

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

“Popular Diplomacy” and Public Diplomacy

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Consider this statement: “The great body of citizens are refusing to wait until negotiations are over or policies are acted upon or even determined. They demand to know what is going on and to have an opportunity to express their opinions at all stages of diplomatic proceedings.”

That sounds like the latest evaluation of the public’s Twitter-fueled expectations to be kept informed about international affairs and to be listened to by policy makers. But this commentary is pre-Twitter; it dates back to 1922 and an essay in the first issue of *Foreign Affairs* by Elihu Root, who served as Secretary of War under Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, became Roosevelt’s Secretary of State, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1912. He was discussing “popular diplomacy,” which he saw as a function of nations being “determined to control their own destinies” and therefore objecting “to being led, without their knowledge, into situations where they have no choice.”

Root argued that the public needed to be better educated about the world because “public opinion will be increasingly not merely the ultimate judge but an immediate and active force in negotiation.” Further, he wrote, this kind of education “about the effects upon national life of the things that are done or refused as between nations” would be essential “so the people themselves will have the means to test misinformation and appeals to prejudice and passion based upon error.”

As public diplomacy becomes more central in the foreign policy of the United States and other nations, the importance of education about international affairs should be recognized. Amidst the flood of information – some reliable, some dangerously false – knowledge is a valuable commodity. Connecting directly with global publics is worthwhile only if members of those publics understand the substance of the conversations in which they are asked to participate.

Public diplomacy-related education takes place today through exchange and visitor programs, but it needs to become more far-reaching and sophisticated. It would be useful for American public diplomacy planners to design world affairs curricula that could be provided to any nation that wants to bring its citizens more fully into the global community. This would include a healthy dose of media literacy training because learning about the world requires the ability to assess the accuracy of information flowing from countless sources.

This is not as easy as it may seem. The tendency in such matters is to make educational material U.S.-centric, concerned at least as much about image-building as about honest teaching. This simply doesn’t work. As I’ve found in my own work with educators in the Arab world, students quickly tune out if their courses are not relevant to their own lives, values, and perceptions. To foster true “popular diplomacy” will require creativity and a willingness to adopt a worldview that is connected to popular interpretations of global issues – an outlook fueled by social media and other readily accessible sources.

There will be pushback. In many countries, political leaders’ greatest fear is that the people

they rule will learn too much about the rest of the world and become uncomfortably assertive. Deposed rulers in the Arab states and elsewhere can attest to the disruptive power of information.

When Elihu Root wrote his essay almost a century ago, the world had recently been turned upside-down by the First World War. The slaughter that was part of that conflict stirred thinking about the responsibilities of democracies and their citizens. Today, political upheaval is closely related to the movement of information and what people do with it. As in Root's time, people want to know what is going on, and they now have unprecedented ability to find out. Influencing what they do with that information should be part of the mission of public diplomacy.
