



## Communication post-integration: reloading Australia's efforts

Ashlee Betteridge

### SUMMARY

Since the merger of Australia's independent aid agency, AusAID, into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in late 2013, the Australian aid program has reduced its aid communication efforts, particularly online. This brief will look at why it is important to invest in aid communication, with a focus on web and social media, and how DFAT can do better. It draws on qualitative and quantitative analysis of aid communication on the DFAT website and on Twitter, and compares DFAT's efforts with those of other aid donors.

### KEY POINTS

- Various reviews of Australian aid have reiterated the importance of communicating the successes and results of the aid program to the public, for reasons of accountability and transparency.
- Many public communications efforts were ended after the integration of AusAID into DFAT, and have not been restored.
- Other large aid agencies are making more significant efforts to communicate with their publics about their work through digital media platforms.
- There are numerous straightforward changes that DFAT could make to improve its external communications outputs to better engage and inform the Australian public.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1984 Jackson Review, there have been calls for the aid program to improve how it communicates and engages with the Australian public on its work, and on development issues more broadly.

*"The Committee... believes a significant initiative in the development education field is warranted. In addition, a much greater effort in informing the public about Australia's program is proposed." (1984 Jackson Review, p. 236)*

*"The Committee believes it is not only legitimate for public funds to be used to inform the public about the aid program, but AusAID has a responsibility to do so" (1997 Simons Review, p. 295)*

*"It is worth reiterating that public communication and public engagement are not peripheral add-ons to the aid program. They are an investment in a solid, long-term foundation for it" (2011 aid review, p. 310)*

The Simons Review of 1997 was the first to make a clear recommendation on this front, and dedicated a whole section to discussing it:

*Recommendation 19.1: AusAID should adopt a more open and transparent approach to public information and ensure that its information activities are guided by the object of public accountability.*

This was followed up in the 2006 White Paper, which articulated the need for building public support for aid, communicating the success stories of Australian aid, and improving information activities in recipient countries.

*"During the consultation process for this White Paper, observations were made that, while the Australian aid program was achieving impressive results, AusAID was not maximising the opportunities to capture its achievements and share information with the Australian public, stakeholders and development partners." (p. 73)*

Fast forward to the 2011 independent aid review, where there was a whole chapter on public engagement (Chapter 17) and recommendations to improve digital communications, start a blog, educate, and again do more about sharing the aid program's achievements with the public.

The need for the aid program to communicate with the Australian public about its work has been well communicated over the past thirty or so years. As the 2011 review stated: "The Australian public has a right to know their aid program is making a difference to people's lives".

But the message bears repeating. In 2016, despite constant digital developments that open up new and more cost-effective ways of reaching the public, we have an aid program that does little to share information on its work in a way that is user-friendly and easily consumable for an average Australian.

It is not clear why. The 1997 Simons report, the 2006 White Paper and the 2011 aid review all refute implied arguments that if the aid program actually wrote about its achievements, it would be taking on an aid advocacy role that would sit uncomfortably with its position as a government agency or department. But the real issue at present with Australian aid communications appears to come down to resourcing and priorities.

## COMMUNICATION POST-INTEGRATION

Some of the first casualties of the sudden 2013 integration of AusAID into DFAT were communications staff, particularly those who were integrated within country teams. It showed. As soon as the integration hit, AusAID's rarely updated blog [stopped all together](#). Stories about news on aid projects, international awareness days and so on stopped appearing on the front page of AusAID and then DFAT websites (see Figures 1-3 comparing the former front page of the AusAID website with the current DFAT website). The aid program's [rebranded YouTube account](#) hasn't had a video added in more than two years (DFAT's YouTube account [has had some though](#) – mostly from the volunteer program). The AusAID magazine (Focus) [vanished](#). Its [Flickr account](#) was rebranded, but the flow of illustrative aid project imagery drastically slowed down and it is now only occasionally updated, usually with humanitarian response shots. [AusAID's Twitter account](#), with more than 12,000 followers, was also shut down instead of being renamed, and its Facebook page vanished.

In short, many of the small gains that had resulted from an effort by AusAID to improve its public communications and to better inform Australians about aid and development were frittered away. The [2015 Australian Aid Stakeholder Survey](#) demonstrated that this is not something that has gone unnoticed - stakeholder views on communication and community engagement dropped substantially between the 2013 and 2015 surveys. In 2013, 41 percent of respondents saw communication and community engagement as a great or moderate weakness of the aid program, but by 2015 this number had increased to 69 percent.

