
Papers

Public relations, not propaganda, for US public diplomacy in a post-9/11 world: Challenges and opportunities

Received (in revised form): 31st January, 2005

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Abstract While propaganda was central to U.S. public diplomacy in earlier times, and remains central today, the United States must now practice *true* public diplomacy, which should rely, not only on political theory and the theories of international relations, but also on theories and models of public relations that are based on two-way symmetrical communication and community-building. A propaganda model centers the United States at the hub of the global milieu in its relationships with other nations, i.e., a diplomatic worldview in which the 'spokes' of America's communication and relationships radiate outward to satellites of stakeholders; in contrast, the United States is not centered so self-importantly in a community-building model. Rather, this model recognizes that America is only one part of a global social system. America's public diplomacy must recognize that the United States' global constituents are 'publics,' not 'markets,' and that an effective public diplomacy model must be one that is not propaganda or market-oriented advocacy, but one that is based on two-way symmetrical communication and community-building.

KEYWORDS: ethics, foreign policy, public, public diplomacy, public relations, market

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INTRODUCTION

'What we've got here is failure to communicate.'
'Captain' in the 1967 film *Cool Hand Luke*

In a global parody of the 'Captain' in the

1967 film, *Cool Hand Luke*, the United States in its post-9/11 diplomacy is suffering 'failure to communicate'. Indeed, our country in its global war on terrorism has not been given the near-universal support that Americans would have

anticipated from their longtime allies; further, this nation has suffered a vitriol of unexpected proportions from among geographically, politically and culturally diverse populations. Beyond the predictable vituperation of its traditional enemies, harsh criticism also has come from surprisingly large numbers of critics worldwide who — while abhorring terrorism — nevertheless share some of the terrorists' sentiments toward the United States.

Examples that are both many and varied illustrate this colossal 'failure to communicate,' e.g., an Associated Press story of Feb. 13, 2004, that reported, 'Even before its first broadcast, a satellite television station financed by the U.S. government and directed at Arab viewers is drawing fire in the Middle East as an American attempt to destroy Islamic values and brainwash the young.' The station *Al-Hurra* (translation: 'The Free One') represents another attempt by those promoting U.S. foreign policy to provide a better understanding of the United States' cultural and societal values. The station's planned programming included an interview with President George W. Bush, who would communicate his commitment to bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East.¹

WHAT'S WRONG WITH OUR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?

What is wrong with our public diplomacy? Is existing U.S. diplomacy truly the best path for the United States to follow in building relationships with those in the Middle East as well as with diverse peoples elsewhere in the world? Twenty-First Century communication technology has all but eliminated the constraints of time and space through a plethora of sophisticated media that allow for near-instantaneous communication. Such channels would suggest unprecedented opportunities for Americans to develop

friendships, respect and understanding with diverse peoples throughout the world. Paradoxically, Americans today instead are reflecting upon *why* their messages appear at best ineffectual — and oftentimes inflammatory.

The thesis of this article is that U.S. public diplomacy must be re-examined and reconceptualized as a heuristic construct that adopts a new model of public diplomacy. This model must be grounded in the two-way symmetrical and community-building models of public relations rather than on the existing model of diplomacy that most closely resembles marketing and propaganda models. This article will begin by: 1) examining the core problem of U.S. public diplomacy and foreign policy; 2) providing criticisms of the existing model; and 3) making recommendations that will increase the likelihood for success in U.S. public diplomacy. However, first we must define and describe some concepts important to our arguments.

