



Public diplomacy comes of age

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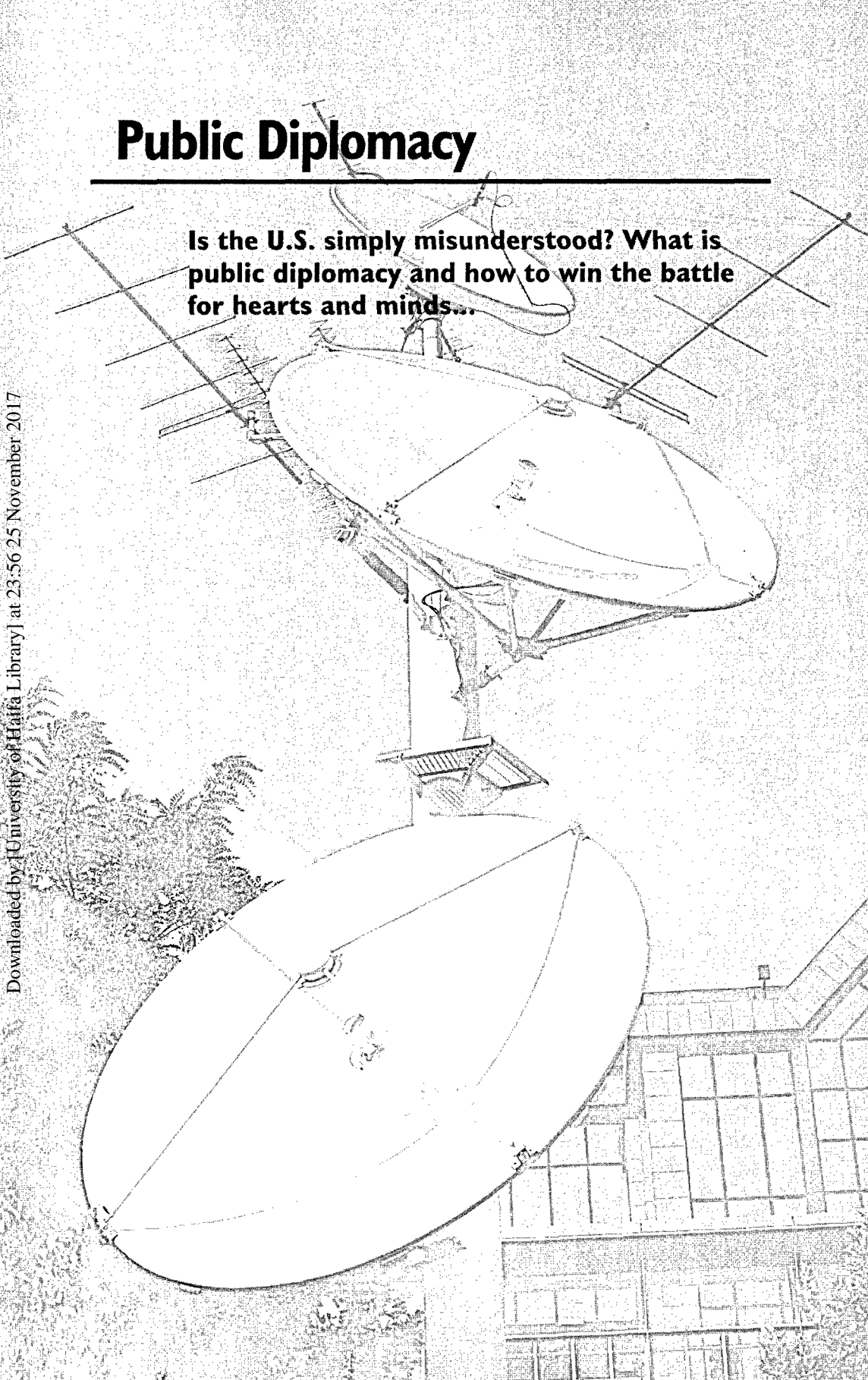
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Public Diplomacy

Is the U.S. simply misunderstood? What is public diplomacy and how to win the battle for hearts and minds...



