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Digital Diplomacy



Mchele Asselin for The New York Times

Jared Cohen, left, and Alec Ross with mobile devices at the ready.

By JESSE LICHTENSTEIN
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It was a Wednesday night in San Francisco's SoMa neighborhood, and Jared Cohen, the youngest member of the State Department's policy planning staff, and Alec Ross, the first senior adviser for innovation to the secretary of state, were taking their tweeting very seriously. Cohen had spent the day in transit from D.C.; Ross hadn't eaten anything besides a morning muffin. Yet they were in the mood to share, and dinner could wait. It wasn't every day they got to tweet about visiting the headquarters of [Twitter](#).

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"Exactly 140 characters," Cohen said.

"What a ninja you are," Ross said.

They looked at each other, thumbs poised above their BlackBerries.

"Whenever we do this, we get called out on it," Cohen said. They did it anyway, in unison. "Three . . . two . . . one . . ." Tweet. Upward of 500,000 people instantly learned that the Twitterers had been to Twitter.

On Twitter, Cohen, who is 28, and Ross, who is 38, are among the most followed of anyone working for the U.S. government, coming in third and fourth after [Barack Obama](#) and [John McCain](#). This didn't happen by chance. Their Twitter posts have become an integral part of a new State Department effort to bring diplomacy into the digital age, by using widely available technologies to reach out to citizens, companies and other nonstate actors. Ross and Cohen's style of engagement — perhaps best described as a cross between social-networking culture and foreign-policy arcana — reflects the hybrid nature of this approach. Two of Cohen's recent posts were, in order: "Guinea holds first free election

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since 1958” and “Yes, the season premier [sic] of Entourage is tonight, soooo excited!” This offhand mix of pop and politics has on occasion raised eyebrows and a few hackles (writing about a frappuccino during a rare diplomatic mission to Syria; a trip with Ashton Kutcher to Russia in February), yet, together, Ross and Cohen have formed an unlikely and unprecedented team in the State Department. They are the public face of a cause with an important-sounding name: 21st-century statecraft.

To hear Ross and Cohen tell it, even last year, in this age of rampant peer-to-peer connectivity, the State Department was still boxed into the world of communiqués, diplomatic cables and slow government-to-government negotiations, what Ross likes to call “white guys with white shirts and red ties talking to other white guys with white shirts and red ties, with flags in the background, determining the relationships.” And then [Hillary Clinton](#) arrived. “The secretary is the one who unleashed us,” Ross says. “She’s the godmother of 21st-century statecraft.”

Traditional forms of diplomacy still dominate, but 21st-century statecraft is not mere corporate rebranding — swapping tweets for broadcasts. It represents a shift in form and in strategy — a way to amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyberactivism. Diplomacy may now include such open-ended efforts as the short-message-service (S.M.S.) social-networking program the State Department set up in Pakistan last fall. “A lot of the 21st-century dynamics are less about, Do you comport politically along traditional liberal-conservative ideological lines?” Ross says. “Today it is — at least in the spaces we engage in — Is it open or is it closed?”

Early this year, Ross and Cohen helped prop open the State Department’s doors by bringing 10 leading figures of the tech and social-media worlds to Washington for a private dinner with Clinton and her senior staff. Among the guests were Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google; Jack Dorsey, co-founder and chairman of Twitter; James Eberhard of Mobile Accord; Shervin Pishevar of the mobile-phone-game-development company SGN; Jason Liebman of Howcast; Tiffany Shlain, founder of the Webby Awards; and Andrew Rasiej of Personal Democracy Forum, an annual conference on the intersection of politics and technology. Toward the end of the evening, Clinton delighted those assembled by inviting them to use her “as an app.”

A few days later, they did. On Jan. 12, the [Haiti earthquake](#) struck, and within two hours, Eberhard, working with the State Department, set up the Text Haiti 90999 program, which raised more than \$40 million for the Red Cross in \$10 donations. Jan. 12 was significant for supporters of 21st-century statecraft for another reason. It was also the day Google announced that Chinese hackers tried to break into the Gmail accounts of dissidents. In response, Google said that it would no longer comply with China’s censorship laws and for a few months redirected Chinese users to its Hong Kong search engine. The dispute rose to a high-level diplomatic conflict, but it also gave added resonance to the 45-minute “Internet freedom” speech Secretary Clinton delivered a little more than a week later, in which she placed “the freedom to connect” squarely within the U.S. human rights and foreign policy agenda.

