian language internet forums. This permits them to present the US administration's views on issues related to American foreign policy in a transparent manner. This case study assesses the process and reach of this new method of internet diplomacy. Does this method provide a promising new conception of public diplomacy for the USA and other nations to move from a more one-way information flow to a more interactive, and individualized, approach to connecting with the Middle East? Is this a useful complement to more traditional forms of public diplomacy? What are the strategic challenges faced by public diplomacy 2.0?

The past five years have witnessed innovations in American public diplomacy methods towards the Middle East, moving from one-way communication through broadcasting and the print media to a more interactive model in which the government joins the conversation. This paper assesses the potential of this new model through an analysis of an early US government Web 2.0 public diplomacy initiative, the State Department's Digital Outreach Team (DOT), focusing on an embedded case study, that of Arabic Internet discussions of Barack Obama's Cairo speech of 4 June 2009, in which the DOT participated. The DOT is a team of ten civil servants that has its own Facebook, Youtube, Flickr, and Twitter accounts, but mostly operates through posting messages on popular Internet discussion forums. The Bureau of International Information Programs that hosts the DOT states that the DOT's mission "is to explain U.S. foreign policy and to counter misinformation" (IIP 2009).

Public diplomacy in Web 2.0 (or public diplomacy 2.0 for short) is embraced by the Department of State on several levels. The Secretary of State has a team of bloggers who post English-language blog and Twitter entries about her activities (Lichtenstein 2010). The State Department website launched an initiative in 2010, *Opinion Space*, which invites visitors to register their opinions about a number of issues, from politics to the economy, and to instantly find out where they stand on the opinion scale vis-à-vis others in the world. A number of US diplomats also blog or use Twitter to reach out to people. In South Korea, the American Embassy runs a networking site, called Café USA, to engage Korean youth (Seo 2009). However, in the context of the Middle East, public diplomacy initiatives have been driven by the post 9/11 security framework that regards the "war of ideas" as a component of the "war on terror". This framework follows Jamie Metzl's advocacy of the use of communication technologies like the Internet and satellite television for "defining the legitimacy of the use of force" (1999: 178) by the United States.

Barack Obama's administration presented hope for a changed US image in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and his speech in Cairo in June 2009 was seen as an attempt to reframe the relationship between

the USA and the Muslim world: "This cycle of suspicion and discord must end. I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings" (Obama 2009). The DOT's reliance on "outreach" is in tune with Obama's Cairo speech and his focus on outreach is in line with the mission of the DOT.

The DOT is a product of the Bush administration and earlier initiatives aimed at using the Internet in support of public diplomacy (Grant 2004). Advances of the Internet and Web, such as enabling users to easily post comments and ratings--what some have called Web 2.0-- provide facilities for joining the conversation and moving away from simply broadcasting a nation's point of view. However, the value and strategies that need to be tied to the use of Web 2.0 capabilities have not been studied systematically. How effective is this approach? Are there strategies for enhancing its effectiveness? The next section traces the development of this initiative, followed by a description of the case study designed to explore these questions.

From the War of Ideas to Engagement

Prior to the mid-nineties, American public diplomacy towards the Middle East was centered on the United States Information Agency (USIA). The USIA was involved in using the media through the Voice of America radio station broadcasting in Arabic (and later Radio Hurriah during the 1991 Gulf War) and the production of a magazine in Arabic. USIA's media use was therefore a one-way transmission of information and opinions through the mass media. This reliance on the mass media continued into the late nineties when USIA merged into the State Department. The invasion of Iraq in

2003 catalyzed the use of radio (Radio Sawa) and television (Al-Hurra) in American public diplomacy towards the Arab world. However, this was not successful. Al-Hurra attracted few viewers and lacked credibility (Dabbous and Nasser 2009). Moreover, there was no correlation between the frequency of listening to Radio Sawa and perceptions of its credibility, and there was some evidence that attitudes towards American foreign policy became slightly worse after people started listening to Radio Sawa and watching Al-Hurra (El-Nawaway 2006).

Public diplomacy scholars have recently argued that diplomats should move from one-way communication to a two-way communication model to be more effective (Grant 2004). In the case of the USA, Mohan Dutta-Bergman (2006) criticizes the traditional American public diplomacy method of monopolizing the sending of information with the aim of achieving "changes in the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of the traditional receiver—the audience in the Middle East—through the use of one-way mass-mediated channels", and instead calls for "the creation of platforms that allow opportunities for developing mutual understanding rather than imposing a particular set of values on a culture through one-way public diplomacy efforts" (p. 121). Dean Kruckeberg and Marina Vujnovic (2005) similarly advocate a two-way communication public diplomacy model based on understanding and negotiation. The need for two-way interaction was embraced by Karen Hughes (2007) in her role as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, with the creation of the DOT in 2006, and by her predecessor Charlotte Beers, who initiated the Media Outreach Center at the American Embassy in London in 2002, which aims at engaging US policymakers with the Arab media and reporting back to Washington the messages conveyed by the Arab media. Hughes' successor, James Glassman, also stressed the importance of utilizing information technologies in public diplomacy (Glassman 2008). In line with Glassman's emphasis on presenting those initiatives through attractive frames, the DOT characterizes its work as "engagement" as opposed to "intervention" (DOT 2010), mirroring Glassman's

preference for using the phrase "global ideological engagement" over a "war of ideas" (Glassman 2008: 20).

The DOT is a team of ten civil servants who work on public diplomacy at the State Department. The Team started in November 2006 as an attempt at directly engaging with online users on popular sites in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu that discuss American foreign policy in the Middle East. Six members of the team are responsible for Arabic sites. Three characteristics distinguish the DOT: First, it is entirely composed of civil servants of Arabic, Persian, and South-Asian descent who are native speakers of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Second, the team members not only post online using their real (if not always full) names, but also always identify themselves as members of the team working for the State Department. The State Department seal is used whenever possible as the avatar of the DOT users on the sites they post on. As such, the team differs greatly from other government teams that use the Internet covertly like in France, Israel, China, and Russia, where government workers pose as "ordinary" bloggers and web commentators to disseminate government views and discredit selected opposing views. Third, the team members post messages about American foreign policy on popular discussion websites and social networking sites rather than on a US government site, and tend to respond to other users individually. This approach is in tune with the team's characterization as aiming at "outreach" and joining an ongoing conversation.

