

# Perspectives

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## Connecting Public Diplomacy and Policy by Philip Seib

American public diplomats cannot do their job as long as people at the top of government see public diplomacy as primarily a smokescreen for ineffective or wrongheaded policy. The assumption that public diplomacy can move in one direction while policy goes in another shows how little understanding exists of what public diplomacy can and cannot do. As U.S. public diplomats (Edward R. Murrow among them) have long observed, policy making and public diplomacy planning must move forward in tandem.

A recent example of the limited effectiveness of public diplomacy when it is left to stand alone was President Barack Obama's June speech in Cairo. His speech was a superb public diplomacy moment, but it was not as effective as it might have been because it was not supported by a substantive policy initiative. Recent opinion research has found that most Muslims retain negative views about the United States. (There are notable Obama-related exceptions in Nigeria and Indonesia.) Although Obama's speech gave a quick boost to these U.S. approval ratings, the president's words and U.S. policy were out of synch. Until Muslims decide that American foreign policy is not tilted against them, no speechmaking or other public diplomacy effort is going to substantially change attitudes in the Muslim world.

This may seem self-evident, but it has been largely ignored by those in several U.S. administrations who have acted as if cleverly designed public diplomacy could repair by itself America's battered standing in the world. When trying to answer the post-9/11 question, "Why do they hate us?" public diplomacy measures were designed to operate independently of policy. Listening tours, amateurish broadcasting ventures, and such could not offset the reality of a war that many in the prime public diplomacy audience saw as being waged against them. If an administration decides that a particular foreign policy approach is in the national interest, regardless of its unpopularity abroad, then it should be pursued, but public diplomacy should not be expected to somehow rescue American popularity.

Gimmicks don't work, and public diplomacy cannot proceed along its own path. It must be directly linked to policy and enhance that policy. If the United States delivers aid to refugees from the Swat area of Pakistan, public diplomacy efforts should accompany that. If the United States provides medical assistance to fight AIDS in Africa, public diplomacy should be built into that project. In such instances, public diplomacy will have a good chance of success because the policy it accompanies is likely to win support among the people it reaches. Public diplomacy can then build upon that support and make it longer lasting.

This is where creativity becomes important. If policy opens the door, public diplomacy can step through it. The U.S. State Department's upcoming "Democracy Is..." competition is the kind of American-sponsored project that can involve young people around the world as they prepare videos that present their definitions of democracy. If the U.S. government were to become more resolute in its support for democratic reforms, even among less-than-democratic allies, this project would have even greater effect. Cultural diplomacy, exchanges, and other forms of what might be called "social diplomacy" have far greater chance of success if they do not have to overcome entrenched, policy-related hostility.

This is not an esoteric matter. The need for greater attention to public diplomacy is partly a function of globalized communication, which has sharpened the points at

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which policy and public meet. Proliferation of satellite television and the Internet means that people know more and know it faster than at any previous time. This can produce quick explosions, such as the Danish cartoon controversy of 2006, and it has increased volatility among the denizens of "the Arab street," "the Chinese street," and other publics. This restiveness affects domestic politics in these countries and complicates the tasks of diplomacy. Less dependent on government-tied

media for information, publics must be courted directly rather than exclusively through their governments. Further, a government concerned that a large part of its population is antagonistic toward the United States may be reluctant to cooperate with U.S. policy. Public diplomacy could help reduce this problem.

The "public" to which public diplomacy is directed is vast, curious, and progressively less inhibited about challenging the information that they are given. This is a world far beyond the niceties of old-fashioned diplomacy that could be conducted exclusively among comfortable elites. New media have opened a reconfigured diplomatic process

to much of the world, and these new participants will never allow themselves to be shut out. Using platforms provided by social networking media, they are, more than ever before, persistent players in the previously closed world of foreign affairs.

For public diplomacy practitioners, new media realities change the nature of their work. The days of stately diplomatic process are long gone, and a public diplomacy initiative that lags too far behind the media flow may be ineffective. Transparency, long considered annoying and even dangerous by many diplomats, is increasingly expected and can be driven by YouTube, Twitter, and other social media. As technological divides narrow, more of the world knows more of what is going on. This means that when policy determinations are made, the world may learn about them within minutes. A parallel public diplomacy plan must be ready for implementation, and that means public diplomats must participate fully in the policy making process.

In addition to quickness, public diplomacy requires imagination in devising ways to capture the attention of global publics. Advancing women's rights, facilitating microcredit programs, championing environmental protection, upgrading public health and public education, and more such ventures are essential in meeting the needs of

the publics that the United States wishes to influence. A more creative approach to public diplomacy might encourage the rest of the foreign policy establishment to become more creative itself. Pulling such efforts together will require remapping bureaucratic turf, which is never an easy task but is an essential one if U.S. public diplomacy is to have the coherence and breadth that it requires.

Another communications-related task for public diplomats is reaching virtual states. For instance, a public diplomacy program for Pakistan cannot be limited to the land mass northwest of India. A "virtual Pakistan" exists that includes millions of Pakistanis living in the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. Through the Internet and other electronic means, this community is connected at an unprecedented level and reaching "Pakistan" means building a Pakistan policy and a public diplomacy plan that take this into account.

And still, it all comes back to the substance of U.S. foreign policy. No matter how imaginative or technologically adept public diplomats may be, and no matter the star power of Barack Obama, those responsible for policy and public diplomacy must develop and sustain a more balanced partnership.



Philip Seib is Professor of Journalism and Public Diplomacy, and Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern California. He is also director of USC's Center on Public Diplomacy. He studies linkages between media and war and terrorism, as well as public diplomacy issues. He is author or editor of numerous books, including *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy*, *The Global Journalist: News and Conscience in a World of Conflict*, *Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War*, *Broadcasts from the Blitz: How Edward R. Murrow Helped Lead America into War*, *New Media and the New Middle East*, *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics*, and the forthcoming *Toward a New Public Diplomacy: Redirecting U.S. Foreign Policy*. He is the series editor of the Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication, co-editor of the Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy, and co-editor of the journal *Media, War, and Conflict*, published by Sage.

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