

Perspectives

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Public Diplomacy and the Obama Moment

by Philip Seib

The significance of public diplomacy has grown exponentially during the past decade, partly because of the pervasiveness of new media. To an unprecedented extent, publics that previously were difficult or impossible to reach can now be contacted in cyber cafés and on their mobile phones. Governments that do not want their publics to be in touch with outsiders can impede this...for a while. But they might as well be trying to hold back the tide. In the contest between obstruction and technology, technology will prevail.

Not only do governments have this tool of public diplomacy, but publics expect them to use it. To varying degrees, people feel intellectually and politically liberated by the technologies that enable them to be part of the larger world. A nation that does not reach out through public diplomacy today will not be considered a global leader, and it will not be adequately serving its own international interests.

The need for greater attention to public diplomacy is partly a function of globalized communication, which has sharpened the points at which policy and public meet. Proliferation of satellite television and the Internet means that people know more and know it faster than at any previous time. This can produce quick explosions, such as the Danish cartoon controversy of 2006, and it has increased volatility among the denizens of “the Arab street,” “the Chinese street,” and other publics. This restiveness affects domestic politics in these countries and complicates the tasks of diplomacy.

Less dependent on government-tied media for information, publics search for information on their own and must be courted directly rather than exclusively through their governments. This courtship is also important because a government concerned that a large part of its population is antagonistic toward the United States may be reluctant to cooperate with U.S. policy. Public diplomacy could help reduce this problem.

New media have opened a reconfigured diplomatic process to much of the world, and these new participants will never allow themselves to be shut out. Using platforms provided by social networking media, members of the global public are, more than ever before, persistent players in the previously closed world of foreign affairs.

For public diplomacy practitioners, new media realities change the nature of their work. The days of stately diplomatic process are long gone, and a public diplomacy initiative that lags too far behind the media flow may be ineffective. Transparency, long considered annoying and even dangerous by many diplomats, is increasingly

expected and can be driven by YouTube, Twitter, and other social media. As technological divides narrow, more of the world knows more of what is going on. The diplomatic pouch has given way to the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera. This means that when policy determinations are made, the world may learn about them within minutes. A parallel public diplomacy plan must be ready for implementation, which means public diplomats must participate fully in the policy making process.

A more creative approach to public diplomacy might encourage the rest of the foreign policy establishment to become more creative itself. Pulling such efforts together will require remapping bureaucratic turf, which is never an easy job but is an essential one if U.S. public diplomacy is to have the coherence and breadth that it requires. This will require political leadership from the highest levels.

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The task for governments is to find a way to use the tools of public diplomacy consistently and systematically. For the United States, this requires breaking away from the Cold War approach of a broadcasting-oriented public diplomacy that was successful then but is woefully archaic today.

The opportunity to craft a new U.S. public diplomacy exists today largely because of the presence of the best American public diplomat since Benjamin Franklin, Barack Obama. His global appeal rests partly on his being what the world hopes to see in America: vigor and intelligence; evidence of what freedom’s harvest can yield.

An example of President Obama’s approach to public diplomacy was his speech in Cairo last June. This was the kind of speech an American president should be delivering if the United States is truly intent on building bridges rather than blowing them up. And this is what the world has come to hope from America and American presidents, at least since Franklin Roosevelt spoke of the United States as the “arsenal of democracy” and defined an American exceptionalism that much of the world welcomed.

But as wonderful as the Cairo speech was, it was undermined by a fundamental flaw: it offered an American

president's words without policy adequate to back them up. Even the most beautiful rhetoric is intrinsically flimsy unless it is built on a foundation of substantive policy.

The larger problem here is the gap – maybe even a chasm – between public diplomacy and America's overall foreign policy. Public diplomacy cannot exist in isolation, and yet that is how things work today in the U.S. government. President Obama or Secretary Clinton or some other member of the administration may eloquently present ideas that capture the attention of the public in the Middle East or elsewhere, but their words are left to stand alone. Public diplomacy must not be merely a “nice” gesture, but must be an essential part of a coherent foreign policy. In the Obama administration so far, public diplomacy has not been accorded that status, but rather exists as a sideshow, clearly outside the heart of policy making.

U.S. public diplomacy also suffers from its emphasis on selling America – trying to convince people around the world that America is a great place populated by fine people. American public diplomacy talks too much about America, while the people it tries to reach ask, “What about us? How will America help improve our lives?”

If the United States wants a world that is less hostile to it, its public diplomacy must be less about advertising and more about service, less about “branding” and more about wisely using American resources to improve the health, education, and day-to-day lives of people who may love American culture and technology but have come to despise American power.

