

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

Networks, Theory, and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Is it time to revisit the “theory question” in public diplomacy studies? There is much to be said about how the art of actually doing public diplomacy reflects a complex array of skills, experience, and personality. Understanding what goes into the practice of public diplomacy is an essential question for those preparing for a career in the public diplomacy sections of the State Department or other foreign ministries, as well as institutions that aspire to educate individuals for this kind of career. As others have said, a career in public diplomacy requires skills and characteristics that aren’t always easily distilled into curricula. Public diplomats require media relations skills, speaking skills, cross-cultural communication skills, web-related skills, and very often, “local” expertise that transcends both political and cultural knowledge.

Is there any room for theoretical innovation? From a disciplinary perspective, the practical arts of public diplomacy reflect a convergence of public relations, international relations/political science, and various aspects of communication studies. Each of these fields has their respective theoretical foundations and practical applications – so it’s hard to cobble these together into an aggregate “theory of public diplomacy” that can provide a ready compass for the public diplomacy practitioner. Theory serves practitioners, but realistically most of the theories from these aforementioned fields (from media framing to ethnographic concepts of culture) are just borrowed concepts for the PD practitioner. That doesn’t make them less insightful or applicable – but from an academic perspective, is there even a need for a distinct theory of public diplomacy?

At this moment, I would argue that any theory of public diplomacy would likely be most useful as a strategic orientation, from which can be derived a set of tactical programs and initiatives for a comprehensive public diplomacy repertoire. The moment for theory is fast approaching, because the domain of public diplomacy (the public management of relationships through engagement/influence) is rapidly becoming a shared burden with traditional concepts of diplomacy. As diplomacy itself gets retooled for the 21st century, public diplomacy may very well get woven into newer theories of diplomacy.

In his “Diplomatic Theory of International Relations,” diplomacy studies scholar Paul Sharp has put forth a masterful work on how international relations can be better understood through the lens of diplomacy. When problems and crises involving U.S. foreign policy are often reported as “failures of diplomacy” – Sharp argues that it’s important to turn serious attention to how we use diplomacy to achieve and sustain foreign policy goals. In the bigger picture, diplomacy helps to manage whatever assemblage of state and non-state actors that currently defines the “system” of an international/global politics, so we should derive more meaningful insight from its practical and normative implications.

Diplomacy isn’t a garbage can for scapegoating failed strategic plans; rather, it’s an institutional practice that can guide how we formulate larger conceptions of international relations. Sharp’s book takes the sociological implications of the “English School” of International Relations and puts it to work: by showing us that diplomacy can be more than

just the messy space of “practitioners,” but a real site of theoretical understanding for how the global politics get done, that can also serve as a normative template for how we can manage complex interdependencies and relationships.

Secretary of State Clinton spoke recently about using diplomacy to facilitate a new “architecture of cooperation” – a key framework for U.S. foreign policy, and indeed an objective in itself. If this vision is actualized by realignments in US diplomatic institutions - if the U.S. carries out the implications of such an “architecture” - it would signify a serious restatement of diplomacy, as well as an explicit necessity for public diplomacy in the mechanisms of U.S. foreign policy. Diplomatic institutions would become both a functional and normative resource for U.S. foreign policy.

Sharp’s work is likely a needed reference for practitioners and theorists alike. But perhaps even more timely and immediately practical for public diplomacy is Robin Brown’s recent essay presented at the 2010 International Studies Association convention. Brown’s essay “Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy and Social Networks” is a theory-inspired statement about public diplomacy that is long overdue – one which brings together a lot of recommendations that have surfaced over the past few years into a concise argument about the relevance of social networks for PD. Brown suggests we step beyond the easy invocations of “networks” when we talk about public diplomacy and look to social network analysis as a way to understand and theorize about public diplomacy.

For Brown, public diplomacy planning could be better served by a social network approach. We need to pay attention to the structural consequences of relationships that can constrain or enable action: both for planning agencies and their antagonists. The relationships embodied in social networks are a useful resource in that they reveal social knowledge as much as routes to influence. Here’s a list compiled from parts of Brown’s essay:

- Social networks tell us about what people know;
- Such patterns tell us a lot about shared characteristics, values, information, and priorities;
- The structure of relationships reveal opportunities for influence and indeed, vulnerability.

