

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Public diplomacy: meeting new challenges. Report of Wilton Park Conference 902

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Webb, Alban (2009). Public diplomacy: meeting new challenges. Report of Wilton Park Conference 902. In: Public Diplomacy: Meeting New Challenges. 902nd Wilton Park Conference, 6-8 Oct 2008, Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning, West Sussex, UK.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 Alban Webb

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/documents/conferences/WP902/pdfs/WP902.pdf>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk



Report on Wilton Park Conference 902

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: MEETING NEW CHALLENGES Monday 6 - Wednesday 9 October 2008 in collaboration with Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Summary

- Public diplomacy is rapidly changing, constantly adjusting to new points of reference, for example the emergence of negotiations around the climate change debate or the discourse surrounding international terrorism.
- The tone of public diplomacy is changing and requires new vocabulary to frame messages for politically and culturally diverse audiences.
- The theory of public diplomacy, and the way in which it is practised, is developing within a body of conceptual frameworks. There are some fundamental questions about the role and methodology of public diplomacy: should diplomats be considered as agents of influence, or rather as conveners of those who do wield influence?
- Public diplomacy faces a series of challenges as a multi-dimensional activity involving state and non-state actors across a broad spectrum of foreign and, increasingly, domestic policy. Collaborations inevitably raise questions of equality between partners and the need to agree common objectives.
- Diplomatic organisations are grappling with ways in which to assert strategic direction within a system of communication that is asymmetric and often not measurable by traditional methods.
- New media technologies, while providing unprecedented opportunities for engaging with audiences, require a re-tooling of the diplomatic machine before they can be used to full effect.
- The practice of public diplomacy is subject to the budgetary and other resource constraints and ultimately, this can limit its effectiveness.

Public Partners: Shaping the Conditions

1 Collaboration is a key dimension of effective public diplomacy. It is difficult to imagine any modern public diplomacy effort which has not been negotiated through a series of partnerships, both in terms of agenda-setting and subsequent implementation. While successful collaboration is nothing new, the analysis of successful methodologies has led to a systematic approach to collaboration based on repeatable, flexible and measurable models.

2 The collaborative process requires consistent effort to ensure that partnerships don't fail and result in a battlefield for aggrieved and competing interests. A strong strategic aim is a precondition for success, albeit one that reflects the interests of all parties and not just the concerns of a dominant partner. Successful collaborations include: the development of a National Taxpayers Association in Kenya; the bringing into being (under United Nations auspices) of an Arms Trade Treaty; and the establishment of M-PESA, the mobile phone payment service, in Kenya. These examples of shared leadership brought a range of partners, including government departments, private companies, international institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizen groups, into discussions about policy options that forged a common purpose.

3 The design of collaborative apparatus was a prominent feature of France's 'Grenelle Environment Round Table', instigated by President Sarkozy in 2007. The initiative defined the key points of government policy on ecological and sustainable development issues as part of a five year plan. The process required engagement on a grand scale, from public meetings across the country, to a political agreement on 268 commitments on a wide range of policy from climate change, to town and country planning. Key to the continued success of the process was the acceptance that the outcome would be a 'ministry of contraries', due to the sheer scale of the issues addressed and the number of partners involved. By contrast, the Danish government's experience of collaboration on climate change policy is a warning of the difficulties that can result when attempting to coordinate a diverse range of partners. The organisational logic apparent at the start of a public diplomacy project

can quickly evaporate, if the objectives are not analysed, reviewed and redirected throughout the process.

4 Effective public diplomacy requires strong strategic leadership characterised by the ability to move an issue, organisation or agenda beyond its own natural inertia. Foresight, judgement and imagination are essential qualities for the strategic leader, but just as important is the ability to manage and maintain 'conversations' between collaborative partners. The communication of strategy within an organisation, or partnership, is necessary to ensure the spread of the vision. It also serves to devolve responsibility and promote continued 'buy-in'. The 'appreciative conversation' between partners avoids pre-judgement and signals a commitment to finding collective solutions. Throughout the partnership, it is important to maintain (or 'tend') these conversations and ensure that both minds and ears are kept open.