Within weeks, Ross and Cohen found themselves dining in San Francisco on the eve of a State-sponsored diplomatic mission to Silicon Valley.

“Dude, tomorrow is going to be awesome,” Ross said.

AT THE GOOGLEPLEX, in Mountain View, the next day, Ross and Cohen took the director chairs next to Schmidt, the C.E.O., for one of Google’s “fireside chats.” Dozens of Google employees were seated in the room, most with laptops open, while Schmidt quizzed the two in a slightly impish tone about their new methods (“Is it like calling up all the ambassadors and saying, Please use [Facebook](#), Twitter and Google?”) and appreciatively referenced the Internet-freedom speech (“The Chinese are not so happy with me right now,” Ross said, “but they’re madder at you”).

At Google, and later at YouTube’s headquarters, Ross and Cohen stressed the political power of viral videos and the potential for mobile phones to become widespread public tools for education, banking and election monitoring (an idea borrowed from Sierra Leone and Montenegro, where volunteers used S.M.S. to report on voting irregularities). It is fair to say that Ross and Cohen are obsessed with mobile phones; they speak at length about

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telemedicine, tele-education and something called telejustice (the details of which they haven't quite worked out yet). At an early-morning meeting in Palo Alto with mobile-banking experts, they looked for ways to expand a successful pilot program used to pay policemen via mobile phones in Afghanistan to another conflict zone in Congo. In both cases, as truckloads or planeloads of cash meant to pay policemen dwindled on their way from the capital cities to the provinces, so did the chances for lawful governance. Mobile banking is well established in places like Kenya, and cellphones are ubiquitous worldwide, even in poorly developed regions. Here was a way to use technology to address diplomacy, development and security concerns at once: direct payments to officers' phones, which would be transferable to the phones of their distant families, could become a powerful tool for stability, even in Congo. Or at least that was the hope.

After the fireside chat, Schmidt sat in on a meeting with Google.org (the company's nonprofit arm) in which Ross and Cohen described the difficulty U.S. embassies have in keeping track of services and resources in countries where the U.S. hopes to spur development — tracking, for example, nongovernmental organizations in Kenya.

"It would be fascinating to transform one of our embassies," Cohen said, "and see if we can create a virtual aspect to make it a one-stop shop for everything that's out there."

"NGOs keep asking for a way to be able to understand, in a country like Kenya, who's doing clean water, who's doing education," one Google employee said.

Several engineers chirped back and forth about the virtues of user-generated feedback and the challenges of multilayer mapping technology, until Schmidt cut them off. "We have a big operation in Kenya," Schmidt said. "We have the smartest guy in the country working for us. Why can't we just do this?"

This new marriage of Silicon Valley and the State Department can, at times, seem almost giddy in its tech evangelism. While it's hard to argue with the merits of helping nongovernmental organizations communicate with one another, there's a danger that close collaboration between the government and the tech world will be read as favoritism or quid pro quo. Anne-Marie Slaughter, director of the policy planning staff, acknowledged as much: "So Google sits here, and Microsoft and Twitter and Facebook, but for all those household names, there are others — and what are the guidelines to make sure that you're being evenhanded, as government has to be? We're just at the outset. Those are issues that are important but can be dealt with — we're going to have to deal with them."

AS MUCH AS Ross and Cohen extol the benefits of mobile banking and Silicon Valley partnerships, they admit that not every problem is best addressed with an app. Clinton, Ross assured me, "doesn't believe you can sprinkle the Internet on something and everybody grows up to be healthy, wealthy and wise." As the recent [Wikileaks](#) scandal suggests, new technologies may usher in as many diplomatic catastrophes as breakthroughs. (In June, a former [U.S. Army](#) intelligence analyst claimed to have given 260,000 diplomatic cables to Wikileaks, a Web site dedicated to publishing confidential material.) When I asked Cohen whether sites like Wikileaks made the kind of diplomacy he advocates harder, he allowed that they posed a challenge: "All of these tools can be utilized by individuals for everything from Wikileaks to other negative purposes" — at least as the State Department sees it — "but that technology isn't going anywhere. So we can fear we can't control it and ignore the space, or we can recognize we can't control it, but we can influence it."

