The Network Paradigm of Strategic Public Diplomacy

By R.S. Zaharna | April 2005

With the nomination of Karen Hughes as the new undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, the United States has the potential to embark on a new and more effective phase in its communication with the international community, particularly with the Arab and Islamic world. Hughes' close working relationship with President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and other advisers in the administration's inner circle qualifies her as a communication heavyweight. If she uses this asset, she can transform the old model of public diplomacy used during the Cold War into a more strategic approach.

To date, the United States has been stuck in a one-size-fits-all model of public diplomacy derived from the Cold War period. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, forcefully surfaced the need for a public diplomacy. The perceptions of foreign audiences have domestic consequences, and public diplomacy, a government's tool for communicating with foreign publics and changing negative perceptions, quickly became the buzz in Washington after the attacks.

In the rush to get America's message out, officials relied on the same approach, tools, and mindset in fighting terrorism that had earlier been used to fight communism. The 2002 National Security Strategy ranked "the war of ideas" second only to the military offensive. The "battle for hearts and minds" became the charge, and the Arab and Islamic world was the target audience. The message was American values, and democracy and freedom were the antidote to stopping the spread of terrorism.

As in the Cold War information battle, the U.S. government rolled out an arsenal of heavy weaponry; a State Department fact book, *The Network of Terror* (December 2001); an Arabic youth pop music station, Radio Sawa (March 2002); the first international U.S. advertising campaign, the Shared Values Initiative (October 2002); an Arabic youth lifestyle magazine, *Hi* (July 2003); and an Arabic-language television satellite network, Al-Hurra (February 2004). All capitalized on the innovative, interactive features of advanced communication technology, but all were government-run media productions in a region with a long experience of exposure to such information sources. All were arm's-length public diplomacy in a region that values people and faces, not facts and figures. Thus, the information battle strategy and mass media tools that worked so effectively in bringing down the Berlin Wall suffered a sandstorm of criticism and ridicule in the Arab world. While the United States focused on presentation of policy, the audience focused on policy, period. The more Washington sought to downplay the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situation in Iraq, the more disingenuous U.S. public diplomacy appeared to the Arab public.

The truly glaring irony was that while the White House vigorously sought to use public diplomacy as a tool for articulating U.S. foreign policy, it made its tool deliberately apolitical. Rather than explaining national interests and clarifying for detractors why the United States was following its policies—and thereby "lessening tension and undercutting terrorist networks like al-Qaida that exploit [those policies]," as Ambassador David Shinn contended—Washington sought to explain U.S. values. Promoting American values merely prompted others to defend and reassert theirs.

After three years of the most intense and expensive public diplomacy campaign in U.S. history, a Pentagon advisory panel admitted the obvious: America has a credibility crisis, and Washington lacks a "working communication channel" for reaching the Arab and Islamic world. The report also dispelled a major argument that the administration had been using to explain the rise of anti-Americanism in the Middle East: "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather our policies."

Perhaps not so coincidentally, the report—submitted in September 2004—was not publicly released until after the presidential elections. Since the report's release, the administration has adopted a radically new approach of mending fences with traditional allies and cultivating relations with uncertain ones in the Arab world. Public diplomacy has once again become a "top priority" of U.S. foreign policy.

Key Points

- Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, U.S. public diplomacy has followed an ineffective information strategy borrowed from the Cold War.

- For U.S. public diplomacy to be effective today, it needs a more strategic approach for communicating simultaneously with diverse publics on a global level.

- Network is the new model of persuasion in the international arena and will define America's effectiveness as a new paradigm of public diplomacy.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Undersecretary Hughes will be tasked with reforming U.S. public diplomacy at the State Department, and the first challenge she will face is transforming Washington's mindset. Fighting information battles by disseminating messages over mass media channels has become the communication equivalent of conventional warfare: it lacks the agility and persuasive power to outmaneuver non-state actors and to navigate the highly charged political and cultural dynamics that define today's global communication era.

During the Cold War it was possible to speak of information battles, and that approach ideally matched the geopolitical landscape and technology at that time. The international arena was defined by the bipolar rivalry between two identifiable government powers with comparable capabilities and constraints. Fighting an information battle readily complemented the political, military, and economic struggle between the two superpowers.