5 Public diplomacy sits astride the domestic and the international agenda and must remain sensitive to internal constituencies as well as external partners. It is a 'cross-border' activity: domestic initiatives, such as 'Grenelle', inevitably connect to wider trans-national and cross-cultural debates and preconceptions. Today's agents of public diplomacy reflect the wide range of partners which lie outside the traditional scope and often beyond the control of governments. In all cases, a successful public diplomacy collaboration should be based on the transparent negotiation of common interests. What is the diplomat's role in this 'brave new world' of public diplomacy? Is it that of an 'honest broker', using their convening power to bring together coalitions of the willing and the not so willing? Have diplomatic imperatives remained the same and it is merely the 'operating environment' which has changed? The challenge to diplomats is to adapt existing skills in order to meet the demands of contemporary public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy: Meeting New Challenges

6 In recent years there has been much debate about suitable definitions of modern public diplomacy. This has been coupled with wide-ranging organisational and institutional reforms of the 'diplomatic machinery'. Today's prevailing approach

is that of action and engagement, with government communication at the centre of activity.

7 Strategic communication, irrespective of the conceptual baggage and connotations such a term carries, is a 'real-time' priority for foreign ministries around the world. In the UK, it is seen as precipitating a revolution, both in terms of project management and communications skills: an attempt to balance external relations with strategic priorities overseas. The unprecedented diversity and reach of new media platforms undoubtedly makes this a highly complex environment. At the same time, it offers governments unprecedented capacity to capture, process and engage with information flows: a new set of tools with a new set of possibilities. Are diplomatic communities sufficiently primed to take advantage of these new opportunities?

8 Identifying and forging the points of common interest between a number of potential partners will always be subject to political trade-offs and renegotiation. Furthermore, 'arms-length' organisations and NGOs, who have their own distinct set of priorities, will not only be deterred by such horse-trading, but will be responding to different, often longer, timescales. Such asymmetry and complexity makes strategic communications extremely difficult. In Afghanistan, for example, the sheer number of foreign actors mitigates against effective coordinated action. Even within a foreign ministry's nominal area of control, such as an Embassy, staffs manage a number of competing departmental strategies that reflect the growing number of domestic stakeholders who have an interest in their work. Nevertheless, the need to avoid equivocation and confusion, in the face of powerful single narratives (such as that of the terrorist), is a major pre-occupation.

9 The working capital of strategic communications, its organisational structures and the people who work in them, are considered by some as ill prepared for the demands of modern public diplomacy. Discreet traditional diplomacy by, for example, a Head of Mission, has been surpassed by techniques of engagement that redefine the means and dynamics of media management and the ability to get the message heard in a highly competitive and evolving market. The introduction of an institutional

skill-set appropriate to these demands (eg. the raising of an organisation's media literacy to an adequate level) is a crucial challenge for government. It requires a change in the nature of establishments that 'do' public diplomacy, the types of people employed, and their subsequent development.

Minding the Gap: National Power and Global Problems

10 The challenge posed by today's global issues, including climate change, terrorism, energy security and fragile states, requires new thinking around the concept of public diplomacy. The diffuse nature of these concerns, involving a plurality of state and non-state actors and impacting on millions of people around the world, has dramatically changed the context in which the means and ability to create influence are calculated. Foreign policy-makers, whether they are politicians, diplomats, soldiers, or NGO activists, are searching for new methods to solve complex and increasingly decentralised problems.

11 The modern day practitioner is challenged by the distinct characteristics which define the conduct of current public diplomacy efforts. The most evident is the need to engage with, and act alongside, non-state actors in pursuit of a common interest. Equally important is the ability to synthesise information to provide the foundation for collective action. There is a responsibility to engage in debate with as many types of partners as possible and, having established a climate for collaboration, to avoid sectional interests coming to the fore and destabilising the process. This ability to synthesise is also important on the domestic front, where recent years have seen a decline in the monopoly of foreign ministries over foreign policy. The diplomat could be at the fulcrum of a government's overseas activity, providing a coordinated centre of foreign policy excellence.

