

Nov 04, 2016 by [Ali Fisher](#)

# The Spectrum of Spectrums: A Review of the International Relations Positioning Spectrum <sup>[1]</sup>

John Worne's International Relations Positioning Spectrum (IRPS), and Nick Cull's response provide interesting perspectives on the Cultural Relations / Public Diplomacy 'divide' and how work in the field is to be articulated. The IRPS appears a useful tool at the national level to help mediate in interdepartmental turf wars. However, the IRPS contains national peculiarities, specifically the difficulty the British Council faces in articulating its position, making it unlikely to become transferable internationally. This is best divided into two sections, first discussing the spectrum itself and second how this reflects the difficulty of articulating the position of the British Council.

## **The IRPS**

The spectrum between aid and power, as Nick Cull has already commented is very closely analogous to the carrot and stick metaphor. This effectively means that the business of influence is something that is done to other people. It remains in the 'power over' school of thought, leaving little room for empowerment; providing the means through which others have the 'power to'. As the British Council has been heavily engaged in education, along with providing assistance to non-violent elements of the anti-apartheid movement, it would be odd if the spectrum lacked elements which could be considered empowerment.

Mutuality, listening, and facilitation do appear on the IRPS, but in the middle. Conceptually this means that the process of exchange is placed between being the recipient of messages and the recipient of financial aid. While this means engagement is observed, the emphasis is clearly placed on different methods of projection.

As Nick Cull commented a more appropriate spectrum would run:

Listening - facilitation - exchange - cultural diplomacy - broadcasting – advocacy.

This spectrum frames the relationship with foreign publics from at one extreme an emphasis on projection to, at the other extreme, an emphasis on reception. Genuine exchange, reciprocity and mutuality logically sit at the midpoint between listening and telling 📄. Other variations in emphasis can then exist in relation to these points.

Fundamentally this approach drives at expanding the thinking about Public Diplomacy beyond telling the 'other' what they should be doing (or advocating a particular policy). It argues for a consideration of a full range of options; this has the potential to create engagement that empowers both sides to find new approaches to the challenges that face them, while maintaining the recognition that in some situations projection / advocacy is the required

response.


The IRPS engages with many of these points but in a way that buries the relationship with the 'other' and gives primacy to considering the actions of the producer. This creates a centralised approach in which the Public Diplomacy actor decides what will happen and only then engages with the outside world. This is reminiscent of Eric Raymond's 'Cathedral.' I've discussed elsewhere the importance of the alternative open-source approach and the value of considering dispersed networks, but suffice it to write here, the future of Public Diplomacy will be in considering all the approaches, and selecting the appropriate option for the given context rather than creating a bias toward projection before analysing the environment.

The IRPS effectively swamps the value of the work the British Council (particularly empowerment) in the middle of the various methods of projection pursued by UK government departments. It puts the relationship with government ahead of the clear articulation of purpose.

### **Articulating the British Council position**



This leads to the second problem; that of drawing attention to the difficulty the British Council has in articulating its position in relation to the UK government. Many of these points have already been raised by Nick Cull's response to the IRPS.

There are perhaps three positions here:

Position 1, Cultural Relations is independent from government; in discussing mutuality , Martin Rose and Nick Wadham-Smith draw that distinction between Cultural Relations and Public Diplomacy. They argue Public Diplomacy, "is the direct contact of governments with other peoples", "is an explicitly governmental activity" and "when the British Council does public diplomacy, it is acting as an agent of government". In contrast they argue "It is useful to reserve the term 'cultural relations' for (a) non-governmental voice". This explicitly makes Public Diplomacy government to people communication and Cultural Relations a non-governmental activity.

Position 2, Cultural Relations is part of Public Diplomacy; as highlighted by Nick Cull this is the position of the Wilton Review, (Annex A of the Carter Report) that "The British Council work on the basis that all of its activity falls under the heading of cultural relations and is therefore a part of public diplomacy". I'm yet to see an unequivocal public statement that explicitly changes this position.

In 2005 this position was reiterated when then-Director General, David Green, argued in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select committee; "We work to FCO strategic priorities because the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is our sponsoring department".

The 2007 UK Government spending review  announced that the money granted to the British Council, "will enable them to continue their vital public diplomacy work ". The money received as a grant in aid from the UK government as a result of the spending review is over £180 million, today's exchange rate puts that at over \$334 million (US).

