Strengthening U.S. Statecraft Through Public Diplomacy

Katherine Brown and Tom Glaisyer

For nearly a decade, experts inside and outside of the United States government have been actively debating how to better engage the world through public diplomacy.[1] Public diplomacy is the set of practices and actions by which a state seeks to inform and influence citizens of foreign countries in ways that promote its national interest.[2] During the Cold War, public diplomacy focused on communicating American, liberal values to publics living in communist societies and was a pillar of U.S. national security policy. Since September 11, 2001, policymakers have increasingly acknowledged that anti-American sentiment can be viral, creating norms and spurring actions that threaten the United States and the security of our allies.[3] However, public diplomacy has seen uneven progress.

President Barack Obama was acutely conscious of global perception of the United States during the Bush administration;[4] in 2009, President Obama signaled that public diplomacy would have a central place in his administration.[5] By publicly denouncing torture, promising to close Guantánamo within a year, engaging Muslim communities through the 2009 Cairo Speech, endeavoring to secure a nuclear weapons-free world, and voicing a multilateral approach to foreign policy, President Obama positively reset America's place in the international system.[6] Geopolitical complications and bureaucratic realities, however, can easily eclipse goodwill rhetoric and public diplomacy action. As of the time of publication, Guantánamo is still open, the Obama administration has escalated the war in Afghanistan, and a global financial crisis has affected millions of foreign citizens. While the

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United States is generally seen in a more positive light now than during the Bush administration, positive perceptions can be fleeting.[7] In Egypt, where President Obama's June 4, 2009, speech notably wooed its audience, U.S. favorability ratings have dropped from 27 percent in 2009 to 17 percent in 2010 (in 2006, during the Bush administration, 30 percent of Egyptians perceived the United States favorably).[8] Reconciling a grand strategy that seeks to rebuild America's credibility and moral authority with ground-based realities—which can often undermine strategy—is an immense challenge.

Public diplomacy can be viewed as its own form of statecraft or it can transcend bureaucratic boundaries and become an essential part of the political, economic, and military instruments of statecraft.[9] Recently, the State Department officially adopted the latter perception and articulated in the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) that public diplomacy should be a core part of twenty-first-century statecraft.[10] For this to be realized and for public diplomacy to function effectively in a fragmented, diverse, and quickly changing global landscape, global public engagement must be as nuanced and varied as the foreign communities with which the United States seeks to engage.

FRAMEWORK FOR AN INFORMATION AGE APPROACH TO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The United States faces a host of national security threats from state and non-state actors, and it must prepare environmental, financial, and pandemic contingencies. The United States can face none of these challenges alone; true support will not just come from allied governments, but—critically—from their publics, too. With a larger proportion of democratic societies than at any other point in history, these publics' influence is significant.[11] But even in non-democratic societies, citizens voice their opinions through new media and devour information from countless sources. Of the hundreds of channels available on satellite television, only a few channels command significant audience shares. With such a vibrant media landscape, individuals often use multiple filters to shape the information they consume.[12] Today's

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information flows are dispersed and two-way, or conversational, in a majority of states; global citizens with an Internet connection or a mobile phone can now communicate within and across borders and question the legitimacy of states' actions. There is no longer a line between domestic and international media. The global news environment is interconnected: what is meant for an American audience is now received and scrutinized by a global one.[13]

The potency of a global information environment is encapsulated by the example of Terry Jones, a once-obscure pastor in Gainsville, Florida, who became a global figure in the summer of 2010 when he threatened to burn copies of the Qu'ran on September 11, 2010. While the American media promoted Jones as a public figure, his campaign actually began on Twitter, then Facebook, and then YouTube. After disseminating his message through social media, Jones was discussed—and detested—in Arab media before his name graced the cover pages of fifty American newspapers. David Petraeus, the U.S. commanding general in Afghanistan, warned that Jones's message and actions would spark a violent reaction and harden anti-Americanism in Afghanistan, endangering troops and the entire war effort. Petraeus explained, "It is precisely the kind of action the Taliban uses and could cause significant problems. Not just here, but everywhere in the world we are engaged with the Islamic community."[14]

While this transnational communications space is in some ways challenging and crowded, it offers numerous—and ever-increasing—opportunities for sophisticated public diplomacy. Being *heard* is easier than ever, but public diplomacy requires a more sophisticated understanding of tone and pitch to produce messages that will both reach and resonate with crucial audiences. For public diplomacy strategy and implementation to thrive in the information age, the United States must focus on interagency coordination, investment in high- and low-technological platforms, and place a greater emphasis on field-level action.