12 How best to exercise influence? Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden (described by one observer as 'the quintessential public diplomat') are innovative communicators who have forged a single powerful narrative of oppression out of a range of grievances, taking advantage of modern forms of communication including the internet and satellite broadcasting. By contrast, traditional diplomacy has been poor at constructing coalitions based around a distinct set of values and ponderous

in communicating effective branding. Whilst understanding the potential of the available options, it is also necessary to appreciate the limits to which influence could, and should, be wielded and to manage expectations accordingly. For example, the promotion of good governance in less developed states attracts considerable attention in the developed world. However, the profile of the issue is not necessarily matched by the ability to influence outcomes. On the other hand, over-exposure with regard to the internal affairs of another country, as currently seen with America and Pakistan, is liable to produce an unintended public diplomacy consequence which can be corrosive to the legitimacy of the actors.

13 The 'narrative', is seen as of paramount importance to some practitioners, however, there are divergent views on its application. A narrative should be elucidating, but at the same time it can be a means of competing with an opposing way of thinking. Is Al-Qaeda's narrative best countered by developing a stronger narrative or would this be counter-productive, alienating audiences rather than influencing them? Alternatively, is the strength of a set of beliefs best exemplified by the projection of one over-riding narrative (which may temporarily conceal internal contradictions), or by demonstrating confidence through the plurality of the narrative(s) presented? Is it better to attempt a 'knock out punch', or will a package of emblematic narratives, be more effective over the long-term?

14 The new diplomat may be no different from the traditional practitioner but may need a different set of skills: tomorrow's diplomat, today, as it were. The job needs someone who can synthesise a vast range of information and extract coherence out of chaos; someone who looks beyond state-to-state relations for the most effective means of communication and collaboration to align domestic policy with international objectives; and someone who recognises the potential of new technologies and is capable of adapting to a rapidly changing environment. The successful diplomat is part analyst, part advocate, part policy-maker and part communications strategist.

Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities for International Engagement

15 The headlines are dominated by the issue of security in Afghanistan. However, the challenges facing the country are not confined to military operations and include development and the need for capacity building. The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, has noted that it is not possible 'to kill our way to victory' in Afghanistan and much depends on the success of nation-building initiatives. However, without security there is no chance to develop capacity or attract the international investment necessary to establish sovereign self-sufficiency. The dilemma for public diplomacy within, and about, Afghanistan is the need for clarity about this co-dependency, whilst explaining what is being done to achieve stability and good governance.

16 The 'Afghan story' can be told with a positive focus on the task of rebuilding infrastructure and improvements in education, healthcare, agriculture and trade. However, these opportunities are often missed and the promise of development has not necessarily been matched by the reality on the ground. The gap between expectation and delivery in Afghanistan increases the risk of failure for the international community and could result in a loss of faith from the Afghans themselves. For some critics, the effectiveness of the reconstruction effort has been severely limited by the failure to engender popular support for the overthrow of the Taliban and for the establishment of an international presence. These difficulties are compounded by the perceived shortcomings of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to coordinate activities with the Afghan Government, the bypassing of the Afghan state in the distribution of some aid resources and the drain of skilled workers to international organisations.

17 The complex organisation of the numerous international actors in Afghanistan and the bureaucratic tug of war thus engendered has resulted in a fragmented narrative of events over the last seven years. It is now essential to support Afghanistan in creating and communicating an ambitious but credible narrative. The role of the international community is to facilitate its 'client', the Afghan Government, in branding its own achievements and not to advertise the interests, concerns and failures of the international partners. The major public diplomacy challenge in

Afghanistan is to admit that the international community has been telling the wrong story. This may prove difficult.

18 The political complexities of managing international cooperation at the start of operations in Afghanistan still pertain. It is also important to court the approval of publics in contributing nations to retain support for their governments' continued involvement. In the past both the message and the messenger have, at times, appeared to be discredited: these mistakes should not be repeated.

