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**IS IT THE MEDIUM OR THE MESSAGE?
SOCIAL MEDIA, AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY & IRAN**

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Abstract

This article discusses communication concepts associated with the practice of public diplomacy 2.0, applying those concepts to analysis of American implementation of PD 2.0 directed toward Iran, a country with which the United States has lacked formal diplomatic relations for more than 30 years. Although interaction between the United States and the Iranian people may be limited, may not always take place in real time, and certainly cannot serve as a substitute for the interactions facilitated by a bricks-and-mortar embassy on the ground, the Virtual Embassy Tehran and its social media accouterments represent an interesting application of American public diplomacy priorities. The effort is consistent not only with the goals of 21st Century Statecraft, but also with the Administration's stated preference for engagement while still pursuing vigorous economic sanctions toward the Iranian regime. The effort also has potent symbolic value given the United States' promotion of global internet freedom as a foreign policy goal. The case of American engagement with the Iranian people as examined here is a unique study in the practice of public diplomacy 2.0 and it offers an opportunity to test some of the more idealistic arguments associated with application of social media to diplomatic efforts.

Introduction

In an age of rapidly evolving communication technologies, enthusiasm about new techniques for outreach can overtake attention to constructing the message to be conveyed. This tendency was common in discussions about the 2008 presidential election, prompting internet doyenne Arianna Huffington to offer the following corrective to analysis about Senator John McCain's presidential bid and his campaign's use of communication technology: "The problem with the McCain

campaign was... the age of the ideas dominating the campaign” (2008). It was the content of Senator Barack Obama’s campaign messages, Huffington concludes, not the means through which they were delivered, that won the election for the senator from Illinois. The technology may have been useful, she cautioned, but it was the ideas that mattered.

Conventional wisdom about public diplomacy similarly assumes the advent of online social interactive media has revolutionized the practice of the craft. But it is still the message that matters. The arguments supporting declarations of a changed diplomatic landscape are familiar and derive from the well-established internet optimism versus internet pessimism debates spanning from the 1990s to today: The internet is a universally democratizing force; the higher the internet penetration rate the greater the diversity of voices to be heard; harnessing the power of the internet guarantees political success; and compelling ideas powered by social media cannot fail.

But lacking both formal theories to guide the practice (Entman, 2008; Gilboa, 2008; 2009) and effective mechanisms to evaluate policy once implemented (Banks, 2011; Gilboa, 2009; Pahlavi, 2007; Steven, 2007), discussions about public diplomacy and the use of social media therein struggle to offer more than anecdotal evidence and a demonstrated affinity for cool tech trends. Social media may be increasingly deployed by the United States Department of State in the name of public diplomacy, but to what end?

This article looks beyond the received wisdom of social media and its place in the practice of public diplomacy and digs into the emerging body of peer-reviewed literature about the application of social media tools to policy and political contexts. It continues with discussion of American efforts to deploy the tools of social media for the purposes of public diplomacy in the case of Iran. It concludes that social media has great potential for the practice of public diplomacy, but learning to exploit its full range of benefits will require both time and a commitment to focusing on engagement.

Is the medium the message?

Alec Ross, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Senior Advisor for Innovation writes “Diplomacy in the 21st century must confront both the potential and the limits of technology in foreign policy and respond to the disruptions it causes in international relations” (2011, p. 455). That disruptions typically accompany the introduction of new technologies is a given. How those disruptions will ultimately affect international politics and diplomatic practice is far from predictable. There is always a degree of hyperbole involved in discussions about the influence of emerging communication technologies and conversation about social media’s use for the purposes of public diplomacy 2.0 has not been immune to this tendency.

There is potential for practitioners to have access to many more thoughts, perspectives, ideas and opinions from different places around the world than have previously been available. Public diplomacy -- by definition, the efforts to reach out directly to populations of foreign countries by sidestepping their governments and the confines of traditional diplomacy -- is ideally suited for exploiting social media's interactive characteristics. Although simply employing the tools that facilitate those conversations is not enough, much of the discussion about social media's public diplomacy potential focuses on the adoption of the technology rather than on the creation of content or the emphasis on engaging with the intended audience.

