



Passing the BATON

*Foreign Policy Challenges and
Opportunities Facing the New Administration*

Morning Panel 1: “Blogs & Bullets: The Power of Online Media in Preventing or Igniting Violent Conflict”

Speakers: **Sheldon Himelfarb**, Associate Vice President, U.S. Institute of Peace;
John Kelly, Founder, Morningside Analytics;
Ivan Sigal, Executive Director, Global Voices;
Duncan MacInnes, Principal Deputy Coordinator, State Department
Bureau of International Information Programs;
Linton Wells, Distinguished Research Fellow, National Defense
University

Main Issues

Modern conflict is a struggle for influence on public opinion in addition to territory and sovereign power – influence that runs increasingly over paths in a digital, networked world. In the last year alone, online tools and user-generated content have been used to track election violence in Kenya, provide a steady stream of news from Gaza in the midst of the war, and mobilize millions of people to protest the FARC in Colombia. At the same time, organizations like al-Qaeda recruit people and resources over the Internet with ever-greater efficiency, while Mumbai terrorists connect with one another over internet-based phone networks to evade detection.

This time of disruption in the expanding information landscape presents new challenges and opportunities for the United States. Building a more peaceful world will require a better understanding of how online media can be used to prevent and ignite conflict.

Duncan MacInnes, Principal Deputy Coordinator of the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs, stated that U.S. public diplomacy uses traditional and new online media to not only represent interests and advocate policy, but also to promote values of civil society, tolerance, rule of law, free markets and respect for human rights – precisely the values that are the foundation of efforts to prevent conflict, counter violent extremism, and promote peace. New media enables active audience participation that is ideally suited to track-two diplomacy and people-to-people conflict resolution programs – directly engaging local communities in a dialogue of values and ideals.

But new online media is equally powerful for the threats that it poses to U.S. security, observed Linton Wells of the National Defense University. Online media can facilitate targeted cyber attacks and flash mobs, recruit activists, raise fund for violent organizations, highlight and inflame grievances, and even foment the conduct of violent conflict.



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Wells described how the 2001 spy plane collision between the U.S. and China sparked online hacking exchanges between citizens of both countries and how non-state actors and terrorists groups have been early adopters of new media technology, posting online propaganda of attacks on Coalition forces and how-to manuals for aspiring suicide bombers. While access to the information world can be liberating, he said, it also allows people to form closed groups that reinforce pre-existing views. Finally, Wells highlighted a U.S. government tendency to protect itself from such vulnerabilities by establishing a bunker mentality that prevents U.S. employees from blogging or otherwise using new media tools to counter online misinformation. Wells cautioned that this tendency can have serious national security ramifications given that the rest of the world is already using and shaping this developing medium.

Two private sector experts demonstrated the state of the art in mapping the blogosphere and understanding its constituents and their motivations. John Kelly of Morningside Analytics showed how his company is mapping linkages among bloggers to uncover relationships and interest clusters. A Taliban network isolated from mainstream discussion in Afghanistan, the existence of 60,000 Persian-language blogs despite Iranian government censorship, and inter-group blog postings on shared topics during ongoing tensions in India and Pakistan are just a few examples he referenced.

Successfully understanding relationships in the public network is the first step in influencing its development, Kelly said. “We need to think about nurturing and shaping these networks when they are small, as they grow very large very fast.”

Speaking as the Executive Director of Global Voices, an organization of bloggers in more than 150 countries, Ivan Sigal emphasized that media are no longer focused primarily on reporting conflict but rather have become actors that influence it. Where it was once assumed that the world’s 60 fragile states invariably suffered from a scarcity of information, this is no longer a given: Somalia has five cell phone networks and reliable Internet connections, but it effectively has no government. Similarly, Afghanistan had no bloggers four years ago, but it has four thousand today.

Sigal acknowledged that such statistics can be misleading, as even a handful of bloggers can be extremely influential by serving as the information elite of a particular society. Moreover, they can provide better information than traditional media, as a Harvard Humanitarian Initiative Study showed of Ushahidi.com in Kenya. These trends represent a fundamental shift toward an environment of information abundance, he concluded, that reinforces the importance of developing online engagement strategies.



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Policy Conclusions*

1. Mapping relationships within the blogosphere provides insight into social networks and their potential to promote peace or ignite violence. Increasing the intensive study of the networked public sphere is essential.
2. Engage early and often to shape development of online media to promote U.S. public diplomacy, democracy, and sustainable local peacebuilding efforts.
3. Prepare for the use of online media for incitement by encouraging government employee education and engagement with online social networking.
4. Provide digitally deprived societies with resources and assist them in opposing online censorship. This can empower individuals and organizations seeking to harness the power of the Internet to promote peace.
5. Build conflict resolution models that incorporate social networking and new online media into a strategic framework for online engagement.

* Policy Conclusions from Group Panel Discussions at Passing the Baton 2009 were not necessarily achieved by group consensus. In some instances, individual panel members may have been in disagreement with the larger group. For specific information on each panel's contents, please see the comprehensive online archive at www.usip.org/baton2009.