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Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy



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p. 121, 128 **Credibility and Public Diplomacy**

Robert H. Gass and John S. Seiter

Immediately following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush enjoyed record high public approval ratings in the U.S.A., ranging from the mid 80s to the low 90s, depending on which polls one consulted.¹ His ratings slipped during the invasion of Iraq, then spiked again following his famous “mission accomplished” speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003. Afterwards, his public approval ratings declined precipitously. As of early 2007, Bush was polling in the high 20s to low 30s, the lowest presidential ratings recorded since Richard Nixon during the Watergate era or Jimmy Carter during the Iran hostage crisis.²

Some of Bush’s lack of popularity can be traced to domestic policy failures, such as FEMA’s sluggish response in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, domestic eavesdropping on U.S. citizens by the NSA, and the firing of U.S. attorneys for apparently political reasons. However, much of Bush’s dismal approval ratings stemmed from shortcomings in his foreign policy—most notably the war in Iraq. Towards the end of his term Bush was not only unpopular at home, he was unpopular abroad. According to a BBC poll, nearly three-quarters of the people polled in 25 countries disapproved of the U.S. policy in Iraq.³ In a similar vein, Zaharna commented that “U.S. public diplomacy has a much more serious problem. It has a credibility deficit of global proportions.”⁴ In short, Bush’s credibility suffered, in large part, due to ineffective public diplomacy.

As president and commander in chief, Bush’s credibility, in turn, rubbed off on the United States in general. As Snow recently lamented, “. . . the American image in the world is now at rock bottom.”⁵ Likewise, Peterson commented “. . . there is little doubt that stereotypes of Americans as arrogant, self-indulgent, hypocritical, inattentive, and unwilling or unable to engage in cross-cultural dialogue are pervasive and deeply rooted.”⁶ Thus, from the vantage point of much of the world, “America the beautiful” became a nation of ugly Americans.

This is not to say that the U.S. has ignored efforts to improve its image abroad. The problem is that many such efforts by the State Department simply seem like window dressing. By way of illustration, rap artist Toni Blackman was appointed as the official “Hip Hop” ambassador by the U.S. Department of State, and former Olympic skater Michelle Kwan holds the official title of “American Public Diplomacy Envoy.”⁷ Moreover, Charlotte Beers, a successful Madison Avenue ad executive was hired to “rebrand American foreign policy” in the Middle East.⁸ She resigned 17 months later, having accomplished little. Apparently, selling Uncle Sam’s policies on the Arab street proved much more difficult than selling Cheerios on Main Street.

In a more serious move to enhance the U.S. reputation abroad, Bush appointed Karen

Hughes, former ambassador to the Middle East, to lead the State Department’s public diplomacy efforts. It is that no set of institutions will secure the liberty of a people who are not persuaded by their rulers.

What U.S. public diplomacy has done is to persuade the world that the U.S. is a land of freedom and democracy.

Aims and Objectives

We concur that the U.S. is suffering from a credibility deficit. We believe that the U.S. public diplomacy efforts to public diplomacy and failures to extend cooperation with international organizations. Thus, Colin Powell’s own credibility as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. was severely damaged by his speech as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N.

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Tenets of Credibility

Whether a country defines credibility as the ability to persuade others, or as the ability to be perceived as credible, the U.S. public diplomacy efforts to public diplomacy and failures to extend cooperation with international organizations. Thus, Colin Powell’s own credibility as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. was severely damaged by his speech as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N.

