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Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy

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1

Rethinking Public Diplomacy

Nancy Snow

Public diplomacy is inevitably linked to power. The work by Joseph Nye is well known in this respect, particularly soft power. Soft power is "based on intangible or indirect influences such as culture, values, and ideology."[1] It is arguably the most referenced term in the public diplomacy lexicon, though its prevalence does not mean that we all agree on its definition and application. The term "soft power" was first coined by Nye in 1990. He wrote that the United States must invest in measures that lead to better ties that bind: ". . . the richest country in the world could afford both better education at home and the international influence that comes from an effective aid and information program abroad. What is needed is increased investment in 'soft power,' the complex machinery of interdependence, rather than in 'hard power'—that is, expensive new weapons systems."[2]

Nye defines power as "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants," and argues that there are three primary ways to do that:

1 coerce with threats;
2 induce behavioral change with payments; or
3 attract and co-opt.

The latter is soft power—getting others to appreciate you to the extent that they change their behavior to your liking. Nye argues that the three types of power, when exercised judicially and combined with soft power, lead to "smart power." In other words, soft power is not the same as little old ladies sipping tea; it is often used in conjunction with more forceful and threatening forms of compliance and persuasion. Thus, the term "soft" can be misleading to some scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy who view what we do in almost messianic terms. A benign example of American soft power at work is illustrated in the February 2002 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine. Writer Joe Klein describes an Iranian school teacher whose visceral reaction to the 9/11 attacks was in the person of one famous New York filmmaker whose work the school teacher admired. "You know what I was really worried about? Woody Allen. I didn't want him to die. I love his films."[3]

With respect to Woody Allen, soft power is culture power. No other country in the world can match the superpower cultural reach of the United States. American soft power is our Superman. It's a blessing and a curse. The central nervous system of this cultural soft power exists in the Los Angeles megapolis that includes Hollywood and the Thirty Mile Zone[4] of celebrity branding

and image in Southern California and the Madison Avenue advertising and marketing firms of New York City. The world will forever have an ambivalent feeling about the U.S. soft power advantage vis-à-vis popular culture and media. It is cast in the refrain, "We Hate You but Send Us Your Baywatch."[5]

Soft power is a new concept for an old habit. Many countries have preceded the American effort to utilize their culture to national image advantage (e.g., France, Italy, Germany, the U.K.). In fact, the United States is a relative latecomer to utilizing culture for diplomatic purposes. Not until World War I and the founding of the Committee on Public Information, known also as the Creel Committee for its founder George Creel, did the U.S. government centralize an effort to shape its image in the global marketplace of ideas. President Wilson assured the world that America's participation in World War I was to make the world safer for democracy and that his war would end all future wars. We know it didn't turn out as Wilson promised, which leads us to how it is that any country can gain or lose a foothold in soft power advantage.

What gives any country a soft power advantage is measured by several dimensions:

1. when culture and ideas match prevailing global norms;
2. when a nation has greater access to multiple communication channels that can influence how issues are framed in global news media; and
3. when a country's credibility is enhanced by domestic and international behavior.

The U.S. is at a comparative advantage with the first two and at a decisive disadvantage with the last dimension. This may explain why so many of the following chapters suggest a rethinking of public diplomacy for the world's sole superpower. If, as Nye first suggested, the U.S. should think about its interdependent soft power ties, then such new thinking should in turn emphasize synergistic practices such as building long-term mutual understanding and global community values over U.S.-led democratic values. The United States holds no patent on soft power or democratic principles. If we could accept that we have no monopoly ownership of the concepts of democracy, liberty and freedom, then we might more readily acknowledge dialogue and dissent around overseas behavior. So far, it seems, we continue to dig in our heels, particularly in how we view ourselves, which leads to charges of hypocrisy from overseas.

