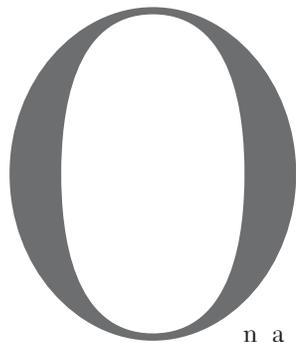


HOW DOES PUBLIC DIPLOMACY MEASURE UP?



HERE'S A LOOK AT WHAT POLICY IMPERATIVES
AND TECHNOLOGY TRENDS MEAN FOR
PROGRAMS IN THE FIELD.

By JOE JOHNSON

In a typical day, former FSO John Brown's blog from the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy summarizing comment about the United States' global image contains more than 50 articles, many of them decrying a "failed" U.S. public diplomacy effort. Public diplomacy, which used to attract little media attention, has in recent years been the subject of scores of blue-ribbon studies — a sure sign that it's the Sick Man of U.S. statecraft.

The blogs, op-ed pieces and articles on Brown's compendium offer no consensus on what's wrong (see <http://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index/php/newsroom/>). U.S. and European observers, Arab commentators, Israelis and Indians and other pundits all take shots at U.S. policies using public diplomacy as a foil. Advocates of broadcasting or the arts urge more funding for their favorite PD activity.

Because there is no agreement about what public

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diplomacy should be expected to deliver for the taxpayers who fund it, it is tempting to rely on measures of public opinion as the standard. But opinion polls by themselves set a standard that cannot be met, because those numbers go up and down for all kinds of reasons.

And that is a problem for the practitioners. If you cannot define success, you'll never succeed. As a former public diplomacy officer, I know exactly how my colleagues in the field are advancing American interests, often working under very difficult conditions. Concrete examples of progress abound, and PD officers deserve credit for their accomplishments. That's why measurement and evaluation of results in terms of a coherent strategy is the single most important element in successful public diplomacy. Yet to date, the PD community has not been able to offer its own independent benchmarks of effectiveness, or even a fully accepted strategy.

This is a point that the Government Accountability Office has made in several analyses of the public diplomacy apparatus over the past few years. GAO's most recent report, issued on May 3, focused on resources, programs and strategy for the Muslim world — an arc of 58 countries with a population of 680 million. The report (GAO-06-535) found posts in the region were operating without guidance on how to implement the strategic framework established this past year by Under

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Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes.

The Office of Management and Budget is more blunt. Evaluating eight informational, cultural and foreign broadcasting programs, it rates public diplomacy field operations as “not performing — results not demonstrated” (www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore). OMB stresses that the programs have had difficulty measuring their impact, if they have been evaluated at all; that few of the State Department PD programs link budget to performance; and that there is no broad overarching U.S. government public diplomacy strategy. Cultural exchange programs and foreign broadcasting programs get “effective” or “moderately effective” ratings from OMB, with cautionary notes about the lack of a master strategy. It finds that the exchange and broadcasting programs have measurable indicators of success.

Strategy and management get short shrift in some corners of the State Department, but they are fundamental to any communication program. In commercial public relations, practitioners are obsessed with proving “return on investment,” fearful that unless they demonstrate their utility they will lose their jobs.

Under Secretary Hughes appears to get the message. The GAO acknowledges the “strategic framework” for public diplomacy that she laid out in a May 10 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations (see <http://www.state.gov/r/us/66098.htm>). There she identified three broad objectives and spoke of “fundamentally changing the way we do business” in six specific areas.

In her written response to the GAO study, Hughes promised an “integrated strategic communication plan,” including tools for individual embassies such as model country-level planning formats and a “best practices” Web site to improve tradecraft.

But even if the PD community is now heading in the right direction, it will not be easy to build a coherent global program. Technology and changing communication patterns around the world pose both opportunities and challenges. Let’s look at their implications for information diplomacy, cultural and educational exchanges, international broadcasting and, finally, for embassy field operations themselves — where it all comes together.

Information Diplomacy: Technology Makes It Harder

On balance, technology is making public affairs and

public communication harder, not easier. The Internet spreads rumors faster than authorities can set the record straight. This is a major worry, for example, for those who are planning to respond to an avian influenza pandemic. Media reports of hospital admissions will appear weeks before epidemiological evidence confirms that a virus is spreading. Using information to control rumors will be a major issue.

