

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

# Culture Posts: Paradox of Promoting National Values in the Global Political Arena <sup>[1]</sup>

I have always been intrigued by the desire of countries to convey their cultural, political or social values as part of their public diplomacy mission. On the surface, it is appealing. However, in practice, it is fraught with challenges and is something of a paradox.

On the one hand, it is difficult to accurately convey cultural values because they are so deeply tied to a country's historical and socio-cultural experience. Something gets lost in the translation. However, because values are so integral to a nation's experience and identity, a nation's communication will inevitably convey something of its values.

## **Appeal of Values**

The appeal of values as a persuasive tool dates back to Aristotle's Rhetoric in the Western intellectual heritage. Implicit in Confucius' The Analects are values that govern behaviors and proper relations in society. Contemporary persuasion theories provide strong support for using values to change attitudes and behavior.

Post 9/11 U.S. public diplomacy highlighted values as a strategic cornerstone in its public diplomacy.

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The first priority of US public diplomacy is "to inform the international world swiftly and accurately about the policies of the US government," and then, "re-present the values and beliefs of the people of America, which inform our policies and practices."

Charolette Beers

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People who share similar values often feel greater attraction to each other and experience more ease in communicating with each other. Similarity and ease in communication and understanding may also fuel public diplomacy use of values.

### **Values as Abstract**

While the desire to use values may be appealing, the challenge of effectively doing so may be daunting. Values are abstract nouns of culture -- and that public diplomacy is inherently intercultural.

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Unlike concrete nouns or objects, abstract nouns do not exist in reality per se – but in our minds and even hearts. This privileged location can heighten their significance in public diplomacy.

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Values are abstract or intangible in the sense that one cannot physically touch them. How do you communicate values such as “generosity” or “discipline” so that it is understood by global publics with different value schemas? To give lavishly or more than is expected may be interpreted as “wasteful” by others who value “frugality.” Pride in self-discipline and controlling one’s urges may be perceived as “rigid” by others who value “spontaneity.”

Nation branding campaigns often try to convey cherished values. Thailand, known as the “Land of 1000 Smiles,” communicated their treasured value using slight variations of related words to appeal to different audiences: “joy” and images of shopping bargains for Asian tourists

and “bliss” and tranquil beaches to lure European vacationers.



## Multiple Interpretations

Because values exist in the minds of people, values can have different meanings and manifestations. Two people with different value schemas – priorities and understandings – can look at the same object and see two different things. And feel very strongly about what they see – and don't see. The 2005 caricatures of the Muslim prophet in a Danish newspaper were simultaneously perceived as “freedom of speech” and “blasphemy.”

While values may be abstract in theory, the manifestations of cherished values are often perceived as very real and concrete to their owners. People may rise up to protect values, beliefs, and traditions as if they were a physical entity.

Given these features of abstract nouns – invisible, yet powerful – public diplomacy officials need to be particularly alert to two major hurdles.

## Selective Attention

Most public diplomacy initiatives are laced with numerous values. PD officials may design initiatives to highlight a particular value only to have audiences focus on something entirely different and even unexpected.

For example, China as the official host of the 2008 Olympics took great efforts to prepare its

domestic public to properly receive the expected crowds of foreign visitors. The people were described as the keys to success. The government distributed a brochure for protecting the national image and included guidelines on proper manners and dress. Such attention to detail, especially in hosting guests, is a hallmark of relational finesse and exemplary of the value of propriety in relations.

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Selective attention – Not all values are prioritized the same. Global audiences will tend to attend to the value that is important for them – which may not be the same value of the public diplomacy planners.

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This attention to relational detail in receiving visitors was not the dominant value for global, especially Western audiences. Global audiences will tend to attend to the value that is important for them – which may not be the same value of the public diplomacy planners.

### **Selective Perception**

Second, there is the concern of selective perception. Even if one is successful in focusing attention on a particular value, the audience may have a different understanding of that value.


Having a “voice” in democracy may mean the act of voting. To others, it may mean being consulted in a deliberative, consensus-building process. Similarly, “empowerment” may be seen at the individual-level, such as empowering individual women entrepreneurs; or, at the group-level, such as empowering the role of women in society, or women’s organization.

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Selective perception -- A value may be universal, but its expression may not. Different cultural contexts often have different cues for expressing and interpreting a value.

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There may be merit in suggesting that values are “universal.” However, in practice, their expression may not. Anne-Marie Slaughter suggested tolerance was universal in her book, “The Idea that is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World.”

Two students in Singapore, one Asian and the other American, reviewed her book . The students debated Asian and Western values and the idea of universal values. They turned, as example, to the value of tolerance. The students discovered difference in perception of the role of listening and speaking in how “tolerance” is expressed and manifest in the American and Chinese perspectives. They concluded: “The virtue of tolerance is universal like the other values in this [Slaughter’s] book. Yet the approaches to tolerance may be defined differently in diverse cultural contexts.”

### **Value Paradox: Ideals, Interests and Credibility**

The paradox of values in public diplomacy is that while nations struggle to convey their values, most communication by any person or entity reflects its values -- whether the person deliberately intends so or not. And, this paradox raises other challenges for public diplomacy.

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There is no “down time” in public diplomacy: nations cannot not communicate their values. Publics are constantly looking for what they perceived as “the true values”

of a nation in its words, actions and policies.

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First, there is the challenge of values as ideals. Values represent the ideal of what people aspire to rather than what or who they actually are. It is difficult for individuals to live up to their ideals. It is perhaps even more so for nations to meet those standards. Yet once those values are expressed and promoted, the nation provides global audiences with a yardstick for measuring its actions and policies. A perceived gap between promoting a value as an ideal, and demonstrating that value as a reality, may erode a nation's credibility. The more visible a nation, the more likely global audiences will scrutinize discrepancies between promoted value and lived value.

Second, there is the challenge of perception. There is no "down time" in public diplomacy: nations and their officials cannot not communicate their values. However, just as publics use selective attention and selective perception in planned public diplomacy initiatives, so they will likely do so in unplanned incidents. Trying to control misperceptions may be futile. Anticipating and adjusting misperceptions may be more fruitful.

Third, there is the challenge of national value and national interest. Not all the problems are about perception. Some are political. When professed national values conflict with actions based on national interests – and publics spot the contradiction – there will be a public diplomacy cost. Human failings that result in a lapse between "ideal" and "real" may be excusable and even lauded by some who value trying. However, publics may be less forgiving for deliberate aberrations between political word and deed.

### **Public Diplomacy Implications**

For planned public diplomacy initiatives:

1. Consider other possible values buried in a PD initiative, not just the particular value that is being promoted.
2. Explore how a value may have different meanings, expressions and manifestations in different settings.
3. Pre-test value-laden programs with culturally diverse audiences.

For un-planned public diplomacy incidents:

1. Stop and try to assess differences in value schema that may be contributing to differences in perceptions.
  2. Look for ways to address the differences on multiple levels, including symbolic and indirect acknowledgements.
  3. Develop a “value radar” for greater self-awareness and other-awareness to anticipate and accommodate differences in the priorities and expression of values.
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