In the years since the 2001 attacks on the United States, American leaders have resorted time and again to hard power in the apparent belief that muscle defines its own morality. Too many U.S. officials consider public diplomacy to be mere window dressing that serves no substantive purpose. Despite the transition from Bush to Obama, the weakness of American public diplomacy persists.

Those who dismiss public diplomacy as a sideshow are correct if public diplomacy efforts have little purpose beyond image construction. But I would argue that public diplomacy has larger roles,, among them, as a valuable antiterrorism tool.

Let's look at terrorism as a pyramid. At the tip are Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a relatively small number of others who will never turn aside from the path of violence and must be dealt with accordingly. But as we move toward the base of the pyramid, the numbers grow larger and the commitment to violence lessens. Here are the people – many of them young – who can still be reached.

They are certainly being reached by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Drop into a cyber café in Tangier or Amman and you are sure to find some 15-year-old boys watching videos showing American soldiers being killed while a stirring martial soundtrack plays and alluring promises are made to those who would join the fight.

This vile proselytizing cannot be allowed to go unanswered. One of the essential tasks of public diplomacy is to provide counterprogramming to offset the messages of proponents of hatred and violence. Establishing dialogue that involves peers, respected leaders, moderate clerics, and others is part of this. But again, an argument is

convincing only if it is backed up by policy that can ensure that the promises made in such dialogue become reality. This underscores the importance of bringing public diplomacy into the heart of foreign policy, not leaving it as a satellite in distant orbit, glimpsed only occasionally.

The methods of delivering public diplomacy messages also need examination. The U.S. government has invested more than \$620 million in Al Hurra, an Arabic-language television news channel. The official role for Al Hurra is to present America's view of the world to Arab audiences. The unofficial but frequently heard justification for Al Hurra is that it was designed to compete with Al Jazeera, the popular Qatar-based news channel that is both Arabic and Arab.

Lots of people watch Al Jazeera; hardly anyone watches Al Hurra. There are many reasons for this: the poor production and journalistic qualities of Al Hurra's news product are important, and even the name “Al Hurra,” meaning “the free one,” is considered insulting by some Arabs who ask, “Who are you to say that your channel is free and our media are not?”

Al Hurra was derived from a Cold War model. During the Cold War, the United States found that its broadcasts on Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other such venues were well-received by large audiences, particularly in Eastern Europe. The principal competition was Radio Moscow and its close relatives – news providers that enjoyed little trust among their audiences. The American broadcasts were welcome because in the absence of trustworthy indigenous news sources, they provided the best obtainable version of the truth.

That situation bears no resemblance to the state of affairs in the Arab world today. During the Cold War, the Eastern European audience was desperately hungry for news, even from outsiders. No such vacuum exists today in the Middle East. Al Jazeera is just one of many channels on which Arab correspondents are reporting to Arab viewers about Arab events. Outsiders are not needed, wanted, or trusted.

Al Jazeera established itself with its audience during the intifada of 2000, and that illustrates why this channel has superseded the BBC, CNN, and other Western news providers as the principal information source for so many Arabs. On an issue of great importance to Arab viewers, a channel was featuring Arab journalists who saw events from an Arab perspective.

Critics may claim that Al Jazeera is not “objective” in the sense of Western journalistic norms, but that is irrelevant. What matters is not “objectivity,” but credibility. Al Jazeera has it. Al Hurra, with its headquarters just outside Washington D.C. and its money coming from the U.S. Congress, does not.

Effective public diplomacy must embrace the world as it is, not as it was. The difference is reflected in the role of new information and communication technologies, which have changed the geography of foreign policy. Public diplomacy today must address the existence of virtual states, and the new geopolitical realities that accompany them.

An example: Pakistan. Is “Pakistan” the land mass northwest of India, or is it something more? I would argue

that there is today a “virtual Pakistan” – a global entity that includes but is not limited to the Pakistan that appears on conventional maps. More than a million Pakistanis live in the United Kingdom; even more live in Saudi Arabia; and the Pakistani diaspora is truly global, with other significant communities around the world.

Diasporic populations are nothing new, but what is new is the nature of pervasive interactive communication that allows the diaspora to retain unprecedented ties to the homeland. Satellite television, e-mail, Twitter, mobile phones (and their ringtones) provide nearly constant connection to the mother country.

By way of contrast, consider America at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1902, as many as 74,000 immigrants each month were arriving in the United States. By 1910, 15 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born. What differentiates that from today’s immigration patterns around the world is that when those immigrants came to America, even if they clustered in communities of individual nationalities, their ties to their homelands were tenuous at best. Most were intent on becoming “Americans.”

Today, with ties to home so easily and constantly maintained, the situation is more complex. Do these links to the homeland allow immigrants to relax and become smoothly assimilated, or do those high-tech ties influence them to see assimilation as unnecessary? This is something the governments of their new homes must ponder.