19 Framing the future public diplomacy of Afghanistan is both its greatest challenge and grandest opportunity: the country cannot succeed in developing capacity and achieving self-reliance without the support of the international community. A renegotiation of the means and objectives of public diplomacy is needed if the real story of Afghanistan is to be told.

New Media: Harnessing the Potential of Digital Diplomacy

20 New media are changing the dynamics of diplomacy and communication strategy, both at home and abroad. There is a fundamental shift in power from traditional areas of control, the 'production centres', into the hands of the user/citizen community. The digital media underlying this change has been apparent for some time, but only now, as a tipping point is reached in the political mobilisation of virtual communities, are governments attempting to harness this new range of tools and comprehend their place and status in the digital world.

21 For governments, this opportunity comes at a practical as well as psychological cost. Not only is there a need to invest in a new digital infrastructure; it is also necessary to change the mind and skill-set of practitioners. Long-established patterns of thought will need remoulding for a digital political landscape that displaces traditional methods of engagement. No longer in the shadow of the Press Office, digital communications require a different type of management system that is rapid and flexible and able to deliver at a point determined by the user, whether that be on You Tube, Flickr, on a mobile phone or via web chats. This new environment will need people of suitable calibre and flexibility in order to maximise the potential.

22 Officials are generally inclined to caution and this can be a barrier to establishing digital diplomacy within the heart of government. Recent developments in the UK and elsewhere indicate a widening of the spectrum of diplomatic activity, albeit a new dimension with an instantaneous and global reach. Foreign departments and embassies will still need to conduct traditional state-to-state diplomacy alongside new techniques of engagement and influence; governments will continue to seek up-to-date means to manage the national brand and reputation.

23 What are the criteria of success for evaluating these new methods and how does one measure them? This question is largely unanswered at present, but anecdotal evidence, such as the increasing use of e-petitions in the UK, suggests that the scope for engagement is on an unprecedented scale. Gaming is particularly interesting and has a reach of massive potential. It also has a credibility with players which many governments are keen to harness, although they are cautious of their ability to do so. For example, the game *World of Warcraft*, has an online gaming community of 17 million, more than twice the size of Bulgaria. Meanwhile, *America's Army*, launched in 2006 for the US Government and available as a free download, has become an exceptionally effective 'recruiting sergeant' for the American armed forces. Governments will find this ability to engage with and influence people increasingly hard to ignore.

24 The world of gaming has established a new literacy and participation culture whereby the freedom to experiment with complex problems and negotiate tactics within the collective intelligence of the community are the norms of behaviour. In terms of mass participation social interaction, this is a paradigm shift whereby people are given the tools, within a specific rule-set (a system of governance), to determine what they think. Games, like governance, are about rules, systems, concepts and public engagement. By contrast, the paradigm shift heralded by digital diplomats does not appear to have happened at the same rate: rather, the ground is being prepared for the revolution yet to come.

How to Change Public Behaviour: the Foreign Policy Context

25 Foreign policy initiatives have many intended and unintended consequences and governments will face difficulties if they attempt to change public behaviour according to a clearly defined set of foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, it remains the task of the public diplomat to attempt to influence attitudes and activities in line with a wider strategic aim.

26 In a world increasingly fused and contracted by global concerns, the distinctions between overseas and domestic issues have become increasingly blurred. In February 2006, five months after cartoons of the prophet Mohamed were originally printed in a Danish newspaper, Denmark found itself the focus of an intense global argument between secular and Islamic viewpoints on freedom of expression and cultural norms. The most controversial cartoon (*'Bomb in the Turban'*), was reprinted in a number of Danish newspapers in February 2008, following allegations of a foiled attempt to assassinate the cartoonist. This reignited a controversy which had already resulted in the burning of Danish Embassies, the boycotting of Danish companies and products and a number of fatalities.