And as Danielle Cave [argued last year](#), letting AusAID's social media accounts fall silent was a grave mistake not only for aid communications, but digital diplomacy, [an area where DFAT lags \(but is working to catch up\)](#).

Some may argue that DFAT does communicate. It has a website. The website contains information about the aid program. The website has improved since the period immediately after the integration, when information on aid was nearly impossible to find.



Figure 1: AusAID front page July 2013 – all stories on the front page provide information about aid. Via Wayback Machine.

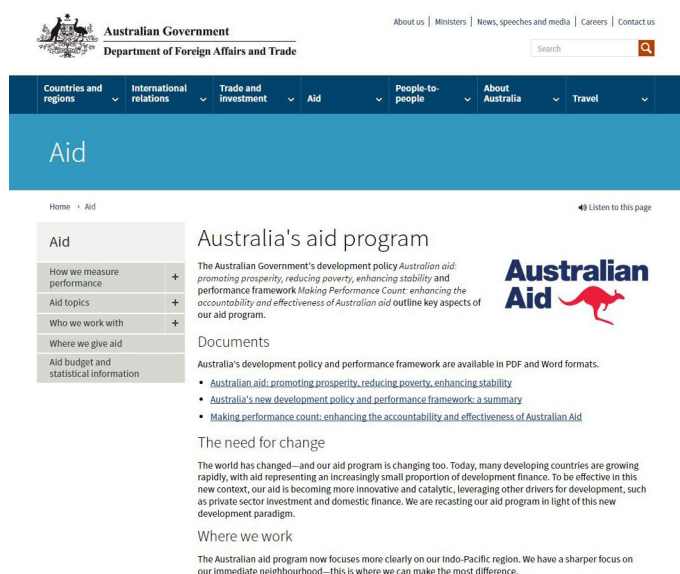


Figure 2: DFAT aid landing page June 2016 – there are no stories about aid programs or outputs, just general information on the aid program. There are also no photographs of aid at work.



It does communicate, but the real question is: how effectively?

Would the average person get an idea of how successful our aid program was from visiting the DFAT Aid website? Would they easily be able to find out what was new or changing about the aid program? Would the new aid paradigm, which shapes our aid policy, make sense as it is currently explained to an average person? Would the average person be able to easily get information about the kinds of people or organisations that Australian aid supports? Would they be able to get an idea of why we support the issues that we do? Or how Australia is engaged with wider international efforts?

Though the DFAT website is not the only place to find out information about Australian aid, it is an obvious one, and in the author's view, despite some recent improvements, it still does a far less convincing job of meeting this purpose than the former AusAID site – particularly the [dedicated Aid page](#), which currently starts out talking about the performance framework (a sure-fire way to have anyone besides the most hardened aid geeks hitting the back button on their browser).

The news section on the DFAT site, when it discusses aid, does so largely in detached press release mode, unless the Volunteers program, Australia Awards, or an external media outlet has written a more engaging story. (For example, the Returned Volunteers newsletter recently had [a whole issue](#) on the importance of storytelling in development – these were the most interesting stories in the DFAT news section for that month.) There are very few stories that set about explaining what the aid program does or why it does it – many are just funding announcements, or reports on panels or policy launch events in Australia. And there is nothing that places Australian aid in context – for example, no page explaining how Australian aid contributes to the Global Goals/Sustainable Development Goals, or other international initiatives.



**Figure 3: DFAT home page June 2016 – none of the featured stories on the homepage were about aid, despite there being very recent aid stories under ‘more news’.**

## AID COMMUNICATIONS BY THE NUMBERS

We can take a quantitative approach to looking at aid communications from DFAT by looking at how frequently it communicates on the aid program compared to other priority areas.<sup>1</sup>

Taking a sample of DFAT's tweets – the last 200 tweets made by [@dfat](#) prior to the time of analysis (20 June 2016) – only 45 tweets, or 23 percent of the total, were about aid-related initiatives. (Note: this sample did not include retweets or replies, but did include duplicate tweets made during the period.) In another sample period of 200 tweets (Oct 25-Nov 24 2015), aid tweets comprised only 10 percent.

