

Public Diplomacy Between Theory and Practice

Jan Melissen

This paper reflects on trends in public diplomacy and on some of Spain's public diplomacy challenges. The author is a member of the Working Group 'Una Diplomacia Pública para España'. The paper is the text of a presentation delivered at the first Madrid Conference on Public Diplomacy, which was held on 10 October 2006 at the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic School. Organised by the Elcano Royal Institute, the conference aimed to open a debate on the current state of -and prospects for- public diplomacy. Both experts and politicians from the Netherlands, the UK, the US, Germany, the EU and Spain made their contribution. All conference documents are available on: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/276.asp>

Public diplomacy is beyond any doubt one of the hottest topics under discussion in the world's diplomatic services. Ministries of foreign affairs (MFA's) in all corners of the world pay more and more attention to their countries' reputation overseas, from Chile to Japan and from Canada to Indonesia. The discourse about 'PD' extends much beyond the world of diplomacy: not only diplomats but also academics, university students in international relations and even those who are targeted by the public diplomacy of states take an interest in this subject matter. That is excellent news. Most people do not care very much about diplomatic practice in general, but many seem to be intrigued by this 'new' phenomenon: public diplomacy.

Speaking in Spain about public diplomacy is a little daunting. As one leading expert on nation branding put it: 'Spain is among the best examples of modern, successful nation branding, because it keeps building on what truly exists'. This observation is indeed the first lesson of both nation branding and public diplomacy. The positive effects of a country's external reputation management will only last if they are based on reality, and overseas perceptions are not easily managed. Not only are foreign publics pretty elusive target groups for public diplomats, they are also the first to benefit from the democratisation of information. Ordinary people have access to multiple sources of information, they can see for themselves and influencing their views has become much more difficult after the latest revolution in communications technology.

Compared to many other countries Spain can also convene an international conference like this one with a great deal of confidence. Spain has a lot less to worry about foreign perceptions than a whole lot of other countries in Europe and beyond. Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe are for instance facing more adverse reports in the international press than they can handle, the United States appears to be hitting an all-time low in foreign polls, and my home country is nowadays not just associated with openness and innovation, but also with Euro-scepticism and intolerance towards Dutch nationals of foreign descent. In comparison, Spain's public diplomacy has really minor headaches to deal with. This perhaps helps explaining why Spain's public diplomacy has mainly focused on the country's main cultural and other assets, rather than focusing on societal debates and issues that may be misunderstood or misinterpreted abroad. In any case, the present state of affairs is for Spain an excellent starting point for a public diplomacy strategy. Spain has a strong brand, delivered by the people of Spain. Nevertheless, there are of course challenges. Why, after all, would we be here at this conference to discuss recent developments in public diplomacy as well as 'PD' in the specific context of Spain's external relations?

One challenge for Spain, in fact for all countries in the current global conversation about public diplomacy, is to go beyond paying lip-service to *diplomacia pública* and develop a coherent public diplomacy strategy with other stakeholders in government and society. It involves truly integrating public diplomacy into the practice of diplomacy. It means making Spanish embassies realise that the

dialogue with non-official groups and individuals, in the countries where they are based, is an important task and in some cases perhaps even their principal task.

Of special significance for countries that have a federal structure, like Spain, is the point that a nation's public diplomacy is two-faced: facing inwards and outwards at the same time. In other words, public diplomacy serves as a window into a society and as a window out. The sense of national identity of citizens, and also how they feel about their country, helps projecting a country's identity abroad. Canadian scholar Evan Potter observes that public diplomacy is not just a foreign policy challenge, but also a national challenge. This observation not only applies to Canada, but also to Spain. Co-existing national and regional identities may complicate Spain's public diplomacy efforts, but they are not necessarily a handicap in the communication with non-official audiences overseas. Spain and some of the autonomous regions on the peninsula draw very different connotations at home, but interestingly, overseas they are often perceived as different parts of the same package. Take for example the fact that Catalan literature has been chosen as next year's theme at the Frankfurter Buchmesse. At home this is likely to be pumped up as an achievement of cultural autonomy and identity, with possibly even an implicit political message, but abroad Catalonia at the Buchmesse will no doubt be seen as evidence of the cultural variety and richness of the whole of Spain.

