



Foreign Affairs
Canada

Affaires étrangères
Canada

Report on Wilton Park Conference WPS06/21

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: KEY CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FRIDAY 10-SUNDAY 12 MARCH 2006

**In association with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign Affairs,
Canada and the US Embassy in London**

Summary

Public diplomacy matters more than ever. It should not be the poor relation of mainstream diplomacy: it plays a critical role in establishing a country's position in the world, and in delivering tangible policy objectives. There are differing views as to whether public diplomacy should be mainstreamed across all diplomatic work, or should be the preserve of specialists. Partnerships with external institutions are critical, whether with the media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or the private sector. Effective public diplomacy is only as good as the policies it portrays. The new agenda of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation underlines this. There are a number of challenges ahead, in particular 24/7 rolling news, the rise of blogging and podcasting, and increasing segmentation across the media world that makes it ever more difficult to reach large groups through single channels. The underlying message is that governments need to listen to messages as well as transmit them: audiences need to be heard and understood. The final challenge is the increasingly important one of measuring outcomes including who we reach, how we reach them and how we measure success or failure. Public diplomacy means different things to different audiences and no single approach will work for every situation, message or government. Ironically being out of the headlines may sometimes serve governments better than being in them.

1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years globalisation and the inter-dependence of states have had a radical impact on both international and domestic environments. Trends such as devolution, democratisation, the revolution in information communications technology (ICT) and the blurring of distinctions between domestic and foreign spheres of policy making, have created an environment in which diplomacy as an arm of government has become more, rather than less, relevant. The consequences of these changes have not been universally positive and some negative aspects found expression in the events in the United States of 11 September 2001. These events, more than any other, have focussed international attention on the underlying issues of resources, migration, energy and the environment, global challenges which require diplomats to develop new means of influencing audiences. Public diplomacy is one area of activity that has acquired greater prominence on the agenda of policy-makers since 2001. There is scope for further discussion of alternative ideas and strategies, as well as the pooling of contemporary experience.

2. What Kind Of Public Diplomacy Do We Want In Today's World?

2.1 Definitions

Public diplomacy has entered the lexicon of 21st century diplomacy without clear definition of what it is or how the tools it offers might best be used. The current UK definition is: 'work aiming to influence and engage individuals and organisation overseas, in order to improve understanding of and influence for the United Kingdom'. This definition applies within the broader priorities of UK foreign policy. Its aim is to inform and engage in order to influence other governments and actors, while accepting that this is as much about ideas as messages. Public diplomacy, according to the UK definition, is regarded as a sub-set of diplomacy. It is designed to establish better links between government and the UK's multicultural society and is part of a wider strategy to break down communication barriers both at home and abroad.

Some governments take the view that public diplomacy should be mainstreamed into the work of all diplomats and that it is not a niche activity. However it does require specialist skills and knowledge of the communities that it seeks to target. The

adoption of public diplomacy strategies as an integral part of foreign policy strategies is particularly appropriate to developing countries where there is an inclination to build fresh, modern images of their states through contemporary media. In the developed world, accustomed to the practice of classical diplomacy, this approach is not as easily adopted. There is a prevailing opinion that public diplomacy should be given a higher profile in career postings in order to attract the most able personnel. It is also recognised that greater effort is needed to ensure public diplomacy skills are retained by staff on return to their conventional diplomatic postings. One of the problems in promoting public diplomacy as a legitimate activity for diplomats is its poor image among the community of professional diplomats. Diplomatic staff in the United States, the UK and China tend to sideline public diplomacy in the same vein as information work, albeit for widely differing cultural and historic reasons.

2.2 Partnerships Within and Outside Government

Public diplomacy can be used to great effect in support of policy development but there are difficulties in co-ordinating messages across government, as well as between government and its non-governmental partners.

There is a relative lack of experience of these techniques in the developed world of these techniques and best practice will only become established over time. One common governing principle, however, is that public diplomacy strategies should be governed by a nation's foreign policy objectives.