Public diplomacy during the Cold War was about bipolar interests, information volume, control, and separate audiences. Crafters of U.S. public diplomacy adroitly defined its strategic goals as promoting U.S. interests, increasing volume, segmenting audiences, and controlling information. Public diplomacy was a product; creating the best and distributing the most information to foreign audiences was the goal.

Mass communication technology deftly served Washington's strategy. Broadcasts were targeted, controlled, and monitored. Information dissemination was vital; the one with the most information could dominate and frame the political debate. Controlling the airwaves through saturation or jamming created a "spiral of silence" that effectively isolated and discredited the opponent. A government's persuasive power rested on quantity rather than quality of information; volume was more important than credibility.

Foreign and domestic audiences were separated both geographically and by news source. Technological and political restrictions limited the flow of information between the two audiences making it possible to speak to one without confusing or alienating the other. The prevalence of government-controlled media made the "free flow of information" a rare and cherished commodity.

But the Cold War information strategy is not working today in the war on terrorism because the political/cultural terrain and advances in communication technology have transformed how nations communicate simultaneously with diverse publics on a global level. The bipolar context that once neatly defined and sorted all information messages has given way to a multipolar context of diversified global concerns, glaring regional conflicts, and heightened cultural awareness. Each dimension adds another layer of filters capable of distorting even the most skillfully crafted message that Washington can devise.

The first dimension of this new multipolar context is multiplicity of global concerns such as disease, poverty, environmental degradation—and terrorism—that transcend the physical borders of individual nations. To address these shared problems, nations have turned to a more collaborative approach. In a setting that favors cooperation, Washington's efforts to singularly pursue national interests magnify foreign perceptions of U.S. exceptionalism, unilateralism, and isolationism.

Second, disputes once overshadowed by the superpower rivalry have resurfaced with a vengeance. U.S. actions relative to regional conflicts and politics now carry greater weight than they did before. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for example, has become a prism for viewing U.S. policy and serves as a litmus test for Washington's credibility in the Middle East. U.S. foreign policy is the local reality for the people absorbed by these clashes. The glaring intensity of these controversies has made U.S. policy the message of U.S. public diplomacy.

Key Problems

- Diversified global concerns, glaring regional conflicts, and heightened cultural awareness filter and distort the best message that Washington can devise.

- U.S. messages disseminated via mass media channels are particularly vulnerable to distortions and can even be turned against the United States.

- The strategic goal of public diplomacy is not to control or dominate the new communication terrain but rather to effectively navigate it.

Third, culture has emerged as the new dynamic in international relations, replacing the surge of nationalism that defined the Cold War era. The more globalization spreads, the more culture becomes the new frontier for defining identities and allegiances. Although culture knows no national boundaries, it creates its own cognitive boundaries. For those within its confines, culture informs communication. For all others, culture distorts the message. U.S. reliance on mass media channels worked effectively with foreign publics during the Cold War, but that dependency has now become a disadvantage. Messages disseminated via mass media channels are particularly vulnerable to unseen cultural filters and distortions. Crossing the cultural barrier has become U.S. public diplomacy's greatest hurdle.

Advanced communication technology has also changed the very practice of public diplomacy. Previously, the most significant feature of the Internet was the *amount* of information—the "paradox of plentitude," as Professor Joseph Nye called it. Today, the Internet's defining characteristic is the *exchange* of information. The immense popularity of emails, blogs, chat rooms, and online discussions reflects the current communication dynamic. Instant messaging, mobile phones, and satellite television are about being connected.

Before, U.S. public diplomacy was an information product, made in America and disseminated overseas. Today's communication interactivity has transformed it into a process. Public diplomacy has become more about "participation" rather than simply "presentation," noted British scholar Rhiannon Vickers in her comparative analysis of British and Canadian public diplomacy. "Dialogue" keeps surfacing in public diplomacy discussions because people expect a more interactive and participatory role.