Thoughtful analyses of public diplomacy and its place in a country's foreign policy strategy suggest looking beyond simple adoption of interactive communication tools for sharing America's story with the world (Hayden, 2011; Lord, 2008). Such analyses also urge caution in use of the term "engagement." Philip Seib calls it "mushy" and worries that it can be mistaken for a policy goal unto itself (2012, p. 121). The emphasis on style over substance is not unique to the field of public diplomacy as earlier discussion of the 2008 presidential campaign demonstrated. As noted above, rhetoric surrounding the 2008 presidential campaign focused on the novelty of the tools rather than the substance of message being promoted.

Enthusiasm for the role of social media in the practice of public diplomacy may have been similarly overplayed in the American policy environment. It is true that the Department of State is recognized as one of the most tech-savvy foreign ministries in the world (Crouch, 2012), but in a public presentation celebrating the Department's practice of PD 2.0, examples of outcomes were limited to numbers of followers, numbers of tweets and plans to get more of both (New America Foundation, 2012). There are, for example, 10 official State Department policy-oriented Twitter feeds in foreign languages and another in English. State now experiments with Twitter briefings, inviting people to submit questions in advance, with the spokesperson responding to those questions at a later briefing and via Twitter.

There was also a recent contest among foreign posts challenging embassies to increase their numbers of followers on a variety of social media sites. The effort resulted in an increase of State's followers from a few hundred thousand to more than 4 million. A forthcoming contest plans to identify 20 embassies to receive consulting services from visiting teams of technology experts to help the selected posts apply lessons learned from the aforementioned follower drive and further improve their local social media presence. This approach to public diplomacy and more generally to the adoption of social media by established institutions has led one internet realist to wryly observe, "If a tree falls in the forest and everyone tweets about it, it may not be the tweets that moved it" (Morozov, 2011, p. 16).

Public diplomacy efforts are notoriously difficult to evaluate (Banks, 2011) and the temptation has long been to assume that quantity is quality. Calculating

numbers of followers is a useful metric for determining potential audience reach, but it offers no insights into the quality of the communications. It also does not guarantee that the communication has evolved to include engagement. Indeed, one participant on the New American Foundation panel mentioned above acknowledged, “We need to start listening.”

Recalling historian Nicholas Cull’s mantra that listening is the most important part of public diplomacy (2011), one worries the continued focus on the number of social media sites in which the Department is engaged and the number of followers the Department has is being mistaken for evidence of public diplomacy success. In reality, such numbers are necessary but not sufficient for public diplomacy success in the current communication ecosystem. As Seib writes “The big question, to which there is not yet a definitive answer, is, does this technology-based approach work better, or at least as well as more traditional contact techniques?” (2012, p. 121).

Understanding social media

It may be possible to glean insights from other disciplines studying the role of social media. The field of political communication, for example, has produced numerous studies examining the place of social media like Twitter and Facebook in the conduct of both political campaigns and governance. Henry Farrell, for example, summarizes many of those findings arguing it is clear the internet has an effect but that researchers and policymakers must consider the technology as part of a broader context, not as a factor by itself. He recommends integrating knowledge of the internet’s effects with ongoing policy debates, exploiting the new availability of data and exploring the mechanisms through which the internet plays a role in cause and effect (2012). Communication scholar James Curran and co-authors accordingly urge caution, suggesting “a narrow, decontextualized focus on the technology of the internet leads to misperceiving its impact” (Curran et al, 2012, p. 179).

There are few calls for this kind of moderation in current discussions about the role of social media in the American practice of public diplomacy. A recent example of unmitigated optimism surrounding the applications of technologies is the discussion of events widely known as Arab Spring. In the heat of the moment, conventional wisdom, promoted by media coverage and policy analysis, declared social media to be largely responsible for the protests. Since then, others have suggested that attributing the protests to the technology sells the protesters short (Gladwell, 2011).

Moreover, the facts suggest traditional media such as television in the form of Al Jazeera played a key role, tracking the social media environment, but then broadcasting information through more typical channels (Seib, 2012). So while some have been quick to attribute the unrest to social media, the reality is more

likely to have been transmission of information through a well-understood communication dynamic known as the two-step flow. This is not new. It is instead a recognized mechanism applied to a new context. Practitioners of public diplomacy would be wise to remember that social media is operating in a broader communication ecosystem, the dynamics of which are well understood.

