Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by Robert Albro

Cultural Engagement as Glocal Diplomacy [1]

If we do not highlight it often enough, cultural diplomacy promotes the creation of transnational social spaces of engagement and interaction. And, even as they are often identified with particular cultures or countries, cultural diplomatic interventions are also unavoidably cosmopolitan in nature, insofar as they move between, confront, and conjoin multiple social worlds. In this way and even when carried away by the worst excesses of national chauvinisms, cultural diplomacy is inherently a transnationalist project of sorts. How does the work of cultural diplomacy account for its perpetual context of "transit"?

But nor do events and expressions of cultural diplomacy occur in an internationalist ether so much as in specific places and informed by particular historical conditions of possibility. This specificity includes the ways that "global" concepts and practice engage "local" ones or the ways "foreign" ideas and values mix (or not, as the case may be) with "national" ones. How these elisions occur is not often enough a focus of attention but it is also a fundamental question for understanding how cultural diplomacy is received and how it resonates with people's meaningful horizons.

Perhaps it is time for us to think of cultural diplomacy in more "glocal" terms. Here I am not so much referring to the popular mantra, "think globally, act locally," as pointing to the ways that the expressive content of cultural diplomacy: is not self-evident; circulates among publics in particular ways; is often understood by audiences in terms of already familiar and available concepts, beliefs, or values; and if it resonates, is typically appropriated into local frameworks of meaning and relevance. It is impossible, in other words, to understand the extra-local content of cultural diplomacy apart from its local context.

The British cultural theorist Stuart Hall's discussion of encoding/decoding is helpful here. Hall helps us to appreciate the extent to which the coding of any given message does not dictate its reception, which is perhaps an unfortunate inconvenience for the advocates of strategic communication. Hall undermines confidence in any notion of communication that mistakenly adopts a straightforward or linear "sender-message-receiver" model. Instead, Hall insists, the two moments of "encoding" and of "decoding" are relatively autonomous from each other, and differently determinate in any process of communication.

In other words, any given public, if an intended audience for the work of cultural diplomacy, is also an important source for the meaning of that same cultural work. And as such, Hall encourages recognition of the "struggle over meaning," not as zero-sum but as fundamental to all communication. Another way of putting this is that whatever the intention of cultural diplomacy interventions, publics for whom they are intended will always actively make sense of them in terms relating to their own interests.

Here I am not referring to any so-called "realist interests" – the rational calculus of political self-interest or practical advantage – but to the cultural grounding of ideas, concepts, values, or commitments that people everywhere use to evaluate the meanings of statements, and which

invest the views people have about the world around them with significance. Interests, in the more encompassing second sense, most often take shape amid regular traffic along frontiers of interaction between the global and the local.

We can consider the significance of cultural diplomacy, then, along a glocal gradient. Take the example of "McDonaldization" as a case of the global circulation of American popular culture. Much attention has been given to whether the ubiquity of McDonalds franchises worldwide represents the triumph of the attractiveness of American fast food (and its associated model of economic efficiency) or is primary evidence for the predatory qualities of American cultural exports that threaten to displace local cultural diversity with a shallower and more monochromatic cultural globalization.

In fact neither story adequately captures another tendency, as colorfully reported in Watson's Golden Arches East: the burger franchise effectively plies its trade along a global-local frontier that it constantly negotiates, and where the global and the local are brought together in diverse ways. While McDonald's serves beer in Germany, does not offer beef in India, and offers seasonal "tsukimi" burgers in Japan to celebrate the harvest moon, this is not just an example of catering to local tastes. Franchises are turned into "local" institutions by patrons in a myriad of ways. In this sense, they are not altogether perceived as "American," but in significant part as different kinds of neighborhood haunts. How a global franchise becomes a local haunt is about what Japanese do with a McDonalds to make it "theirs."

Another illustration is human rights discourse and practice, which is a regular dimension of U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Typically the U.S. asserts the universal aspirations of human rights, promotes human rights in conjunction with secular and individual freedoms of equality and choice, and disregards cultural frameworks when advancing human rights goals. Nevertheless, international human rights law typically comes to matter to peoples around the world only once it has – in the words of researcher Sally Merry – been effectively "remade in the vernacular," often in locally contingent and fragmentary ways.

Merry is clear that, to be most effective, human rights advocacy must be appropriated, translated, and framed in local terms. This might include human rights concepts about the nature of the person, the community, or the state, which do not travel easily from one setting to another. Instead of the more prevailing understanding of culture by international human rights activists as a retrogressive and anti-modern "custom" and as a ready excuse for non-compliance, Merry encourages attention to the ways transnational human rights ideas and institutions are made meaningful using cultural images, symbols, and narratives – in places like Fiji and India often couched in religious rather than secular terms – that help to articulate specifically local conceptions of social justice that do not simply echo international human rights covenants. Instead they are articulated, for example, in relationship to prevailing kinship obligations, culturally-defined ideas about the body; or particular historical contexts, such as long-term struggles over land ownership, among others.

As a recent lucid essay by Charles Kupchan argues, the contemporary world is not best met with the expectation of "conformity to Western values," but instead through recognition of the proliferating hybrid modernities that characterize it. In glocal terms, whether dealing with global popular culture or with the universalizing discourses and practices of human rights, we should be considering how the subjects, recipients or audiences of these culture industries, global discourses and frameworks, are also at the same time agents of them, sources for them, and authors of them. Promotion of a more "glocal diplomacy" – the translation of the global and its often creative elision with the local – remains mostly disregarded, given the

constant pressure to “control the message.”