

Envisioning a Multidisciplinary Research Agenda for Public Diplomacy

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Public diplomacy and related concepts such as “strategic communication” and “nation-branding” represent a range of increasingly commonplace practices of statecraft. It also represents an area of research with considerable growth potential. Nation-states across a variety of contexts have recognized the need to communicate to foreign publics and cultivate networks of relations through various modes of engagement, including international broadcasting, exchange programs, and cultural diplomacy. As a result, public diplomacy has become a floating signifier of intentional communication with foreign publics, to forward immediate policy goals, to cultivate long-term relations, and to address pressing transnational policy issues.

Yet, there are larger issues that lurk behind the popularization of contemporary public diplomacy initiatives that represent opportunities for students of international studies, communication, and cognate disciplines. What does it mean when the Chinese government spends billions on establishing a robust international broadcasting capacity, or, when the United States strives to cultivate networks of relations across social media platforms? Many states “do” public diplomacy, but the design, intent, and ethics of its inherent communication in practice varies dramatically.

Given the proliferation of public diplomacy programs and the kind of questions it provokes about notions of actorhood, power, and institutions – it is hardly surprising that the concept has garnered scholarly interest among a variety of disciplines, including (but not limited to) International Relations, Political Science, Communication, and Public Relations. Public diplomacy, broadly conceived, suggests a productive array of research questions and avenues for inquiry that bring together disciplinary knowledge and methods in potentially new and productive ways. This essay makes the case for three broad aspects of public diplomacy inquiry that may help to guide new scholars in their own investigations: transnational politics, media studies, and diplomatic institutions. These aspects are not intended to be exhaustive, but to elaborate questions and issues that connect public diplomacy to broader interdisciplinary themes.

Challenges to Public Diplomacy Research

The promise of interdisciplinary inquiry into public diplomacy requires some explanation, especially given the different avenues that both new (and seasoned) researchers approach the topic. The “problem” with public diplomacy research starts with conceptual ambiguity.^[1] Public diplomacy is arguably an expansive concept that corrals disparate forms of diplomatic activity under one label of bureaucratic convenience. The diversity of what counts as public diplomacy in contemporary writing all too often reconciles forms of practice with radically different objectives, time-frames, and norms. To make matters more complex, practitioners within the sub-categories of public diplomacy (like international broadcasting and cultural diplomacy) are hesitant to label what they do as “public diplomacy,” given the term’s more recent connotation as a strategic tool closely tied to the imperatives of foreign policy. As a result, generalizations about public diplomacy as an aspect of modern statecraft are by necessity somewhat limited. When educational exchange providers can be lumped in with social media campaigning for military operations, the term public diplomacy begins to lose its definitional clarity.

This is not necessarily a problem for practitioners, but it presents some necessary choices to those scholars and

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writers who want to “say something” about public diplomacy; especially those who are trying to formulate research questions grounded in theoretical frameworks. To date, the most recognized scholarship related to public diplomacy has come from history, and a good portion of that from the history of US foreign relations.[2] This is not to say that formulating research about public diplomacy outside of retrospective analysis is impossible. But it’s telling that there is a healthy amount of skepticism from some writers about the promise of public diplomacy scholarship that does not come from either historians or former practitioners. What does this mean?

For a variety of reasons, public diplomacy has largely fallen through the cracks between social scientific and humanistic traditions, and among those disciplines that can claim some interest in what is at stake in the practice of public diplomacy. This is unfortunate, given that the business of public diplomacy – from the relation-building of cultural diplomacy to framing of international news by international broadcasters – reflect research questions well-established within more “mainstream” disciplines.

Perhaps as a result, public diplomacy also lacks a readily workable “theory of public diplomacy” that would generate a tradition of research questions. As I have argued elsewhere, this is not necessarily a problem – as the engagement, persuasion, and interpersonal dynamics of public diplomacy conveniently enough have theories already established in other disciplines.[3] However, the closest thing to a *theory of public diplomacy* is Joseph Nye’s soft power thesis that highlights the capacity of resources like culture, values, and legitimacy to help states achieve objectives.[4]

Yet public diplomacy is not the same thing as soft power, though it may be helpful to think of public diplomacy as operating within a larger discourse formation sustained by the arguments of soft power. The key claims of soft power serve as a set of warrants for policy-makers and practitioners to effectively argue the necessity of public diplomacy in comparison to other tools of statecraft.[5]

As a prescriptive theory of international relations, however, soft power has already been subject to considerable criticism.[6] It also seems difficult to claim that public diplomacy practitioners could “wield” such invariant structures such as culture or political values to meet the ends of soft power. For researchers, a more interesting (and productive) inquiry might look to how the practice of public diplomacy functions as a kind of re-directive force or “jiu-jitsu” that amplifies those resources identified by Nye. How does public diplomacy contribute, amplify, or otherwise leverage the capacities implied by soft power in ways that analytically visible?

