ISSUE BRIEF

Harnessing Communications and Public Diplomacy

Four Rules for Success in Strategy Development

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Largely neglected after the end of the Cold War, the use of information and public diplomacy to influence audiences and help achieve national objectives is making a comeback. However, this revival is not due to the efforts of the United States, but rather to those using information in dangerous ways. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) uses graphic visual images and threatening language to recruit new members and intimidate those it rules. Russia uses messaging and misinformation to create doubt among Western audiences and hide its efforts in eastern Ukraine. And China controls domestic access to information in order to amplify nationalistic attitudes and create mistrust of others, especially of the United States.

In contrast, the United States appears out of touch in this area. Headlines such as "@ISIS Is #Winning" and "America Has Forgotten How to Tell Its Side of the Story" abound.[1] National policymakers struggle to stay relevant and express skepticism that the US government can be an effective actor in today's information exchange. The State Department, the official owner of the nation's public diplomacy effort, acknowledged in 2010 that "we have been misrepresented—or not represented at all—in too many global conversations."[2]   State's newly revamped Global

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[1] Robert Newsom, "America Has Forgotten How to Tell Its Story," *Newsweek*, December 4, 2014, http://www.newsweek.com/america-has-forgotten-how-tell-its-side-story-289238; Kori Schake, "@ISIS Is #Winning," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/09/isis-is-winning.

[2] US State Department, *Public Diplomacy: Strengthing US Engagement with the World*, February 26, 2010, https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/legacy/pdfs/PD_US_World_Engagement.pdf.

US President Barack Obama answers questions asked on Twitter during an event at the White House. *Photo credit:* Geoff Livingston/Flickr.

Engagement Center appears to address this concern, but in reality it is narrowly focused on countering violent extremism via a holistic approach to US public diplomacy efforts and it is unclear how integrated with strategic policymaking it is.

The reason for this narrative challenge to a slow-moving institution like the US government may be understandable given today's evolution—and many say, revolution—in the communications field that underpins public diplomacy. Led by the rapid growth in Internet connectivity and mobile technology, an individual's ability to be a part of the global conversation is unprecedented.[3] As the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030* asserts, two of the four global

megatrends over the next fifteen years will be individual empowerment and the diffusion of power away from nation-states, both partially driven by the personal networks created through this communications revolution.[4]

This increase in personal empowerment and dialogue between individual social networks is leading to a corresponding increase in the ability and desire of audiences to verify information on their own. Instead of hearing a piece of news from a single source, audiences can now review several sources, including personal connections they view as trustworthy. As a result, audiences perceive organizations to be less credible until their information has been verified. Even long-established information-sharing institutions, such as the *New York Times*, are struggling to convince their

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3 According to GSMA Intelligence, half of the global population (3.8 billion) is expected to have access to the Internet through mobile technology by 2020. See GSMA, *Digital Inclusion 2014*, 2014, p. 3, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/GSMA_Digital-Inclusion-Report_Web_Singles_2.pdf.

4 National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, December 2012, http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf.

audiences based solely on reputation. An organization's task of convincing an audience of the authenticity of its information is even more difficult when the organization appears to be less than trustworthy. The US government's reputation, always under intense scrutiny, is even more tenuous after recent events, including the Iraq campaign, National Security Agency leaks, and federal budget paralysis. This shift to a more cynical view of institutions means direct engagement and sharing of the US government's message through public diplomacy is becoming increasingly difficult and is negatively impacting wider strategic efforts in various regions.

Faced with the fast pace of this communications revolution and its impact on the execution of public diplomacy, national policymakers should understand how to harness it in such a way that it contributes to, rather than undermines, the success of a given strategy. This issue brief frames the discussion in strategic terms, exploring evolving communications mechanisms, their effect on public diplomacy, and how they should be woven into policy development. Specifically, when developing strategy and policy and the public diplomacy effort supporting them, policymakers should build around four core communication elements: understanding today's audience; finding the mutuality; creating the space for an enduring conversation; and holding a conversation, not a monologue.