The DOT practice is particularly unusual in light of competing views, such as those by Mark Leonard and Evgeny Morozov, that governments should be covert about such activities to maintain message credibility. Leonard writes: "If a message will engender distrust simply because it is coming from a foreign government, then the government should hide that fact as much as possible. Increasingly, if a state is to make its voice heard and to influence events outside its direct control, it must work through organizations and networks that are separate from, independent of, and even suspicious of governments themselves" (2002: 54). Morozov (2009) opines: "Americans also have a 'decency

handicap': members of the Digital Outreach Team are required to state who they work for while most of the Chinese and Russian comments are unsigned and, thus, probably a tad more believable". There may be covert US approaches that proceed in parallel with the DOT, but the DOT's policy to genuinely identify their posts is a key strategic choice in their efforts to gain credibility.

The Case Study

This case study is an exploratory assessment of the working methods of the DOT, the challenges it faces, and the impact of its work in context of Obama's historic speech of June 2009. The Obama speech has been chosen because it has been regarded as a key moment of engagement with the Arab and the Muslim worlds, and arguably presented a good opportunity for the DOT to engage Arab online users and build on and support the key messages of the speech.

The study is based on analyzing posts in 30 discussion threads on 19 websites where the Obama speech in Cairo was discussed between May and December 2009. The websites were chosen on the basis of a list of popular sites supplied by the DOT and from Internet searches (through Yahoo and Google) for relevant sites where discussions of the speech took place with DOT participation. The sites are a mixture of country-specific discussion forums (egypt.com (Egypt); egyptsons.com (Egypt); paldf.net (Palestine); nationalkuwait.com (Kuwait); maghress.com (the Maghreb)); pan-Arab discussion forums (alsaha.com; maktoob.com; moheet.com; yabdoo.com; qwled.com; montada.com); video and photo sites (youtube.com; ikbis.com; flickr.com) where the DOT post videos and photos on their own accounts; the site of the pan-Arab newspaper Alsharq Alawsat (aawsat.com); the Arabic site of an international discussion forum (ar.globalvoicesonline.org); the online discussion site of Russian public diplomacy Arabic television channel Russia Today (forum.rtarabic.com); the online discussion site of

the pan-Arab satellite television channel Al-Jazeera (aljazeeratalk.net); and a DOT member's Maktoob blog (walidjawad.maktoob.com).

Overall, there were 181 posts (text, video, and photos) by the DOT and 459 posts by other users during this period in the 30 discussion threads. The average length of threads is 20.65 posts, with a standard deviation of 52.71. Eighteen of the thirty threads were begun by DOT users, and the rest by other users. Seventeen threads out of 30 contain at least one post by both the DOT and other users, with the DOT taking an average of 2.77 days and a median of 2 days to respond to posts by other users (the sites are: Egypt Sons, Al-Saha, Aljazeera, Maktoob, RT, Moheet, Yabdoo, PALDF, and National Kuwait). Seven threads were started by the DOT through posting either the text of the speech or a summary or video of it, and have responses from other users but no other DOT posts (the sites are: Egypt Sons, Al-Saha, Ikbis, Youtube, Alsharq Alawsat, Flickr, and Maktoob). Three threads were started by the DOT through posting the speech but have no posts by other users (on Maktoob, Montada, and Maghress). And on three threads started by other users, the only posts by the DOT are of the speech text, summary or video (on Global Voices, Egypt.com, and Qwled.com). This means that in almost half of the threads examined (13 out of 30), the DOT's participation was only through posting either a summary or the full text (in written or video form) of Obama's speech.

The frequency of DOT participation in threads started by other users has been largely minimal. For example, on Al-Saha, there are 16 threads about the Obama speech, only 2 of which have DOT posts, while on PALDF, out of 49 threads about the speech, only one has a DOT post. The exception is aljazeeratalk.net, where one thread started by the DOT has 290 responses, which include lengthy replies by the DOT, responding to individual users.

Content analysis was used to determine the stance, type of rhetoric, and tone used in each post, and to determine what themes are discussed by the posts. This methodology follows the model developed by Hassan, Qazvinian, and Radev (2010) whereby attitudes in online discussion sentences as

opposed to individual words are identified. Stance was characterized as positive, negative, or neutral. Rhetoric was characterized as emotional, "logical" (i.e., relying on facts), or religious, or any combination of those categories; and tone was characterized as dismissive, refuting, accepting, ridiculing, engaging, condescending, or a combination of these categories.

The content analysis findings were discussed with members of the DOT in an in-depth interview conducted in July 2010, where further information about the team was also obtained.

Content Analysis Results

Themes

The DOT often posts very similar messages and responses in terms of content on different sites, and there are considerable differences between the themes discussed by the DOT in its posts and those raised by other users (Figure 1). The diversity of themes is remarkable, but DOT posts tend to converge on the following themes:

- Challenging perceptions of US foreign policy towards the Middle East
- Stating that the USA is supportive of establishing a Palestinian state
- Stating that the USA wants to withdraw from Iraq
- Stressing that the USA is not at war with the Muslim world
- Stressing US multiculturalism and religious tolerance
- Presenting Islam as a religion of compassion and describing Islamic extremists as foreign to Islam and to what most Muslims think

- Presenting Obama's speech as a new beginning for US-Arab relations

- Ridiculing myths and conspiracy theories and calling users with extreme views radicals but claiming to enjoy engaging with users who post objective views

- Defending DOT members as US civil servants when accused of being spies and traitors

On the other hand, people's responses to the DOT converge on the following themes:

- Describing them as slaves and traitors, suggesting that they have little or no credibility

- Posting photos of dead children and dead and injured American soldiers

- Refuting views on American foreign policy by citing Palestine and Iraq as examples

- Posting doctored sarcastic photos of Obama

- Posting photos of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda figures

- Posting a YouTube video of Obama's speech to AIPAC where he calls Hamas terrorist

- Citing verses from the Quran

- Saying that the USA will be destroyed

- Posting myths and conspiracy theories (like saying the date of Obama's speech was chosen because it's the day before that of the Naksa of 1967 (the Six Day War))

