Invited Paper #1

USAID's First Public Engagement Campaign: Measuring Public Engagement

Eric Abdullateef, Macfadden

Keywords

International development communications, foreign assistance, public engagement campaign, public diplomacy, evaluation, social media, Rapid Assessment Procedures

Abstract

Public engagement campaigns have become a prime vehicle for U.S. public diplomacy efforts and are being used by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Social media are integral to these campaigns. While these campaigns frequently enjoy success, the effectiveness of measuring "public engagement" has been an ongoing challenge. This commentary focuses on measurement and assessment strategies and USAID public engagement campaigning using social media. It discusses the needs and rational for conducting evaluation and introduces a tool "Rapid Assessment Procedures" (RAP). Using tools such as RAP can help position and study the effectiveness of messaging and social media in public engagement. The paper addresses some of the challenges and limitations of RAP in evaluating public engagement campaigns.

Introduction

The U.S. Agency for International Agency (USAID) has become a major partner with the U.S. State Department as part of the overall U.S. public diplomacy efforts. For both agencies, public engagement campaigns are a critical component. The challenge of measure has become more difficult with social media is added to the mix. How does one measure campaign effectiveness? And, is there a way to use the new media tools as part of the measurement approach? Measuring campaign effectiveness is a problem not only of USAID, but also for U.S. public diplomacy in general.

This paper focuses on the problem of measurement and assessment. It selected as a case study, USAID's FWD Campaign. The FWD campaign was the first ever public awareness campaign targeted toward the U.S. public. "FWD" does not actually stand for "Forward", but Famine, War and Drought. The FWD Campaign has the dual intent of raising U.S. citizen awareness of and drumming up support for USAID’s targeted interventions to address food insecurity in the Horn of Africa. The campaign took place at a time when those favoring the provision of "food and medical assistance" abroad slipped from 82 percent in 2004 to 74 percent in 2010, according to a poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Thus, the context and the challenge were great.

The campaign broke all records. Raising billions worldwide, the international response to the Horn of Africa crisis was overwhelmingly successful. However, even with successful campaigns, and perhaps even more so, one still needs to conduct evaluations. In fact, understanding why a campaign succeeds may make duplicating that success more likely with other campaigns.

One measurement and evaluation tool that is gaining currency is “Rapid Assessment Procedures,” or “RAP” for short. RAP has its origin in a similar method called rapid ethnography, which uses a variety of methods to capture rich data when there are substantial time constraints. As a relatively new tool, RAP can be used at the design stages of communication projects. Most of all, RAP is a type of field research. The goal is to identify, refine, or validate both project and communication objectives. It offers a broadly applicable framework for isolating themes and arguments that are likely to help audiences take in what you have to say and see the logic of the solutions you offer. It can be tailored to the advocates’ own voices and needs.

This paper introduces RAP as a tool for evaluating public engagement campaigns. The first section discusses the need for evaluation and why evaluation matters. The second section provides an overview of USAID’s challenge and profiles the FWD Campaign. The third section introduces RAP and suggests aspects of RAP, including techniques using social media tools that can help provide insight to the FWD campaign. The paper concludes with benefits and limitations of RAP tool.

The Need for Evaluation

How do media messages during the heightened political discourse of a presidential campaign affect what the American public knows and feels about USAID? To answer this question requires a greater understanding of the interests and motivations of the general public as well as the obstacles to public support of development concerns.

Such assessments of public interests benefit both scholars and professionals. The benefit for an academic audience are in terms of identifying difficulties in the research process and ways to improve the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. For the practitioner audience the benefits are in terms of identifying practical barriers to conducting and evaluating engagement processes. This paper aims to speak to both of these audiences.

Measurement and assessment is particularly important for public engagement campaigns. These types of campaigns promote reflection and debate within donor community around issues related to the ethics and effectiveness of their domestic communications. They basically follow two main lines of effort: education and advocacy. The flagship USAID FWD campaign, featured here, blurs that line.

