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Persuasion in Public Diplomacy: Back to Basics [1]

Much of the discussion on the Public Diplomacy blog dwells on how a nation can persuade others about its image and its policies. The most common observation has been that actions (e.g. a foreign policy) can "speak" louder than any communication campaign. Again and again, this argument is presented: U.S. public diplomacy programs face difficulty because U.S. policy actions so obviously overpower any attempt to persuade publics through international broadcasting, cultural exchanges, and the other components of U.S. public diplomacy.

The U.S. needs to move beyond this stopping point. The debate on branding has been instructive, but I think some enduring questions remain regarding what constitutes the relationship of persuasion to public diplomacy, and really what place persuasion has in U.S. foreign policy. My questions are, how do public diplomacy policymakers understand persuasion, see what actions actually persuade, and craft persuasion objectives? I can't address all these in this post -- so I'll focus on the first one here.

I am grateful for Simon Anholt's previous response to my last post, because it highlights the crux of this issue. Anholt presented a straightforward distinction between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy based on the kind of persuasion methods each audience requires. He wrote (in the "comments" section of my previous post):

> The complexity of understanding and managing public rather than professional opinion points to one of the key differences between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy.

Anholt argued that the audience in traditional diplomacy (foreign policy elites) requires a different kind of argument. Traditional diplomacy operates in a more deliberative mode, where the merits of a policy are considered for its own sake. I'm not sure I totally agree with this generalization (you can't discount how historical narratives or institutional culture shape diplomatic rationality). Nevertheless, the demands of persuasion are different for policy-makers than for foreign publics. Each audience both expects and uses different kinds of arguments.

Foreign publics, according to Anholt, do not respond to the deliberative argument that defines traditional diplomacy. Instead, they respond to peripheral cues, historical images, and the "background" of national reputation. Public audiences attend to the larger context of a nation's actions.

According to Anholt, public diplomacy rhetoric doesn’t "work" as a short-term, reactive, or commercial-style intervention to sell a policy. He suggests that public diplomacy should reflect

what realistically persuades publics about nations and policies. This amounts to a rhetoric that constructs or repairs the background reputation of a nation. Anholt's solution is to make sure that public diplomacy is built-in to foreign policy -- to the point where foreign policy has a feedback mechanism. Every policy should have a metaphorical "comment box" that suggests that the policy can be changed and is not dogmatic.

This view builds upon the appeals to "dialogue" that define much of public diplomacy criticism. But more importantly, it begins to outline what a rudimentary theory of persuasion in public diplomacy might look like. Problem is, I'm not convinced that U.S. foreign policy has an agreed-upon role for persuasion, nor has it settled on how persuasion should work in public diplomacy campaigns.

It's no great surprise that persuasion and public argument are a little underdeveloped. U.S. foreign policy draws from theoretical traditions of international relations that focus on state behavior (and not audiences or domestic constituents for political discourse). Ideas like power-balancing, the security dilemma, and regime-building in an "international system" reflect a state-centric bias with well defined means of symbolic communication and signaling. There's not a lot of agreement in the IR community on the importance of domestic constituents for foreign policy, let alone their impact on inter-state relations. Given the biases of the IR canon, it's no wonder that public diplomacy and international persuasion have received less than considerable attention.

But how does that translate to U.S. foreign policy, public diplomacy, and its implicit logic of persuasion? Consider for a moment some remarks by Karen Hughes when she took the post as Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy on September 8, 2005. Here she detailed how she will support ambassadors so they can incorporate public diplomacy into their mission:

> [W]e know we need to do a better job of providing tools and information to them. And that's why we've already started publications like the *Echo Chamber* to get information to the field in a fast and quick and usable way so that -- the goal of that is so that our ambassador can get that and pick it up and know that that's information he can use or she can use in meetings or speeches or in talking with the press around the world.

Echo Chamber? Talking points? This conception of public diplomacy carries the implication that consistency is crucial to the U.S. persuasive strategy. Consistent arguments -- getting all U.S. representatives on the same page -- seems to outweigh connecting with the audience in a manner that invites trust or implies the U.S. will listen. Then there is the matter of how persuasion is organized into the institutional mission of the State Department:

> The other side of engagement is a much more rapid and aggressive response to information that is wrong. We'll create a rapid response unit here at the State Department, it's already in the works, to monitor media and help us more aggressively respond to rumors, inaccuracies, and hate speech whenever -- wherever they are engaged in around the world... And we plan to forward-deploy regional SWAT teams who can look at the big picture and formulate a more strategic and focused approach to all our public diplomacy assets; not just country by country, but within a region of the world.

Here, we have a policy rhetoric that imagines persuasion as a competitive field. While it invokes the agility of corporate communications and military operations -- Hughes's rhetoric says something more central about the place of persuasion. The focus on consistency and agility sound more like the demands of a domestic political campaign, and less like the long-term, reparative work necessary to build the image of the United States. This view of persuasion seems appropriate for the divisive world of partisan politics within the United States.

Of course I do not suggest that the U.S. government doesn't understand persuasion. There is a growing field of "strategic communications" that is steeped in persuasion skills and knowledge (though these policies cut closer to propaganda). Yet public diplomacy remains strangely ambivalent towards persuasion. Many are familiar with the argument that public diplomacy (or foreign policy, for that matter) is not a "popularity contest." Well the range of recent global opinion reports clearly confirm that -- so what is public diplomacy for?

I would suggest that Anholt's "Stage III" public diplomacy is, in fact, a kind of popularity contest. In this view, international relations itself is framed as a kind of struggle for loyalties and authenticity. As nation-states, populations, and threats are de-territorialized, the currency of opinion becomes increasingly important. Public diplomacy and foreign policy in this view are synonymous, as all policy carries a symbolic and suasive value. It recognizes that policy cannot help but be communicative and that this serves a distinctly strategic purpose. Persuasion builds the interpretive frames through which the world views the U.S.

Anholt's view takes a broad swipe at the question of how to approach persuasion in public diplomacy. I do think that it needs further elaboration. A glaring example of a system of persuasion can be found in the information war waged by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, which I will discuss in greater detail in my next post.