Nevertheless, over 40 percent of the themes could not be categorized by these dominant themes (Figure 1), underscoring the range and diversity of these discussions.
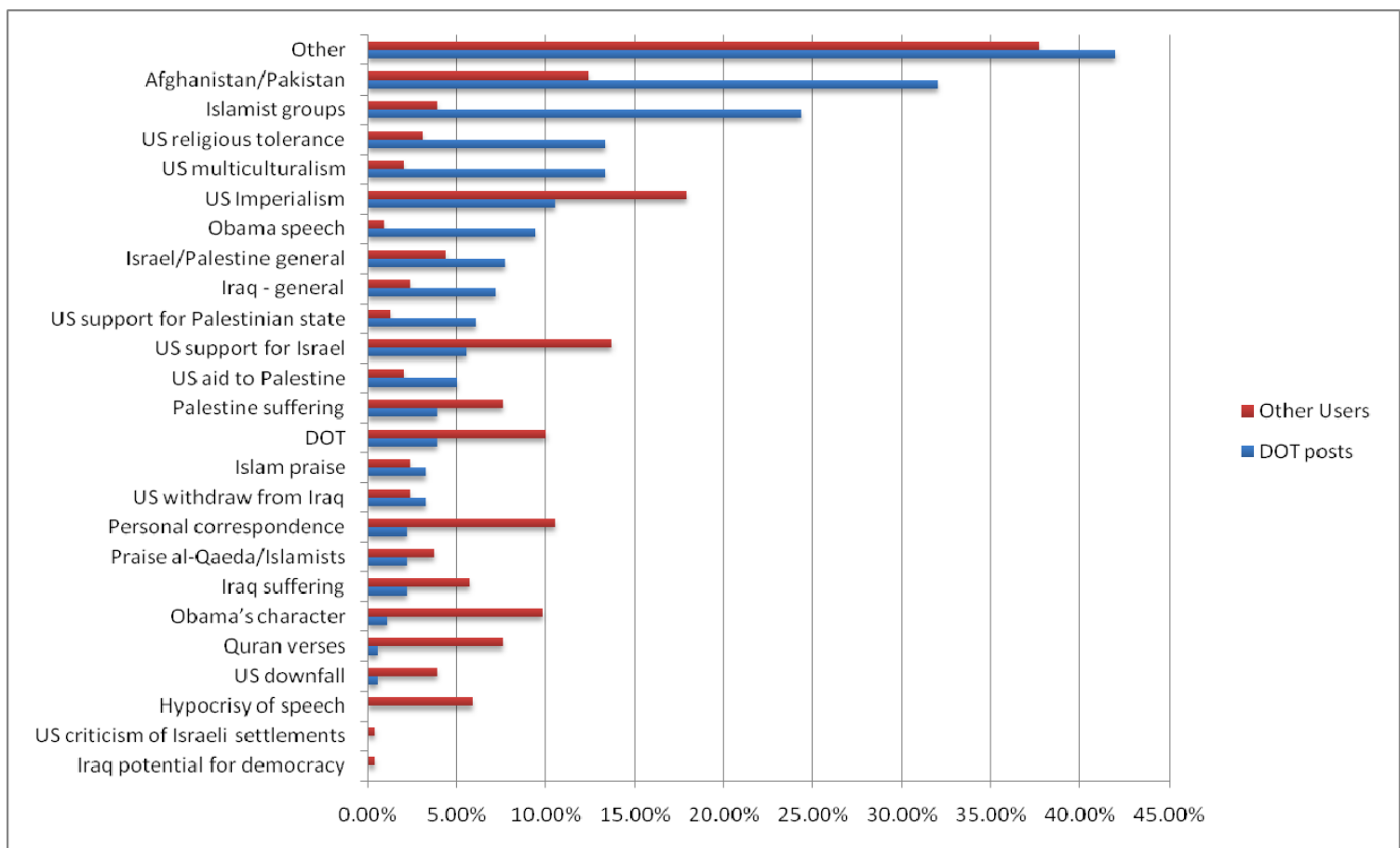
Fig. 1. Themes present in posts in the 30 discussion threads about Obama's Cairo speech (figures add up to more than 100% because multiple themes may be recorded).

Rhetoric

The vast majority of DOT posts, 93.92%, use logical rhetoric (Figure 2). Only 5.5% use only emotional rhetoric, though a combination of logical and emotional is very common at 74.6% of the posts. Religious rhetoric is used only in 0.6% of DOT posts, and always in combination with logical rhetoric.

Al-Jazeera was the only site on which DOT used religious rhetoric. In contrast, 91.9% of posts by other users employ emotional rhetoric, 38.78% use logical rhetoric, and 15.5% religious rhetoric (Figure 3).
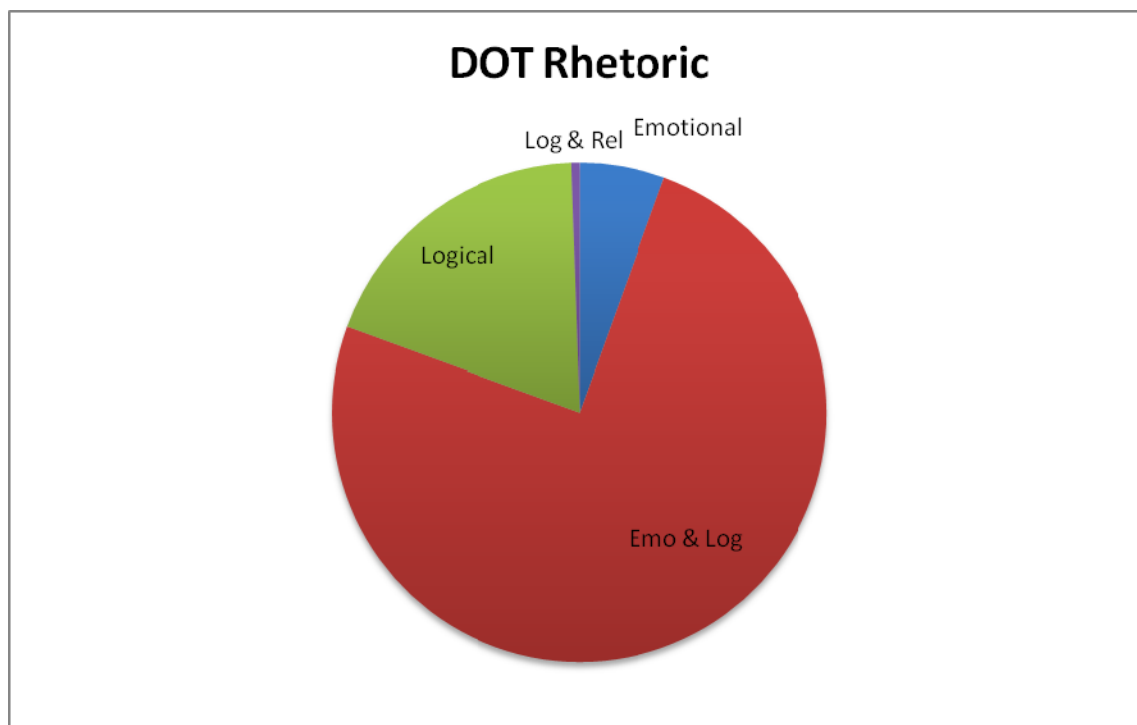

