Winning hearts and likes

How foreign affairs and defence agencies use Facebook

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ASPI

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Contents

What's the problem?

For defence and diplomacy, digital media, and specifically social media, have become an unavoidable aspect of their operations, communications and strategic international engagement, but the use of those media isn't always understood or appreciated by governments.

While the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of Defence (DoD) both use social media, including accounts managed by diplomatic posts overseas and by units of the ADF, both departments can improve how they reach and engage online. It's important to note, however, that their use cases and audiences are different. DFAT's audience is primarily international and varies by geographical location. Defence has a more local audience and focus.

More importantly than the content, online engagement is dependent on the strength of the ties between the senders or sharers and the recipients of the content. For both departments, improving those online ties is vital as they seek to influence.

What's the solution?

The Australian Government should use social media far more strategically to engage international audiences—particularly in the diplomatic and defence portfolios. Both DFAT and Defence should review outdated digital strategies, cross-promote more content and demonstrate transparency and accountability by articulating and publishing social media policies.

Both departments should create more opportunities for training and the sharing of skills and experiences of public diplomacy staff. They should refrain from relying solely on engagement metrics as success measures (that is, as a measure of an individual's, usually senior staff's or heads of missions', level of ability or achievement).

Instead, by changing the emphasis from the producers of social media content to the audiences that interact with it, the engagement data can be usefully regarded as a proxy for attention and interest. This can tell us what kinds of audiences (mostly by location) are engaged, and what types of content they do and don't engage with. This information indicates the (limited) utility of social media; this should guide online engagement policy.

This report also highlights and recognises the value of social media for the defence community—especially as a means of providing information and support for currently serving personnel and their families—by supporting the use of Facebook for those purposes by all defence units.

DFAT should remove the direction for all Australian heads of mission overseas to be active on social media. While this presence is indeed useful and boosts the number of global government accounts, if our ambassadors aren't interested in resourcing those accounts, the result can be sterile social media accounts that don't engage and that struggle to connect with publics online. Instead, both departments should encourage those who are interested in and skilled at digital diplomacy to use openness, warmth and personality to engage.

Introduction: the global rise of Facebook

This report examines DFAT's and the DoD's use of one social media platform—Facebook—and evaluates current practices to identify how, where and for what purposes Facebook has impact. The focus on Facebook reflects the platform's global reach and its popularity as an everyday, essential medium for accessing and sharing information. Besides notable exceptions (such as China), in most places (such as some Southeast Asian countries), Facebook is so popular that it's often roughly synonymous with 'the internet'. This is a symptom of the platform's ubiquity and utility as well as a consequence of Facebook's heavily promoted services, including the Free Basics internet access service, which provides limited online access via a Facebook application.[1]

In order to generate lessons learnt, this report makes comparisons between Australian Government pages and their counterparts in the US, the UK, New Zealand and Canada.

The analysis of Facebook use for diplomatic purposes is based on 2016–17 data extracted from Facebook pages of the diplomatic missions of eight 'publisher' nations (the five that are the subject of this report, as well as India, Israel and Japan) in 23 'host nations'.[2] More recent data couldn't be used because access is no longer available, but a review of the pages suggests that the analysis stemming from the data extracted during that period remains relevant.

The underlying design of Facebook deeply influences and limits its use by publishers and users. The Facebook newsfeed—the most commonly used feature for getting regularly updated information—prioritises posts from accounts that are either closely associated through a history of user activity, including liking, sharing, commenting and messaging, or are boosted through paid promotion.

One of the main consequences is that the more a Facebook user interacts with content that they prefer, the more likely they are to receive that type of material in their newsfeeds, which they're in turn more likely to interact with and so on. Successful content has emotional appeal, or is useful, and comes from a Facebook page that's been frequented by the user or been shared with a close member of a user's Facebook network of friends. As this cycle continues, Facebook 'gets to know its users better and better'.[3]

In other words, it isn't enough to make engaging (meaning fun, compelling or relevant) content. Online engagement is dependent on the strength of the ties between the senders or sharers and the recipients of the content, at least as much and very probably more than the nature of the content. Understanding this is vital for governments as they seek to influence online.

But, as a social media network, Facebook brings with it complications for public diplomacy and defence social media strategies. For example, Facebook's utility is limited by its underlying algorithm architecture and the habits and preferences of individual Facebook users, which are influenced by in-country patterns of social media usage and internet access. These issues need to be factored into departmental communications policies and social media strategies.

Online content, classified

Facebook posts can be classified into four types, according to their apparent function or purpose: outward-facing publicity (including propaganda), inward-facing publicity, engagement, and diplomacy of the public.[4] The categories often overlap: content may be both inward- and outward-facing, for example. An analysis of these four types of content can be very useful for creating a strategy for effective DFAT and DoD Facebook use.

1. Outward publicity

Outward-facing publicity is the most common. It's characterised by its evident target being the broader public of the country in which it's posted, or a section of that public, such as overseas students, potential immigrants or, less commonly, large expatriate populations. It therefore uses the language of the local population and locally popular themes and topics. Content varies but usually involves the provision of information, publicity for events, branding exercises or the posting of trivia (such as pictures of koalas). Posts can also be warm and personal and include one of the internet's maligned features—cuteness.

The most popular Facebook post recorded during this research displays many of those features. It's a video of two American embassy 'diplokids' playing the Indian national anthem on the occasion of India's Independence Day.[5] It's been viewed 2.53 million times and shared more than 125,000 times (as of January 2020).

Many popular posts are practical and transactional, such as information about employment, scholarships, funding opportunities and visa applications. The US Embassy in Mexico, for example, published a series of videos outlining the procedures for various visa classes. The Australian Consulate in Hong Kong published a sequence of posts targeting Australian citizens in the lead-up to the 2016 Australian federal election with information about how to vote, and—taking advantage of Facebook's potential to target specific audiences—paid to promote them.

Posts announcing employment opportunities at the embassy or consulate for locally engaged staff are consistently among the most popular, especially in small and developing countries. These posts can serve as more than mere job ads. One such post, on the American Facebook page in Iraq, prompted an enquiry via the comment feed from a potential applicant who feared he might be too old to apply. The American page administrator replied, assuring this applicant that his application would be welcome and reiterating American policies against age-based discrimination in a way that promoted US values and demonstrated respect for an older Iraqi man, which in return inspired several positive comments in the thread.

Other popular outward-facing promotional posts include commemorations on significant memorial days and on the occasion of tragedies such as natural disasters. Noting these days of significance on Facebook should out of respect be considered obligatory, as they largely appear to be. Posts announcing support in the aftermath of disasters are often very well received (as indicated by numbers of shares and supportive comments) and suggest that Facebook can have a useful role in promoting aid and relief efforts. For example, the Australian Embassy in Fiji posted about assistance efforts after

Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016; those posts had engagement figures in the thousands (the mean engagement figure for 2016 was 29).[6]

Facebook posts promoting military activity elicited significant support in other contexts. US Facebook posts in support of Iraqi soldiers serving as part of the American-led coalition against Daesh, for example, were widely shared and commented on, almost entirely positively.

How important are ambassadors and consuls-general as proponents of outward-facing publicity? The research suggests that they're significant assets where they're personable and relatable and embrace the community and nation where they're posted.

Speaking the local language, either proficiently or with evident effort, is a major asset. While most posts are typically published in the local language (often as well as in English), publishing videos of heads of mission speaking the language seems to have additional audience appeal. One of the few Australian Facebook pages that increased its levels of engagement from 2016 to 2017 was that of the Embassy in Paris. Australia's Ambassador to France, Brendan Berne, a fluent French speaker, features in a number of posted videos, including media appearances and official speeches.

In one popular video post, Ambassador Berne introduced changes in Australian law to legalise same-sex marriage and then popped the question to his unsuspecting partner, Thomas.[7] This was acknowledged as unorthodox but was a calculated risk that paid off, increasing the profile of the Ambassador and thereby providing him with further platforms, including popular mainstream broadcast media, on which to promote the bilateral relationship.

