

Public diplomacy practitioners: a changing cast of characters

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It is speculation – undocumented by papers or interview – that the late Edmund A. Gullion, a career diplomat in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, was thinking of international public reactions to America's political actions in the Congo and Vietnam when he coined the term “public diplomacy” in 1965. It is fact, however, that he had been US ambassador to the Congo from 1960-1963, was stationed in Saigon for several years in the early 1950s and, as such, had led the then young congressman John F. Kennedy through that country on his first exposure to it. As a diplomat then, he had experienced the real and imagined effect of public attitudes on traditional diplomatic maneuver personally. So it is no surprise that he invented and used the public diplomacy phrase.

Moreover, his relationship with Edward R. Murrow, journalist and later head of the US Information Agency (USIA) under President Kennedy, was of a personal and intellectually harmonious nature. Before accepting his nomination to direct the USIA, Murrow had insisted on a seat on the National Security Council in order to most effectively use “words not weapons” in the pursuit of American foreign policy objectives.

This position gave him inside access to the initial arguments for activism in Vietnam. He was especially troubled by one of the first overt military steps undertaken by the US, the use of defoliants in South Vietnam's Phu Yen province to deny the Viet Cong food and jungle cover – primarily because of its predictably adverse impact on international public opinion. Ed Gullion may well have had other views on the matter. But his admiration of Murrow was such that he persuaded him and his wife to leave all of his professional papers to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where they are now archived as the basis of the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy dedicated by then Vice President Hubert Humphrey in 1967.

So public diplomacy as a phrase has a combined real world and ivory tower heritage. The definition and description attributed to Gullion that appeared in the first Murrow Center guide defined it as a discipline that:

Deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies . . . encompasses dimensions of foreign relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications. Central to public diplomacy is the transformational flow of information and ideas.

It could be said that the above definition differs only in degree from a dictionary definition of public diplomacy's first cousin, propaganda. Propaganda, derived from a church word for the spreading of religious doctrine, has been utilized for centuries, most notably in the twentieth century during wartime. The buildup and waging of the Second World War for instance featured the idealizing of national socialism and the Third Reich by German



filmmaker Leni Reifenstahl, the radio broadcasts of Tokyo Rose and the actions of Washington's Office of War Information. During the cold war such organs as the US Information Agency, with its derivative broadcast arms such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, carried on the tradition of public information and persuasion, morphing gradually into the more refined practice of public diplomacy. Murrow, the personification of good public diplomacy as a result of his reputation for integrity and credibility as a journalist, described his government job as "operating on the basis of truth" to make US foreign policies "everywhere intelligible and wherever possible palatable." But he chafed at things like the ill-considered Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba (about which he was given no forewarning) by Cuban mercenaries with US air cover in 1961 and pressures to put a good spin on it, uttering a blunt credo that:

If they want me in on the crash landings, I'd better damn well be in on the take-offs.

New public diplomacy players on the market

For this Murrow period and the 25 years following, public diplomacy was seen as almost exclusively the purview of Washington. It was in fact a phrase and practice of the cold war, part of the ongoing battle of ideas between the west and the communist world.

The dogma that public diplomacy is government alone carried on well beyond the reality of the situation as the number of players communicating on and about America became ever more numerous and independent of government control or influence. Indeed, some of these players became arguably more powerful and influential than the government itself based on their apparent impartiality. The trend lines intersected for certain just a decade ago when the USIA was disbanded, its budget cut, its voice muted and its living family members transferred largely to the Department of State. America had, after all won the cold war, so why the need for funding and continuing campaign to explain ourselves to the rest of the world. Or so the reasoning went – and went demonstrably awry.

In the decades since the end of the USIA, a confluence of forces – 9/11, anti-globalization movements, the rise of China and India and other developing countries, and, most recently, resentment of the US and its war policies – has made clear both the need for maintaining international communications as a government priority and the folly of having done away with it so readily. These same forces have given rise to non-governmental practitioners filling the vacuum left by government. The most notable of these are the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations.

The media are classic communicators in the very terms defined by the Murrow Center 40 years ago, exchanging information between sources, forces and the public. And of course among themselves. It is perfectly fair to see the prototypical war correspondent or foreign correspondent having as much to do with affecting domestic public opinion about the merits of a military campaign or an alliance as any exchange of official diplomatic correspondence. Indeed, the overseas correspondent was often the mouthpiece for diplomats – and sometimes the foil for them. The conflict between *Time's* China correspondent Theodore White and the magazine's founder Henry R. Luce over reporting of the Chinese Nationalists versus the Communists in the late 1930s and early 1940s was a case study of the yin and yang of this dynamic, and central in the subsequent US government debate on "who lost China"?