So what is public diplomacy? The shorthand definition that immediately conveys the essence of public diplomacy is that it involves 'getting other people on your side' –public diplomacy is ultimately about influencing other people's opinions and attitudes–. The 'people on the other side' are characteristically multipliers of opinion and future opinion leaders or high potentials, but also ordinary people who have direct access to all sorts of information. Rather more formally, as a recent British report does, one could define public diplomacy as work which aims at influencing in a positive way the perceptions of individuals and organisations abroad about one's own country and their engagement with one's country. Public diplomacy can then be seen as the instrumentalisation of soft power, ie, the power of one's attraction and reputation overseas. The importance of this dimension of power can hardly be overstated today, but was recognised by statesmen for many centuries. Cardinal Richelieu already observed that the reputation of a country is one of the most important sources of its power.

The current debate about public diplomacy has become a global conversation, although rather dominated by the American experience and post-2001 US preoccupations with the war on terror. It may therefore serve as a useful reminder for those who are new to the field of public diplomacy that it was practised in many different ways and by many different countries before 2001. Europe's post-1945 experience shows that public diplomacy was no stranger to the Old World and that European countries have accumulated considerable experience in this field. The 'European school of public diplomacy' does in fact draw on a much longer and more varied experience with public diplomacy than any other region in the world. For some of the nations of Europe, public diplomacy was a top priority from the first days of their existence. This was true for some of the new nations on the Balkans in the 1990s, but it was also the case for Germany's *Politische Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* from the very start of the Federal Republic in 1949. For the French post-war republics, their *politique d'influence* aiming at foreign publics rather than governments was an essential tool in restoring their *grandeur* after national humiliation in two world wars. Other European countries have had public diplomacy in their toolkit for decades. With the slogan 'Spain is different' Franco's dictatorship was of course targeting citizens rather than elites abroad, even though the term public diplomacy was non-existent. The Netherlands developed *publieksdiplomatie* avant-la-lettre around the so-called moral issues long before the Cold War was over. Liberal Dutch policies on for instance euthanasia and drugs were highly controversial outside the Netherlands, a situation that called for reaching out to multipliers of opinion in a number of other European countries.

A wealth of European 'PD' experience therefore antedated the present era and had nothing to do with issues such as terrorism or the dialogue between civilisations. Nevertheless, it was a remarkable experience for me, back in 2004, when at a two-day conference for small and middle powers at the Clingendael Institute, it appeared perfectly possible to discuss public diplomacy without the shadow of

the war on terror hanging over the conference. The message was clear: one can learn a lot about public diplomacy from countries that are usually not associated with PD, and a lot of good public diplomacy is about issues that cannot be found in the headlines of international newspapers.

Public diplomacy is tailor-made to the needs of different countries that have given it greater priority in their diplomacy for a variety of reasons. Their efforts may for instance support long term foreign policy objectives, as was the case for a number of Central European countries aspiring to EU accession (for example Poland). Alternatively public diplomacy may aim at boosting a country's exports and foreign inward investment, which is usually a prime driver for public diplomacy in developing countries. It may also assist small powers punch above their weight on the world stage (Norway), even help them in articulating their own identity (Canada), or PD may be instrumental in conveying their commitment to a stable international society and peaceful multilateral order (both Canada and Norway). Yet others believe public diplomacy may help correct disturbing stereotypical images among foreign audiences (a sad reality for Balkan countries) or counter negative perceptions abroad as a result of incidents and/or crises in domestic society. The Netherlands is a case in point: the murder of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2001, the public outrage after the killing of Theo van Gogh by an Islamic radical (2004), the no-vote on the EU Constitutional Treaty (2005), and the debate surrounding the threatening denial of Dutch citizenship to MP and former asylum seeker Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2006), were exceptional public diplomacy headaches that contributed to a steep learning curve in the Dutch foreign ministry.

