

Public Diplomacy and National Security: Lessons from the U.S. Experience

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*Calls to build greater civilian capacity in national security are well founded, and public diplomacy is high on the list of essential capabilities that must be strengthened. U.S. public diplomacy's principles and methods are rooted in 20th century models of communication, governance, and armed conflict, which contribute to an inability to learn from recent experience and foster real change. This article defines public diplomacy, describes forces shaping the context of 21st century public diplomacy, and identifies five lessons from recent experience that point the way to change: abandon message influence dominance; drop the war on terror narrative; leverage knowledge, skills, and creativity in civil society; emphasize net-centric actors and actions; rethink government broadcasting and adapt to new media.**

Ask most strategists today about national security reform and one answer is assured: strengthen civilian capabilities to meet 21st century challenges and relieve an overburdened military. High on the list of capabilities to be strengthened is what variously is called public diplomacy, strategic communication, and “winning the war of ideas.” The Defense Department’s 2008 *National Defense Strategy* laments that the U.S. is unable to communicate to the world what it stands for as a society. The State Department calls for new public diplomacy approaches and getting the “war of ideas right” in the battle against today’s terrorist threat.ⁱ Seven years after 9/11, the nation’s leaders agree. Public diplomacy is crucial to national security and must be improved.

These calls for change sound strikingly familiar. The 2002 *U.S. National Security Strategy* also urged “effective public diplomacy” – “a different and more comprehensive approach” in “a war of ideas to win the battle against international terrorism.”ⁱⁱ Lawmakers, cabinet secretaries, and the 9/11 Commission were in early agreement on the same diagnosis, inadequate public diplomacy in an ideological struggle, and the same solution, transform tools designed for a different era and use them more effectively.

Why then has there been no real change? It’s not that U.S. leaders lack for advice. Experts in and out of government wrote more than thirty reports on public diplomacy during the past seven years. Failure to turn report recommendations into business plans and action is part of the answer. But much of the challenge lies in learning from experience.

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What is public diplomacy? What can be learned? And how might it change for the better?

What is Public Diplomacy?

Public diplomacy is now part of a global conversation. It has many different meanings and “no one size fits all.”ⁱⁱⁱ The term strategic communication is gaining traction. Some see it as more inclusive than public diplomacy and more descriptive of a multi-stakeholder environment. For most analytical and practical purposes, however, the two terms can be used analogously. For example, in 2007 the State Department issued a *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication* without offering a distinction.^{iv}

Public diplomacy can be viewed as an instrument with analytical boundaries and a few broadly applicable characteristics. Public diplomacy describes the means by which states, associations of states, and non-state actors **understand** cultures, attitudes and behavior; **build and manage** relationships; and **influence** opinions and actions to advance their interests and values.

Public diplomacy differs from education, journalism, advertising, branding, and public relations. However, it imports methods and discourse norms from civil society, and it depends on deep and diverse relationships with civil society to succeed. Public diplomacy operates through actions, relationships, images, and words in three time frames: 24/7 news streams, medium range campaigns on high value policies, and long-term engagement. Its tools range from electronic media to cultural diplomacy to “the last three feet” of personal communication.

The World of Public Diplomacy Has Changed

Despite great differences between the hot and cold wars of the 20th century, the underlying factors that shaped the practice of public diplomacy were similar. States dominated international relations. Non-state actors were few in number. “Big ideas” were secular struggles between authoritarian and democratic worldviews. Media and communication systems used analog technologies. Hierarchies were the principal organizing structure in society. National armies fought on battlefields with industrial age weapons.

Armies still cross borders, but it’s a different world. States are not what they used to be. Governance is provided increasingly by political actors above, below, and around the state. Thick globalism, non-state actors, a mix of secular and religious “big ideas,” digital technologies, and new forms of communication have transformed the old world order. Network societies challenge organizational hierarchies. Attention – not information – is today’s scarce resource. And we confront insurgents and terrorists in a new paradigm of armed conflict fought within civilian populations by contestants with local and global reach.^v

U.S. public diplomacy's principles and methods are rooted in 20th century models of communication, governance, and armed conflict. Five lessons from recent experience point the way to strategic change.