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Understanding Today's Audience

The statement seems obvious: Know who you are talking to. Indeed, classic audience analysis focuses on demographic information such as age, gender, and economic status and is still at the core of front-end communications research. But many audiences today dictate when and from what sources they obtain information, requiring audience analysis that is more agile than ever before and that goes to a greater level of fidelity. That additional analysis must focus on how that audience receives information, by identifying each

medium through which the receiver communicates and who influences that receiver.

The number of ways audiences can receive information today is exponentially greater than a generation ago; every day a new app or aggregating website seems to appear. Therefore, to reach a desired audience policymakers need to understand each medium that the audience uses to receive information. If the receiver favors a particular social media path and the sender stubbornly sticks to traditional broadcast media like television then not only is it considered out of touch but it implicitly shows a lack of respect for the audience's desired means of reception. As a result, the sender's message is either ignored or never heard in the first place. This then creates an opportunity for others more attuned to the audience to happily fill the void and influence the audience to their desired ends.

As an added benefit, harnessing new communications technology tends to create credibility. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used the radio to bring knowledge to the masses in the 1930s and 1940s, while President John F. Kennedy used television two decades later; some argue that President Barack Obama likewise broke new ground through his use of social media. By recognizing the power of the new communications medium of the time, each demonstrated to the receiver adeptness at employing new technology and appreciation for the audience's shifting taste for consumption.

Understanding an audience also requires an appreciation for who influences it. As mentioned above, with the rise of individual empowerment comes a resulting decline in the perceived authenticity of institutions. In a report entitled "Taking Soft Power Seriously," the authors note that "the trustworthiness of a source is undermined if the source has a direct stake in the matter at hand, especially when the source promotes a position that clearly furthers [its] interests."[5] When coupled with the sheer volume of

5 Matt Kroenig, Melissa McAdam, and Steven Weber, "Taking Soft Power Seriously," *Comparative Strategy,* 29 (2010), p. 415.

available information today, receivers instinctively filter out much and lean heavily on those they deem to be both expert in a given subject and trustworthy. Therefore, the United States must identify and leverage credible local voices to share its narrative, using a combination of depth and breadth. For depth of interaction, the continued use of cultural, academic, and military exchange programs provides deep knowledge and linkages among a select group of current and future leaders. For breadth, programs like the recently created Young Africans Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network, which already has nearly 140,000 people associated with it, creates a wide array of influencers the United States can leverage going forward.[6] Understanding who the audience listens to is in some ways as important as identifying the audience itself.

The task of identifying who the target audience is, how it receives information, and who influences it takes a large amount of front-end analytics and requires constant evaluation to maximize the chance of success in engagement. In this regard, US policymakers have room for improvement. US-based foundations' and philanthropic organizations' standard for this type of analysis is 3 percent of the communications budget. In contrast, the US government's resourcing via the State Department is only 1 percent of the overall public diplomacy budget, itself only 4 percent of State's total International Affairs budget.[7] At the same time, multiple departments and federal agencies execute research on similar audiences, duplicating limited resources. By centralizing

resources on this function not only would the requisite funding be available, but also a more uniform picture of the audience would be available, minimizing confusion during policy development. One option that leadership should consider is forming public-private partnerships with established analysis firms or even outsourcing audience analysis to local firms in a given market. Doing so would save personnel and financial resources and would ensure that local nuances are included in the analysis, resulting in more informed policymaking.

Finding the Mutuality

Once the audience is understood, the next step is to understand what action you want the audience to take. Traditionally, simply conveying the preferred action of the sender was the norm in shaping the desired narrative to a relatively passive audience. In today's environment with a more active receiver, the ability to dictate a certain action is less effective than if the sender can identify those actions that both it and the receiver desire to take. In the communications field this is called *finding the mutuality*. By acknowledging those areas of cooperation the sender shares with the receiver, the sender demonstrates respect for the receiver and works toward building a foundation of trust for future interactions.

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An important step in finding the mutuality is understanding what each party wants out of a given policy or action, which is often different. For example, one party may take an action to appease a constituency while the other takes that same action for material benefit. Understanding the desires of the receiver and how to appeal to those desires will allow the sender to fine-tune its message and encourage a mutual action with the receiver that is beneficial to both.