Fig. 2. Rhetorical style of DOT posts in the 30 discussion threads on the Cairo speech
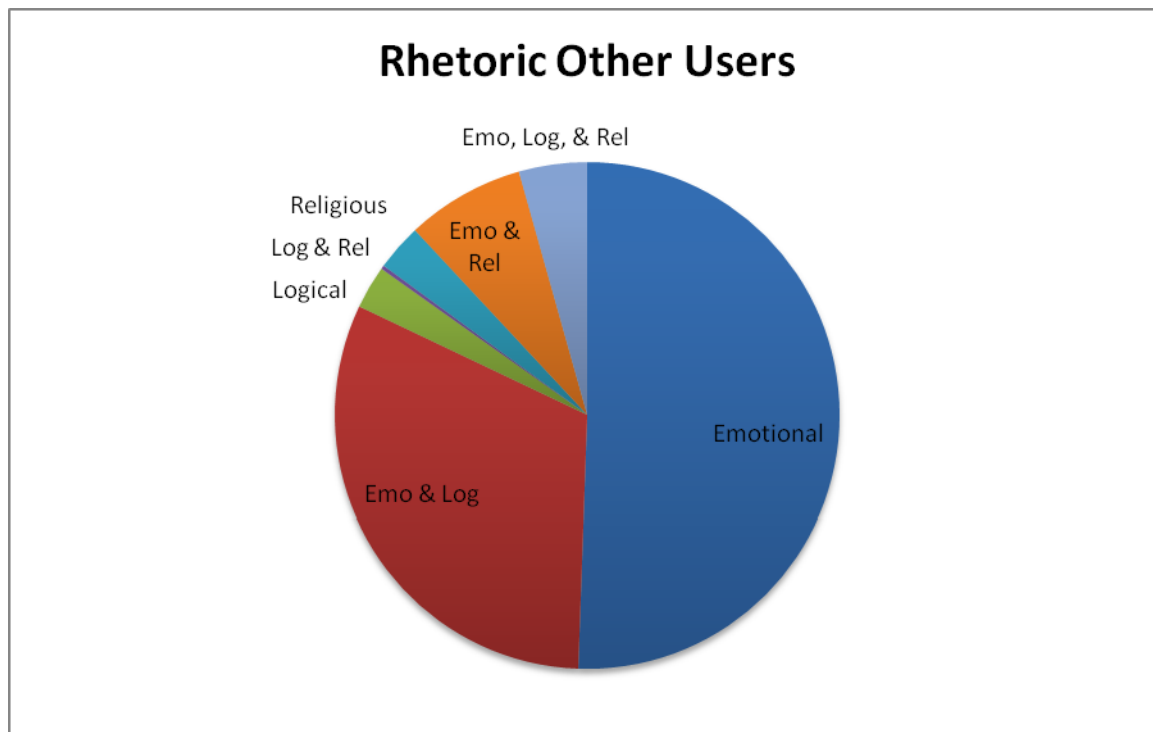
Rhetoric Other Users

Fig. 3. Rhetorical style of non-DOT posts in the 30 discussion threads on Cairo speech

Tone

In line with its stated mission of explaining US foreign policy and countering misinformation (IIP 2009), DOT posts mostly refute (76.8% of posts) and engage (85.6%) (Figure 4). Other users' posts also mostly refute (56.0%) and engage (47.9%), though sigfincantly less so than DOT posts. Other users also use a ridiculing tone in over a third of posts (34.1%).
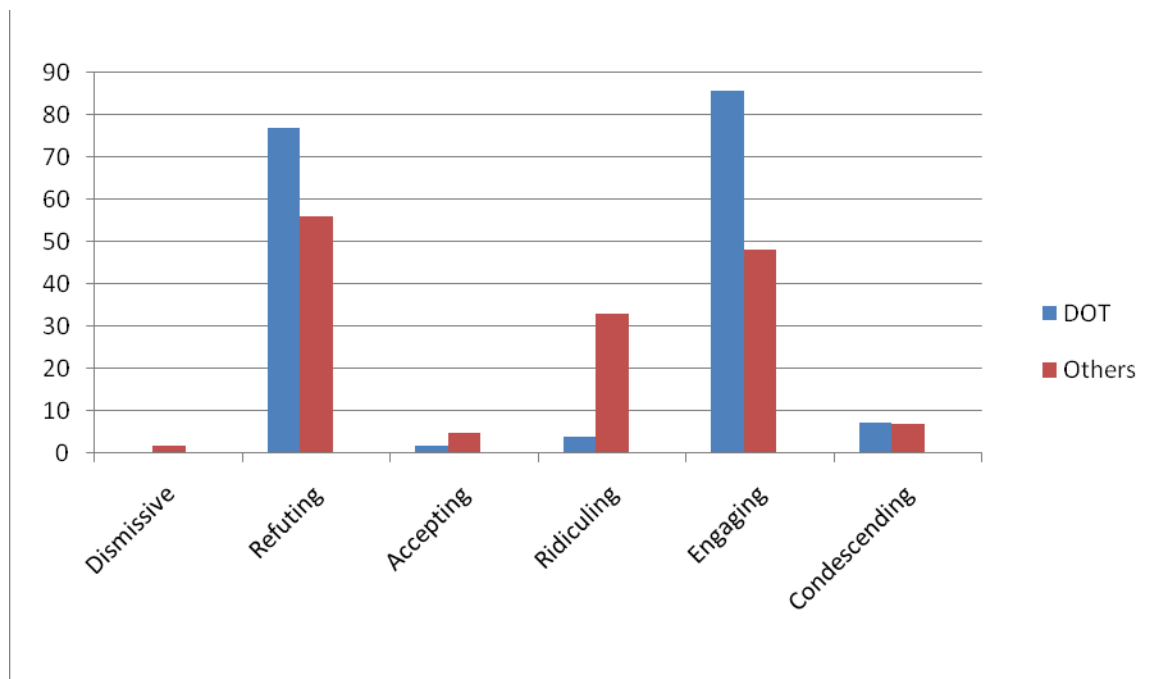
Fig. 4. Tone of posts in the 30 discussion threads on the Cairo speech

Stance towards American foreign policy

Of 459 posts by other users, only 4.8% expressed positive views of US foreign policy, 68.0% expressed negative views of US foreign policy, and 27.2% expressed no clear stance. Negativity is typically expressed by calling Obama a liar or a new George Bush, whereas posts with no clear stance tend to express a "wait and see" attitude about Obama's policies towards the Middle East. The phrase "actions, not words" is repeated across a number of sites.