Former US Consul-General in Hong Kong, Clifford Hart, exemplified how the personal can empower public diplomacy, to the extent that he was known as Clifford Baby (or 'Clifford BB').[8] His very popular farewell video post featured Hart reflecting in Cantonese on his favourite places and dishes in Hong Kong. The video also uses catchphrases from Stephen Chow (an iconic actor in Hong Kong), which, while meaningless for those unfamiliar with his work, carried immense appeal for Hong Kongers.

2. Inward-facing publicity

Inward-facing publicity is related to outward-facing publicity but has an internal focus by appealing to smaller audiences—perhaps the local diplomatic or government community or to (even more internal) colleagues in Barton, Foggy Bottom or Whitehall.

This content frequently features a staged, formulaic photo of 'distinguished guests' at an official event. Anecdotally, it's been made clear to me on a number of occasions that this type of content is regarded as important, to the extent that hours can be spent on its production—the text carefully parsed and often escalated up the chain for approvals.

Although these events have limited appeal, they have a specific value that isn't evident in their typically low engagement metrics.[9] They're important for those people featured in the photo and at the event as a record and an acknowledgement of their participation, and for indicating their status by highlighting their access, but the limited broader appeal of the posts suggests that the resources devoted to them should be minimised.

Other types of posts are evidently not (or poorly) targeted at a broader local public. These posts are characterised by the negligible use of local language or cultural connections and an overt emphasis on topics and themes that are of minimal interest to local target populations and more aligned to internal or specialised interests.

Common examples include key messages from governments about matters that are perhaps of global significance and represent core national values or positions on international matters (such as an opinion on certain environmental or human rights issues) but do not, according to the engagement data, resonate locally. These types of posts do no harm and are probably useful as records of, and advocacy for, important international issues. However, if they're resource intensive, they present a poor return on investment.

One example of content that's, probably inadvertently, inward-facing is a series of podcasts produced by the Australian Embassy in South Korea using the time of very senior diplomatic officials and promoted on the Embassy's Facebook page. The podcasts featured interviews in English with significant Australians, including senior government figures. The low engagement metrics on Facebook (and the modest listening figures via Soundcloud) are unsurprising: in a saturated media market it's difficult to imagine the appeal of podcasts in English featuring guests who (although esteemed and accomplished) are of marginal interest to a Korean audience.

The podcasts weren't an evidently effective way of engaging with a Korean audience and, after 28 episodes over 18 months, were concluded at the end of 2017. While here it's characterised as unsuccessful, creativity and bravery in public diplomacy should be supported. The idea of using podcasts is one that has value and could be adopted elsewhere, perhaps targeting specific audiences such as potential international students or investors and promoted via a more professionally oriented platform, such as LinkedIn. The South Korean experiment has the obvious lesson that such efforts can be made more likely to have impact if they're planned to connect to and target local audiences as well as conveying Australian views and expertise.

Analysis for this report reveals that both outward- and inward-facing publicity posts by DFAT and Defence vary greatly in the engagement rates they enjoy. It's difficult to see a pattern, and most successful posts are probably a result of good luck, good management and additional localised idiosyncrasies. But the general sense is that audiences largely pay attention to content that's useful and relevant for them, not necessarily what's most important to the authors of the content.

3. Engagement

Engagement posts are far less common than publicity posts. This is a bit surprising, as social media has been lauded as a site for interaction, discussion and debate and for making connections. Some recent scholarship has concluded that diplomats aren't taking advantage of this potential due to ingrained, institutionalised resistance, based on norms for information control and risk aversion.[10] As a probable factor, this report outlines another entrenched problem: Facebook, due to its algorithmic factors that prefer close ties or paid promotion, isn't often a very good platform for two-way engagement.

There are, however, some excellent examples of how Facebook has been used by Australian diplomats to facilitate a limited yet effective type of engagement through photo competitions. One, in Timor-Leste, invited photographs that characterised and shared affection for that country, thereby demonstrating 'relational empathy'.[11] Another, in the Australian Office in Taipei, invited Taiwanese in Australia to submit photographs of their travels and experiences, resulting in Taiwanese participating in a kind of networked conversation with other Taiwanese about their positive experiences in Australia, via an Australian diplomatic Facebook page. These types of photo-based campaigns could be replicated elsewhere.

Both of these competitions take advantage of a key function of social media—the ability to share images and tag friends—to increase the reach of their content. This turns Facebook users into micro-influencers, quite powerful at a smaller scale, distributing and personally endorsing content in their networks. An obvious advantage is that the content is provided and driven by users, not government officials. The fact that the content providers are from the local community also makes the content itself likely to have local references and appeal.

4. The audience, themselves

The last type of content present on these Facebook pages isn't authored by the account holders (the diplomats) but by the Facebook users themselves. Usually, this appears in the comments, which can easily veer off onto (some malicious but some benign, even useful) tangents. The US Embassy in Mexico, for example, posts information about visa applications that can prompt reams of comments that ask for advice about people's precise circumstances. Many of the requests are responded to by other Facebook users, who are able to offer specific advice.

Examples like this underscore the key lesson about Facebook for public diplomacy: social media users are often active audiences and participants who make choices about what content they respond to and how they respond to it based upon how relevant, useful and appealing they find it. This fundamental conclusion is a core lesson for DFAT and similar agencies.

Engagement—by the numbers

Ranking nations according to metrics fuels the spurious idea that those nations might be in competition with each other for attention in the digital space. Instead, it's evident that diplomacy *per se* is in competition with the practically limitless amount of material published from all manner of sources, much of it antithetical to the aim of international amity, and all diplomats could benefit by learning from each other's experiences. Instead of treating them as a measure of success, engagement metrics can be useful means of approximating audience size and attention.

On average, the data (in Figures 1–4) indicates that the Facebook audience for the 23 US official diplomatic accounts reviewed is far larger than others, but is also relatively passive. In comparison, Australia's audience is comparatively more active and engaged. But we should note that all the figures below are global averages, varying considerably by location (again suggesting that a global ranking is unhelpful). The variations between the locations (see Table 1) contain important insights about what types of useful content, and which audiences are more active and engaged, are consequently more valuable.

All the following data is based on the Facebook pages of official diplomatic posts (embassies, consulates and similar offices).[12] They're typically managed by diplomatic staff who are often not public diplomacy specialists and are usually on a 3–4 year posting, usually with considerable input by locally engaged staff.

Figure 1 is based on the numbers of page likes (people who have 'liked' a Facebook page) in the host country where an embassy or consulate is located. Figures 2–4 are based on the levels of engagement (reactions, comments, shares) with the content that those embassies and consulates posted on their Facebook pages.

Figure 1: Facebook page likes, January–February 2018 (total, users located in host country)