CONCEPTS

Diplomacy

Berridge, Keens-Soper and Otte define diplomacy as the official channels of communication that are employed by members of a system of states.² They observe that these channels are found today primarily in a network of diplomats and consuls who enjoy the protection of special legal rules and who permanently reside abroad — with some serving as representatives at international organizations. Ziegler says that the present system of international politics goes back to 1648, when the peace of Westphalia was signed — ending the Thirty Years' War and beginning the modern state system.³ Predecessor to all diplomacy, says Eban, were the Greek city-states, which were the primary architects of diplomatic traditions.⁴

Seemingly, diplomacy has always been a win/lose proposition, e.g., the Greeks' Roman successors never questioned the need to coerce foreigners to accept the *Pax Romana*. Indeed, the origins of diplomacy seem rooted in the acceptance of rivalry as the natural condition of interstate relations, with an ambassador's basic function to get as much as possible for his country while giving as little as possible in return. Eban suggests that diplomacy flourishes best in conditions of fragmentation and pluralism as well as with a theoretical equality of status that makes each state's goals achievable only through persuasion, eloquence, inducement, threats and intimidation.⁵

Nor has an overt concern about ethics/morality been a predominant characteristic in the history of diplomacy. Eban (1998) notes that, unlike fundamentally consensual domestic politics in which all parties suffer from wrong decisions, foreign policy is intrinsically conflictual — with competition and rivalry built into the separatist mentalities of nation-states.⁶ Nevertheless, Thomas suggests that ethics have not always been marginalized in diplomacy; rather, from the time of Thucydides through the Second World War, reconciliation of ethical principles with self-interested state behavior held a central place in the scholarship of international relations. However, he says two trends changed this focus after World War II, particularly in the United States: 1) the ascendancy of realist thought, with its emphasis on power and its dismissal of ethics as irrelevant to international politics; and 2) the influence of positivist thought on the social sciences, which led to the desire to produce analytically rigorous, 'value-free' explanations of international politics — two trends that were mutually reinforcing. Thus, ethics should not interfere in building structural theories regarding what states actually do, rather than what they ought to do.⁷

Donnelly ironically recognizes an *ethical* argument to support an 'amoral' foreign policy, i.e., 'our' interests should count more than the interests of others (which 'ordinary' morality enjoins us to consider as equal to our own). However, he acknowledges that there is no reason why states cannot define their national interests in moral terms, e.g., if citizens of a country value the alleviation of suffering elsewhere, they are free to value the welfare of people in other countries in their foreign policy.⁸

Nation/nation-state

A 'nation' can be defined as an imagined political community, i.e., imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anderson says a nation is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, yet each member thinks of a communion among his or her fellow citizens. A nation is imagined as inherently limited because 'even the most messianic nationalists' do not expect all people to become part of their nation. A nation is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept of a nation was born when both the Enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realms. Finally, it is imagined as a *community* because — regardless of any inequality and exploitation that might exist — a nation as such is conceived as a deep and horizontal comradeship.⁹

Ziegler identifies the three basic criteria for a 'state': a group of people (who are most likely to be referred to as a nation), controlled by an effective government (which will claim to be acting in the best interests of the nation), in undisputed control of a clearly defined piece of territory. If the group's claim is recognized by other states, the state is recognized as sovereign.¹⁰

Propaganda

Often used pejoratively to suggest blatant untruths, propaganda is a neutral term whose origin is innocuous at worst and noble at best, i.e., 'propaganda' originated in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV established the *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, i.e., the Congregation for Propagating the Faith, to support the Church's missionary activity. Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg define propaganda as '(a) function that involves efforts to influence the opinions of a public in order to propagate a doctrine'.¹¹ Laskin provides a more comprehensive and precise definition: 'Propaganda is a communicative tool to advance a certain point of view through symbiotic appeals that contrast themselves from other 'wrong' opinions and employ positive and negative emotions in an asymmetrical exchange.'¹²

American propaganda has a long history, dating back at least to the Spanish-American War, but it was most evident during the Cold War. In an article published when the Cold War was in full swing, 'Propaganda: A Conscious Weapon of Diplomacy', George V. Allen, then Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs (and later director of the U.S. Information Agency from 1957 to 1960), unequivocally equated 'our information activity' with 'propaganda'. He said:

I am not particularly concerned whether either gunpowder or propaganda have benefited or harmed mankind. I merely emphasize, at this point, that propaganda on an immense scale is here to stay. We Americans must become informed and adept at its use, defensively and offensively, or we may find ourselves as archaic as the belted knight who refused to take gunpowder seriously 500 years ago.¹³