A series of events last year helped Ross and Cohen's work gain traction by showing that connection technologies have become inextricably entwined with the challenges of foreign policy. In April 2009, there was the so-called Twitter revolution in Moldova. In July 2009, there was China's regional-information blockade, including a total shutdown of the Internet, following the Uighur uprisings ("full" Internet usage was restored to Xinjiang 10 months later). And then, of course, Iran, beginning in June 2009, when the organizing power of cellphones and social media — and their ability to capture and disseminate images like the death of a young Iranian woman, [Neda Agha-Soltan](#) — arrested the world's attention. (On the visit to YouTube in February, Cohen described the Neda video as "the most significant viral video of our lifetimes" and told the site's senior management that YouTube is in some ways "better than any intelligence we could get, because it's generated by users in Iran.")

Most of the news that reached the West from Iran came via YouTube and Twitter. In June of last year, three days into the postelection protests, a Twitter post by the opposition candidate [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#) alerted Cohen that Twitter was scheduled to go down for maintenance. Cohen sent an e-mail message to Dorsey, the site's 33-year-old chairman, without running it up the chain of command. Dorsey went to work — “I was definitely raising my voice” trying to find a way for the service to stay up, Dorsey told me. The New York Times broke the story of Cohen's e-mail message. A flurry of public speculation ensued as to whether keeping Twitter up contradicted the president's stated policy of nonintervention in the Iranian election. The same debate was under way among the secretary's senior staff.

“There's no precedent for what it meant to keep a social-media network up in a postelection environment,” Ross told me later. “There's no casework. There's no legal statecraft precedent for such things.” Secretary Clinton's decision not to condemn Cohen's actions was an example of her willingness to “ride the wave,” Slaughter told me. “Things were happening very fast; the stakes were very high. We didn't put out propaganda to try to influence what was going on there. We simply made it possible for people to continue communicating.

“We weren't set up to think about what we would do in that situation,” Slaughter went on. “Now we would be.”

The State Department recently cut financing for some activist groups based outside Iran that promote democracy and began to focus on providing information technologies that would facilitate communication among dissidents in Iran. Restrictions imposed by U.S. sanctions were lifted to allow for the export of instant-messaging and antifiltering software. But it's not clear how easy it will be for companies to enable Iranians to download applications while keeping government censors at bay; even if they can, not everyone agrees that Twitter's revolutionary power has lived up to the hype.

Evgeny Morozov, an academic at Georgetown and perhaps the fiercest critic of this brand of diplomacy, published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* in February, charging that the State Department has been all too willing to sweep the dangers of Twitter diplomacy under the rug. “Facebook and Twitter empower all groups — not just the pro-Western groups that we like,” he wrote, pointing out that the Iranian government was also active online: “Not only did it thwart Internet communications, the government (or its plentiful loyalists) also flooded Iranian Web sites with videos of dubious authenticity . . . that aimed to provoke and splinter the opposition.” (The Iranian government later used Facebook to track Iranian dissidents around the world.)

When I brought up the op-ed, Cohen dismissed Morozov's complaint. “The problem with his thinking,” he said, “is it neglects the inevitability that this technology is going to spread — so he advocates a very dangerously cautious approach that says it's dangerous and we shouldn't play in that space. What the Evgeny Morozovs of the world don't understand is that whether anybody likes it or not, the private sector is pumping out innovation like crazy.”

In other words, the U.S. gains nothing from shunning the social media everyone else uses. “The 21st century is a really terrible time to be a control freak,” Cohen said. “Which is a quote Alec and I often use when explaining this.”

