



Highlights of [GAO-10-767](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Following budget cuts and attacks against U.S. embassies in the 1990s, the Department of State (State) began to close some public diplomacy facilities, such as American libraries, and move others onto secure embassy compounds. As a result, the number of visitors to these facilities declined and face-to-face interaction with foreign publics became more difficult. To improve its engagement with foreign audiences, State's new public diplomacy strategic framework calls for expanding outreach platforms. GAO was asked to (1) describe the outreach platforms State uses overseas, (2) examine the challenges and opportunities related to these platforms, (3) review State's plans for these platforms, and (4) assess the extent to which State has evaluated these platforms. GAO analyzed State's public diplomacy framework and planning documents; interviewed State officials; and conducted fieldwork in Brazil, China, and Indonesia. We selected these locations based on the mix of existing and planned platforms.

## What GAO Recommends

To improve plans for using and expanding Department of State outreach platforms, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State conduct an assessment of the relative effectiveness of each of State's overseas outreach platforms, such as by measuring how each platform has expanded engagement with foreign audiences. State concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-10-767](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## ENGAGING FOREIGN AUDIENCES

### Assessment of Public Diplomacy Platforms Could Help Improve State Department Plans to Expand Engagement

#### What GAO Found

State utilizes a broad range of venues, both physical and virtual—referred to in this report as outreach platforms—to engage foreign audiences outside of embassy compounds overseas. These platforms include facilities in leased commercial space staffed by American diplomats, such as American Centers, which offer libraries and meeting space. They also include partnerships with other institutions, such as Binational Centers, which are autonomous organizations that conduct a range of activities, usually including English-language teaching, and American Corners, which are typically collections of American materials and programming spaces within a host institution. State also manages virtual outreach platforms, such as Virtual Presence Posts and social media, including Facebook pages, to engage foreign audiences.

While State faces several challenges related to these outreach platforms, both U.S. and foreign officials have identified opportunities for using them to increase engagement with foreign audiences. Policies designed to safeguard U.S. personnel and facilities overseas have led to the relocation of embassies and their outreach platforms to sites outside of city centers, hindering their use. Additionally, technical and staffing issues pose challenges to the current use of social media, and host country restrictions can affect State's ability to expand its outreach platforms. U.S. and foreign public diplomacy officials have identified opportunities for using outreach platforms to engage audiences abroad, such as increased language teaching and working with nongovernmental partners.

State's new strategic framework for public diplomacy calls for opening more publicly accessible platforms overall, and its plans for specific platforms vary. Following the issuance of the framework in February 2010, State convened eight working groups to examine the issues outlined therein, including one on outreach platforms. As of June 2010, the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was analyzing and prioritizing the working groups' recommendations. State's plans pertaining to individual platforms vary. While State plans to expand some platforms, it has postponed the establishment of others. The Under Secretary has also promoted various pilot projects for increasing engagement with foreign public audiences through new platforms, such as a space in a mall in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Although State plans to expand its use of outreach platforms, it lacks information that would enable it to assess the effectiveness of these platforms. State has developed several tools to collect data on public diplomacy activities, including descriptions of events and audiences reached, but these tools do not include all outreach platforms. State has acknowledged the importance of using evaluations to inform resource allocation decisions, yet it has not evaluated the extent to which outreach platforms contribute to expanding engagement. The lack of such information limits State's ability to adjust its plans or reallocate resources toward activities that offer a greater likelihood of success.