

Public Diplomacy: At the Crossroads Between Practitioner and Theorist

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Disclaimer: *The views expressed in this article are the author's own views and not necessarily those of the Department of State or the US Government.*

“He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.” Many educators would bristle at least a little bit at this statement, originally penned by George Bernard Shaw in his work, *Maxims for Revolutionists*. While the divide between practitioners and theorists in various subjects is long-standing, it has never been more apparent in the field of public diplomacy than today. This is partly attributable to the fact that the formal academic study of public diplomacy is a relatively new undertaking. Increasingly in the past decade, academics, independent analysts, councils, and commissions dedicated to US public diplomacy have produced numerous articles, blogs, publications, and reports, often focusing on the weakness of American public diplomacy. Many include recommendations on ways to improve the US government's efforts to engage foreign publics around the world. The extent to which these analyses are read by actual practitioners of public diplomacy is unknown; anecdotally, I venture the guess that few active field practitioners have the time to read much of the published academic literature on the subject of public diplomacy.

Moreover, a good deal of this published material is not particularly relevant to the day-to-day work of a practitioner. Some practitioners complain that public diplomacy theorists are off-base, do not understand realities on the ground at our posts around the world, and do not engage in meaningful dialogue with practitioners when they conduct research. In some cases, these complaints are justifiable. While practitioners are reluctant to concur with academic critiques of American public diplomacy, however, they are quick to commiserate with one another about any number of internal deficiencies: lack of staffing, inadequate training, dwindling budgets, poor communication between field posts and the leadership in Washington, and so on. Yet these are issues that are in fact raised in a number of publications on public diplomacy authored by non-practitioners.

The relationship between public diplomacy practitioners and academics should be a natural one, generally speaking. After all, one of the key audiences with which public diplomacy officers (and cultural affairs officers, in particular) traditionally engage in the field are elite academics of the host country. It is back home, in the United States, where the linkages between public diplomacy practitioners and their academic counterparts are somewhat more fractured. I recently attended a panel organized by the Public Diplomacy Council, which convened several former practitioners who now draw upon their experiences to teach students pursuing degrees related to public diplomacy. In the audience were mid-level public diplomacy officers currently serving in the US Foreign Service.

Some important insights that arose in this discussion, which are relevant and informative to the overall work of public diplomacy, include the following:

1. There is no coincidence to the recent rise in the academic study of public diplomacy in the United States. As one panelist put it, during the decade that followed 9/11, “we had a perfect storm of interest and incapacity in public diplomacy in academia because there was a catastrophic drop in the US image overseas...The subject matter was moving so fast, but the serious academic work on the subject was almost non-existent.”¹
2. There is no comprehensive “theory of public diplomacy”—on this, the practitioners and the academics generally agree. But that does not render irrelevant the study of public diplomacy with higher-level academic rigor nor does it devalue the exchanges among practitioners of global ‘best practices’ in public diplomacy.
3. Global public opinion and trends are particularly salient issues for both researchers and practitioners of public diplomacy—and it is particularly on this subject where each has much to gain from the other.
4. Regular, focused dialogue between theorists and practitioners of public diplomacy will strengthen the activities of each.

Academics are from Mars, Practitioners are from Venus...?

The gap between theorist and practitioner is nothing new, nor is it unique to public diplomacy. The academic’s job has always been to expand analytical space through dedicated research about various phenomena. The practitioner in any field typically does not have the time, resources, or immediate motivation to produce lengthy tomes that include a full literature review on a given topic, details of data collection, and several chapters’ worth of analysis interpreting the data. And so these two camps—the theorist and the practitioner—often tend to march forward on parallel tracks, with minimal intersection, save the occasional conference panel, jointly-drafted article, or when an individual leaves one camp to work in another (often the practitioner moving to the classroom or a think tank).

The division is fundamentally the result of each other’s function in and contribution to society, as well as the lens through which we view the world around us. When I was in academia, working on a full-length book about the relationship between nationalism, public policy, and political rhetoric, I would have been appalled at the thought of reducing something as complicated as, say, our foreign policy towards Latin America to a page of single-sentence talking points that would be easily digestible to the public. Years later, as a Foreign Service officer, I have written such summarized talking points countless times.

¹ Ambassador Pamela H. Smith, Presentation on “Public Diplomacy in Academia,” United States Department of State, 16 June 2011. It is worth noting, however, that while 9/11 was an important trigger event that generated heightened interest in American public diplomacy, and indeed US diplomacy writ large, it was by no means the only driver of the development of public diplomacy as an academic field of study.

And, having done both, I recognize the value and function of both. I also understand better how the theorist and practitioner can more broadly inform each other, resulting in higher-quality outcomes in each area of activity.

Public diplomacy scholar and former diplomat Bruce Gregory identifies three issues that help explain the natural space between theorists and practitioners. First, he notes that each approaches what they do in different ways and that there are quite different risks that each takes in their work. Second, there is a fundamental distinction between the academic study of public diplomacy and the functional training of diplomats—each serves different purposes, resulting in different intellectual frameworks for public diplomacy. Finally, Gregory notes that the modes of collaboration between scholars and practitioners can present conflicts of interest. As he writes:

Public diplomacy fundamentally is an instrument of power that serves strategies of political actors and society's public interests. Universities and scholars likewise have obligations to society, which they fulfill primarily by providing the best education possible for students and research that expands human knowledge.²

The intrinsic differences between theorists and practitioners, however, should not eclipse the value that each potentially brings to the shared space of public diplomacy. Nor should these differences lead us to believe that the two professions never overlap—as Gregory notes, one important commonality between the academic and practitioner is that each serves society. That Foreign Service officers serve the American people as well as advance foreign policy objectives is a point often overlooked in academic writing on public diplomacy.

