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The Semi-Public World of Influencer Diplomacy, Universities and Think Tanks

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MAX NURNUS, FEB 10 2020

Public diplomacy, in contrast to traditional diplomacy, describes the communication and engagement of a government with a foreign public to further its goals. The term is usually understood as encompassing activities such as media campaigns, high-profile leadership visits and the promotion of language studies. Public diplomacy is public in two ways: first, in that it targets foreign publics, or at least parts of the public, and not merely government actors, as is the case for traditional diplomacy. And second, in that it happens in the open, whereas traditional diplomacy oftentimes takes place behind closed doors.

Like few other concepts from the discipline of International Relations, public diplomacy is popular among both theorists, who do research on public diplomacy, and practitioners, who engage in public diplomacy. Many governments have public diplomacy strategies, and some even have dedicated public diplomacy organizations, for example the United Kingdom with the British Council, Germany with the Goethe Institute, and Sweden with the Swedish Institute.

Public diplomacy, in theory as well as in practice, overlaps with other concepts, such as propaganda and soft power. And just like the activities that these concepts describe, public diplomacy has been part of the political playbook for hundreds of years. But contemporary public diplomacy isn't just the one-way communication of governments with foreign publics anymore. Today, governments engage in two-way exchanges with foreign publics, involve and collaborate with them, strive for mutual understanding and create long-lasting relations and networks for this purpose.

Although the name implies it, public diplomacy does not always target foreign publics as a whole. It is difficult to shape public opinion, and even if it succeeds, influence on government policy isn't assured. Instead, public diplomacy oftentimes focuses on strategic publics: those individuals or groups who are of strategic value as they can advance or hinder a nation's interests. Governments therefore target 'citizens whose opinions, values, activities and interests may help sway another government's position', as James Pamment put it.

Some strategic publics are composed of relatively few people. One example is the targeting of academics at universities, researchers at think tanks as well as of other pundits. Foreign governments engage with them through funding and other forms of support, which represents one of the most pronounced trends in modern public diplomacy. Not only do these individuals have the potential to influence governments through their professional activities; they sometimes even move through the revolving door between public sphere and government.

The targeting of these experts is certainly more public than traditional diplomacy, yet it hardly fits the common understanding of 'public'. It doesn't target the public at large but only a very small subset; and it doesn't happen in the open but rather flies under the radar of the public. It requires knowledge of its existence and a closer look to see it. Public diplomacy, thus, is misleading as a label for these activities, even though they fit the common definitions of the concept. At best, these activities are semi-public. A more appropriate label for this particular form of public diplomacy might therefore be 'influencer diplomacy'.

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References to influencers aren't new: scholars like Kathy R. Fitzpatrick, Andreas Pacher and James Pamment have described them as the targets of public diplomacy. Similar references can be found in the writings of other authors, for example when Joseph Nye refers to 'the development of lasting relationships with key individuals' as one dimension of public diplomacy. Not all public diplomacy, then, is influencer diplomacy; but influencer diplomacy is an important form of modern public diplomacy. And nowhere are its workings more visible than in Washington D.C. and in the activities of foreign governments there.

Consider the example of South Korea, a country that has been investing significant political capital and money into its public diplomacy in recent years. It provides large sums of money to influencers in the US-American capital through institutions like the Korea Foundation, the government-run organization for South Korea's public diplomacy efforts. The Korea Foundation sponsors or co-sponsors, or funnels private money towards, positions such as a professorship at Georgetown University and a research unit at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), one of the world's most prominent think tanks.

Beyond the direct funding of positions, the Korea Foundation's influencer diplomacy also encompasses sponsorship for events, scholarships for research, travel grants and other forms of support for the professional activities of academics, researchers and pundits. These efforts by the Korea Foundation are not limited to Washington. They also target think tanks and universities elsewhere in the United States and around the globe, from the Rand Corporation in California to Vrije Universiteit in Brussels. Even future influencers are included through support for internships, language classes and post-doctoral research.

