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## Managing national reputation and international relations in the global era: Public diplomacy revisited

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review and re-examine the concept and practice of public diplomacy in light of the incredible pace of change in global politics and communication, and to discuss implications for future research. It first explains the significance of national reputation and its linkage to public diplomacy. It then surveys and assesses a broad range of literature on public diplomacy, characterized by three basic discourses: public diplomacy as policy-driven rather than relationship-based, the primacy of nation-state governments in the structure and process of public diplomacy, and an emphasis on mass media communication. The paper finally suggests and outlines further research efforts based on the existing literature and the evolving contexts.  
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Just as personal reputation and corporate reputation, national reputation also matters. As a form of public goods, it creates "either an enabling or a disabling environment" (Foreign Policy Centre, 2002, p. 9) in which nation-states pursue political goals and policies in the global arena. National reputation is unquestionably an instrument of power. Managing national reputation and nation-states' relationship with stakeholders overseas has been an integral part of foreign-policy making and public diplomacy.

National reputation is all about having a good name in the world of nations. It refers to collective judgments of a foreign country's image and character that are then used to predict or explain its future behavior (Mercer, 1996, p. 6). It is, simply put, others' summary construct of one nation's culture, policy, and conduct. One of the reliable indicators of a nation's reputation is the opinion of the given nation as expressed by foreign publics. Historically, as part of a nation's "soft power" (Nye, 2004), national reputation, along with military and economic resources, has been a pivotal force in international relations. These days, foreign public opinion is gaining ever more significance in forming an emerging globalized public and influencing international political process and outcome. As Leonard (2002, p. 48) observed, "[t]he last decade is rife with examples of popular perceptions, rather than governments, setting the pace for international diplomacy."

Cultivating and managing a favorable international/world opinion toward a nation-state has been the mandate of public diplomacy, the so-called "public face" of traditional diplomacy. As an extension of traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy generally refers to "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring

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about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). Its main instruments have included TV and radio broadcasts, films, books, magazines, cultural and educational exchanges, etc. However, with the changing global political and economic landscape, the proliferation of media and communication technologies, the emergence of new players in global affairs (e.g., world organizations, multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations) and, most of all, the complex confluence of these facets, the credibility and effectiveness of standard communication practices in public diplomacy is increasingly under challenge.

The purpose of this paper is to review and re-examine the concept and practice of public diplomacy in light of the incredible pace of change in global politics and communication, and to discuss implications so as to pave the way for future avenues of research on this topic. Specifically, this effort includes three tasks. First, we need to gain a clearer understanding of the significance and power of national reputation that underpin the foundation of public diplomacy. Academic research on public diplomacy (e.g., Gilboa, 1998; Grunig, 1993; Kunczik, 1997; Manheim, 1994) as well as historical accounts by historians and professional diplomats (e.g., Dizard, 2004; Wolper, 1993) tend to take this for granted. In this paper, we will incorporate literature in international relations to describe and explain why national reputation matters. Second, we will take stock of the "state of the field" by reviewing the four major strands of literature on public diplomacy to identify common threads and assumptions, and point out biases and gaps. Third, we will outline research implications based on the literature survey and the contemporary challenges facing public diplomatic communication.

### 1. Between weapons and words: national reputation as "soft power"

National reputation matters in international interactions and transactions. As Jervis (1970, p. 6) wrote, a desired image and reputation can often be "of greater use than a significant increment of military or economic power." It is hence a form of power and, in Nye's (1990, 2004) term, "soft power." Nye extended the argument made by E.H. Carr decades ago, who categorized international power into military, economic, and power over opinion (2004, p. 8). According to Nye (p. x), soft power refers to "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." In essence, national reputation, rooted in international/world public opinion, signifies the presence or absence of international legitimacy accrued to a certain nation (Tucker & Hendrickson, 2004, p. 18).

Moreover, the weight of power resources varies and shifts. As Nye (2004) argued, the relationship between "hard" and "soft" powers encompasses three main aspects. First, hard power and soft power are related and reinforce each other to achieve behavioral goals. Second, we are moving from military force, population, and geography to economic growth, technology, information, and education. Third, relying on one source of power is insufficient to achieve desired goals.

National reputation is one clear indication of a nation's power strength. It reflects and affects the country's standing in the global arena. For instance, a nation's reputational capital may affect the country's ability to build coalitions and alliances to achieve international political objectives (e.g., Nye, 1990, 2004), to influence perceptions and purchase decisions regarding products from certain countries of origin (e.g., Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Jeffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 1993), to attract foreign investment (e.g., Kotler & Gertner, 2002) or in-bound tourism (e.g., Chon, 1990; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000). Though these goals are more often than not inter-related and intertwined, this essay focuses on the role of national reputation in international politics and relations, and its implication for public diplomatic communication.

