Forging a New Paradigm of Engagement Through Innovation: Insights from Alec Ross

Whether strengthening old alliances, forging new partnerships to meet complex global challenges, engaging with citizens in civil society, or charting new strategies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, U.S. national interests depend on effective engagement and innovative public diplomacy. It is an innovative public diplomacy that focuses on maximizing the potential of technology in service of U.S. diplomatic goals.

Alec Ross, senior advisor for innovation, U.S. Department of State, joined us on The Business of Government Hour to discuss the expanding use of innovative technologies, such as digital networks and social media, as tools to reach beyond traditional structures and forge a new paradigm for foreign policy engagement. Here’s a sampling of his insights:

What can you tell us about your unique role in the department? What does the senior advisor for innovation actually do?

The role is brand new. It was created by Secretary Clinton with the mission to maximize the potential of technology-fueled innovation in service of our diplomatic and development goals. As a very practical matter, what we’re really concentrating on is defining and demonstrating 21st century statecraft. What that means is… thinking about things like our global networks, about innovations in science and technology, and then applying those to diplomatic and development challenges.

Given your role, what would you say are the top challenges that you face as an advisor on innovation?

One challenge is that by its very nature innovation has a higher risk profile than what is typically practiced diplomatically. What we need to get used to if we’re going to infuse innovation into our diplomatic and development programs is simply knowing that not everything is going to work—nothing is guaranteed. Things like social media are very messy. Things that you think are going to work don’t, and things that you think are long shots end up having really high payoff sometimes.

Number two is speed. In the world of technology, things are very, very fast moving, and government oftentimes isn’t particularly well set up to adapt to the speed of technology and to the speed of innovation. In the private sector, you can be much more nimble than you can in government; being able to move fast while also safeguarding taxpayer resources is important.

A third challenge is simply that, in an increasingly technology-rich, knowledge-based world, the actors are not all state-based actors; the way that the State Department is principally organized is to engage government to government, state to state. When you think about the increasing rise of non-state-based actors, that becomes a big challenge, and it requires a whole new toolbox to be able to respond to those kinds of challenges.

From your perspective, how has American diplomacy changed to meet those changing realities?

I think it’s changing now. From the time of Thomas Jefferson until most recently, engagement was principally done government to government. While government-to-government engagement is and always will be incredibly important, I think what we have to do is figure out how we can reach more of the globe’s people directly using the proliferation of [digital] networks. This expands the framework for engagement in a new and impactful way.

I would point to two examples of this. First, in the very early months of the Obama administration there was something that was almost an experiment. It was the issuance of a Nowruz message, that being the Persian New Year. We taped a message from President Obama, dubbed it into Farsi and subtitled it, and [promoted it] on the Internet; it was a
message to Iranian citizens, to the world’s Persian speakers, that became viral. While we haven’t had diplomatic relations with Iran in decades, what we proved early in the Obama administration was that we can just put up a video and could now reach tens of millions of Iranians directly. This became the strategic basis for the Cairo speech. We all take for granted now the power and importance of the Cairo speech; it was really an innovation that would not have been available 10 years ago in terms of ensuring its reach.

President Obama was at a university in Cairo, but he wasn’t just speaking to university students or the government of Egypt or even speaking to Middle Eastern governments. He was speaking to Muslims the world around. We took advantage of the fact that our global networks now mean that state-controlled broadcast media is no longer just the way to reach people. The innovation that we’re bringing, particularly in terms of how we do global engagement, I think is very new—it is chapter one, page one.

Secretary Clinton has noted that in this changing landscape some of what we’ve been talking about requires us to expand the concept of diplomacy beyond government to government. Can you describe for us the 21st century statecraft? How does it seek to foster a new kind of public engagement internationally?

— Alec Ross —

Twenty-first century statecraft, first of all, is the recognition that the world is different today than it was 10 years ago, 50 years ago, or 200 years ago. I think that our diplomatic efforts have been organized around a Cold War frame. What we have today is the increasing rise of non-state-based actors that aren’t bound by national boundaries. We live in an increasingly multilateral world with regional economics being dominant over national economics, and we have this proliferation of technology going directly to individuals. Twenty-first century statecraft is the recognition of the changing dynamics of the 21st century and a repivoting of our diplomatic efforts to respond to those realities with a particular focus on going beyond, as you’ve said, government-to-government engagement to government-to-people, people-to-people, and people-to-government.

Let me give an example. I was in Mexico with a team of technology executives; the challenge we tried to address was not a new one, pretty conventional statecraft: How can we help the Mexican government with its counter narcotics campaign? The specific problem: Increasingly, Mexican citizens are unwilling to report gang and cartel activity, or other crime because they’re at risk. This may have nothing to do with technology, but we said, “Let’s take a 21st century statecraft approach to this problem.” I took half a dozen really smart innovators who understand technology and posited this question: [How do we develop] an anonymous reporting program so people can text message or e-mail information about narcotics activity, gang activity, and/or violence. The outcome: developing a private-public partnership among [a telecommunication company], the Mexican government, and Mexican NGOs to do this. The message will be scrubbed so that the anonymity of the [sender] is preserved; it’s then linked in with what are called the C-4s—the Mexican federales. The technology to do this didn’t exist 15 years ago; there wasn’t ubiquitous access to cell phones or the Internet for this to work in a low-income community in a Mexican barrio. Today, people in Mexican barrios do have cell phones and do text message. We now have the technology to protect people’s anonymity. This is an example of 21st century statecraft—not just because of the use of technology—but because of the nontraditional actors involved in this effort.