Yet control — over the message, who delivers it, who originates it — is still a cherished tenet of foreign policy. Morozov no doubt voiced the concerns of many when he wrote: “Diplomacy is, perhaps, one element of the U.S. government that should not be subject to the demands of ‘open government’; whenever it works, it is usually because it is done behind closed doors. But this may be increasingly hard to achieve in the age of Twittering bureaucrats.” (The fracas over Ross's and Cohen's seemingly frivolous Twitter posts during a recent trip to Syria, a country some lawmakers feel the U.S. should not be speaking with at all, would seem to bear him out.)

When I spoke to Clinton in March, she maintained that the benefits of connection technologies far outweighed the risks. “That doesn't mean that there won't be problems,” she said, “and there are a lot of people who are very risk-averse.” Clay Shirky, a [New York University](#) professor who has engaged in an ongoing debate with Morozov, has given

similar advice to members of the State Department. “The loss of control you fear is already in the past,” he told me. “You do not actually control the message, and if you believe you control the message, it merely means you no longer understand what’s going on.”

It’s one thing for our diplomats to accept that they can’t be control freaks; it’s another to expect the rest of world to believe that they aren’t — or that social-media companies have no responsibility for how users interact with their services and with one another. What if governments don’t make a distinction between a user’s message and the message service? In May, Pakistan blocked access to Facebook after a user set up a page promoting “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.” Even longstanding allies of the United States — South Korea, Italy, Saudi Arabia and Australia — hold widely divergent views on rights of online assembly and what constitutes protected speech.

Then there’s the chance that, say, Twitter will be seen in some quarters as an extension of the U.S. government. On this point, State Department officials I talked to were philosophical. “This may be a huge difference between the governments that control information — or try to — and governments that don’t,” Slaughter says. “They have a harder time understanding the limits of our power. We can’t shut down CNN!” Still, there are real dangers when companies are conflated with states. “The risk,” Carlos Pascual, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, told me in February, “is if and when in a particular country — whether that’s China or Iran or Cuba or North Korea — there’s a perception that Twitter or Facebook is a tool of the U.S. government. That becomes dangerous for the company, and it becomes dangerous for people who are using that tool. It doesn’t matter what the reality is. In those circumstances, I think it’s still better to allow the tool to exist. But there is some sort of a line there, and we have to respect that line.”

LAST SPRING, Ross and Cohen began leading technology delegations abroad. These trips — or techdels, as they’re now called — to Iraq and elsewhere (Russia, Congo, Haiti) have since become a staple of American diplomacy. Software engineers, entrepreneurs and tech C.E.O.’s are asked to think of unconventional ways to shore up democracy and spur development. Though the delegations function as traveling idea labs, both Ross and Cohen are obsessed with producing “deliverables”: giving tech leaders specific assignments to work toward, like building support networks in the U.S. for fledgling Iraqi I.T. companies or finding ways to use crowd-sourcing to stop human trafficking in Russia.

In October 2009, Ross and Cohen jointly led a techdel to Mexico City. The idea was to generate novel solutions for countering narcotics crime, an enormous internal problem for Mexico but also an expensive and politically explosive border issue for the U.S. (The U.S. will spend more than \$3.5 billion on drug interdiction this year, much of it in Mexico.) In 2009, Ciudad Juárez alone had 2,600 homicides; given the frequent collusion between gangs and the police, witnesses to crimes fear coming forward, which contributes to a kind of narcostate just the other side of the U.S. border. “The lack of trust in the police is a big part of the problem,” Ross says. “The whole concept of anonymous crime reporting has been lost.”

The techdel’s highlight was a meeting with [Carlos Slim](#), the telecom giant and currently the richest man in the world (as well as a major stockholder and creditor of The New York Times). Pascual later told me that in the meeting, James Eberhard of Mobile Accord pointed out that even in the lowest-income neighborhoods of Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey and Mexico City, people have cellphones and use S.M.S. all the time. Why not have a free short code for [text messages](#) so that anyone could report a crime? All personally identifiable data would be stripped from the S.M.S. before it entered a centralized database. From the database, the information would be fed into federal and municipal police systems, then could be monitored by a third-party NGO and mapped on the Internet publicly — in essence bringing anonymity and transparency to crime reporting. Just as important, the actions taken (or not taken) by municipal police forces would also be publicly traceable and monitored.