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Today this is complicated further. The media is ubiquitous and its impact is almost instantaneously universal. Information has become the world's most important and most fungible commodity. A report about a desecrated Koran at Guantanamo Bay becomes the object of riots in Afghanistan and Pakistan less than 48 hours later. The beheading of a foreign hostage in Iraq provides instant imagery on numerous worldwide websites. The push-pull dynamic of media to its audience has been distinctly muddled, muddied and reversed. Accordingly, the media's role in public diplomacy is both ubiquitous and suspect.

NGOs are in a somewhat similar boat. Self-appointed and self-anointed, they have impact in all manner of human rights, economic development, humanitarian relief and the environment. Their combination of information, activism and persuasive powers as lobbyists and with the media often positions them as the loudest voices in their chosen fields. Greenpeace can cause consumer boycotts of non-green product lines more quickly than any government regulation might. Amnesty International can facilitate the release of political prisoners more rapidly than diplomats or presidents. The International Red Cross report on the abuses at Abu Graib – and their uncharacteristic decision to make the report public – ended any effort by the Bush Administration to deny that it happened. The numbers of NGOs is multiplying, their impact growing. Tellingly, what is politely called “civil society” has a place at all UN meetings today, and, more importantly, in the hearts and minds of the international public.

Multinational corporations, by contrast with the media and NGOs, are typically more reluctant players at the public diplomacy table. The biggest international companies and corporations are publicly owned enterprises for the most part and global players for sure. Having long held to the primary stated goal of maximizing stockholder value, they have of late been gradually moved to more mission multi-tasking. The concept of shareholder as top priority has evolved to that of stakeholder, to include consumer, staff and society at large.

In this vein, corporate executives are compelled by public opinion to practice good governance and to project a sense of corporate social responsibility. No longer can the head of Nike ignore the issue of child labor, or Phillip Morris lung cancer, or McDonald's health food or Levi Strauss consumer homogenization. Today enlightened heads of multinational companies recognize that they impact not only the tastes and mores of their global customers but also on occasion their societal attitudes as well. Corporate leaders have a different kind of bully pulpit than those in government, the media or NGOs from which they speak and project. Increasingly what they see as enlightened self-interest is social self-interest as well. Thus, the head of Texaco can speak about the need for alternative energy with something of a straight face. And, after its commendable actions in getting pre-positioned water trucks to the Gulf Coast victims of Hurricane Katrina well before the US government was able to, WalMart has earned credibility in promoting the spirit of community.

The business community often resists organization for competitive and proprietary reasons. But it has not always been the case in the rarified world of public diplomacy. Back in 1953 the first Eisenhower Administration fostered the Business Council for International Understanding to carry the American consumer values flag abroad. In fact, this did not wash very well, and subsequent business groups have been much more self-stimulated. For the last decades in the UK, the Prince of Wales Business Leadership Forum has encouraged corporate responsibility for multinationals operating in the developing world. The Geneva-based Business Council for Sustainable Development and more recently the US-based Business for Diplomatic Action are at the forefront of corporate responsiveness, public communication of values and therefore of public diplomacy.

Not only made in America

Public diplomacy is a crowded and competitive field on the domestic US front both in terms of who speaks for America and who in fact has the most impact and influence on public attitudes overseas. But the competition is not only domestic. All countries have their own public diplomacy machinery, and some are notably good. Consider how rapidly Ireland embellished its image as the high-tech, good life style player of the new Europe. Consider the effect of Colombia's fictional coffee man Juan Valdez in tempering the country's unsavory

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narco-terrorism image. And how about China, from the public relations low point of the Tiananmen massacre in 1985 through ping pong and panda diplomacy and Chinese language Confucian centers to its solid international reputation today as proud host for the upcoming Olympic Games in 2008.

Fidel Castro's offer of Cuban doctors to assist Katrina victims and Hugo Chavez's provision of cut rate Venezuelan heating oil for select US consumers in northern states were as transparent and probably as effective public diplomacy efforts as US military teams helping Tsunami victims in Indonesia.

Still, for the time being America holds the public diplomacy advantage in having more players among the media, multinationals and NGOs who call the US home and speak with a global voice. It is a dynamic and increasingly crowded field, with a rapidly growing cast of characters and changing rules of the game. All appreciate – if do not necessarily practice – the importance of credibility in order to have impact.

As in days past when Edward R. Murrow insisted on being part of the National Security Council to be able to weigh in on policy making at its inception, so too would today's government practitioners like to be in position to do something more than simply explain, defend or spin. Of course, by definition the media, NGOs and multinational corporations are not part of this official policy making equation. Yet just how they react and what they have to say about policy certainly is one of the central considerations. They are, as it were, passive aggressive practitioners. Welcome to today's competitive world of public diplomacy. Yes, governments initiated the process. But governments are only one of many players in the game today.

Keywords:

Non-governmental organizations,
Multinational companies,
Mass media

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