

Strengthening the United Nations Secretariat's Use of Social Media: The View of One Practitioner

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Abstract:

In 2017, the United Nations Social Media Team undertook several important changes in the way it works. This paper aims to explain how realigning and strengthening the UN's approach to social media helped the Organization to better capitalize on multilingual communication opportunities while facing limited financial and staffing capacities. Taking a look at audience needs and monitoring comments from fans and followers resulted in a new focus on countering negative rhetoric and a revitalized "back to basics" approach to content in general.

Key Words:

Digital diplomacy, multilingualism, public or external affairs, public information, social media, digital engagement.

In 2017, the United Nations and some of its related funds, programmes and agencies, faced a surge of criticism, misinformation campaigns and actions designed to weaken and diminish the Organization and the value of international cooperation. Many of the falsehoods about and attacks on the UN were spread in the digital sphere and gained traction on social media, notably on Facebook and Twitter. Some of this was likely related to the actions and words of some political candidates and leaders to push nationalist policies and ideas into the limelight. In response, intergovernmental institutions faced a series of challenges including negative media coverage and cuts to already strapped budgets.

Similarly, priority issues on the UN's agenda were under attack, including support for climate action, reproductive rights, human rights, and efforts to establish international agreements on refugees and migrants. At the same time, the United Nations welcomed its ninth Secretary-General, António Guterres, who made it clear that the UN had to reform its un-

wieldy bureaucracy in order to better help the people it serves and also to prevent crises, instead of merely responding to them.

All of the above made 2017 an ideal time for the UN Social Media Team, based in the Secretariat's Department of Public Information in New York, to undertake several important changes in the way it works. This paper aims to explain how realigning and strengthening the UN's approach to social media is helping the Organization to better capitalize on communication opportunities with limited financial and staffing capacity. A new focus was placed on countering negative rhetoric both in response to specific events or misinformation campaigns and, ideally, to pro-actively get out ahead of criticism.

Organizational Setting

UN Secretariat

Communications activities for the UN Secretariat are, for the most part, managed by the Department of Public Information,¹ which was established in 1946, by General Assembly resolution 13 (I), to promote global awareness and understanding of the work of the United Nations. The Department carries out this mandate through radio, television, print and online publications, websites, liaising with journalists and undertaking outreach activities such as special events, educational programmes, guided tours and exhibits. The Department reports annually on its work to the UN General Assembly's Committee on Information.² The Committee is responsible for overseeing the substantive work of the Department and for providing guidance and feedback on policies, programmes and activities of the Department.

¹ "Department of Public Information", United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/department-public-information/department-public-information/department-public-information/index.html>, accessed 29 January 2018.

² "About the Committee on Information", United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/ga/coi/about/bg.shtml>, accessed 29 January 2018.

The Department is led by an Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications who reports directly to the Secretary-General. The Secretary-General has his own communications team, led by a Director of Communications (which includes several speechwriters and advisors) and he is served by a team of spokespeople. On Social Media, the Secretary-General manages his own Twitter account, @AntonioGuterres, in consultation with his advisors and with help from his communications team, spokespeople and the Department of Public Information.

Across the Secretariat, other Departments and Offices also carry out communications activities on social media. Some senior officials manage their own social media profiles, individually or in consultation with communications teams, usually determined on a case-by-case basis depending on interest, needs, staffing and Departmental/Office culture.

Social Media Team

For the purposes of this paper, all examples cited, unless noted, refer to the team located in the Secretariat's Department of Public Information.

As the UN Member States had not been willing or able to allocate budgetary resources to hire additional personnel to take on the highly time consuming and specialized work of managing social media accounts, from 2010 to 2017, all social media work was undertaken by staff carrying out other mandates, such as producing multimedia news content and managing websites, or by staff who had been officially reassigned within existing resources.