“I think there was a personal reaction on the part of Slim,” Pascual says. “He’s fascinated by these 30-year-old entrepreneurs that are two generations behind him.”

According to Ross: “He went around the room and asked us all of our ages. He started nodding, and he goes, ‘This is wonderful.’ And he pushes this button and calls in his sons.”

The meeting was scheduled for 40 minutes but lasted two hours. Slim offered, on the spot, to sponsor the free nationwide short code.

The program, which is to be implemented this fall, has some easily recognizable challenges. How do you weed out false reports? How do you gain trust in the anonymity of reporting? Recently, Mexico attempted to register all cellphone users in order to counter telephone extortion rackets, but the personal data, which was to be held confidentially, was soon available for purchase at a Mexico City flea market. “If you get people using these cellphones and reporting crimes and it results in retribution toward somebody because the data really isn’t stripped away, then people will never touch it,” Pascual says. “We’ve got to work with our Mexican counterparts and NGOs, the government and outside of government, so that this is something that they adopt and they want and they sustain.”

THE UNDERPINNING PHILOSOPHY of 21st-century statecraft — that the networked world “exists above the state, below the state and through the state” — was laid out in a paper in *Foreign Affairs* in 2009 by Slaughter, before she became head of the policy planning staff. Cohen rereads the paper all the time. Ross gives it to all new U.S. ambassadors. It is crucial to how Cohen and Ross see themselves: equal parts barnstormers and brainstormers, creating and sustaining networks of networks. Ross and Cohen share all their contacts and remain in touch constantly, though they’re often on opposite sides of the globe. (“Jared and I divide and conquer,” Ross says.) Their closeness might come as something of a surprise: Cohen was appointed by [Condoleezza Rice](#) and still considers her a mentor; Ross was deeply embedded in the Obama campaign. And they pursued very different paths to the State Department.

Cohen, who sprinkled his undergraduate years with trips to Africa (his senior thesis was on the [Rwandan genocide](#)), managed to set up a meeting with Rice, then national security adviser, when he was only 22. As a Rhodes scholar, Cohen had ditched England for extended travel through Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, where he interacted daily with a younger generation closely interconnected through social media and wireless technology. “He had insights into Iran that frankly we didn’t have in the government,” Rice recalled when I spoke to her in March. “He was so articulate about it, I asked him to write up a memo that I could send to the president.”

When Rice became secretary of state, she tapped Cohen, then 24, for the policy planning staff, with an emphasis on youth outreach, counterradicalization and counterterror. In February 2008, large-scale protests against the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#) (FARC) sprang up there and in close to 200 cities around the world, organized through Facebook and [Skype](#) and instant messaging. “It was the largest protest against a terrorist organization in history,” Cohen says. “In what I’m sure was the very first diplomatic engagement via an online social network, I found the group One Million Voices Against FARC, and I sent a message to the organizer of it. I said: ‘I’m with the State Department; are you the one that did this? I’m going to come down to Colombia and see you.’ People thought this was weird — like, almost eerily reminiscent of an Internet date.”

Rice told me: “He started social networks of people who could talk about how to combat terrorism worldwide. He put that together really pretty much on his own.”

Nearly a decade older than Cohen, Alec Ross spent his early postcollege years as a [Teach for America](#) recruit and was slower to join political life. In 2000, he helped found One Economy, a nonprofit dedicated to closing the digital divide that was instrumental in pushing Arabic-language content onto the Web. Ross was particularly successful in getting titans of business and technology, from [Bill Gates](#) to the former F.C.C. chairman [William E. Kennard](#), to support his cause. Impressed, the current F.C.C. chairman, [Julius Genachowski](#), picked Ross to run the day-to-day operations for Obama’s technology, media and telecommunications policy. In April 2009, Ross joined State.

As a Bush-era appointee, Cohen had been walking on eggshells. “There were all these haters trying to get this guy shot in the head,” as Ross puts it. “I read what he’d written, and I’m like, This guy’s actually brilliant; he’s going to be my partner.”