Stance towards the DOT

A significant minority, 46, of the posts by other users (10.0%), discuss the DOT as a theme. Only 2 (4%) of these posts have a positive stance, 37 (80%) have a negative stance, and 7 (15%) have no clear stance. The vast majority, 93%, of other users' posts that discuss the DOT use emotional rhetoric, 46% use logical rhetoric, and 20% use religious rhetoric (Figure 5).
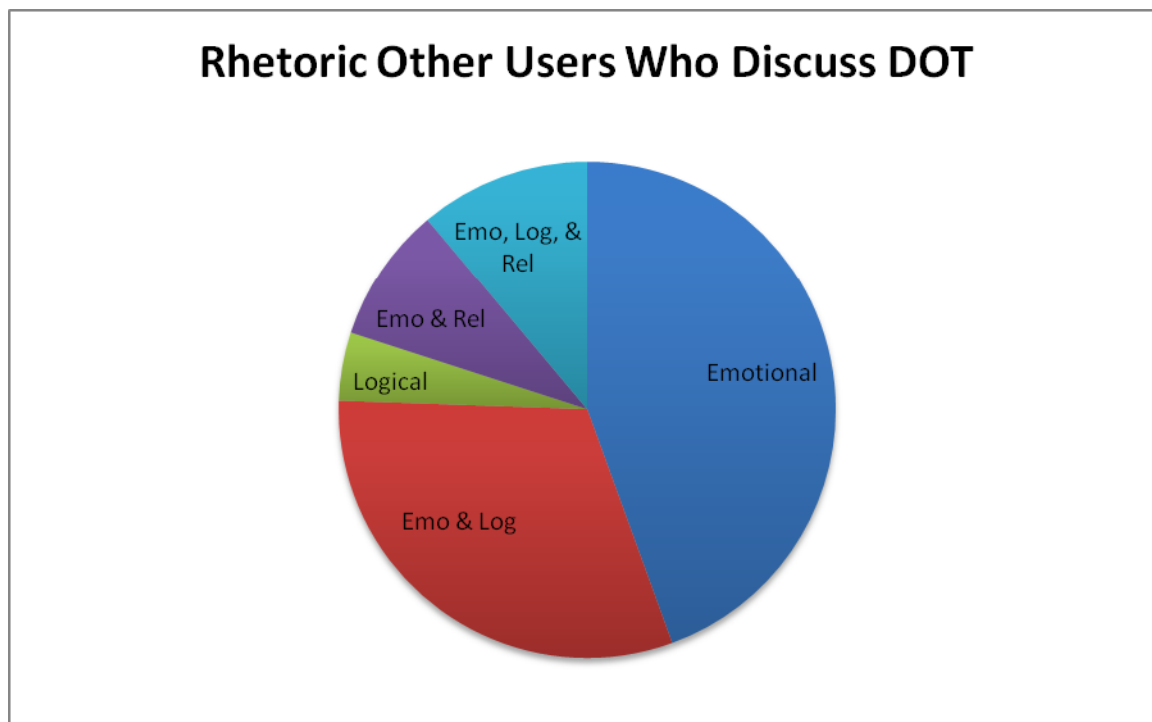
Fig. 5. Rhetorical style of non-DOT posts discussing DOT in 30 discussion threads about Obama's Cairo speech

The tone of the posts about the DOT is mostly refuting: 69.9% refute, 10.9% accept, 50.0% ridicule, 34.8% engage, and 19.6% condescend (Figure 6). The proportion of posts about the DOT that ridicule and condescend is much higher than for all posts by other users in general (Figure 6). The proportion that engages is lower than in all posts. Al-Jazeera has the highest proportion of ridiculing posts.
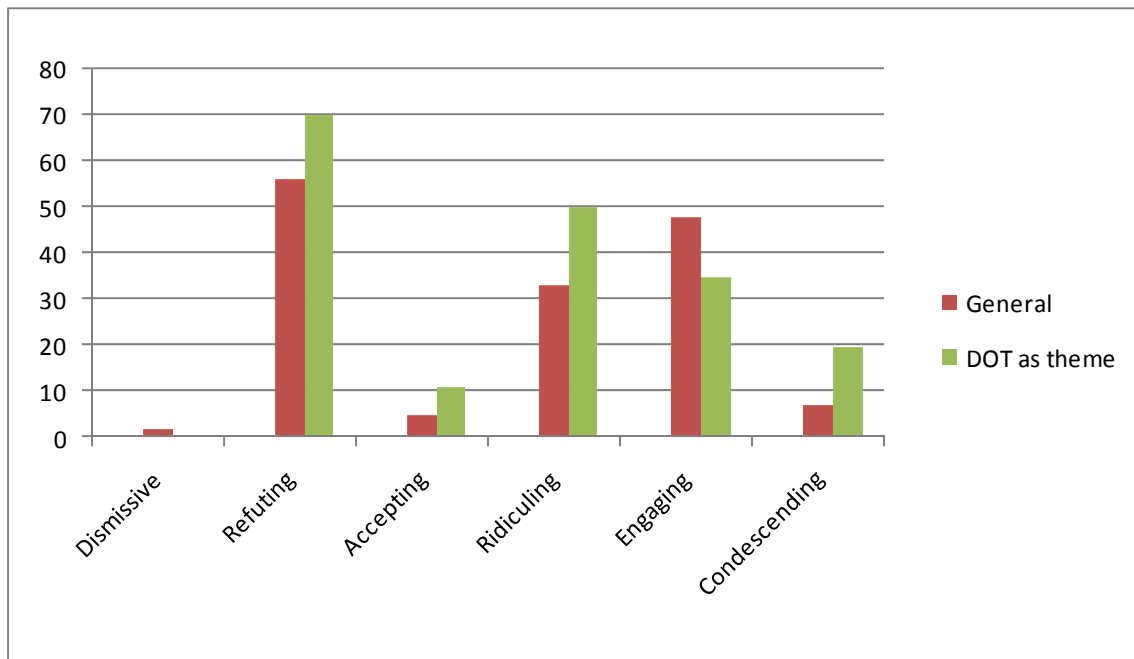
Fig. 6. Tone other users who discuss the DOT compared with general tone for all posts by other users in general.

Multimedia

Other users post far more multimedia than DOT users, 0.44 pictures or videos per post versus 0.04, respectively. Restricting analysis to posts by other users that included pictures, the average post contained 4 pictures. The most common themes of these posts are US imperialism, Palestinian suffering, US downfall, and US support for Israel, where the pictures seem to be presented as evidence for these themes (Table 1).

Table 1. Most common themes for posts with pictures.