Moreover, individuals are taking over a slice of news and commentary. Bloggers uninhibited by professional news ethics can now frame an issue for the public. The widespread riots and demonstrations earlier this year over Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad spread over the Internet before authorities could react, causing notable damage to East-West dialogue. Under Secretary Hughes’ rapid reaction team and associated public affairs improvements and the Bureau of International Information Programs’ modest “misinformation” Web page have not reported major success in countering such developments.

I recently had occasion to review Washington’s major sources of public information for foreign audiences: the Web sites of the State Department’s Public Affairs and International Information Programs bureaus, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the foreign broadcasting organizations under the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Nearly all use up-to-date Web technology to disseminate information; a few offer promising interactive programs as well.

PA and IIP both offer moderated online discussions and Really Simple Syndication feeds. IIP’s Web site (<http://usinfo.state.gov>), which is meant for use by foreign audiences only, contains broader content and is much more easily searchable than the Public Affairs Web site. PA’s site, www.state.gov, has blossomed with photos, features and online discussions in recent years. Both sites offer Web chats with U.S. officials and experts. A list of “Major Public Diplomacy Accomplishments,” distributed by Hughes’ office, describes some of the new Web-based information tools as “an enhanced technology initiative.”

But information media habits are the most rapidly changing part of the global dialogue. Few people read Web sites in the same way as a newspaper or magazine. New media — Web broadcasters, social networking sites and computer games — link millions worldwide in dialogue and collaboration. People are connecting to each

other as much as they are connecting to information on the Web. Putting your message out there offers no guarantee that the audience will receive it.

On the other hand, Internet search technology, blogs and syndication have greatly simplified communication with people who *are* receptive to your message. Religious extremists are an excellent example of the phenomenon. Al-Qaida exploits the Internet to market its ideology as well as to operate.

It is difficult to find impartial evaluation of public diplomacy's success with online media; full evaluation is probably not possible without active data collection at the embassy level, where IIP articles, journals and other products are promoted and distributed to local embassy contacts. The Web chats may be fine things to do, but they are mere tactics; they mean nothing until their effect can be evaluated. USAID's low-tech repository of foreign assistance success stories (www.usaid.gov/stories/) might even claim more cost-effective results.

ECA: Technological Advantage Can Threaten Bureaucracy

The Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau is in some respects the leader in the intelligent use of technology. The bureau has developed multiple databases to hold information about exchanges alumni, and it is working to integrate those databases so as to evaluate exchange programs. The bureau has been conducting program evaluation for more than 10 years using data processing, and the results are beginning to show. The Office of Management and Budget describes its programs as "effective," its highest rating, explaining: "[The Bureau of] Educational and Cultural Affairs at the State Department use performance data and tools to make management decisions. They are now focused on meeting with staff regularly and have adapted tracking systems to better monitor and evaluate ongoing activities."

At a tactical level, the bureau has established a Web site for former exchange participants at <https://alumni.state.gov/>, where ex-Fulbrighters and others can network. The site is private, but its description speaks of "a global community." The CultureConnect arts program (<http://cultureconnect.state.gov/>) aims to link aspiring artists around the globe with U.S.-sponsored artistic ambas-

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sadors. It is surprising that we're not hearing more about initiatives like those. Both are in sync with current media consumption trends (think of Facebook.com) and both magnify other PD programs.

The spread of access to the Internet is enabling distance learning and collaborative academic research, which will be a windfall for international education. To examine in detail what emerging technologies may offer, it is worth consulting the New Media Consortium's annual Horizon Report, which describes six areas of emerging technology that will have significant impact in higher education over the next one to five years (see www.nmc.org/pdf/2006_Horizon_Report.pdf).

However, to exploit these trends intelligently, ECA will have to streamline its own bureaucracy. The bureau took a first step when it conducted a review of its information architecture two years ago. (Information architecture describes how information is managed within an organization and how that affects needs for computing.)

To understand why this is a critical issue, visit www.exchanges.state.gov, which lists 29 separate programs for Americans and foreigners — several of them named after members of Congress. That complexity is matched by the numerous IT systems supporting the programs, each tweaked to match a different set of procedures. The perennial squeeze on ECA's administrative overhead places a premium on standardizing paperwork. Tedious though they are, tasks like business-process modernization can save significant resources.

