

# Conversations and Comments on the State of Public Diplomacy at State – A View from the Bottom Up

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**W**hat is Public Diplomacy? What does it mean to be a “Public Diplomacy officer?” Who should be doing Public Diplomacy in the US government and how is it best done? Why does Public Diplomacy (known far and wide as “PD”) still have a mixed record, despite years of effort and attention? How is the State Department addressing the many changes that new media have brought?

These questions and many others often filled my head during my three-year tour as a mid-level Public Diplomacy officer at US Embassy Beijing where we were lucky enough to have in Ambassador Jon Huntsman a Chief of Mission who believed in Public Diplomacy and empowered its officers. Seeking answers led me to the Council’s Kathryn W. Davis Public Diplomacy Fellowship. Thanks to the Fellowship, I was able to spend this past year talking to high-level US government officials, ex-officials, academics, think tank representatives, and private industry professionals, all of whom think strategically and care deeply about Public Diplomacy. Since my interviews were on background in order to encourage candor, what follows is a synthesis of the opinions I heard as an inexperienced PD officer making his way about Washington. Thus, these are not my opinions, but rather those of seasoned professionals who have been observing and working in Public Diplomacy for many years. I present them in all their candor, in the hope that they will become part of the ongoing conversation on the state of Public Diplomacy at State and throughout the US government.

First the good news: never has Public Diplomacy been more needed or more appreciated. And, almost everyone recognizes this, especially among the junior ranks. PD officers serve tours in every cone, are integrated completely into the State system and vocabulary, and our colleagues from other cones compete for highly sought after PD tours. While the canard that talking to the press can only hurt you still exists at State, I have not met a single officer overseas who would disagree with the need for more active engagement with the public, and thus the media, by a wide-range of embassy officials. The benefits far outweigh the risks. Public Diplomacy is also the place to be for the conversations happening beyond the reach of governments and censorship, in the virtual worlds of social media.

Because of all these factors, the intake of PD officers is on the upswing. Recruits of the highest caliber with diverse but relevant experience are bringing fresh ideas and new insights to the field. They are also putting in place best practices from the professional world—at a time when their skills are needed to secure and maintain the reputation of PD officers in the field. These new recruits are increasingly working for a new generation of PD leaders who have moved past the divisiveness of 1999, when the United States Information Agency was integrated into the State Department, and are looking to do the

most they can with available resources. In short, State has the people, tools, and the desire to define and orient Public Diplomacy to positively influence thinking and feeling about America around the world. The new Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Tara Sonenshine, has an historic opportunity, and she and her office staff (R) seem to know it. Already, in their outreach to officers in the field, there is a sense of redefined and clarified mission.

On the other hand, as many conversations made clear, Public Diplomacy at State is still reeling from a lack of consistent leadership at the top. The constant rotation in the Under Secretary position over the last ten years has taken a toll on staff and on the image of Public Diplomacy at State. A constant refrain I heard was that Public Diplomacy writ large is suffering from a lack of budget, a lack of defined mission, and a lack of boldness. While this did not always seem the case in the field—where strong leadership and front office support put Public Diplomacy at the front-and-center of many of our efforts in China—it also seemed clear that many in Washington believe this. Judith McHale, the former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, undertook the onerous task of instituting necessary internal structural reforms that has left R stronger. But there's a feeling among PD professionals that PD officers must now take the lead in putting forward their best and boldest ideas. There are, apparently, new directives to the field that are soon to be deployed in order to instill a stronger *esprit de corps* and a greater sense of boldness. These should go a long way to helping define Public Diplomacy's mission and empowering PD officers.

I was also told repeatedly that State needs to work better with the military. This makes sense. State PD officers should further recognize the tremendous organizational strength, reach, and resources of the Department of Defense (DOD). While this is already happening on the ground at embassies around the world, we need to ensure the trend continues and gathers strength in Washington. There are currently some PD officers who are not comfortable working with the military; or they believe State and DOD should never mix. This attitude dooms State to a place far from the decision-making table. We should confront this attitude and change it. Not only do State and DOD report to the same boss, but our missions are compatible and complementary, not competitive. Just look at port visits by US Navy hospital ships to developing countries. While interagency cooperation across the board should be any PD officer's mantra—and I have seen more than one Public Affairs Section bring a variety of warring agencies and personalities together—no relationship is more important, and potentially more valuable, for State PD officers to get right than the one with the military.