Country	Page likes
USA	11,381,688
UK	1,504,497
Canada	1,060,164
Australia	1,003,591
NZ	478,531
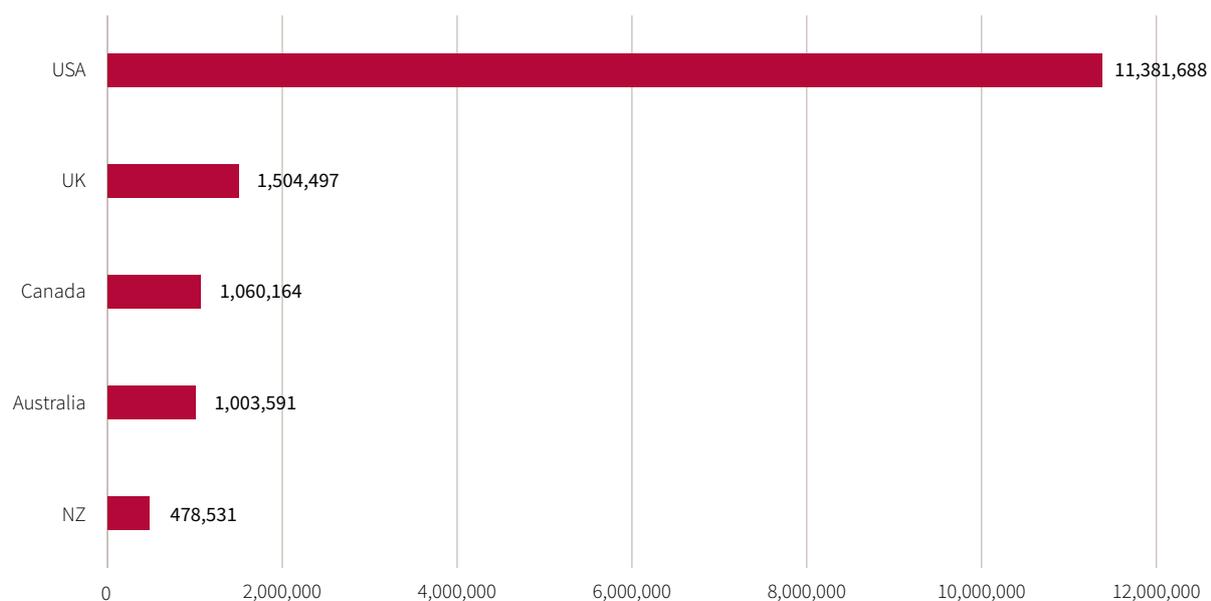
Note: This data is no longer downloadable from Facebook's application programming interface due to restrictions introduced by Facebook in 2019. This is one of the ways Facebook has limited public access to data. For example, until early 2018, it was possible to extract data about the location (based on their Facebook profile) of Facebook page followers, making it feasible to analyse the percentage of followers who were located in the host country (that's the figure used here) or who were located elsewhere, either based in the home country (probably mostly expats) or in a third country. This includes followers who are suspected to be bogus, either paid to follow through click farms or fake accounts attempting to appear real. See D Spry, 'Facebook diplomacy, click farms and finding "friends" in strange places', *The Strategist*, 7 September 2017, online.

Figure 1 is the total for all of the embassies and consulates counted (a list of them is included in Table 1). Figure 2 is the average figure per embassy or consulate.

Figure 2: Average engagement per Facebook page, January–February 2018
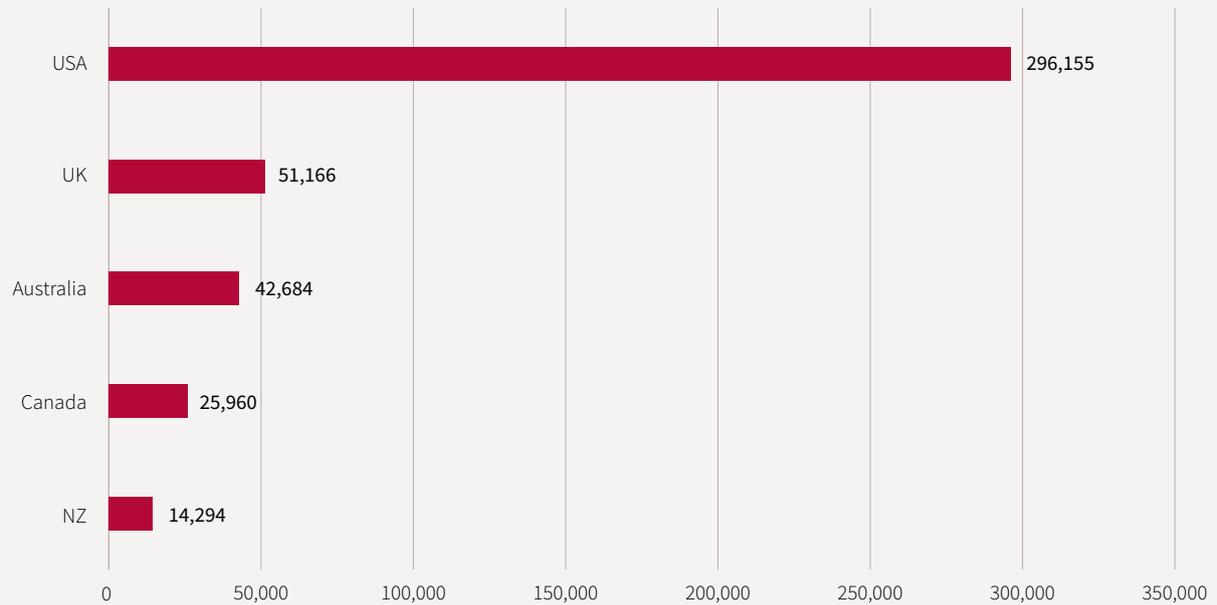
The large number of the US Facebook page likes/followers highlighted above results in a relatively high level of engagements per post but not more engagements per user. In the latter category, Australia leads; the US runs last.

Figure 3: Average engagement per Facebook post, January–February 2018

Figure 4: Average engagement per Facebook user, January–February 2018

Country	Value
Australia	1.46
NZ	1.44
UK	1.25
Canada	1.09
US	0.82

Table 1 shows Facebook reach (the percentage of a country's total Facebook users who are following an embassy or consulate Facebook page) for 23 countries. As per Figure 1 (and see endnote 11), these figures include only those Facebook users who are located (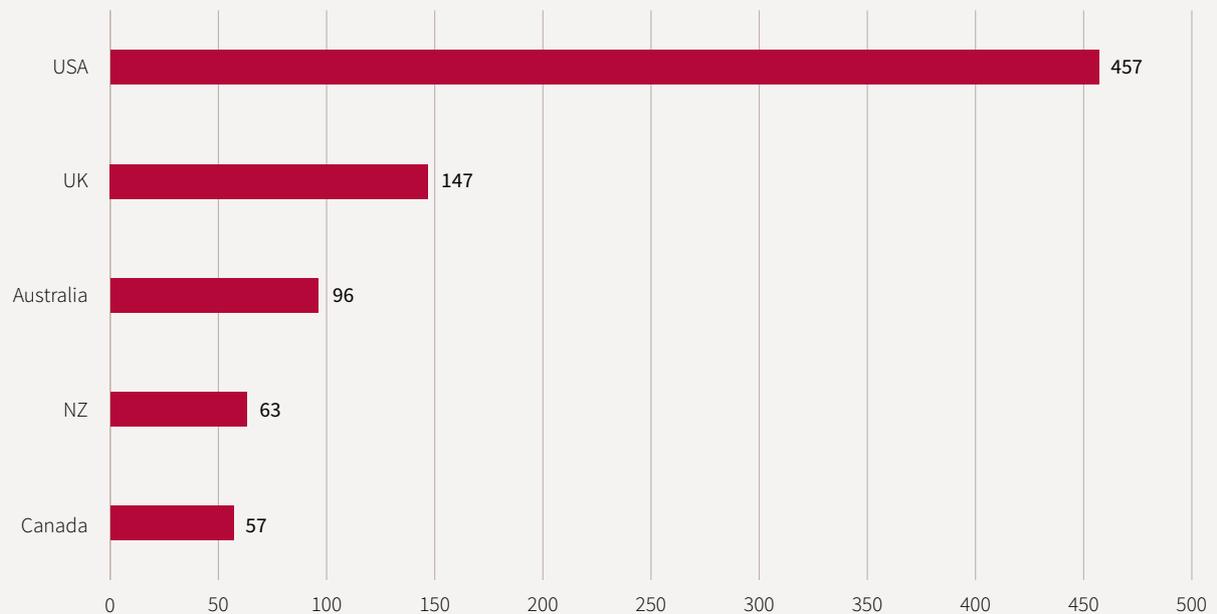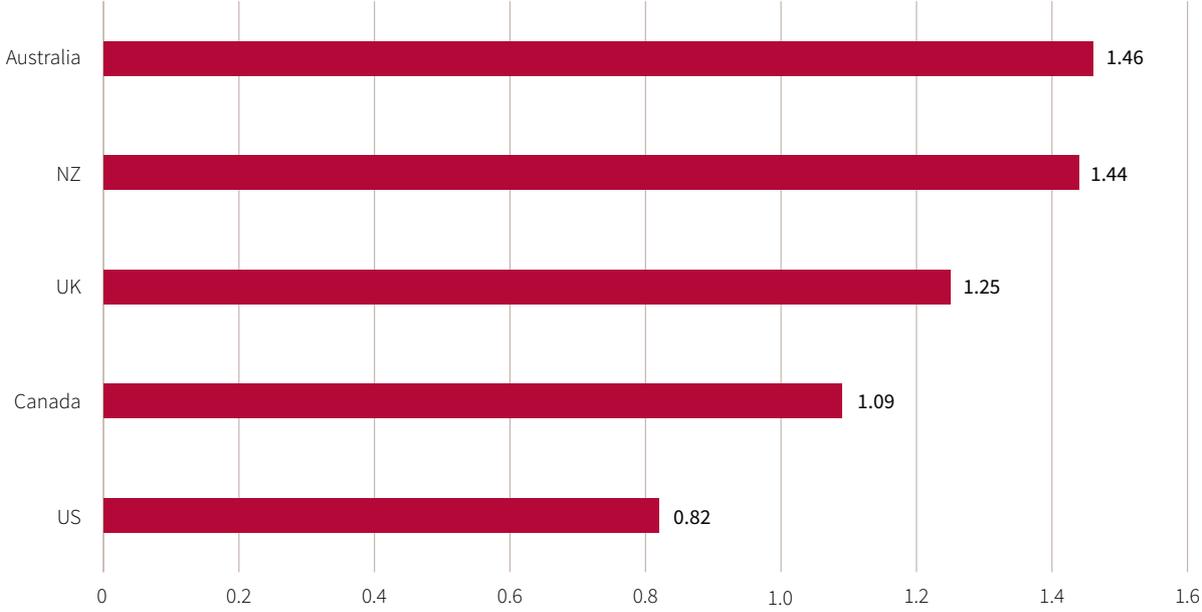according to their profile) in the country where the embassy or consulate is based (for example, followers of the Australian Embassy in Dili who are based in Timor-Leste). The figures in Table 1 are the average figures for the five nations and can vary considerably. For example, for Timor-Leste the average for all five embassies is 10.495% but for Australia it's considerably higher (approximately 35% when last checked; this is one of the few embassy Facebook pages that demonstrates significant growth).