Public Diplomacy Comes of Age

Since the September 11 attacks on the United States, the nature and role of public diplomacy have been debated more vigorously than at any time in recent memory. A foreign affairs specialty that was once the province of a relatively small number of professionals has suddenly—and quite properly—taken its place in the wide-ranging discussion of national security in which the U.S. population is currently engaged. The growing consensus that the time has come for the United States to rethink, reinvigorate, and reinvest in not just traditional diplomacy but also in the public dimension of the government's overseas presence has been encouraging. I am delighted with the burgeoning recognition that how the U.S. government communicates abroad—and with whom—directly affects the nation's security and well-being.

Yet, what is this art that people call public diplomacy? It is not traditional diplomacy, which consists essentially of the interactions that take place between governments. The practitioners of traditional diplomacy engage the representatives of foreign governments in order to advance the national interest articulated in their own government's strategic goals in international affairs. Public diplomacy, by contrast, engages carefully targeted sectors of foreign publics in order to develop support for those same strategic goals.

Global Changes Affecting Public Diplomacy

The practice of public diplomacy by professionals, including U.S. ambassadors, has changed dramatically with the proliferation of communications

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technology and the equally remarkable increase in global mobility. A full generation ago, for instance, small teams of U.S. Foreign Service officers drove Jeeps to the hinterlands of Latin America and other remote regions of the world to show reel-to-reel movies to isolated audiences, while U.S. diplomats in capital cities scouted out future leaders and sent them on exchange programs to experience life, society, and democratic values in the United States firsthand. That world now seems impossibly quaint, and the contrast with today's global environment could hardly be more pronounced.

First and perhaps foremost, the number and affiliations of players in public diplomacy have mushroomed. The U.S. government is by no means the only actor on the public diplomacy stage abroad. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and, with increasing frequency, individuals now pursue their goals in public venues around the world, often with skill and success. Even among government agencies, the Department of State is in no way the only actor involved in public diplomacy. Many observers have noted the spiraling rise in the number of federal, state, and local agencies that conduct international activities and frequently have an overseas presence. Less widely appreciated, however, is the on-the-ground fact that most of those agencies and organizations play an ever-larger role on the public stage in the countries with which they are involved.

Communications technology has changed as well, proliferating and constantly extending its reach. The players have changed, in greater numbers with more mobility and increasing skill. The media have changed, with multiple channels and segmented audiences. Not surprisingly, then, the challenge facing government practitioners of public diplomacy has also changed. To take advantage of the resources at hand, they must more often effectively galvanize disparate efforts than command their own limited funds and personnel. They must promote collaboration among all the actors involved inside and outside government. They must stimulate and persuade. They must also exploit their one distinct advantage—they are, after all, the U.S. government's authorized voice to audiences abroad. An NGO spokesperson may make an eloquent case for his or her cause, but only U.S. practitioners of public diplomacy can articulate official policy to foreign publics.

Ways to Communicate the Message

A good portion of the current debate about public diplomacy has focused on decisions made in the past—particularly in the wake of the Cold War, but actually retreating even further in time—that reduced the resources for what Edward R. Murrow called “telling America’s story.” That kind of collective soul-searching is useful to a point. The September 11 attacks and

their continuing global resonance clearly indicate, however, that the United States must focus not on what happened in the past but on the challenges it faces today and will face tomorrow. Ways to describe the challenges are abundant: winning hearts and minds, making friends and influencing enemies, building the policy context, projecting U.S. values. However it is phrased, public diplomacy essentially operates in two separate but closely linked ways.