Broadcasting: Are They Really Listening?

Since the U.S. government began radio broadcasts to foreign audiences during World War II, government-paid newsmen have jealously guarded their editorial freedom from interference by diplomats. Today, the Broadcasting Board of Governors oversees seven different radio and television organizations. The Secretary of State holds one seat on a board of private-sector members from both major parties. The board's Web site speaks of its "fire-wall" function to insulate foreign broadcasters from political interference. Yet no other element of public diplomacy experiences as much political conflict as the broadcasting board, which often winds up on the pages of the

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Washington Times and opinion magazines. At present, only seven of the nine seats on the bipartisan board are filled. Complicating matters, the board's bylaws do not allow for a chief operating officer.

For decades, the United States has sponsored a two-pronged approach to broadcasting: the Voice of America, giving news and information as a U.S. media outlet for the rest of the world; and "surrogate broadcasters" like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and, later, Radio-TV Marti. The surrogates acted as if they were indigenous broadcasters, focusing on news in their target regions and employing exiles and local correspondents.

In a reorganization act of 1998, Congress aggregated VOA and most television assets along with RFE/RL under the Broadcasting Board of Governors. To invigorate programs, reach new audiences and attract younger viewers, the board added new, regionally-focused stations to the mix: Radio Free Asia; Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television in Arabic; and Radio Farda for Iran. Like RFE/RL, the new stations are grantee organizations

funded entirely by the government but accountable only to the BBG. The administration's FY 07 request for the BBG comes to \$672 million. That is larger than the line items for either PD operations or educational and cultural affairs.

In terms of measuring success, the broadcasters have an advantage over public diplomacy: clear metrics. Using Neilson and other professional rating services, they regularly publish listener statistics. Overall, more than 100 million people access U.S. international broadcasting programs in some form every week. (You can read about these numbers as well as other performance goals in the BBG's annual report at www.bbg.gov.) On that basis, the OMB judges that the programs are demonstrating performance.

Critics and commentators, however, offer more subjective judgments about whether the listener numbers are making any difference with hearts and minds. Each critique tends to reflect the politics of the observer. A review by an organizational consultant is said to exist in

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draft form, but has been held up by the board. The State Department's Office of the Inspector General issued a critical report on Aug. 13.

The administration's current budget request eliminates VOA's flagship English-language broadcasting service for the new fiscal year. Alan J. Heil Jr., a former deputy director of VOA, attacks this economy measure as a disastrous move that ignores the role of English as a world language. He cites several foreign organizations that are opening English-language services. Moreover, RFE/RL and Radio Free Asia continue to broadcast and publish copious amounts of news in English on *their* Web sites. The cut occurs despite steadily rising appropriations for broadcasting since 2001, and prompts the question: could greater management efficiency free up resources to continue VOA English?

When the new Middle East services were established in 2003, they set up separate studio and associated technical services, contracting hastily under pressing deadlines. Resentful personnel in the services wing of government broadcasting — the International Bureau of Broadcasting, seen as a VOA entity — were probably not eager to make exceptional efforts. Three years on, however, the do-it-yourself approach is showing some wear. While not challenging the concept of independent services focused on regions and a single Voice of America, the Government Accountability Office challenged their separate arrangements for support services in a 2004 report (GAO-04-7111). It said: "Organizationally, the existence of five separate broadcast entities has led to overlapping language services, duplication of program content, redundant newsgathering and support services, and difficulties coordinating broadcast efforts."

Two Strategic Challenges

Broadcasting faces two strategic challenges: how to adapt to the rapidly changing global media environment; and how to connect to the global dialogue sponsored by all the other public diplomacy efforts.

New technology abounds. Digital television broadcasting will become mandatory in a few years, posing high investment costs. Digital shortwave broadcasting

How long can the individual stations continue to upgrade technology without consolidating their IT infrastructure and services?

offers expanded options for short-wave listeners. Meanwhile, young people in the developed world are abandoning terrestrial broadcasts to watch and listen on satellite and, increasingly, on computing devices. Recent studies show more than a billion Internet users. English, Chinese and Japanese dominate the language mix. "In fact, professionals in their 20s and 30s — the demographic that advertisers covet — are just as

likely to spend time in front of a computer as in front of a TV set," said a recent report from China. In the U.S., a bellwether for digital media, 19 percent of young people are listening to Internet radio each week, a number which has increased 50 percent over the past year.

