When you invited me to participate today, I was surprised and pleased. Surprised, because some of the best thinking on public diplomacy is taking place in universities, foreign ministries, and think tanks here in Europe and in Canada. Exceptional essays in Jan Melissen’s book, The New Public Diplomacy, make the point. As do papers at last year’s Madrid conference on public diplomacy, a Wilton Park conference sponsored by Canada’s Centre for International Governance Innovation, and Counterpoint’s recent conference on “The Trials of Public Diplomacy.”

I was surprised also because U.S. public diplomacy in recent years has been, well, “suboptimal” – as one European scholar put it to me gently. Enthusiasm for American discourse on public diplomacy five to ten years ago has been tempered justifiably by U.S. mistakes in Iraq and concerns about two gaps: a gap between words and actions and a gap between America’s soft power and what Melissen describes as “an unrivaled capacity to make a free fall into the abyss of foreign perceptions.”

So this is a daunting task. But I welcome this opportunity to meet with informed practitioners and to learn from your deliberations.

This workshop is also a chance to express appreciation for NATO’s contributions to the study and practice of public diplomacy in the United States. I’m thinking, for example, of Dr. Jamie Shea’s writings. His NATO Defense College speech on “Dealing with the Media During Crises and Peacekeeping Missions” was required reading in courses at the National Defense University. I still assign his “8 golden rules” to students at George Washington University.

Kosovo is an excellent case study on strategic communication in complex emergencies. Alastair Campbell’s influence on General Wesley Clark and NATO’s communication strategies during that conflict are well known.

Less known perhaps is Campbell’s influence on Karen Hughes and the Coalition Information Centers that linked Downing Street, Washington, and Islamabad in the months immediately following 9/11. Hughes describes Campbell’s visit to the West Wing in her book and agreeing with his advice that the U.S. should adopt methods from
an information campaign designed for different time zones. It's no stretch to say the State Department’s Rapid Response teams – and her conviction that diplomats must seize media opportunities – are a consequence in part of NATO’s experience in Kosovo. And [smile] the communication strategies of Britain’s Labor party.

I propose that we think about upgrading public diplomacy’s tools in the context of three axioms, a definition, and five propositions. It may seem unusual to talk about axioms in a field where concepts are contested. Nevertheless, let me suggest three that are shaping our craft.

**Axiom 1. States are not what they used to be.** States still matter of course. Especially on security issues. But as Jan Scholte suggests, there are competing spheres of governance: *above the state* through regional and global associations of states, *below the state* where municipal and provincial bodies have increasing autonomy, and *beside the state* – where satisfaction of human needs and wants is provided more and more by private institutions.

**Axiom 2. Attention is today’s scarce resource.** Fifty years ago, governments took advantage of widespread demand for news and information. Today, information saturation creates what Joseph Nye calls a “paradox of plenty.” “A plenitude of information,” he says, “leads to a poverty of attention.” With too much information, the signal to noise ratio makes public diplomacy more difficult. Credibility, actions, and reputations matter more.

**Axiom 3. Information technologies and social structures favor networks.** Manuel Castells tells us all societies are “penetrated, with different intensity, by the pervasive logic of the network society.” Rapid change, flatter hierarchies, and reversible processes are central to this paradigm. Diplomats have become “boundary spanners” as Brian Hocking puts it – communicators and bargaining agents between state and non-state actors on multiple issues in constantly changing patterns of interaction. This network logic is consequential for the strategies we employ, the skills we need, and the tools we use.

**Now to a definition.** I occasionally wonder if we still need to say what we mean by public diplomacy. The term after all has become part of a global conversation. But understandings vary. And our terms change over time.

Strategic communication has traction, particularly in U.S. military circles. It is seen to be more inclusive than public diplomacy and more descriptive of a multi-stakeholder environment. A few weeks ago, Karen Hughes issued a “US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication,” a document that has strengths and limitations.

In saying what we mean by public diplomacy, we should avoid excessive preoccupation with conflicts of the moment. Public diplomacy is, to be sure, relevant to ideas that are causes and consequences of war. But it is also a way to engage global publics on competing ideas about governance, economic growth, democracy, the distribution of
public goods, and a host of cross border threats and opportunities. On public diplomacy’s many uses, I fully agree with those who say “no-one-size-fits-all.”

At the same time, I believe we can view public diplomacy as an instrument with analytical boundaries and a few broadly applicable characteristics. It is a term that describes the ways and 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 depends on thick relationships with civil society to succeed. It 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.