Public diplomacy is no one-size-fits-all concept, but what are a few of the most salient features of the new public diplomacy that diplomats new to this field of activity should be aware of? First of all, public diplomacy delivered by embassies is tailor-made –always adapted to local circumstances and preoccupations–. For practitioners engaging with foreign societies it is of course elementary that in some countries certain controversial issues can be effectively addressed whereas they are a 'no-go' in others. Dutch 'ethical issues' like drugs and euthanasia are not public diplomacy material in for instance Turkey and the United States, whereas neighbouring Germany or Spain are much more open to the Netherlands as kind of a social laboratory. Another point rarely mentioned in discussions on public diplomacy is that it may be a very useful tool in bridging gaps between radically different cultures, but that most of it is actually practised between countries and regions where there is a great deal of economic interdependence (the European Union, the United States and Canada) or between societies that are interconnected at many different levels (once again, the EU).

Next, all recent literature on public diplomacy makes the seemingly self-evident point that dealings with foreign target groups should be a two-way street, that PD is essentially dialogical instead of a one-way messaging process. In other words: public diplomacy is as much about listening and receiving as it is about speaking and sending. In this respect public diplomacy shares similarities with marketing techniques. As many students of public diplomacy have observed: it starts with the perceptions and beliefs of 'consumers', a term that is no longer entirely alien to those in diplomatic establishment that deal directly with citizens. But as always understanding theory is so much easier than changing practice. The information departments of foreign ministries generally have a lot of experience in disseminating all sorts of information about their country, including brochures, glossy magazines, films, CD ROMs and DVDs. They have however accumulated much less experience in the art of actually dialoguing with non-official organisations and individuals abroad. Feedback of any significance is often simply missing. Also in Europe it may be tempting for countries to see public diplomacy basically in terms of sending messages, without too much consideration for communication with foreign publics as a genuine two-way street. What is required is a pretty radical change in working habits and indeed in diplomatic culture. It would be a formidable understatement to say that the old dog merely has to learn a new trick.

The public diplomacy frenzy that has now reached all corners of the globe should indeed not delude us into thinking that all diplomats are 'into PD'. An observation that is probably closer to reality is that public diplomacy is still a rather peripheral concern for most practitioners. Interestingly, senior

management in the MFA's of a growing number of countries appears to be convinced of its importance and some information departments have by now been renamed as public diplomacy departments –but changing the name is not the same as changing the game–. Many junior and mid-career practitioners probably have good reasons to believe that their careers are still best served by jobs in other sectors of the ministry. Incorporating it in the day-to-day work of the foreign ministry and rewarding PD work in terms of career progression is therefore a significant challenge. Most MFA's have not even started mainstreaming public diplomacy and vanguard countries that are in the process of doing so, including Britain, Canada and the United States, know that integrating public diplomacy in the foreign policy making machinery requires patience and a sustained support from the highest levels.

For foreign ministries that consider a far-reaching shake up of their practices premature, but that are confronted with the urgent need to tackle their overseas reputation, it may be tempting to outsource their image management to private consultants. Hiring outside communication expertise may indeed help public diplomacy work considerably, but there is of course no way that private consultants can be a substitute for the work of ordinary practitioners. The bottom line is that public diplomacy is DIY –a do-it-yourself business–. This work is particularly testing where short term PD is meant to support foreign policy objectives. Rules of thumb is here that there should be no tension between a country's public diplomacy and its actual foreign policy, just as a nation brand should be based on reality and not contradict it in any way. As the case of the United States shows clearly, there is no public diplomacy that can mask policy failure. Where pictures and deeds speak louder than words, public diplomacy is simply the hardest thing to do. This observation does however not only apply to the United States, it is one that has to be learnt over and over again by many countries, even though on a much smaller scale and with much less dramatic issues at stake. Others are equally exposed when the stories they tell and the images they project do not match with overseas perceptions. The reputation one aspires to is ultimately based on what is real and recognisable. As Socrates put it, the way to achieve a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear.

