

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jill A. Schuker*

# The Challenge of Public Diplomacy and the Role of Government <sup>[1]</sup>

Understanding and influencing public attitudes and those who shape them, beyond the traditional diplomacy of government-to-government contact, is the "work" of public diplomacy in our globalized world.

More than ever, almost daily improvements in communications technology and the ability to have a true transnational flow of ideas and information, has transformed the conduct of public diplomacy. It has made it both more important and more challenging for the successful formation and execution of foreign policies by governments and a range of multi-national authorities.

Conducting effective public diplomacy is a serious global security challenge. While the engagement of civil society, non-state actors, the private sector, and a range of non-governmental organizations and policy institutions are crucial to the effective operation of public diplomacy, it is, at core, a function and responsibility of government. Therefore, it must be supported by government in word and deed, with resources that enable public diplomacy to be taken seriously and viewed as essential to both the policy process and to the public interest. There must be a parallel recognition that its role is also separate and independent from specific policy advocacy, which differs in degree and kind from public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is integral, in fact, to achieving *both* "soft" and "hard" power objectives, providing both the essential underpinning for actions, and anticipating and explaining the *consequences* of actions.

Effective public diplomacy provides the groundwork necessary between state and society for the acceptance and legitimacy of a country's policy actions and outreach. Effective public diplomacy can make the crucial difference in the attraction, rejection and perception of how a country, its people and its policies can influence and alter others' attitudes and decisions. If mishandled, public diplomacy can morph disastrously into propaganda, dismissed at home, and open to ridicule around the globe.

While independent cultural exchanges such as the recent New York Philharmonic visit to North Korea, private sector training, educational and scientific exchanges and civil society initiatives are crucial elements of public diplomacy, they do not replace the moral authority, *public* responsibility and values represented by government which sets the tone and atmospherics for the conduct of public diplomacy. It is important to recognize as well that these other public diplomacy actors understandably have more discrete agendas, financial interests and even conflicting priorities as opposed to government's public mandate.

More attention and innovative thinking need to be given to forming domestic and international partnerships and alliances so that public diplomacy will be encouraged, supported and

extended in ways that government itself cannot accomplish, but government can neither abdicate nor neglect its essential role in making public diplomacy a centerpiece of its responsibility. It also must be cognizant of how global public diplomacy is being conducted and viewed by other states, and meet the challenges and opportunities this represents.

The United States itself in this last decade, presents a cautionary tale about the integral and delicate relationship of government to public diplomacy, at home and abroad. Already, plummeting public perceptions of the U.S. over the last decade according to reliable polls have put global engagement on the front burner in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. How to "reintroduce" U.S. moral authority, credibility and global engagement and who is best to do so are key issues in the intense contest for the White House and will be a major global challenge for the next President. This includes both the conduct and the structure of public diplomacy and its role in shaping policy.

Under the current Bush presidency, public diplomacy became largely uni-dimensional, first as a by-product of the 9/11 attacks and then as a handmaiden to Iraq war policy. This has created a flawed and crippled public diplomacy and led to lost credibility and tentative public support both stateside and abroad. Effective dialogue, openness, and engagement at all levels have been missing and U.S. public diplomacy has suffered the consequences.

Yet, there are some unexpected and interesting examples of effective public diplomacy in heretofore unlikely places. Qatar, for example, in addition to Emir al-Thani's launch of the highly influential Al Jazeera satellite television network globally, has made educational exchanges and "foreign branch campuses" a priority. At Education City in Doha, Qatar's capital, one can study medicine at a branch of Cornell University, international affairs offered by Georgetown University, computer science and business by Carnegie Mellon, fine arts by Virginia Commonwealth, Engineering by Texas A&M, and soon journalism by Northwestern University.

Government as the tone-setter for energetic and successful public diplomacy remains the *sine qua non*. This is where responsible global public diplomacy realistically must start. It must be integral at the "take-off" of decision-making and at the "landing" and it must be credible, encouraging both listening and dialogue. Without these elements, effective public diplomacy is doomed to fragment and fail.

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