Table 1 also demonstrates the correlations between Facebook reach and per capita GDP, population size and median age (see the appendix for the methodology). Also, countries that are closer or more strategically intertwined are more likely to follow embassy and consulate Facebook pages (for Australia, Timor-Leste; for the US, Mexico and Iraq). An important finding of this research for Australian officials is that Facebook appears to be more useful for public diplomacy in developing countries that are small, young and geographically close to Australia.

Table 1: Facebook reach across 23 countries via a selection of indicators

Location	Facebook reach %	per capita GDP (nom.)	Population (million)	Age (median)
Timor-Leste	10.495	$1,405	1.25	18.9
Papua New Guinea	5.363	$2,500	8.08	23.1
Cambodia	4.440	$1,270	15.58	25.3
Iraq	2.797	$4,610	37.20	20.0
Fiji	2.240	$4,234	0.89	28.9
Myanmar	1.906	$1,196	53.90	28.2
Egypt	0.536	$3,478	91.51	23.9
Mexico	0.300	$8,209	127.02	28.3
Israel	0.207	$37,783	8.38	29.9
Indonesia	0.204	$3,570	257.56	30.2
Hong Kong	0.185	$43,681	7.90	44.4
India	0.162	$1,709	1,311.05	27.9
Brazil	0.152	$8,650	207.85	32.0
Taiwan	0.134	$24,226	23.41	40.7
New Zealand	0.102	$39,416	4.56	37.9
Turkey	0.079	$10,863	78.67	30.9
Japan	0.072	$36,176	126.96	47.3
South Korea	0.035	$27,539	50.62	41.8
France	0.030	$36,855	66.81	41.4
Germany	0.030	$42,070	81.41	47.1
United States	0.022	$57,638	321.42	38.1
Australia	0.026	$49,928	23.78	38.7
United Kingdom	0.014	$40,341	65.14	40.5
Canada	0.014	$42,158	35.85	42.2
Key	>1.0%	low-middle income	<10 m	18–30
	0.1–1.0%	high-middle income	10 m – 100 m	30–40
	<0.1%	high income	> 100 m	40+

The metrics vary by orders of magnitude: in Timor-Leste (on average) a Facebook page will be followed by about 10% of the population who have Facebook accounts; in Myanmar, it's about 2%; in Taiwan and New Zealand, it's about 1 in 1,000; in the UK and Canada, it's about 1 in 10,000. In other words, on average, a Facebook page in Timor-Leste is close to a thousand times more likely to have a local follower than one in the UK or Canada.

For Australian diplomatic posts, the contrast is even starker: in Timor-Leste, around 26% of the local Facebook population follow the Facebook page of the Australian Embassy in Dili; the equivalent in the UK is 0.01%; in Canada, 0.005%. Australia's Facebook page in Timor-Leste is around 5,000 times more likely to have a local follower than in Canada.

The temptation is to see this as a measure of the performance of Australia's staff in Dili, Ottawa and London. That temptation should be resisted—there are, as Table 1 suggests, demographic factors (age, size, wealth) to consider when seeking reasons for the large variations in Facebook reach.

These demographic correlations suggest that Facebook diplomacy's 'success' (or, I would suggest, 'relevance') isn't necessarily the result of the public diplomacy staff's skills and endeavours but more likely a product of external factors: the popularity of Facebook as a means of accessing information among younger populations; a lack of competing sources of information in smaller countries (with smaller media industries); and the funnelling of users onto the Facebook platform in those countries (including Timor-Leste and Cambodia) where Facebook's Free Basics service provides free but limited internet access.

This implies that, while a Facebook page may be an effective, even a primary, public diplomacy tool in some places, it won't always be in others: therefore, resources and strategy can be adjusted accordingly. For example, it suggests that the Australian embassies in Dili, Port Moresby and other high-ranking Facebook locations should be supported and encouraged to use Facebook (as they appear to be successfully doing). The high commissions in London, Ottawa and similar locations should maintain a presence but not prioritise Facebook as a means of public diplomacy, as it isn't an efficient communication channel.

Limitations of using Facebook for diplomacy

However, if these numbers look small enough to question the point of having a Facebook page in some locations at all, it gets worse: average posts prompt engagement from between 1 in 100 and 1 in 1,000 followers. This means that in the UK, for example, the reaction rate is about 1 in 1 million active Facebook users. While reaction rates don't equate to reach (reach figures aren't obtainable), they're indicative of attention and interest, and also contribute to the organic (non-paid) spread of the content.

This is likely to get worse. Changes to the Facebook algorithm since 2014 have made it more difficult to reach large audiences unless content is promoted through paid boosts. This is reflected in the engagement metrics falling or flattening year-on-year in most locations, with a few exceptions.

Therefore, the argument for an active Facebook page shouldn't rest on the average engagement metrics alone. Facebook posts, as long as they're prepared using minimal resources, are low risk,

low investment and usually low reward. But some posts are quite valuable, even in locations where there's usually little engagement, potentially serving as an economical means to exert influence with small, but repeated, effects. An examination of the types of posts and the levels of engagement they receive offers some insights.

Defence's use of social media

A review of available defence organisations' policies and associated commentary outlines three general areas of social media use:

1. personal use by personnel, whether or not on deployment or active duty, and their families

2. professional use by personnel in matters relating to their employment, such as networking and communication for the purposes of professional development and knowledge sharing

3. official use by personnel acting as representatives of the defence force and in pursuit of the defence force's aims.

The first type—personal use—prompts concern among military forces for its potential to endanger military personnel and operations, or to damage the reputation of defence organisations. Those risks aren't confined to official Facebook pages and are as likely to occur elsewhere; infringements are already covered under existing policies (such as preventing harassment and promoting operational and personal security). Posting on social media may bring infractions to light, meaning that they can be addressed, but also increases the risk of exposing the offending content to a wider audience before it can be deleted and the infraction contained.

The UK and US defence forces are especially active in promoting responsible social media use, including by publishing guidelines for personnel.