It is easy to criticise public diplomacy by pointing to contemporary practices that do little else than discrediting notions such as 'dialogue' and 'mutuality' in the field of official communication with foreign audiences. Still, it appears to make sense to take a normative approach and indeed to distinguish public diplomacy from practices such as international propaganda, which have an entirely different pattern of communication.[1] Neither is it very helpful to lump together or obscure fundamental differences between concepts like public diplomacy and nation branding, or even to quietly submerge one concept into the other. The discourses on nation branding and 'PD' generally pass one another like ships in the night, but it may be helpful for diplomats to articulate a few basic differences. Here I want to make the case that public diplomacy is first of all *diplomacia pública*, with the emphasis on *diplomacia*. Like diplomacy in general it is about relationship building rather than the projection of identity, which seems to be at the heart of branding. As far as I am aware there is no comparative literature on this, but a few arguments suggest that diplomatic practitioners better not limit themselves to a marketing approach of dealing with foreign publics.

First, it should be pointed out that branding was a largely spontaneous process in the case of countries that are generally mentioned as success stories of branding in modern international relations, such as Spain and Ireland. One cannot blame consultants for talking about branding in a can-do manner, as something one can achieve (and ultimately purchase), but the truth is that there are many more disillusioned foreign ministries and governments than success stories of branding. Not only have a number of countries in the Balkans and Central Europe lost their initial enthusiasm when the branding promise failed to deliver. A number of MFA's in Western Europe have come to the conclusion that branding is at best incapable of delivering the (often political) public diplomacy needs of foreign ministries, and at worst incapable of moving beyond a fairly rigid and sometimes even superficial approach of country promotion. There may be a permanent tension between the discipline imposed by the branding approach and the diversity and pluralism of modern societies. Transplanting the success of branding from the corporate sector to countries' international relations could well be one bridge too far. To be sure, various historical and modern champions of nation branding were not much troubled

by their societies' complexity: branding Cuba, well-orchestrated from the top, was always easier for Castro than branding Spain has been or will ever be for González or Zapatero.

For Spain's reputation abroad, the time is ripe to explore public diplomacy initiatives aimed at truly engaging foreign societies, rather than the broad, ambitious and to date successful, but arguably also more static approach of *marca España*. Typically, public diplomacy is about dialogue and debate. That includes dealing with sensitive and controversial themes, with a variety of issues that are not only subject to public debate on the Iberian Peninsula, but also north of the Pyrenees and south of Gibraltar. Spain's public diplomacy has something to contribute to transnational conversations on a range of topics. It has the potential of correcting foreign perceptions and, equally importantly, giving a distinctive Spanish perspective on issues that are debated across Europe. What springs to mind is the Spanish way of dealing with Islamic terrorism and the unique albeit controversial Spanish approach of illegal immigration. These are just a few examples of typical issues for public diplomacy initiatives of Spanish embassies in countries like France, Britain or Germany. But a few others could also be listed here. The Spaniards have experience with combating terrorism and views on dealing with terror in their society that draw the admiration of many outsiders. And let us not forget that Spain brings to the dialogue with the Islamic world the historical experience of living with Islam for 800 years. Spain also has experiences with devolution it could compare with other countries going down the federalist road. This is not the place to identify a long list of themes for Spanish public diplomacy, but rather to suggest that public diplomacy initiatives along these lines, building on the existing strength of Spain's reputation and strong cultural relations, might be usefully considered for Madrid's future public diplomacy strategy. Such an approach appears to be more appropriate to transnational dialogue in an interconnected world than an ongoing elaboration of Spain's key assets and selling points in the framework of 'Brand Spain'.