Discussing social media generally, New York University professor Clay Shirky writes that the disruptions associated with social media stem from individuals' ability to organize without organizations (2008). Recent research places social media on a spectrum of communication tools saying it "is located somewhere between the formal and informal communication sources..." (Solomon, 2012, p. 2). That study notes, "online social networks change the relationship between the population and sources of information..." (p. 3). A well-known social media expert similarly declares, "One of the greatest lessons in social media is that everything begins with listening... Not only are new media channels rich with insight, they are also interactive. There are people on the other side who have expectations of... engagement" (Solis, 2011). This restates journalism scholar Jay Rosen's observations about the "former audience" and the effect of access to interactive media on the part of previously passive recipients of information (2006).

The subsequent disruption of traditional communication models and the ability of people to organize without organizations naturally render interactive media appealing to practitioners of public diplomacy. But interactive media is, by definition, about more than the ability to operate the modern equivalent of one's own printing press. It is used to fullest advantage when conversation flows in both directions. Seib emphasizes this fact, stating "The interactive nature of social media underscores the importance of listening because the time is long past when one-way pronouncements rather than balanced conversation could suffice" (2012, p. 107-108).

Information revolutions in context

Historian Robert Darnton observes "The marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past – even a sense that communication has no history" (2010). Journalism scholars Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel offer similar insight regarding the assumption that modern communication technology changes are the most significant in history. Instead, they remind readers that there have been significant disruptions in communication technology before, beginning with the development of written communication, continuing through the invention of the printing press, through the inventions of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries until the internet (2010).

This "big picture" perspective is similar to the view of Bruce Bimber who argues the arrival of the internet is simply another in a series of information revolutions in the American context, following newspapers, the telegraph and broadcast technologies. Each revolution is disruptive, he suggests, because it offers new

access to information, and with information comes influence and the ability to affect political outcomes (2003). Diplomacy, too, has evolved with these information revolutions. Assuming that this is the era that changes everything about public diplomacy risks ignoring valuable context available to teach that at its core, diplomacy is about the message, not about the medium used to deliver it.

Seeking to provide context for discussion about the introduction of technology into a new environment, one historian notes “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral” (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 545). The same scholar speaks about the need to distinguish between utopian goals and practical realities when considering a new technology’s possible applications. The question facing public diplomacy scholars and practitioners today is not whether social media has public diplomacy applications, but rather how best to exploit social media technologies for the practice of public diplomacy.

Writing about public diplomacy, Jan Melissen notes it is “similar to propaganda in that it tries to persuade people what to think, but it is fundamentally different... in the sense that public diplomacy also listens to what people have to say” (2005, p. 18). Social media makes it possible to listen in ways previously not possible. R.S. Zaharna elaborates on this idea writing that networks are “the new model of persuasion in the international arena and will define America’s effectiveness as a new paradigm of public diplomacy” (2005, p. 1). Inherent in these discussions of networks and social media is the idea of multidirectional communication, not the one-way model associated with traditional mass media and long-time propaganda methods.

Speaking of the American approach to public diplomacy, another scholar writes “The U.S. government has traditionally approached public diplomacy as a two-track process, employing a one-way track of information dissemination while arguing that the effort is mutually beneficial in outcome. The network model of public diplomacy requires a movement beyond the one-way dissemination of information to foreign publics toward a more dialogic engagement with the target populations” (Izadi, 2009, p. 56). The challenge for the United States is to employ social media to facilitate true conversation. This is the practice of listening that Cull regularly urges be prioritized above all else (2011).

Much like the disruptions to established media institutions resulting from the former audience (Rosen, 2006) acquiring a voice, established public diplomacy practices are ripe for overhaul since the foreign publics to which messages are broadcast now themselves have the tools to participate. Just as traditional media that fails to interact with its audience is seen as behind the times and neglecting an important constituency, so too are nations that fail to engage the publics with whom they seek to interact and whose opinions they wish to influence.

American public diplomacy 2.0

There is danger of irrational exuberance when entering into discussions about the use of social media in the practice of public diplomacy 2.0. Scholars caution “it is important not to confuse the internet itself with the content that is exchanged or accessed over it... The technology creates the means. The people that use it define the ends to which it is put” (Westcott, 2008, p. 3). In other words, equipping public diplomats with social media technology does not ensure the successful delivery of a message. Nor does it guarantee the message’s favorable response upon receipt. Internet realist Evgeny Morozov is blunt in his analysis of the place of social media in public diplomacy, arguing that putting more diplomats in front of computers to use social media in public diplomacy efforts actually clouds the primary issue which is the content itself (2009).

