

Did Public Diplomacy Kill the British Council?

Written by James Pamment

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JAMES PAMMENT, DEC 22 2012

Last week I was chatting to some senior staff at the British Council. When I explained the kind of research I did, one of them described PD as that fad people were talking about five years ago but which now had vanished. The irony is that rise and decline of the concept, from the perspective of this particular organisation, is a remarkably loaded issue. Indeed, in the book *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century* (Routledge New Diplomacy series, 2013), I essentially argue that public diplomacy was the term that pretty much killed the British Council.

From Arm's Length to Arm Around the Shoulder

British debates into PD in the early 21st century purposefully placed the British Council within the UK's PD apparatus. In 2005, Lord Carter defined PD as 'Work aiming to inform and engage individuals and organisations overseas, in order to improve understanding of and influence for the United Kingdom in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long term goals.' The final clause in this sentence is crucial. The British Council, although funded via the FCO, supposedly conducts cultural relations at an arm's length relationship from government policy. Under Carter, arm's length equated to an arm around the shoulder. The Council was freed from short term advocacy of the government's line, but it was expected to follow the spirit of governmental policy at the one-to-three year level.

Public accountability was the means of enforcing this. At Carter's recommendation, new management systems were put into place which saw the Council's projects rationalised and measured like never before. The notion of intangible influence through cultural engagement, developed over time in order to shape perceptions and build trust, did not fit with this approach. Instead, projects had to be linked to yearly objectives, measured for immediate outcomes, and reported as favourability percentages and other similarly inane indicators of impact. The Council has been told to expect its budget to fall 25% between 2010 and 2015, and it has been forced to look at new ways to sell the English language and monetise its online presence.

All of this is a far cry from the laissez faire cultural relations organisation that existed just 10 years ago. The key driver for this change was the concept of public diplomacy, which may have slipped from many agendas but remains a crucial signifier of governmental control over a nation's promotional assets.

'New' Public Diplomacy Provides the Impetus

A related point is the important notion of 'new' public diplomacy popularised by Jan Melissen, but having its origins in debates surrounding the technological promise of the internet in the late 1990s. Following 9/11, think tanks and scholars pointed towards greater public expectations of dialogue and inclusion in foreign policy, and the potential for social media to revolutionise this. In *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century*, I aimed to capture this period of change within PD organisations in the UK, US and Sweden.

Each of them, in its own way, has undergone fundamental changes hinging on re-conceptualisations of the term PD during these 10 years or so. However, in contradiction to the multilateral, dialogue-based and participatory agenda of new PD theory, PD actors in foreign ministry and cultural institutions have focused their reorganisation efforts on their own internal organisation and objective-setting *in order to support greater public contact*.

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Emerging evaluation cultures have focused upon the effects of PD campaigns, using the goals of the organisation as the yardstick. Attempts to understand foreign cultures, perceptions and attitudes have been rearticulated within these goals, where the concept of *outcomes* – simply put, whether the things ‘we’ did seemed to contribute to the results ‘we’ wanted – has subsumed all other measures into supporting the organisation’s objectives. The new PD has been a motivator of this period of organisational change to the extent that our most basic theorisations of the new PD need to account for this.

New Public Diplomacy Has Revolutionised Organisational Cultures

Therefore, the new PD is not simply a shift towards increased dialogue and more effective use of communication technologies, but more accurately represents a shift in organisational cultures motivated by debates surrounding the potential for dialogue and social media to challenge established patterns of communication. A wider choice of media has led to tighter control over the contents they may be permitted to carry. Over this period of little under a decade, these national-level PD actors have succeeded in de-radicalising any dialogical potential, and have instead rearticulated the new PD within traditional structures.

For an organisation like the British Council, this has meant that its strengths (i.e., its capacity to work to a long term, non-governmental cultural relations agenda) have been transformed into medium term objective-setting, intrusive measurement of all activities, and bean-counting exercises which make for detailed annual reports but little in the way of profound, long term cultural engagement.

How to Realise the New PD’s Promise?

From this perspective, I argue that this focus on the PD organisation and its objectives must be rejected. Instead, we need to integrate a culturally-informed understanding of foreign groups, organisations and dynamics into the core of decision-making. Instead of placing the PD organisation and proof of its ability to follow the government line as the main indicator of success, we need to put foreign publics first.

Indeed, if dialogue truly is the spirit of the new PD, we need to position the capacity for dialogue at the heart of all measurements, objectives and strategies. Therefore, organisations promoting a new PD agenda should evaluate the quality of research into public groups and the quality of the decisions that are based on that research. Rather than making organisations accountable for the alignment between their outputs and their goals, they should be made accountable for their insight, analysis, and decision-making.

You can’t hold an organisation accountable for the autonomous actions of the people it attempts to influence, but you can for the quality of evidence they assemble, the rigour of the strategy, and the accuracy of their situation analysis as a whole.

The great irony is, of course, that the British Council was better prepared to meet the demands of the new PD a decade ago than it is now. It was previously engaged in intangible dialogues over the *longue durée*, quietly building trust based on the insight, decisions and dialogues of country directors with influencers in host countries. Now it has monolithic global rollouts and intrusive management systems, and the country director roll has lost much of its dynamism and creativity. And this is not limited to the Council.

The Swedish Institute followed suit with a management system inspired by the Council, while the State Department has attempted to construct a massive database capable of holding and tracking all kinds of data on PD activities. The FCO took strides towards a centralised system during 2009 only to reverse its position following a round of cutbacks which left the Communication Directorate without a director. The impact of this remains to be seen, but the most recent set of reorganisations have seen around 30% of PD staff removed and the campaign planning function devolved to individual directorates. This could be a major step towards integrating PD with policy formation, and therefore bringing dialogue into the heart of things. Or it may signal the temporary decline of the PD ‘fad’.

I wrote *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century* intending to bring our assumptions about PD into question through

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comparative, contextualised case studies of developments in three different countries. The result is more of a zeitgeist study; the book captures a unique period in the history of public diplomacy, a period of introspection and change which may well have consequences for years to come. Whether this period heralds the death of the British Council remains to be seen; this certainly isn't the first time this institution has been forced to fight for its survival. That this weakening of the Council took place under the conceptualisation of a 'new' PD is the crucial point, and it suggests that we need to re-engage with the term in order to understand its actual meaning in real historical contexts. This book is an attempt to do just that, and I hope its readers will find much to provoke and challenge our most fundamental assumptions about public diplomacy.

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