

Nov 04, 2016 by **Craig Hayden**

A 'New Paradigm': The Private Sector and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

On January 10, 2007, the State Department hosted a Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy. The purpose of the conference was to bring together professionals from the public relations sector to consider how U.S. public diplomacy programs and objectives could be improved by input from the corporate communications world. Given the recent BBC polls showing that U.S. popularity continues to plummet worldwide -- it's no surprise that the State Department is reaching out to organizations that are defined by their communication expertise.

A corporate vision for public diplomacy appears to be on the rise again. On January 29, Sebastian Mallaby wrote in the *Washington Post* that the United States could look to its corporate brands as instructive examples for how to maintain the brand image of the nation. It would seem that branding-as-public diplomacy has once again surfaced as a corrective for U.S. communication strategy. Does any of this sound familiar?

Institutional memory may not be what it used to be. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell famously announced a few days before 9/11 that the job of the State Department is to sell the "product" of "democracy." Yet Charlotte Beers, the advertising executive heralded as a savior for U.S. public diplomacy after 9/11, left amidst a hailstorm of criticism for her "Madison Avenue" approach to public diplomacy. Naomi Klein asserted that "America is not a hamburger." Beers's advertising-based appeals came up short against the politics of getting advertisements aired abroad. Yet the "marketing" meme kept going. Commercial broadcasting competency was the compelling force behind arguments for Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television. We needed to "compete" in Middle East media markets because as Norman Pattiz said, there is a "media war" going on and we "don't have a horse in that race." Nevertheless, even those efforts have had mixed results in acquiring market share, let alone translating into tangible public diplomacy gains.

So here we are in 2007 with a new conference to bring the competencies of the public relations industry back into play. Statements made at the recent conference were revealing:

Karen Hughes, the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, announced that the conference represented part of the task to "create a new paradigm for public diplomacy in the 21st century." This boiled to three strategic objectives.

America must offer people across the world a positive vision of hope that is rooted in our deepest values, our belief in liberty, in justice, in opportunity, in respect for all.

[I]solate and marginalize the violent extremists that we are facing and confront

their ideology of tyranny and hate.

[F]oster a sense of common interest and common values between Americans and people of different countries and cultures across the world.

Hughes comments echo the chorus of policy recommendations on public diplomacy put forth since 2001 and articulate nothing particularly new. These strategic objectives highlight the difficulty in converting arguably strategic objectives into tactical communication actions -- something the current administration has had difficulty in doing. Communicating the value of "culture" is more than simply asserting its universal appeal -- but a more complicated and lengthy process of showing and "doing" the works that demonstrate American values. U.S. actions symbolically convey its motives, inviting interpretation of its intentions in a way that cannot always be controlled.

Hughes's speech acknowledges this complexity, and accurately describes public diplomacy as a quotient of the actions of many both in and out of the government:

"It's a very, very complex tapestry painted by thousands of different artists. And your contribution can be really invaluable. When you donate computers to a school overseas, you are not just helping your company, you are also helping your country. And we're very grateful for that and you have a unique role to play."

Here, she rightly notes that "what we do" carries a communicative value. More importantly, she implies that the "we" of public diplomacy is bigger than the State Department. For this reason, embracing public relations and the private sector draws together the expertise of that industry while adding more communicative actors to speak for America's image. The attending public relations executives chimed in with similar assertions. Mary Lou Quinlan, former CEO of N.W. Ayer Advertising focused on retaking control of Brand America. "It's time to get back to the basic values that made our brand great, things like respect for freedom and individual rights, and approaching people with humanity and integrity.... We are a leader brand, not a bully brand. We represent cooperation and reaching out to a diverse, complex world, not 'my way or the highway.'"

Yet Quinlan's advice comes after years of foreign policy that have done a considerable job of building a profoundly negative brand. This raises the question: can public diplomacy mitigate entrenched negative perceptions? Richard Edelman, president and CEO Edelman, suggests that public diplomacy take place in venues and outlets that do not connect with forums of policy that are arguably unpopular. He says, "take it out of politics." But what does that mean?

Edelman goes on to suggest that communication programs of public diplomacy be less "top down" and "command-and-control." Instead, focus on direct communication and blogging. The strategy should focus on peer-to-peer communication rather than distribution of talking points from the government's centers of message management. This follows R.S. Zaharna's basic critique of contemporary information programs: public diplomacy needs to be less about "information battle" and more about "networks." To rip off some classical communication theory -- we need more "peripheral" rather than "central" routes to audience persuasion.

Edelman and Quinlan's suggestions are all fine in an abstract sense. But they also imply a more important concession in the struggle for a successful U.S. public diplomacy. The "brand"

associated with the United States government is so diminished that proxies must take its place in the global conversation that is public diplomacy. Basically -- someone else has to speak for the U.S. government. Undersecretary Hughes's "new paradigm" means that more respected representatives are needed that best exemplify the abstract ideals that she is so eager to convey. "Take it out of politics" really means "take it away from the U.S. government." That sounds like outsourcing public diplomacy.

The role of public relations in U.S. public diplomacy is by no means new. What is interesting, however, is the cycle of its influence. Why has the "marketing" discourse waxed and waned in U.S. public diplomacy rhetoric? The conflation of public diplomacy with public relations and corporate activity carries no small amount of significance and symbolism. Seriously -- what does it mean if the government seeks commercial "best practices" to prosecute its public diplomacy. Or, when Undersecretary Hughes envisions that public diplomacy's sphere grow to include "private sector 'foreign service officers?'"

There are consequences to how our leaders rhetorically construct their conception of effective persuasion and international dialogue that needs further exploration. In my next post, I will discuss the implications of the "marketing" discourse that has resurfaced and speculate on what it means for public diplomacy as an inclusive sphere of international communication.
