

Nov 04, 2016 by **APDS Bloggers**

# Discussing the Future of Public Diplomacy

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**APDS Blogger:** Aparajitha Vadlamannati

At USC on April 6, the Association of Public Diplomacy Scholars held a conference on the Future of Public Diplomacy. Experts, academics, and practitioners gathered to discuss what lies ahead for the field of public diplomacy. There were a couple of major takeaways from the conference.

First, new technology, with its power to create networks, has also enabled individuals to gravitate to others with similar beliefs, creating “silos” of people sheltering themselves from cross-cultural, collaborative dialogue. The creation of these “silos” has made the task of bridging gaps and creating new conversations more difficult. Consequently, public diplomats must work harder to converse. Second, public diplomacy must foster intelligent dialogue, not just engagement, between a multitude of emerging actors. If public diplomacy utilizes listening, then the next step is to take the information and cultivate focused and constructive policy change.

The great benefit and challenge of public diplomacy is its ability to create dialogue between analogous and contradictory groups. Due to the development of new technology and networking, this dialogue is more easily facilitated. However, the multitude of voices present due to this development makes dialogue difficult. Additionally, search engines like Google present people with the most popular information, not necessarily the most accurate.

The keynote speaker for the conference, Ben Hammersley is the United Kingdom Prime Minister's Ambassador to East London Tech City. The room was abuzz when he remarked, “Your foreign policy is whatever Google says it is.”

Taking Hammersley's point into account, PD practitioners must work even harder to ensure their messages are crafted precisely through careful listening.

To facilitate the creation of these messages, several techniques have been developed to track and capture authentic voices as demonstrated by Dr. Taha Kass-Hout of the U.S. Center for Disease Control, Beth Haber of Lieberman Research Worldwide, and Anoush Rima Tatevossian of UN Global Pulse.

The dashboards and evaluative processes the panelists utilize daily track everything from correlating symptom searches on Google with the next flu pandemic to market research answering the fundamental question of “so what?” – why should we listen and what do we gain. If public diplomats get better at listening, they can tailor thought provoking messages which encourage informed dialogue about policy issues. Dr. Nicholas Cull's opening address at the conference reinforced the importance of adapting new tools for listening because according to him “public diplomacy of the future is about connecting.”

Connecting is a complicated process that is easier said than done. Elizabeth Linder of Facebook pointed out that every organization varies in who they determine to be their audience and how they connect with them. However, she also emphasized that it is crucial for actors to avoid the pitfall of having an online presence with no purpose. A purposeful online presence includes having a meaningful dialogue or conversation with an audience. Furthermore, Geoff Anisman of the Bureau of International Information Programs at the U.S. State Department agreed and said, “technology must be used as an amplifier” of policy and vital messaging.

Traditionally underrepresented actors are now taking the idea of amplification further through both new technology and traditional public diplomacy campaigns. Ellen Huijgh, researcher at Carleton University, shared her study of how “public diplomacy [today] gives power to those with traditionally little power.” Through purposeful and directed communication sub-state actors, such as Quebec in Canada and Catalonia in Spain, are getting creative by identifying engagement strategies utilizing key partnerships for maximum impact. These sub-state actors are also conducting public diplomacy to ensure their policy positions are being heard.

The final panel, which was exceptionally multicultural, was composed of traditional actors in public diplomacy discussing their activities. Brazilian cultural attaché Sergio Mielnicko talked about hosting a radio show to connect with listenership interested in Brazil. Chinese cultural attaché Zhaohe Che highlighted finding commonalities to create connections. Finally, Vera Mejojlic, founding Director of the South East European Film Festival, showed the importance of building a strong festival with the buy-in of large sponsors to reach as many people as possible for cross-cultural dialogue.

We may not have prognosticated the prospects of public diplomacy, however, we certainly have an idea. The future of public diplomacy will be about the following:

- Being in on the first wave of new technology and communication
- Experimenting with multiple communication techniques to grab attention
- Messaging more intelligently and tailoring it to niche audiences because the global public is smart and proficient in online communication
- Breaking the “silos” to foster cross-group dialogue that can influence policy

There is certainly a vivid future for public diplomacy and as a public diplomat in training, I am excited to be a part of it.

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