Non-governmental partners can be important actors in the co-ordination of messages. Some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), for example, recognise that they can share common objectives with government in areas such as governance and the promotion of human rights. Partnerships often rely on the interaction of personalities which can result in outcomes beneficial to a host country's diplomatic objectives. For example, the practitioner-government-celebrity interface during the 2005 G8 Summit had some direct influence on the meeting's outcomes with regard to development strategies in Africa.

There are limitations on public diplomacy. While it can address the demands arising from democratisation of the policy-making process, public diplomacy cannot be used to mask failures in policy. Its potential is both strengthened by the existence of English as the common language and simultaneously weakened owing to the

nuances of the language and the potential for misinterpretation of common words. This can impede accurate communication of sophisticated messages.

3. Public Diplomacy and the 'War on Terror'

The incidence of global terrorism has generated a new impetus to harness the tools of modern communication in order to counter misperceptions of policies and societies. However the 'War on Terror' has created some specific problems for governments most closely associated with that struggle. There are varying perceptions about the emergence of an Anglo-American approach to public diplomacy. The current US approach to public diplomacy and its uses has generated much debate.

Four principles govern the US approach. Firstly, the need to engage more aggressively in order to advocate policies that are fast, accurate and authoritative. The media is clearly the biggest challenge in this regard owing to the speed of communication and the reluctance of presenters and journalists to moderate a story in response to the articulation of the government position on controversial issues. The need to move swiftly to define the framework for public debate is seen as crucial to the success of public diplomacy initiatives. Secondly, cross-national and cross-cultural exchanges, particularly in the field of education, are seen as the area with greatest potential, but it remains unclear how these can be used most strategically. Other types of exchange can be achieved through public-private partnership initiatives and partnering with different groups, particularly in the field of aid donations. One way to achieve this is to co-operate internationally in order to make create greater impact through aid donations. This approach has been effective in Pakistan. Thirdly, education, is an important component, especially the teaching of English, but also the education of Anglophone speakers in strategic languages. This agenda has been promoted successfully via meetings of college principals, representing a range of private and state funded colleges across the United States, to debate the issue and thereby raise its profile in curricula development. Finally, there is the strategy of empowerment, particularly empowering citizens to communicate the desired image of the society in an international context.

There is a need to consider a range of issues arising from these strategies. These include: over-association of messenger and message; the need for increased resources to the public diplomacy sphere; the relationship between public diplomacy

institutions and central government; and the risk of reinforcing existing dislikes by further promotion and explanation of western ideas and societal values.

4. The Two-way Nature of Public Diplomacy

The need to listen as well as to send messages is a recurrent theme amongst public diplomacy practitioners. This two-way process is more clearly recognised in the business context rather than in government and the public sector where the emphasis has traditionally been on the outward projection of messages. Complex foreign policy agendas can complicate the listening and communicating components of public diplomacy strategies.

The benefits to be derived from the two way process can be recognised in a number of ways. Firstly, it leads to a greater understanding of how a country is perceived by those it seeks to influence and with whom it wishes to build, or rebuild, a relationship of trust. Mutual understanding and trust are key to the success, or failure, of public diplomacy. Seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, a technique widely used in the business community, is now perceived as a necessary component in the development of effective public diplomacy strategies. There must be a readiness to accept and understand the audience on its own terms rather than repackage a preconceived or distorted image. This applies equally on the domestic front. Public diplomacy serves as a window into a society as well as a window out and this can have benefits as well as disadvantages. The profile of a country, both internally and externally, can be severely damaged by the perception and reporting of events that take on their own momentum.

The publication of the Danish Cartoons is an example of this. A crisis that arose from poor government handling rapidly implicated the whole of Danish society. Other events, ranging from Canadian seal hunts to the invasion of Iraq, have provoked similar international opprobrium which has impacted, however short-term, on the international perceptions of individual countries with which they are associated. Adverse publicity as much as the release of good news requires careful management. Conversely positive and deeply embedded notions about a society can override short term drops in its international reputation arising from specific mistakes or events. However, the public diplomacy, as with most diplomatic tools, is limited and is inherently unable to mask the consequence of a policy failure.

