

Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

PD, POR, and the Public Environment ^[1]

Practitioners of public diplomacy (PD) routinely put their shoulders to the great wheel of public opinion in hopes of nudging it -- forward, backwards, sometime even sideways. Lately in government there has been a renewed commitment to the idea of measuring that performance and to assessing the results. Curiously, though, relatively little systematic or practical use has been made by officials of the one gauge designed specifically to register and monitor changes in widely held views and attitudes. That instrument - public opinion research (POR) - offers the promise of providing public diplomats and their political masters with insights into the changing public environment. Yet input from polling, or even less so from other more supple forms of research such as focus groups or interviews, is rarely used to illuminate the way forward or to guide the development of international policy. While it could provide greater levels of transparency and accountability, it is not routinely used to track the success or failure of efforts intended to "move the needle".

USC Professor [Nicholas Cull](#) referred recently to this preoccupation with metrics as the equivalent of "rushing out into the forest every night to see if the trees have grown". That is an evocative metaphor and it may well be so, but clearly there are many critical issues at play here, many revolving around a single point of intersection -- the public.

Do the three P's -- public diplomacy, public opinion research and the public environment -- in fact inhabit the same pod? Or should they? Diplomacy, and the issues with which it deals, remains for most people somewhat of a remote, even ethereal concept with limited relevance to daily life. Polling makes for great headlines and often provides an accurate snapshot of opinion on particular issues at a given moment in time, but it is of less utility in mapping the broad landscape of attitudes and pre-occupations as they evolve. And at that level, that of the changing public environment, the task of analysis becomes so hugely complex and multi-faceted that assessments tend to owe much to the perspective of the beholder.

That said, POR can help public diplomats determine whether or not they are connecting with populations; there are few alternatives when it comes to establishing performance metrics. With few exceptions, however, POR is not tightly integrated into international policy development. If feedback loops were working properly, policy planners and PD practitioners would be using POR systematically, especially to get to know much more about emerging currents in the thinking of the internationally attentive public - but resource constraints, coupled perhaps with a certain culturally-rooted reticence to consult, have ensured that they don't.

Polling, moreover, though the dominant expression of POR, is expensive, easily manipulated, and does not always produce actionable results. Other forms POR - focus groups and interviews - are more likely to yield useful insights, but governments are not generally enthusiastic about commissioning such studies as the outcomes are less predictable.

And at the political level, there will always be the conundrum about whether to try to lead, or to

follow public opinion.

Bottom line? The three P's are not yet as aligned as practitioners might hope.