Diasporic clusters also must receive recognition in public diplomacy efforts. To stay with Pakistan as an example, public diplomacy directed toward Pakistan must reach out to the diasporic communities of “virtual Pakistan” as well as to people living in the physical homeland. Messages to a Pakistani living in London will reach Pakistanis living in South Asia, and vice versa. Failure to undertake this broadened communication ignores the influence that the “virtual Pakistan” has within the greater Pakistan.

Recognizing the realities of virtual states is just one facet of the new world of public diplomacy that the United States and other nations must more forthrightly embrace if their public diplomacy efforts are to have success in a world in which new media’s influence continues to grow exponentially.

An example of a virtual non-state community is the ummah, the global family of Islam. The conventional wisdom has been that the Muslim in Jakarta and the Muslim in Karachi and the Muslim in Dakar and the Muslim in Toronto are not connected because their shared religion cannot bridge their differences in language, culture, and politics.

But what if new media platforms provided the previously missing connection? Suppose satellite television such as Al Jazeera – particularly Al Jazeera English – and Web sites such as IslamOnline were to provide common ground that the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims could share? With unprecedented cohesion such as this, the global geopolitical balance might shift significantly.

That is speculative, but it is the kind of thing people engaged in public diplomacy should be pondering. And it is exactly the kind of thing to which the unimaginative U.S. public diplomacy establishment has paid little attention.

Concerning the matters I have discussed, a number of action steps should be taken by the Obama administration.

First, in this world of interactive media, it is anachronistic to operate public diplomacy programs as monologue. U.S. policy makers need a far better sense of not just what the world thinks of America – we have a good idea of that from a large volume of polling – but also what the world expects of America. “Listening tours” will not suffice; they are primarily gimmicks. Expectations can be gauged in numerous ways, through carefully crafted survey research and, perhaps more important, through content analysis of what various media around the world are saying. From this we could develop a better sense of what people want, which – if that can be delivered – could be the foundation of better relationships with people around the world. That is crucial to a successful public diplomacy.

This is particularly important in reaching young people. The United States needs to connect with the rising generation of leaders in government, business, the professions, and the arts. They are poised for success in their own fields and they will shape the future of their countries and the world. Far more systematic efforts should be made to reach out to them. International visitors programs, which have consistently been successful, need significant expansion. Public diplomacy must involve seeking global counsel from ranks that extend far beyond those in the spotlight.

Also, U.S. public diplomacy should be less Middle East-centric. I despair about lost opportunities to build bridges to Russia and the neglect of Latin America and much of Africa. This underscores the need for public diplomacy to be incorporated throughout U.S. foreign policy, not just relied on in certain areas.

I should point out that there have been successes during the current administration in using innovative technologies in contacting people who previously were outside the range of U.S. foreign policy efforts. The people in Africa who have been helped to use mobile phones for banking, and those in Mexico who use online networks to fight crime, and those who take advantage of the increased transparency of the U.S. State Department offered by the DipNotes blog...all these are evidence of progress.

But there still is a lack of cohesion, an absence of a truly systemic approach to 21st century public diplomacy.

As for the mechanisms that can reach large numbers of people, the Cold War model needs to be put in the attic and a new plan devised. Al Hurra should be terminated before more millions are wasted on it. In its place, the U.S. government should commission programming that actually has a chance of finding an audience. Documentaries about America and Americans, entertainment programs that depict American life, news programs that are the same as Americans see rather than obviously manipulative pseudo-journalism – these could all be offered if someone could find the ingredient so obviously lacking in U.S. public diplomacy today: imagination.

Concerning virtual states: the concept is not that hard to grasp, but doing so requires a willingness to set aside the myths of maps. Take a look at maps of many parts of the world and you will see lines drawn by victors of conflicts to serve their own interests, not the needs of the people

actually living within the imposed boundaries. A map of the world today must be multi-dimensional in order to reflect the realities of virtual states. Directing public diplomacy to the real Pakistan, the real Kurdistan, the real communities of Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere – that is a task that may at first seem daunting, but it is absolutely essential if the Obama administration's public diplomacy is to succeed.

This is just an overview of U.S. public diplomacy during the Obama moment. Barack Obama's presidency offers a wonderful opportunity for the United States to reassert its capacity to lead the world and serve the world.

It is painful for those of us who want to see this happen to watch that opportunity be neglected.

The Obama presidency has had its ups and downs, but it offers hope. And that is important, because public diplomacy is, at its heart, about hope – shared aspirations, shared dreams, and shared respect for our fellow global citizens.

Public diplomacy will not save the world, but it can give us a good start toward doing so. It is worth a far better effort.



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