Public diplomacy can effectively adopt the business techniques of stakeholder surveys and consultations that build in a feedback loop. Those consulted are informed about which ideas were helpful and led to changes in policy, while explaining why others were rejected. Some governments are now experimenting with a similar system. In Canada the Internet has been used successfully to post certain new policy directions for public comment and discussion. The responses received were analysed and summarised and the changes notified on the net for public information.

A different dimension to this two way process can be seen in some of the UK's exchange schemes such as the Global Exchange programme that takes young people from Bangladesh, Indonesia and elsewhere to work on projects with young people in the UK. This has proved productive in promoting mutual understanding and experience of working across the cultures. Over the last three years a similar interactive programme in sub-Saharan Africa, has been developed by and for Africans and facilitated by the UK.

5 How Can Impact Be Measured?

5.1 Branding

Branding is a controversial notion in the context of public diplomacy. There is a view that its adoption leads to superficiality. Labels such as 'Cool Britannia' adopted by the New Labour government in 1997 can be useful in the short term to herald change but quickly become stale and the object of unhelpful humour. Moreover the concept is seen as too closely linked to commercial activities in the public mind to be readily assimilated in the promotion of cross-cultural understanding. The presentation of a national culture or identity needs to be about values, packaged in order to change minds and alter external perceptions. This is more likely to lead to greater commercial exchange. Nevertheless, the growing importance of opinion on 'the street' as a lever over government, both domestically and internationally, indicates that this resource should be harnessed in support of foreign policy objectives. In an era of democratisation, the domestic population is an ally to be incorporated in the promotion of identity and the unique value of a society's contribution to the international 'community'.

The alternative view is that branding is an enormously valuable concept. Poor image is offered as one reason why some countries do not develop in spite of receiving sometimes substantial amounts of development aid. In the business world the brand of a given corporation is its most valuable commodity, providing a group of individuals with a common identity and vision and a sense of shared purpose. Brand is the recognition of equity and is a means by which an organisation can capture value. The adoption of this concept by government would provide public diplomacy with a platform on which it could build. There is much misunderstanding about how this concept might be applied as an aid to public diplomacy strategies. Countries are not branded as such, it is the populations that do the branding and this then translates into fairly simple messages that are easily assimilated abroad. Branding can be used to counter what may be seen as the trivialising images of public opinion. However, it requires countries to establish a good internal perception of their vision in order that the 'brand' will then seep out automatically. Effective leadership is key to the use of 'soft power' techniques, presenting the world with a positive story about the country which is both true and more interesting than the one they have, and repeat the message for years until it becomes established as fact. 'The way to achieve a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear' (Socrates). However, simply reminding people of good works and sound principles is dull and uninteresting. The key is to find an exciting and engaging way of presenting the message such that it is absorbed by the hearer and hence overwrites earlier, less helpful, perceptions that the communicator wishes to diminish.

While many in the developed world find branding an uneasy concept to accept, in the developing world it appears to sit more easily in state image-building strategies where the most powerful motivation is often to make the country economically competitive and attractive to overseas investment. Often the task is to change the image of the country and to alter a pre-existing perception. Brand South Africa is an example which has emerged very rapidly in recent years. It is benefiting from the use of a sophisticated array of public diplomacy techniques both within the country, in the African continent and beyond. In spite of this, South Africa's reputation in key parts of the world still lags behind the reality by 20-30 years. Public diplomacy strategies require sustained and long-term investment to be effective.

