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Entering the Network Phase in Public Diplomacy [1]

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We have been on the cusp of the network phase in Public Diplomacy for some time now, but as yet we have not fully crossed the threshold and adopted the operating model of a network based approach.

John Arquilla's recent article in Foreign Policy outlines the impact the changing operational environment is having on US military operations:

> Networked organizations like al Qaeda have proven how easy it is to dodge such heavy punches and persist to land sharp counterblows... But the principles of networking don't have to help only the bad guys. If fully embraced, they can lead to a new kind of military -- and even a new kind of war.

Something similar is true for Public Diplomacy, as Hillary Clinton noted in her Remarks on Internet Freedom. "The spread of information networks is forming a new nervous system for our planet".

To meet the challenges of today, Judith McHale has proposed a "complex, multi-dimensional approach to public diplomacy   ". States can no longer act in military isolation as Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the USA, argued; "we will have to use diplomacy, because no one nation can meet the challenges of an interconnected world acting alone".

Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister has noted the same trend:

> "Today, we should practice multi-vector network diplomacy conducive to flexible cooperation among groups of states for the sake of harmonizing identical interests. Today, we are not engaged — or, at least, should not be engaged — in the struggle against any state or in the containment policy. Time has come to apply collective efforts to promote concrete interests of the international community as a whole or of groups of states."

However, while many significant voices speak of a need for new means of multi-faceted interaction with the increasing number of actors going beyond government and involving both civil society and citizens of those countries where influence is sought, most state actors find it difficult to make the shift to a new operational model. Government agencies favour a mode of transmitting rather than receiving in relating to both domestic and international audiences and they retain a touching belief that ever more information leads to ever better understanding. More information may create knowledge if anyone is interested and it is communicated effectively; insight is more elusive, but not so hard to find as wisdom.

The command and control structures of state actors in budgeting and decision-making, which are essential for traditional public legitimacy, are ill-suited to an evanescent virtual world requiring quick, flexible responses. Even more fundamentally, the people working in traditional state organisations are, for the most part, at a loss in the network world, not least because they are too old to have grown up in this world. Adaptation to the world of networks – with the professional race three quarters run and the finishing line in sight - is much harder than total immersion from childhood. A few token references to Facebook in a speech delivered face to face simply demonstrates the inadequately masked confusion of most senior government people. After all, most of them scarcely go near a computer. They have other people to do that for them and anyway, they are too busy going to wall-to-wall meetings. The culture change required is extreme and implausible.

In the network phase of Public Diplomacy an organisation seeking diplomatic outcomes (whichever whatever sector they emanated from) would move from holding events, having contacts and organising exchanges to bringing all the people involved in those events and exchanges into a global network. This is not a server-busting and time consuming many-to-many, where all-channel approaches even in relatively small networks become hopelessly inefficient unless each participant has perfect knowledge of the network. Instead this will mean developing an understanding of coordination effects which influence the way they define their interests, the forms of media through which they choose to communicate, and the way they interact within each method of communication.
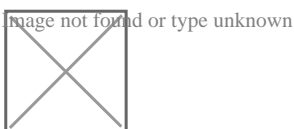
With an understanding of the numerous available networks comes the potential for someone who works in public diplomacy, or who is in contact with a PD organisation, to know or know how to reach every great young artist in the world, every great scientist, political leader, every great philosopher, religious leader, civil society activist, educator, social or creative entrepreneur and many more besides. It might even be the case that through all their contacts an organisation could reach all the interesting people in the world; not just the powerful people, but all the interesting people.

Imagine the impact if we could bring our knowledge of all those people together in one place as well as bringing all those people together in one virtual space. We could work with those people to make an ever-changing map of how the world thinks, who knows who in the world, what's on the mind of the brightest and best – and what is their call to action on the great issues of our time – on climate change; on culture and creativity; on the future of cities; on human rights; on global poverty; on understanding between religious believers and the secular-minded; on inter-generational understanding; on the social impact of new technology; on the future of education - on all the issues we care passionately about. Not every problem

has a solution, but every concern is susceptible to collaborative action, and that such action must have a greater capacity for doing good when able to across borders and cultures.
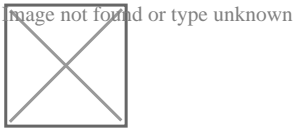
This network could be like a vast, transparent net of knowledge and information stretched across the shifting, contemporary world. The people in it could come together in an almost infinite number of different combinations, for an infinite number of reasons – all of them measurable in involvement and impact. The opportunity is to be the facilitator of those meeting points. The participants from all these different backgrounds could be the agents of change, the new network diplomats, on the great issues of our day as they themselves defined them. We would have moved from a diplomatic world where states seek to convince their own people and other governments of their view of the urgent priorities and what should be done about them to a world in which thinking, doing people from all walks of life could define the agenda and act on it collaboratively.

Our operating model will have to be turned upside down – the people outside the organisation would be the agents of change, not the beneficiaries of change. We would no longer have audiences or customers, but collaborators and network members instead. We would not be the suppliers of knowledge and content, but the receivers and distributors. Our staff would become network facilitators and mapmakers, not teachers and managers.

This is the vision for a new network phase in public diplomacy. In parts it is already happening, but the organisational shifts take time and there is still much we need to learn about it.

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