Discourse Norms in Public Diplomacy: Necessary and Artificial Fault Lines

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Remarks prepared for presentation at a panel on
Ethics and Public Diplomacy
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 2006 Convention
San Francisco, August 5, 2006

Abstract

Public diplomacy is an instrument used by political actors to understand, engage, and influence what publics think and do in support of interests and values related to governance. Public diplomacy differs from education, journalism, advertising, public relations and other ways groups communicate in societies – apart from governance. Public diplomacy’s relationship with society creates distinctions that can be described as necessary and artificial fault lines. Necessary fault lines protect imported educational and journalism norms, distinguish public diplomacy as open communication, and separate analytical judgments from political and moral judgments. Artificial fault lines include legal restrictions on domestic public diplomacy; firewall abuses; public diplomacy roles of diplomats, other state actors, and non-state actors; and distinctions between discourse communication and instrumental communication.
Public diplomacy—today—is part of a global conversation!

Fifty years ago, we used separate terms. We talked about information, cultural relations, international broadcasting – and propaganda. In the 1970s, practitioners began to use public diplomacy as an umbrella term and a way to avoid the word propaganda.

In the 1990s, a few scholars and practitioners turned to changes in diplomatic practice as part of a broad inquiry into the impact of globalization, the microchip revolution, and the rise of non-state actors. Leaving the Cold War behind, some began to look at diplomats as “boundary spanners.” Others talked about “virtual diplomacy.” And some began to think about public diplomacy as a strategic instrument used not just by foreign ministries, but by other political actors.

Public diplomacy today is a critically important diplomatic activity in countries around the world. Kuwait sends diplomats to my university for public diplomacy training. India’s external affairs ministry recently created a new public diplomacy division. The EU and every EU country have public diplomacy components in their embassies and foreign ministries. And Canada is mainstreaming (that is, merging) its political and public diplomacy career paths. I could go on & on.

The Dutch scholar, Jan Melissen, suggests states use public diplomacy for a variety of reasons. They do it to enhance visibility, project identity, strengthen economic performance, support long-term policy goals, prevent and manage crises, win support for military objectives, and counter adverse stereotypical images. Melissen argues the
public diplomacy of small states is challenged by limited resources, a desire to be noticed, and noticed for the right reasons.

Big states too face public diplomacy challenges, and America’s are well documented. Being noticed is not a problem, but being noticed favorably certainly is. Military spending dominates foreign affairs budgets in American political culture. Americans have a history of episodic commitment to public diplomacy and, except in wartime, an aversion to “propaganda ministries.”

I don’t intend to dwell on definitions. But I will state briefly what I mean by public diplomacy as a basis for our conversation about discourse norms and fault lines.

Public diplomacy is an instrument used by political actors to understand, engage, and influence what publics think and do in support of interests and values related to governance.

Public diplomacy’s objectives and means are quite diverse. However, I argue there is common ground on four central elements. Public diplomacy is used by governments, groups, and individuals to:

1. Understand attitudes, cultures, and media framing of events and issues,
2. Engage in a dialogue about ideas, values, and social practices.
3. Advise political actors on the public opinion and communication implications of policy choices; and
4. *Influence* attitudes and behavior through communication strategies and persuasive narratives.

These four elements comprise an analytically distinct, broadly political instrument that is essential to governance and also to the successful use of other instruments of power – political, economic, and military.

Three time frames are necessary to this understanding of public diplomacy.

- One is driven by the demands of 24/7 news and media relations. If political leaders and diplomats do not get inside news cycles, others will, often with disadvantageous perspectives in terms of their interests.

- A second time frame relates to public diplomacy campaigns on high value policies for months or a few years. Choices are needed. Not all policies require public diplomacy campaigns. Nor are resources available to conduct them effectively on all policies.

- A third is long-term engagement between people and institutions in the domains of ideas and values – relationships, reasoned dialogue, vigorous debate, and shared knowledge. Investments are made for years, decades, and generations.

Public diplomacy differs from education, journalism, advertising, public relations and other ways groups communicate in societies – apart from governance. At the same time, public diplomacy imports methods and discourse norms from society and depends on private sector partnerships. This relationship between public diplomacy and society
raises structural and conceptual issues leading to distinctions between what I describe as

necessary and artificial fault lines.

• By necessary, I mean the fault lines are critical to a conceptual understanding of

public diplomacy -- or to its success in practical terms.

• By artificial, I mean they are invoked for questionable reasons -- or the basis for them

lacks warrant.

Three “Necessary” Fault Lines

First, firewalls that protect imported educational and journalism norms. Cultural
diplomats import educational norms. Fulbright scholarships and grants to arts
organizations almost always are based on peer review. Many academic institutions,
professional associations, and cultural organizations in the US and abroad choose
participants on the basis of academic and professional criteria, not on policy or partisan
grounds.