It is certainly naive to assume that publics, domestic or foreign, always have an informed view or coherent opinion on matters related to cross-national and foreign policy issues (e.g., Holsti, 1991). Most likely, they do not. Neither are we certain that direct and effective linkages between public opinion and policies do always exist (e.g., Kull & Ramsay, 2000; Powlick & Katz, 1998; Todorov & Mandisodza, 2004). However, the role of individuals and their expressed opinions do form a climate of opinion, in which decision-makers pursue policies. When public opinion is activated, the climate of opinion can limit or broaden policy choices and actions. Therefore, the perceptions and opinions held by foreign publics regarding a given nation become critically important to decisions by nation-states. Managing the information flow in such contexts has been the realm of public diplomacy, and still is in this brave new world of globalization and communication. But the practice of public diplomacy needs to be re-examined and re-assessed.

## 2. Public diplomacy revisited

Diplomatic communication, historically based on "government-to-government" and "diplomat-to-diplomat" interactions, has expanded to include "government-to-people" contacts (e.g., Manheim, 1994, p. 3; Sprout & Sprout, 1962, p. 142). To make sense of this area of inquiry and bring some order to the enterprise, we group the existing literature on public diplomacy into four categories: (1) mass media and public diplomacy, (2) public diplomacy and its intersection with adjacent disciplines, (3) historical perspectives of public diplomacy, and (4) public diplomacy strategy and management.

The first group of research investigates the role of the mass media in public diplomacy (e.g., Gilboa, 1998; Kunczik, 1997; Manheim, 1994). Manheim and Albritton conducted a series of studies to investigate image campaigns by various national governments and their coverage in the media, and to explore the impact of such campaigns on foreign public opinion (e.g., Albritton & Manheim, 1983, 1985; Manheim, 1994; Manheim & Albritton, 1984). Examples of such communication tactics included the staging and subsequent press coverage of heads-of-state visits (see also Wang & Chang, 2004) and other public relations initiatives (see also Zhang & Cameron, 2003). Gilboa (1998, 2000) provided a detailed analysis of the various roles that the mass media play in diplomatic processes and activities, ranging from their roles in secret diplomacy to the media as a broker in international conflicts.

In light of the growing contact points in international interactions and, especially, with the rising prominence of the internet and other new communication technologies, we can no longer take for granted the centrality of the mass media in communicating with foreign publics. The efficacy of media communication as a primary tool in public diplomacy in certain regions of the world is also called into question. For instance, as Zaharna (2003) pointed out, the U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world represent an "information-centered" view of communication, with information transmission as the central goal; whereas, in the Arab countries, communication means relationship, and hence interpersonal communication tactics might be more appropriate than mass media.

The second stream of research represents an exploration of how other disciplines of knowledge may be relevant and useful to public diplomacy. Earlier on, the apparent consensus was that public diplomacy practitioners could benefit from the knowledge and insight from social scientific research (e.g., sociology, psychology, anthropology, language, and communication) on human behavior (e.g., Fisher, 1972; Hoffman, 1968). More recently, public diplomacy has been examined from the perspective of public relations. Signitzer and Coombs (1992) argued that, with similar objectives and tactics, these two areas of communication practice are "in a natural process of convergence" (p. 146). Grunig (1993) suggested various models of public diplomacy based on public relations frameworks.

A series of research and career accounts of U.S. public diplomacy efforts have shed light on some of the historical episodes and the inner workings. This body of literature mainly focuses on two U.S. public diplomacy institutions and their practices, i.e., the Committee on Public Information (CPI) (e.g., Creel, 1920; Vaughn, 1980) and the United States Information Agency (USIA) (e.g., Dizard, 2004; Haelele, 2001; Malone, 1988). For instance, case histories of CPI's work overseas during World War I (e.g., in China, Schmidt, 1998; in Spain, Wolper, 1993) highlighted the role of public diplomacy in international communications and relations, the range of communication vehicles employed, and their impact. In addition, there have also been general accounts of how other countries and governments conducted their public diplomacy programs—Keylor (1993) on France; Rawnsley on Britain (1996) and Taiwan (2000).

Finally, a group of research projects on public diplomacy have recently been conducted by a number of U.S. and British think tanks—the Brookings Institution (2004), the Council on Foreign Relations (2003), and the Foreign Policy Centre (2002), to name a few. All of them identified gaps in the current concept and practice, and addressed the needs for strengthening public diplomatic communication. If the U.S. efforts were a result of America's deteriorating image and reputation in the world community in recent years, the analysis by Britain's Foreign Policy Centre represented a more pro-active examination. The report stated that public diplomacy is not merely about advocating and promoting political and economic goals to the international public; it is, instead, about relationship building between nations and cultures through better communication.