Hughes, former White House Communications director, as Under Secretary for public diplomacy in 2005.⁹ She was roundly criticized, however, for lacking knowledge of, and experience in, the Middle East.¹⁰ Her lack of experience underscored the U.S. credibility problem. The reality is that no set of talking points from the State Department can undo the damage caused by the Abu Ghraib scandal, the detainees still being held at Guantanamo, and trials involving extraordinary renditions of foreigners by the CIA. Zaharna underscored this point, noting that:

What U.S. officials don't seem to register is that no amount of information pumped out by U.S. public diplomacy will be enough to improve the U.S. image. The problem, ultimately, is not lack of information but lack of credibility . . . Without credibility, no amount of information holds persuasive weight, and U.S. soft power can't attract and influence others.¹¹

Aims and Goals

We concur that America has an image problem. Most notably, the United States' credibility is suffering. We also believe that it is difficult to project a credible image without knowing what credibility entails. In this essay we therefore examine the concept of source credibility as it relates to public diplomacy. Specifically, we draw upon recent examples of public diplomacy successes and failures to illuminate key constructs related to credibility. In addition, we argue for an extended conceptualization of credibility that includes not only individuals, but corporations, organizations, institutions, governments, social movements, and other organized collectivities.¹² Thus, Colin Powell's speech before the United Nations on February 5, 2003 affected not only his own credibility, but that of the entire Bush administration. Powell subsequently described that speech as the "lowest point in my life."¹³

In addition to advocating an expanded view of credibility, we argue for an expanded conceptualization of public diplomacy, rather than the traditional view that public diplomacy entails official government-sponsored efforts to shape public perceptions.¹⁴ Our view is consistent with that of Snow and others included in this volume. Public diplomacy, in our view, consists of more than the words or deeds of heads of state and their representatives. Public diplomacy also encompasses civic action, such as actions by social movements, cultural exchange programs, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations. Public diplomacy is essentially a form of national image management, which includes any and all efforts to capture the hearts and minds of others, through official or unofficial means.¹⁵ Thus, the U.S. military's role in the Abu Ghraib scandal can be viewed as an unfortunate act of public diplomacy that severely damaged the U.S. military's credibility in Iraq and America's credibility in the Middle East. In contrast, efforts by Habitat for Humanity International to build homes for poor people across the globe have enhanced the United States' image abroad.

In advocating an expanded view of credibility we also argue for an expanded view of persuasion. We suggest that persuasion may be intentional or unintentional. Accidental influence is, in fact, quite common. Thus, missteps by an organization or institution may inadvertently damage that organization's or institution's credibility and, in turn, its potential to persuade. Missteps by the U.S. in Iraq, for example, have damaged U.S. credibility and, in turn, the U.S. ability to persuade other nations that Iran's nuclear intentions are military rather than commercial.

Tenets of Credibility

Credibility is a Perceptual Phenomenon

Whether a source possesses credibility or not is largely in the eye of the beholder. O'Keefe defines credibility as "judgments made by a perceiver (e.g. message recipient) concerning the

Definitive

believability of a communicator."¹⁶ This definition highlights the fact that credibility is receiver-based. Credibility does not reside in a source. It is bestowed on a source by an audience.

This realization is important because a source westerners might see as lacking in credibility may nonetheless have high credibility in the eyes of his or her followers. For example, Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is almost universally disliked by Americans and Brits. Yet among his conservative followers, especially the ideological hardliners, he is extremely popular. He is less popular among Iran's centrists and reformists, which illustrates that within his own country his credibility varies.

Organizational or institutional credibility is a perceptual phenomenon as well. To some, a multinational corporation such as Coca-Cola may be revered, while in the eyes of others it may be reviled. Much the same applies to governments and nations. Some nations—though they are regrettably fewer of late—respect and admire the U.S., while others loathe America and its policies. As Snow opined, "Too often the United States is seen as a benevolent Dr. Jekyll at home and a malevolent Mr. Hyde abroad."¹⁷ Such differences in domestic versus foreign perceptions of the U.S. illustrate the perceptual nature of credibility.

Of course, saying that credibility "resides" in the minds of audience members is different from saying that the source has no control over perceptions of credibility. Indeed, while audience members ultimately decide who is and is not credible, their impressions are affected by the statements and actions of a source. This notion is central to Impression Management Theory, which not only suggests that communicators try to project desirable images but also that credibility is centrally important to this process.¹⁸ For example, while other dimensions (e.g., a source's likeability) may be significant for those attempting to project a positive public image, Tedeschi and Norman noted that credibility was the most important dimension.¹⁹ The implication of this is clear: sources have the ability to influence perceptions of their credibility and will be most successful when they can adapt to their audiences. This theme is so important, we will return to it shortly.