27 Although this crisis was not caused by government, it became a significant public diplomacy problem for the Danes. There was agreement between the Danish Foreign Minister, Per Stig Møller, and Muslim colleagues, that attempts should be made to deflate the crisis. However, it became very difficult to manage events as protests in the Muslim world took on their own momentum. The Danish Government had few options: a campaign of defensive public diplomacy was employed in order to engage with the popular dissent. Ambassadors were instructed to use local and national media, at their own discretion, to give voice to rebuttals, corrections and additional information in what amounted to a decentralised campaign, tailored to local conditions. The Danish Government effectively devolved its public diplomacy effort in order to engage on specific terms with defined audiences.

28 The UK government has similarly sought an appropriate means of engagement in the attempt to counter radicalisation in the Muslim communities. Recent initiatives include the Research, Information and Communications Unit

(RICU), based at the Home Office and including officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government. The role of RICU is to counteract messages put out by violent extremists and to strengthen communication with communities and organisations in support of their efforts to tackle terrorism. This represents a shift of focus from the message to the audience. Recent assessments of the government's core message on the 'war on terror' have identified it as over complicated and confusing to target audiences. For example, references by officials to 'Islamist terrorism', are extremely likely to alienate Muslim communities with potentially damaging consequences.

29 Credible communication does not necessarily rely on the promotion of an 'own brand'. A narrative of 'them' against 'us' narrative will ultimately fail if the 'us' is not liked or understood. Accordingly, while strategies designed to undermine the terrorist brand should seek to expose the weaknesses of violent extremist ideology and support and promote credible alternatives, they may be best served by minimising the profile of the government messenger. This is producing a new approach to engagement. Terrorists should be seen as criminals and murderers regardless of their motivation: an unambiguous distinction which emphasises their attempts to destroy common values. This approach also serves to open up the dialogue about the nature of the threat and effectively involves the public in the search for solutions.

30 In the face of extreme and persistent anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, US public diplomacy also appears to be coming to terms with the realisation that 'selling' America is not the solution. This emerging doctrine of national brand avoidance was articulated by James Glassman, US Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, when he argued that in the war of ideas, 'our core task is not to promote our brand, but to destroy theirs'. What seems axiomatic is that anti-Americanism is here to stay, for now at least, and that US messages advocating freedom and democracy have been drowned out by an inherent scepticism of American motives and foreign policy initiatives in the region.

31 The failure of earlier post-9/11 modes of American public diplomacy in the Middle East seem to have led to the realisation that in a hostile communications environment where the US lacks legitimacy, rational arguments aimed at Muslim audiences will not necessarily elicit understanding or sympathy. People will not learn to 'love America' merely by having America explained to them. Communities will feel threatened by views that do not accord with their own and the US needs to soften its rhetoric on the 'war on terror'. This does not necessarily preclude attacks on terrorists and the organisations that support them.

The Theory of Influence: Developing a Strategy

32 The techniques and practices of what is currently termed public diplomacy are not new. Nevertheless, new dimensions have evolved in accordance with the wide range of circumstances, contexts and actors now involved in the equation. A modern and more sophisticated vision of public diplomacy is needed to describe an activity that is receiving growing attention amidst the increasingly complex matrix of today's communication strategies and technologies.

33 Public diplomacy is undergoing a wholesale re-evaluation in light of the global challenges facing governments: these include international terrorism, climate change and global economic crises. However, some nations perceive public diplomacy solely in terms of the potential gains to the individual state.

34 Public diplomacy can be seen as a multi-actor communication strategy; the voice of crisis communication, and a powerful advocacy tool. It can have a strategic role: long-term, proactive and allied to policy goals. In addition, it has a tactical function such as summitry and media management. This variety of applications often makes it difficult to identify appropriate ways in which to measure its success.

35 New technologies are radically reshaping the practice of public diplomacy as well as changing the traditional boundaries between audiences and publics. Global issues and global technologies have expanded the opportunities for engagement while at the same time contracting the field of activity. The distinctions between domestic and overseas audiences have all but disappeared although cultural

sensibilities remain distinct and, at times, oppositional. Accordingly, public diplomats are a professional class in the throes of permanent evolution. Adept at management and with an ability to maintain and develop relationships and networks, they need to be part anthropologist, part psychologist, part analyst, with an ability to express complex narratives clearly and authoritatively across a range of media in accordance with strategic objectives. Above all, the most effective practitioners will have learnt the value of listening, even when they don't like what they hear.

