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Can Branding Define Public Diplomacy 2.0?

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The next round of the seemingly endless frustration over U.S. public diplomacy is underway. Rod Dreher's recent rebuke of contemporary public diplomacy programs succinctly recapitulates the "problem" with U.S. public diplomacy -- at least according to how he frames the subject. For Dreher, the U.S. public diplomacy is losing the "information war," because it is being outflanked by jihadist media campaigns. For Dreher, U.S. efforts look absurdly anachronistic. The U.S. relies on message strategies rooted in Cold War models and appears increasingly unresponsive to audiences in the Middle East and Islamic world.

Dreher's arguments come as Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes attempts to re-envision the agents and activities of an ideal public diplomacy campaign. Dreher's criticism and the State Department's renewed efforts to revamp public diplomacy signal that there may be a growing battle for framing public diplomacy itself.

But what would a "Public Diplomacy 2.0" look like? Given the spate of criticism and policy recommendations since 2001, it is fair to conclude U.S. public diplomacy has struggled to find an orienting metaphor that links effective policy with realistic strategic objectives. During the past five years, we have seen the rise, fall, and then rebirth of the "marketing" policy language. This language has shared the stage with descriptions of "media war," "information battle," and other militaristic frames to conceptualize public diplomacy. These two ways of talking about public diplomacy push policy in different directions and anticipate different objectives.

These two discursive frameworks for public diplomacy are set against a larger U.S. strategic discourse. Public diplomacy's supposed dialogue-oriented mission must be carried out amidst a strategic imperative that distills international relations into an epic struggle of good versus evil; where regional and ethnic context is collapsed into a monolithic "war on terror." U.S. public diplomacy is situated within a complex of policy rhetoric that overshadows its persuasive mission. How does a nation communicate when its other actions preclude a receptive audience and drown out overtures towards dialogue? The broad strokes of U.S. foreign policy leave ample room for other media framers to respond in kind, with conspiratorial narratives that reinterpret the sweep of U.S. "value"-promotion rhetoric in a visceral, immediate way. This framing has "connected the dots" far better than the bland appeals to shared universal morals implicit in U.S. public diplomacy.

Yet to say that U.S. policies "speak" louder rhetorically than any information campaign obscures public diplomacy's conceptual problem. To disentangle the difficulties facing U.S public diplomacy, let us start with the language we use to describe it. In my previous post, I discussed the recent State Department conference that brought together experts from the public relations industry to strategize new directions for U.S. public diplomacy. The conference envisioned a role for the private sector to represent and communicate U.S. values abroad. The role of the "outsourced" public diplomacy program taps into the well-worn themes

of U.S. marketing competence, and repositions public diplomacy as a branding campaign.

So is there a problem with this? The idea of politics-as-branding has been popularized in the works of Peter van Ham and Simon Anholt (to name a few). What if Public Diplomacy 2.0 became defined by this policy discourse, and what sorts of polices could be derived from this defining language?

Students of rhetoric often refer to Kenneth Burke's notion of "terministic screens" to illustrate how language can selectively narrow interpretations of reality within rhetorical discourse. Burke also observes that, "there is kind of a terministic compulsion to carry out the implication's of one's terminology." Following this logic, if the U.S. describes the terrain of public diplomacy policy as a kind of branding milieu, then its policies will reflect this -- including all the advantages and disadvantages that such a communication policy would entail.

It is obvious that the flexibility of corporate marketing and public relations is desirable in the fast-paced, global communications environment. But this also frames the practice of nation-based communication in a profoundly different way. The problem with branding in the conventional marketing sense is that it hails its audience in a way that does not invite participation in the politics of foreign policy. Public diplomacy is traditionally justified by how foreign publics can shape the foreign policy attitudes of their leadership. Yet if messages are targeted to cultivate brand-loyalty -- does that constitute the kind of dialogue implicit in previous conceptions of public diplomacy?

Put another way, is it possible to cultivate the kind of identification implicit in domestic branding campaigns in a way that is so essential to Nye's notion of soft power? If we appeal to audiences as consumers in what Monroe Price called the "markets for loyalty," does this enable our audience to "see the world" in a way that is sympathetic to a our perspective? Or, does branding in fact cheapen the brand itself? Previous criticism of the branding idea argued that it ran against the norms international dialogue, while failing to do justice to the values implicit in the national "brand." I would add a more immediate concern. Branding strategies that rely on proxies begin to conflate the cultural "message" of the Untied States with the contrived brand-image of the corporate proxy. If we invite audiences to view us as brand, we can be just as easily discarded as a consumer product. Of course, embracing a "branding" paradigm doesn't necessarily mean letting corporations do the talking -- but that's the direction implied by the recent State Department conference.

The idea is not without merit. John Q. Tourist of the Public Diplomacy Watch blog stated that:

> Let the private sector help underwrite the broadcasts, in exchange for commercial mentions the way that public broadcasting in America often mentions the names of sponsoring corporations and foundations.
>
> Think about it: America is home to many corporations with global reach, global brands and global ambitions. Would Coca Cola or Pepsi or Google or eBay or Disney or American Airlines or McDonald's or Microsoft or Motorola or Starbucks perhaps want to underwrite increased American public-diplomacy broadcasts into various parts of the world? I'd bet so.

This suggestion solves the perpetual problem of minimal resources for U.S. international broadcasting, but also incurs the symbolic baggage of the corporations. These corporations thus "speak" for America; it leaves the brand of America open to symbolic marriage with its corporate brands. Not only that, such a proposal reveals that the U.S. must rely on corporate sponsors to communicate, and re-affirms a reluctance to aggressively fund public diplomacy. More generally, what is conveyed when a nation out-sources its public diplomacy?

Of course, this wouldn't be an issue if Brand America wasn't so already tarnished. I merely point out that merging the ideographs of "America" with the motives embedded in corporate brands poses some risks to U.S. "impression management." More broadly, an attempt to corporatize the practice of public diplomacy -- while possibly more "effective" as a campaign of persuasion -- signals a more cynical stance towards message promotion and the perceived motives of U.S. public diplomacy. This may heighten existing skepticism of U.S. public diplomacy and reinforce perception that it is simply propaganda.

To embrace the discourse of branding is thus a conflicted strategy. The benefits of corporate competencies are a positive corrective to the current array of U.S. public diplomacy. Yet such acumen should not define the ethics of U.S. international communication. This concern surfaced in the wake of the Cold War when public diplomacy, lacking an antagonist, was justified as a tool for free market-promotion. We need branding practices. I am not entirely sold on the retooling of politics as branding.

Yet real security concerns develop apace with the debate over branding-inspired "best practices" for public diplomacy. Can a redefined public diplomacy address these threats?

I guess the real issue here is how our policy language draws boundaries around what U.S. public diplomacy should attempt to accomplish. Dreher's lucid criticism depicts the "battlefield" of U.S. public diplomacy to be opinions of populations sensitive to jihadist messages. His words clearly orient the reader to public diplomacy as a kind of warfare over the rhetorical framing of reality itself in these populations. While I do not object to the need for action that counters the efforts of jihadist propaganda, I wonder if his criticism is off the mark. Is public diplomacy the policy instrument that cuts across the information vulnerabilities of the United States? Or should there be clearer distinctions between strategic communication and public diplomacy? In my next post, I explore how public diplomacy figures in arguments over international security, and how information warfare has come to dominate debates over public diplomacy.