

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, October 31, 2011 9:35 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Ambassador to Zimbabwe

From: Ross, Alec J
Sent: Monday, October 31, 2011 8:57 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J; Hammer, Michael A; Smith, Dana S (PA)
Subject: Ambassador to Zimbabwe

I wanted to make sure you saw this blog post by our Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Charles Ray. Thought worth reading because it counters notion that social media for younger people and less applicable in sub-Saharan Africa.

http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/zimbabwe_social_media

Conventional wisdom holds that people over 50 cannot master social networking; that new media and fancy tech toys are reserved for the young. This is an unfortunate misperception that causes many senior government leaders to avoid a great opportunity to reach out to new audiences in a manner that they "hear" and understand.

For the record, I'm solidly in the pre-computer generation, having turned 65 over a year ago and worked as a government employee for over 49 years. Therefore, according to prevailing thought, I am one of those who simply cannot make best use of new technologies that my younger colleagues take for granted. But, I refused to accept this.

For years, I was casually active on social networking sites, but since I took up my post as Ambassador to Zimbabwe, I have leveraged my social media activity as part of my job to promote U.S. foreign policy. How has a member of the "Silent Generation," those born before or during World War II in the hush that preceded the digital explosion, managed to do this? Buy into the system (literally and figuratively), find your voice, and use the tools every day.

Almost every U.S. embassy and agency has a website, and even a Facebook page, to communicate with public audiences -- in the United States and abroad. U.S. Embassy Harare has a [website](#) and a [Facebook page](#), as well as a [YouTube channel](#) and a [Twitter account](#). I use my personal Facebook page, Twitter feed, and blog to supplement and expand the embassy's messages. In Zimbabwe, where 65 percent or more of the population is under 35, these tools are increasingly effective channels for communicating with educated, young Zimbabweans. With Zimbabwe's dramatic rise in the use of 3G service to access the Internet, our use of these methods gives us rapidly growing access to young people on their cell phones. Using Facebook and SMS, we regularly put together youth-oriented discussions and programs at a moment's notice.

My embassy team also uses social media to blunt the impact of incessant anti-Western propaganda by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). For example, when hard-line elements blocked meetings I had scheduled with young people in rural areas, we responded with live Facebook chats -- engaging the very same young people, some of whom logged onto Facebook through their phones while others participated on computers in our American Corners. The chat was accessible to anyone following our Facebook page and generated more discussion and media coverage than an actual live meeting would have.

I also engage in daily chats with young Zimbabweans on my own Facebook page. My page has become a platform for explaining U.S. policies in an informal setting. This has changed some of the perceptions that young Zimbabweans have of the United States and American officials. During one of my late night chats, a young Zimbabwean man wrote, "Who does the writing on your page? A member of your staff?" "No," I replied. "I do it myself." "Wow!" was his response. "I've never heard of a senior official doing something like that himself."

In a country, such as Zimbabwe, where young people are often ignored, making myself available to youth audiences on social networking sites has done more to undercut slanted government messaging than almost all of our other programs. I answer their questions and sometimes ask my own; but, more importantly, I engage them in conversation and I listen to what they have to say. The fact that young Zimbabweans are seeking us out at the rate of 25 -- 40 new followers per day is testament to the effectiveness of this method of communication. Even some younger government officials have joined our fan crowd.

By demonstrating U.S. values in direct and practical ways to a vast, hungry digital audience, we have changed the terms of the debate in our bilateral relationship immeasurably. We're not just talking about the values of open dialogue -- we are "walking the talk." To quote my grandmother, the woman who raised me and shaped my own values, U.S. Embassy Harare's use of social media is proof that, "What you do speaks so loud, I can't hear a word you're saying."

And, it also proves that you don't have to be a member of "Generation X" or a "Millennial" to use these tools effectively!