Assessment takes on increased significance in times of limited resources. In an era of budget tightening, the battle over resources may come down to accountability for how effective past allocations of resources have been spent. It is critical that agencies comprehensively measure the performance of their strategic communication efforts to understand which efforts are most effective and, in turn, determine how to make most efficient use of limited resources.

Finally, assessment is important given the nebulous nature of public knowledge and sentiment, especially on international issues. Studies on U.S. public opinion on international development assistance have shown that while Americans generally favor humanitarian aid, they have very little idea how much money is allocated to aid programs (Council on Foreign Relations, 2009; Philips & Davis, 2003). The RAP rapid assessment procedures previewed here are being deployed in a related research project to tease out the complexity of public attitudes towards foreign aid and USAID efforts to reshape them against the backdrop of best practice, political economy and a rich body of literature on American foreign affairs attitudes.

Why Evaluation Matters

A 2006 Development Assistance Council Review recommended that USAID improve public awareness of its development cooperation. The Council did not recommend specific communication interventions or identify what level of awareness to focus on. With regard to U.S. public diplomacy, The General Accountability Office (GAO, 2009) reported that current information suggests a failure to adapt in today's dynamic communications environment could significantly raise the risk that U.S. public diplomacy efforts could become increasingly irrelevant, particularly among younger audiences who represent a key focus of U.S. strategic communication efforts.

As social media continue to expand and billions of people acquire mobile phones with text messaging capabilities, analysts say there is clearly a need for new and creative ways of vetting global issues to different publics. Such vetting may be especially important for USAID if it is to animate a new public debate around the limits and potential of international cooperation. One of several unanswered questions is how to measure and evaluate levels of public engagement and changes in values and attitudes amongst participants more effectively (Hogg, 2011).

A significant proportion of public engagement activities in the international development sector are either not evaluated at all, or have evaluations, which do not accurately capture the engagement that the activity has achieved. Part of the reason for this may be that effective measurement of public engagement is a challenge.

With an explanation of how those in the American debate view America's global cooperation, USAID can begin to see the outlines of American public opinion on a wide range of issues. The Agency can also better establish whether the use of specific reinforcing or countervailing messages in appeals would make Americans, and Congress by association, more supportive of USAID.

USAID and the FWD Campaign

Since June 2011, USAID has pursued Forward policy reforms focused on innovation. USAID's division for Citizen and Organizational Engagement has among its objective to make it easier for people seeking to work with USAID to do so. The division redesigned and leveraged the Agency's online tools, operational platforms and programs in sync with, increased engagement and meaningful interaction with the American public. As envisioned in USAID Forward, USAID will empower the public to make informed choices on issues of global concern. This goal speaks to USAID's role as educator. It also suggests that the concepts of public dialogue and popular action are intended to influence a shift in opinion support of international cooperation are gaining ground at USAID.

In September 2011, USAID launched its first ever communications campaign—"USAID FWD"— targeting the American public. Many of USAID's current public awareness tools target those who work in government or have vested interests in the USAID. However, the Agency has never had a campaign for the general American public. Note that USAID communicates far more frequently to Southern recipients of aid than it does to industrialized country Northern audiences at home and abroad.

The USAID FWD (Forward) outreach effort integrated an innovative array of traditional and new-media platforms. The outreach effort was aimed at key Northeastern audiences and stakeholders, with the distinction being that the role of stakeholders should be a proactive one and the term "audiences" would not necessarily reflect that connotation. The hybrid Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) discussed later addresses the "who" of each situation investigated by involving all relevant stakeholders.

USAID FWD targeted catalytic individuals based on the belief that by identifying and engaging deeply with influencers in a variety of communities of the American public, it may be possible for the international development sector to influence wider public attitudes and values relating to the cause of international development. It is assumed that such individuals have a role in encouraging the wider public to engage with USAID FWD.

The USAID FWD campaign website www.usaid.gov/FWD) served as the hub of USAID's flagship journey into mass public engagement. It was a step away from passive participation toward Open Government, open data (Howard, 2012), and citizen engagement online. Such empowered participation was stressed in the Open Government Directive (USAID, 2010):

"Participation allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so that their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society."

Noteworthy, FWD concentrated USAID's direct effort on a particular audience segment and a single issue.