Credibility is Dynamic

Like a bull or a bear market, credibility comes and goes. Popular leaders cannot rest on their laurels. Maintaining credibility is an ongoing effort. As we noted at the outset of this essay, George W. Bush's public opinion polls were saw-toothed, waxing soon after September 11 and waning steadily during his second term in office. Bush remained steadfast in his support for the war, but the swagger he displayed when he proclaimed "Mission Accomplished" aboard the *U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003 was soon gone. Similar ups and downs are experienced by many if not most world leaders. A leader's standing tends to ebb and flow over time.

Such was the case for Kofi Annan. His credibility dipped dramatically in 2005, in the wake of the oil-for-food scandal.²⁰ Some \$64 billion worth of Iraqi oil was illegally sold on the black market. Worse yet, Kofi Annan's son, Kojo, was implicated in the scandal. In light of this and other scandals, a number of sources called for Annan's resignation.²¹

The dynamic nature of credibility holds true for organizations and institutions as well. An institution, such as the U.N. can enjoy high credibility in one decade and low credibility in another. Most recently, the U.N. has been an embattled organization, rocked by scandals and plagued by the perception that it is largely irrelevant.²² The movie *Hotel Rwanda*, for example, portrayed the U.N. as ineffectual in preventing genocide in Africa. Consider the following characterization of the U.N. that was offered in an editorial in the *Columbus Dispatch*:

The United Nations gave credence to the charge that it is a useless debating society when it was powerless to stop an Arab militia's slaughter of thousands of Africans in Sudan's Darfur region. Add to that the scandals in the oil-for-food program in Iraq, missing documents in a probe of wrongdoing

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by an oil-for-food contractor that employed Secretary-General Kofi Annan's son, sexual abuse of Africans by U.N. peacekeepers and the membership of the worst human-rights violators on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. The United Nations is damaged goods.²³

This harsh assessment illustrates the dynamic nature of institutional credibility. The U.N.'s new secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, has an opportunity to restore the organization's image. His personal credibility and that of the United Nations will be tested on such hot button issues as nuclear proliferation in Iran and genocide in Sudan. To restore the world body's tarnished image, he will need to demonstrate that the U.N. is capable of doing more than sending people wearing blue helmets to stand by and do nothing while refugees starve or are butchered.

Credibility is Situation-specific and Culture-bound

Sources must realize that because they are credible in one situation or circumstance does not mean they are credible in all situations or circumstances. A source's credibility is subject to change as she or he moves from one setting to another. By way of example, Bush's credibility soared when he addressed the first responders and the nation via a bullhorn from ground zero on September 14, 2001. It was an iconic moment in his presidency as he stood with his arm around one firefighter. He seemed made for the job. He exuded toughness and fortitude. He also exhibited compassion and reassured a nation that was in shock. "I can hear you" he said to firefighters who shouted their support. "The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."²⁴

Cut to four years later and Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina and the situation was entirely different. Gone was the confidence and fortitude he had displayed at ground zero. The president seemed detached, disconnected, and disengaged.²⁵ There was no "bullhorn moment." Instead, there was another defining moment of his presidency, when he complimented his political appointee, Michael Brown, who lacked any experience in disaster relief, by proclaiming "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." Brown, the head of FEMA, resigned 10 days later following an onslaught of negative publicity.

Not only is credibility situational or contextual, it embodies a cultural component as well. Credibility operates similarly, but not identically, across cultures. We examine cross-cultural differences in credibility in more detail later. For the moment, however, it is worth noting that the importance attached to particular dimensions of credibility may vary from culture to culture. Hayes reported, for example, that the general finding that high credibility sources are more persuasive than low credibility sources held true for international audiences.²⁶ However, Hayes found that Jamaicans were less suspicious of a low credibility source (Radio Peiping) than Americans or Cubans, while Cubans were more critical of a high credibility source (the BBC) than Americans or Jamaicans. The differences were attributed, in part, to Cold War perceptions of the media.