What Skills do Diplomats Need?

36 Traditionally, to possess information was to wield power. However, in today's age of global technologies, information is widely available and it is the person who can capture attention who now has the influence. The ecology of public diplomacy can be characterised as a series of contests of competitive credibility, as Joseph Nye put it, where success is measured by 'whose story wins'.

37 In a political context, these narratives can be a cohesive force providing a back-story for current action and a hook from which to hang a range of policy options. The value of a good narrative is well understood and to lack such a story is often to invite criticism. What are the key components for a resonant narrative? The emotion, passion and authenticity with which the story is told (its 'voice'), will draw attention to the content. A hero, or protagonist, will give the audience a point of view to gain purchase with the story in their own terms. Similarly, the antagonist will seek a compelling narrative which has to be overcome.

38 There is a pivotal point in all such narratives between the aspiration and the transformation: this moment of awareness is sometimes portrayed as redemption. At its most effective, it can elicit broad support by translating common values between different publics. The challenge for public diplomacy is to identify the larger narrative arc within which to develop a series of sub-narratives.

39 Metaphors often make the most impact in story telling because they are narratives in a capsule, giving a glimpse of the wider narrative architecture. For example, the term 'guerrilla fighter' can describe a whole story. This provides a

powerful ingredient for public diplomacy precisely because it is extremely engaging for audiences. However, narratives have as much power to alienate as they do to coalesce and gaining support for the story requires an appreciation of the dynamics of listening. Stories that place the listener in the same group as the narrator are far more likely to garner understanding and sympathy for the inherent ideas. By contrast, a 'them' and 'us' dynamic will inevitably alienate those who don't already identify with the narrator. It is also important to recognise the capacity of audiences to manage dissonance when core beliefs are challenged. When presented with contradictory evidence, people with staunch beliefs are able to register the disparity but quickly replace this moment of equivocation with an increased affirmation of their original assumption. The credibility of the messenger can be of greater importance than the message itself.

40 The importance of narratives to public diplomacy lies in their ability to tell a story that contains complexity and a number of contradictions. It explains where you've come from, where you're going and why. Understanding which stories are relevant to which audiences requires skill and, above all, an ability to listen and to comprehend which narratives motivate which people.

Conclusions

41 Public diplomacy is distinguished by its complexity, diversity and the variety of tools available. For those new to the scope of its activities it can present an intimidating challenge, both conceptually and in terms of day to day management. Is it a subset of diplomacy, or does it have distinct attributes that set it apart? Is it simply good diplomatic practice for the contemporary world? However, while it is useful to engage with the theoretical frameworks this should not distract from the practical application.

42 It is clear that new technologies are reshaping the skill-sets required to conduct public diplomacy. There is considerable potential in digital diplomacy and other media-related developments: institutions will need to invest in training of new diplomats to ensure they are equipped to deal with these fast emerging tools.

43 Public diplomacy offers the valuable opportunity of meaningful collaboration among a number of partners on the basis of a shared common interest. The breadth of potential partners, including state and non-state actors raises important questions about the strategic management of these relationships. Public diplomats could benefit from the sharing of best practice, within a global community, including the expertise of other sectors of public service and business. This could be codified within the curriculum of a trans-national and cross-cultural 'diplomatic academy' or through an evolving resource such as a public diplomacy 'playbook'. The reach, methods and potential of public diplomacy require further exploration and practitioners would benefit from continued and open communication.

Alban Webb
March 2009

Wilton Park Reports are brief summaries of the main points of a conference. The reports reflect rapporteurs' personal interpretations of the proceedings - as such they do not constitute any institutional policy of Wilton Park nor do they necessarily represent the views of rapporteurs.