FWD's main objects were to inform, engage, and connect with the American people to partner with USAID on dire but solvable problems. FWD videos were uploaded to YouTube (youtube.com/usaidvideo) and were aired on television networks across the United States. The strategy of the campaign was one that paints a very serious development issue, food security in the Horn of Africa, with documentary-style edutainment, culture and at times celebrity.

The first round of public service announcements (PSAs) featured prominent celebrity figures, including the wife of the U.S. Vice President, Dr. Jill Biden, model Chanel Iman and actors Uma Thurman, Josh Hartnet and Genna Davis. Spots have aired more than 3,600 times on American television.

The Campaign was heavy on micro-site online venues and special events like the BowTieCause.org event that blended professional sports and development. The Bow Tie Friday event included FWD Campaign public service announcements that USAID developed in partnership with the Ad Council, National Football League (NFL) and NFL Players Association.

Figure 0: Bow Tie Friday campaign

This partnership approach appears to have significantly increased the audience reached per project. These PSAs ran on CBS television network during the highly popular sporting event of the American Football Conference (AFC) Championship pre-game show, on network broadcast of the football Pro Bowl as well as strong online presence. Attendees (and supporters) for the BowTie kick-off event were urged to wear a bow tie and given the graphic shown in Figure 1 to pin on. The complexity of valuing the contribution of a partnership in general also complicates the precisions of measuring the return on investment in a co-branded PSA.

Between the launch of the Campaign in September 2011 to January 2012, a mere four months, FWD generated more than 150 million “forwards”, page-views, “likes” and friends through Facebook, re/tweets on Twitter, and YouTube views and raised awareness on the famine crisis in the Horn of Africa.

Forwarding or sharing the campaign on to friends, family and colleagues is an example of taking a new supporter on a journey from interest to activism. The number of “likes or dislikes” associated with a posting might serve as a proxy quantification of audience agreement. The horizontal or lateral communications between participants, i.e. “friends”, is exemplary of a participatory approach. Participatory communication according to Stuart and Bery (1996) is “an exchange among individuals that value each person’s perspective and voice.”

Campaigners found it is good practice to enlist trusted people to communicate with their peers in local community settings, rather than using politicians or ‘outsiders’ to the community. By far the most trusted sources of public information – and increasingly important in an information-saturated world – are the people closest to home: friends, colleagues, neighbors and family members. Faith-based groups illustrate the importance of social ties in mobilizing people to march (Hogg, 2011). Interpersonal relations are proven channels for driving international development initiatives. Attracting individuals with strong social ties, faith-based groups coalesce members who are able to encourage others to engage.

Overall, the Horn of Africa Crisis response has shattered fundraising records, topping a little more than $5 million in private donations. Unquestionably, this campaign marks a dramatic shift in USAID branding. Through edutainment, it tactically combatted what is sometimes called “compassion fatigue,” a phenomenon that had reportedly been on the rise. Meanwhile, opinion surveys continue to record broad public sympathy in most industrialized countries for taking an active part in world affairs.

A Program for Public Consultation 2011 study looked at 31 aid programs. Respondents were slightly more favorable to a larger USAID appropriation in comparison to an 11 percent cut on average. Respondents did make substantial cuts, however, to U.S. aid programs with less altruistic and more strategic objectives: the Economic Support Fund (cut 23 percent) and military aid (cut 15 percent). This research project highlights the complexity of public attitudes towards international aid and efforts to reshape them.

On November 9, 2011, the Campaign set a milestone of having 13.3 million people learn about the crisis (as measured by click-throughs). USAID dispersed Campaign messages in collaboration with GOOD, Facebook, Google and Twitter (hashtag #FWD). A FWD Campaign Room with humanitarian hummus was set up at USAID where visitors could make their own FWD PSA video and email campaign.

Measuring Public Engagement: The RAP Approach

Today, online social media spaces and edu-tainment spaces are the new public courtyard where citizens can witness the democratization of influence and listen to aspects of America's dialogue regarding our relationship with the rest of the world. These spaces capture the public sentiment in a parallel fashion similar to reader's comments in newspapers and magazines of the past.