International broadcasters import journalism norms in news broadcasting. Few question
the need to shield broadcasters from partisan politics and interference by policymakers in
news content. There is a long history of attempts to do so. The statutory Voice of
America Charter and the Broadcasting Board of Governors have legitimate roles in
maintaining the credibility and journalistic integrity of government broadcasting
organizations.

A second “necessary” fault line relates to open communication. Public diplomacy’s
success depends on truth and credibility. Political actors know that to persuade – and
gain attention in what Joseph Nye calls “the paradox of plenty” -- they must be credible. To build consent, there must be a basis for trust in what they say and do, an inclination by others to believe, and perceptions of reliability over time. Credibility is diminished when words and actions do not match, when statements directed to multiple audiences are inconsistent, when overt and covert activities are seen to be co-funded and co-located.

In contrast, intelligence and military instruments use both overt and covert activities. Deception is expected and necessary in military operations. Distinctions are made between “white,” “gray,” and “black” information.

- **White** is open, truthful information where the source is revealed.
- **Gray** is open, truthful information where the source is concealed.
- **Black** is deceptive information, where the source is concealed or plausibly denied.

For a time during the Cold War, a classified annex to the U.S. Information Agency’s mission statement authorized “gray” information intended to be truthful, but the source was concealed. The Eisenhower Administration’s “Jackson Committee” on international information activities argued: “As a general rule, information and propaganda should only be attributed to the United States when such attribution is an asset. A much greater percentage of the information program should be unattributed.”

The CIA’s two decades of covert funding of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty ended with press disclosures in the 1970s. Today these radios are funded openly through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. CIA also covertly funded international activities of
the AFL-CIO, educational and cultural organizations, the National Student Association, and other NGOs during the early years of the Cold War. Many US intellectuals and organizations were aware of this and glad to accept the funds. Again public disclosure ended the practice. The National Endowment for Democracy was created as a private entity in the 1980s in part to continue some of these activities through open government grants.

Decades of debate on whether USIA should be independent or located in the State Department turned partially on whether a degree of distance was needed between public diplomacy and a traditional State culture that emphasized closed communication.

Today “necessary” conceptual and structural fault lines separate public diplomacy from covert operations. Deceptive information may be required in the same way that “just wars” may be required. But deception is linked to other instruments, not to public diplomacy. This raises important questions arise: Should the military support or conduct public diplomacy? Who directs and coordinates? Who in government should make decisions at the point where these instruments intersect? As Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO) stated in 2005:

“I am concerned about the credibility of the United States Armed Forces. Specifically, I am worried that the blending of the realms of Public Affairs (PA) and Information Operations (IO) will have long lasting negative effects on our military, and ultimately our nation . . . It is my understanding that in General Casey’s command in Iraq they are combined in one organization . . . If so, are you satisfied that a firewall exists between the two functions so that disinformation and misinformation does (sic) not bleed from IO, where they are legitimate techniques, to PA, where they would represent the abdication of the Armed Forces’ responsibility to present truthful information . . . .”
A third “necessary” fault line exists between analytical judgments about the instrumental effectiveness of public diplomacy – and political and moral judgments about actors and their policies and strategies. Both judgments matter. But conflating them is a path to confusion. Non-state actors do not enjoy political and moral superiority simply because they are non-state actors. Nor do state actors have political and moral legitimacy simply because they are sovereign states.

Political and moral judgments about the actions of both state and non-state actors turn on assessments of the means and ends they employ, not on perceived taint based on their institutional status in governance. Both state and non-state actors can use public diplomacy effectively or ineffectively for policies and strategies that may be wise or unwise, ethical or unethical.

A different point relates to the use of language. Political leaders often say they employ public diplomacy in the service of goals they believe have merit. Their adversaries are often said to engage in “propaganda.” An interesting question: Are Osama bin Laden’s messages on global media platforms public diplomacy or propaganda? Should labels turn on what we mean by public diplomacy or on Al Qaeda’s political objectives? Now let me turn to:

Four “Artificial” Fault Lines

First, legal restrictions on domestic public diplomacy. For half a century, US laws have restricted use of public diplomacy to influence public opinion in the United States.
Tactically, concerns can be traced less to principle than to whose political or policy ox is being gored. Nevertheless, few public diplomacy issues energize Congress more. Lawmakers to this moment stoutly resist repeal of the anachronistic “domestic dissemination ban” in the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948.

This firewall raises broad questions. First, geographically-based legal restrictions don’t pass the “laugh test” when the Internet, satellite footprints, and other technologies blur the line between foreign and domestic. Global NGOs and virtual communities are not defined by borders. Scholars, journalists, and the public have legitimate interests in the government’s public diplomacy materials.

