



# twitter Diplomacy

**D**iplomats were once known for communicating their views and activities through lengthy missives cabled to the upper echelons of foreign ministries.

Today, anyone can follow two Canadian heads of mission in Europe on Twitter or Facebook through a DFAIT pilot project designed to provide current information, promote Canada's brand and interact with wider, younger audiences through social media.

The 140-character tweets and Facebook updates are a natural evolution in diplomacy, says Ambassador John Barrett in Vienna, who, along with Ambassador James Lambert in The Hague, is taking part in the project.

"Our missions abroad are there to communicate with people, to get to know them, to offer the views of Canadians and an awareness of Canada's priorities," Barrett says. "If one of the tools of communication is social media, we have to use it."

Adds Lambert: "The two media make for interesting opportunities," from trade visits profiled on Facebook to tweets about education and immigration issues. "It provides us with a new way to engage people."

The two ambassadors began their digital forays in December, sending out three to four tweets a week with the support of their mission staff. The content, in English, French and the national language, has included holiday greetings, announcements of Canadian government policy and follow-ups to embassy events.

Evan Potter, an adviser to DFAIT's communications bureau, says that social media is a "new way to get the message out," and it targets young people who will one day be decision makers.

"If we're trying to reach these successor generations and make them attuned to Canada, we've got to get them where they are," says Potter, who is a professor of communications at the University of Ottawa and the author of *Branding Canada*. He says that for "digital diplomacy" to be effective, it's important to have a critical mass of content, such as tweets, and to gauge who is following it.

"The moment we are living in represents the largest increase in expressive capability in human history," Potter adds.

Martha McLean, deputy director of e-communications in the Planning, Advocacy and Innovation Division, says the two "digital ambassadors," as well as the handful of missions, such as Beijing, New York and Washington, D.C., that have been "testing the waters" with early steps into social media, are helping DFAIT to determine the best approaches to take.

"These are new tools we have available to do our jobs," McLean says. The next issue is what we want to achieve with social media, she says, adding that it's important to focus on "local engagement" with such efforts.

"DFAIT still has a lot to learn," says Alain Lemay, BCI's senior web analyst assigned to the social media file. "While we are not exactly new to social media—our Twitter feeds have over 6,600 followers—social media evolves so quickly that it's a constant challenge to keep up. Our use of social media is also evolving. Initially, our Twitter feeds were essentially just broadcast channels. With a bit of experience and confidence under our belts, we have started to engage our audience, which is where the true value of social media lies. For example, through Facebook and Twitter, we have answered immigration questions, warned clients of visa scams, provided consular assistance to Canadians at home and abroad, and warned embassies of potential threats."

Pilot projects such as these allow DFAIT to test the waters and develop tools and best practices that can be shared both within the department and with other government departments. These tools end up in DFAIT's Social Media Toolkit, so all employees can benefit. The department is also developing training for employees. Since the release of the *Policy on the Use of Social Media* (see sidebar), several missions have contacted the communications bureaus (BCD and CSM) to find out how they can use social media to connect with their clients, and more are sure to follow.

Other foreign ministries are embracing social media. There are 59 British heads of mission blogging worldwide, including Andrew Pocock, the U.K.'s high commissioner to Canada. The U.S. State Department's 21st Century Statecraft initiative includes briefings with questions selected from its 10 Twitter feeds. David Jacobson, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, also blogs extensively. There are more than 100 U.S. embassies on Facebook; the most popular of these, in Jakarta, has some 400,000 "friends."

Barrett says that developing social media content is resource-intensive and raises other issues, such as security. "We can't just put things on the website or Twitter account and say, 'Pretty cool, eh?'" At the same time, it's important for the material to be useful and interesting, as well as personal, spontaneous and somewhat fun. Timeliness, which he says is critical in social media, is always a challenge for government communications.