One measurement approach that is gaining currency is the Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP). When an understanding is required of the motivations and attitudes that may affect behavior Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) may be successful. RAPs are successful in answering the what, who, and why of each situation investigated by involving all relevant stakeholders. RAP is the first step of any development communication initiative and assesses the situation, the political risks, and the best option to support and achieve change. RAP explores technical issues to "connect the dots" with broader social issues and identifies the inputs to cement consensus around the development initiative.

When what is needed is a practical recommendation, RAP can solve the problem and help a manager development questions, hypotheses, and propositions for more elaborate, comprehensive formal audience analysis.

RAP has its origin in a similar method called rapid ethnography, which uses a variety of methods to capture rich data when there are substantial time constraints. A relatively new tool, it can be used at the design stages of communication projects. Ethnographic research is usually very time-consuming, because it takes place over several months - or even years. It is not a method suited to evaluating one-off campaigns.

RAP is, most of all, a type of field research. The goal is to identify, refine, or validate both project and communication objectives. It offers a broadly applicable framework for isolating themes and arguments that are likely to help audiences take in what you have to say and see the logic of the solutions you offer. It can be tailored to the advocates' own voices and needs. This tool is a working draft, subject to further discussion, testing, and revision.

The RAP techniques enable managers of a development program to tease out what differences there are between good enough, perfect activities (as defined by one's audience) and current activities. Managers can see what needs to change. So, why not change it?

The Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) presented here proffers a formative appraisal approach for listening to and extracting policy positions from user-generated content found in a purposeful scan around the development blogosphere. RAP pays more attention to qualitative issues than quantitative ones. It is particularly valuable in identifying and assessing issues not easily measurable. Along the continuum of formality, this approach is somewhat informal. The model is a qualitative alternative to study designs that measure knowledge, attitude, behavior and practice (KABP) and differs in important ways (see Myers 2005 for brief overview). Research that measures KABP is based on the assumption that a person's knowledge influences their attitude, which in turn influences their behavior. KABP measurement instruments usually involve standardized questionnaires that are composed of yes/no questions.

The Importance of Benchmarks & Logs

RAP is a low cost tool for benchmarking public sentiment and crafting messages that command attention. It clarifies what people want to know, the myths that have persisted and identifies the attitudes impeding support for an organization, in this case, USAID. Keeping logs, journals and documenting online feedback may seem obvious, but they are all extremely important monitoring procedures that are often overlooked in international development. Transcripts of blogs must be made and stored carefully, web-hits must be recorded, as must notes on every activity such as events and workshops, press-coverage, and any informal feedback received. A checklist of regular documentation for broadcast projects in the monitoring and evaluation manual was prepared by Kitty Warnock (2002).

If strategists start a campaign by keeping logs and documenting baseline attitudes on the salience of American's international cooperation, then they can measure awareness levels, attitudes and behavior changes, such as whether deficit weary Americans value the U.S. having a humanitarian and long-term development role. They can unravel the causal connections between U.S. foreign assistance, national security interests and involvement in developing countries on a variety of issues ranging from efforts to stop disease pandemics, to respond after a tsunami and other natural disaster, to implement agricultural programs for combating destabilizing food price increases, or to help newly emerging and unstable democracies to build competent institutions.

How much is it worth to know your audience?

Research can be very expensive. There are numerous ways to reduce the cost, but they bring certain disadvantages. Opinions vary as to what percentage of your budget should be dedicated to evaluation. A rough rule of thumb would be between 10 and 15 percent. Studies can take a few days or weeks and are usually only a fraction of the $200,000 to $300,000 often spent for a sample survey. They typically have a smaller sample size and narrower focus, and they often require less technical and statistical expertise than formal methods. PEC success greatly depends on the establishment of a dedicated budget line.

RAP can vary greatly in length depending on when it is performed and on the nature and characteristics of the project (size, sector, and so forth). It also depends on the establishment of a dedicated budget line. When conducted in a relatively “quick and dirty” way, the investigation might be conducted in a few days or a few weeks. In some cases, two or three weeks are sufficient to conduct a communication-based assessment and to identify the needed objectives in order to define the communication strategy.