For US leadership, finding the mutuality should take the form of identifying policies that it wishes another nation to take and understanding what might motivate it to do so. For example, the United States wants China to increase Internet freedom to promote the American value of freedom of speech. That desire does not resonate with Chinese leadership, who believe that free

6 The YALI website is a good example of promoting a US desire without conspicuous US government branding. Despite being managed by the State Department, the site downplays State's association with YALI, providing the initiative a level of independence from the sponsoring agency. See Young Aftical Leaders Initiative, "Providing the Tools, Training, and Technology to Promote Leadership: The YALI Network," https://youngafricanleaders.state.gov/yali-network.

7 Katherine Brown, Chris Hensman, and Palak Bhandari, eds., *2015 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting*, United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2015, p. 24, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/247329.pdf.

Social media played an important role during the 2011 Egyptian protests, as illustrated by this sign carried by a demonstrator. *Photo credit:* Essam Sharaf/Wikipedia.

expression disrupts internal security. Therefore, to encourage the action, rather than beating the free-speech drum to a Chinese audience only to have it fall upon deaf ears, US messaging could promote how a freer Internet stimulates the economy, an outcome held in high regard in Beijing. In appealing primarily to another's desire instead of its own, the US narrative would stand a better chance of achieving the end goal of a more open Internet.[8]

A note of caution: Finding the mutuality can be challenging, especially when doing so could result in the abdication of values on one side of the exchange. If faced with a choice between satisfying a mutual action and upholding its values, the United States should default to the latter. The broader damage done to the nation's reputation when those values are relinquished

in the name of satisfying a particular audience's desire or common action can be pronounced. A good example is the much-publicized 2013 Twitter fiasco from the US Embassy in Cairo. The embassy posted a John Stewart video criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood government's jailing of Egyptian comedian Bassem Youssef on its Twitter feed, only to shut down that feed and delete the tweets under pressure from the Egyptian government. Instead of demonstrating the American value of freedom of expression, the US Embassy chose to cede that value to the host government in the name of mutuality, demonstrating that freedom of expression is important to the United States only when it is not challenged. The resultant outcry from local actors was understandable, damaging the United States' image and impeding its future narrative, not only with that audience but others who watched it play out on global media.[9] Good

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8 To read more about this approach, see Clay Shirkey, "The Political Power of Social Media," *Foreign Affairs,* September 16, 2014, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2010-12-20/political-power-social-media.

9 For more on this episode, read Cynthia Schneider, "US Embassy Learns a Hard Lesson about Twitter," *CNN*, April 10, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/10/opinion/schneider-bassem-youssef/index.html?iref=allsearch.

communication stems from a foundation of mutual respect, even if the parties disagree on certain values.

Creating the Space for Enduring Conversation

With the audience identified and the mutuality found, US policymakers should then focus on creating a space for conversation that is sustainable over the long term. All the technology and clever narrative in the world will mean little if the receiver cannot receive it, or if the receiver receives only an internally biased message that a sender like the United States cannot influence. The most extreme example of the latter is the North Korean populace whose access to the outside world is cut off by the government in Pyongyang. However, in many parts of the world shades of restrictions abound. Some take the form of explicit government interference in marketplace mechanisms, such as China's control of the Internet within its borders or Egypt's harassment and jailing of journalists. Others, like Russia and its Twitter-trolling operations, oversaturate the information space and create misinformation and biases that are difficult to correct due to their volume. Even democratic nations like South Korea and Israel have taken measures in the past year to monitor online activity and censor discussions criticizing their governments.[10] An open discussion requires an open space. The United States should promote policies that allow for greater freedom of information exchange, be it by encouraging broader Internet openness or by challenging nations that suppress free and independent journalism.