All the U.S. government's foreign broadcasters have a Web presence, and all of them except Alhurra Television stream their programs — offering everyone the ability to listen and watch on a personal computer. That brings broadcast products to the desktop in digital form, where they can be combined as the user sees fit. If you wish to explore the possibilities, go to www.voanews.com (not .gov) and sign up for a Podcast or an RSS news feed.

As the various government-sponsored broadcasters move toward complete Internet service, VOA seems to be in the lead. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty also hosts a lively multimedia program mix at www.rferl.org. Radio Sawa offers digital versions of its eight playlists, each selected for a subregion of the Middle East through modern audience-sampling techniques. Alhurra Television so far offers only snippets of streaming video on its Web site, which is essentially a program guide.

But the question is: how long can the individual stations continue to upgrade technology without consolidating their IT infrastructure and services?

The second problem is that U.S. foreign broadcasts have rarely been plugged into embassies' public diplomacy effort, in deference to the so-called "firewall" protecting them from political interference. When VOA was part of USIA, embassies assisted occasionally in marketing broadcast products. That doesn't happen very much any more. The newest broadcasters' business model relies on leasing local AM and FM transmitters. It eschews efforts to get independent local stations to carry

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programs — a major dissemination tool for the VOA.

When one considers the limited assets available for public diplomacy and the power of voice and image, one begins to question the rationale for their separation. Surely public diplomacy can find ways to integrate and magnify broadcasting while protecting independent news programs. It could start on the Web, through cross-promotion links and activities outside the newscasts and news pages. As it stands, that firewall is sealing off an asset costing half a billion dollars per year.

Where It All Comes Together: Field Operations

Broadcasting, educational exchange and information programs all come together in each embassy's public affairs section. This is where most dialogue and persuasion happen. This is also where accountability rests: in order to make the public diplomacy apparatus accountable to Congress and the taxpayer, the 180-plus public affairs sections must account for their contribution to the

overall strategic objectives, as well as to their ambassadors. And it is here — not in the realm of dissemination of information, but in the realm of internal management and missing links at the field level — that public diplomacy's real technology gap lies.

Using technology strategically would promote a more unified global effort and would enable measurement so as to evaluate success. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation presents an example of how to do this. In addition to supporting scientific studies and experiments on HIV/AIDS, the Gates program offers grants for the creation of standard criteria to measure success or failure, and for the establishment of a new secure Web site to share all data resulting from the research in real time. Measurement and shared expertise are the two fundamentals.

Today, Washington cannot quantify even the most basic outputs of its embassies. Let's say the Africa Bureau wants to build support in key regional capitals for a multinational force deployment. One public affairs objective

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might be to disseminate persuasive arguments for committing troops to key audiences in each potential contributing country. But it would be a major production for the bureau's PD office director to say whom the public affairs sections actually contacted.

It doesn't have to be that way. As embassies move to electronic distribution of press releases, event lists and information resource center packets, they generate data in digital form. Even where Internet access still limits digital dissemination, embassy staff have the computer tools and broadband connectivity to State's networks. What they lack is a mandate and standards for reporting.

The foundation of the record-keeping has to be the individual foreign audience member, yet contact lists are presently unstructured and fragmented. A study by State's Office of eDiplomacy published in July 2004 found that several embassies were hard-pressed even to compose an invitation list for the annual Independence Day reception. The surveyed embassies used a variety of tracking tools from business-quality customer relationship management software to the proverbial shoebox full of business cards. Only one or two had integrated, embassywide systems. No single data standard exists.

Until embassies can report consistently on output and basic audience responses (how many attended the speaker program last night?), more significant performance measures are not likely to stand up under scrutiny. That's a problem for the Office of Policy, Planning and Resources, established during Secretary Powell's tenure and continued under Secretary Rice. Commercial public relations experts say that most businesses spend between 4 and 7 percent of their annual program budget on measuring effectiveness, utilizing relevant surveys and tools from other parts of the enterprise where possible.