Theme	Other Users (%)
US imperialism	26.1%
Palestinian suffering	21.7%
US downfall	21.7%
US support for Israel	19.6%
Iraqi suffering	15.2%

Challenges for the DOT

The content analysis has revealed two key challenges for the DOT: response time and rising negative attitudes by other users. The DOT takes an average of 2.77 days to respond to other users' posts. Slow response times makes it is hard for readers to keep up with the points that they are specifically responding to.

The analysis also measured stance towards American foreign policy before and after DOT posts (Figure 7). In threads where the DOT does post, other users' posts are 42.3% negative and 7.7% positive before any DOT posts, and 73.4% negative and 3.6% positive after DOT posts.
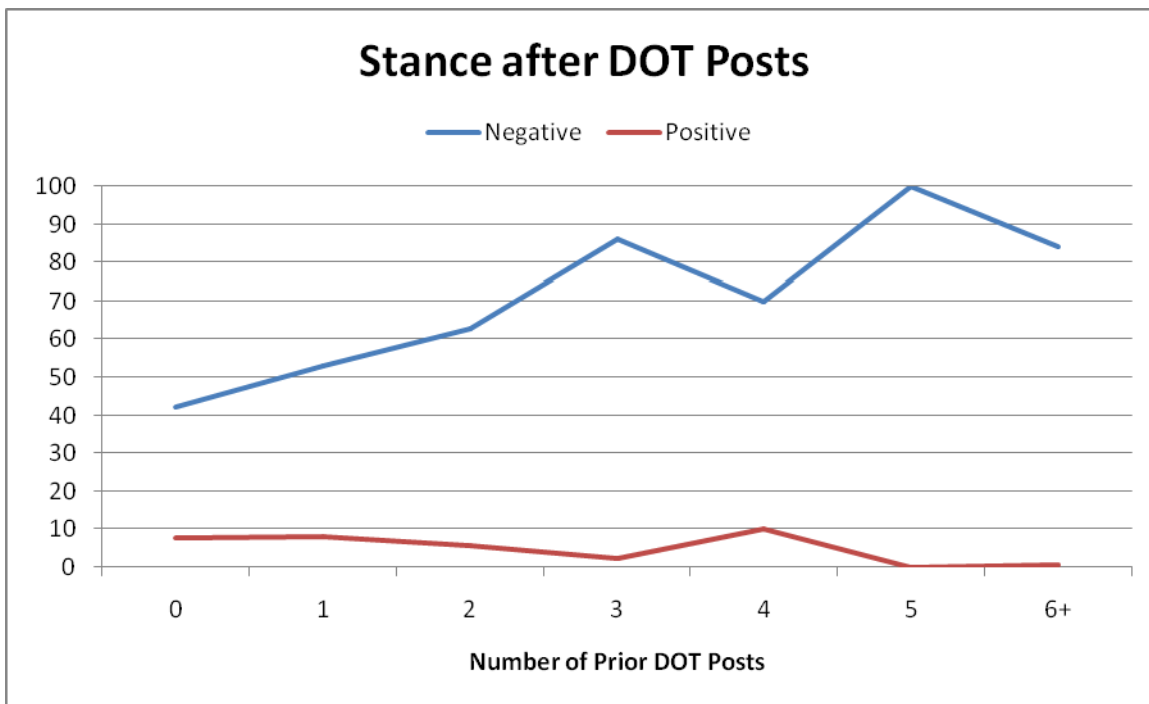
Fig. 7. Stance towards US foreign policy of other users' posts after DOT posts.

Discussion

In an interview with the first author, the DOT explained that its participation strategy is based on generally not posting on threads where a discussion is interpreted by the DOT as having a healthy dynamic, or where the team feels that its participation might impede the conversation. The DOT does not always address all the points raised by other users in their posts, and the team says that this is because anything it posts has to be thoroughly researched for factual accuracy, and it simply takes too long to research too many points. In addition, addressing everything generates very long replies, which the team feels is not productive as the team members prefer to be more focused in their replies. The team says that people often post similar questions and discuss similar topics on different sites, which explains why the DOT offers similar answers and similar post content (DOT 2010).

In terms of themes, other users talk about US imperialism, US downfall, US support for Israel, Palestinian suffering, Obama's character, and quote the Quran more than the DOT does. In contrast, the DOT discusses US multiculturalism and religious tolerance, US support for a Palestinian state and aid to Palestine, US withdrawal from Iraq, and Islamist groups more than other users. This suggests that the DOT is mostly focused on discussing "positive" themes that present the USA in a favorable manner. In a study by Lee et al. in 2005, it was found that "traditional journalists use the Internet to gather a variety of opinions on issues and that the Internet has the power to shape public opinion by affecting the agendas of other media" (Messner and Distaso 2008: 449). The focus on positive themes by the DOT can be interpreted as an attempt at resetting the agenda both for the traditional media—intermedia agenda setting (Breen 1997)—and for the public reading the posts. Nisbet et al. (2004) argue that this kind of "agenda building" through existing non-US communication channels is more effective in terms of influencing portrayals of the United States than establishing new American channels like Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa.

It is also an effort to interpret the meaning of events and to counter negative interpretations. Such efforts have been negatively labeled as "spin" by media pundits. Spin carries an implication of being disingenuous. However, texts or speeches do not do all the work involved in creating meaning. Headlines, critical reviews, news coverage, and blog posts can present an interpretation of the outcome of a debate or speech that can influence how it is received. In such ways, the DOT and other public diplomacy practitioners need to be involved in efforts to spin events, such as Obama's Cairo speech, unless they wish to leave it to others.

The rhetoric used by the DOT in its posts is largely logical and it is keen on presenting facts. This resonates with its stated goal of contrasting "objective facts and analysis with the often emotional, conspiracy laden arguments of U.S. critics in hopes that online readers will take a fresh look at their opinions of the U.S." (IIP 2009). The tone of DOT posts is mostly refuting and engaging. This is in line

with the DOT's explanation that decisions on what themes to actually respond to are made on the basis of choosing issues that are clear, picking on the weakest argument by other users and showing the fallacy of the logic used in the argument (DOT 2010). Nevertheless, in 13 posts the DOT used a ridiculing or condescending tone (often both). These posts are present on two sites: Al-Saha and Al-Jazeera, which seem to attract users with extreme anti-US views, several of whom identify themselves as supporters or members of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, and where users have insulted the team member personally or have expressed especially anti-US views. In parallel, dismissive tones by other users only appear on Egypt Sons, Al-Saha, and Al-Jazeera, and Al-Jazeera is the site on which the most cases of condescending tones by other users are found. Al-Jazeera is also by far the most negative site, with 86.8% of posts expressing a negative stance towards US foreign policy.