1. *Abandon message influence dominance.* Responses by U.S. officials to the attacks of 9/11 assumed that failure to communicate effective and consistent messages was the central problem in American public diplomacy. Soon after 9/11, the White House created an Office of Global Communication to “ensure consistency of messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad.” In 2002, then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice created a Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee “to develop and disseminate the President’s messages across the globe.” The top public diplomacy recommendation of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission stated: “The U.S. Government must define what the message is, what it stands for.” In 2006, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley created a new interagency Strategic Communication Coordinating Committee. Its purpose: “to disseminate the President’s themes and messages across the globe in the most effective way.” And the mission of the Counterterrorism Communications Center headquartered in the Department of State was “developing messages and strategies to discredit terrorists and their ideology.”^{vi}

The message influence strategy holds that public diplomacy is primarily a matter of deciding on the right message and disseminating it to others consistently and often. This strategy overlooks two important considerations in how people create meaning. First, they interpret messages through their culture, history, language, influence relationships, and personal needs. Second, people make assumptions about the intentions and motives of communicators. And they do so in complex mediated environments that we often do not understand. As Arizona State communications scholar Steven Corman astutely puts it, “The message influence model assumes, incorrectly, that communication is the transfer of ‘meanings from person to person’ and that the message sent is the one that counts.” Decades of communication research demonstrate that “the message *received* is the one that really counts.”^{vii}

The invasion of Iraq, conflation of Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein in the political rhetoric of U.S. leaders, and a counterterrorism strategy that framed “winning the war on terror” by promoting democracy have been interpreted by many as efforts to impose Western values on Muslims. The U.S. message, “would you rather fight them there or here,” led to misunderstandings among those who were “there.” Problems with the message strategy were compounded when actions and words that gained attention were unattractive: Abu Ghraib, rendition, secret prisons, Guantanamo, “enhanced interrogation procedures,” fortress embassies, “crusade,” “Islamofacism,” and “Axis of Evil.”

Messages do matter. Governments show respect for the opinions of global publics when they state their policies clearly and credibly. Messages can persuade when they are congruent with actions and consistent at home and abroad. The point is that public diplomacy occurs in complex interdependent systems. Messages – when they are not

ignored or lost in white noise – are construed on the basis of our mental filters, emotions, and interpretations of the sender’s intentions. As Walter Lippmann wrote nearly a century ago, most people don’t choose between true and false messages, they choose between trustworthy and untrustworthy messengers.^{viii}

America’s leaders now talk more about “listening.” But the talk is too casual. Do we really understand cultures, beliefs, media filters, and social systems? Do we see others as they see us? Do we know what’s going on in non-elite networks and youth sub-cultures – 44% of the world’s population is under the age of 25 – and in communication flows that are bottom up and many-to-many? In public diplomacy, deep comprehension of the interpretations and expectations of others matters more than defining the right message.

2. *Change the framing narrative – from the hedgehog to the fox.* The distinguished scholar Isaiah Berlin wrote famously that the hedgehog knows one big thing, the fox many things. U.S. leaders framed their response to the attacks of 9/11 overwhelmingly as one big thing – a “war on terror.” According to the *U.S. National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, this war is a “battle of ideas” with an “ideology of terrorism,” an ideology in which “Islam has been twisted and made to serve an evil end.”^{ix}

The global war on terror became a master narrative for America’s strategy and its public diplomacy. It defined a problem. It set the agenda. It identified the source of security threats. It conveyed moral judgment. And it offered solutions. But this narrative has had far greater consequence for stirring anxieties at home than for effective public diplomacy abroad.

Many experts now question militarizing counterterrorism other than to deny safe haven. It fosters moral outrage and gives glory and warrior status to terrorists. It falls short as public diplomacy, because it allows terrorists to frame the discourse to advantage. Many are also skeptical of democratization as a centerpiece for public diplomacy in a “war on terror.” That terrorism occurs in democracies is only part of the problem. Espousing democracy at the point of a gun in Iraq, support for authoritarian regimes where election outcomes are preordained, and turning away from election winners in Gaza and Algeria undermines credibility and democratization’s value as a separate enterprise.

Grounding public diplomacy in contested interpretations of religion is problematic as well. It puts the U.S. in an arena of religious war it seeks to avoid. Why should Western leaders tell Muslims what is or is not extremist or moderate Islam? The Princeton Project on National Security concluded “The best way to start is to take Islam itself out of the equation.”^x Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues that “attempts to tackle terrorism through the aid of religion has had the effect of magnifying . . . the voice of Islamic clerics and other members of the religious establishment on matters that are not in the domain of religion.” This overlooks the richness of Muslim achievements in other fields, downplays political and social identities, and weakens rather than strengthens civil society.^{xi} David Kilcullen defends the importance of human psychological and social factors. “The Islamic bit is secondary,” he says. “This is human behavior in an Islamic setting. This is not Islamic behavior. People don’t get pushed into rebellion.”^{xii}

