

Nov 04, 2016 by [Craig Hayden](#)

Disaggregate: A Strategic Direction for Public Diplomacy ^[1]

An article by George Packer in the December 18, 2006 issue of the *New Yorker* raises some interesting questions for public diplomacy. The [article](#), titled "Knowing the Enemy: Can social scientists redefine the 'War on Terror'?" highlights how insights from counter-insurgency and cultural anthropology studies have revealed that the U.S. conflict with jihadist groups is largely informational. And, this conflict is comprised of multiple groups reflecting both local and regional concerns. According to Packer, the sweeping notion of the "War on Terror" fails to reflect that the "war" is made up of very particular groups that operate on a local level, engaging local populations in a kind of information warfare. The "War on Terror" unites these actors in a fictitious entity, an abstraction that blinds policymakers from addressing the minute, local reality of jihadist networks in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond.

A crucial conclusion from Packer's interviews is that the U.S., with all its communication assets, is not winning the larger battle. The jihadist movement meanwhile continues to aggressively prosecute a propaganda war on numerous fronts:

An information strategy seems to be driving the agenda of every radical Islamist movement.... In the information war, America and its allies are barely competing.

So the U.S. is losing the propaganda war. David Kilcullen, an Australian analyst profiled by Packer, argues the U.S. needs a new strategic imperative to define its struggle against terror groups. He argues for a new strategic direction: the U.S. should attempt to disaggregate these groups from their local population. While it's true that there is a global insurgency that takes advantage of global communication outlets, it's not exactly a unified front. Instead, groups are unified around tactics to control portrayal of the United States and recognize that they must control the field of persuasion. The "War on Terror" has only fueled their narrative portrayals of a great, global struggle. And their narratives do have power. Steven Fondacaro is quoted in the article as saying:

A revolution happened without us knowing or paying attention. Perception truly now is reality, and our enemies know it. We have to fight on the information battlefield.

So what does this mean for public diplomacy? The U.S. government is rightly turning its attention to jihadist and insurgent [communication tactics and recruitment techniques](#). Perhaps this will result in the paradigmatic shift in strategy towards "disaggregation" that Kilcullen

suggests. The "disaggregation" perspective could also benefit the formulation of public diplomacy policies. Public diplomacy, in some sense, suffers from the same conceptual problems that hinder anti-terror propaganda efforts.

I am suggesting public diplomacy needs to be animated by more than a strategy of "message management." Furthermore, the messages jihadists communicate don't necessarily reflect opinion leadership in important publics. Public diplomacy media outlets, exchange initiatives, and dialogue opportunities need to be grounded in a sense of the communication infrastructure that operates in every "market" it tries to reach. In other words, public diplomacy itself needs to disaggregate. Surely, the U.S. should be worried about what jihadist groups are saying to each other online. But equally important is how these messages filter into and gain legitimacy in more mainstream channels of communication. How might their arguments become persuasive to larger communities? Generally speaking, social movements rely on "opportunity structures" in which to flourish, where media and interpersonal communication practice can be leveraged to facilitate their challenge to the status quo. Has this happened in critical Arab and Muslim populations? Public argument in mainstream communication outlets are a critical venue where public diplomacy (as opposed to counter-insurgency propaganda) can intervene.

Does current public diplomacy accomplish this? I'm going to borrow a concept from communication scholar Sandra Ball-Rokeach to illustrate the kind of strategic thinking I advocate. Her notion of "communication infrastructure" maps the relationships between individuals, local organizations, and news media outlets. This infrastructure is instrumental in how individuals identify with their community and act as a community. It is a model that illustrates how communities are embedded in practices of communication and media exposure. People identify with their locality and engage others based on the representation of their community in this matrix of communication. Of course there are other "ecological" or social perspectives on how media exerts its influence on social groups. But what I am getting at here is that media systems are instrumental in perpetuating and reinforcing frames about the United States that might counter its public diplomacy. In the process, these systems reinforce how people identify with the United States, which I believe is the crucial soft power goal of public diplomacy.

I think this is one reason why recent appeals to "marketing" and "branding" have been so popular. Segmentation analysis and audience research is central to modern commercial campaigns. There is, obviously, a risk to what policy-makers import from the domain of marketing and I don't want to suggest that the U.S. needs to "sell" itself better. It just needs to recognize that the local complexities faced by global marketers also bear upon the persuasion strategies of the U.S. government. If communication infrastructures are pivotal resources that people return to for perspective and identification, then perhaps the U.S. needs to think more clearly on how to become part of these local conversations -- where populations make sense of ambiguous or threatening events through public discourse. More audience analysis, more localized research into media consumption, and more attention to the "granular" nature of communication practice in local cultures is essential.

Of course the government does this research. But how has it translated into conceptions of public diplomacy? This blog forum has discussed how public diplomacy is not the short-term repair of national image that I think some policy-makers would like it to be. Even so, public diplomacy remains a worthwhile attempt at government-lead rhetoric; a venture to mitigate conflict and establish a foundation for understanding across borders and cultures, while

rebutting those narratives that cultivate negative opinions about the United States.

So what stands for high profile public diplomacy now? The over-arching emphasis on "staying on message" and repeated appeals to values that allow others to "know us better" has not "moved the needle" that much. U.S. popularity continues to be abysmal in the Middle East. In the process, the U.S. sounds more tone-deaf and incapable of self-criticism. This shouldn't be news to anyone following the public diplomacy debate.

While the U.S. cannot wage a War on Terror against an abstracted "terrorist" front (a frame that really only serves the interests of jihadists), the U.S. must also disaggregate its practice of public diplomacy. It must recognize the diversity of communication environments, which can provide the opportunity structures that allow "norm entrepreneurs" to sustain their framing of U.S. actions and hinder attempts at sincere dialogue. However, all of this discussion on how persuasion is mitigated by such systems begs a follow-up question: just what exactly should be the objectives for U.S. public diplomacy? Assuming the U.S. adopts a flexible public diplomacy strategy analogous to the insights drawn from counter-insurgency and information warfare, what can the U.S. reasonably expect from public diplomacy? I'll address that in my next post.