These concerns are counterbalanced by the capacity for social media to act as a means for military families and friends to stay in touch with loved ones while they're on deployment. Also, as some American studies suggest, social media are especially beneficial for military spouses who form support networks based on their shared experiences and concerns.[13]

The second type of use—professional but unofficial use—is evidenced in limited ways on Facebook. One example is the Facebook page for *The Cove*,[14] a website set up for the purposes of promoting research for military professionals.

The third type, official use, is the focus of this report. The defence forces of the Five Eyes nations all operate numerous Facebook pages. In the case of the US, each branch of the armed services has at least hundreds (US Air Force), if not thousands (US Army), of Facebook pages.[15] The pages representing each of the main branches have millions of followers, while pages at the level of operational units (regiments, battalions and the like) vary in size accordingly.

Unsurprisingly, the Facebook pages of the branches of the US military have followers (page likes) an order of magnitude larger than in other nations (Figure 5).

Figure 5: US main military Facebook page likes, March 2018

US Marines	3,444,787
US Air Force	2,724,197
US Navy	3,074,855
US Army	4,707,055
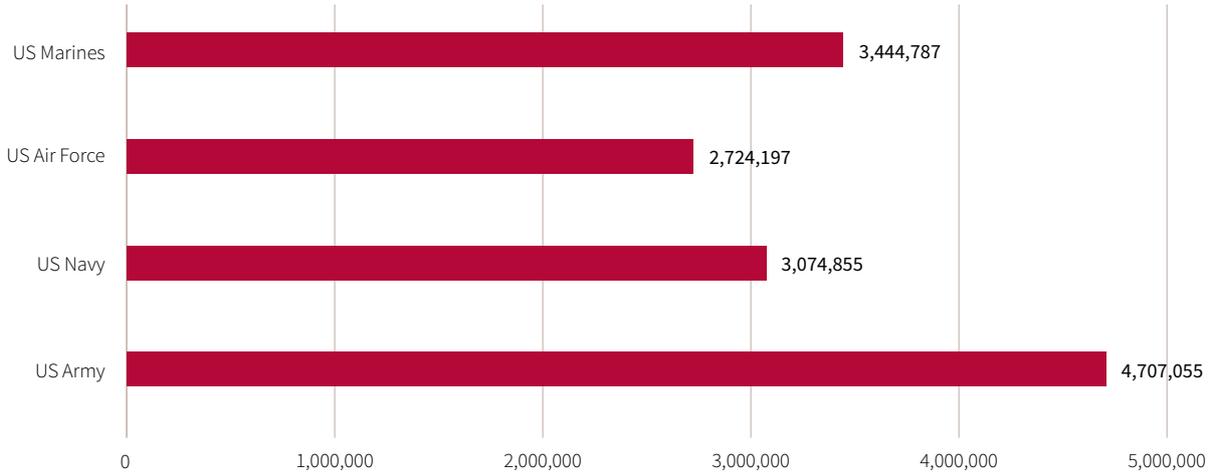
The militaries of the others have comparable numbers of page followers, but the British Army has a significantly larger cohort than the others (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Main military Facebook page likes, non-US, March 2018

UK Royal Air Force	641,697
UK Royal Navy	597,725
British Army	1,637,110
NZ Defence Force	97,207
Royal NZ Navy	73,682
Royal NZ Army	49,740
Canadian Armed Forces	240,172
Royal Canadian Air Force	252,528
Royal Canadian Navy	11,433
Canadian Army	229,987
Defence Australia	50,762
Royal Australian Air Force	281,581
Royal Australian Navy	121,168
Australian Army	360,513
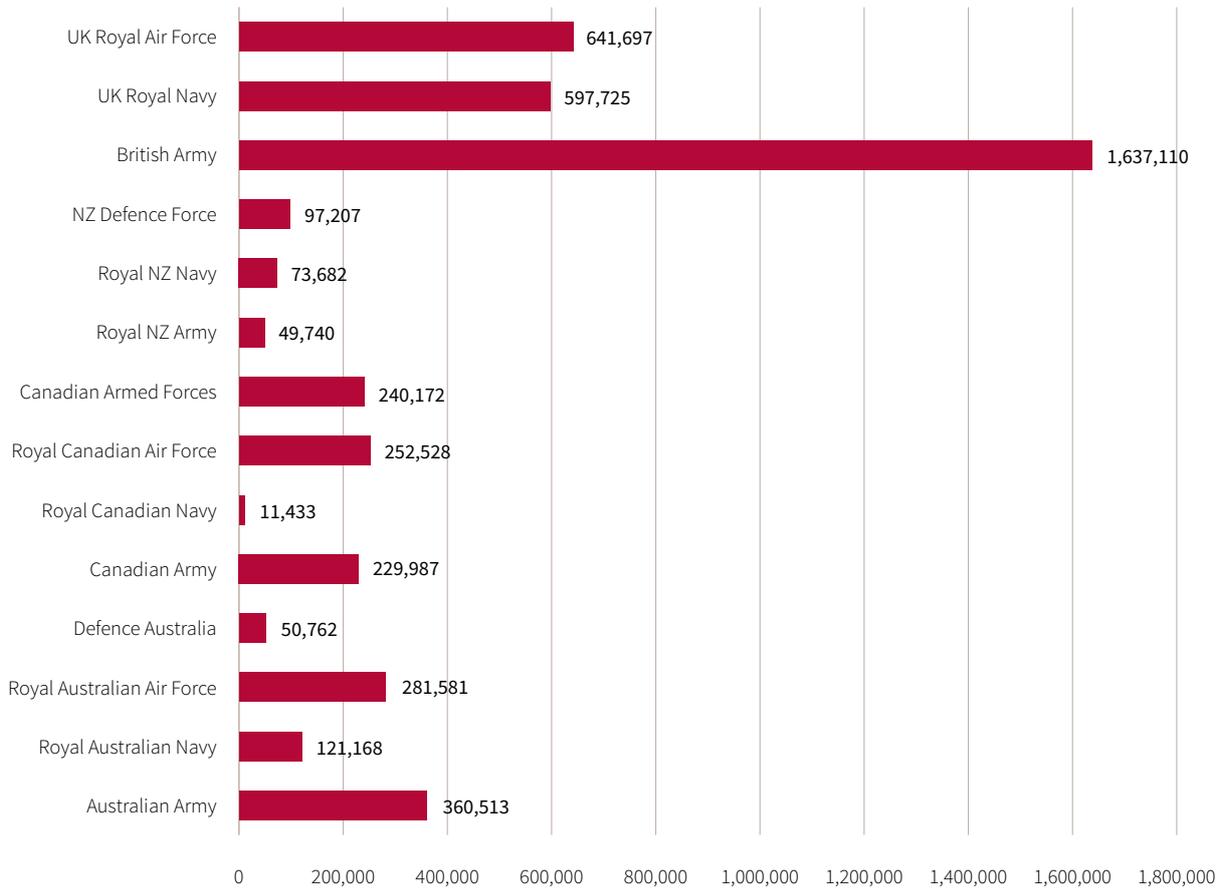
Quantitative analysis of the defence forces' Facebook pages indicates that they receive considerably more attention and engagement than their diplomatic counterparts. The average Australian diplomatic Facebook page is followed by about 0.02% of the Facebook population in the host country (the notable exceptions are Timor-Leste, 26%, and Papua New Guinea, 7%). The larger defence force pages are followed by a larger portion of the Australian Facebook population: Defence Jobs Australia (3.3%) and the Australian Army (2.4%).

The raw numbers are similarly stark. Defence Jobs Australia has close to half a million followers, the Australian Army more than 360,000, the RAAF more than 280,000 and the RAN more than 120,000. Those numbers increase daily.

The combined figure of the page likes of the ADF Facebook pages analysed for this report is 1.45 million, or close to 10% of the Australian Facebook population (although of course many Facebook users can follow multiple pages and some may come from overseas).