How many are in your audience?

Researchers should enumerate and segment the American public or audience of interest to a USAID development communications effort. USAID communicates to several audiences and it is not always clear who is in it or how big the audience is. We can estimate the size of the American audience that USAID is hypothetically targeting to be between the ages of 6-25. However, given that we are looking at a social media campaign rather than a development education campaign, the audience probably includes teenagers and above.

When – If asked to implement a communication needs assessment, a specialist would investigate the communication environment (for example, media available, information systems, institutional capacities, audience profiling, and so forth) and the information needed to achieve the objectives of the project. A RAP can be used at the start of a project or while it is running (to help you make adjustments to one’s work as one’s program develops).

When qualitative and descriptive information is sufficient for decision-making, RAP may be appropriate. Although a RAP can be used at different stages of the project cycle, its effectiveness is greatly enhanced if it is applied at the beginning of an initiative, since it can link the dots across sectors and compare and contrast different priorities.

When dealing with evaluation of development communication initiatives, things get more complicated because of the nature of communication and the longer time span under which change becomes visible.

Appling RAP to FWD Campaign

In a separate study underway, the author is using the USAID FWD campaign as a case study on which to demonstrate this Rapid Appraisal Process. There is clearly a need for innovative and creative ways of screening global issues to different publics, if USAID is to animate a new public debate around the limits and potential of international cooperation.

About 50 individual comments on USAID were scanned spread over a one-year period of analysis. The data were selected using nonprobability-sampling techniques. The author and co-raters looked for tone and featured coverage of USAID to measure the strength with which particular attitudes are held and the relative importance of factors driving such attitudes, which is the ultimate aim of our research.

Among the many things our coders estimated was a breakdown of the audience into the following segments:

% Active enthusiasts

% Interested mainstream

% Family first sympathizers

% Distracted individuals (ambivalent and persuadable)

% Insular skeptics

% Disapproving rejectors

The coders' scores were based upon a reading of several data streams: primarily qualitative, including excerpts from online blogs, e-mail comments, analysis of the discussions, and open-ended feedback responses (letters and received). Raters calibrated the views of Americans who have already made their views known by contrasting their views with other participants in the debate.

The computer tools for gleaning knowledge from the Internet's vast trove are fast gaining ground. At the forefront are the rapidly advancing data mining techniques such as natural language processing, pattern recognition and machine learning and search engine optimization.

Our case study of FWD is time-bound around the beginning and ongoing 2012 U.S. Election Campaign and the fiscal austerity of the federal government, as America's leadership abroad is a perennial campaign-trail talking point and political football in the federal budget trimming exercise. The timeframe for the analysis of campaign discourse is approximately one year. The timing of evaluation design is an important and often neglected aspect in the communication program cycle.

For our study, we used Google. Google's search experimental robot cars and search algorithms mimic artificial-intelligence and allow a researcher to do tricks like parse vast quantities of data and instantaneously point to possible remediating courses of action. See Google Inside Search for further tips.

Hot Tip: To confine your search results to a specific date range, use the "show search tools' option in Google and then conduct your date-range searches. One of the fastest ways to get a sense of the public discourse around a topic is by searching within "grey literature" blogs and comments at Google Blogs.

To baseline American sympathy levels and plot a future direction that USAID and other donors might take, a researcher will need to follow on with some desk research to further refine a communication strategy. The goal of the research is to assess the political, social, cultural, and economic environment in which the FWD initiative is situated, exploring the best options for change.

Our study also applied qualitative research approaches in the course of development communication evaluation to gain a broad understanding, crunch some numbers and to identify best practice. We scanned global development communications activities aimed at publics in the industrialized North rather than the South (e.g. the types of people in the audience, what they prefer, etc.).

Scans, conducted primarily via the Internet and a few expert interviews, may also entail review of published and "gray" (unpublished) literature as well as communications with other international development and humanitarian agencies. Donors should try to find out if the information they need is already available. If the information exists, donors might not need to undertake the research approach offered here. If the information is not available, donors should go forward with a research plan.

