

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2497  
June 19, 2009

## The Iranian Elections and Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Tale of Untapped Potential

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**An Opportunity in Iran.** Iran's elections last Friday and their dramatic aftermath provided the Obama Administration a unique opportunity to put into action key elements of the government's public diplomacy strategy. Unfortunately, as President Obama has carefully positioned himself on the fence between the alleged winner, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the candidate supported by Iran's hundreds of thousands of protestors, Hossein Mousavi, the message from the U.S. government has been muted.

While Web 2.0 technology has the potential to play a role similar to that played by fax machines in the Solidarity uprising in Poland in the 1980s and cell phones in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, America has done too little to support Iran's widespread and growing democracy movement. A golden opportunity to reach out to a population trapped in a positively medieval political system is being missed.

So far, U.S. government outreach has been limited to the State Department's revelation that it requested that the social Web site Twitter postpone its scheduled maintenance operation in the days after the election as protesting Iranians were relying heavily on its service to communicate—causing some to suggest that these protests could end up being called the Twitter Revolution. Undoubtedly, this action was important, but given the resources of the U.S. government, it was hardly proactive.

**Other U.S. Government-Funded Media.** The Internet is not, of course, the only means through which the U.S. government can reach out to foreign

populations such as that of Iran. However, the record is spotty on other fronts as well. On the plus side, Radio Free Europe is doing yeoman's work broadcasting 24 hours a day into Iran in Farsi through its service surrogate Radio Farda, providing critical information from the outside world for embattled Iranians listening on short wave radio. Operating as a surrogate service, Radio Farda provides a platform for Iranian exile journalists to broadcast back into their country with otherwise censored information.

Under severe budget constraints, Voice of America (VOA)—whose mandate is to provide both the news and an American perspective on world events—recently closed down its Radio Farsi service along with a number of other critically important language services, such as those in Russian and Georgian. Needless to say, these cuts did not send positive signals about American engagement in countries like Russia and Iran, where free media are under pressure.

Television in Farsi is still being broadcast from VOA headquarters, but it is being blocked on the Internet by the Iranian government, which clamped down on Internet access the day after the election and has restored only limited access since. TV satel-

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Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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lite dishes remain a target of the Iranian authorities, making possession a highly dangerous proposition.

**The Potential of the New Media.** The fact that the Administration so far has chosen to take a hands-off approach in Iran, where its engagement could make a real difference, means that the potential of its tech-savvy approach to public diplomacy is not being realized. Were these new technologies being implemented efficiently, they could have significant potential as an addition to other more traditional means of communication.

In its first months in office, the Obama Administration indicated that it is committed to using 21st-century technology in various forms as an integral component of public diplomacy efforts. In a similar fashion to strategies employed in last year's U.S. presidential campaign, a wide variety of social networking and communication mediums can be employed in order to maximize the exposure and resonance of U.S. outreach attempts.

As part of this effort to make the U.S. brand more marketable and accessible to foreign populations, Obama appointed Judith McHale, former president/CEO of Discovery Communications, as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. The selection of McHale—who molded Discovery into a global giant with 1.4 billion subscribers in 170 countries and 35 different languages—speaks volumes about what form Obama envisions public diplomacy taking.<sup>1</sup>

When asked about what made Discovery so effective in the global market, McHale stressed the need for understanding target audiences and conveying information in user-friendly ways. McHale has called the then-new technologies a “game-

changer.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, they could be if the political backbone is there.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Obama's commitment to technology as a vital mechanism of public diplomacy and to McHale's initiative was the mass distribution of the President's recent speech in Cairo by means of various communication and networking technologies. In an effort to disseminate Obama's call for improved U.S.–Arab/Muslim relations to as large an audience as possible, various government agencies used a variety of Internet applications, including social networking sites, podcasts, and a live Webcast on the White House's Web site. Additionally, updates via text message were an extremely well-utilized tool, reaching over 20,000 users worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this particular service, which was funded by the State Department, was clearly on the citizens of nations abroad, as it was unavailable to U.S. citizens. The text messages themselves were available in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and eight other languages, reaching over 200 countries.<sup>4</sup> This effort to allow people to hear Obama in their native tongue was not limited to text messages. Translated versions of the speech in both text and video were available on such sites as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, as well as the popular South Asia networking site Orkut.<sup>5</sup>

An international discussion was created on Facebook, the social networking site with over 20 million Arab users, by the White House specifically for the event, and responses to the speech submitted via text messages were compiled and later posted on America.gov.

All of these efforts clearly have a vision and a strategy behind them that could bear fruit in the 21st-century media environment. Unfortunately,

1. Merle David Kellerhals, Jr., “State's McHale to Spearhead U.S. Global Public Engagement,” America.gov, June 2, 2009, at <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2009/June/20090602083933dmslahrellek0-.6198542.html> (June 9, 2009).
2. Judith McHale, “Testimony as Nominee for Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs,” testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Senate, May 13, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/124155.htm> (June 9, 2009).
3. Associated Press, “20k People Outside U.S. Got Obama Speech Texts,” *Technology Review*, June 6, 2009, at <http://technologyreview.com/wire/22767> (June 9, 2009).
4. Roy Furchgott, “State Department to Text Obama Speech,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2009, at <http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/voice-of-america-to-become-texts-of-america> (June 9, 2009).
5. Jake Tapper, “The Speech (the White House Hopes) Heard ‘Round the World: A Preview of President Obama's Speech to the Muslim World,” *ABC News*, June 3, 2009, at <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2009/06/the-speech-the-white-house-hopes-heard-round-the-world-a-preview-of-president-obamas-speech-to-the-muslim-world.html> (June 9, 2009).

new media is, in its own way, as vulnerable as traditional media to government interference in highly controlled societies like Iran or China. Consequently, other new technologies like cell phones and old technologies like short wave radio will continue to play an important role.

**Recommendations.** The U.S. government should:

- Get off the fence and propose that if President Ahmadinejad really believes he has won, he should allow recounts overseen by international election observers;
- Tell the Iranian government to respect the free media and stop interfering in television transmission and Internet access;
- Deploy all the Web 2.0 tools used in the promotion of the President's Cairo speech to reach the Iranian public; and

- Restore funding to Voice of America, thereby allowing it to resume its broadcasts in Farsi.

As demonstrated by the activities coinciding with Obama's speech, the U.S. government has seized on the possibilities of cutting-edge communication. Yet if the political will is not there to project a positive message in defense of political freedom and values that the United States has promoted for decades, it will matter little how effectively this new media is used.

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