Credibility is a Multi-dimensional Construct

Those attempting to project a credible image must realize that credibility is not comprised of a single factor or dimension. Credibility represents a confluence of characteristics which have been classified into primary and secondary dimensions. In 380 B.C.E. Aristotle proclaimed that ethos was comprised of "good sense, good moral character, and good will."²⁷ He was, for the most part, on target. Factor analytic studies conducted since the 1960s have confirmed that there are three basic or primary dimensions of credibility and perhaps a half dozen secondary dimensions.²⁸ As we'll note later, while the primary dimensions tend to be relevant in almost all contexts, the

secondary dimensions are more situation-specific. We now examine each of these dimensions, in turn, as they apply to public diplomacy.

Expertise

An important, primary dimension of source credibility is expertise, which is also referred to in the literature as competence or qualification.²⁹ Expertise answers the question, "Does the source know his or her stuff?" In the case of an organization or other entity, one might ask, "is there sufficient institutional expertise?" To be viewed as credible a source must be seen as knowledgeable about the issue at hand, competent in dealing with the issue, and capable of making the best decision on that issue.

A clear example of a lack of apparent expertise is illustrated by the fact that the Bush administration got it all wrong when it concluded Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Various White House officials, from Colin Powell, to Dick Cheney, to Donald Rumsfeld, to Condoleezza Rice, to the President himself all announced matter-of-factly that Iraq had stockpiles of chemical and biological agents and was pursuing nuclear weapons. In 2003, Rumsfeld pronounced "We know where—where the WMDs are. They're near Tikrit and Baghdad, and north, south, east, and west of there."³⁰ In a now infamous sound bite, Rice stated "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."³¹

The Bush administration also damaged its perceived expertise by adopting an "anti-science" stance on a number of issues, most notably global warming. Bush withdrew from the Kyoto Accord, claiming the "jury was still out" on climate change. Furthermore, testimony by witnesses at Senate hearings held in February 2007 revealed that administration officials tried systematically to manipulate or withhold information on climate change and to muzzle government scientists who tried to speak out on the issue.³²

Bush is not the only actor on the world stage who has demonstrated an apparent lack of expertise. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's decision to host a "holocaust denial" conference did little to enhance his perceived expertise. His denouncement of claims that 6 million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis as "a myth" convinced many in the world community that he is not a rational actor.

In the Arab world, the *Al Jazeera* network is viewed as having expertise. The network, which is now more than a decade old, boasts some 50 million viewers and possesses far greater credibility to its viewers than the BBC or CNN. *Al Jazeera*, well-known for airing Osama Bin Laden's videotapes, has a decidedly Muslim bent (using terms like "martyr" rather than "terrorist"). Viewers throughout the Middle East, however, regard it as a reliable alternative to Western media propaganda. Based in Qatar, *Al Jazeera* is seen as offering a more balanced perspective, countering both Western media and more extremist networks such as *Al Manar* (the pro-Hamas station).³³

Al Jazeera functions as an arm of public diplomacy in the Middle East in the same way that the BBC and CNN do in the Western world. George W. Bush himself may have inadvertently boosted *Al Jazeera's* credibility on the Arab street. According to a memo leaked to the British press, Bush considered bombing the network at one point.³⁴ *Al-Arabiya* is *Al Jazeera's* major rival satellite network in the Middle East. The American-owned and operated satellite channel, *Al-Hurra* ("the Free One"), has attracted only a few million viewers.

Trustworthiness

A second, primary dimension of credibility is trustworthiness.³⁵ A source may be knowledgeable or possess expertise, but what if the source can't be trusted? Trust is vital for actors on the world stage. Consider George W. Bush's comment about Russia's president Vladimir Putin, when the two met for the first time in 2001. "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very

straightforward soul."³⁶ Cont Iraq, and Nor and Kim Jong

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