THE CORE PROBLEM

U.S. public diplomacy today is best characterized as 'marketing

communication,' a concept that begs a definition of marketing. Hutton and Mulhern define marketing as 'the process of identifying, stimulating and satisfying customer wants and needs'.¹⁴ Marketing communication thus can be defined as 'sharing information or meaning that helps to identify, stimulate or satisfy customer wants or needs'.¹⁵ Problematic is a satisfactory definition of 'market,' which can be defined in contrast to a 'public': 'Organizations create markets for their products and services by segmenting a population into components most likely to purchase or use a product or service. Publics, however, create themselves when people organize to deal with an organization's consequences on them.'¹⁶ Already these definitions hint at the utility of considering 'publics' rather than 'markets' in public diplomacy.

U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East has focused on 'building bridges' by filling information gaps between the Middle East and United States, i.e., messages that give Middle East citizens *more of us and more of what we see as America*: music, entertainment and Hollywood dream-factory movies, without any sensitivity to the fact that this is exactly how these people interpret cultural imperialism. The first reactions on *Al-Hurra* by those in the Middle East confirmed these fears. Rami G. Khouri, executive director of Lebanon's *The Daily Star*, expected *Al Hurra* to 'exacerbate the gap between Americans and Arabs, rather than close it'. He wrote, 'Al-Hurra, like the U.S. government's *Radio Sawa* and *Hi* magazine before it, will be an entertaining, expensive and irrelevant hoax. Where do they get this stuff from? Why do they keep insulting us like this?'¹⁷

An analysis of Khouri's statements and questions can provide us with some answers to where the problems of American public diplomacy lie. Chua, in her recently published book, *World on*

Fire, gives an interesting rationale for why the United States is hated in so many countries throughout the world. Her thesis is that America today has become a 'market-dominant minority'. Market-dominant minorities, such as the Chinese in the Philippines and the Croatians in the former Yugoslavia, are exposed to hatred because they prosper economically within certain societies. Americans have gained economic, political and military power and wealth far out of proportion to their numbers.¹⁸ Chua (2003) reminds us of two views concerning this disproportionate wealth: 1) America's overall success is the result of superior institutions, an entrepreneurial spirit and generations of hard work; and 2) today's more pervasive view that America's wealth and power are the spoils of plunder, exploitation and exclusion.¹⁹

Mark Helmke, in his article, 'The Mess of American Public Diplomacy,' asserts that the rest of the world wants what we have: economic prosperity and democracy.²⁰ And that supports another of Choua's theses, that anti-Americanism is often a blend of admiration, awe and envy on the one hand and seething hatred, disgust and contempt on the other:

Thus, for millions, perhaps billions, around the world, America is 'arrogant', 'hegemonic', and 'vapidly materialistic' — but also where they would go if only they could. In Beijing, for example, many of the same screaming students who bombarded the U.S. embassy with stones after the U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade returned a few weeks later to line up for U.S. visas. One of them, interviewed by *U.S. News & World Report*, explained that he wanted to attend graduate school in America and that 'If I could have good opportunities in the U.S., I wouldn't mind U.S. hegemony too much'. Similarly, in another interview with *U.S. News*, Oscar Arias Sanchez, Costa Rica's former president who won a Nobel Peace Prize for

brokering peace in Central America, charged that America 'want(s) to tell the world what to do. You are like the Romans of the new millennium.'²¹

Khouri's question: 'Why do they keep insulting us?' can give us a clue just how complicated America's public diplomacy situation is. America as a market-dominant minority, with its desire to 'spread democracy,' is seen as the source of both insult and humiliation. Arabs feel humiliated as much as do the French as well as do those in many other nations in the world today. This feeling of humiliation will not go away because of *Al-Hurra* or *Hi* magazine; instead, U.S. public diplomacy's use of mass media will bring an even bigger gap in understanding as well as a continuing sense of inadequacy among those with whom we are trying to communicate simply because it's based on the old Cold War model of propaganda that was used to support U.S. foreign policy of that time. Today, long after the Cold War and in a post-9/11 world, public diplomacy must mean something else. Propaganda was central to U.S. public diplomacy in earlier times, and it remains central today, but does this centrality serve today's public diplomacy needs?