The US government needs to be cautious about removing space for conversation itself. As security concerns for overseas US entities increase, the move toward a "fortress America" intensifies. One troubling example is the possible relocation of American Centers into embassy compounds. American Centers are US-controlled, freestanding locations that provide a variety of public diplomacy functions in the host nation. According to the US Advisory Commission on Public

Diplomacy, twenty-one of the thirty-two urban locations are "at risk for being co-located" in a new embassy compound, with the imposing security infrastructure and limited outside access that connotes.[11] As noted public diplomacy expert Bruce Gregory writes, "A sharp divide exists between the risk tolerance of diplomats and the risk aversion of lawmakers and officials in Washington."[12] Despite the rise of social media technology, the exchange of ideas between two parties still thrives on personal contact. If the United States wants to have a conversation, particularly with nongovernmental actors, it needs to do so face-to-face, not behind a wall.

Other mechanisms by the United States to create space for conversation are seeing varying levels of success. On a positive note, the Voice of America (VOA) broadcast program in Africa is a success story. Fifty percent of VOA's total worldwide audience is in the sub-Saharan region, and VOA is the only international broadcaster that covers the entire area. Its ability to reach audiences otherwise shut out due to government interference and other inhibitors is having a constructive impact.[13] For example, during the Ebola outbreak, VOA, in partnership with the British Broadcasting Corporation, passed along key information through multiple media, reaching 1.5 million people that otherwise had no access to that information and contributing to the disease's containment. This engagement on the African continent furthers US interests and will become increasingly important as Beijing's influence grows in that region and possibly counters that of Washington.

On the negative side, under-resourced public diplomacy shops hinder the United States' ability to have a dialogue. One example is the effort in Moldova. Though that nation

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10 Arch Puddington, *Freedom in the World 2015, Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist*, Freedom House, 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf.

11 For an in-depth discussion about this issue, read US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *Public Diplomacy at Risk: Protecting Open Access for American Centers*, US State Department, May 2015, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/242141.pdf.

12 Bruce Gregory, *The Paradox of US Public Diplomacy: Its Rise and 'Demise,'* Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communications, George Washington University, February 2014, p. 20, https://ipdgc.gwu.edu/sites/ipdgc.gwu.edu/files/downloads/IPDGC-SpecialReport1-BGregory.pdf.

13 Brown et al., eds., *2015 Comprehensive Annual Report*, p. 60, op. cit.

is particularly vulnerable to undue Russian influence within its Transnistria region, US public diplomacy expenditures there are less than $500,000 annually, an amount that ranks forty-first out of spending in forty-seven nations in Europe, and that is below spending in the more stable and similarly sized nations Ireland and Slovenia.[14] As the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) report notes, there are relatively easy, cost-effective fixes that could be enacted that would bolster the efforts against the heavy Russian narrative, open up greater space for engagement and exchange, and ultimately work toward stabilizing the nation.[15]

One broader policy consideration is creating engagement strategies that shift the United States from the role of participant to that of facilitator. With the increasing number of participants present in many conversations, expert Kristin Lord argues that public diplomacy may be moving towards a "network-focused" model, placing as much value on the ability to facilitate a discussion among various actors as on building and promoting a specific narrative.[16] The United States would create the conversation space by linking others together and building a common framework of discussion for those parties. Unlike conventional diplomacy of the Camp David variety, this linking would bring traditional diplomatic actors together with newer audiences, such as thought leaders and nonprofit organizations, all focused on specific problems. In this regard the US government is well positioned, as one of its key attributes is the ability to build coalitions by pulling together disparate actors for a common cause.

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Holding a Conversation, Not a Monologue

Conversation involves listening as much as talking. As individual empowerment increases, entities like the US government must shift from "on-the-mountaintop" proclamations to more personal exchanges in order to get audience buy-in and acceptance. As communications expert Rebecca Leet writes, "Organizations must change from having *telling* cultures to having *asking* cultures if they want to be effective in today's world of increasing personal power."[17] For US policymakers, this means creating mechanisms to solicit feedback on a particular policy or strategy, not just from classic interlocutors such as diplomats or other government officials, but also from key nonstate influencers and the target audiences themselves. Even something as basic as answering questions on an embassy Facebook or Twitter account goes a long way towards demonstrating that the United States is not just sending but is also receiving.