Moreover, why should a statutory limitation apply only to fractions of the State Department and broadcasting budgets? Anomalies abound. Most of the Bush administration’s communication campaign before the Iraq war came from public affairs budgets in the White House and Defense and State Departments -- not from public diplomacy. Few oppose reasonable government-funded activities intended to inform Americans about their foreign policy: a Presidential news conference, a speech by the Secretary of State.

There are legitimate questions on limits – on the extent to which tax dollars should be used for campaigns to persuade Americans about the merits of a particular policy. Abuses, however, can be handled through the political process: media scrutiny, and Congressional oversight.
A second artificial fault line relates to firewall abuses. Firewalls are needed to protect the integrity of imported norms – in news broadcasts, selection of Fulbright scholars, etc. Firewalls are not justified, however, when invoked by broadcasters to avoid oversight and strategic direction on budget and language priorities, technologies, and types of broadcasting. Here there is a case for direction and oversight by political leaders in the executive branch and Congress.

Similarly, cultural diplomats often rely on firewalls in seeking to influence strategic choices on leadership, funding, and organizational issues. Should European exchanges be cut to expand exchanges in the Middle East? How much should be spent on exchange operations? How much on evaluation? Should choices of academic fields of study reflect foreign policy goals? Should exchanges be managed by federal agencies or a private endowment? Here too, there is a case for strategic direction by political leaders in the executive branch and Congress – informed of course by the views of career officers and private sector professionals.

A third artificial fault line exists between diplomats – and other state and non-state actors. Spirited debates occur on whether public diplomacy includes cultural diplomacy, broadcasting, public affairs, political communication advisors, democracy-building, and open military information operations. I suggest that public diplomacy is conducted by all of these tribal cultures – not only by diplomats.
Public diplomacy clearly is a government instrument. But I have recently begun to argue that public diplomacy is used also by NGOs and individuals. Here the argument is a bit trickier.

I mean we can think of public diplomacy as an instrument used by non-state actors when they contribute to global governance independently, not just as partners with state governments. In global governance, it is increasingly difficult to make categorical distinctions between state-to-state diplomacy and transnational networks – and between state and non-state public diplomacy.

Consider Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Internet Committee on Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) -- just four of many NGOs that pursue global governance goals that satisfy human needs and wants. These single-interest NGOs may be less accountable. They may not be backed by the legitimacy and command power of state authority. They certainly are not required to engage in the tough multi-interest trade-offs required of democratic governments.

Nevertheless, each of these NGOs seeks to “understand, engage, and influence” publics in support of governance interests and values. Is what they do political communication? Outreach? Discourse? Advocacy? Or something else? Is public diplomacy a term to be reserved only for government actors?
Finally, an artificial fault line exists between discourse communication and instrumental communication. Much thinking on discourse communication is rooted in Jurgen Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere and earlier writings by John Dewey. Discourse communication assumes people can engage in non-manipulative ways that lead to shared understandings and compatible actions. It relates most directly to those public diplomacy elements that emphasize cultural diplomacy and the exchange of people and ideas.

Instrumental communication draws on Walter Lippmann and subsequent scholarship in the social sciences. Instrumental rationality is goal oriented, driven by interest-based preferences, and linked to power and the market. It is most applicable to those public diplomacy elements that emphasize persuasion, targeted audiences, opinion research, media relations, and policy advocacy. Discourse theory is not absent from this reading of public diplomacy. The best practitioners know listening and inter-active dialogue are keys to persuasion.

Many post-modern writers challenge the possibility of separating discourse communication from power. Others challenge the advisability of doing so. Michael Walzer, for example, argues the need for deliberative discourse, but contends politics has other important values. These include mobilization, organization, governance, and management of conflict. Simone Chambers contends that society’s need to take decisions places constraints on discourse. The closer participants come to closure in the
political process, she argues, “the more participants will be motivated to act strategically rather than discursively.”

All public diplomacy is instrumental at its core. Discourse reasoning often drives tone, budget priorities, organizational structures, and time horizons. But discourse reasoning in public diplomacy occurs within an instrumental context. It is not only that public diplomacy involves activities with resource or symbolic ties to governments. It is because public diplomacy is carried out in support of broadly based interests and values related to governance.

Let me conclude by emphasizing a few bright lines.

• Public diplomacy is open communication. It is not covert.

• Public diplomacy should be credible, not deceptive.

• Public diplomacy needs limited structural firewalls to protect norms imported from education, journalism, and other parts of society.

• Public diplomacy necessarily entails discourse and two-way communication. This leads some to privilege cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is dialogic, but it is also instrumental in that it serves group interests and values. Public diplomacy also matters in news cycles and short term advocacy. Short term advocacy also has dialogic characteristics – understanding publics, choices of issues on which there is common ground, credible and persuasive symbols and words, and message authority.
• Public diplomacy entails actions as well as words and images. It can be a powerful tool, but it cannot triumph over flawed policies, fundamental differences, and other barriers.

• Finally, good public diplomacy is necessary and it is hard work.