Another interesting suggestion on the practice of Public Diplomacy that I heard was the need for State to refocus on TV, the outlet from which we most shy away, especially when it comes to vernacular languages. I was repeatedly told that State tries too often to hide behind the imagined silver bullet of social media, sending out carefully translated and approved posts and tweets. However, State PD officers should be appearing more and more on local and satellite TV, speaking out and conveying the US government's message to hundreds of millions of watchers. As the world grows wealthier, more and more citizens will buy their first TV (before their first computer) and we need to talk to

them—even if that means the occasional misstatement. If the United States does not talk to the world through TV, then CCTV (China Central Television), Russia Today, and others certainly will.

The R bureau also needs to put its own best practices to work inside the Harry S. Truman building. Several insider stories emphasized for me that Public Diplomacy's biggest enemy seems sometimes to be itself. Other agencies, as well as people and institutions outside of State, do not yet understand how Public Diplomacy at State works, who is in charge, and how Public Diplomacy can help drive US government goals. But this is not something to simply bemoan. It is an opportunity for PD officers: a chance to go out and prove ourselves, especially in the field where one well-done Public Diplomacy event can win over even the most skeptical Ambassador. This requires training, experience, and Public Affairs Officers who are experienced, professional, knowledgeable, and willing to propose interesting, smart ways to engage with the public and the host government. While PD officers still need to do the bread-and-butter press conferences, interviews, and exchanges expertly, we also need to be thinking strategically so that we can react to events as they occur, offer proactive responses, and prove our worth.

Finally, based on my conversations, here are a few suggestions to the most frequently mentioned critiques. Although all of the following suggestions have been made before, tackle huge topics beyond the scope of this article, and are currently being debated in Washington today, I hope that by raising them, I can add a mid-level officer's view to the conversation:

- ◆ *CRITIQUE*: Public Diplomacy needs to be more specifically defined. There is a clear difference between cultural (long term) and press (short to medium term) and they should be treated and staffed differently. Trying to lump them together only creates confusion and forces people to take jobs for which they aren't best suited.

*SUGGESTION*: Cultural Affairs should be its own independent agency with a different focus, agenda, and personality.

- ◆ *CRITIQUE*: Leadership is essential. Public Diplomacy is currently viewed as an implementation shop for “selling ideas,” instead of a strategic policymaker whose ideas, actions, and programs rank in importance to any government-to-government relationship.

*SUGGESTION*: R should drive a philosophy of one government, one message that is led solely by R in coordination with the National Security Staff. Therefore, PD officers should focus more than their colleagues in other cones on becoming specialists in areas of expertise, regions, and languages. Depth of knowledge is what brings respect and earns a seat at the table. At the same time, our embassies should focus on hiring local staff and contractors with extensive TV, radio, online and print expertise.

- ◆ *CRITIQUE*: The Smith-Mundt Act should be reconsidered. There is a very long history here and a deep philosophical debate to be had on what role and

relationship Americans should have in and with Public Diplomacy. But it seems that Smith-Mundt has outlived its time and is often used as an excuse for inaction.

*SUGGESTION:* State should either seek to eliminate the Act or take a more open interpretation of it, recognizing that most Americans get their news and views online.

- ◆ *CRITIQUE:* Strengthen the Public Diplomacy cone. Moving away from PD practice for a moment, many people with whom I spoke cited the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) and their restructuring of CA, down to one-email bidding, as an example of how to rebuild morale.

*SUGGESTION:* Focusing further on officer development would have many benefits. PD officers should have more opportunities for the training they need, along with opportunities to work in the private sector, academia, and beyond, so that they could become true experts and specialists. PD officers should work more often and more closely with DOD and have more DOD excursion-tour opportunities. In general, PD tours should be longer and require area, language, or medium (TV/print/online) specialization. At the same time, R should strengthen relations with think tanks, institutions, organizations, and agencies outside of the US government.

The above is a laundry list of suggestions, demands, and criticisms based entirely on input I received from a wide-range of fascinating conversations afforded to me through my Fellowship. For a young PD officer peering up from the bottom rungs of a long ladder, it was an excellent introduction to the realities of Washington bureaucracy and a roadmap for considerations as I make my way in my career. I hope readers will consider them as jumping off points for an honest discussion and evaluation of the prospect for continual improvement of State's Public Diplomacy efforts.