In general, the literature on public diplomacy is characterized by three basic discourses. First, public diplomacy is part and parcel of foreign-policy making and has primarily been policy-driven rather than relationship-based. The sine qua non of public diplomacy has been the advocacy of a country's specific international policies through cultivating favorable attitudinal environment for the policies. Second, as an integral part of foreign-policy making, national government is inseparable from the structure and process of public diplomacy. Military and foreign policy have been the executive sovereignty of a modern state. Except in the recent think tank reports that start to challenge the received

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notion of the primacy of the government in public diplomatic communication, much of the literature assumes that national government plays the sponsor and communicator role in public diplomacy. Third, there has been a bias toward the employment of the mass media (e.g., print, radio, television, and film) in public diplomatic communication. Although the power of the mass media allows people to develop awareness of the world beyond their immediate surroundings, much of public diplomatic communication has remained undifferentiated, one-way transmission.

### 3. Research implications

As in the general study of international relations, the field of public diplomacy is inevitably driven by changing events, if not exclusively so (Holsti, 1991, p. 4). Given its currency in contemporary international relations, based on our review, we identify at least three aspects of public diplomacy in need for further exploration. First, managing national reputation is not just about projecting a certain national image but rather negotiating understanding with foreign publics. Such communicative acts are premised on a precise definition of one's audience and a measured understanding of them. With more and more civic participation and public expression of opinions from around the world, the scope of the audience for public diplomacy needs to be broadened. Further research is necessary to help us better understand and map out the varied audiences for public diplomacy programs.

Moreover, if public diplomacy is about building relationships and negotiating understanding between nations and peoples, it is important that we develop a better understanding of the audiences, not only at the rational but also at the emotional level. The formation of one's opinion about or attitude toward a certain foreign nation encompasses both rational and emotional grounds, and the latter remains under-explored. Standard survey instruments are adequate in revealing audiences' general evaluation (e.g., positive versus negative) of a foreign country and their perception strength (e.g., strong versus weak). Yet, the element of how audiences relate to a foreign country (e.g., emotional versus deliberative) is often ignored.

The second implication of the present review is that, while government is still the driving force behind public diplomacy, the onus can no longer fall on the nation-state government alone. The credibility and efficacy of the government, as the primary communicator, is now often suspected, because people tend to perceive communication by a foreign government as political propaganda. Without source credibility, no amount of communication and information will ever be effective and, worse, could even be counter-productive. However, it is unclear how to re-define the government's role and to identify other social institutions and their roles in public diplomacy. Further study is needed to understand some of these key issues involved. Should the government continue to be the overseer of public diplomatic communication? With the rising influence of new actors in international relations, such as non-governmental organizations, trans-government organizations (e.g., the United Nations), and multinational companies, what is their role, if any, in public diplomacy?

The third research implication from this review deals with modes of communication. Two issues are highlighted here and invite further examination. One is that more research is necessary to help us understand whether a certain mode of communication (e.g., mass media) or a combination of various modes (both one-way and dialogic communication) is more effective. In conventional public diplomacy, the prevalent mode of communication is mass media-driven, one-way communication, supported by two-way communication, such as cultural and educational exchanges. What remains to be better understood is the relationship among the different communication modes. The other issue we would like to highlight as a fertile ground for research is the role of new communication technologies in public diplomacy, especially as related to communicating with the younger generation of the global public. Except for brief mentions in some of the think tank research reports (e.g., Brookings Institution, 2004), there is a glaring absence of efforts devoted to studying the role of the internet and other new communication technologies in public diplomacy.

### 4. Conclusions

As Dewey (1938, p. 499) puts it, the most vibrant and useful social research grows "out of actual social needs, tensions, 'troubles'." The renewed interest in public diplomacy is clearly attributable to the increasingly diffused centers of interest and power in international politics and the ever more complex communication dynamics. The end of the Cold War did not diminish the role of public diplomacy, but rather made it more significant than ever (Leonard, 2002, p. 48). This review discusses the vital importance of public diplomacy to cultivating and managing national reputation and its continuing relevance in managing international relations. Based on the review of the existing literature, we

identified at least three areas in the process of public diplomacy that await investigation. They are suggestive rather than exhaustive. In short, the essay represents our modest attempt to synthesize the traditions in the study of public diplomacy and to open up new vistas for exploration in this area of research.

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