Even before the widespread diffusion of social media, a 2009 report from the U.S. Government Accounting Office identified a number of challenges to the Department of State’s ability to execute public diplomacy and raised questions about whether American interests were being “adequately addressed” (p. 2). The implication was that the Department struggled not only with message transmission, but also with message formulation. The report expressed concern that State’s “failure to adapt in this dynamic communications environment could significantly raise the risk that U.S. public diplomacy efforts could become increasingly irrelevant” (p. 31). The Department of State under Secretary Hillary Clinton has been faced with both developing a consistent message and ensuring its effective dissemination.

It was into this context that Secretary Clinton introduced the concept of 21st Century Statecraft. Speaking of State’s much-commented upon digital outreach efforts, Seib writes “The big question, to which there is not yet a definitive answer, is, does this technology-based approach work better, or at least as well, as more traditional contact techniques?” (2012, p. 121). In the case of Iran, at least, historical evidence suggests traditional diplomatic techniques have failed. It therefore presents an interesting opportunity for study of the applications of social media-driven public diplomacy efforts.

Iran

Speaking of the benefits of virtual diplomacy, one of the State Department’s original tweeting diplomats writes “social networking tools are multiplying the outreach capabilities of embassies in a way that was never possible when engagement was only face-to-face... This does not negate the need for a physical presence and personal contact but it does underline the need for embassies to learn how to develop and maintain and staff up for virtual relationships” (Graffy, 2009). But what about circumstances where a physical presence is not possible? What benefits, if any, can social media offer? The case of the United States’ deployment of social media in Iran where there is no

physical embassy presence offers a unique opportunity to examine the technology's capacity for public diplomacy.

The Department of State's 21st Century Statecraft declaration describes the preferred modern approach to diplomacy as "complementing traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverage the networks, technologies and demographics of our interconnected world" (Department of State, 2010). The recently introduced Virtual Embassy Tehran is an example of efforts to practice 21st Century Statecraft. It is an effort undertaken in a difficult situation where the traditional foreign policy tools have failed for the last 30 years. While it is too soon to pass final judgment on the effort, after a few months it seems fair to call the experiment a well-intentioned effort implemented as well as possible given technological and political constraints, and by the metrics available for evaluation, one that seems to be having a small, but growing impact.

In December 2011, the United States launched Virtual Embassy Tehran. Speaking at an event marking the launch, one of the State Department's senior advisors on Iran announced "This is the first of its kind for the State Department, a virtual embassy.... Despite our differences with the Iranian regime, we still have a deep desire for engagement and dialogue with the Iranian people. So for us this is a mission to the Iranian people" (Federal News Service, 2011). Although there have not been formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran for more than 30 years, Iranians still often seek information about the United States, whether about travel, politics or culture. The website is designed to provide a channel for acquiring that information without intermediaries.

A video message from the Secretary of State is available on the website. In it, Secretary Clinton says "Because the United States and Iran do not have diplomatic relations, we have missed some important opportunities for dialogue with you, the citizens of Iran. But today we can use new technologies to bridge that gap and promote greater understanding between our two countries and the peoples of each country, which is why we established this virtual embassy" (Federal News Service, 2011). The message continues with an invitation for Iranians to visit the virtual embassy's Facebook and Twitter pages in order to "leave your thoughts and ideas about how we can engage even more and deepen our relationship" (Foreign News Service, 2011).

Iranians are accepting that invitation. As of this writing, the State Department's Persian language Facebook page has 61,712 likes. The Twitter account has 10,411 followers and follows 171 Twitter users in return. The YouTube channel has 128 videos posted, 670 subscribers and 617,599 video views. The Department's site makes clear the virtual embassy is neither official nor an embassy, but that it is intended to serve "as a bridge between the American and Iranian people" (Department of State, Virtual Embassy, About Us). It further

explains that the site was designed with input from the Iranian people “shaped by what you wanted” and it is intended to provide an opportunity for “you” [the Iranian people] “to tell us more about what you think and why.” Site documentation explains Virtual Embassy Tehran was created “so you can make up your own minds about the U.S., our concerns about the Iranian government’s activities at home and abroad, and our serious efforts to achieve a resolution to those concerns.”