In response to reforms called for by the Secretary-General and after a difficult internal consultative process, one important change took place in 2017. Midway through the year, all "flagship" social media accounts managed by the Department of Public Information, meaning accounts that posted issues of the most general nature in the overall name of the United Nations, in six official languages plus Kiswahili and Portuguese, were moved under the management of one team after having previously been administered separately. This was seen as a major step forward for improving messaging and social outreach to non-English-speakers which, for too many years, had been a lost opportunity for the UN. This required the reassignment and retraining of 21 staff members, the bulk of whom

were previously working as multimedia producers and production assistants, some of whom had extensive experience in radio production.

This Team was given the responsibility to manage the platforms while dozens of additional colleagues across the Department produced multilingual content for social media and other outlets. Strategic communications professionals also provided advice on messaging and campaign materials. Graphic designers and video producers from other divisions were engaged to produce videos, animations, gifs and quote cards. The Team also worked closely with colleagues who manage special events, partnerships, and livestream broadcasts. Also consulted regularly as needed were the communications and spokesperson's teams in the Office of the Secretary-General, protocol, security and other thematic advisors across the Secretariat and United Nations System.

Multilingual materials were shared on the following platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. English content is also shared on Google+, Tumblr and Snapchat. Chinese content is shared on WeChat and Weibo, and other video platforms. Russian content is also shared on VKontakte. The total number of fans and followers reached 30 million across all platforms by the end of the year. It is estimated that social media content produced or overseen by the Team is seen by hundreds of thousands of people every day. The countries with the most followers are: China, United States, India, United Kingdom, Canada, Nigeria, Mexico, Kenya, Pakistan and Egypt. Other countries with large numbers of fans and followers include Australia, Brazil, Kenya, the Philippines and Iran.

Team members also served as advisors for staff at field offices called Information Centres.

In addition to creating optimised and on-message content for social media platforms in eight languages, some of the duties of this new Team included:

- Using its leadership role to help coordinate the response to communications crises across the UN System and to bolster those agencies and offices most affected.
- Fostering close collaboration with the office of the Secretary-General and his spokesperson to ensure that the Secretary-General is involved

and highlighted as appropriate. It was noted that content featuring the Secretary-General played extremely well with social users, who were looking to him as a voice of truth and reason. His focus on prevention, the futility of conflict in today's world, non-discrimination, and the UN as an imperfect but essential stabilizing force, was seen internally as particularly important.

- Drafting Secretariat social media policies.
- Providing ideas to celebrity supporters (UN Messengers of Peace, Goodwill Ambassadors and other high-profile supporters) about how and when to post UN content, how to be engaged to rebut fake news/misinformation, and to speak out against negative rhetoric.

UN System

The broader UN System³ is made up of dozens of affiliated Programmes, Funds, and Specialized Agencies, all with their own mandates, membership, leadership, and budgets.

Communications around the United Nations System are decentralized, with communications experts and expertise on social media dispersed and unevenly staffed. Communications priorities vary for many reasons, including prioritization of communications personnel to deal with ongoing global crises, differing mandates and competition for limited budgets.

A system of “UN Communications Groups” is in place, both globally and at the country level, which is meant to help coordinate communications efforts. The lack of formal governance of UN social media accounts across the wider system (including inside the Secretariat) made the challenge of trying to put out harmonized messaging on social media quite difficult, leaving the door open for inappropriate and off-message content to be posted in the UN's name, damaging the reputation and work of the Organization.

Starting in 2011, the Secretariat's Department of Public Information took on a *de facto* coordination role to manage an email mailing list of

³ “Funds, Programmes, Agencies and Other Entities”, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/funds-programmes-specialized-agencies-and-others/index.html>, accessed 29 January 2018.

social media focal points around the system which has been seen as a key internal communications and knowledge sharing tool and service. The Department also organized semi-regular informal in-person meetings, training events and presentations by external speakers. Communicators working at diplomatic missions to the United Nations were invited to take part as a courtesy. These communicators are usually employed by their own governments and, as such, had different goals and objectives from UN System personnel who take an oath of neutrality as “international civil servants”.

In 2018, the Department will explore new ways to share information (e.g. Slack channels) in order to decrease reliance on email and to better serve colleagues working at different duty stations around the world.