In comparison, major news programs have about 1.5–2 million Facebook followers, and the *ABC News* Facebook page has close to 4 million. News and magazine pages are the leading Facebook pages for engagement, averaging about 100,000 engagements per page per week; Defence pages averaged 45,000 in total. The Australian Army page alone received 12,500 engagements on average per week— comparable to the music industry average and above education, department stores and politics.[16]

Other nations' pages are similarly popular. These figures suggest that Facebook is valuable for defence forces as a means of communicating to their publics. They also suggest that those publics are paying attention to these pages.

Why? Partly, the answer lies in the content posted on the pages and the ways that publics engage with it. Defence department Facebook pages differ from their diplomatic counterparts in important ways—chief among them is the nature of their audiences, which appear more domestic and more closely engaged. Partly, this arises out of the large numbers of current and former personnel and their friends and families. Also, in many democracies, publics have greater levels of emotional connection— trust,[17] nostalgia, admiration—with militaries than with other parts of government (including foreign affairs agencies).

Official use of these Facebook pages includes a number of related functions. The main ones are:

1. publicity, firstly in the sense of promoting the defence force's values, achievements and legacies, as well as information for potential recruits, and secondly in the sense of maintaining the openness and transparency that (within the parameters of operational and personal security) are expected from defence forces of democratic nations

2. information sharing with the defence force's broader community of interest, including family and friends of serving personnel and veterans as well as other stakeholders (such as people residing near bases or training areas), and including sharing details about exercises and deployments

3. commemorations, including notifications and memorials for service personnel who have died on deployment or exercises, celebrations and thanks for retiring senior service personnel, and days of significance, either national (such as Anzac Day) or specific to the defence force.

This report's analysis suggests that Facebook performs each of those functions usefully and in ways other forms of media would find difficult. User engagement varies considerably across the Facebook pages analysed. Some general observations include the following:

• Levels of engagement are generally higher than for public diplomacy pages. In particular, defence content is shared more and attracts more comments.

- Content on smaller Facebook pages (such as regiment, brigade or group pages) has a higher level of engagement per capita, suggesting a smaller but more engaged user community.

- Comments appear to be positive and supportive: they express admiration for defence personnel, thanks for service (especially for those who died on duty), patriotism and nostalgia.

- Military hardware in use has considerable appeal—cinematographic and otherwise.

- Defence forces are highly regarded for their service (the 'trust factor') as well as their embodiment of national identity.

- Members of defence forces, and their families and loved ones, use defence Facebook pages to express and share emotions, including, commonly, pride and admiration.

Some important posts—including notices about mental health—attract less engagement because those topics are sensitive and Facebook is public. This is an example of how Facebook users are conscious of their online personas and tend to portray themselves cautiously. It isn't an argument against the value of those posts, which are useful opportunities for defence forces to raise awareness of important issues and available support services.

In action and in memoriam: ADF pages

The ADF Facebook pages attracting the highest engagement fall into two main categories: accounts of activities undertaken by ADF personnel (including community undertakings, training, exercises, deployments and military action) and commemorations of days of significance, the loss of military lives, or both.

The most important commemorative day on the Australian calendar, Anzac Day, is also the dominant topic on Defence Facebook pages, appearing in the top five most engaged posts of all the larger pages. An exception is the Chief of the Defence Force's Facebook page, where the most popular posts are those commemorating the return to Australia of fallen Vietnam War veterans and the 20th anniversary of the loss of 18 Army personnel during a Black Hawk helicopter collision in 1996.

On the smaller, unit-level Facebook pages, in addition to Anzac Day, popular posts commemorate important battles in the history of the unit, such as Long Tan in the Vietnam War and Kapyong in the Korean War. Other popular Facebook posts noted Australia Day, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day and Christmas, sometimes connecting them to personnel currently serving overseas.

The popularity of commemorative posts suggests that Facebook facilitates support for ADF personnel and traditions in a public, shareable forum. Anzac Day's popularity among the larger Facebook pages implies that those pages enjoy widespread popularity, whereas attention to unit-specific commemorations in the smaller pages indicates their importance to those with closer ties to those units, including veterans and their families.

Some posts feature videos of ADF personnel using impressive military equipment. These have evident appeal for military aficionados and, according to the Defence Jobs Australia Facebook page metrics, for potential recruits.

Another popular type of post outlines current actions taken by the ADF. Examples of this type include HMAS *Darwin's* seizure, under UN sanctions, of illicit weapons heading to Somalia; assistance provided by HMAS *Canberra* to Fiji following Cyclone Winston; and Operation OKRA: Strike Vision, involving F/A-18A Hornets destroying facilities operated by Daesh in central Iraq.

Other examples of popular Facebook pages featuring the ADF in action include graduations (the Australian Defence Force Academy), promotions and—especially at the unit level—posts showing personnel assisting local communities and charities.

Five-Eyes defence forces

Commemorations and actions are top posts in other defence forces' Facebook pages. The US defence forces' pages, in particular, are notable for their popular displays of military hardware as well as being sites of public, patriotic support for troops.

The most popular post on the US Army Facebook page, on the anniversary on the 6 June 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy, exemplifies this combination of patriotism and military memorialisation. The comments on this post further indicate the commemoration's personal significance for veterans' families.

These US Facebook pages demonstrate the significance of the military services and suggest how deeply they're embedded in American culture, in family histories, national identity and popular culture. Popular UK posts similarly suggest the link between military service, family legacies, history and nationalism—in this case sometimes represented by the British royal family.

Although similar themes are evident in all defence force Facebook pages, some examples of popular content from UK, Canadian and New Zealand pages offer small but significant contrasts with Australian pages.

For example, a New Zealand Defence Force video of a ceremony at the Menin Gate memorial in Ypres, Belgium, featuring personnel performing the haka was shared more than 30,000 times,[18] and the most popular New Zealand Navy Facebook post was a link to a news report on the first sailor to get a moko (a full-face traditional Maori tattoo; Figure 7).[19] The popularity of these posts reflects support for Maori culture as an intrinsic and valued part of New Zealand and its defence forces.

Figure 7: New Zealand Defence Force personnel perform a haka at Menin Gate, Belgium
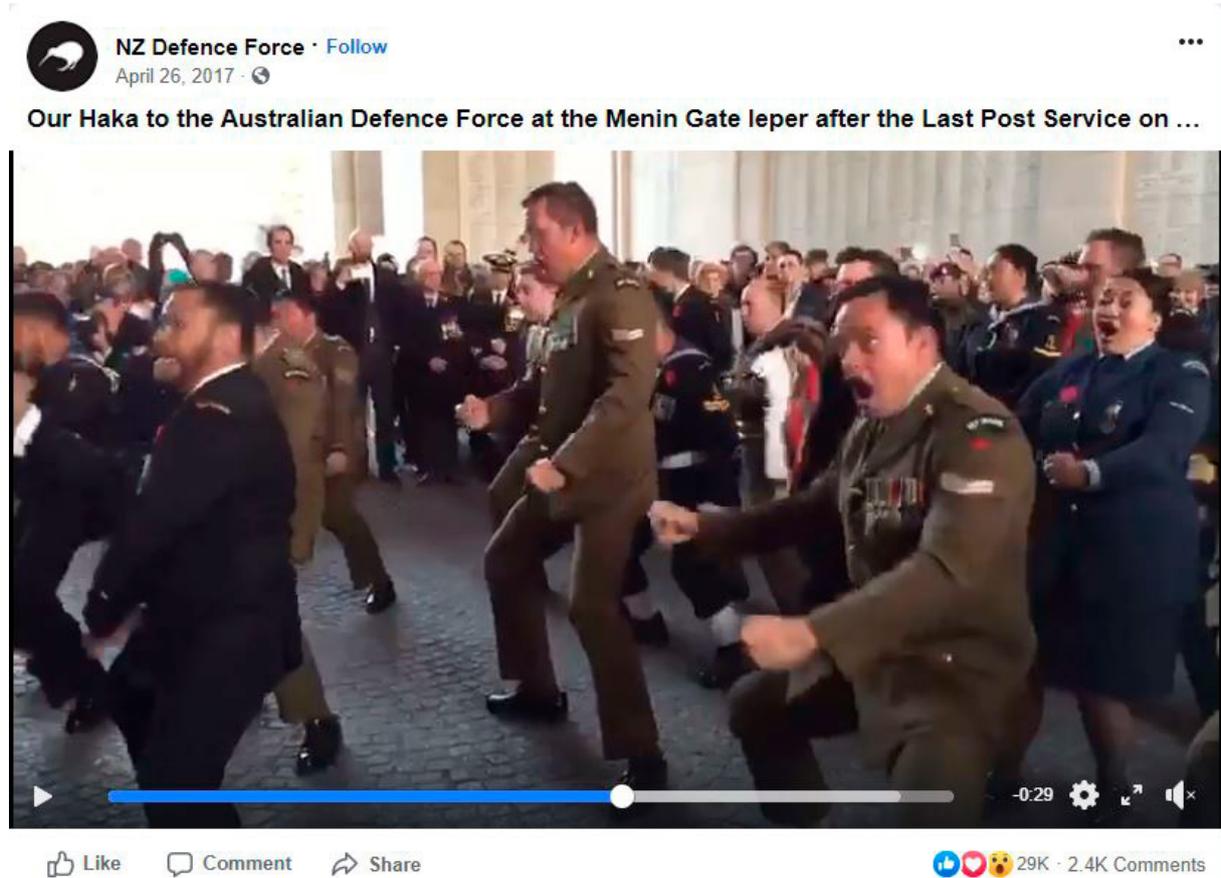
Source: NZ Defence Force, 'Our haka to the Australian Defence Force at the Menin Gate Ieper after the Last Post Service on Anzac Day', *Facebook*, 25 April 2017, online.