For example, former US Ambassador to Russia Mike McFaul and current US Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert each have strong reputations in their host nation audiences because they engage via social media. They both impact audiences by holding conversations, not just by putting out polished messages. A more prominent example is then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Pakistan in 2009. During the three-day outing she held several town hall events with university students and the media, taking pointed questions and offering frank replies. As a sender, her willingness to listen and speak honestly was not lost on the receiver, in this case the Pakistani populace. As a Pakistani government spokesperson stated afterwards, "In the past, when the Americans came, they would talk to the generals and go home. Clinton's willingness to meet with everyone, hostile or not, has made a big

14 Ibid*,* p. 221.

15 According to ACPD, some of the fixes for the US public diplomacy effort in Moldova include a renewal of at least $1 million in Economic Support Funds to support Moldovan independent media and civil society; a finalization of the lease for the new American Center across the street from Moldova State University; and the addition of a permanent Information Officer to meet the increasing demand from local media to hear America's views on issues in Moldova and Eastern Europe.

16 For more on the idea of networks and public diplomacy, read Kristin M. Lord, *Voices of America: US Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, Brookings, 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Reports/2008/11/public-diplomacy-lord/11_public_diplomacy_lord.PDF.

17 Rebecca K. Leet, *Message Matters: Succeeding at the Crossroads of Mission and Market*, Fieldstone Alliance, 2007, p. 71.

impression . . ."[18] They reacted favorably to holding an authentic conversation with a senior US official rather than having to endure yet another sterile monologue.

A conversation on any level also requires agility on the part of the sender to adjust the message over time to meet the evolving needs of the receiver. US policymakers, still stuck in a pre-twenty-first-century desire to control the narrative from Washington, must continue to push for cultural changes during public diplomacy and engagement efforts. A new framework known as "elastic messaging" involves advancing a central overarching message that can then be fine-tuned to meet a particular audience's mutuality with the sender. In effect, it is the narrative version of centralized guidance with decentralized execution. As the information flow and the pace of the conversation quickens, US policymakers should worry less about the specifics of execution, and more about providing clearly articulated guidance on the overarching theme of the conversation that it wishes to have with its audiences. In short, policymakers must trust that those holding the conversations will uphold the central message of a given policy even as they may tweak that message in order to converse with their audience.

Recommendations

Here is a synopsis of the four steps US policymakers should take when considering how to use communication and public diplomacy in today's ever-changing environment:

Know the audience. Be specific in its identification to hone public diplomacy and engagement efforts. Determine how that audience receives information and use that medium to reach it; do not expect the audience to come to you. Identify those who can influence the audience and, when necessary, leverage them as your primary instrument of communication.

Find the mutuality. Understand what you and the intended audience wish to achieve in common and target that commonality in your narrative. Appreciate

that you and the audience may be approaching the mutual action from different angles, but do not abdicate your values to achieve mutuality. Be prepared to walk away to hold your moral ground.

Create a space for sustainable conversation. Champion policies that allow for a free exchange of ideas, which can endure over the long term, between you and the intended audience, as well as among the audience itself. Avoid inadvertently shutting down conversation by hiding behind walls. Understand that creating space for conversation may mean you are simply a facilitator and not an active participant in the dialogue.

Have a conversation, not a monologue. Engage with the audience and solicit feedback. Do not preach from on high; talk at the same level as the audience. Have mechanisms in place to respond quickly and keep the conversation going, even as personalities change on both sides. Provide clear, succinct guidance and trust the senders at the local level who tweak that guidance to meet the needs of the local audience.

Conclusion

As the last few years have shown, the ability to influence others through public diplomacy and engagement is as powerful as other national elements of power, such as military strength or economic leverage. This is due to a greater understanding of the communication process and how when harnessed properly it can persuade audiences and shape their views of the sender. To use communications as part of public diplomacy effectively, US policymakers must likewise appreciate its elements and weave it into strategy development. Doing so will facilitate the policy goals of the United States and enhance their chance for success.

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18 Joe Klein, "The State of Hillary: A Mixed Record on the Job," *Time,* November 5, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1935090,00.html.