While there is no universal formula applied a priori to successfully address a development communications situation, there is a range of tools available. Communication specialists should select the most appropriate ones according to circumstances and objectives. GAO (2009) and Mefalopulos (2008) summarized Public Engagement Campaign research and evaluation basic steps as:

- Define key issues, core messages and themes;
- Define target audiences (or "key stakeholders;
- Develop detail strategies and tactics to reach your target audiences;
- Probe problems, causes, risks, and opportunities;
- Assess and rank options and solutions to achieve the intended change;
- Validate extent of the problem

- Implement, monitor and evaluation a detailed communication plan

Researchers conducting an initial assessment should identify the key indicators from the start. Second, if they are called in after the campaign has launched, communication professionals should assess and triangulate the extent of the needed change, validating or, if necessary, modifying the set objectives. Third, when assessing the impact at the end of the communication intervention, often through a post-baseline survey, it is important to consider and to assess if and how external variables have influenced the outcome (Mefalopulos, 2008).

Usually it is enough to do a baseline at the beginning and then one at the end to have an accurate idea of the level of change that took place in the populations of interest. Current evaluation methods are capable of providing such measurements in an accurate way. But the reality is that many PECs start without baseline data, so alternative research methods are sometimes more appropriate.

Where to Target Efforts

USAID's social media and public engagement strategy targets the American people online — whether in the United States or abroad. Public engagement campaigns publicize Agency successes beyond the Agency's Washington beltway headquarters.

Evaluation of should key on American discourse and the social networks that they engage in as manifested by a blog or online community. Blogs are forums where participatory communications in the form of dialogue and democratic participation, take place (Singhal, 2003).

In terms of the entry point where a communication specialists will want to intervene, that point is determined by the research, or in this case the RAP. For example, if there is no awareness of the problems at all, then the focus of an engagement campaign should be on awareness. However, if the RAP reveals that relevant audiences are aware of the problems and have the knowledge of how to change, the campaign could focus on the attitudes and behaviors right away. Sometimes there is the need to address a change more on a social level, such as mobilizing communities to play an active part in the decentralization effort, having different groups of stakeholders collaborating on a common initiative. Such change is usually addressed by dialogic (two-way interpersonal) communication approaches, which are thought to reinforce and amplify messages transmitted in the media.

Due to challenges in quantifying its impact, the key role of two-way communication is not always fully understood. It is more or less settled doctrine that a participatory mode of communication is key to proper design although it does not provide any direct or visible results. Without its use many initiatives would be destined to fail (Mefalopulos, 2008). A researcher observing dialogic communication should accept what they see even if it cannot be measured in a scientific way. Hence, the emphasis should be on "impressionistic" methods of accounting for stakeholders' perceptions and opinions about initiatives and their degree of involvement.

Once the focus of the intervention approach is defined, the communications specialist can align evaluation indicators that fit the objectives. If the objective is to raise awareness or provide knowledge about certain issues, the measurements and related indicators should be about changes in those two dimensions, rather than the process or changes in attitudes or behaviors.

Evaluation design for communication interventions cannot be devised effectively once the project has commenced, since, in general, impact is assessed through comparative measurements of the change before and after the intervention. To be accurate and meaningful, evaluations should be conceived, prepared, and budgeted during the research phase, and proper indicators should be set out and measured.

Researchers can undertake keyword searches and deploy Google analytic operators to take snapshots of American attitudes about development assistance. Using summary code sheets or coding grids, multiple raters will review the virgin text against some body of "reference texts" that will serve as a mainstream barometer of American attitudes on development assistance. In practice one could set aside a day in preparation for a campaign to monitor public discourse in advance or monitor periodically as needed.

RAP: The Benefits

The benefits of evaluating communications initiatives are that it minimizes possible risks and enhances projects' chances for success and sustainability. The impetus for this study stems from the fact that many people, both within and outside of USAID feel that USAID lacks brand awareness among the American public.