Popular Canadian Facebook posts also showcase diversity and personality. The Canadian Army's most popular post pays tribute to an indigenous veteran, Sergeant Francis Pegahmagabow of Wasauksing First Nation, a highly decorated World War I scout and sniper.[20] Other popular content includes videos of deployed personnel in a snowball fight in Poland,[21] a light-sabre fight marking Star Wars Day (#MayTheFourthBeWithYou),[22] a warning against venturing onto military property while chasing Pokémon[23] (see cover image) and personnel wearing red stilettos to support domestic violence survivors (Figure 8).[24]
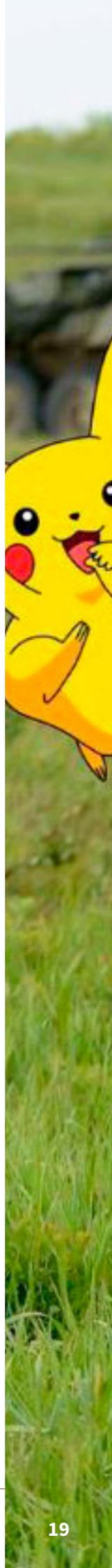
Figure 8: Members of 3rd Canadian Division taking part in the #WalkaMileInHerShoes fundraiser in downtown Edmonton

Source: 3rd Canadian Division, 'Members of 3rd Canadian Division are taking part in the #WalkaMileInHerShoes fundraiser in downtown Edmonton', *Facebook*, 21 September 2017, online.

Defence recruitment

The relative popularity of defence recruitment sites indicates the value of Facebook for promoting military careers. This use of Facebook differs from the pages of the main defence force branches or at unit level, as it's more akin to advertising and promotion and less like a community site: more bulletin board than discussion boards. It's likely that many of these posts have been promoted through paid boosts and advertising, which is a common and reasonable use of marketing budgets (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Defence force recruitment page likes, March 2018
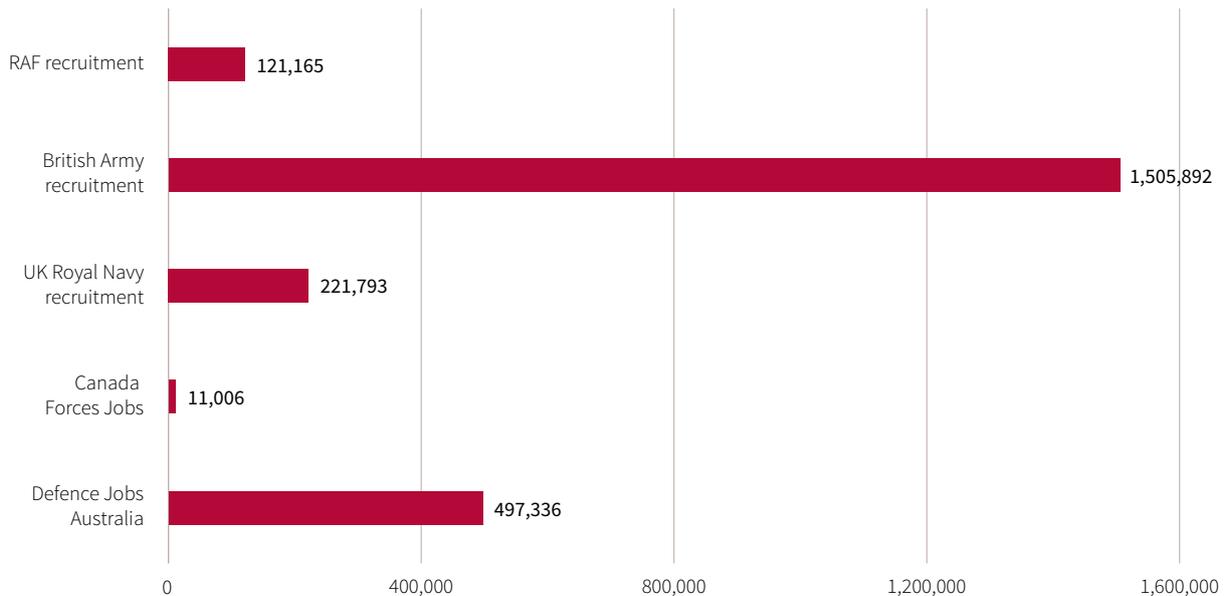
Generally, the recruitment pages' content appears to have similar appeal to the main pages. For example, the most popular posts on the Defence Force Australia page are a 360-degree view of a boat drop from the amphibious ship HMAS *Canberra* (the second most popular post on Australian defence Facebook pages) and Anzac Day 2016.

The recruitment Facebook pages are also notable for the high number of posts by Facebook users. Between 20% and 30% of the posts on the Defence Force Australia, RAF and UK Royal Navy recruitment Facebook pages are by users. Many of these user posts are genuine requests about positions and recruitment procedures.

Defence social media policy and strategy

The ADF's social media guidelines, policies and strategy documents are not public. The last publicly available external review of Defence's use of social media was released in 2011.

This aversion to publicness and openness contrasts with the position of DFAT, which has published its public diplomacy[25] and digital media strategies[26], as well as the defence force of Canada, which has published its social media strategy,[27] the defence force of the UK, which has published social media guidelines,[28] and the various US forces, which have each published numerous policy and guideline documents.[29]

The Canadian social media guidelines go so far as to promote transparency and accountability as 'principles of participation', aimed at meeting community standards of trust and confidence. It's unclear why the ADF doesn't operate on similar principles.

Conclusion and recommendations

Facebook pages provide opportunities for defence forces to communicate to publics and, at least as importantly, for publics to express their gratitude, admiration and affection to defence forces.

In contrast, diplomatic Facebook pages are targeted at, and receive attention from, foreign publics. Compared to defence, diplomatic Facebook pages receive far less attention, but the levels of attention vary. Specifically, in countries that are smaller, younger, poorer and closer (such as Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea), Facebook is, based on the data, an important means to inform—and engage with—general publics. Communications strategy should therefore prioritise Facebook in those countries by training personnel, allocating funds to content production and paying heed to the levels and nature of engagement by publics. Elsewhere, such as in Canada and the UK, Facebook is far less important and should be deprioritised in, but not eliminated from, public diplomacy strategies.

The strengths and limitations of Facebook's usefulness are determined by its algorithm, which prioritises audiences' pre-existing connections and optimises content that appeals to their needs and desires. It's essential therefore that Defence and DFAT prioritise those audiences when determining if, when and how to make use of Facebook.

This report argues for a measured, more strategic use of social media. Specific solutions are as follows.