The first step is to develop an interagency public diplomacy plan that expands on the 2010 reports on strategic communications and public diplomacy by the White House, State Department, and Defense Department.[15] This plan should more clearly distinguish the purpose and value of each government agency in global public engagement and it should clearly identify the State Department as the lead agency for implementing public diplomacy programs.

Second, the State Department must continue to transform public diplomacy's toolkit. With the proliferation of communication technology, the U.S. government can more effectively communicate internally and

externally; by using a mushrooming set of collaborative tools, messages crafted in one context can be modified and then shared in another. For the United States, every new policy announcement or moment of international crisis can be used to test and iteratively leverage modularized technological innovations.[16] Undertaking these changes gradually will help the United States avoid the difficulties and risks associated with technology projects that have sought grand transformations and which have often failed. Embracing conversational media technology will signal a culture of openness, responsiveness, and collaboration. If the United States fails to participate actively and frequently in the online conversation, other actors—including those with outright subversive intentions—will fill the void by voicing their interpretations of U.S. policy and intent.[17]

Finally, an interagency plan must recognize the two mutually reinforcing ends of the public diplomacy spectrum: the macro and micro levels (or Washington and field levels). The field post must be the center of public diplomacy innovation, with the U.S. Embassy in charge of all U.S. government in-country communication. A field-level focus can ensure that any global public outreach programs designed by the State or Defense Departments become increasingly nimble, fluid, and responsive to on-the-ground realities. This is relevant in both the wired world (comprising 28.7 percent of the global population), where technology enables quick and authentic exchanges online, and the non-wired world (71.3 percent),[18] where an exchange of views can unfold more effecively through person-to-person engagement. While there are increasing opportunities to connect through mobile phone technology, traditional public diplomacy programming such as English-language education, entrepreneurship programs, local media engagement, and more effective aid delivery should be intensified.

AN INTERAGENCY PLAN FOR CIVILIAN-LED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

When Edmund Guillion, a career diplomat and former dean of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, first defined the term "public diplomacy" in 1965,[19] global public engagement fell under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). President Eisenhower created USIA in 1953 to influence foreign citizens living within—or influenced by—communist societies. In 1999, after the Cold War and with the "triumph of liberalism,"[20] USIA was dismantled and its international broadcasting responsibilities reassigned to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The State Department absorbed USIA's non-broadcasting public diplomacy activities and created the post of under secretary of state for public

affairs and public diplomacy; individuals filling this position have struggled to recreate the dedication and resources that USIA enjoyed during its zenith. Simultaneously, the quantity of government actors working in strategic communications and public diplomacy has swelled considerably since the 1990s: the Department of Defense, Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and multiple NGOs have an overseas presence and engage in foreign messaging.[21] The Defense Department, especially, has become invested in connecting with foreign citizens to combat violent extremism.[22]

Since U.S. policies affect the financial and physical security of millions abroad, there is a public diplomacy dimension to how those policies are articulated and implemented. To map the interagency global public engagement actions, the State Department, Defense Department, and National Security Council released reports in 2010 on their approaches to public diplomacy. The State Department's strategic framework aims to proactively shape America's policy narrative; broaden and deepen person-to-person relationships; have public diplomacy expertise inform policymaking; better coordinate public diplomacy action; and combat violent extremism.[23] The NSC and Defense Department reports were congressionally mandated and they defined the many different offices and committees involved in strategic communications and public diplomacy. The Defense Department report states that the department does not engage directly in public diplomacy but acknowledges that its informational activities and "key leader engagements closely resemble State Department public diplomacy efforts."[24] Currently, staff members from the State Department, Defense Department, and the NSC are scrutinizing their roles and responsibilities to identify areas of overlap.[25] This review is an opportunity to clearly define the State Department as the lead agency in coordinating and operationalizing public diplomacy programs to ensure that global public engagement is civilian-led in locations devoid of combat operations.

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The State Department must now reinvigorate its public diplomacy programming with a multigenerational approach, considering the long-term effects of its programs. Perhaps because of the late integration of public diplomacy into the State Department's core functions, the perception that

public diplomacy is subordinate to "real" foreign policy is pervasive. In a 2008 report, the U.S. Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy stated that while the public diplomacy career track is no longer "separate…it is certainly not yet 'equal.'" In 2007, only 7 percent of public diplomacy officers served in senior management positions.[26] The secretary of state commented in the QDDR that public diplomacy is part of the State Department's core diplomatic mission, particularly in policymaking decisions in the regional bureaus; this is an important statement and should be repeated frequently.[27] The State Department should also focus on leveraging technology within a local context, recognizing that there is a micro- *and* a macro-level approach to public diplomacy, with the micro (or field) level being the most important.