According to a 2007 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation study, "Research Findings and Message Framework" (Gates, 2008), the media environment about such things as foreign assistance was overwhelmingly negative. Seven (7) in 10 respondents said what they had heard about global health efforts in the preceding three months was mostly negative. Only one American in five believes U.S. aid is reaching the people most in need, the Gates Foundation discovered.

Another offsetting advantage of the RAP is that it provides flexibility by allowing the researcher to explore relevant new ideas and issues that may not have been anticipated in planning the study. Such changes are not possible in sample surveys once the questionnaire is designed and the survey is under way.

Blogs have the advantage of linking people and groups with similar interests who might otherwise not be in contact. The community owns them. What emerges is a new marketplace for loyalty that bypasses traditional barriers of time, geography, authority, hierarchy, culture, and language.

RAP: Some Limitations

The fast-changing nature of new technologies makes it difficult to measure their impact. The RAP approach results in detailed, qualitative information, but it cannot provide the baseline for an experimental design, as the sample isn't large or random enough to stand up to statistical scrutiny.

One of the limitations of sampling blog posts is that it may not always be possible to enumerate the gender, age or other demographic characteristics that might inform the public engagement campaign.

Informal RAP methods are more susceptible to bias. They do not generate systematic, verifiable information, and thus may not be credible with decision-makers. The lack of quantitative data derails precision and generalizable findings that can be made for a whole population. While RAP can give a picture of prevalence, it cannot tell the extent or pervasiveness (USAID-CDIE, 1996).

GAO (2008) research cites that USG agencies face several inherent challenges in measuring the effectiveness of their strategic communication efforts. First, strategic communications may only produce long-term, rather than immediate, effect that require long-term planning, and the use of many different media within a mutually reinforcing strategy. The one-year timeframe of most projects means that there is insufficient time to evaluate more than the immediate result at the time of project activities.

Second, it is difficult to isolate the effect of strategic communications from other influences, such as policy. Third, strategic communications often target audiences' perceptions, which are intangible and complex, thus difficult to measure.

Agencies seeking to implement this new approach to public diplomacy face several key challenges. First, there is a general lack of adequate research and understanding of how government entities can and should operate in a social marketing environment. Social marketing is an approach rooted in the principles of marketing applied to social issues like eradicating hunger.

Third, agencies will generally lose control over content since participants in a dialogue or collaborative project are free to voice their own opinions and distribute information as they choose. As noted by one senior State official, however, a difference in opinions is one of the core strengths of the approach and the underlying basis for its effectiveness.

Fourth, views expressed by U.S. officials on, for example, social networking sites or blogs, become part of the permanent discussion record, which raises practical questions about how best to mitigate potential instances of miscommunication.

Fifth, the level of available resources is small compared to the magnitude of the global communications environment. Limited resources make it difficult to devote adequate effort to data collection and ongoing monitoring. The literature suggests that these challenges relate primarily to the costs of deeper engagement. For example, State's Digital Outreach team consists of eight individuals and USAID’s of two are seeking to provide a U.S. point of view into a communication environment consisting of millions of personal blogs and discussion forums on thousands of Web sites.

Finally, this approach is likely to pose technical challenges, as agency efforts to plan, coordinate, fund, implement, and evaluate their Public Diplomacy 2.0 efforts could strain systems and capabilities that have had difficulty operating smoothly in the less complex environment of traditional public diplomacy efforts.

Perhaps the main difficulty in conducting a development communication evaluation concerns the process of defining “effectiveness”—that is, selecting, or agreeing upon, suitable evaluation criteria. The analyst has no way of interpreting the derived spaces without imposing at least some a priori assumptions about their dimensionality and the substantive meaning of the underlying policy dimensions, whether doing this explicitly or implicitly.

Another key issue is that there is no U.S. Government guidance on how to operate in this new information environment, and how results will be measured when message control is partly or completely ceded to other groups that can distribute information through hundreds or thousands of diverse communication channels (GAO, 2009).