The findings show that DOT posts generate more negativity and that the DOT itself is not popular on the sites analyzed. On the surface, it seems that the DOT is counterproductive as the result of its participation is so negative (including driving more expressed negativity towards US foreign policy (general negativity) and negativity towards the DOT itself (posts that express negative opinions about the DOT). But there are other possible interpretations. Negativity could be a sign that people are concerned enough to respond, otherwise they might have ignored the posts. And the overwhelming negativity among users can be linked to Noelle-Neumann's (1984) "spiral of silence" theory, which says that people are less likely to voice their opinions in public if they believe those opinions are in the minority, which means that those with more positive views do not feel encouraged to participate in the debate. In addition, the DOT explained that it chooses to participate when something highly negative is being discussed in the first place (DOT 2010). This choice is because the DOT's aim is to "explain American foreign policy, counter stereotypes about the US, and correct misinformation, not change the minds of users" (DOT 2010). The DOT moreover says that its purpose is to challenge views it disagrees with – for the benefit of lurkers rather than for the participants. The DOT aims, through online

discussions with other users, "to present to the lurkers a scenario so the lurkers can judge: who has got the better case? Who has got the most logic?" (DOT 2010). This strategy appears sensible in light of estimates that the majority of people who visit Internet discussion sites are lurkers (Nonnecke and Preece 2001), and is supported by the high rate of logical rhetoric in DOT posts (93.92%).

Evgeny Morozov (2009) criticizes the approach of the DOT by saying that "You don't win a war of ideas by growing the number of new media staff who sit by their computers and, much like robots, respond to every online thread that mentions US foreign policy with an official position of the State Department, which is, in fact, what the State Department's Digital Outreach Team has been doing". However, each member of the DOT has their own writing style and online personality, so even though they tend to post the same facts and figures on different sites, in the posts where they engage in an online conversation with other users, they still seem to come across as authentic individuals and "real" persons. This is deliberate. The IIP's statement about the DOT says that "The team creates engaging, informal personas for its online discussions instead of simply making dry policy pronouncements" (IIP 2009). This explains the high percentage of DOT posts mixing emotional and logical rhetoric (74.59%). The DOT says that it wants online conversations to be "real" and akin to offline human interactions (DOT 2010). It is an individualized approach that departs from the detached, impersonal approach, a criticism that was often leveled at the State Department in early public diplomacy initiatives like Voice of America.

The DOT clearly faces a number of challenges. It is hard to respond to images like those of injured children. Such images give an advantage to "local" online users who are close to the "event" over "distant" diplomats. The DOT's normal response to such images is to point the finger at Islamist terrorists who are responsible for killing children in places like Iraq. But, as the discussions on the Al-Jazeera site show, responding to emotionally flamed rhetoric, even factually, may exacerbate tension instead of alleviating it. Another challenge is the issue of scale: DOT members are certainly

outnumbered. There are only 6 DOT members posting in Arabic compared to a much larger number of networked activists opposed to US policy. Additionally, even though decisions on when and whether to post are made individually, by the team members, the content of each post must be discussed in the group prior to being posted. All team members share their messages with colleagues before posting them. This tie to hierarchy is a disadvantage in the face of networked individuals operating horizontally. Added to the need to research facts, the effect of time zone differences, and weekends, when the DOT does not operate (DOT 2010), and the result is a relatively slow average response time of 2.77 days.

Since the beginning of 2009, there has been organized online presence by Islamist groups on discussion sites and they target the DOT (DOT 2010). This has led to a more negative tone and more attacking language by other users compared with 2006 when the DOT first started. An article in the *Washington Times* in early 2007 quotes Jeremy Curtin, then acting coordinator of the Bureau of International Information Programs at the State Department, as saying that "even when posters disagree with U.S. policies or opinions expressed by the State Department team, they are 'polite, respectful and courteous'". The real challenge for the DOT in this respect is not the attacking language, but the reality of having to engage directly with terrorists online—despite its aim of not engaging with extremists (Arsenault 2009)—because the Internet dissolves boundaries.

The general focus on countering negativity and misrepresentation means that the work of the DOT is largely reactive rather than proactive. This approach resonates with James Glassman's view on public diplomacy, that "it's often more effective to destroy [U.S. adversaries'] brand than build up ours" (quoted in Ackerman 2009). However, one of the leading members of the DOT has launched an initiative connected to his personal blog (walidjawad.blogspot.com) which focuses on the legacy of Lebanese-American poet, artist, author, and philosopher Gibran Kahlil Gibran (http://gibrankahlilgibran.blogspot.com/), in an attempt at creating a "parallel narrative" as opposed to a "counter narrative" about the USA (DOT 2010), and thus at building an attractive US brand based on

multiculturalism and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, a challenge for all DOT's work effectiveness is in appealing to lurkers, among whom there are potentially an undecided audience, because it is difficult to measure the position of lurkers. But the DOT judges its own work by saying "if we're not there, we're not making any difference", even if this leads to more anti-US posts (DOT 2010).

Is Public Diplomacy 2.0 Worth It?

This question is difficult to answer directly because although the evidence points to a lack of impact for DOT postings, its intended target audience is among the lurkers on blogs and Websites, who leave no evidence of their reactions online. It is therefore possible that lurkers are influenced by seeing anti-US views challenged online but it is impossible to be sure whether they are convinced by the DOT arguments or not. Nevertheless, there are a number of advantages and disadvantages with the DOT approach.

In terms of advantages, the approach is flexible in the sense that the websites that the DOT posts on change depending on site popularity, traffic, and the topics discussed. For example, when the DOT first started, it posted videos on Myspace and Yahoo videos, but it now only actively posts videos on YouTube and Ikbis as these two sites have proven to be more successful. On YouTube, the DOT has so far had 700,000 hits for 90 videos in Arabic, and it recently placed an advert on Facebook, which raised its number of "friends" to 3900. Second, Arabic language DOT members are native Arabic speakers with local knowledge of the Arab region, which allows them to use language more creatively (although this authenticity is sometimes met with criticism by other users who accuse them of being traitors). Third, the DOT does present an image of a government that is trying to engage with and listen to people directly (although, again, this has been met with skepticism by some users who accuse them of being spies). Fourth, the DOT actively engages in reframing debates about the USA.