Promoting Reciprocal Education and Engagement

Perhaps because the nature of their work is quite distinct, occasional cross-training could benefit both the practitioner and theorist. Although the Department of State currently provides some opportunities to Foreign Service officers for advanced education at the mid-career level, many (including currently serving officers) have called for a major expansion of these training opportunities. In a report issued earlier this year, the American Academy of Diplomacy made a number of recommendations concerning the training and professional development of the United States' diplomatic corps. Among their recommendations was an explicit call for all mid-level Foreign Service officers to complete a year of advanced study as a requirement to cross the threshold into the Senior Foreign Service. The report noted:

As they rise to more senior ranks, FSOs need to acquire and refine the ability to think strategically beyond the requirements of specific assignments, to reflect on the broad policy issues of the day and the directions of their profession, and to develop their intellectual capabilities free from the

² Bruce Gregory, "Public Diplomacy Scholars and Practitioners: Thoughts for an Ongoing Conversation," *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, Fall 2010, 8.

frenetic pace of daily work...Periods away from the demands of a frenetic daily schedule enable FSOs to address issues that are vitally important, but not necessarily urgent, to refresh their intellectual capital and to prepare to respond to the broad gamut of challenges the United States faces in international affairs.³

While answering this call will prove particularly challenging given the current budget environment (a reality the report also acknowledges), it is vitally important to sustain focus on professional development and expand the space for such opportunities wherever possible in spite of budget downfalls. In addition to providing practitioners greater access to advanced education beyond the functional training they receive, it is equally important that those who teach and write about public diplomacy emerge from the ivory tower to directly observe and interact with practitioners in the field. This will require openness and willingness on the part of the State Department to engage in new and creative partnerships with academia.

Both the theorist and the practitioner bring unique insights, perspectives, and rich experiences to the table. The question remains, however, where is the proverbial table around which academics and practitioners should sit? Some exchanges are taking place in various fora, and these have been increasing in number and scope over the past decade. For example, the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy has for the past six years hosted a two-week training program specifically oriented toward professionals whose work centers around public diplomacy and/or public affairs. The seminar brings together, in an academic environment, diplomats from around the globe, US military personnel who work on strategic communication, and representatives of international organizations, among others.⁴

At the 2011 annual conference of the International Studies Association, a working group on public diplomacy convened for the first time ever and included a keynote speech by a senior-level career diplomat in public diplomacy from the Department of State. In a Tufts University course on public diplomacy, taught by former ambassador and career Foreign Service officer William Rugh, undergraduate students are required to interview active public diplomacy officers serving overseas when writing their term papers. The few well-established university courses that do exist on public diplomacy include government reports, actual case studies, and academic publications on their reading lists. And recently, I completed a course at the Foreign Service Institute on advanced cultural diplomacy, designed for practitioners, in which at least a third of the speakers were established academics in the field of public diplomacy.

³ "Forging a 21st-Century Diplomatic Service for the United States through Professional Education and Training." The American Academy of Diplomacy, The Henry L. Stimson Center and the American Foreign Service Association, February 2011, 48.

⁴ For the past three years, the Council of American Ambassadors has sponsored one mid-level Foreign Service officer to attend the USC institute through its Kathryn W. Davis Public Diplomacy Fellowship, which has been a valuable contribution to the limited range of external professional development opportunities for mid-level officers at the State Department.

Looking Ahead: Recommendations at the Crossroads

While these intersections between practitioners and theorists are encouraging, there is plenty of room for greater collaboration. Academics should ensure that real case studies, drawn from field-based interviews and discussions, are a core part of the study of public diplomacy. Practitioners should actively seek out opportunities to engage with those who study and write about public diplomacy. They should regularly read published articles, books, and blogs that analyze public diplomacy—and they should correct the record when the theorists get it wrong. Retired practitioners shouldn't be the only voices in the classroom; active-duty officers at both the mid- and senior-levels should be speaking with students of public diplomacy at every opportunity. In turn, the leading theorists on public diplomacy should have a voice in the functional training of public diplomacy officers at all levels.

The State Department should dedicate resources for Foreign Service officers to pay for professional memberships in associations that focus on scholarly study of international affairs and public diplomacy—a benefit that is standard in many other sectors, and provides an essential bridge to connect 'those who do' with 'those who teach.' Academic associations with an interest in and focus on public diplomacy should ensure the practitioner's voice is robust and present at conferences when they plan their agenda of speakers. Given that the State Department is at the center of US public diplomacy efforts, it assumes an inherent burden in engaging with theorists of American public diplomacy outside the Department. Toward this end, the Department's public diplomacy leadership should consider establishing an annual forum in which leaders in the practice of public diplomacy could exchange ideas with senior academics that are researching and writing about public diplomacy.

The net result of enhanced communication should be improved practice *and* study of public diplomacy. The theorist's analysis will be more accurate and focused with greater access to and understanding of public diplomacy activities and strategies as they are carried out by diplomats around the world. The practitioner's efforts to implement public diplomacy strategies will be strengthened when there are regular opportunities to pause, *think*, and reflect upon those actions, as well as engage meaningfully with those who have the luxury of time to research and analyze them.

Fundamentally, however, there must be due respect for the places that both the theorist and the practitioner occupy in the arena of public diplomacy, and this respect should resonate in any critiques one side levels at the other. The very concept of public diplomacy embodies the idea that respect is fostered through relationship-building and communication, and that requires ongoing, sustained effort. So, while some may dispute George Bernard Shaw's maxim that opened this article, both practitioner and theorist should agree on another of his observations: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."