For diplomacy

1. Review the digital media strategy to account for the location-based variability of Facebook's usefulness and prioritise resources accordingly.

2. Encourage diplomatic missions to develop, implement and review localised social media plans using the experience and expertise of locally engaged staff (providing training where required), and redefine the role of Australia-based staff to strategic oversight and governance.

3. Remove the direction for all heads of mission to be active on social media; encourage those who are active on Facebook to use openness, warmth and personality to create relational empathy.

4. Create opportunities for training and sharing the skills and experiences of public diplomacy staff.

For defence

1. Demonstrate and promote transparency and accountability by publishing social media policies.

2. Recognise the value of social media for the Defence community, especially as a means of providing information and support for currently serving personnel and their families, by supporting the use of Facebook for those purposes by all defence units.

3. Continue Defence's impressive work using Facebook as a platform for the community to express support for personnel and veterans, and maintain the dignified, sombre tone of the memorial content.

For diplomacy and defence

1. Consider cross-promoting content. Defence pages reach the large national audience that diplomacy increasingly needs. Diplomatic Facebook pages—in some locations—provide opportunities for the ADF to promote its actions and values to international audiences, acting as a useful vector for strategic communication.

2. Refrain from using engagement metrics as success measures for diplomats; use them as proxies for public attention in order to gauge how the value of Facebook varies according to audience type and location.

3. Prioritise audiences' use of social media when developing strategies, creating content and allocating resources.

Appendix: Methodology

This research focused exclusively on Facebook. While other social network platforms, especially Twitter, are also relevant, they lie outside the scope of this report.

The research used digital media research methods, which made it possible to gather and analyse large amounts of data indicating Facebook users' engagement with online content, including which posts received more than average attention, through the examination of Facebook engagement metrics (likes, comments and shares).

This enabled analysis of Facebook users' interests based on either the content (what types of posts receive the most attention) or the users (who was engaging with content). In turn, this suggested how social media are used and therefore how they can be useful.

The analysis of Facebook use for diplomatic purposes is based on 2016–17 data extracted from Facebook pages of the diplomatic missions of eight 'publisher' nations (the five that are the subject of this report, as well as India, Israel and Japan) in 23 'host' nations.[30] Restrictions imposed by Facebook in 2019 (and before 2018 data was extracted) mean this form of research isn't currently replicable. The database used in this research is therefore unique; it's available from the author.

Unlike the defence Facebook pages, the data for the diplomatic pages includes the location of those Facebook users who have followed the Facebook pages of the diplomatic mission. Again, this feature is no longer possible due to restrictions introduced by Facebook in early 2018, before the defence Facebook pages analysis was undertaken .

This report is based on data that accesses the Facebook application programming interface and obtains Facebook post and comment content (text, and links to images and video), as well as engagement data (reactions, including likes, comments, and shares). Analysis followed a two-stage, mixed-methods approach. First, quantitative data analysis identified trends and outliers. Second, identified outliers (such as high-performing pages and posts) were treated as key case studies and their content was considered more closely using methods based on qualitative media studies.

The analysis of the Facebook pages was contextualised and informed by an examination of publicly available policy and strategy documents as well as background discussion with several currently serving or former defence and diplomatic personnel from Australia and elsewhere. An important note: the engagement metrics are not, and shouldn't be, considered as indicators of the 'success' of a particular Facebook page. Instead, they were used here as indicators of attention, and therefore as a means of assessing what content a specific page's audience was more interested in and how it made use of that content.

Notes

1   L Mirani, 'Millions of Facebook users have no idea they're using the internet', *Quartz*, 9 February 2015, online. See also Facebook, 'Where we've launched', online.

2   D Spry, 'Facebook diplomacy: a data-driven, user-focussed approach to Facebook use by diplomatic missions', *Media International Australia,* 168(1):62–80.

3   'The inquiry: How powerful is Facebook's algorithm?', *BBC World Service*, 24 April 2017, online.

4   D Spry, 'From Delhi to Dili: Facebook diplomacy by ministries of foreign affairs in the Asia–Pacific', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 2019, online.

5   US Embassy, New Delhi, *Facebook*, 14 August 2017, online.

6   Australian High Commission, Fiji, *Facebook*, 20 March 2016, online.

7   L'Australie en France, 'Marriage equality—Ambassador's proposal', *Facebook*, 7 December 2017, online.

8   L Tam, 'Interpersonal approaches to relationship building: diplomat as a human agent of public diplomacy', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 2017, online.

9   It's possible that some of these Facebook posts are in part to build an ambassador's personal profile, with one's career in mind. Given that DFAT's digital media strategy encourages heads of mission to be active online, some diplomats may feel pressure to demonstrate that they're following departmental guidelines and meeting expectations. So, it's unreasonable to be excessively critical and, as in the case of Ambassador Berne, it's possible to use personal appeal to promote national values and interests to a broader public.

10   I Manor, 'Are we there yet? Have MFAs realized the potential of digital diplomacy? Results from a cross-national comparison', *Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 2016, 1(2):1–110.

11   Tam, 'Interpersonal approaches to relationship building'.

12   For example, the Australian examples include the Embassy in Jakarta, the High Commission in London, the Consulate in Hong Kong, the Office in Taipei and others as listed in Table 1. All the examples were verified through official sources such as the DFAT (and equivalent) websites. The Facebook pages for the department in question (DFAT, US Department of State etc.) aren't part of this study (they have different audiences and purposes).

13   Michelle D Sherman, Lynne M Borden, Octavia Cheatum, Kyle R Hawkey, Michelle W Kuhl, Amy Majerle, Jessie H Rudi, Burgess Smith, David Steinman, Lara Westerhof, *Social media communication with military spouses*, The Military REACH Team, Research and Outreach (REACH) Laboratory, University of Minnesota, 2015, online.

14   *The Cove*, online.

15   See US Air Force, online; US Navy, online; US Army, online; US Marine Corps, online.

16   'Australia's top Facebook pages revealed', *B&T*, 1 March 2018, online.

17   C Johnson, *Trust in the military exceeds trust in other institutions in Western Europe and US*, Pew Research Centre, 4 September 2018, online.

18   New Zealand Defence Force, 'Our haka to the Australian Defence Force at the Menin Gate Ieper after the Last Post Service on Anzac Day', *Facebook*, 25 April 2017, online.

19   Royal New Zealand Navy, 'Navy welcomes first sailor with moko', *Facebook*, 7 January 2017, online.

20   Canadian Army, '#FactFriday', *Facebook*, 28 May 2016, online.

21   Canadian Armed Forces Operations, 'Op REASSURANCE snowball fight / une bataille de boules de neige', *Facebook*, 5 December 2016, online.

22   Canadian Army, 'On an exercise far, far away', *Facebook*, 4 May 2017, online.

23   Canadian Armed Forces, 'This isn't a safe place for Pikachu, and it's certainly not for you', *Facebook*, 28 July 2016, online.

24   3rd Canadian Division, 'Members of 3rd Canadian Division are taking part in the #WalkaMileInHerShoes fundraiser in downtown Edmonton, *Facebook*, 21 September 2017, online.

25   DFAT, *Public Diplomacy Strategy 2014–16*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2014.

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27   Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, *DND/CF guidelines for the external use of social media*, Canadian Government, Ottawa, 2011.

28   Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force, *Social media is changing the face of defence*, no date, online.

29   US Air Force, *Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 35-1, Public affairs management*; US Air Force, *Air Force social media guide*, 4th edition, 2013; US Department of Defense (US DoD) Public Affairs, *Memorandum for military service public affairs chiefs, US DoD public affairs guidance for official use of social media*, 2016; US Marine Corps (USMC), *The Marines*, no date; USMC, *The social corps: the USMC social media principles*; US Navy Office of Information, *Navy social media handbook*, 2018.

30   Spry, 'Facebook diplomacy: a data-driven, user-focussed approach to Facebook use by diplomatic missions'.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF   Australian Defence Force

DFAT   Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

DoD   Department of Defence

GDP   gross domestic product

RAAF   Royal Australian Air Force

RAF   Royal Australian Navy

UN   United Nations

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