Strategies that privilege religion and democratization neglect a wide variety of terrorist motives and agendas. Terrorism is a tactic of nationally based insurgent groups and marginalized young Muslims motivated less by doctrine than by anger, moral outrage, and intense group loyalty based on friendship or kinship. As counterterrorism consultant Marc Sageman writes, “Let us not make the mistake of overly intellectualizing this fight. It is indeed a contest for the hearts and minds of potential terrorists.” But it is more about feelings and emotions than an “intellectual debate about the legitimacy of an extreme interpretation of a religious message.”^{xiii}

There are many reasons for skepticism about master narratives in a world of multiple threats and cross border challenges. “War on terror” as a dominant narrative oversimplifies in a multi-issue, multi-stakeholder strategic environment. Its rhetorical excess often fails to convince many of the global publics that leaders seek to persuade.

3. *Leverage knowledge, skills, and creativity in civil society.* To make public diplomacy smarter and better, we must take collaboration with civil society to a new level. Thoughtful voices are calling for an independent, non-partisan Congressionally-funded center for global engagement to attract experts with knowledge, skills, and creative imagination. Groups as diverse as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Defense Science Board, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies have recommended such an entity.^{xiv} Their proposals differ in detail, but they reflect a growing consensus: much of the expertise needed for effective public diplomacy is outside government. A focused and networked center for global engagement would attract those reluctant to be identified with government agencies, and provide a “heat shield” to safeguard independent advice from the special pleadings of government organizations.

This center would provide expertise on cultural influences, media trends, social and psychological forces that shape human behavior, and communication strategies. Academic, scientific, and research communities have needed expertise in languages, cultures, and knowledge domains. The commercial sector has an edge in media production and information technologies. The center would tap into these domains and respond quickly to unexpected events. As a central clearinghouse for expertise and professional resources, it would increase government-wide capacity and situational awareness in time-sensitive environments.

A center for global engagement also would supplement government’s reliance on opinion polling with independent media framing analysis, Internet mining, social network analysis, and other tools. Opinion polls have been used for decades to understand public attitudes, although policymakers undervalue them and budgets are tiny. U.S. public diplomacy still spends less on foreign opinion research than most major American political campaigns. Polling is important, but there are many other avenues to deep comprehension of mindsets and cultures and to better public diplomacy: hard language skills, expertise in new media, automated sentiment capabilities, the insights of anthropologists, psychologists, and other social scientists.

There is a growing consensus that a new government hierarchy – such as recreating the U.S. Information Agency or a new version of USIA – is not a 21st century solution. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made news recently not only by calling for greater investment in soft power, but by questioning the need to recreate institutions of the past. He urged “new thinking about how to integrate government capabilities with those in the private sector, in universities, [and] in other non-governmental organizations, with the capabilities of our allies and our friends.”^{xv} Hybrid institutions that connect government and civil society can strengthen public diplomacy, and they sit more easily with the logic of networks, global governance, and new forms of armed conflict.

4. *Emphasize net-centric actors and actions.* Tribal cultures dominate U.S. public diplomacy: foreign service officers, broadcasters, cultural diplomats, military officers, democratizers, and other practitioners who operate competitively in hierarchical organizations. Hierarchies and concentrated expertise have their place. But technologies and social structures now favor networks and flexible practitioners – boundary spanners rather than gatekeepers.^{xvi}

Public diplomacy needs risk takers: flexible practitioners who will operate in the space between state and non-state actors on multiple issues in changing patterns of interaction. They must adapt quickly in a world of new media, networked allies and adversaries, and events with unforeseen impact. This will require changes in recruitment, training, and execution with requisite incentives and penalties in career systems – in short, transformation in organizational cultures. This is not your grandparent’s public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy also benefits from networked actions – what some call a “diplomacy of deeds.” Providing health care, education, economic opportunity, and help after disasters can engage others more effectively than words. A recent Defense Science Board study on *Strategic Communication* looked at a range of such initiatives: *One Laptop Per Child*, an effort to provide poor children with durable, inexpensive laptop computers; *Sesame Street*’s international co-productions; *Developing Radio Partners*, an NGO that supports community radio stations in developing countries; and government activities ranging from Fulbright scholarships, to the Peace Corps, to the Navy’s hospital ship visits.^{xvii} Actions that build trust convey hope rather than fear, and eliminate symbols of an unjust America can be public diplomacy game changers. The Defense Science Board concluded that these and other initiatives by government and civil society actors deserve higher priority than disseminating messages.