The first is the communication of policy. Whereas the task is ongoing, intensive, and fraught with difficulties, public diplomacy is basically a short-term effort with a simple goal: to articulate U.S. policy clearly in as many media and languages as are necessary to ensure that the message is received. The practitioner, however, must keep in mind the home truth that it is not what one says, but it is what the other hears that ultimately matters most. This task is the daily work of ambassadors, the press, and information offices in U.S. embassies. Murrow's famous "last three feet"—the distance to be crossed when one person meets another—remain vitally important in the chain of communication that successfully delivers the country's policy message. Direct, face-to-face contact has no substitute. As the United States builds a public diplomacy apparatus equal to the daunting task at hand, the government should frankly acknowledge the need for a robust corps of public diplomacy specialists in the field. The language-capable, media-savvy, policy-wise, accessible, and persuasive Foreign Service officer who understands the country in which he or she is serving has no acceptable replacement.

What is this art that people call public diplomacy?

Equally important, the impact of technology on how public diplomacy work is carried out can scarcely be overstated. One recent example suggests how much things have changed since Foreign Service employees overseas went to work early in the morning to pull down the "Wireless File" and distribute reams of mimeographs or photocopies. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) produced a pamphlet, *The Network of Terrorism*, designed to convey the horror of September 11 to foreign publics and to persuade them not only that terrorism must be fought but also that the coalition required for this effort must be sustained.

While printed copies were being sent around the world, *The Network of Terrorism* was loaded onto IIP's Web site, enabling interested embassies and media abroad to download sections of the document easily and reproduce what they needed to present to local audiences. In practice, the Web site has

exponentially expanded the pamphlet's readership. For instance, *Panorama*, Italy's most influential weekly news magazine, reproduced most of *The Network of Terrorism* in its own full-color, Italian-language edition. The State Department's IIP has put translations of the document on its Web site in 14 languages, and, at last count, embassies and others who saw the utility of a document that was visually impressive, clearly presented, and effectively persuasive have produced versions in more than 30 languages. *The Network of Terrorism* is an encouraging example of paying careful attention to that home truth.

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More generally, the Internet has become a fundamental medium for communicating State Department policy. The IIP Web site has attracted hits that number in the millions; and embassy Web sites, which are linked to IIP's site, generate their own heavy volume of traffic. Thanks to technology, U.S. policy is reaching audiences as never before.

The goal is similar in the use of the more traditional media: radio, television, and the press. Those media are used to articulate U.S. policy clearly and forthrightly and to make a sustained effort to develop support for that policy. Radio represents a special case. When the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) was folded into the State Department, the Voice of America (VOA) became part of the independent Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). A good portion of the success that VOA has enjoyed is attributable to its objectivity, which the organization's distance from other foreign affairs agencies protects. Even though this relationship sometimes leads to tensions between what the Department of State would or would not like to broadcast and what the VOA actually airs, the United States should continue to cherish VOA's success and also to support a system that ensures VOA's credibility. At the same time, one should ask whether a different kind of U.S. government broadcasting service with more (or less) policy content has a role to play in communicating policy.

In fact, open overseas broadcasting and Web-based narrowcasting is necessary—via radio, television, and the Internet—as a means of advocating U.S. policy. The former USIA's Worldnet television service offers one model that might be modified for today's media environment. Foreign television networks recognized that Worldnet material existed to support U.S. policy positions. The networks aired Worldnet programs on their stations because the feed provided footage of top U.S. policymakers and others to whom foreign networks would not otherwise have had access. The model was successful partly because of vigorous sales work by public diplomacy Foreign Service

officers in the field, who lobbied, sometimes with signal success, for stations to carry Worldnet programs. Today, the proliferation of audiovisual media and advances in technology offer an opportunity to exploit new broadcast niches while seeking to bolster a U.S. presence on prime-time news programs around the world. The keys to success are high production values, access to senior policymakers, and active work on the part of the U.S. government's field officers as liaisons.

In the world of hard copy, U.S. embassies rightfully continue to place a great deal of importance on cultivating good relationships with national and local newspapers. This effort remains the classic, heavy-duty contact work performed by embassy press officers, who must know reporters, editors, and publishers in order to place articles, influence opinion pieces, and generally affect the coverage of events and issues that the U.S. government considers important. Technology makes some of this work easier. An embassy information officer can use e-mail to transmit a story to an editor instead of sending a printed copy through the mail. In an information-rich environment where articles are a dime a thousand, however, the human relationship between diplomat and journalist is the especially critical nexus for the communication of policy information.

