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This Isn't Your Parents' Cultural Diplomacy

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APDS Blogger: [Tala Mohebi](#)

It used to be that the U.S. Department of State could simply dispatch Dizzy Gillespie to play overseas, and Cold War divisions would be gently eased. In 1956, such simple offerings allowed foreign publics to find new ways to relate to Americans and their musical ingenuity. Similarly, [the Ping Pong diplomats](#) of the 1970's that took sports culture and broke down hardened barriers of entry into China proved to be a great and often cited success of cultural diplomacy functioning for policy. While these traditional types of exchange continue to supplement state-to-state diplomatic relations, communicating with foreign publics needs to adapt to the ever-changing communications landscape.

The end of the Cold War signaled many changes in the offices charged with conducting public and cultural diplomacy. Significantly, the budgets set aside for cultural programs have tended to decline while the demands of engaging broader (including more age-diverse) publics have continued to increase. This paradox has been especially apparent in light of the haphazard and compulsive cultural programs put forward by the United States. Alternatively, many countries have used the post 9/11 period to pursue innovative programs working with new technologies and communication networks.

As an example, the Nigerian film industry, known as "Nollywood," has come to play a significant role in representing the country both regionally and internationally. Nollywood came to prominence in the early 1990's and has since become the second largest movie industry in terms of annual production, overtaking Hollywood in the process. The types of films produced vary in their genres and stories, but one significant advantage of creating over 1,000 movies annually is the ability to represent stories from this African country from the viewpoint of its inhabitants. No longer is the image of Africa solely shown through the lens of Western media. Changing the storyteller's perspective has broadened and balanced the realities of life in Africa.

Recognizing this opportunity, the Minister of Information and Communication of Nigeria [enlisted Nollywood in 2009](#) to serve as part of its rebranding project. Using film as a central part of this initiative, the Nigerian government hopes to distinguish its country and reveal the cultural assets it can offer. Nollywood films are available in remote areas of Africa and to American viewers through Internet and satellite connections. The opportunities for rebranding Nigeria's image and opening space for dialogue about the art coming from Africa are precisely what makes Nollywood a prime example of a new wave of cultural diplomacy.

While Nigeria directly reached out to its Nollywood community for assistance with public diplomacy programs, other countries have begun to recognize the power of their cultural assets. Japan has recently begun to harness the vast amount of interest and excitement generated by its manga (comics) and anime (animated film) arts. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has recently tapped into this wealth of curiosity to incorporate its

public diplomacy messages into the dissemination of these art forms. Initiatives have been launched to promote Japanese language studies as well as travel and tourism to Japan through various expos and other pop-culture events.

Additionally MOFA has made direct use of these cultural assets by appointing, for example, an anime Ambassador who has hosted nearly 120 screenings of anime movies in over 60 cities around the world. These programs are not intended to replace other, more traditionally focused elements of public diplomacy, but the openness to engaging with younger generations interested in this aspect of Japanese culture points to the adaptability and potential for furthering Japanese cultural diplomacy programs.

Present day cultural diplomacy bears the characteristic mark of being influenced by ever-greater and more physically distant individuals connecting through new forms of communications technologies. The Internet and tools of social networking create real-time dialogue that relays messages and responses in addition to channeling visual and audio materials that previously would have been filtered through television or radio outlets to determine if they would ever be made available to the public. In the new communication landscape, as the amount of cultural content available broadens its content becomes more diverse.

Cultural diplomats may raise eyebrows about the particular arts and content being used today. But as always, the subjective nature of culture leaves endless room to debate each item a country presents as representative of its nation's offerings. The value of a cultural diplomacy program can only be gauged by its ability to engage with foreign audiences and adapt to their means of communicating in meaningful ways. Nigeria and Japan, two of many countries that can be selected for their innovative programs, have proven yet again that the role of culture in public dialogue cannot be overvalued. Promoting understanding through the sharing of cultural programs continues to be a vital element in the promotion of a state's interests no matter how different the content may look over the years.

Tala Mohebi is a graduate student in the Masters of Public Diplomacy program at the University of Southern California. She is Editor-in-Chief of PD Magazine, a bi-annual publication that brings together works from scholars and practitioners in the field of public diplomacy.