Explaining the virtual embassy’s origins, a State Department representative says “we needed an information headquarters – a hub, if you will – and the notion of ‘Virtual Embassy Tehran’ was born. It’s information central for Iranians who need to know about the U.S., our policies, study opportunities and work visas. That’s the same service an actual brick-and-mortar embassy would provide, so we figured ‘why don’t we create a virtual embassy online?’” (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Despite Iranian government attempts to block it, the site attracted more than 300,000 visitors in the first three months with users employing proxy servers and virtual private networks (VPNs) to gain access to it and to related social media accounts. State Department official Greg Sullivan says “We’re pretty confident that this information is going to get out there. It may not be available to everyone inside of Iran, but we’re pretty confident that – you know, that there’s going to be some sophisticated users that are able to get the information and actually, you know, make sure it gets around to others” (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Concerning the Iranian government’s efforts to block the site and related technologies, Sullivan says “We have heard that 40% of Iran’s web traffic bypasses government filters. We estimate there are as many as 14 million Facebook users inside of Iran despite the fact that Facebook is one of five million or so sites blocked for use by Iranian Internet Service Providers” (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Department officials suggest Iran faces what is often referred to as the “dictator’s dilemma” -- the fact that the regime itself derives economic and other benefit from the internet and it therefore jeopardizes its own well-being by shutting off the flow of the internet into the country altogether.

In terms of the virtual embassy’s role in overall American strategy toward Iran, Sullivan says “In many ways, our efforts to reach out to people connects with our methods to put pressure on the regime” (Fitzpatrick, 2012). The Department’s spokesperson on Iran, Alan Eyre, seconds this noting “U.S. policy toward Iran is to increase the pressure on this country... Our intention is for the Iranian people to have the opportunity to establish relations with other world peoples” (Jafarov & Khatinoglu, 2011).

The text of the virtual embassy website employs the term “engagement” but as implied earlier, there is little evidence of real opportunities for it. The site consists of a page dedicated to debunking myths about the United States and there is visa information for students and others who wish to travel to the United States. Sullivan acknowledges the one-way information flow comprising the site’s

content, but he emphasizes the Facebook, Twitter and YouTube opportunities previously discussed. He also mentions a blog launched about the same time as the virtual embassy. The day of the virtual embassy's launch, for example, there were 117 participants seeking to interact with American representatives.

Media coverage of the continuing virtual endeavor mentions several Google+ hangouts with Alan Eyre, the Department's face to Iran. The Department has also launched an effort called "Ask Alan" calling it "a new effort to engage with the Iranian people through our Persian language social media brand...[It] is active on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter" (Department of State, "Ask Alan", 2011). In practice, Ask Alan involves the production of a 5 to 7 minute video every month produced in response to questions supplied by Iranians on pre-set topics. The first topic was visas. Alan also appears on various United States international broadcasters, including Voice of America. He is increasingly the face (and the voice) of the United States in Iran.

Analysis

The Virtual Embassy Tehran is a serviceable application of the language and goals presented in the 21st Century Statecraft document and its redefinition of diplomacy. That document states "No longer is diplomacy conducted purely government to government or government to people. It is now conducted people to people and people to government" (2010). This is the definition of public diplomacy. Such a statement makes clear the Department's intent to exploit social media for diplomatic purposes, particularly on the public diplomacy front. And, in the case of Iran, where there is no formal diplomatic relationship, technology provides a way to plant the seed for future, more robust relations.

Several years ago, an article in a public relations journal discussed the role of symbolism in public diplomacy (Zhang, 2006). The context of the study was the international humanitarian response to the Asian tsunami in 2004. The typology presented in that article is broadly applicable here, particularly given the technical difficulties associated with achieving substantive give and take with the Iranian people at this moment. In that article, the author discussed the roles of identity, symbols, interactions and power relations in creating and sustaining a relationship based on public diplomacy principles.