South Korea is not alone in engaging in this form of public diplomacy. In the case of CSIS, numerous other foreign governments provide just as much or even more money, among them Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates and Norway. The Japanese government sponsors professorships at Georgetown University, Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And numerous US-American schools receive millions in support from the government of Saudi Arabia and its state-owned companies, for example to establish research centers.

These activities aren't just signs of generosity. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that this form of public diplomacy and the funding it provides do not equal lobbying. The latter describes activities that are meant to directly influence a government in specific ways. Influencer diplomacy does not directly target foreign governments, nor does it turn its targets into lobbyists. The support it provides usually does not go hand in hand with expectations or even requirements to advocate a specific position. The academics, researchers and pundits who profit from it are not 'bought' and remain free to voice their opinions and criticize their sponsors – at least on paper.

Rather, influencer diplomacy works in more subtle ways. It creates goodwill among those who stand between the public sphere and government, those who feature as experts in the public and political discourse and those who sometimes move through the revolving door into government service. It provides a foreign government with access to politicians and those who influence them, and it puts that government and its concerns on the agenda. This can happen through think tank events and publications, editorials in newspapers, courses on offer at universities or simply the talk of the town. And it ensures that those who seek expertise on certain topics know where to turn and whom to trust.

The example of South Korea illustrates the potential of this approach to diplomacy. As Kent Calder has argued: 'Korea, relative to its giant neighbors, is a small nation' and 'does not loom large in the realist power calculus'. Yet, through novel as well as more traditional means of engagement and lobbying, the country 'wielded considerable influence in Washington, attaining substantial visibility' in recent years. Calder sees signs of this success in the frequency with which the US-American Congress as well as the national media pay attention to Korea-related issues, and in how South Korea pushed its own positions in Washington.

The desire to create visibility is a driving force behind this form of public diplomacy. Attention is a scarce resource in modern politics. Through influencer diplomacy, governments can ensure that the issues that matter to them and their own positions are visible for other governments. This approach is especially valuable for governments who may not be able to create visibility on their own or want to avoid the impression of overt lobbying. Instead, they utilize well-

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established and trusted actors like academics and think tanks. It is no coincidence that among the countries that spend the most on influencer diplomacy in Washington are those that rely on and profit the most from America's attention: its allies in the Middle East and East Asia.

South Korea, maybe more so than other nations, has an interest in the US-American government being aware of and sympathetic to its interests and concerns. The country hosts some twenty thousand US soldiers and relies on them for its national security. For the past years, it has struggled to contain growing demands from the United States to pay more for this support. South Korea also has an obvious interest in making its voice heard in the Trump administration's erratic engagement with North Korea. And the country has been trying to prevent the United States from imposing new and stricter trade tariffs on South Korean exports for years.

Governments are not alone in trying to utilize influencers for their purposes. The tobacco, arms and oil industry have a long history of supporting research at universities and think tanks. More recently, the activities of large tech firms such as Google have come under scrutiny for this behavior. Journalists such as Rana Foroohar and Nitashi Tiku have detailed how the company has been funding hundreds of academics and researchers and holding open the revolving door for some of them. Their support isn't bought through a quid-pro-quo; they are rather instrumentalized for the company's purposes through 'cognitive' and 'social capture', as Foroohar and Tiku put it.

Unfortunately, there are also episodes that suggest that money can in fact buy influence. In the case of Google, a think tank – The New America Foundation – that had received millions of dollars in support from the company fired a scholar in 2017 after he expressed an opinion that ran counter to the company's interests. Officially, no strings were pulled, and the decision was made for unrelated reasons, of course. In a similar vein, South Korea cut its funding for the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University two years ago, which subsequently had to close. According to the institute's former chairman, this was a direct response to the institute's refusal to fire several employees based on orders from Seoul. The South Korean government argued that the funding was withdrawn due to concerns about the institute's transparency.