These ideas aren’t new to network scholars, but they are relatively new as a systematic approach to diplomacy. Brown argues that a social network approach, that is, taking seriously core concepts from social network analysis, can provide a good strategic template for diplomatic practice. In particular, the “practice of diplomatic representation” (the work of embassies), the “practice of coalition building,” the “practice of exchanges,” and international broadcasting.”

Taking networks seriously means using ideas and concepts from social network analysis to conceptualize the ways in which international actors relate, influence each other, and how their relational structures reflect characteristics of actors across various and overlapping global networks. It does not mean justification for the latest networking technology – though using such technology may very well be necessary.

Taking social networks seriously also means a more systematic view of the world, and may also provide more concrete objectives: networks provide ways to more clearly conceive of objectives and thus, ways to measure effectiveness in public diplomacy programs. Experts like Ali Fisher have been saying this for some time – we need to clearly articulate what we want to accomplish, rather than carry forward vague notions of engagement without strong sense of the objective. We can start by actually paying attention to the networks we participate in

as part of public diplomacy.

I don't think that diplomatic practitioners are unaware of the insights of network theory – rather I think that such insights are rarely integrated in a systematic way to guide policy and practice. Network theory provides a lens to see the world for diplomatic practitioners. A social network approach provides a ready, tested, and relatively clear set of terms and ideas through which to manage global relationships.

Others have pointed the way for network-centric approaches to public diplomacy (for example, see the work of [Steven Corman and his research associates](#)), but I think the implications of Brown's essay are even more provocative. The public diplomacy "community" of practitioners and commentators is well aware of concepts like "credibility," "attention," and "connection." In the case of the United States, these are often frustratingly hard to match with appropriate programs or interventions. Brown's piece explicitly argues that foreign ministries (the State Department or otherwise) can't approach such terms separately as particular aspects of diplomacy or public diplomacy. Such terms are more readily understood as functions of the network relationships that define the "audience" for diplomatic intervention. When we define the diplomatic traditions of relationship management as acting upon, through, or with knowledge of social networks, the fundamental nature of diplomacy changes.

This change also signals a gradual convergence of diplomacy with public diplomacy - something that was initially predicted around the time the USIA was [folded into the State Department over 10 years ago](#). The practical difference between diplomacy and public diplomacy in Brown's view boils down to which social networks are being used or accessed. Brown's conceptual move also tightly binds public diplomacy into the social fabric of communication – the communication infrastructure of shared stories, outlets, and connections that serve as a context to diplomatic and future public diplomacy programs. We can't perceive public diplomacy as a wholly separate activity from diplomacy. Just because public diplomacy doesn't have [an office on the seventh floor of the State Department](#), doesn't mean it's somehow operating in its own universe of international relations.

Simply put, diplomatic activity is embedded in multiple layers of social networks. These can be studied, mapped, adapted to and otherwise exploited. A social network approach distills some of the conceptual clutter raised by the many challenges to traditional and public diplomacy in the 21st century (and the breakdown of familiar analogies that we use to make sense of foreign policy) into actionable units for diplomatic strategy. Yet I don't think this is a simple policy heuristic – nor do I think that a social network approach "solves" all the problems that foreign policy attempts to address.

Social networks reveal structural routes to influence, but the **specifics** still need to be hammered out – what messages, symbols, actions constitute the appropriate actions for a particular aspect of the network. Diplomats thus need both the social scientific insights of its networked stakeholders, as much as a humanistic understanding of the particular and the local – a rhetoric of networks to fulfill the expected, structural routes of influence. For example, [Marc Sageman's arguments](#) about Al-Qaeda's new "blob"-like structure means there are limits to networks as an encompassing optic for diplomacy and foreign policy. But a theoretical understanding of public diplomacy needs to start somewhere.

Brown's call for a social network approach is also a call that has serious real-world implications. It's a case where theory would drive policy in a transparent way. Obviously, the convergence of PD and diplomacy isn't going to happen overnight, no matter what kind of

theoretical framework is developed to comprehend 21st century diplomacy and public diplomacy. The boundaries are reinforced by considerable inertia in diplomatic institutions, yet the immanent necessity of attention to networks as the site of diplomatic activity may inevitably force transformation, and ideally inspire further conceptual and scholarly labor in the field of public diplomacy.