Goals and Audiences

The overall goal for using social media was to position the United Nations as a force for good which makes concrete and positive differences to the lives of people in every country. It aims to do this by:

- Raising awareness of the basics about the UN: what it is and is not, what it does and does not do.
- Encouraging online and offline action to defend the goals and priorities of the UN.
- Engaging UN supporters to help amplify UN messages and increase support for the UN and issues on its agenda.
- Defending UN issues and principles.
- Dispelling myths and misinformation.

The audiences were defined as:

- Existing social media fans and followers, including the disaffected.
- New fans and followers.
- Journalists and civil society.
- Representatives of United Nations Member States.
- UN personnel, including staff and retirees.

Audiences were selected based on communications and/or campaign needs and also by who was best placed to amplify facts about the UN and respond to misinformation. Meeting the information needs of existing audiences who had already indicated a clear interest in the work of the UN, along with potential new fans and followers, were usually seen as a priority.

Through looking at comments and shares, it was noted that among these audiences was a large number of disaffected fans and followers – those who are skeptical of the United Nations, who were fearful of what they saw as undue international interference in their local affairs, or who lurked on United Nations platforms in order to attack the opinions of fans and followers or to “troll” the Organizations and its supporters.

UN staff and retirees were identified as important but previously untapped audience. UN staff had traditionally been encouraged to, for the most part, quietly carry out their UN duties. These tasks included, but were not limited to, servicing meetings of Member States (translators, interpreters, meetings officers, security, etc.), providing procurement, administrative, legal, logistical and/or coordination support for peace and humanitarian missions, writing reports of activities for UN members. These staff did not see themselves as communicators for external audiences.

However, in the age where everyone has a mobile phone with a camera and a likely large majority of UN personnel were joining social networking platforms, the Organization began looking at ways to see all staff as communicators, not just those with more traditional communications roles. For a few years, content shared on Organizational social media platforms has been featured prominently on the Secretariat's intranet, but very little guidance on what to post has been shared as it was not clear which Departments or Offices had the responsibility to advise staff on these cross-cutting issues – human resources, legal affairs, staff representation, ethics, etc. To make the most of staff as communicators, it has been agreed that additional staffing and resources would be required and policies or stronger guidelines on staff use of social media would need to be put in place, along with an internal communications campaign to explain the ramifications of staff actions on social media, especially in light of their status as international civil servants.

Retirees were identified as a possible audience as they were seen to have extensive knowledge of the Organization's aims, had seen its impact firsthand and a vested interest in the reputation of their former employer. In addition to forming a network of sympathetic fans and followers, they likely also had more time to spend on platforms. As retirees, they also had more perceived freedom to be seen as outspoken supporters of the UN and somewhat controversial issues, whereas current staff may have felt more pressure to maintain a quieter and more low-key online presence.

As they have dedicated and different sources for and access to information, journalists, civil society and Member States were seen to have more specific reasons for following UN social media accounts. While journalists likely prefer to manage their own sources and see the UN accounts a propaganda outlets, they were still an important audience as they had influential followers of their own and were poised to help influence editorial decisions made by their employers. Civil society and representatives of Member States followed the UN as they were interested in very specific issues and wanted to keep tabs on the latest related developments.

Thematic Campaigns and Content

Generally, content shared on social media platforms was created by the Social Media Team in close consultation with the following specialists: thematic strategic communications experts, graphic designers, multimedia audio, video and news producers.

In most cases, one piece of content was created and repurposed across platforms, with some exceptions for speakers of different languages and, more and more, different sizes to meet specific platform needs.

Longer-term campaigns were usually conceived and managed by subject matter experts across the UN System, usually in consultation with the Social Media Team. Sometimes external consultants were engaged when needed and when funds allowed. In rarer cases, ad and communications agencies devoted *pro bono* support.

The challenges of balancing content that identified audiences want to see with the aims of the Organization resulted in daily, even hourly, discussions on what to post and when.