In 2007, the *Washington Post*'s Walter Pincus wrote about the DOT, "The State-Defense communications approach is… turning to a more sophisticated message, one that moves away from trying to change perceptions of the United States, focusing instead on the self-perceptions of its target audiences. 'Our core message must outline an alternative future that is more attractive than the bleak future offered by the terrorists,' said Michael Doran, deputy assistant secretary of defense for support of public diplomacy" (Pincus 2007). This study shows that the DOT is indeed engaging in this kind of reframing, not only by presenting counter-narratives but also by responding to Islamists by presenting them as radicals and foreign to Islam and accusing them of alienating other Muslims and of propagating a gloomy outlook for the Islamic world.

Finally, the nature of political communication today is one where political actors cannot ignore the digital sphere. When the DOT starts a thread about Obama's Cairo speech, it aims at making people think about the speech, putting it on the thought map. The importance of this is emphasized in light of the active circulation of anti-Obama statements by anti-US elements around the time of the speech to try to deflect attention from it (Curtis and Phillips 2009). As Karen Hughes said in 2007, "There is an information explosion, and we are competing for attention and credibility in the midst of that explosion," (quoted in the *Washington Times* 2007).

There are also a number of disadvantages with the DOT strategy. First, at the time of the Obama speech in Cairo, a priority for the 6 members of DOT was to publish the speech on as many sites as possible (especially in light of online campaigns against the speech), hence the high number of threads containing the speech text or summary only with no other posts by the DOT (DOT 2010). Yet the process of posting the Obama speech without further interaction is an old fashioned one-way mode of communication. In one thread on Al-Saha, other users even called for the DOT to respond and it did not (possibly because of the issue of scale discussed above).

Second, in its attempt at presenting itself as rational, the DOT is sometimes too reliant on presenting technicalities in the context of a battle of ideas, perceptions, and emotions. For example, in a thread on Al-Jazeera, in response to a post on the issue of the occupation of Iraq, the DOT's response was that the United States is not occupying any Muslim country right now because of international (Afghanistan) or bilateral (Iraq) agreements and that Iraq is now better off without Saddam Hussein (http://www.aljazeeratalk.net/forum/showthread.php?t=190561&page=3). Even if the technical current reality in Iraq is not one of occupation, the perception of a large number of Arabs is that it is.

The third and perhaps most important challenge is the role of foreign policy and implementation. The work of the DOT is being undermined by the trajectory of US foreign policy towards the Middle East. For example, shortly after the Cairo speech, the DOT expressed too much confidence in Special Envoy George Mitchell's ability to help solve the Israel-Palestine issue. In a post on June 26, 2009 on Al-Jazeera, the DOT referred to Mitchell as saying that it is only a matter of weeks before some concrete results are seen on that front (http://www.aljazeeratalk.net/forum/showthread.php?t=190561&page=5). Mitchell's optimism has since been challenged by the path the peace talks have taken.

A similar criticism applies to the limitation of using Obama's Cairo speech. The speech itself has taken a life of its own as a public diplomacy tool. More than a year after the speech, references to it still crop up every now and then in posts by the DOT to support arguments about US engagement with the Middle East region and about changes in foreign policy. The State Department's Peace in the Middle East Arabic page on America.gov features a photo and caption of the Cairo speech, saying that "the only way the ambitions of both sides can be realized is by a two-state solution where both Palestinians and Israelis can live in peace and security" (http://www.america.gov/ar/relations/middle_east_peace.html). Yet the few posts by other users on the Obama speech today on sites such as Egypt Sons (http://www.egyptsons.com/misr/showthread.php?141470&p=1424124&highlight=#post1424124) refer

to it as the hope that was never realized and frame it in terms of disappointment. This resonates back to the 27.2% of users who reacted to the speech in 2009 by saying that actions matter, not words.

Even though opinions expressed on the Internet do not represent public opinion at large, the case study's findings about attitudes towards American foreign policy (at 68.0% negative) are not too different from those of the 2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll, which is produced each year by the Brookings Institution in conjunction with Zogby International: "Early in the Obama administration, in April and May 2009, 51% of the respondents in the six countries [surveyed: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates] expressed optimism about American policy in the Middle East. In the 2010 poll, only 16% were hopeful, while a majority - 63% - was discouraged" (Telhami 2010).

Another key issue for the DOT is that even though it is supposed to be discussing policy (in contrast, say, to the Secretary of State's Twitter team that does not engage in policy issues), in practice, the DOT is not close to the policy community at the State Department. One of the newer activities of the DOT (since 2009) is a form of opinion mining (Pang and Lee 2008), which focuses on disseminating a bi-weekly written brief called "What's Playing in Cyberspace" to different bureaus at the State Department, which summarizes what people talk about online and how the DOT is responding to those issues, but it is not clear if and how this written brief is used in policy making circles. The State Department is showing greater awareness of the need to link public diplomacy closer to policy, and since 2009, it has appointed public diplomacy officials in each of its regional bureaus. But ultimately, as numerous public diplomacy scholars have argued (Nye 2004; Kraidy 2008; Seib 2009; Khatib 2011), no matter how sophisticated the public diplomacy messages, if US foreign policy towards the Middle East does not produce more than rhetorical change, public diplomacy 2.0 will not be able to alter perceptions of the USA in the region.

Conclusion

A case study is limited and cannot form the basis for generalizing to a larger population. All case studies are unique and the debate surrounding President Obama's Cairo speech was a landmark event. However, this exploratory case illustrates that technological advances will not automatically realize the vision of public diplomacy 2.0 without creative, strategic thinking about how to implement and use Web 2.0 most effectively in conversations among distrusting adversaries that are often hostile and suspicious. There is no quick technical fix. However, the case study suggests a set of strategic issues that the DOT and other public diplomacy initiatives might consider. No text or video speaks for itself, and efforts to interpret and contextualize messages—what might be denounced as spin in the political arena—are necessary and need to be timely and at a scale that competes with adversarial interpretations. Efforts to increase the scale and speed for response and to employ more visual images could help the DOT compete on a more level ground with the critics of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

A key threat posed by the Internet is that individuals might lock themselves into virtual "echo chambers" in which they fail to be exposed to diverse opinions and contradictory viewpoints (Sunstein 2007). The efforts of the DOT to join the conversation seem to stir counter-messages, but they also enable those reading these sites, including the undecided among the lurkers, to hear alternative perspectives. It is important that diplomats around the world recognize the potential of joining two-way conversations about controversial issues in the age of networks, but also systematically explore strategies for grappling with often hostile and emotional arguments where there is a lack of trust among the adversaries. And regardless of how much the USA invests in developing public diplomacy methods, the best way to change attitudes and gain trust in the Middle East is through a positive change in foreign policy that links words and deeds. These are some of the major strategic challenges facing public diplomacy 2.0

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