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Journalism, Mass Communication & Public Diplomacy ^[1]

I recently returned from the annual Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference in Chicago where suddenly everyone's talking about public diplomacy. Or at least, using the term. It calls to mind a favorite movie quote: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means..."

It's not clear to me that we in the field of journalism and mass communication are sure yet what we mean when we say "public diplomacy." At AEJMC, the term was often used as a near synonym for "international communication." Of course, as scholars and practitioners have long recognized, "public diplomacy" is a malleable term -- the Center's list of recommended books, articles and other documents is testament to that. But after a few days at the conference, I wondered if we weren't starting to test the limits of the term's malleability.

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy's definition of public diplomacy is broad, noting it concerns "transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals." The Center explains the definition can also be extended to fit the idea of "new public diplomacy" thus capturing the actions of "non-state actors with some standing in world politics -- supranational organizations, sub-national actors, non-governmental organizations, and (in the view of some) even private companies -- [that] communicate and engage meaningfully with foreign publics and thereby develop and promote public diplomacy policies and practices of their own". At its most basic then, public diplomacy is about consciously influencing foreign audiences. Whether it is a nation, a non-government organization, or a citizens' group seeking to do the influencing is secondary. This understanding of public diplomacy definitely leaves room for a lot of maneuvering, but it would be a mistake for our discipline to simply disregard already-existing understandings of the term.

Defining it in a way that may be useful to scholars of journalism and mass communication, historian Nicholas J. Cull describes public diplomacy  as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public". This is where the interdisciplinary nature of public diplomacy shines through and where the subject's connection to journalism and mass communication research is particularly evident. Media effects theories; media content theories; public opinion formation, measurement, and manipulation; principles of public relations, advertising and branding; and technologies for message delivery and interactivity are just a few examples of entrees into the study of public diplomacy from the perspective of journalism and mass communication.

Still, when it comes to media agenda setting theory in the public diplomacy context, for

example, what matters is not whether a certain collection of media coverage influences the population of a given country, but whether that coverage was consciously constructed to influence the population of that country and by whom. Likewise, when it comes to measurement of change in public opinion, what matters is not whether data suggest the opinion of one public toward the government or people of another country has changed, but whether the country about which opinion appears to have changed can somehow claim responsibility for that change.

Communication is fundamental to human experience and every activity alluded to in established definitions of public diplomacy has a communicative element. But that doesn't mean every communicative process with an international element is accurately described as public diplomacy. Of course the First Amendment, scholarly freedoms, and other basic protections keep any wayward souls from the fool's errand of attempting regulation of terms in an academic discipline. But it would be smart for contemporary journalism and mass communication researchers to acknowledge prevailing usage of "public diplomacy" instead of employing the term devoid of existing context.

I worry that our discipline's failure to acknowledge current context surrounding public diplomacy could lead to future confusion, not just on the part of scholars who approach the subject from a variety of other disciplinary perspectives, but also on the part of practitioners who seek practical insights from academic work in the field.

To ensure the relevance of our research employing the words "public diplomacy" and to improve the likelihood of practical applications stemming from our work, journalism and mass communication scholars should consider using the term in a manner consistent with extant usage. By adopting this prudent approach, our contributions are more likely to receive thoughtful reception from other academic and policy communities also engaged in discussion of the subject.

Certainly journalism and mass communication scholars have much to contribute to understanding of public diplomacy in both theory and practice. Original insights driven by the rich scholarship that shapes our field can only further strengthen the literature of public diplomacy. But we should employ the term purposefully, conscious of its connotations and respecting the real-world limits of its application. In this way we really can help shape the meaning of "public diplomacy" -- not by staking out our own isolated outposts for the term's usage, but rather by building bridges between our understanding of the communicative dynamics at play and already-existing insights into the subject of public diplomacy as gleaned from the fields of history, government, public policy, international relations, comparative studies, and others.

As students of the media and as experts in communication, we know well that words have consequences. We should do a better job of demonstrating that awareness as we delve into the stimulating, multidisciplinary world of public diplomacy research.

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