Content and design files for adaptation were shared with peers around the UN System through a variety of mechanisms including Trello boards, Dropbox links, Google Drives and proprietary platforms.

A New Approach to Shaping the Narrative

From looking at comments on or in relation to United Nations social media platforms, longer-service staff working on the team had realized that many in the general public had trouble understanding what the UN is and does. For example, many in the general public did not understand that the United Nations does not have a rapid reaction force of “blue helmets” that can fly in to stop crises on a moment’s notice. So, an ongoing goal had been getting fans and followers to understand that, instead, it is a rather complex and difficult process to get a peacekeeping mission underway.

On an even more basic level, some fans and followers were not aware that the UN was comprised of Member States and that their own country was represented and voting on elections for UN bodies like the Human Rights Council, for instance. Most seriously, many believed that the UN has an exorbitant budget, wastes money and breaks local laws wherever diplomats live.

While previous social media strategies had focused on how general social media fans and followers could be involved in UN activities and help amplify its messages, it became clear that a shift had to take place in 2017.

In addition to its ongoing efforts to promote specific thematic issues (development, human rights, peace and security), the Social Media Team devised and undertook a three-pronged approach to creating a previously untried type of content:

- pro-active posts to get out ahead of criticism and highlight facts;
- reactive posts as an indirect response to specific political actions, statements, misinformation campaigns and fake news stories;
- direct responses to comments and mentions.

In 2017, for the first time, the Team put together a wide variety of “ever-green” content in order to be able to jump into emerging conversations

and also to respond quickly when issues related to the UN start to surface in the news. Examples of such content included: the need to take action on climate issues, gender equality and the cost effectiveness of the United Nations. Additional templates were created so that the Team could adapt them as new issues surfaced online.

Content examples included:

- Back to basics: fresh content featuring basic facts about what the UN is and does, making it clear where the UN's budget goes (to help people) and show concrete actions in the most basic of terms.
- "Here's what the UN does for you" (and "why you should care?") in addition to the well-established "here's what you can do for the UN" approach.
- Shareable facts and content for supporters to help them help the UN. This involves making the active contribution of the UN very clear in every post put out and asking peers across the UN System to do the same.

For instance, in previous years, the focus was on telling the stories of individual refugees, what's widely believed to be a compelling form of advocacy, hopefully playing on the heartstrings of fans and followers to advocate for providing the basic needs and rights entitled to them under international law. What was missing from this approach was how the UN was involved, what the UN was doing about it and why anyone would/could care and how local projects/work affects the rest of the world.

Throughout the year, working with colleagues who produce multimedia news products, graphic and website designers, video producers and other outreach materials (books, publications, tour guides, etc.), a series of digital products were shared on social media platforms to reinforce the following ideas:

- The United Nations is a good deal, one that represents an overwhelmingly positive return for minimal financial investment.
- The United Nations works for every person in every country.
- Global challenges know no borders. Active participation in the UN is essential for the security and prosperity of all countries.
- The success of the United Nations depends on the countries that form it.
- The United Nations saves lives every day.

- The United Nations works to prevent crises before they happen and before they have a global impact.
- Member States (referred to as “countries” for social media purposes) have obligations under international law.

Comments and Engagement

While it was assumed that social media posts shared by the Organization would unlikely change the minds of the disaffected, the Department saw its accounts as a key opportunity to refute these negative or misinformed commenters. While comments that were deemed to be inappropriate (hateful, profanity laden, sales pitches, etc.) or off topic were deleted on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, the Organization used social media to respond to comments that are based on inaccuracies. Note: Comments critical of the Organization were left online. Often, other social media fans and followers responded before staff had time to respond, which was acknowledged as likely to be even more effective than a response from the Organization itself.

Most questions were answered by employees, but basic questions on issues like career opportunities or where to find more information on a specific topic may be answered by an intern. The Team also reached out to the department’s librarians and tour guides to help answer questions online. When necessary, some questions were escalated to other departments and spokespeople for response.