The paradox of American soft power revealed itself in the "Report of the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World," also known as the Djerejian Report for the former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Israel, Edward Djerejian, who led the delegation. The 2003 report stated the following:

> Surveys show that Arabs and Muslims admire the universal values for which the United States stands. They admire, as well, our technology, our entrepreneurial zeal, and the achievements of Americans as individuals. We were told many times in our travels to Arab countries that "we like Americans but not what the American government is doing." This distinction is unrealistic, since Americans elect their government and broadly support foreign policy, but the assertion that we like you but don't like your policies offers hope for transformed public diplomacy. Arabs and Muslims, it seems, support our values but believe that our policies do not live up to them. A major project for public diplomacy is to reconcile this contradiction through effective communications and intelligent listening.[6]

Therein lies the rub. U.S. citizens most certainly have a greater tolerance for unpopular foreign policies than those on the receiving end of such policies. But that should not lead us into a false sense of security about the rightness of our foreign policies. Is it possible some five years later after the release of the Djerejian report to reconcile "we like you, not your policies?" What may be needed is a public diplomacy campaign led by the public, not the government. If "it's the policy, stupid" prevails, then allow more open channels of communication between the

governmental and nongovernmental players involved in carrying out the day-to-day responsibilities of national image and reputation management. U.S. media should work to build stronger and lasting relationships with international journalists. Interpersonal communication is the most important opportunity to build trust, understanding, and friendship, which is why the Fulbright Program, International Visitors Leadership Program, and arts and writer exchanges have the most promise for winning hearts and minds in the United States.

America's soft power ground zero may still be Hollywood and Madison Avenue, at least in the mediated mind's eye. But a fuller, more balanced picture of America emerges from all those in-between states and cities whose international relations could be strengthened through exchanges like those offered by Rotary International, Sister City International, and the World Affairs Council. The State Department itself often touts these citizen and professional exchanges, along with the Fulbright program, as the best value for the buck in the public diplomacy business.

I spent just two years working inside the U.S. Government's agency responsible for "telling America's story to the world." Every day I wandered through the corridor of our building on C Street in Southwest Washington, D.C., I wondered what America's story was becoming. It was in the early 1990s and the Cold War's demise was still fresh. The United States had a spring in its step with the election of a Baby Boomer Democratic president Bill Clinton, the man from Hope, Arkansas, who as a former Rhodes Scholar symbolized a sense of promise for the country's place in the world. Perhaps America's story would be one of U.S. moral leadership in the world, and for a time it seemed to be heading that way. But quickly that leadership emerged as one driven primarily by economic interest. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement became a key public diplomacy campaign inside the halls of the U.S. Information Agency, and for a time our telling became a model of selling, particularly America's know-how and prowess in economics and business.

Some 15 years later it is time to shift focus again. Our new thinking in public diplomacy must involve a motto-shift from USIA's "telling America's story to the world" to "sharing values, hopes, dreams, and common respect" with the world. We need a shift from the Clinton doctrine of economic engagement and enlarging markets and the Bush doctrine of preemptive security and the long war to a new doctrine of global partnership and engagement. Former CBS anchor Walter Cronkite captures the spirit of a nation that seeks lessons from the 20th century that can help set things straight in the 21st:

> The way for this nation to win the hearts and minds of those most offended by our Iraqi invasion and occupation is not through press agentry and advertising. Rather, it is by proving to them that the American spirit—which, with good will and unselfish financing, once helped reinvigorate the world after the great wars of the past century—still exists despite the arrogant and bullying tactics with which we have launched the 21st century.[7]

At the time of this writing, the United States is engaged in a presidential campaign unprecedented in its early slate of candidates for the highest office in the land, but one which quickly winnowed down to a final three, a woman and an African-American Senator on the Democratic side, and a former POW Senator on the Republican side. The candidacy of African-American Senator Barack Obama from Illinois is illustrative of new thinking in American public diplomacy. His biography alone is a lesson in new thinking. As writer Barbara Ehrenreich opined:

> A Kenyan-Kansan with roots in Indonesia and multiracial Hawaii, he seems to be the perfect answer to the bumper sticker that says, "I love you America, but isn't it time to start seeing other people?" As conservative commentator Andrew Sullivan has written, Obama's election could mean the re-branding of America. An anti-war black president with an Arab-sounding name: See, we're not so bad after all, world![8]

Obama's Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton has promised to send her husband and two-term president Bill Clinton all over the world doing a repair job on the American image. At least the two leading Democrats have a strong sense of what the Djerejian report warned in 2003:

> We have failed to listen and failed to persuade. We have not taken the time to understand our audience, and we have not bothered to help them understand us. We cannot afford such shortcomings.[9]

Along with new thinking about America's image and policies in the world, we could use a public diplomacy that educates its own public. We already have the Congressional legislation that mandates such international education. The original design of the Fulbright program was:

> to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and other countries of the world.[10]

So far, much of the old thinking about U.S. public diplomacy has focused on the one-way exchange of information about the United States to the rest of the world, a preference for telling. We need more two-way exchanges of information if we believe some of the polls of late that have indicated a woeful lack of intelligence and interest among young Americans about international affairs. A 2006 National Geographic-Roper poll indicated that just over one quarter (28%) of 18-to-24-year-olds consider it "necessary to know where countries in the news are located."[11] This was three years into a war with Iraq that has arguably done more to damage America's standing in the world than anything since the war in Vietnam. The same poll found that six out of ten in the same age group (63%) could not locate Iraq on a Middle East map.[12] If we are to reeducate our young people about why international relations matter, then we must shift our understanding of what diplomacy means.