<sup>1</sup> Notes on method: Currently available Twitter extraction tools only enable the last 3200 tweets per account to be download, which played a role in selecting sample periods and ability to include retweets. Tweets were downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet and then individually coded by whether they were primarily about an aid-related topic (defined as aid-funded work or an issue closely related to aid and development i.e. World Malaria Day, humanitarian assistance, InnovationXchange) or not. Only the primary DFAT Twitter account, and anything it retweeted, was analysed – so this does not include offshoot accounts (i.e. [@AustraliaAwards](#)) controlled by DFAT or aid contractors. Website stories were extracted to an Excel spreadsheet and were coded in the same manner as tweets. Facebook was not included in the analysis due to a lack of tools to easily extract posts.

Table 1: Web story and Twitter content counts

	DFAT (May 4-June 20 2016)	DFAT (Oct 25 – Nov 24 2015)	AusAID (May 4 – June 20 2013)	AusAID (Oct 25 – Nov 24 2012)
Tweets (no retweets)	200	200	115	51
Number on aid	45	20	115	51
% on aid	23%	10%	100%	100%
Tweets (with retweets)	296	278	NA	NA
Number on aid	76	24	NA	NA
% on aid	26%	9%	NA	NA
Web stories	79	81	38	40*
Number on aid	32	7	38	40*
% on aid	40%	9%	100%	100%

\*Note: stories that may have been published on Nov 22 and 23 in 2012 were unable to be accessed in the archive.

If we expand the sample to include retweets of other content (the large majority of which came from other DFAT social accounts, such as those of in-country representatives) and DFAT's tweets (but not replies to other tweets), in the same sample period (May 4-20 June 2016), the percentage of Twitter content on aid-related initiatives was 26 percent, or 78 out of 296 total tweets and retweets. For the 2015 sample, it was 9 percent.

We can also look at the stories on the DFAT website ([collated here](#)) over the same period. During the 2016 sample period, 79 news stories were published – 32 stories, or 40 percent, were on aid work. Half of these stories (16) were on the Australian Volunteers program. A quarter (8) were on sport for development initiatives. In the Oct 25-Nov 24 2015 period, only seven stories were on aid, or 9 percent of total stories on the DFAT website.

It is worth noting that at the time of writing (mid-July 2016), nor earlier in June when the above screenshot was taken of the DFAT homepage, there were no stories about aid featured anywhere on the front page of the DFAT website, despite there being very recent aid stories under the 'more news' section. Diplomacy and trade content was given priority on the front page.

We don't have a true pre-integration baseline of social media and website content, because the AusAID social media accounts and website were of course 100 percent dedicated to talking about the aid program and development issues, and social media use has only grown in importance

over the past three years, so one would expect more tweets on the whole now than in 2012/13. But using the Wayback Machine (a web archiving tool), it was possible to compare the number of stories about aid on the AusAID website in a similar sample period with DFAT's efforts, as well as the volume of tweets.

The findings from the two sample periods, and comparison with AusAID's efforts during the same time period in 2012 and 2013, are summarised in Table 1.

These are arbitrarily chosen samples, but they do give some picture on how much these platforms are dedicated to aid communications. (Note that the 2016 sample does cross over with part of the pre-election caretaker period, but otherwise there are no reasons to think the samples are atypical).

There was some considerable improvement between the 2015 and 2016 sample, bringing up the number of news stories on aid on the DFAT website to a similar number as were on the AusAID site in a comparative period (note that only stories in the latest news section on the AusAID page were counted – this does not include stories or communications on other areas of the former AusAID site).

The performance on Twitter also improved (likely due to having more aid content from the website to tweet about), but it is still less in absolute terms than under the AusAID comparison period, despite social media use more broadly only having grown since the integration.

## HOW OTHER AID AGENCIES DO IT

Communications from other countries' aid agencies provide strong examples of how DFAT could improve its efforts. For example, when it comes to story-based content, it is easy to find good examples of explainer and case study content on the [DFID homepage](#), which has many stories about its work. For example, [this story](#) illustrates a complicated concept – anticorruption programming – through case studies that can be clearly understood. DFID also [blogs about its work](#), writes 'NGO-style' stories about how aid helps change the lives of recipients, and has a YouTube account with content that ranges from [videos](#) with pop music over the top of their Minister speaking about the SDGs, to [real stories](#) from recipients.