As USIA wrestled with budget cuts in the 1990s, the agency progressively eliminated its print publications. Passionate advocates of magazines remained, arguing that the publications were particularly irreplaceable vehicles to transmit U.S. values. Magazines are labor intensive and expensive to produce, however, and USIA magazines disappeared as a result. As a number of commentators have recently pointed out, the blessings of Internet access have not yet reached many of those around the world whom the U.S. government should be addressing. Hence, Washington has begun to reconsider the need to communicate in print.

Although apparently counterintuitive at first, IIP's experience with *The Network of Terrorism* actually advocates a return to print publications. Debating the advantages of printed publications versus electronic media misses the point. State Department publications should be conceived as digitized content that, by exploiting technology, becomes available in as many media as local circumstances dictate. In some countries, a Web presence may be sufficient. In others, Web usage is still so low that the U.S. message must be communicated in print. In some places, a magazine published by the State Department might be appropriate; in others, carrying the U.S. message to a wider audience by entering into a cooperative arrangement with a respected local publisher to make U.S. government-produced material available may be possible. In unusual or compelling circumstances, the government might even consider buying space in an important foreign publication.

Similarly for languages, English-language publications will cover the State Department's needs in some places; in others, versions in the country's native language are absolutely essential. In all instances, however, the concept undergirding the State Department's return to print publications must be that of Web-based, digitized content made rapidly available for use in any and all media and transmitted electronically to publication centers as individual circumstances dictate.

Programs to Promote Cultural Understanding

As demanding as articulating U.S. policy to foreign publics is, it is only half of public diplomacy's responsibility. The other half is a longer-term effort to develop an overseas understanding and appreciation of U.S. society—the people and values in the United States. As the Fulbright-Hays Act states, the U.S. government must conduct activities that lead to “mutual understanding.” Yet how is this task performed? For the most part, the government uses educational and cultural exchange programs, the overwhelming majority of which consists of educational exchanges. Among these, the Fulbright Program remains the flagship government-sponsored exchange, and deservedly so, but cultural programs barely register beyond Fulbright.

Success on the information front can be measured. An op-ed piece signed by an ambassador and placed in a major newspaper is an indisputable triumph, especially when one tracks its influence in changing attitudes. In contrast, gauging the success of exchange programs is more intangible and requires time and patience. In the past, one common mistake was thinking of government exchanges as a kind of frill, a nice undertaking if the resources were available. Today, viewing exchanges as a long-term investment in the national security of the United States is vital. The effects of a young government official's stay in the United States may take years to make themselves felt, but much more often than not they will be felt. The U.S. government will benefit from having exposed that person to U.S. society, values, and the company of U.S. peers. The degree of apparent hostility to the United States and the depth of unfamiliarity with U.S. society—its values, accomplishments, and aspirations—that recent events have brought into dramatic relief have surprised even those who work in foreign affairs. Perhaps the United States should have expected it. In any event, the way forward is clear. The U.S. government must commit the resources, both financial and human, that are required to increase our exchange capacity to a level sufficient to respond to the national security challenge the country faces. The government must recognize exchanges as a high-priority invest-

ment, even though the returns will only be apparent over time and, even in the best of circumstances, will be difficult to measure.

As the government invests in exchanges, a number of factors must be considered. First, what types of people should it invite to participate in these programs? In general, participants should be young. They should be individuals whose minds remain open and who would not otherwise have an opportunity to get to know the United States. They should not be the sons and daughters of local elites, people who can visit or study in this country any time they choose, but upwardly striving persons of promise who are likely to make an impact on their own societies, chosen by U.S. embassy officers with a thorough knowledge of the country in which they are serving. An invitation to participate in an exchange program with the United States is not a reward or a favor.