Traditional diplomacy is government-to-government relations (G2G) and if one were to picture it, it would be a photo op of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sitting across the table from the foreign affairs minister in another nation state. Traditional *public* diplomacy has been about governments talking to global publics (G2P), and includes those efforts to inform, influence, and engage those publics in support of national objectives and foreign policies. More recently, public diplomacy involves the way in which both government *and* private individuals and groups influence directly and indirectly those public attitudes and opinions that bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions (P2P). Why the shift from G2P to P2P? One development is the rise in user-friendly communications technologies that have increased public participation in talking about foreign affairs and the subsequent involvement of public opinion in foreign policy making. Another development is the increase in people-to-people exchanges, both virtual and personal, across national borders. This shift from the diplomatic emphasis to the public emphasis has resulted in the rise of two different philosophies about public diplomacy's utility:

1. those who view public diplomacy as a necessary evil, a mere ancillary tactic that supports conventional public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy efforts; and
2. those who view public diplomacy as a context or milieu for how nations interact with each other, from public affairs officers in the field to the citizen diplomat and student exchangee at the grassroots.

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One aim of this handbook is to examine just how contentious or compatible these two views will become.

The rise of communications technology in public diplomacy is neither value neutral nor value positive to traditional public diplomats. Joe Johnson, a retired Foreign Service Office and my former supervisor in the Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the US Information Agency, tells us that new technology is making the practice of public diplomacy much more complicated, at least inside government corridors: "On balance, technology is making public affairs and public communication harder, not easier. The Internet spreads rumors faster than authorities can set the record straight . . . Using information to control rumors will be a major issue."[13] Thus the new public diplomacy in the new digital age is a challenge for public diplomacy practitioners and public affairs officers (PAOs). This is a cautionary note for efforts to utilize the latest bells and whistles in technology to both monitor and respond to dialogue on the Web.

Traditional public diplomacy tends to take the public for granted, or views public opinion measurement as a necessary evil in foreign policy. There was once a greater emphasis on teaching good citizenship and educating U.S. citizens about their rights and duties in this participatory democracy experiment that we still today promote as a beacon of light for hope and change throughout the world. The halcyon exchange period was in the early 1960s with the advent of the Peace Corps, along with an internationally inspiring civil rights movement, and an enthusiastic sense of international mission and zeal associated with a youthful president and French-speaking wife, both of whom inspired new frontiers in thinking and technology from international outlooks to space travel. The Peace Corps emphasized international service to country, as did the proverbial words of John F. Kennedy in asking not what our country can do for us but in what we ourselves can do for our country. In the last 40 years, however, and certainly since 9/11, the government has not defined much of a role or function for its own public when it comes to public diplomacy. More often than not, citizens have been spectators to the process. The missing public participation in public diplomacy seems to mirror the decline in civic participation.

My research and advocacy are to put the public back into diplomacy. Figure 1.1 emphasizes some of the differences between the public versus diplomacy orientation.

Conventional public diplomacy emphasizes citizens but has at times emphasized citizens in asymmetrical one-way efforts to inform and build a case for a nation's position. An exemplar of this is illustrated in the remarks by President Bush one month after 9/11: "I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding about what our country is about. We've got to do a better job of *making our case.*"[14]

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. Government emphasized a public diplomacy based on some communication theories that have since been challenged. First, communications strategies put in place were crisis-driven and self-preservation oriented, some with very ominous sounding names, and many of which had a very short shelf life. These included Coalition Information Centers (CICs), the White House Office of Global Communications (OGC), and the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) and Total Information Awareness (TIA) at the Department of Defense. These efforts, some more successful than others, were designed to get out more information and to better coordinate information about the U.S. response to 9/11. They are based on the premise that more information leads to better communication. In other words, "they" hate us because they do not understand us. If "they" just knew more about us—if we made a stronger case for ourselves and our position through increasing information about us—then the better off all would be. "They" would like us more.