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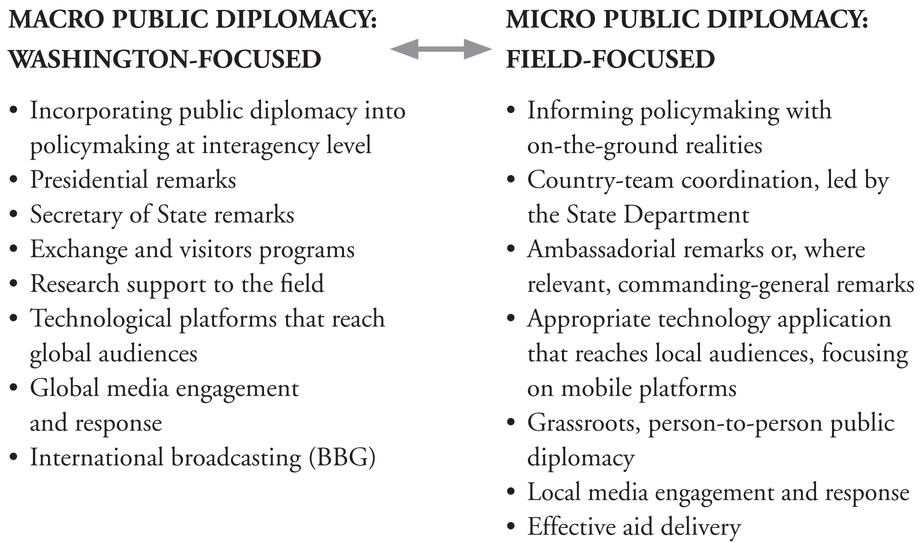
FIELD-BASED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: MACRO AND MICRO APPROACHES

Public diplomacy looks very different in Washington than it does "in the field," and that field is hardly a monolithic space. In Washington (at the macro level), public diplomacy policy requires more financial resources and strategic oversight; in the field (at the micro level), public diplomacy policy demands more gradation and focus from U.S. embassies, consulates, USAID missions and, where relevant, U.S. defense officials. Efforts from both ends of the spectrum must reinforce each other (Figure 1), with the understanding that public diplomacy officers in the field bear the brunt of unpopular policies. Building credibility often requires a quick, authentic exchange of information. With a focus on micro public diplomacy, field officers equipped with tools—and the skills to use them—must have more autonomy to rapidly and appropriately respond to local dialogue and to report back to Washington on policies or rhetoric that are damaging U.S. national interests in that country. Without such flexibility, field officers are limited to traditional remits, which constrains their impact and shrinks their roles.

Figure 1: Macro and Micro Public Diplomacy



Macro-Level Opportunities

Opportunities at the macro level include expanding education programs, incorporating public diplomacy expertise into policymaking, and strategically using the president for global engagement.

Because the president's messages speak more loudly to the global public than do messages from any other U.S. government spokesman, the NSC must continue to identify opportunities for President Obama's remarks and overseas visits to advance foreign policy goals. The Obama administration demonstrated its ability to convey complex messages to Muslim communities in the June 2009 Cairo speech and the November 2010 Jakarta speech. Both were carefully crafted, but the Cairo speech's delivery—its translation into fourteen languages and distribution through synchronized SMS blasts—was even more important. However, many of those who heard it were already sufficiently sympathetic to Obama's messages to pre-register for the White House SMS and email lists. The challenge is not just to sustain America's popular sentiment in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the

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In Washington, incorporating public diplomacy sensibly into policy-making is also vital. Public diplomacy officers are currently placed in different regional bureaus to illuminate media and public perception and to gauge how perception impacts policy.[29] Public diplomacy can never be policy's camouflage; it must be an integral part of its conception and implementation.[30]

Strengthening global, traditional public diplomacy initiatives—especially exchange and education programs—also must happen at the macro level. In 2009, the United States received a record number of more than 670,000 international students.[31] Many of the benefits of existing education exchange programs come from person-to-person contact, but there are significant opportunities to augment them with online modules. For instance, the international NGO Soliya facilitates the Connect Program, which provides a web-conferencing tool for youth from the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States in order to broaden participation in exchanges.[32] Voice of America has adapted its traditional one-way broadcast radio platform to include an interactive English-language online module, *Go English Me* (<www.goenglish.me>), which enables Chinese, Persian, and Russian-speaking individuals to enroll in free online English-language training. The United States also has an opportunity to expand education programs to include business skills, thereby empowering a new generation of global entrepreneurs. The April 2010 Entrepreneurship Summit in Washington drew more than 250 entrepreneurs from Muslim communities. Similarly, the website <www.entrepreneurship.gov> offers various resources for entrepreneurs, investors, business mentors, and researchers.[33] But virtual hubs are not enough; physical, entrepreneurial hubs in different geographical regions would enable the United States to more effectively market what the world most wants to emulate: American innovation. Like the Summit itself, this requires a strategy at the macro level, but with intense follow-up at the micro level.