It’s relatively easy to talk about these concepts, and much more difficult to put them into practice. Turf and bureaucratic politics too often drive funding choices. Deciding on policy and program priorities is far from easy. Strategies that create political will at home may be counterproductive abroad. And we need firewalls to separate public diplomacy from deception techniques used legitimately in warfare? What you do is difficult work.

With this, let me offer five propositions.

**Proposition 1.** Develop and use a wide variety of “listening tools.” Understanding mindsets and cultures has long been part of public diplomacy. We have used opinion polls, focus groups, and embassy reports on attitudes and influence dynamics for decades, although budgets for this work are small.

Polling and reporting should remain in the toolbox. But media analysis deserves higher priority. Media frames shape much of what we know, and political actors go to great lengths to influence the frames of publics and competing elites. Internet mining techniques can be used to monitor opinion changes and identify social networks. Public diplomacy can benefit from social network analysis and network software used to identify key players and their connections as a basis for developing communication strategies. This software can also provide useful data for your successor when you go to your next assignment. Cultural and ethnographic studies are important interpretive tools of course. And exciting research on two-way speech-to-speech translation capabilities offers potential down the road for public diplomats as well as for war fighters.

I asked recently if the State Department shared its polling results with NATO members or if it received NATO-commissioned opinion surveys. I was told that sharing polling with other governments (and the media) is at the discretion of U.S. missions — and this happens occasionally. My contact could not recall receiving NATO-commissioned polling.
I’d welcome your views on several questions. First, can we do more to share the results of our efforts? U.S. agencies gather lots of information, but the U.S. often “doesn’t know what it knows,” because information is not shared. Is NATO’s situation similar? Second, can we benefit from collaborative tradeoffs? Some states may have an advantage in Internet mining, others in media analysis, still others in ethnographic studies. Can we minimize duplication and save money with a division of labor? Third, do we still need government-sponsored polling when the German Marshall Fund and others do excellent opinion research?

We talk much more about “listening.” But our approach is entirely too casual. Listening means deep comprehension of cultures, attitudes, beliefs, media filters, and social systems. It means seeing how others see us – and how they interpret our motives, actions, and messages. Importantly, it means understanding non-elite networks and youth sub-cultures. We need to use all available tools in ways that are actionable and relevant in contexts that are changing and diverse.

**Proposition 2. Emphasize actions and relationships.** Too often, in the U.S. at least, we have emphasized message influence models. The assumption has been: if we just send the “right message” we can change attitudes. Linear persuasion campaigns tend to dominate in strategic communication planning. This despite compelling evidence that actions and relationships matter more than words. And evidence that the “pictures in our heads” – to use Walter Lippmann’s phrase – have much to do with how messages are received.

We should of course use messages effectively to explain and advocate policies. And we should be very concerned about “message vulnerabilities” – as the U.S. discovered with words such as “crusade,” “Islamofacism,” and “Axis of Evil.”

But the big thing to keep in mind in public diplomacy is that actions and relationships are more important than messages. Consider such initiatives as *One Laptop Per Child*, a non-profit organization founded by MIT’s Nicholas Negroponte, which is dedicated to providing poor children with cheap, durable laptops designed to promote learning. *Or Sesame Street’s* international co-productions developed in country by local production teams. Or, *Developing Radio Partners*, an NGO that supports independent radio stations in developing countries. Many such efforts receive no more than moral support from political leaders. Others receive government seed money, and still others steady stream public funding. These are American examples. Europeans will have their own.

Karen Hughes’ new public diplomacy strategy speaks of promoting a “diplomacy of deeds.” Actions such as providing health care, education, economic opportunity, food and shelter, and help after disasters, she argues, “can communicate values and beliefs far more effectively than all of our words.” Her strategy also calls for increases in critical exchange programs, which she identifies as “perhaps the single most effective public diplomacy tool of the last fifty years.”
Three quick comments on these agreeable points.

(1) Good deeds are not always self-evident. Communication is still needed whether we are talking about the Berlin airlift 60 years ago or building the Kanjaki dam in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province today.

(2) Long-term relationships and dialogue can enhance tactical communication in political and military conflicts. But there are no guarantees. Shared understandings may not overcome disagreements and competing interests. The divorce courts are full of people who know each other very well.

(3) We spend too little on tools needed to maintain contact with exchange alumni on the move. This means databases that are well maintained. University alumni offices have much to teach us. It also means meaningful contact with exchange alumni through follow-up initiatives of value to them. One possibility is offering online courses that update what they learned in their civilian and military education and training programs.

