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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, August 20, 2010 4:00 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: Article I mentioned from Canada

FYI

From: Ross, Alec J
Sent: Friday, August 20, 2010 3:38 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: Article I mentioned from Canada

Joining the conversation

BY KATE HEARTFIELD, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 19, 2010

Ottawa Citizen

The U.S. Department of State has made it very clear: The security of information on BlackBerrys is not just about economics.

It's also, in the words of spokesman P. J. Crowley, "about what we think is an important element of democracy, human rights and freedom of information ... You should be opening up societies to these new technologies that have the opportunity to empower people ..."

Canada's government has made, at least in public, no such link between BlackBerrys and democratization. It has not spoken about the potential for authoritarian governments to abuse monitoring privileges. It has decided the demands placed on Canadian company Research in Motion by the governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and India add up to a business story, not a foreign-affairs story.

This is just one example of a larger political failure in Canada to appreciate the full foreign-policy potential of communication technology.

In the United States, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called for a "21st-century statecraft" that harnesses tools such as Twitter and text messages.

Articles this summer in The New York Times Magazine and Foreign Policy have called it "digital diplomacy." Some, such as Canadian diplomacy expert Daryl Copeland, call it "e-diplomacy."

In 2010, the world sees Canada through YouTube.

"Diplomacy in the international arena is no longer about the big-D diplomat charging in on his white horse and expounding the virtues of Canada at cocktail parties," says Shauna Sylvester, who was the director of Canada's World, a three-year non-governmental project consulting citizens about foreign policy.

The United Kingdom's Digital Diplomacy web portal (yes, it has one) defines digital diplomacy as "solving foreign policy problems using the Internet." Social-media enthusiasts often talk about the wisdom of crowds; post a problem on the Internet today, and someone, somewhere, will post a solution tomorrow.

No one's likely to craft peace in the Middle East by creating a Facebook page. But Facebook pages, and other social media, can shift global public opinion in new directions. That, in turn, affects Canada's tourism, trade, security, immigration.

Canada's government has done some important work in digital diplomacy. "Canada was a pioneer in this field," says Copeland.

In 2003, for example, Canadian Foreign Minister Bill Graham solicited online comments about policy questions.

In 2005, the government created a virtual network called Connect2Canada.com "for friends of Canada and Canadians in the United States." It's still going strong and is a good example of 21st-century government communication, including an "ask the ambassador" link and a YouTube channel.

More recently, the government created an impressive, if unwieldy, interactive site for the G20 summit. It is also actively "correcting misinformation" in social media when it comes to the seal hunt.

But Sylvester says the enthusiasm for open government seemed to fade after the Conservatives took office in 2006. "Engagement was no longer part of the government's role."

There are people who get it in the public service today, and some very good initiatives. There are even a few ministers who get Twitter. But there is no Hillary Clinton pushing the government to do better, no office of digital diplomacy working on a strategy.

How we do it is almost as important as whether we do it at all. The tactic the government has taken on the seal hunt, for example, could have the intended effect of countering inaccuracy, or it could come across as a heavy-handed attempt to control the debate, especially if the government's not simultaneously engaged in more crowd-pleasing ways to get its message across. Some governments have had fun with social media, opening virtual embassies on Second Life, for example.

Wikipedia edits are another tricky area. As for seeding Twitter and the blogosphere with Canadian values, it has to be done with care. Security analyst Peter Jones points out that if, for example, an Iranian blogger becomes too closely associated with the West, his or her credibility could suffer.

The field of digital diplomacy is new, and fraught with risks. The opportunities, though, are exciting.

In that New York Times Magazine article, Alec Ross, Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, said the key question for 21st-century statecraft is "Is it open or is it closed?" That's a sensitive question for this Conservative government.

A real advance in e-diplomacy, a real engagement in the split-second, wide-open, on-the-record world of Twitter and Wikipedia, requires a prime minister who is willing to let public servants and diplomats have a constant unmediated conversation with the public. It means relinquishing central control of the message.

The alternative is to fade into irrelevance. Because that big, messy, whirlwind global conversation's going to happen anyway, whether Canada's part of it or not.