It has been estimated that one-third of the world’s population will be on the web by 2011. Would you elaborate on how social media technologies are spreading in the developing world? How are they accessing the network, and what are some of the benefits that you’re seeing?

— Alec Ross —

You’re right…. By 2011, one-third of the world will be on the Internet. Today, two-thirds of those who currently access the Internet do it via their phones. What I’m seeing is that, while there’s an upward trend towards people using...
computers and accessing the Internet, what's happening far faster, particularly in poor countries, are people are accessing the Internet on their cell phones. There are 4 billion mobile handsets in the world right now, 3 billion of which are in the developing world. Five years ago, the approach was [getting] poor people computers and have broadband built in poor communities. We’ve seen that the way that people consume information is increasingly mobile. In the developing world, people don’t even think of the computer per se oftentimes as the way in which to connect and engage—that’s another interesting trend.

To what extent can 21st century technology be used to possibly solve some of the heretofore intractable development challenges and the use of this technology for economic and social good?

— Alec Ross —

I get really excited about this because development is a hard field and we’ve spent a lot of money over the years; we’ve made a great many good things happen, but a lot of the time we have invested by necessity in very large infrastructure projects. Oftentimes, those at the village level, are isolated or don’t always directly benefit from America’s development efforts. The really cool thing about all of this technology is that it devolves power to the individual. Let me give an example: There’s a sorghum farmer in Mali; that person just lost a third of their crop, and they don’t know why. In the past, a university professor in Surrey would have driven to Heathrow in London, would have gotten on a plane to Nigeria, would have then connected to Mali, would have then gotten in a Jeep and driven three hours to this sorghum farmer; [he] would have looked at that farmer’s crops [and diagnosed the issue].

Today, what can happen is that same sorghum farmer can walk up to his crop, can pull out a Smartphone, take 10-20 pictures, e-mail them to that professor in Surrey, and without the three plane rides, without the three hours in a Jeep, without the tens of thousands of dollars of expense, that professor can provide direct feedback to the farmer. What’s even better is that, if the professor didn’t know, he could e-mail the images to his 30 friends and peers in the [discipline]. [We] have revolutionized efficiencies in providing agricultural assistance. These are the kinds of examples that we need to be driving; these are the ways in which we can save resources and produce better development outcomes.

What kinds of interagency, private-sector, and nonprofit partnerships are you developing to improve operations or outcomes at State, and what are you doing to enable the success of these partnerships?

— Alec Ross —

As was the case with the Mexico example I gave, most of the partnerships that I’m focused on are public-private. They tend to involve companies, government, and nonprofit organizations. Another example that I would give is the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Congo is the least banked place on Earth. Far less than 1 percent of the population has a bank account. It is entirely a cash-in-the-mattress economy, and that produces a lot of problems—creating conditions more prone to corruption and things like it being physically near impossible to pay soldiers. The capital of Congo is in Kinshasa, which is far from east Congo. We’re developing [a partnership] there to bring mobile banking into [Congo].

Though there isn’t great transportation infrastructure, there is great mobile telecommunications infrastructure. I remember getting off the U.N. plane in Goma, where there’s a per capita GDP of $184—that’s $184 per person per year. It’s incredibly poor, but there are as many 3-G wireless networks in Goma as there are in Washington, D.C. There are hundreds and hundreds of cell phone kiosks and just about everybody uses cell phones. The cell phone can be this great distribution channel for doing what we call mobile banking—an innovation that was actually borne out of Kenya and then brought to Afghanistan. We see best practices, and our
role is to connect, convene, and build partnerships that have a public good, such as mobile banking in Congo.

Are you looking to expand any more of the public-private partnerships you’re involved in with the State Department?

Absolutely. This is something that is very characteristic of Secretary Clinton—going back to the time when she was first lady of the state of Arkansas she used this technique with great effect. Secretary Clinton has always understood that, if you can bring together public and private actors to solve a problem, it’s going to be more effective than a just-government solution or a just-private solution. She has built an office at the State Department specifically focused on the development of public-private efforts. It’s also a big focus of mine and the challenge for me is to develop models that are scalable globally.

Alec, we talked a lot about this technology—the mobility of it, the democratization of access to the network and communication—and yet, as I think about it, diplomacy is about stability. How do you balance the fact that the trend is towards openness and access with the need to keep things a little bit more stable?

First of all, the disruption that takes place because of technology, because of democratized access to information, is taking place with or without us. This is a bigger dynamic than anything any of us can control; it’s only going to get bigger and more pronounced. The challenge is: What are we going to do about it? The 21st century is a lousy time to be a control freak. All of those things we could do as a matter of command and control during the Cold War—good luck doing them now. You’re just going to get rolled by the dynamics that are created by an increasingly networked society. If you understand that it’s neither good nor bad—it is what it is—you can engage and try to maximize the degree to which it can create stability. The thing that you can’t do is ignore it. It just doesn’t work.

What trends do you see over the next few years in the evolution of social media and diplomacy, and how do you envision State shifting to capitalize on those trends?

Right now, we are all trying to understand and harness social media. We’re trying to understand what all of this “crazy” technology means for us in the diplomatic world. I have a feeling that in five years it won’t be thought of in those terms. In fact, I bet we don’t have a [social media] technology strategy—that we just have diplomatic strategies that have that at their core. I don’t believe that this technology is a piece of the pie. It’s more the pan. It’s more something that infuses things like counter radicalization, development, regional concerns, and nonproliferation. In five or 10 years, we’ll be thinking less about social media as something distinct; we’ll be thinking about it more as just another tool in the toolbox.