Some elements of a solution for PD are already there. The most important token of success is also the simplest and cheapest: the anecdotes identifying significant changes in the host government or society made possible or abetted by public diplomacy. The department already records thousands of such small victories in a database called RESULTS. Here are a couple of examples: "The local courts have liberalized their procedures after a

*It would not be too
hard to build the
RESULTS approach into
a full-scope system
of measurement.*

senior judge returned from an international visitor grant"; or, "The government introduced a bill to protect intellectual property after a series of American speakers."

USIA developed standards to sort such results by rough order of magnitude, but that discipline flagged after entry into State. It should not be too hard to build the "results" approach into a full-scope system of measurement.

The Gap in Expertise

Since the incorporation of USIA into State, public diplomacy personnel have experienced massive turnover as senior officers retired or moved up to DCM slots and even ambassadorships. New recruits flooded in under Secretary Powell's Diplomatic Readiness Initiative. The USIA-State consolidation also allowed officers from other cones to take assignments in public diplomacy. That is surely a good thing. The function is everyone's job, and the public affairs section's role is to steer and supplement the bilateral dialogue. PD is an ensemble, not a solo.

However, the churn in overseas staffing raises the question of whether the new public affairs officers possess sufficient command of their tradecraft. The GAO's May report on public diplomacy in the Muslim world found a notable all-round shortage in PD expertise: "One senior State official said that administrative duties, such as budget, personnel and internal reporting, compete with officers' public diplomacy responsibilities. Another official in Egypt told us that there was rarely enough time to strategize, plan or evaluate her programs." State officials in Washington acknowledged that "additional requirements for posts to improve strategic planning and evaluation of their public diplomacy programs would need to be accompanied by additional staff with relevant expertise."

The Foreign Service Institute rebuilt and expanded PD training in 2003-2004. However, the need for professional development is still daunting. Anyone who thinks training is not important should consider a few qualifications that I think an ambassador has a right to expect of his or her PAO:

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- Knowledge of journalism practice, writing and editing;
- Public affairs practice and process within the State Department;
- Knowledge of higher education institutions;
- Familiarity with the broad range of popular and high culture;
- Communication and media law and ethics;
- Behavioral science principles, including communication models;
- Research techniques including polls, media trend studies and focus groups; and, above all,
- The ability to define a communication problem and work up a plan to address it.

All those requirements come on top of basic abilities like language fluency and sensitivity to the local culture.

Improving the skill set of field officers will clearly do as much as anything to afford each ambassador sound advice as well as to account to Washington for host-country public diplomacy. Distance education and on-the-job training may be as necessary to the peripatetic

PD workforce as the formal FSI courses. These techniques will pay even greater dividends for the Foreign Service Nationals who operate the public diplomacy sections.

The “Best Practices” Web site mentioned above speaks to this need, but it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Large global organizations now offer a range of options for their members to share knowledge, from online manuals and approved instruction to informal messaging centers, where one member can post a question and others who have worked the same problem can offer advice. State needs not just a Web site for “Best Practices,” but an integrated, searchable portal inside the enterprise network.

The most critical challenge for State’s PD leadership is not to get more appropriations for new programs. It is to develop a well-trained field component and to impose baseline standards and processes to measure results. Those are the keys to building confidence in our nation’s public diplomacy.

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A Caveat

Under Secretary Hughes has the stature to set realistic expectations for public diplomacy. But, contrary to the implication of so many pundits, public diplomacy alone cannot turn around the present hostility toward the United States. Our military presence in Iraq, the treatment of illegal combatants and suspected terrorists, and associated security policies affecting travelers to the U.S. are going to generate negative polls and attitude studies regardless of the PD effort. At a recent panel discussion, the experienced Washington correspondent for *O Estado de Sao Paulo* told U.S. policymakers: "Don't spend a single cent on public diplomacy as long as you're conflicted about torture being appropriate." Only major alterations to U.S. foreign policy will change a broad perception like that.

Contrary to the implication of so many pundits, public diplomacy cannot turn around the present hostility toward the United States.

But change is inevitable, and not all factors are against the United States. For example, "Billanthropy" (as *The Economist* terms the activities of the expanded Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) is likely to generate significant international good will over the coming decade. On the other side, radical Islamists feed off public

anger now, but they offer no positive vision and no hope of prosperity. Their momentum will eventually flag and they will fail.

At some point down the road, these and other factors will carry the U.S. ship of state into more favorable waters. In the meantime, our public diplomacy needs a sound strategy and smart methodology to help regenerate a positive dialogue between America and the world. ■



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