To win hearts and minds in today's politically charged landscape and global communication era, U.S. public diplomacy needs to be able to navigate the new terrain. Instead of trying to control or dominate the playing field, which tends to spawn resentment and magnify U.S. isolation and anti-American sentiment, Washington's public diplomacy needs to bridge the gap that separates the United States from foreign publics. Fighting information battles over the airwaves cannot do that; building communication bridges and forging a network can.

Jamie Metzl of the Council on Foreign Relations proposed the idea of "network diplomacy," suggesting that public diplomacy was "ideally suited for a network orientation." Other countries are beginning to explore the idea. The United States as a communication leader and innovator needs to aggressively do so as well, or it will remain stuck in the Cold War era, vulnerable to mass media distortions and the agile non-state actors forever ready to use and exploit those distortions.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

Networking has become the new model of persuasion in the global communication era. If the Cold War was about information command and control and the Information Age was about bits and bytes, the global communication era is about networks. Disseminating information is spam, networking is strategic.

Key Recommendations

- Networking has replaced information dominance as the new model of persuasion in the global communication era.

- U.S. public diplomacy needs to switch its strategic focus to start building bridges and forging a network between the United States and international publics.

- Yesterday, the communicator with the most information won. Today, the one with the most extensive and strongest network wins.

Not only does networking capitalize on the capabilities of new communication technologies, but it provides a protective buffer against the cultural distortions that plague messages disseminated over mass media channels. Aggressively pursued, building bridges can traverse cultural and political hurdles to capitalize on the interactivity and connectivity that define the global communication era.

Switching the focus of U.S. public diplomacy means redefining its communication goals. Previously, public diplomacy was equated with "overseas information programs," and its mission was "to engage, inform, and influence" foreign publics. In the global communication era, effective public diplomacy is about building bridges with foreign publics; a mission defined by a network of global links matching U.S. citizens with others in the international community.

Switching strategic focus also means adopting new tactics. To insure dominance, Washington historically focused on maximizing the quantity of information. In those days, the communicator with the most information won. Today, the one with the most extensive network and strongest relations wins.

There are numerous ways to build networks. One is to identify and explore potential links. Effective U.S. public diplomacy must operate less as a communicator and more as a facilitator in an international dialogue. Another tactic is reinforcing existing links; e.g., providing assistance in organizing or facilitating conferences, training symposia, or goodwill ventures. A third approach is to actually create links where none existed before. To achieve this,

U.S. public diplomacy may have to become more agile, flexible, and innovative.

Adopting network strategy also calls for new avenues of public diplomacy research. Research has been subservient to creating the message, hence the focus on surveys and opinion polls. Though U.S. officials may have mastered the art of translating polling data into messaging strategies for domestic publics, they have been less than successful with foreign publics. The Shared Values campaign is a case in point. Rather than using research to find the right messages, Washington should attempt to learn how people are connected in order to develop new links. In the future, reliable databases will be more valuable than opinion polls.

A new generation of communication research is developing the tools to measure the quality of relationships. Traditionally, information output has been the primary measure of success. Yet as the U.S. Government Accountability Office noted, impressive numbers in reaching international audiences have not translated into any measurable support for U.S. policies. On the other hand, the perceived quality of political relationships does profoundly impact a nation's credibility, image, and stature. By measuring the quality of America's relationships with key publics rather than the quantity of viewers or listeners, research can more reliably predict public diplomacy effectiveness.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, Washington has incorporated several relationship-building endeavors such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative and American Corners into its public diplomacy model. Indicating a new direction, the U.S. Public Diplomacy Advisory Commission added "relationship-building strategies" to its 2004 annual report. Similarly, U.S. cultural and educational exchange programs are inherently about relationships. Washington has also used the interactive features of advanced technology to try to stimulate a dialogue with international publics. These are important steps on the road to forging a network of global constituents.

Public diplomacy is of vital significance to U.S. security. As Lee Hamilton noted, it is "an essential element of how we stop people from coming here to kill us." Diplomacy has become even more critical to Washington's ability to pursue its foreign policy objectives globally. Public discontent has spread beyond the Arab and Islamic world to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The perceptions of foreign publics do matter, and changing those perceptions is possible. In the global communication era, to effectively maneuver

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the political landscape requires networking as the new paradigm of strategic U.S. public diplomacy.

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