This approach, which typically uses qualitative rather than quantitative research techniques, is particularly apt in new environments where little is previously known, where quantitative data are difficult to obtain and where hypotheses are difficult to generate. This position generally leads to “evaluations” that take the form of case studies, in which results are based upon the evaluators’ subjective interpretations. However, such exercises create limitations as to the extent to which results may be replicated or generalized, and pose serious questions about the reliability and validity of their findings.

Sometimes human behavior doesn’t follow a logical progression. Communicating the scientifically correct information is seldom enough to change audiences’ attitudes and behaviors. Community values can override individual interests. So sometimes collective or institutional changes are necessary before individuals can be targeted effectively.

There is evidence that people's behaviors inform their values, which in turn inform the deep frames that they use to make sense of the world.

This scan is further limited in that it was primarily Internet-based and excluded a number of online content with a date or acknowledgement of the moderator and person commenting. In Western culture speaking out is a given, but in many other cultures, it is not. Therefore this approach may have a Western bias.

Media-based campaigns of public education that fail to take into account the public's need to reconcile conflicting values are those that work most poorly.

Conclusion

USAID has traditionally been timid in its approach to communications and external relations. There are signs, however, that its demure approach is shifting to one more updated to fit the Facebook and Twitter media landscape and external context within which it operates.

The Agency has launched more captivating Public Engagement Campaigns to improve the public's understanding of USAID's role, objectives, operations and impact.

By assessing public discourse in a cross-cutting manner, communication specialists help project managers to identify and properly arrange the various pieces of the puzzle, which include the communication-related ones as well as other technical and political issues related to campaign design.

Monitoring and evaluation are indispensible in gauging the effectiveness of development communication program activities, identifying issues that require attention, and strengthening processes. It is the last phase of the communication strategy, because measuring the difference between the starting and ending points is often the only way to measure impact.

Resources

Council on Foreign Relations (2009), "U.S. Opinion on Development and Humanitarian Aid" (Chapter 15) in *Public Opinion on Global Issues*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

Gates Foundation (2008, June). *Health Message Framework*.

Hogg, M. (2011). Do we need a deeper, more complex conversation with the public about global issues? A review of literature, *Think Global*. http://think-global.org.uk/resources/item.asp?d=4602

Howard, A. (2012, February 24). "USAID goes FWD with open data and open government." Retrieved from http://gov20.govfresh.com/usaid-goes-fwd-with-open-data-and-open-gov

Mefalopulos, P. (2008). *Development communication sourcebook: broadening the boundaries of communication*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Myers, M. (2005). *Monitoring and Evaluating Information and Communication for Development (ICD) Programmes*. Department for International Development, Wiltshire, U.K. Accessed from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/2/46388330.pdf

Philips, R. & Davis, D. (2003). *An Assessment Report: U.S. Public Opinion on Development Assistance and the USAID Development Education Program*. Arlington, VA: Development Associates. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACT061.pdf

Singhal, A., Cody, M., Rogers, E., & Sabido, M. (2003). *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice.* Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Stuart, S. & Bery, R. (1996). "Powerful Grass-roots Women Communicators: Participatory Video in Bangladesh." In Servacs, J., Jacobson, T., & White, S., (Eds.). *Participatory Communication for Social Change*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

U.S. Agency for International Development - Center for Development Information and Evaluation (USAID-CDIE). (1996). *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPSS: Using Rapid Appraisal Methods.* Number 5.

U.S. Agency for International Development (2010). Open Government Taskforce (OGTF), *USAID Open Government Plan*, www.uaid.gov/open.

U.S. Government Accountability Office (2007, July). *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research,* GAO-07-904.

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2008).*Government Performance: Lessons Learned for the Next Administration on Using Performance Information to Improve Results,* GAO-08-1026T.

U. S. Government Accountability Office. (2009, May) *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight*, GAO-09-679SP.

Warnock, K. (2002). *Monitoring and evaluation manual.* Kampala: Panos Institute.

About the Author

Eric Abdullateef is a Macfadden associate. As a Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist assigned to USAID's Office of Civilian Response, Mr. Abdullateef enables organizational learning and risk-based decision-making. He investigates performance issues and assesses the Civilian Response Corps' contribution to smart power, interagency collaboration and U.S. national security.