Realistically, the incredible diversity of activities labelled as public diplomacy likely obviates the need for a “theory” of public diplomacy. Those seeking to investigate public diplomacy may be better served by examining how public diplomacy offers new sites of inquiry into existing questions of theory and practice. The following sections offer a quick take on some opportunities apparent in the study of public diplomacy based on disciplinary vantage points.

Media Studies and Communication

Strangely, public diplomacy has received intermittent attention from both humanistic media studies and social scientific media effects research. And yet, insights from these fields can directly contribute to aspects of public diplomacy knowledge-building. Indeed, it is these fields that could directly address much of the pressing concerns that animate current anxieties amongst practitioners regarding measurement and evaluation.[7] For example, Christina Archetti’s discussion of the selective utilization of communication technologies by embassies highlights the inevitable context of the global media ecology on the ability of practitioners to achieve diplomatic objectives.[8] Public diplomacy scholarship is only beginning to scratch the surface of how the circulation of narratives and media frames within media flows constrain and enable the ambitions of public diplomacy.[9] From a humanistic perspective, media studies scholars could address the cultural and social factors at stake in the appropriation of social media technologies by practitioners, in ways that move past unproductive debates between technology skeptics and evangelists. Finally, more traditional methods of political communication analysis, including agenda-setting, priming, and framing analysis can and should provide a better understanding of messaging and advocacy with a complex mediatized context.[10]

Diplomatic Institutions

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Scholars within diplomatic studies have already generated significant claims about the transformative implications of public diplomacy and the rise of the so-called “new public diplomacy.”[11] In particular, the growth of public diplomacy underscores related observations about the increasingly polylateral nature of diplomacy that reflects the proliferation of actors acting as diplomatic agents.[12]

Less developed, however, is an understanding of how public diplomacy signifies institutional trends within the larger practice of diplomacy. As the two concepts increasingly converge, as evidenced in the 2009 US Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review strategic document, the traditional business of public diplomacy becomes integrated into other aspects of diplomacy. Both the notion of diplomacy and public diplomacy do not emerge unchanged.

One way to approach this trend is through a pragmatic analysis of public diplomacy’s “meaning in use.” James Pamment’s comparative institutional analysis of US, Swedish, and UK public diplomacy highlights the consequences of differing organizational orientations toward the perceived requirements of public diplomacy that ultimately condition the kind of programs generated.[13] Likewise, I have presented a comparative analysis of soft power discourse as adapted into the public diplomacy of the US, China, Japan, and Venezuela.[14] Pamment’s work also points to the institutional ramifications of bureaucratic fixation on measurement and evaluation, which ultimately transform the implementation of public diplomacy as it contorts to “fit” into the discursive parameters established by evaluation imperatives.

Transnational Politics

The scholarly discussion about public diplomacy as a pragmatic adaptation to perceptions of the strategic importance of communication still seems underdeveloped. A “practice theory” approach to analysis of public diplomacy might illuminate public diplomacy as part of a larger shift in the sociological underpinnings of diplomatic practice, in ways that account for the recognition of network relations as strategic resources, and in how the ubiquity of information and communication technologies impact the scope of diplomatic objectives and purpose.[15] For example, US technology advisor Alec Ross has made sweeping statements about tectonic upheavals in the practice of geo-politics as a result of such contexts, but more needs to be done to substantiate these kinds of claims, or at least place them within a broader discursive context.[16]

Public diplomacy activities represent a good range of cases to start addressing these kinds of claims. Public diplomacy as a field of study is also well-equipped with a variety of typologies to account for different forms of practical categorization[17], but more in-depth, cultural and institutional analyses would help to situate public diplomacy within interdisciplinary debates about the nature of politics both above and below the level of the state, or as embedded in technologically sustained network relations.

More to the point, public diplomacy has evolved to encompass new modes of practice that extend beyond “traditional” modes of informing, educating, and persuading, and this evolution can yield insight for more than just public diplomacy scholars. Public diplomacy, as a practice of statecraft, also functions to facilitate or convene stakeholders in ways that both borrow from the traditions of public diplomacy practice (e.g. the historical burdens of relation building), and also account for the ways in which technological platforms envision new possibilities for diplomatic activity. For example, the so-called “21st Century Statecraft” initiatives developed by the United States State Department work to convene technology developers with civil society and other development actors – not to burnish the image of the United States – but to engage in problem resolution. These kinds of activities are prescribed in Ali Fisher’s extensive work on collaborative public diplomacy, and anticipated in Anne Marie Slaughter’s notion of “collaborative power” – a corrective to the agent-focused soft power template for a competitive world politics.[18] What remains to be seen is whether such kinds of activity – represented by programs often reliant on social media – actually evidence a substantive form of connectivity and responsible communication.[19]