Micro-Level Opportunities

Public diplomacy initiatives at the micro level are adaptable to field-based officials' varied and nuanced challenges—intangible from Washington—that depend on the availability of media and technology. In countries where technology has penetrated civil society, this includes responding via mobile phones and online, allowing public affairs and public diplomacy teams to engage more directly through virtual nodes of

in-country communication. Embassies are already using Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter to communicate messages to both local and foreign populations. Embassies can also participate in conversations on local blogs, or on other local or global online platforms, on which foreign citizens may react to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. embassy in Indonesia, for instance, maintains a vibrant, ongoing conversation on its Facebook page and also created a mobile application for President Obama's November 2010 visit to Jakarta.[34]

In countries that rely on more traditional modes of communication, technology-based strategies and tools may be of marginal use. Though 5.3 billion people are expected to be cell-phone subscribers by the end of 2010, 72 percent of the world remains unconnected to the Internet.[35] The non-wired world can include countries where public diplomacy challenges are the toughest and where U.S. national security interests are strongest. Throughout the Middle East, for example, 29.8 percent of the population can access the Internet; throughout Africa, only 11 percent have access.[36] In these regions, it is vital to maintain traditional public diplomacy exercises, which focus on person-to-person contact such as local media engagement, English language programs, and vocational and entrepreneurial training through outposts such as American Corners or Lincoln Centers. This grassroots approach means that civilians must travel and work beyond the capitals to launch open dialogues and become less risk adverse.[37]

At the micro level, face-to-face interaction conveys the most potent message of American goodwill. The smallest kind of face-to-face interaction can make an impression; the military has acknowledged this by moving towards population-centric, counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Throughout the developing world, the best complement to rhetoric is positive and effective aid delivery. The ongoing expansion of both the State Department's and USAID's Foreign Service programs is a remarkable opportunity for public diplomacy message-integration. The State Department and USAID are both increasing their staff capacity, with USAID projecting to double its workforce by 2012.[38] This personnel increase is encouraging, but success will ultimately depend on the agencies' ability to effectively communicate U.S. foreign policy while simultaneously delivering much-needed results that will resonate more strongly than any message can on its own.

Aid, however, is not delivered only by U.S. government agencies. Public diplomacy should ideally be an inclusive, holistic process, which Americans who work abroad and are invested in an overall positive perception of the United States can inform and assist. U.S.-based NGOs, businesses, science and arts institutions, and private individuals each implicitly

represent the United States; for decades, often under the label "citizen diplomat," these actors have played a role in public diplomacy. The government should encourage these partnerships at the micro level, while searching for the right balance between supporting citizen diplomacy work and not branding it as official U.S. policy.

CONCLUSION

We inhabit an increasingly interdependent and democratic world in which global public opinion matters. We need to maintain favorable standing with foreign publics not just to effectively counter violent extremism but also to advance a host of specific policy objectives, such as preventing food shortages, curbing climate change, and strengthening the global economy. To meet our responsibilities, we must adopt a field-focused and iterative approach to public diplomacy and continue to transform the contents of our technological toolkit. This requires that more civilian public diplomacy officers acquire the skills to engage with traditional and social media. It also requires officers to leave capital cities and engage in the field so they can readily and innovatively respond to ground-based realities. Dialogue through technological platforms should be intensified, but these platforms should never replace person-to-person contact, which can often leave a more lasting and accurate impression on foreign citizens.

Immediately after September 11, 2001, public diplomacy was falsely perceived as being about messaging and finding a better way to "explain U.S. foreign policy."[39] Today, public diplomacy's focus is on action and on building trust through both virtual and in-person engagement. There is no quick fix to reversing anti-American sentiment and behavior. To produce goodwill, public diplomacy will take decades of sustained effort, continuous innovation, and an institutionalized conviction of its importance to national security.[40] Looking at the long term, we must move public diplomacy away from the periphery and into the center of twenty-first-century statecraft. ■

ENDNOTES

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