5.2 Measurement and Evaluation

The merits of measurement techniques are a subject of some debate and uncertainty. For some developed countries these techniques are less familiar and the prejudices against measurement are more deeply entrenched. There is a view that measurement is a means to the end of calibrating public diplomacy strategies in an environment where little consistent attempt has been made to develop this tool in the diplomatic armoury. Accountability is integral to developing novel techniques and to calibrating the allocation of human and financial resources most effectively. Others hold that the activities associated with public diplomacy and the outputs of such activity are, by their very nature, difficult to quantify. Furthermore, the drive to measure activity leads to a false selection of measures to be adopted and as such is an unhelpful activity in a sphere in which governments have relatively little experience. Methods derived from best practice and the use of scorecards are practical mechanisms presently being tested in the UK.

6. How Do We Operate In A 24/7 Digital Era?

6.1 Bridging The Gap Between Policy And Public Diplomacy

In the media environment, public diplomacy techniques can be seen to operate on three distinct policy levels. Firstly, it has a role before policy is made: policy makers have to exploit the media to create an environment in which the proposal will be regarded as acceptable. For example NATO's use of the media during the Kosovo campaign effectively pressurised allies to react in a way that accorded with their strategic objectives. Secondly, public diplomacy can 'sell' a proposal by carving out and maintaining the policy space until the policy objective has been reached. Thirdly, public diplomacy can be used to create a permissive global climate of trust which enables long- term policy to unfold. However the most urgent task is to make a success of the present and thereby create a positive climate for future achievements.

Multinational organisations or alliances are similarly affected by the challenges arising from the overall perception of the organisation. This can be seen in the context of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union. Pro-activity on the part both of individual governments or coalitions is often controversial and requires that public perceptions are managed. The fact that a policy may be 'right' is not sufficient to keep the public onside when the implementation process generates unwanted side effects. When the use of military force is mooted, the 24/7 news environment requires a shift from traditional

information campaigns towards sophisticated and planned public diplomacy campaigns including outreach to a range of elites, parliamentarians and press, NGOs and the broader community. It can be problematic linking in to the appropriate network for the operation in hand. Target audiences have to be carefully selected, creating an intellectual hinterland and thereby a debate in broader civil society to demonstrate the relevance of the planned action. Audiences who are dissatisfied with official information will aim to make their voices heard above the official message.

Handling the media is not a substitute for more traditional diplomatic activities but mishandling it can undo much good work. Accordingly, organisations that handle the media well tend to get ahead of the rest. Many developing societies have twenty-four hour media of their own; the format is poorly developed as yet, but it is nevertheless commonplace and is fuelling demand for improved services. The availability of information simultaneously stimulates the appetite for more information on demand, leaving policy-makers with less time for planning. There is often little time to frame the domestic debate on a controversial issue, but there is a need to say something early on in a developing news story. An information vacuum invites others to set the parameters of public discussion in a manner which can prejudice the policy-maker's agenda. There is a need for greater understanding of outside networks but this cannot be achieved under pressure. Audiences want to see a story unfolding in front of them. People are empowered as a result of the 24/7 news environment; the most effective policy makers understand this and will attempt to shape the environment in order to make it friendlier for the presentation and understanding of government policy.

6.2 The Blogosphere

Blogs are about inter-active debate and activity and, in this respect, differ from television and the Internet. They promote trust and meet communication needs particularly in countries, such as Iran, where the media is largely state controlled. The Blogosphere's particular potential lies in its ability to empower the individual over the information.

This medium is not necessarily helpful to the public diplomat. It is a very personal medium, well suited to individual communication, and it is unclear how the blogger, if

serving as an official, could be legitimately detached from the blog. Without such separation it would be difficult to exploit this medium in the interests of government policy-making.

