

Nov 04, 2016 by [R.S. Zaharna](#)

Culture Posts: A New Frame - The U.S. Public Diplomacy Act of 2014 ^[1]

It is the summer of 2012 and America is debating whether to modernize a piece of 1948 legislation on U.S. public diplomacy called the Smith-Mundt Act. At a time when American officials are racing to keep pace with the new communication technologies and trying to “out-communicate” the terrorists, not just other nations, the whole debate is mind-boggling. Ultimately, the debate is about much more than the legislation and speaks volumes about America understanding of communication in a global era. To get up to speed, U.S. public diplomacy needs the U.S. public, and both need a U.S. Public Diplomacy Act as soon as possible.

A Potentially Dead-In Debate

Yesterday’s analysis of the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act revealed a battle between two iconic American values. In one corner: “modernization” and the appeal of the future. In the corner: “propaganda” and the threat to individual freedom. So long as these two values remain pitted against each other, the legislation floating on the surface will continue to draw fire from across the political spectrum. At stake are treasured American values. U.S. public diplomacy is caught in cross fire.

The longer the debate continues, the more likely the two competing frames will become entrenched. Already, the battle has moved to the social media, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. As mentioned in a previous post, and quoting Alec Ross, “the social media reward the extremes.”

Unfortunately, or fortunately, any reference to “Smith-Mundt” is likely to trigger a repeat of the propaganda-public diplomacy debate. Not surprisingly, two years ago there was such an attempt and it didn’t get far. What’s needed is a fresh start in how the public, officials, and policy makers think about U.S. public diplomacy – which is a good thing.

New Tools: Media Literacy

Many have suggested the Smith-Mundt battle is generational. Actually, it may be more a matter of education and training. What the younger bloggers share with some of the beyond twenty-something bloggers trying to put propaganda in perspective, is formal study of persuasive tactics and media literacy. Learning how to read, analyze and create media content has become as critical as learning grammar. It begins in elementary school now.

The fear of propaganda harkens back to an era when persuasion was a new field of study. Mass media was the “new” media. Both were little understood and perceived as all powerful. Over the years, persuasion strategies have grown increasingly sophisticated. Compared with

advanced stealth tactics, propaganda's one-way "information dissemination" mode probably ranks a 2.4 out of 10 on Richter scale of persuasion. While persuasion strategies today are more sophisticated, so too is the audience. Media literacy and constant exposure to persuasion have made the public, especially the youth, not only savvy consumers of persuasion but producers as well. From the Arab Spring to Anonymous, the communication tables are turning between publics and governments. It's not just social media. It's media literacy.



New Mindset, New Frame

If one thing has become increasingly clear from the debate it is the lack of understanding about the critical role of U.S. public diplomacy – and the role of the U.S. public in U.S. public diplomacy. U.S. public diplomacy needs not just a new amendment, it needs a new mindset. With that mindset lays the promises of a new U.S. Public Diplomacy Act.

1. Think Global Communication: Global technology & Global publics

The first feature of the new mindset and goal of the U.S. Public Diplomacy Act is to think globally. Currently, on several levels, U.S. public diplomacy is defined in national and even inter-national terms. Perhaps a short decade ago, it was possible to think about communication in those terms. With today's advanced communication technologies, there is no longer a domestic public or even truly foreign publics; but rather one global public. What one hears; they all hear albeit differently. The challenge is not how to separate the two; but how to speak to so many simultaneously. Remember also, that global public is constantly on the move. Global migration means thinking of audiences in terms of media platforms rather national territories.

2. Think Monitoring and Transparency

A second feature of the new mindset and goal of the U.S. Public Diplomacy Act is monitoring and transparency. Not only is the communication environment global, it is highly competitive. U.S. public diplomacy may be the leader in the field, but it is not the only player. Numerous

countries have established television programming and cultural programs specifically for the U.S. public. There is Qatar's Al-Jazeera, BBC's UK-USA and Russia's Russia Today. If China's CCTV has not been as successful, its Confucius Institutes are. Where is U.S. public diplomacy in this line up?

Rather than keeping the U.S. public in the dark about official U.S. communication activities, U.S. public diplomacy needs more exposure and transparency. First, for those who worry about U.S. government takeover of the American people, unfettered access to U.S. public diplomacy is exactly what's needed to monitor it and make sure it doesn't get out of control. Helle Dale of the Heritage Foundation picked up on this point early. It needs underscoring. Second, U.S. public diplomacy could benefit from domestic feedback, especially from one as ethnically diverse as the American public. Other countries have been quick to appreciate the importance of not only their domestic public but their diaspora in the global communication equation.

3. Think Collaborative Diplomacy and Citizen Diplomacy

A third feature of the new mindset and goal of the U.S. Public Diplomacy Act is moving from the old public diplomacy to the new public diplomacy. Once upon a time it was enough to craft messages and shoot them into stationary target audiences. It worked once. It doesn't now. Governments are no longer the only players competing against each other. And radical activists rarely play by the rules. Soft power is transforming into what Anne Marie Slaughter called "collaborative power." Public diplomacy is becoming more networked, more collaborative public diplomacy.

To be effective or even stand a chance in such a dynamic communication arena U.S. public diplomacy needs an expanded vision beyond its official itself. The U.S. public needs a voice in the conversation that is U.S. public diplomacy.

Already, the U.S. public is trying to be more involved. Witness the thriving [citizen diplomacy and public-private partnerships](http://www.nciv.org). They are mushrooming across the nation. In one of her first statements, the new Under Secretary of State Tara Sonenshine spoke of the link between people, policy and U.S. public diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy along with collaborative public diplomacy exemplifies the new vision of U.S. public diplomacy.

More than ever, the U.S. public needs effective U.S. public diplomacy. And, more than ever, U.S. public diplomacy needs the U.S. public. Rather than competing against each other, both can embrace the challenge of change and innovation in a new U.S. Public Diplomacy Act of 2014. That is, if it can be achieved sooner.