5. *Rethink government broadcasting and adapt to new media.* U.S. international broadcasters responded to 9/11 by creating the Arabic-language Radio Sawa and the Al Hurra television networks, and by shifting attention to Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. They used the “war on terror” to make the case for more funds, and Congress was quick to comply. The broadcasting budget is roughly equivalent to funding for all State Department exchange and information programs.

U.S. broadcasters compete with Al Jazeera and other global media, successful local broadcasters, and a Web 2.0 world of interactive media and user generated content. In broadcasting, greater market density creates a higher signal to noise ratio and higher costs. With few exceptions government signals in information rich media environments are no longer competitive. Decisions on the future of one-to-many government broadcasting will require strong leadership and independent research on media trends and broadcasting's impact, not just on market share.

The Internet is not only breaking the broadcasting model, it is changing all mediated public diplomacy. The Internet's "long tail" – a few dominant sites with an unlimited number of smaller sites transmitted at almost zero cost – vastly increases user choice and content creation. Open source software enables wiki applications. Viral connectivity spreads information like an epidemic with multiplier effects through different media forms. New social media – YouTube, MySpace, chat rooms, video games, and virtual worlds – are changing media habits, especially among the young.

Governments must consider whether the priority they give to message transfer through broadcasting can be sustained in a media environment dominated by user choice and new media forms. Wise decisions require an understanding of media trends and more willingness by the broadcasters to supplement their market research with research on the impact of their broadcasts.

That terrorists and other adversaries use the Internet to advantage is well known. Experts vary in what this means. For many, networked adversaries are seen to have an edge due to their greater flexibility, decentralized leadership, and a strategy that gives top priority to the political possibilities of new media. But others, such as Daniel Kimmage in his report on *The Al Qaeda Media Nexus*, contend that Al Qaeda and its affiliates are stuck in Web 1.0 while the world moves to Web 2.0. Kimmage argues they "fear the intrusion of free-thinking, content generating individuals" and seek to "maintain strict message control." They resemble "the stodgy structures of traditional mainstream media" in a world "run wild with self-created content and interactivity."^{xviii}

Whether U.S. public diplomacy can compete in Web 2.0 remains to be seen. Duncan MacInnes, a senior American diplomat, recently told Congress the U.S. needs new tools and a shift in resources from elites to "a broader audience" that includes potential recruits to terrorism and those who are "young, marginalized or disaffected and hostile towards and suspicious of the United States." These new tools include coordinated web hosting, streaming video and blogging. The Defense and State Departments are beginning to use individuals with strong language skills to post entries on influential blogs in Arabic and other languages. According to MacInnes, "These bloggers speak the language and idiom of the region, know the cultural reference points and are often able to converse informally and frankly rather than adopt the usually more formal persona of a U.S. government spokesperson."^{xix} U.S. public diplomacy in new media requires different skills.

Beyond Terrorism

Americans “discover” public diplomacy in wartime. They mount campaigns against single threats with myopic intensity – Nazi Germany, communism, and the “war on terror.” It is an episodic pattern of commitment in which instruments of public diplomacy are allowed to rust when the war is over only to be “rediscovered” when the next challenge occurs.

The terror frame for a time built consent for war policies at home. Abroad, it was far less successful. Terrorism is important, but it is not an existential threat or the only threat. Still, the administration has not tired of the narrative. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy James Glassman confidently asserted when he recently took office that the “war of ideas is in early renaissance.” His dominating priority: ideological confrontation and winning a “war” against “Islamic terror.”^{xx} We run a considerable risk if we focus exclusively or even predominantly on a “war of ideas” or “war on terrorism.”

The global “strategic buffet” is enormous and varied – nuclear proliferation; climate change; failed states; the growing power of states in Asia; threats from non-state actors other than terrorists; famine, disease, and genocide in Africa; global pandemics; trade; and emerging scientific, environmental, and energy issues. Where are the varied and adequately resourced public diplomacy strategies for these challenges?

Americans must learn from experience. They must learn to think and act like foxes, not hedgehogs.

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He is the author of “Public Diplomacy: Sunrise of an Academic Field,” in Public Diplomacy in a Changing World: Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 616, March 2008, 274-290; “Public Diplomacy as Strategic Communication,” in James J.F. Forest, ed., Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century, Vol. I, Praeger, 2007, Chapter 17, 336-357; “Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication: Cultures, Firewalls, and Imported Norms,” a paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Conference on International

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