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Soft Power and the Open-Source Ethics of Public Diplomacy 2.0 [1]

Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy James Glassman gave a comprehensive overview of his vision for the next phase of United States public diplomacy during his talk in early December at the New America Foundation. The subject of the talk was "Public Diplomacy 2.0", while host Steve Clemons of the Washington Note suggested "Facebook/Twitter diplomacy" as a more appropriate title.

Glassman provides some clear distinctions about how Public Diplomacy 2.0 is distinguished from previous efforts to provide a "strategy" of public diplomacy. Granted, some of his points have been made in prior engagements by Undersecretary Glassman, and in the rollout of such initiatives like "Briefing 2.0". Yet this speech articulates an obvious re-imagining of public diplomacy strategy – something akin to a policy compass that was hard to discern in the spate of whitepapers and reports on PD in the past seven years. The two developments appear to be:

1) New Goals for PD: the reduction of violent extremism by offering alternatives to terrorism for at-risk populations around the world; and,

2) New Priorities for PD Methods: the emphasis on providing public forums, and convening opportunities for citizens to connect and realize alternatives to extremism.

Glassman described PD 2.0 as a form of "indirection". It's not entirely surprising since the U.S. has suffered from a "toxic brand" for some time. If the "messenger" (the U.S. and its unpopular policies) speaks louder than the message (what the U.S. tries to elaborate in its advocacy), then U.S. PD is doomed to fall flat. In contrast, PD 2.0 provides a basis for programs that bring people together to talk, criticize, and debate. It proceeds from the tacit assumption that it is insufficient in this globally mediated environment, and more likely counter-productive for governments to directly speak to publics. Rather, PD 2.0 connects people to people.

So how does PD 2.0 meet the needs of the United States, let alone any nation-state? Ali Fisher lays out the case for an "open source" public diplomacy in his recent article in the *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* . Fisher acknowledges that the global communication infrastructure – the available information & communication technology and how it is used in daily life – is increasingly defined by participation in social networks. The clunky monologues of corporations and states are obviously not a product of the communities we participate in online – where the transparent nature of our connectivity and communicative contributions lend credibility. Fisher draws heavily on Eric Steven Raymond's The Cathedral and the Bazaar, a history of the rise of the open-source movement in the development of the Linux operating system, as an ideal model for public diplomacy approaches.

Fisher's argument is compelling. First, he rightly argues that large, pluralistic nation-states, like the United States, cannot hope to manage a unitary message in an complex global media environment. Second, he identifies the potential of an invitational approach to organizing public diplomacy – where multiple groups with "overlapping" agendas might contribute to rather than "receive" the objectives of a public diplomacy program. Governments must seek to "belong" to the communities defined by communication networks – rather than to address them as outsiders. He cites Trevor Giles-Scott:

> In place of futile attempts to control all information outlets and non-state actors, the aim has shifted more towards proposals 'to create image and value platforms' and 'network relationships' around which state and non-state actors can congregate and mobilize.

So what does this look like? Fisher is worth quoting at length:

> …the open-source approach to public diplomacy engages in collective effort among peers (both foreign and domestic), whether they are governments, NGO, commercial enterprises, or members of a blogroll or Facebook group. In doing so it may seek to aid groups that lobby a foreign government for a change in policy but may equally aim to achieve the beneficial outcome by changing the behaviour of the population, directly irrespective of government policy or direction.

The "Open Source" approach is not without some potential operational wrinkles. For example, Fisher suggests that one of the "open-source" –inspired strategies would be to work with "co-developers" in the communities that the U.S. may seek to engage. Even if the U.S. had no direct advocacy ambitions, the ability of the U.S. to provide opportunities to connect people might be compromised by latent suspicion of U.S. motives and the potential stigma of being associated with (or co-opted by) the United States. Obviously, this won't be true in all cases, and the recent Youth Summit in New York is a step towards illustrating the effectiveness of this "open source" approach.

