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

Nov 04, 2016 by Robert Albro

Collaborative/Creative Diplomacy/Partnerships [1]

Stephanie Stallings recently suggested that creative collaboration is a useful model for cultural diplomacy. She is definitely onto something. Circumstances have changed around the work of diplomacy. Publics are now much less distant, more assertive, and actively engaged participants in the making of their encompassing cultural worlds. To embrace this new reality likely requires rethinking many of the methods of cultural diplomacy and perhaps its basic goals.

In response to this, significant attention is now given to the pursuit of collaborative diplomacy. The call for more collaborative diplomacy tends to emphasize trust-building through cooperation on mutual objectives and around shared values, often via the "team work" of more inter-agency partnerships in projecting the U.S. image abroad. This is a practical call: in a climate of scarce resources, no one can go it alone. Too, typically problems are interconnected and cross-cutting, and so require partners to address. Likewise, the power of social networking – as a social media-driven basis for collaboration – promises to scale-up outreach and engagement.

A turn to collaborative diplomacy echoes collaboration-talk across a range of related activities, from innovation, to science, to the arts. Thomas Friedman recently added his own to the chorus of voices extolling the virtues of Silicon Valley-style creative problem-solving. For Friedman, such problem-solving is epitomized by platforms like GitHub – the largest open-source computer code-sharing host in the world – and by customer-driven non-zero-sum "co-opetition" networks exemplified by the likes of LinkedIn. His message: innovation is unprecedentedly collaborative.

Thingiverse, an online platform for artists, designers, and engineers, to share digital design files through creative commons licensing, is on the cusp of this trend. It represents a public model of innovation through community-building, where distinctions between producers and consumers disappear. And it includes innovation for diplomacy. An emerging biodiplomacy promotes "new forms of technology-based international partnerships" with the promise to "alter the traditional patterns of international cooperation."

Science is no exception. Knowledge generation is an increasingly borderless activity, and access to necessary expertise, ideas, samples, funding, equipment and machinery now routinely requires international cooperation. Global scientific challenges – from climate change and biosecurity to nanotechnology – are trans-boundary problems requiring CERN-type collaborations in the search for global solutions. And the number of transnational research networks continues to rise steeply. Last year set a record of more than 120 published papers in physics with more than 1000 authors

The National Science Foundation's new Science Across Virtual Institutions platform,

fostering global interaction among STEM researchers, exemplifies this turn. Science is now anything but the solitary visionary toiling alone in his lab. And as has been suggested, a new more multipolar "era of science diplomacy is emerging."

We might also consider arts diplomacy. But I do not mean the traditional model, held over from the Cold War, of sending, say, the New York Philharmonic to North Korea for a one-off concert. Instead, as I have previously discussed here, we could consider the work of international applied humanities networks. Whether as a dimension of humanitarian response, conflict mitigation, or peace-building, these networks apply arts-based skills in theater, heritage conservation, and museum curation to facilitate skills transfers and enable expressive opportunities. Rather than singing the praises of one's own culture, they represent relationships of collaborative storytelling.

These networks at once create new opportunities for public dialogue, and transform conceptions of participation in such ongoing projects as "Europe." The Europeana project, a cross-border, cross-domain, user-centered service drawing on the collections of over 2000 European libraries, archives, and museums, offers one ambitious example of this sort of frame-building, creating new ways for users to participate in their own cultural heritage even as they are also empowered to generate original content.

Yet not all collaboration meant to be creative is so. It turns out that "brainstorming" – a widely popularized generative technique taken from American business practice – is counterproductive, if creativity is the goal. It generates fewer ideas than the same number of people working alone.

Research suggests this is because brainstorming encourages groupthink at the expense of debate, dissent, and critical engagement with unfamiliar viewpoints. Brainstorming tends to marginalize encounters along the frontiers between disciplines, industries, and kinds of expertise, encounters that promote what urbanist Jane Jacobs identified as "knowledge spillovers": the non-rivalrous cross-fertilization of ideas among individuals that advance neighboring fields.

By and large, policy rationales for public diplomacy emphasize self-representation, defining the message, and identifying a common basis for cooperation (usually articulated as the promotion of "shared values"), as these promote national interests.

To take creative collaboration seriously as a model means to think more about how particular forms of collaboration engender different creative outcomes and what these outcomes have to tell us about the changing practice of diplomacy. Instead of an initial – sometimes incorrect or superficial – commitment to searching out shared values or interests to the end of building trust and goodwill, the object would be to focus on the often unscripted results of collaboration.

We should start by distinguish mere partnership – fine so far as it goes – from work associated with creative collaboration. The possibilities of collaboration are minimally addressed with the recognition of the practicality or cost-effectiveness of partnership in the face of resource scarcity. If an enabling prerequisite for collaboration, relationship-building is not a sufficient rationale for attentiveness to creative outcomes.

Networked virtual platforms producing user-generated digital content represent one model for creative collaboration, but certainly do not exhaust the possibilities. Over at least the last fifty

years, with one foot in the humanities and the other in the social sciences, cultural studies have documented the historical sources of cultural expression. With regular attention to the multiple sources of any given expressive form – say, the Japanese influence upon the spaghetti western – they have consistently described the hybrid results of cultural engagements, often as these occur along fraught social frontiers, in ways relevant to the practice of diplomacy.

Applied cultural studies have much to offer the practice of cultural diplomacy, starting with the fallacy of understanding creative expression as if derived from a unitary cultural source. If we are to take the possibilities of creative collaboration seriously, a cultural-studies-based appreciation for cross-fertilization might helpfully counter a tendency to view cultural exchange as display in the service of representation, where art diplomacy is too often considered a universal and self-evident language.

Instead, we might consider cultural diplomacy as it participates in the blurring of genres, or the work of bricolage, or more recently as part of a culture jam or a mashup. Each offers a different account of the collaborative multi-vocality of cultural expression with which we might animate international relations.