Among other initiatives, such as [region-specific YouTube accounts](#), USAID has a [print and online magazine](#) with long-read features about its work and a [monthly newsletter](#) – its [front page](#) also showcases stories about aid successes.

Even other aid agencies that have been integrated into foreign affairs departments are making stronger efforts.

In New Zealand, where its aid agency was integrated into the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) in 2009, the [aid landing page](#) is full of photographs and news stories, and in addition to institutional social media accounts, it promotes those of [some of its individual aid staffers](#).

The social media accounts of Canada's formerly independent aid agency weren't deleted, but have continued as channels [dedicated to development news](#). Its aid website has a '[results and stories](#)' section in a prominent position, which includes 'stories from the field'.

A publication compiled by members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee's DevCom network in 2014 titled [Good Practices in Development Communication](#) provides many other examples – including highlighting some of the former AusAID's work.

## HOW DFAT CAN DO MORE

Now that the dust has settled from the aid program's 2013 integration, and the re-election of the Coalition government in July 2016 means there will likely be no major shake-ups to the aid program over the next three years, it would be an opportune time to strengthen communications within an aid program that is increasingly unlikely to be 'un-integrated'.

There are a number of straightforward and practical changes that could be made to better communicate with the Australian public.

- Start telling more interesting stories about aid program successes in an accessible way, and diversify the content – there are many formats that can be utilised, such as short news stories, feature articles, explainer pieces, recipient stories, short videos, field work diaries, infographics and more. Consider a regular publication, such as a newsletter or online magazine, to ensure momentum for creating this content isn't lost among other priorities.
- Add more photos and visual media to the DFAT website, particularly the aid landing page, and other communications outputs mentioned above, so that people can see aid in action, instead of just being swamped by text (see New Zealand, USAID and Canada's websites to see how pictures can help make sites more user-friendly).
- Improve the ratio of content about aid on the DFAT homepage and on DFAT's social media accounts, including through various in-country accounts, or consider bringing back accounts on social media platforms that are just about Australian aid.
- Invest in communications professionals who have an understanding of aid and development issues and can communicate these issues in a clear way, and who can translate aid successes into stories. Reconsider the 'embedded communications' model that operated at AusAID, with communications professionals located within country teams – internal communications are also important when it comes to creating content, and having people who know what achievements are

being made on projects and who have all the relevant contacts will support this.

- Capitalise on content-makers who sit outside DFAT. It was clear from the analysis of website stories that much of the content on aid came from projects that had outreach requirements as part of their agreements (Australia Awards and Australian Volunteers being the biggest providers of content). For projects with these arrangements, use and promote the content they produce. For those without, consider implementing communications requirements, or finding other ways to draw out content.
- Australian NGOs make significant investments in communications and development education opportunities (which often are closely entangled with communications and aim to explain aid and development issues in a way that is currently lacking from DFAT's outputs) – the aid program should consider if there are ways to capitalise on this source of content about aid-funded projects, particularly considering the broader goodwill within the public for Australian NGOs.
- Engage with the communications efforts occurring around international campaigns, such as the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Ministerial support for aid communications should be encouraged. Both the Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Minister for International Development and the Pacific Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells frequently share social media posts about their attendance at aid-related events or visits to the region – but this material often does not explain what Australian aid does or why their government supports development. Enlisting their assistance, and other leaders such as the Prime Minister, to disseminate and promote content on Australian aid results would be a significant boost to aid communication efforts.

- More engagement with mainstream media is needed - better website and social media content could inspire more positive content on aid in the media, reaching those who may not visit the DFAT website, but more proactive outreach and story-pitching to media outlets should be part of any serious attempt to communicate the aid program's successes to the broader public.
- A transparency agenda and a communications agenda should go hand-in-hand, and the aid program should have both ([Stephen Howes has already written on transparency issues](#)). They feed into and support each other, are both important for public accountability, and consequentially should be developed in close collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

It should not be too difficult for DFAT to at least return to the level of communication that was achieved by the late AusAID, and it is one area where that aid and diplomacy union that was sought from the AusAID-DFAT merger is a particularly mutually beneficial fit. But the goal should be to not just restore communications, but to do even better. If political decision-makers on all sides really support aid as much as they purport to, they should be proud of the aid program's achievements, and they should want the public to be better informed about them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashlee Betteridge is a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre.

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