The case of the United States' Virtual Embassy in Tehran fits nicely into the categories Zhang employed. The virtual embassy seeks to begin rebuilding a bilateral relationship that has been stagnant for three decades. For much of that time, the United States has been portrayed to the Iranian people by their government as a treacherous enemy. Rather than trying to re-introduce the broader American brand, the Virtual Embassy Tehran project and associated social media instead reach out to the Iranian people and do so with a friendly face attached. If public diplomacy is intended to be about people-to-people relationships, then what better way to forge those relationships than in the form

of an American who speaks the language and who can engage in conversation in all forms of media?

With respect to symbols, certainly a virtual embassy is no replacement for the large operation a bricks-and-mortar institution brings to a host country. However, lacking the opportunity to establish such a real-world institution, the development of social media-based contacts and interactions that can begin to approximate some of the most basic functions an embassy serves from the perspective of the host country population is a creative start. Criticizing the operation as being less effective, less present and less permanent than a brick-and-mortar institution emanating from establishment of formal bilateral ties misses the point. The message the virtual embassy sends is that when traditional diplomacy fails -- and it has failed for the last 30 years -- public diplomacy might be able to find a way pry the door open a bit.

On the subject of interactions, clearly the quality and quantity of interactions facilitated by the virtual embassy and related social media outlets is not the same as that seen elsewhere in American PD 2.0 efforts in relationships with countries with which the United States has formal diplomatic relations and in which internet access is largely unimpeded. But that does not mean efforts to engage, however limited, have no value. A recent report from the Congressional Research Service notes State Department leadership has testified that some "democracy promotion funding has been [dedicated] to train[ing] Iranians in the use of technologies that undermine regime internet censorship efforts" (Katzman, 2012, p. 69). Creating and sustaining the virtual embassy and related social media components can be seen as an effort to give the internet-savvy on the ground in Iran something with which to interact.

With respect to power relations, the fourth category Zhang presents in the discussion of symbolism in public diplomacy, scholars have long observed that information revolutions can disrupt established institutions. This is certainly true in the international political context. For 30 years the United States has had no formal diplomatic relations with Iran. As State Department spokespeople have indicated, such a long absence of normal relations has led to a lack of familiarity between Americans and Iranians. Iranians in-country have been deprived of the chance to meet Americans and visiting official Americans have been deprived of the chance to meet Iranians at home. The result is a dearth of the people-to-people interactions that form the backbone of stable bilateral relationships.

It is the people-to-people relationships that comprise soft power and without the opportunity to exercise soft power, public diplomacy efforts cannot succeed. Power is the one public diplomacy component discussed by Zhang that is missing from the United States-Iran equation. However, information technology now offers an opportunity to begin filling that empty reservoir of American soft power influence in Iran. For now, the flow of information may be kept to a trickle, but in the same way that desert rains yield vibrant blooms, one hopes the

interactions between Americans and Iranians, facilitated by communication technologies as described here, will someday blossom into a vibrant bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

Continued strains between the United States and Iran may prevent these efforts from going much further at present. But given a vacuum of 30 years without diplomatic relations, it is indeed necessary to start somewhere. Why not embrace social media technology in an effort to do what that technology does best -- bring people together?

The question in the case of American digital outreach to Iran is whether digital outreach is better than none at all. In the interest of the principles of public diplomacy the answer needs to be yes. The conversation may be limited, monitored, stilted and leading nowhere obvious in the short-term, but the fact that there are conversations taking place is important. The State Department's Virtual Embassy Tehran is an example of an attempt to be proactive rather than reactive. The measurable effects may be limited in the short-term, but public diplomacy has an important role to play in attaining long-term goals and when talking about rebuilding ties between the people of countries without formal diplomatic ties, slow, gradual progress is still better than no progress at all. Indeed, as Lynn White Junior wrote in 1962, a new technology "merely opens a door, it does not compel one to enter" (p. 28).

A recent opinion piece in the New York Times considered the void caused by lack of conversation in society. The author noted, "We are tempted to think that our little 'sips' of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation. But they don't. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, all of these have their places... But no matter how valuable, they do not substitute for conversation" (Turkle, 2012). The same conclusion must be drawn about the Virtual Embassy Tehran and related social media efforts. Such efforts are only preferable to no contact at all. Should formal diplomatic relations ever resume between the United States and Iran, a relatively static website and a few social media accounts will not suffice. For now, however, it must be enough.

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