Second, Fisher offers that people associate in online networks around areas of common interest and experience. If the United States representatives (trolls or otherwise) seek to participate and, indeed, inhabit these networks – what if the goals of the U.S. efforts are to explicitly redefine interest? The U.S. can provide forums for democracy and mobilization against extremism, but these forums do not necessarily, by themselves, change the local and immediate agendas of "target" populations. The U.S. can embolden existing networks that share goals and aspirations that the U.S. supports, but can it resist the imperatives to direct such online, virtual, or otherwise networked conversations? It would seem that for public diplomacy, the metaphor of *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* is not so simple; the U.S. seeks to promote certain conversations at the expense of others. Nevertheless, I think it's important to remember Fisher's point that an open-source public diplomacy is also about learning from the online environment – a level of attentiveness to the circuits of global communication and public argument about the United States.

So does open-source public diplomacy translate to a viable strategic template for PD 2.0? The logic of "indirection" that Glassman speaks of in PD 2.0 more accurately refers to an indirect causal process by which the U.S. government effects change through indirect means. The

change desired is a reduction in terrorism and violence. The indirect "means" is enabling publics to transform the environments at risk to the long-term goals of U.S. foreign policy. Yet this is a very roundabout way of assuming long-term effects, and it should not replace the wealth of what has "worked" before that can still be applied. As Mitchell Polman argued here in the CPD Blog, Let's Not Forget Public Diplomacy 1.0, there are many parts of the world that are not connected to the Internet, embedded in the circulation of global culture, or even literate. The past inheres in the way we communicate and deal with the technologies of communication. Books, radios, and television are still important.

Of course I don't think Glassman believes that PD 2.0 replaces the relevance of old media, just older conceptions of message management. But here is the real issue at stake: I think PD 2.0 "works" if we discard the previously anticipated gains of U.S. soft power through public diplomacy. Playing a diminished or even invisible role in enabling venues for international social action does little to obviously burnish the image of the United States. It is not a reparative attitude. It is not, I think, nation-branding through indirection. It is altering the strategic environment by proxy.

So where does an open-source PD leave soft power? Does the U.S., in the indeterminate future, gain some measure of soft power by playing host to proliferating networks of democratic, liberal opponents of what Glassman calls nihilistic "death cults"? If PD 2.0 is not about improving the image of the United States, then does it signal the abandonment of soft power as "image" and "attraction" ? In previous thinking, an improved image of the U.S. would, in some abstract fashion, lead to the growth of democratic institutions and regimes that are friendly to the U.S. The old view of image-management puts national strategic outcomes as second order effects of positive opinion about the U.S.

In some sense, PD 2.0 does help U.S. soft power by "modeling" democratic modes of communication and political discourse. And, perhaps by opening a space for criticism of the U.S., it may repair some of the U.S. credibility worn away by contradictory rhetoric and policies. I am less convinced, however, that PD 2.0's focus on network building translates readily into improved public opinion – there are simply too many leaps of faith to make in this formulation. This is not necessarily a damning critique, for as some have argued, PD is not a "popularity contest".

Both Glassman's PD 2.0 and "open-source" public diplomacy represent a rejection of monologic advocacy. They are neither necessarily covert nor disingenuous. Rather, it's a reflexive stance towards the fluid and pluralistic nature of opinion construction in global media. I think PD 2.0 acknowledges the practical and cultural dimensions of contemporary global media infrastructure, the prevalence of what we might call the "open source" ethic in how people live out their lives with media. Even more traditional social movements now utilize and, indeed, embody the pluralistic politics enabled by technologies of connectivity. As communication scholar, Manuel Castells has argued, "power" in this increasingly global social configuration lies in the gatekeepers (the network "switchers") and the content providers for these networks. PD 2.0 is a tentative intervention into gatekeeping, which requires a conscious disowning of the U.S. message. By providing the conduits for global conversation, perhaps the U.S. can acquire a kind of "network power." In the interim, at least PD 2.0 is firmly grounded in the goals of deterring violence through global dialogue. Perhaps it reflects the evolution of soft power to an as-yet-measured network power. Since the social and political impacts of social networks may be "emergent" and at some level indeterminate, I think PD 2.0 may be difficult to reconcile with an enduring U.S. desire for a predictable, measurable, and

effective investment in public diplomacy.