So for those that say the British Council doesn't do Public Diplomacy, or variations of this argument including Public Diplomacy is government, Cultural Relations is independent and the British Council is independent, all I ask is that we have our annual payment of £180 million

back, as the public documents from the Spending Review identify that public money as being granted for Public Diplomacy.

Position 3, presented in the IRPS, is that Cultural Relations and Public Diplomacy overlap. This is a compromise intended to combine the desire to maintain an image of independence from government while keeping the funding and privileges. The structure of the IRPS means that this compromise is buried in the middle of the work of other UK Government Departments, with Ministry of Defence (MOD), Department for International Development (DFID) and FCO enveloping the 'non-public diplomacy' element of the British Council.

To be fair, as an internal articulation of the way Whitehall departments relate to each other, and the British Council's contribution to that activity, the IRPS sorts out the melee of competing departmental interests in a way that can make sense within the process of government. Through the IRPS, points of overlap can be identified and the way different departmental roles relate to each other can be established; in doing so it brings some much needed clarity to the process.

Difficulty, however, still exists around the Cultural Relations / Public Diplomacy overlap. Can a government / non-government divide between Public Diplomacy and Cultural Relations be pursued by a single organisation? An organisation with employees that hold Diplomatic status and access to the civil service pension scheme? In effect, if the conceptual divide were accepted, how would the divide / compromise work in practise?

If you were to write to the British Council in the US you would use the British Embassy address, were you to talk to the British Council Director in Canada, you'd be talking to the Cultural Counsellor of the British High Commission. You could go to two events on the same day, in one the British Council would be acting as a government agent, the next it would be non-governmental, while potentially holding both events within an Embassy or High Commission.

How does an organisation temporarily undo the status, privilege, and funding (including position in an Embassy / High Commission) that come from the government grant-in-aid for Public Diplomacy? Can it be turned off while cultural relations work is conducted, only to be reactivated when the work falls back inside the overlap? I suggest this is implausible and the reason for the longevity of the discussion about whether others understand the position of the British Council.

### **A Clearer Articulation?**

Using a spectrum that articulates the changing power relationship between the actor and foreign population, (listening to advocacy) would allow the British Council to define what it does in relation to the public with which it wants to engage, rather than in relation to Whitehall. In doing so it could make use of CPD's broader conception of Public Diplomacy "as it pertains to a wide range of institutions and governments around the globe". Nick Cull's suggested use of 'international actor 🧑', rather than government, in his definition provides further support for an approach that considers Public Diplomacy beyond the confines of national government.

Once the relationship with foreign publics have been defined, if others believe likewise and wish to contribute to achieving that goal (whether MOD, DFID, FCO, the EU, private philanthropic foundations or multinational companies) there's no shame in that. So long as your stated vision is clear, is one in which you believe and is based on your beliefs rather than

the potential to get funding, any relationship to government can be clearly articulated. Yes, it is in the national interest for strong links to exist between cultures; no, that doesn't mean policy advocacy must be part of it.

Back in 1936, the British Council argued "Modern defence consists not only in arms but in removing misunderstanding and promoting understanding". Perhaps today an alternative to 'modern defence' may be preferred. However, the interminable introspective debates about CR / PD division might be avoided if the relationship with the audience, rather than the relation with government were the focal point of discussion.

Publics can be credited with the ability to distinguish between an organisation that advocates specific government policies and one which organises exchanges or provides educational opportunities - if the organisation maintains that distinction clearly, articulates their rationale and doesn't take government privileges while expecting to be seen as independent. Without these things, the government / non-government distinction is almost impossible to pursue when real life demands that the different corporate functions are delivered by the same individuals and offices.

As a result the IRPS is a valuable tool for clarifying interdepartmental relationships in Whitehall, but is too deeply embedded in the specific UK context to have wider application. The process, however, of developing various national positioning spectrums could well be one which other organisations may wish to trial to clarify their own interdepartmental rivalries.

A final closing point - while in the UK there can be a suspicion of academics in 'ivory towers' and of practitioners doing their own thing largely isolated from wider understandings developed by practitioners and academic study elsewhere, it is great to see a senior practitioner from the UK engaging (in the spirit of the CPD blog) and better still, writing his own material!

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