Does that mean that all support for academics and researchers from foreign governments is morally fraught? Most likely not. The stakes are higher when experts on international relations, trade policy or foreign direct investment, and especially those who qualify as influencers, receive support from a foreign government than in the case of non-influencers. The direct funding of positions at universities and think tanks, or even of specific research and publications, deserves more scrutiny than support for language classes. And if funding from foreign governments enables great research, teaching and punditry, this is not necessarily problematic as long as this support is provided in an open and transparent manner and without undue strings attached.

Nevertheless, influencer diplomacy deserves attention and scrutiny. First, and from an academic perspective, because the existing research on public diplomacy has paid comparatively little attention to this not-so-public dimension of contemporary diplomatic practice. The large sums of money that flow across borders to universities and think tanks imply its importance. The case of South Korea, once again, illustrates this. The Korea Foundation spends more on what its financial reports refers to as 'international networking', much of which targets current or future influencers at universities and think tanks, than on the promotion of the country's culture or of Korean studies abroad.

The rhetoric of governments behind closed doors also indicates the potential they see in influencer diplomacy. Leaked documents from the government of Norway detail how the country provided tens of millions of dollars to several dozen think tanks in the United States from 2006 to 2010. The documents argue that the country's influencer diplomacy was able to secure meetings with US politicians, to influence their agenda, and maybe even to influence US policies. Similarly, leaked emails by the government of the United Arab Emirates describe how the country in 2016 provided money for think tanks in Washington that wrote reports in support of its policy goals, and how it intended one year later to sway politicians by catering to influencers.

Second, influencer diplomacy deserves more scrutiny because it affects the role that foreign governments and their interests play in the political discourse, both in the United States and elsewhere. Those who profit from the support of foreign governments are not necessarily in their pockets. Yet there is an obvious mismatch between, on the one

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hand, the funding they receive and, on the other hand, the promise and the expectation of independent and neutral expertise. Companies like Google have already attracted criticism for how they try to control the political debate through research funding; and the experts who accept their support have been called out on the questionable nature of these arrangements. In the world of influencer diplomacy, universities and think tanks, this sort of critical scrutiny is less pronounced.

The lack of transparency surrounding influencer diplomacy only adds to the questionable nature of the arrangements that it produces. As the New York Times detailed several years ago, US-American think tanks and other institutions usually do not disclose the details of and the strings attached to the funding they receive from foreign governments. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this money can go hand in hand with financial incentives towards self-censorship and a suppression of critical opinions. Nevertheless, well-paid experts routinely publish research and appear before the public or even governments without clearly disclosing where their funding comes from and that there is the potential for a conflict of interests.

None of this is a secret among those with a professional interest in foreign policy. Some prominent commentators have in the past criticized the role and ties of influencers, for example Stephen Walt when he wrote that many of Washington's think tanks are 'advocacy organizations masquerading as independent research bodies'. Yet it is questionable whether the wider public and all those who rely on and trust academics, think tanks and other experts are aware of what influencer diplomacy is and what role it plays in the public discourse. Otherwise, the appearances in the media, in front of government and even in academia of influencers who receive government support from abroad would probably be seen in a more critical light.

Academics and researchers also have an interest in a critical engagement with these issues for their own sake. For those who rely on a reputation as trustworthy, it would be foolish not to critically scrutinize and call out activities that might create the impression that the work and expertise of their peers can be bought – or, even worse, that it is actually being bought. This seems especially prudent in an era of political polarization, the belief in 'alternative facts', and the increasingly widespread dismissal of expert knowledge.

At the same time, the governments that engage in influencer diplomacy as well as those who benefit from it have an interest in keeping these activities semi-public: sufficiently visible and transparent to avoid accusations of logrolling, backroom deals or even legally problematic behavior; sufficiently hidden to avoid the direct association of influencers with foreign interests. It is no coincidence that governments oftentimes engage in influencer diplomacy through separate organizations with inconspicuous names. These activities may run under the label of public diplomacy, yet that label itself is misleading and maybe even deceptive.

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