

What I'm Talking About When I Talk About Strategic Public Diplomacy

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Disclaimer: *The author is a Special Assistant in the Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and the 2008-2009 recipient of the Council of American Ambassadors' (CAA) Kathryn W. Davis Mid-level Public Diplomacy Fellowship. The views expressed in this article are his own views and not necessarily those of the State Department or the US government.*

Diplomacy is traditionally the business of governments talking to governments. It's about delivering a message, clarifying a position, or making a stand. That model worked well in a world of one-way communications where people watched the dialogue and were told what had been said. Today, that world is history. In today's world the traditional model for diplomacy isn't gone, but it's only one part of what matters. Sure, governments still do and still must talk directly, both in public and behind closed doors, about their messages, their positions, and where they stand. But in today's communications world, the public isn't just a passive observer—the public is often a very active participant, with a stake, and a viewpoint, and a voice. Public diplomacy today has a direct and crucial role side-by-side with traditional diplomacy. So now we have to get public diplomacy right if we want to succeed.

But there's the rub—what does it mean to get it right? Traditional diplomacy had it easy—it was primarily one-way communication. Our government delivers its message to your government, and gets a response. Our government tells your government what it thinks of your government's response. It was slow, measured, genteel, quiet. Public diplomacy is chaotic, multidirectional, multi-layered, loud. The participants often self-select, and where they are or why they matter may not be immediately apparent. But it is immediately apparent when you fail to include them. Most importantly, public diplomacy is not linear—it's not about getting to an end, it's about staying engaged in a process—a process that will go on with or without you participating. So it's hard to know when you've got it right—or who you got it right with. Is it ever right, for instance, from a public diplomacy perspective, to have improved relations with a dictator/tyrant/authoritarian ruler? Maybe it is at the time, but not so much afterwards, but maybe that doesn't matter, but maybe it does. Unless it doesn't. So public diplomacy is, perhaps, less about getting it right in a particular instance or on a particular issue, and more about getting into the conversation so your voice and position (based on sound principle and policy) don't get hijacked, or lost in the shuffle.

But where is the conversation that matters? Today, there isn't just one conversation on one medium, there are many conversations, in many places. We all know about social media, new media, new communications, connections technology, or whatever you want to call it. Twenty years ago, you just had to get a face on TV, and you'd get a voice on radio, and 15 years ago maybe you had a Web site with a press release. Build it, and they will

come was the mantra. Not anymore. The market isn't set by the suppliers anymore, the buyers don't come to whatever mall you build. Instead, the market is where the buyers meet, and suppliers go there if they want their goods to sell. And each market is very, very specialized. If you don't get the voice right, if you don't moderate your tone effectively, you get excluded—or ignored. And when that happens, it doesn't matter how good your message is, anything you say backfires.

But at the same time—don't forget—not everyone is on social media.

Public diplomacy's challenge today, then, is to make itself relevant in many places with many voices for many audiences—while carrying a coherent message. First off, we need to know what we are doing and why. Like any good business, we need a mission statement that keeps us on the right trajectory, and the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy has made clear what our mission is in the Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy: *To support the achievement of US foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by informing and influencing foreign publics and by expanding and strengthening the relationship between the people and government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world.* Public diplomacy, in its old guise, had a real love-hate relationship with policy. But in a world of tight budgets and fast-changing attitudes and relationships, that connection now has to be central to what Public Diplomacy does. It can't just focus on telling the story of what Public Diplomacy itself is doing—reporting on exchanges, conferences, or small grants. Public Diplomacy has to have as its goal the establishment of relationships of trust between the people and government of the United States and the people of other countries. And through those relationships, Public Diplomacy must support US foreign policy goals and objectives.

Going forward in Public Diplomacy, I would argue there are four guideposts to follow to keep on track. Public diplomacy programs should be guided by policy, responsive to conditions as they change, focused on the audiences we want to reach, and based on data and research.

I. Guided by Policy: Purposeful

It does us no good to reach out and connect with foreign audiences if we don't know why or on what basis we are making that connection. That doesn't mean that Public Diplomacy can only be transactional—but engagement in its own right is only an end up to a point. Engagement on the part of the government—to the benefit of the governed—becomes worthwhile when it is part of an overall strategy, when policymakers and implementers have a clear vision for and a stake in the success of both the policy and the engagement.

II. Responsive to Conditions: Nimble

Public Diplomacy has to strike a balance between adhering to long-term goals and being capable of responding quickly to changing circumstances. What it has to guard against is valuing programs over results and audiences. A particular program has no inherent value—except in so far as it helps achieve a policy end

with a particular audience. Public Diplomacy can't just be a response to the latest crisis, but it needs to be part of the toolkit to influence conditions on the ground when a crisis is brewing or has already hit.

III. Focused on the Audience: Relevant

One way to ensure the balance between being both nimble and involved for the long-term is to understand the audiences you are trying to reach. If we know who we are engaging, and if our programs are actually relevant to the groups we hope to reach, then what we do has staying power in the face of crisis and can achieve the goal of building a relationship of trust that sustains positive relations. Relevance and audience go in two directions—Public Diplomacy needs a domestic, US constituency to be part of engagement, and it needs a foreign audience to engage with when the goal is building relationships. Forging those relationships means Public Diplomacy needs to be where audiences are—online, in the marketplace, in the schools, wherever our target audience happens to be, to demonstrate active, meaningful engagement through relevant contact.

IV. Based on Data and Research: Measurable

Finally, Public Diplomacy can't rely on anecdotes and gut-reaction to make a case for employing scarce resources. It has to be quick and responsive, but it also has to be measured and measurable—or able to be evaluated. By identifying goals (in conjunction with policies) and audiences, and laying out what the expected behavior is that Public Diplomacy hopes to engender, it can better establish measurable indicators. Decisions need to be made on the basis of constant research so that we understand the audiences we engage. We need to accompany programs and follow them up with further research and data so that we learn from what works, and stop doing what doesn't.

Purposeful, nimble, relevant, measurable public diplomacy is what we need to support policy and national security goals. Successful foreign policy today means engaging foreign publics and building relationships of trust between American and foreign publics. Focusing solely on the government-to-government side of the equation only builds a house of cards guaranteed to come crashing down any time there is any kind of disconnect between a foreign government and its public. Publics, even in authoritarian regimes, have influence on their governments. Our ability to reach those publics and deepen their engagement with America will be an indicator of our ability to achieve our foreign policy and national security objectives.