6.3 Moving Out From Government: Allies In Public Diplomacy

There are difficulties in harnessing non-governmental actors as 'force multipliers' in government driven public diplomacy. This is primarily because non-governmental organisations and businesses do not share the same objectives, or limitations, as national governments. For instance, large businesses are often global in their orbit of operations and have leaderships that are highly multinational in composition. So, while businesses play a major role in international affairs, their loyalties are broader. Firms such as ICI, Cadbury's and HSBC, are all examples of multinationals that are seen to disassociate themselves from their national bases. Most companies, including those which are small and nationally based, are crude when it comes to national thinking. However, they may be useful in public diplomacy in the sphere of ethical trading. Corporate social responsibility, in terms of employment of overseas personnel (Marks & Spencer), in the context of fair trade (Starbucks) or in the promotion of environmentally friendly products (BP), has become a much more important strand in business strategies since the 1990s. Some companies are now focussing on how they target overseas minorities in home countries and attract them as regular customers. This can add value to international perceptions of a particular country. An example of this is the way in which Prime Minister Thatcher's economic reforms proved a hugely significant factor in the re-branding of Britain in the 1980s.

Given the multicultural nature of many modern societies, the task of engaging with domestic minorities and their mother countries in order to promote understanding across communities is central to public diplomacy strategy. Religious leaders are valuable partners owing to the level of trust they inspire in their communities and the principles by which they are accountable. There is a risk, however, of reinforcing the host community's perception of a particular minority. Dealing with that minority as a distinct group can add to the sense of its 'otherness' and set it apart from the mainstream.

The engagement of NGOs as partners in policy making has been in train for some time. This is particularly the case with the growing emphasis on good governance

and the promotion of human rights agendas which has created common objectives between non-governmental and state actors. NGOs are now sufficiently influential to constitute a legitimate target of journalists, and this in turn can feed back into the policy route, particularly when things go wrong. Development agencies must be engaged by governments as partners, working in coalitions such as the Make Poverty History alliance, the Conflict Diamonds campaign headed by Global Witness, and the anti-personnel mines campaign of the late 1990s which all achieved significant results.

Cultural exchange is arguably one of the most effective means of promoting public diplomacy through improved cultural understanding among the educated of differing societies and encouraging an awareness of what it is like to walk in the shoes of another. These exchanges provide opportunities for students to gain an understanding of a society's political system, its social structures, its news and media, as well as the building of cross national friendships, and even marriages, which form important long-term links between the sponsoring societies and its sponsors. The precise impact of schemes such as the US Fulbright Scheme or the Rhodes Scholarship programme are difficult to measure but the contacts made under these programmes are amenable to monitoring and to a systematic gathering of feedback. These indicators demonstrate the way in which informal networks established under these schemes are sustained over the longer-term.

7. Looking to the Future

The most common theme to emerge from public diplomacy discussions is the diversity of approaches and the importance of tailoring strategies to suit the cultural norms and policy requirements of the host country, and those of the target country, as fit the needs of the policy the public diplomacy initiative is trying to support. There is no common definition or common approach that will suit all and what works well in one country may not be appropriate for others.

Specific components of public diplomacy can be identified. Firstly, the importance of networks, including conventional diplomatic routes used to make links to influential members of society. Public diplomacy is another means of achieving this type of access but calls for a wider range of specialists who can operate beyond the range of the old elites that are the traditional preserve of diplomatists. Secondly, the presentation of foreign policy objectives to domestic audiences in localised environments. Ordinary people need to understand the benefits of foreign policy to

their daily lives. In this way they can be engaged more effectively as allies in the promotion of national identity. Thirdly, the long-term efficacy of government-directed public diplomacy must be questioned particularly in the light of the constantly expanding volume of information available to individuals. This increasing volume of material could either drown out government information or, conversely, increase its value as the public seeks a pre-packaged way of filtering information. Fourthly, not every society will wish to use public diplomacy to further enhance its strongest characteristics. An unthreatening, if dull, image is less burdened by baggage and can be a greater asset than the competitive, glossy images that emerge from certain societies. Such images can constrain their government's ability to shape international perception of particular policies. Finally, the purpose of public diplomacy implies a competition between countries. The agenda of public diplomacy campaigns, and the direction of resources into these activities, must be governed by long-term societal goals. The choice of targets will say as much about the societies' intelligence and long-term strategy as it does about its image and cultural values.

Dr Ann Lane

April 2006

Wilton Park Reports are brief summaries of the main points and conclusions 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.