**Proposition 3.** Take full advantage of the Internet and other new technologies. At one level this means more effective use of interactive media – websites, blogs, web videos requiring high broadband, web videos for cell phones, and electronic books and journals. At another level it means appealing to the video game and Second Life generation. Easy to say. Harder to do well. A few examples.

We all know websites are important. The challenge is to make them attractive when attention is scarce. Transport mechanisms are cheap. Content that attracts repeat site visits is expensive. Public diplomacy practitioners need to satisfy policymakers whose content ideas can be narrow and sterile. They also need content that is credible and promotes dialogue among users with diverse views. Deciding which external web links you include to enrich a government website is only one of many difficult choices.

Online forums can become “echo chambers” where people sort themselves into likeminded groups. Conversation often does no more than reinforce interests and prejudices. Meaningful dialogue in the blogosphere is problematic for all who use web-based media.

On the Internet, social context and sender identity are not always self-evident. This creates other issues. A question for Second Life enthusiasts. We know the social context of Sweden’s virtual embassy. But we can be far less certain about the avatars that populate Second Life. What are the implications for public diplomacy in virtual words where identities are concealed? Optimists will side with Oscar Wilde who said, “Give a man a mask and he’ll tell you the truth.” Pessimists may find more value in Plato’s story of Gyges – the shepherd who discovered he became invisible when he twisted the ring on his hand. He promptly seduced the queen, killed the king, and took over the kingdom. This is an area where academic research will prove valuable to practitioners.
Proposition 4. Rethink government-sponsored international broadcasting. Government broadcasters, like all broadcasters, face profound challenges driven by new technologies, intense competition, and changing media habits, especially among the young. The implications of Nye’s “paradox of plenty” are acute. The more competitive the market, the higher the signal to noise ratio and the higher the costs. They face challenges not only from Al Jazeera and other global media, but increasingly from small, competitive local broadcasters in the developing world. The future of one-to-many broadcasting by governments in Europe, Canada, and the U.S. is a central issue in public diplomacy.

Let me raise just four questions.

(1) Is audience research used effectively to determine priorities for television, web services, and radio?

(2) Do government broadcasters do enough to understand the impact of their broadcasts? To be sure, they do a great deal of audience and market research. And, commendably, many share their findings. But I suspect they do far less research on impact. This is certainly true of U.S. broadcasters.

(3) Should governments move resources from direct broadcasting to other public diplomacy tools: syndicated programming, support for private broadcasting ventures, greater use of diplomats and other voices with language and media skills on indigenous media, or enhanced exchange and outreach activities?

(4) Will market pressures force greater collaboration between national broadcasters? Philip de Gouveia argues it makes no sense for the BBC, Deutsche-Welle, and Radio Netherlands all to broadcast to Burma or North Korea when their goals overlap. I suspect this rationale for divesting language services is a hill too high to climb. But given market pressures, government broadcasters may be open to collaboration in newsgathering and the expensive work of creating web content in text, audio, and video formats.

Proposition 5. Leverage the knowledge, skills, and creativity of civil society. We can build public diplomacy capacity within governments as we have done in the past, and we can do more to develop hybrid institutions that connect government and civil society. We need both, with greater emphasis on the latter.

We need to take government collaboration with civil society to a new level. Academic, scientific, and research communities offer untapped resources in knowledge domains, languages, training, and evaluation. The commercial sector has a competitive edge in media production and information technologies. Civil society organizations often are more credible and more agile than governments.

Many non-state actors want no association with public diplomacy. But many do. Partnerships can multiply limited resources on both sides of the public-private divide. Depending on circumstances, there can be mutual advantage in relationships that are publicized and in those that are open but discrete. Leveraging civil society can
strengthen discourse norms and shared values. And it sits more easily with the logic of networks and 21st century changes in global governance.

Whether it is understanding cultures, tribal groups, and ethnic tensions; or developing video games; or benefiting from association with skilled professionals, celebrities, and sports teams, we need to take advantage of the knowledge in our universities and think tanks, the imagination of media industries, and the talents of a broad range of private actors.

**Conclusion**

In upgrading public diplomacy tools, I have suggested three axioms. States are not what they used to be. Attention is today’s scarce resource. Information technologies and social structures favor networks. I have offered some thoughts on public diplomacy’s analytical boundaries and central characteristics.

Finally, I have suggested five propositions.
(1) Develop and use a wide variety of “listening tools.”
(2) Emphasize actions and relationships.
(3) Take full advantage of the Internet and new technologies.
(4) Rethink government-sponsored international broadcasting, and
(5) Leverage the knowledge, skills, and creativity of civil society.

I thank you for this opportunity to meet with you. I welcome contrasting views. And I look forward to our conversation.

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