One apparent paradox of 21st-century statecraft is that while new technologies have theoretically given a voice to the anonymous and formerly powerless (all you need is a

camera phone to start a movement), they have also fashioned erstwhile faceless bureaucrats into public figures. Ross and Cohen have a kind of celebrity in their world — and celebrity in the Twitter age requires a surfeit of disclosure. Several senior members of the State Department with whom I spoke could not understand why anyone would want to read microdispatches from a trip to Twitter or, worse, from a State Department staff member's child's basketball game. But Secretary Clinton seemed neither troubled nor bewildered. "I think it's to some extent pervasive now," she told me in March. "It would be odd if the entire world were moving in that direction and the State Department were not." Half of humanity is under 30, she reminded me. "Much of that world doesn't really know as much as you might think about American values. One of the ways of breaking through is by having people who are doing the work of our government be human beings, be personalized, be relatable."

Just such an effort was under way one recent morning in Washington, where Ross and Cohen were meeting with Farah Pandith. Pandith is also the holder of a newly created position: special representative to Muslim communities for the United States Department of State. Born in Kashmir, Pandith emigrated to the U.S. at a young age. Now in her early 40s, she is a vibrant presence in a room and, since she was sworn in in September, has been to 25 countries trying to broaden the scope of U.S. interaction with Muslim communities. She had just returned from India, Pakistan, Qatar and the Netherlands, and she and her deputy, Karen Chandler, were ready for Ross and Cohen's pitch.

"Here's the problem we're solving for," Ross said. "It's physically impossible for one office to engage 1.4 billion people across the planet in a way that involves a lot of air travel. We've got to work with you to build out a connection-technology strategy."

"Wherever you go," Cohen said, "there should be a trail of Muslim engagement behind you."

"It's the BOF strategy," Ross said, pronouncing it *boff*. "Blowing out Farah."

Pandith and her staff laughed.

For the next half-hour, Ross and Cohen riffed on BOF: how to take the undoubted asset that is Pandith — an articulate, attractive female speaking on behalf of the United States to a large, diverse population that continues to suspect this country's motives — and scale her presence with technology so that her job promises more than a Sisyphean series of intercontinental flights.

"What you did in Doha with the secretary," Ross said. "There's nothing to have kept us from Ustreaming that, and going from an intimate meeting with Farah Pandith, the secretary of state and 12 civil-society actors to something thousands of times larger."

"What you need is a really good hash tag," Cohen said.

After a moment everyone agreed that "#muslimengagement" was too long.

"We don't have to come up with that right now," Ross said. "You have a body of great material. We ought to have somebody go through it and do grabs. Figure out over the course of whatever it is you've said, those things that can be encapsulated in 140 characters or less. Let's say it's 10 things. We then translate it into Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, Swahili, etc., etc. The next thing is we identify the 'influencer' Muslims on Twitter, on Facebook, on the other major social-media platforms. And we, in a soft way, using the appropriate diplomacy, reach out to them and say: Hey, we want to get across the following messages. They're messages that we think are consistent with your values. This is a voice coming from the United States that we think you wanted to hear. So we get the imam. . . ."

". . . the youth leader. . . ." Pandith said.

"We get these other people to then play the role of tweeting it, and then saying, 'Follow this woman,' and/or putting it on whatever dominant social-media platform they use."

To do the translation, Ross and Cohen suggested the Muslim engagement office bring in 10 bilingual members of the Virtual Student Foreign Service, an internship program Cohen developed to assist U.S. embassies in dealing with social media. Pandith's deputy sat

mostly quiet through the meeting but then voiced a concern that must reverberate throughout the diplomatic ranks. College kids translating diplomatic messages from the State Department? In languages their supervisors can't read?

"How do you make sure that what they're posting is vetted?" she asked.

"In the 21st century, the level of control is going to be decreased," Ross said, reiterating what Clinton told me earlier. "The young woman from Saudi who translates something to Arabic, what she's translating is language that's been vetted, but it's not being handed over to a State Department translator, who's handing it over to State Department public affairs, who's approving it. We're past that."

Jesse Lichtenstein has written for The New Yorker, Slate, The Economist and n + 1; this is his first article for the magazine.

A version of this article appeared in print on July 18, 2010, on page M24 of the Sunday Magazine.

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