Public diplomacy may be the name of the game, but what is in a name? Some people have suggested that it would be better to speak of political communication or strategic communication, instead of public diplomacy. I do however believe that there is great merit in continuing to refer to public diplomacy. It reinforces the view that public diplomacy is part of the wider process by which states and others represent themselves and their interests to one another. PD is in other words not a stand alone phenomenon, and by no means the mere application of new techniques of marketing, advertising, media management or spin doctoring to the conduct of international relations, but an expression of broader patterns of change in diplomacy. The crux is in the recognition that the practice of diplomacy is moving into another phase, away from the exclusive CD world and closer to the main street. Daryl Copeland of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Canada speaks of 'guerrilla diplomacy', and suggests that the new diplomat should make it his or her permanent business to establish and maintain contacts, seek tactical advantage and strategic intelligence. And in his book *The New Diplomacy* (in Spanish with the more intriguing title *Adiós Diplomacia*) Shaun Riordan refers to the emergence of a collaborative model of diplomacy. It is true that the kind of new diplomacy that increasingly moves outside its original habitat, works more and more with other agencies and organisations, and operates in a variety of networks, helps creating an environment in which public diplomacy is also thriving.

The connections between diplomacy and society are becoming closer. It is no coincidence that public diplomacy shares some characteristics with consular affairs, another field of diplomatic activity that is becoming more prominent under the conditions of interdependence and globalisation. What these two fields of diplomatic activity have in common is that they deal with 'ordinary people', whom they regard as consumers of the services and products delivered by the foreign ministry. This shows us that the classic distinction between high-priority sovereign representation and the relatively low-priority service tasks of foreign ministries is out of date. Interestingly, public diplomacy and consular affairs both also deal with issues of image and reputation: it is after all the job of public diplomats to manage the external reputation of the country, whereas consular officers are always conscious of the impact of their work on the domestic image of the MFA. Broadly speaking these developments show the growing 'societisation' of diplomacy. This is not a paradigm shift, not even a revolution in diplomatic

affairs, but nevertheless highly significant change in the conduct of diplomacy of which the rise of public diplomacy is a part.

I have argued that understanding public diplomacy is much easier than putting it in practice. This is not the place to elaborate on this point in great depth, but it is important to bear in mind that governments do not control what their own societies project to the outside world. Even less are governments in control of how their countries are perceived by foreign individuals and organisations. A major challenge for all foreign ministries is what Joseph Nye calls the 'paradox of plenty': diplomats must gain attention in a world where there is an abundance of information. But the paradox of plenty hits different countries in dissimilar ways. Some of them are desperate to be noticed in the first place, or not to be confused with states that look all too similar to outsiders (the Slovak Republic, or Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania respectively), others do not want to be noticed for the wrong reasons (Balkan countries that have emerged from the war) and there are even those that see the absence of news as 'good news' for their international reputation (countries as diverse as Israel and Sudan). Finally, I would like to suggest a brief sobering thought about two types of structural limits that government officials come across when they are acting as public diplomats. First, they have to come to terms with the fact that their own role in international affairs is not always what it used to be. In a global landscape of multilayered links between countries, diplomats sometimes have to accept that they are no longer at the centre of international relationships. On top of that, when it comes to their contacts with foreign publics, the accredited representatives of other states are unlikely to benefit from the same degree of credibility as vis-à-vis their foreign peers. Ironically, the practitioners who realise this and use it to their tactical advantage are well placed to be successful in public diplomacy.

It should be clear that public diplomacy is a major challenge for all countries. Spain has the distinct advantage of being able to develop a public diplomacy strategy on the strength of a very strong brand. Moving on from that success to a public diplomacy that is aimed at truly engaging foreign audiences appears to be the obvious next stage in Spain's reputation management project. Spain's 'PD' could deal with themes that matter to Spanish society and where Spain has something distinctive to contribute to debates that do not stop at its borders. This would amount to the development of a public diplomacy that may have a more political character and that would deal with the concerns of modern Spanish society. It would be an exciting challenge for all partners and stakeholders in Spain's public diplomacy.