As the sheer volume of comments, particularly on Twitter, made it virtually impossible for all comments to get a response, the task of monitoring comments was divided amongst staff members, interns and subject specialists. Care was taken when deciding which comments got a response. Responses normally were only given to questions where there is a clear answer on a UN issues and when a related website link could be included for more information. As engagement is an important task, and thought to be expected by social media fans and followers, commenters were thanked when time allowed. Care was taken to avoid responding to comments when it was determined that a response may have been seen

as legal advice/interpretation or when it could have been seen that UN staff were entering into an ongoing debate between its Member States.

Security threats were reported both to the platforms themselves but also to UN security.

Key partners, such as the UN Foundation, the New York City Office for International Affairs and other civil society actors, were engaged to respond directly to criticism where the UN cannot. One example is the Better World Campaign⁴ which produced materials on why it was important for the United States to pay its UN assessments (*e.g.* dues) in full.

Evaluation and Reporting

Goals and evaluation parameters were set in several ways:

- The Team set goals in terms of overall fans and followers as part of the budget cycle. It reported on growth impact and reach in reports to Members States on communications in general and also in issue specific reports to General Assembly bodies.
- Communications campaign plans and strategies outlined specific goals and targets. These goals and targets were often devised in consultation with the Department's Evaluation and Communications Research Unit which, among other things, provided guidance and support on general and specific campaign issues, conducted impact surveys, and collected data.
- Internal oversight bodies, including the Office of Internal Oversight Services,⁵ audited social media activities, including on issues related to strategic communications and information technology risks.
- *Ad hoc* updates were shared with Member States and senior officials, including the Secretary-General, through requested, in-person meetings, courtesy calls, presentations, and less often, formal memos.

⁴ "Better World Campaign", United Nations Foundation, <https://betterworldcampaign.org/us-un-partnership/importance-of-funding-the-un/>, accessed 29 January 2018.

⁵ "Office of Internal Oversight Services", United Nations, <https://oios.un.org/>, accessed 29 January 2018.

- The Team set its own working internal benchmarks and captured activity and impact through monthly reports using insights/analytics gleaned through social media platforms. It captured basic numbers like follower growth, follower demographics and most and least popular posts.
- In 2017, an external consultant was engaged to review the types of comments received and to put forward recommendations on how to carry out this type of work going forward.

A combination of native analytics and limited subscription tools were used to monitor reach and engagement. The Social Media Team did not have capacity for monitoring of sentiment towards and discussion of the UN and UN-related issues on social media issues at this time. Additional training, tools and staffing will be needed in coming years to fully harness the listening power afforded by analyzing social media conversations and comments.

Looking Ahead

In early 2018, the Team was enthusiastic about the structural changes and already seeing important results in terms of improved content quality and a five percent increase in overall followers. Tangible benefits seen thus far include reduced duplication, improved job satisfaction (such as staff are learning new skills and seeing the online impact of their work) and time saved from taking a multilingual team approach.

Senior leaders, including the Secretary-General himself, have indicated that additional changes may be forthcoming to the Department as a whole and the Team will make the case that additional staff are needed to carry out its work and to build on achievements. One source of additional staffing discussed may be to rethink the strategy of staff working at information centres around the world, to have them join remotely as support for the accounts managed in languages that they speak but more importantly to ensure a fully global approach (24/7 coverage) and to show UN work worldwide.

In 2018, the Department will begin exploring ways, within existing resources and possibly with partners, to create content for different de-

mographic groups and platforms. For example, plans are underway to create materials of interest specifically to younger audiences, populations in countries which are major troop contributions to peace operations and populations in countries where access to the internet is still unreliable due to infrastructure or cost.

The Team will continue to study the platforms themselves to see where changes in strategy will need to be made. The Team is beginning to discuss how it may be able seek external or partner funding to pay to boost or promote posts, something it has not been able to do thus far but is increasingly being understood to be a critical part of any social media strategy. Additional research will be put into the way the Organization may need to increase its work to produce ephemeral content, on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram, and to experiment on messaging apps like WhatsApp, Line and Telegram.