Such issues open up public diplomacy to investigations that can revisit existing theories of influence and network based persuasion. But the ambitions (or conceit) of public diplomacy also provide a rich terrain for social theory, that can be of interest to critical and post-structural scholars.[20] This is especially the case when public diplomacy

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advocates hitch their claims to debates about mediated identities (e.g. as with the efforts of the US to engage in Arab and Muslim web-based fora through communicative action), symbolic politics, and novel forms of global governance. While public diplomacy is not the same thing as propaganda, when it is deployed within systems of governmentality to sustain power relations, it merits critical attention.

Conclusion

The research trajectories discussed in this essay are obviously a selection, rather than a reflection, of the possibilities open to the public diplomacy scholar. Issues of gender, race, and critical economic asymmetries are largely unmentioned here. Nor is public diplomacy's ambivalent relationship with nation-branding.[21] Public diplomacy, by virtue of its mandate and its practice, is squarely situated at the intersection of culture, international politics, and communication. But it's important to keep a few aspects of this convergence in perspective – especially as scholars consider taking it on as an object of study.

First, the popularity of public diplomacy is clearly tied to bigger social and political changes precipitated by the growth of information and communication technologies. While public diplomacy's importance is without question impacted by mediatization, scholarship should strive to move beyond the “headlines.” For example, recent research within communication studies have called into question the popularized narratives of the Arab Spring as a technological revolution, and have drawn attention to the persistence of offline, cultural, and political factors that shaped the Arab Spring.[22] Likewise, public diplomacy studies should also consider strands of continuity that inhere in new practices of technology-enabled public diplomacy.

Second, public diplomacy cannot be characterized by the experience of the United States and Western Europe. As Jan Melissen cautioned, public diplomacy requires more comparative analysis that accounts for the diversity of policies, cultures, and political contexts that shape the development of public diplomacy around the world.[23] Public diplomacy provides a new opportunity to study how actors translate beliefs and attitudes *about* communication and power into strategic imperatives that yield programs and policies. This process of translation is inevitably filtered through local organizational, political, and cultural frameworks that can inform comparative research.

In sum, it is evident that the study of public diplomacy invites perspectives and methods from across disciplinary boundaries in ways that build on the considerable insight of historical and practitioner accounts. It has grown as a concept beyond a euphemism for propaganda into a diverse (and at times contradictory) set of practices by international actors seeking to leverage the resources of communication for strategic purposes. Public diplomacy as a field of study does not require a rigid theoretical template to flourish, but rather a broader audience for its relevance to pressing questions that scholars continue to grapple with at the borders of communication, international politics, and culture.

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[1] Bruce Gregory, “American Public Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 6, no. 3–4 (2011): 351–372, doi:10.1163/187119111X583941.

[2] Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U. S. Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (University Press of Kansas, 2008); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

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[3] See <http://intermap.org/2009/05/19/public-diplomacy-and-the-phantom-menace-of-theory/>

[4] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 94–109, doi:10.1177/0002716207311699; Nancy Snow, "Rethinking Public Diplomacy," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Phillip Taylor (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 3–11.

[5] Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Lexington Books, 2011).

[6] Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, "In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for US Foreign Policy?," *World Politics* 64, no. 03 (2012): 555–585, doi:10.1017/S0043887112000123; Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 583–612, doi:10.1177/03058298050330031601.

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[9] SR Corman and A Trethewey, "A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas" (COMOPS, April 3, 2007).

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[11] Jan Melissen, *Beyond the New Public Diplomacy* Clingendael Paper (Netherlands Institute of International Relations: Clingendael, October 2011).

[12] G. Wiseman, "Polylateralism: Diplomacy's Third Dimension," *Public Diplomacy Magazine* no. Summer 2010 (2010): 24–39; John Robert Kelley, "The New Diplomacy: Evolution of a Revolution," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 21, no. 2 (2010): 286, doi:10.1080/09592296.2010.482474; Ali Fisher, "Looking at the Man in the Mirror: Understanding of Power and Influence in Public Diplomacy," in *Trials of Engagement: The Future of US Public Diplomacy*, ed. Scott Lucas and Ali Fisher (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2010), 271–296.

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[14] Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power*.

[15] Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B Neumann, "The Future of Diplomacy: Changing Practices, Evolving Relationships," *International Journal* 66, no. 3 (2011): 527–542.

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[17] Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 55–77, doi:10.1177/0002716207312142; R. S. Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy After 9/11* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nicholas J.

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