

Nov 04, 2016 by [Ernest James Wilson III](#)

Innovations in Global Public Diplomacy: The Implications for Foreign Policy and National Security ^[1]

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For those interested in the evolution of the practice and the profession of public diplomacy, we have arrived at an interesting moment in its history, a moment of innovation and adaptation. I wish to point to two trends in this global evolution, and then underscore several challenges they pose to the future of the field. One trend occurs at the global level, where several universal conditions are worth noting. The second trend is unfolding within the United States with the advent of the administration of President Barack Obama, which manifests some of the global trends but also presents unique elements worth noting.*

Global Trends in Public Diplomacy

The three trends I identify below are of relatively recent occurrence, and have not always been a part of the long history of the field. First, prime ministers, presidents and other high level government leaders across a wide variety of states increasingly have come to recognize that public diplomacy (PD) is a useful element of statecraft, along with traditional elements like war fighting, standard diplomacy or the exercise of economic leverage. No longer restricted to states like France or the Nordic nations in the global North, senior government officials around the world believe that they can advance their national interests through the judicious use of PD.

Second, over the past several years many governments' leaders have actually acted on this recognition by allocating money and manpower to design, organize and implement PD. They have created new directorates within their ministries of foreign affairs as well as entirely new free standing agencies, staffing them with senior officials and allocating government funds to support them.

For example, in June I met with a senior government official in India whose public diplomacy department has a fascinating portfolio that includes informing domestic audiences of the importance of India's international PD, reaching out to its increasingly powerful diaspora, and using its popular film culture to leverage national interests. Similar departments have been

created in Canada, Germany and other nations. The MPD program at USC Annenberg is attracting a growing number of students from around the world, including mid-career professionals, who come seeking the most relevant individual skills and the 'best practices' for their organizations back home. Canada and Germany have created and funded separate units for PD, as have Mexico and Brazil. The People's Republic of China is also beefing up the organizational and budgetary capacities of its PD agencies. USC Annenberg has been invited by several states in the Gulf to offer customized courses on strategic communications and public diplomacy.

Third, a wide variety of non-governmental interest groups are learning the language of "public diplomacy". Business associations, civic groups and human rights movements are increasingly incorporating PD language and tactics into their relations with like-minded groups around the world (this is also true for public units below the national levels, as cities and states vie for greater visibility and appeal in a globalizing world.) Non-governmental groups are also using the language of PD to try to influence their own governments to pursue policies in the international arena that support their own values and views of what is important.

PD Trends in the Obama Administration

Some of these same trends are visible in Washington, but to varying degrees and influenced by other trends that are unique to a superpower and unique to American culture. For example, one can see the global trend toward more dialogue with civil society groups in Obama's greater reliance on two-way conversation with non-governmental organizations (and with governments) than in the preceding administration of George W. Bush. President Obama's speech to the Muslim world delivered in Cairo is one example.

This administration's visible movement toward greater diplomacy, whether public or private, is running into the imperatives and expectations of a dominant super power which possesses unparalleled military and intelligence assets. From the Middle East to Europe, from trade to terrorism, the still-young administration is trying to calibrate its use of military power and diplomacy, its balance of hard power and soft. The current Secretary of State and her immediate team are on record in favor of reaching beyond traditional government parameters to engage women's organizations and local self-help bodies, and her senior policy advisor in the Policy Planning office (Anne-Marie Slaughter) has written persuasively in *Foreign Affairs* and other outlets about the need to engage all segments of society in a 'global network' of mutually beneficial ties in order to modernize foreign policy – not just governments, but companies, NGOs and knowledge centers. But for some problems like terrorism, and some nations like Afghanistan and Pakistan, PD's appeal and utility is limited.

But most importantly, and most obviously, America's reliance on more public diplomacy has an obvious asset in the person of President Obama. As the first American president with the heritage of rising from a despised minority, he has judiciously but consistently called on his minority status – and his experience living abroad in a Muslim society – as an important basis for his global appeal to people in other socially-difficult conditions around the world, going over the heads of their governments to claim unique understanding and sympathy for the excluded and the impoverished. Translating this personal charisma into sustainable policies and organizational reforms will be more challenging, which leads me to the final section on the remaining challenges confronting all those who are interested in institutionalizing and

expanding the reach and impact of public diplomacy.

Remaining Global Challenges in the Design and Conduct of Public Diplomacy

Despite the impressive spread of public diplomacy as an important instrument to achieve one's international purposes, critical challenges remain. Let me identify challenges which are internal to PD, external, technological and political.

Internal challenges. Within the domain of public diplomacy, how should governments (and significant NGOs) combine the multiple constituent elements of PD into one organic whole so they are mutually reinforcing and not pulling in different directions toward chaos and failure? (cf Nicholas J. Cull on this issue) PD consists of the pursuit of quite distinct purposes that employ quite different instruments. International broadcasting, citizen exchanges, cultural diplomacy and policy promotion are used to achieve different goals, and governments confuse them at the risk of weakening the impact of all. The daily briefing from the president's office, and the attendant 'strategic communication' message imposed across all government agencies should not try to achieve purposes of exchanges which take a generation to bear fruit.

External challenges. How should government leaders find the correct balance between its soft power instruments of conversation and persuasion on the one hand, and the hard power instruments of armies and coercion on the other? All governments by definition have armies and police forces, and they sometimes use threats and coercion to achieve their international purposes. What individuals in a country, and what institutions, have the breadth of understanding necessary to design 'smart power' through the integration of the ingredients of 'hard power' and 'soft power'? Public diplomacy and soft power are not ends in themselves; they should be seen as ingredients of 'smart power.'

Technological challenges. What is one to make of the new communications and information technologies like the Internet and its equally-radical modern updates, known as social media? NGOs from health organizations to terrorist cells are better at deploying these assets than governments, and these technological changes have proved profoundly disruptive to government's plans to conduct 'public diplomacy'. The tension between access and control has proved unsettling, and will remain so for some time.

Political challenges – who really cares about public diplomacy? In a world where other instruments of state power have influential lobbies, who stands up for PD? International trade has its powerful trade associations and lobbyists. The military establishment is powerful everywhere, whether current and retired generals or arms makers and sellers. Will domestic coalitions emerge that learn to press government consistently and insistently to do more PD? And how will governments respond – by heeding calls for more PD from civil society groups, or will they try to co-opt or crush them? Do NGOs run the risk of becoming mere tools of state power? Will government PD agencies become the captive of the loudest PD advocate?

These challenges are not open to easy or immediate resolution. But for those who care about the long term health of global international affairs, they do constitute the next steps in enhancing the design and implementation of global and national public diplomacy. Meeting these four challenges requires hard work, immediately, to start reforming the institutions and

training the PD experts of tomorrow. Creating the public diplomacy field of the future is an important task for all of us.

*These observations flow from my work as a member of the team at the Center on Public Diplomacy and a lecturer in the Master of Public Diplomacy degree program at the University of Southern California, and recent conversations in India, China, Taiwan. I also served on the Presidential Transition Team of President Obama, with responsibilities in the area of public diplomacy.