In addition, the U.S. government must think about a judicious expansion of its cultural programs around the world. As widely known, the portrait of the United States that most people absorb through mass culture and communications is skewed, negative, and unrepresentative. A U.S. cultural presence indeed has a place abroad. Done properly, cultural programs are not simply the government's version of art for art's sake. The programs are not a luxury, and they are not the provinces of cultural elites. Cultural programs are, instead, the frank mobilization in the service of national security of what Joseph Nye referred to as "soft power."¹ U.S. culture is dynamic, diverse, and democratic. It already has tremendous appeal around the world. Harnessing its obvious power is another cost-effective investment to ensure U.S. national security.

Much has been written about the virtues of developing public-private partnerships to advance the U.S. cultural presence abroad; these arrangements indeed have a number of built-in advantages. Private-sector partners, however, reasonably expect to see the federal government's financial commitment to the cause in which they are invited to participate. The private sector does not want to be simply tapped for cash. The State Department's unique advantage of maintaining a global network of cultural experts in embassies is invaluable but not by itself sufficient for a partnership. The United States should wisely invest money in cultural programs, perhaps beginning with a few pilot projects in strategically important places, while leveraging the investment with private partners who may be willing to follow the government's lead.

**U.S. public
diplomacy must
build support for
U.S. policy and U.S.
society.**

Another mainstay of public diplomacy fell on particularly hard times in the 1990s. American studies came to be viewed as the most expendable luxury—at best, as a kind of sweetener to make the hard truths of policy more palatable. Yet, in a world in which information is power and in which power works by persuasion, American studies can inform and sometimes

Educational and cultural exchange programs are part of public diplomacy.

even persuade some of those whose reaction to the events of September 11 was expressed in the throwaway line, “They deserved it.” If the government decides to reinvest in American studies, it cannot revert to the old model of support for foreign universities’ literature departments. Rather, the government should direct its efforts at the target audiences it seeks to influence: the media; the NGO community; governments (and not just foreign ministries);

academic institutions; and even, selectively, the business community. The founding of the first Department of American Studies in an East European university in Warsaw in the late 1970s was a courageous act by the faculty of Warsaw University. The department’s first chairman later became Poland’s foreign minister and graduates of the program have become prominent in international commerce and politics.

A Paradigm for the Future

Finally, as the United States begins to rebuild the government’s capacity to conduct public diplomacy, considering a new paradigm would be useful. Throughout the Cold War, public diplomacy efforts ran essentially one way. Programs and activities were pushed out to target audiences. Given the bipolar international political environment of the time, that approach was appropriate and, indeed, successful. (The obvious exception, the exchange programs, was predicated on mutual exchange.)

In today’s world, the United States is more likely to meet with success if it structures activities in ways that encourage dialogue. Although the wording of recriminations varies—ranging from hegemony to multilateralism to cultural imperialism—the United States, as the world’s dominant power, will inevitably be accused of heavy-handedness and arrogance. It will inform and influence public opinion effectively only if it changes the paradigm of the past and establishes a two-way approach that builds credible dialogue. To arrive there, the United States should experiment and take a few chances, developing programs that encourage two-way engagement with the people it seeks to influence. Some efforts may fail, but others will

succeed; the U.S. government can use those successes to shape a sustained future effort.

Terrorism has changed the way people think about public diplomacy. Today, no serious observer can deny the link between perceptions of the United States and the country's national security. Some of those perceptions range far beyond U.S. control. Some of them, however, depend on how the United States talks to the world. All the pieces matter: the U.S. policy message itself, the channels of communication the United States selects, the tone of voice in which it speaks, and its familiarity with the environment in which it is speaking.

The United States will never persuade its sworn enemies. The surprisingly muted reaction to the quick U.S. military success in Afghanistan, however, suggests that more people might be able to be persuaded than we originally thought. Certainly, most people will back a winner. The United States is winning and, because it is resolute, it will continue to win. Nevertheless, great numbers of people reject terror and hope for themselves, their families, and their societies exactly that for which the United States is known: democratic governance, tolerance, and freedom to prosper. In their complexity, their remoteness, and their distrust of U.S. leadership, such people are the target audience for the United States. Is anybody out there listening? The answer is yes. Let the United States engage them.

Note

1. Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990).