We can argue that there was a shift after the Cold War in how America perceives itself compared to the rest of the world, resulting in America's quest for a new identity. In any theory-building attempt in public diplomacy, several questions emerge. Doyle and Ikenberry assert that any reflection on international relations, foreign policy and public diplomacy requires us to first ask: 'What should we want? What is required to promote justice or human welfare, or our national security, welfare or prestige and power?' Second, we must address existing obstacles by asking questions such as: 'What are the obstacles that threaten the achievement of our goals? How might these obstacles

change? Why do such obstacles arise? What are the most effective ways to achieve the changes we want or to avoid the changes we do not?' Questions for policy analysis then are — normative ('What should we do?') and analytical — ('What will happen?') —and are bridged by a third question, i.e., an implicit question of identity — ('Who or what we are?').²² The United States today is faced with all of these questions, but most of all the question of its identity. Who are we and who do we want to be? Do we want to be a world police force, a new world power such as the Roman Empire once was? Or do we want to be a model of virtuous democratic society, a model that we would want many — if not all — other nations to adopt? This crisis of the United States' identity has resulted from this country's current confusion in public diplomacy that must be resolved quite soon or else it will cause long-term — perhaps irreversible — damage to America's image in the world as well as even greater political and economic challenges. What is that which we want to give to the rest of the world? How do we want to be seen in the eyes of this world?

The influential writer Robert D. Kaplan has considered these problems, Chua notes. One of the United States' long-term goals is to 'spread the model of democracy,' a goal of which Kaplan disapproves. Chua reports that, in some of Kaplan's recent writings, he recommends that we should not promote democracy until free markets produce enough economic and social development to make democracy sustainable.²³ Of course, this recommendation reminds us of the history of Marx and the Communist revolution. Marx predicted that the Communist revolution would happen in those societies that had the highest levels of capitalism, and this, of course, did not happen. Many today assert that this failure might be one of the reasons why Communism didn't

succeed as political system. Kaplan thinks that the American compulsion to democratize others is arrogant, provincial and irresponsible. Although Chua agrees with many of Kaplan's points, she nevertheless thinks that Kaplan doesn't appreciate the global significance of market-dominant minorities:

Kaplan stresses the ethnic biases of elections, but neglects the ethnic biases of capitalism. At the same time he is overly optimistic about the ability of markets alone to lift the great indigenous masses out of poverty. The awkward reality is that markets in developing societies favor not only some people over others, but some ethnic groups over others. Worse, they often benefit a hated ethnic minority of the nation in frustrated poverty. Overlooking this reality, Kaplan blames too much of the world's violence and anarchy on democracy.²⁴

Whether or not Kaplan is correct concerning America's arrogance in attempting to democratize other countries, we whole-heartedly agree with Chua that the best economic hope for post-socialist and lesser-developed countries lies in some form of market-generated economic growth; furthermore, the best political hope for these countries certainly lies in some form of democracy that has constitutional constraints, that is tailored to local realities and that safeguards people from ethnic oppression and its resulting bloodshed. This is what should ground U.S. public diplomacy! And, as Chua contends, the United States' public diplomacy must also recognize that the best hope for global free markets — fortunately or unfortunately — lies with these market-dominant minorities, themselves. Because the United States is the largest and most influential market-dominant minority, the biggest responsibility lies with us and in our public diplomacy. Therefore it's even more important to move beyond propaganda

and dig into *true* public diplomacy, which should more than ever rely, not only on political theory and the theories of international relations, but also on theories and models of public relations that are based on two-way symmetrical communication and community-building.

