

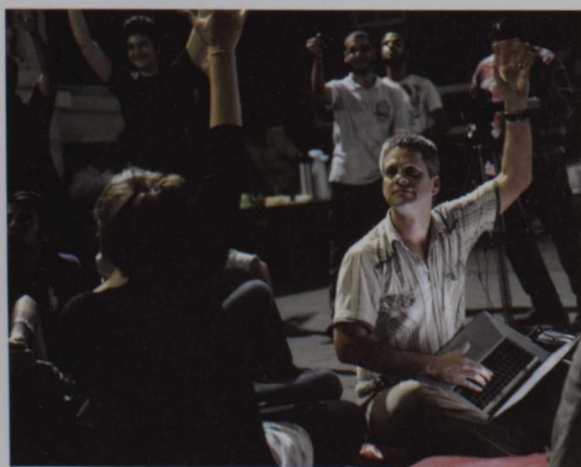
Rowswell, along with Farhaan Ladhani and Shuvaloy Majumdar, now both of CIDA, started the group, which used an online platform to mobilize expertise in support of the activists and to encourage “mass collaboration” among Egyptians.

“It’s an extremely powerful concept that’s already changing the world around us,” says Rowswell, a long-time Middle East hand at DFAIT. He calls Cloud to Street “an experiment in foreign policy for the information age.”

The group held a series of sessions with activists in Cairo, organized “hackathons” where Silicon Valley programmers wrote free software for them and developed “crowdsourcing” tools to allow many people at once to collaborate on activities like helping to draft Egypt’s new constitution, says Ladhani.

“The big issue is how you move technology into the periphery and beyond the core,” says Ladhani, a senior advisor at CIDA, adding that it was fascinating to see the sophistication with which technology engaged people in Egypt. “Information technology can act as a catalyst or an accelerant; it offers the capacity to channel the thoughts of many, unbounded by geography and time, into a single, very powerful voice.”

Inspired by the important role of social media in the Arab Spring movement, as well as other recent phenomena like the North London riots and the Occupy movement, DFAIT’s policy bureau has embarked on an open policy initiative that promises to help transform how policy development happens.



Ben Rowswell takes part in a “tweet seminar” in Tahrir Square last August, raising his hand to signal agreement with the speaker and live-tweeting from his laptop.  
photo: Hanna Sistek

“The Arab Spring was one of the pivotal events that pointed to the role of social media,” says Marketta Geislerova, a senior policy analyst in the Policy Research Division. “It was a wake-up call. In cyberspace, you can organize, you can agitate, you can create.”

Geislerova and policy analyst Andréanne Goyette have developed an online network on GConnex, the government-wide social network. Anyone can join the community, called Networked Societies and Foreign Policy, Goyette says, and take part in the process. There are plans for round tables, “fast-talk sessions” and exercises involving heads of mission, foreign representatives in Canada and other groups.

“We are open-sourcing information,” explains Geislerova, adding that the initiative already includes a cross-section of staff in DFAIT and other government departments, who all have a say in how it develops.

Goyette says the goal is to better understand the “digital agency” and how it can be used in the future. “We want people to talk about it, and to tell us what they think,” she adds.

“Social media is changing the way people are participating in political processes,” says Geislerova. “This is the recognition that diplomats don’t have a monopoly on foreign policy.”

*To participate in the open policy development exercise, go to GConnex on the DFAIT Intranet and search for the community called Networked Societies and Foreign Policy.*



Blogger Ahmed Ragab: “Youth took the revolution from Facebook and Twitter to the squares.”  
photo: Muhamed Sabry