The emblem of this approach was the Charlotte Beers' directed Shared Values advertising campaign of 2002. Five two-minute adverts presented as documentaries and supported by the Coalition of Muslims for Understanding and the American People were prepared for airing in

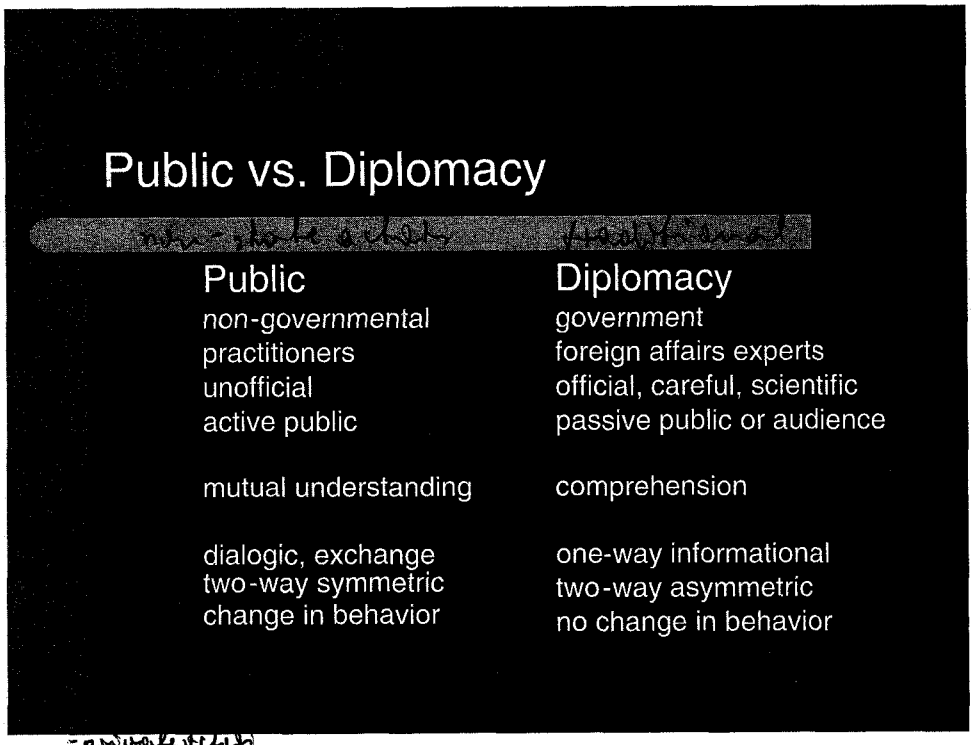

Figure 1.1. Public vs. Diplomacy Orientation

Islamic countries during the Ramadan season. The content of the ads was never in dispute. The problem was that they addressed a communication gap between how Americans view themselves and how others see us. The U.S. position was that 9/11 symbolized a misunderstanding. We were attacked because people did not know who we really were. If we could only show the world that our Muslim American citizens fare well in an open society, then maybe we could work to build bridges with the Middle East, Arab nations, and Islamic believers. What the target audience saw was how well Muslims Americans fared in comparison to how poorly many Muslims fared in U.S.-supported autocratic regimes. The effort to share values ended up showing a harsh contrast between the daily life realities of Muslim people living in the United States and those living under much harsher regimes. Instead of a hoped for message that "our success is your success" it was "our success isn't your success" and here are the images that prove it.

Case making has a long tradition in public diplomacy. In the 21st century it is not enough. Global publics will not allow themselves just to be talked to, but are demanding fuller participation in dialogue and feedback through the help of Web 2.0 communication technologies and new media like Second Life, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. These new media offer interactive back-and-forth engagement that was not even fathomable 10 to 15 years ago, much less in the month after 9/11. Even without such technologies, traditional broadcast media, where most of us still get our information about the world, are now around-the-clock and include speculative reporting that includes a lot of instapundits who can judge, fairly or unfairly, a government's case-making strategies in real time. Our media are becoming "I" media and "We" media, so any public diplomacy research must take into account the various publics and diplomacies that are engaging, collaborating, combating, and just bumping into each other. It requires new thinking about what it means to be part of a public, including what it means to be part of that amorphous global public.

In rethinking public diplomacy, old habits are hard to break. Traditional public diplomacy