In an article published in 2001, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke underscored what he believes to be the close link between public diplomacy and propaganda:

Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare or — if you really want to be blunt — propaganda. But whatever it is called, defining what this war (on terrorism) is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance.²⁵

Although he is correct about the close link between public diplomacy and propaganda, it is now more important than ever that America makes this distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda. As John Paluszek, in his article, 'How do we fit into the world?', says, since the time of the reorganization in which the USIA (U.S. Information Agency) became a part of the U.S. State Department after the Cold War, public diplomacy has not been central to the United States' foreign relations policies.²⁶ However, while it certainly is imperative for public diplomacy to once again become central to our foreign policy, our nation's success will depend not only on such public diplomacy, but also on changes in our foreign policy — requiring and reflecting *public relations models* of public diplomacy. We should promote trust, but must also be trustworthy; we should promote standards, values and democracy, but we must live by those standards, believe in our values and live in a true democracy.

In the Associated Press story cited in the beginning of this article, Samiha

Danhrough, head of Egypt's *Nile News Channel*, said that Washington's image wouldn't improve among Arabs until it changes its policies toward them.²⁷ R. S. Zaharna, a Palestinian scholar who is a professor at American University, Washington, D.C., provides a good explanation why public diplomacy as it is now practiced cannot restore our image in the world and help us to be what we want to be:

Public diplomacy alone cannot address America's credibility or image problem in the region. For that, American officials may need to reassess the country's policies so that they reflect the best of America to others. No amount of spin in public diplomacy will compensate for an American foreign policy that negatively affects others. In communication between peoples, actions still speak louder than words.²⁸

John Brown, a veteran U.S. diplomat, says public diplomacy must be a prime force in the furtherance of American foreign policy. Information, education, culture — and also propaganda — make up the principal components of this responsibility, he says. If these functions are sometimes at cross-purposes, Brown nonetheless contends that the resulting tensions can contribute to a more effective presentation of America's story to the world. He recommends: 1) a truthful and accurate information campaign; 2) long-term educational exchange programs; 3) and U.S. cultural activities that appeal to those in other countries, especially among the young. He says public diplomacy's achievements also lie in two broader areas: keeping lines of communication between the United States and other countries open, and depicting America in all its complexity. Brown argues that, by maintaining an on-going international dialogue, public diplomacy can assure continued linkages between the United States and other countries, even when

government-to-government relations are disrupted.²⁹

THE UNITED STATES IS A NATION, NOT A PRODUCT

Distinctions between *publics* and *markets* are widely recognized — if not fully understood and discretely conceptualized — by scholars and practitioners in public relations, marketing and advertising, but are not so readily distinguished by those practicing public diplomacy. Marketers and advertisers (and diplomats) too often see public relations as a tactical tool for their sales (and diplomatic) missions when directed at their ‘markets’; in turn, public relations practitioners commonly see an all-encompassing role for public relations in which public relations (and public diplomacy) has a societal — as well as an organizational (and diplomatic) function that includes and co-opts the marketing and advertising functions as tactical components.

America’s public diplomacy must recognize that the United States’ constituents are ‘publics,’ not ‘markets,’ and that an effective public diplomacy model must be one that is not propaganda or market-oriented advocacy, but one that is based on two-way symmetrical communication and community-building. Kruckeberg and Starck remind us that public relations advocacy models have always had their limitations, both in their effectiveness in achieving their goals as well as ethically; the authors have argued that it is through community-building that public relations (and public diplomacy) best serves society as well as its organizations — up to and including nations.³⁰

A propaganda model centers the United States at the hub of the global milieu in its relationships with other nations, i.e., a diplomatic worldview in which the ‘spokes’ of America’s communication and relationships radiate outward to satellites of

stakeholders (other nations and their people). This Cold War model is inferior to a community-building model in which the United States is not centered so self-importantly, but which recognizes that America is only one part of a global social system. Grunig notes that press agency and publicity are one-way models of public relations that try to make an organization look good—either through propaganda (press agency) or by disseminating only favorable information (public information) — while the two-way asymmetrical model uses research to develop messages that are most likely to persuade strategic publics to behave as the organization wants.³¹ These models closely resemble today’s attempts at public diplomacy.

In contrast, Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model that is based on negotiation, compromise and understanding,³² and Kruckeberg and Starck’s community-building model of public relations³³ clearly are far more egalitarian, democratic and relational in their orientation — and are far better models for public diplomacy than are the existing propaganda and marketing communication models that drive our public diplomacy today.

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