

Nov 04, 2016 by *R.S. Zaharna*

Culture Posts: Four Fallacies of Network Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Recent *Culture Posts* have highlighted “relationalism,” which emphasizes relations, and by extension, networks. The term network is appearing with greater frequency in all things related to public diplomacy. It seems only a few years ago that Jessica T. Matthew was lamenting the fate of state actors as entrenched hierarchies in “Power Shifts”. Now Manuel Castell’s work on network power pervades the scholarly literature. Anne-Marie Slaughter’s network vision drives policy analyses.

We have a network state. The public is the network society. The internet, as the network of networks, reinforce the perception that everything public diplomacy is about networks. In some ways that is true. In other ways, it is a fallacy.

So far, I have counted four fallacies.

Fallacy # 1: It’s All “Network Public Diplomacy”

The logic of a network state in a networked world communicating with network audiences using network communication tools would perhaps suggest that *all* public diplomacy is now “network public diplomacy.” The reality is it is not.

The first major fallacy of “network public diplomacy” is that not all initiatives under the umbrella of “network public diplomacy” are actually networks.

Claiming a network communication approach suggests links or connections. But who is connected to whom and why? There may be connectivity, but is there interactivity? Are the people in the network communicating with each other? What is the public diplomacy goal for creating those links and building relations?

What makes network public diplomacy is not the label, structure or even platform. It is the network perspective and underlying communication dynamics.

Public diplomacy initiatives that use social media tools such as Facebook or Twitter make it fairly easy to create a network structure. Not surprisingly, there has been a surge of network-based initiatives. However, it is possible to use the new social media in the same way as the old mass media, as a means for broadcasting information about one’s self – and call it ‘sharing.’

Networks, as organizational forms, have distinctive features. Recognizing network features

and dynamics is a critical first step in identifying network-based public diplomacy initiatives.

Fallacy # 2: The Generic “Network” Public Diplomacy

A second fallacy of network public diplomacy is that there is one “network” in network public diplomacy. Much of the literature contrasts networks to hierarchies in such a way that networks appear as a generic structure. Compared to hierarchies that have a more rigid, vertical structure, networks are agile, horizontal forms. The hierarchal structure is good during times of stability. Networks gain the advantage during times of change. In hierarchies power comes through holding onto information [think: information is power]. In networks, shared information gains value [think: viral].

While networks in their generic form constitute a persuasive tool, the reality is there is no generic network in public diplomacy.

When we speak of “network” initiative, we need to ask what type of “network” is it, Is it a network similar to the terrorist network composed of loosely held together individuals working in cells, rarely communicating together? Or is it a tightly knit network, whose members interact frequently, such as a women’s empowerment network?

Networks vary greatly and the ways in which they vary should be shaped by their purpose and goals. In public diplomacy, one can think of a typology of *networks of purpose* that strive to match network structure and dynamics with public diplomacy purpose. *Networks of awareness* may be large, open structures dedicated to disseminating information. *Networks of influence* tend to have dense structures that can promote attitude or behaviors change. *Networks of exchange*, aimed at facilitating the exchange of information and resources, may be sparse, open networks that incorporate diversity to maximize network synergy. *Networks of empowerment*, which focus on creating personal or institutional capacity, may opt for slow growth in order to focus on structures that reinforce sustainability. *Networks of cooperation* may strive for structures that facilitate exchange or dynamics that foster trust. *Networks of collaboration* strive to generate value-added information.

Fallacy # 3: Network Structure Promises Success

A third fallacy of public diplomacy is that network structures alone are enough to promise success. Whereas the network structure may supply the advantage, the reality is that network public diplomacy can fail just as decidedly as one-way media initiatives. Additionally, ill-conceived network initiatives can backfire. A network designed to spread the good word can instead become a vicious rumor mill.

In public diplomacy, networks are not inanimate grids linking inanimate objects or “nodes.” Those nodes are people. Culture matters. A more apt metaphor for networks in public diplomacy is to view them as organic structure. As organic, living structures, they can grow and thrive – or wither and die.

In this organic structure, communication dynamics are the life blood. Three relational processes can combine to create the synergy needed to fuel a network. First, internal relationship building through bonding and team activities help define and solidify the network. Second, external coalition building such as linking to other like-minded groups helps feed the network with new resources. Finally, adding diversity to the network can make it more resilient

and provide a source of innovation.

Failure of a network initiative to demonstrate these relational processes may result in the collapse of the network as a dynamic organism. The network may become static, rigid and ultimately vulnerable to breaking, decaying, or fragmenting. A sponsor may be able to sustain the network but it will likely require substantial investment of resource. When a network initiative combines these three relational dynamics to create relational synergy, the network may not only sustain itself, but grow well beyond a sponsor's investments and expectations.

Fallacy #4 – Networks are the Best Approach

Perhaps the biggest fallacy of network public diplomacy is that it is universally effective or even a substitute for other communication approaches. Despite the appeal and prominence of networks in public diplomacy, network communication is not the only approach, nor is it necessarily the best approach.

All communication approaches have their distinctive advantages and disadvantages. Mass media communication is highly efficient for disseminating information to a large audience, but it may not be effective as a persuasive tool. Interpersonal communication is the most persuasive medium, but it has limited reach. Network communication can offer persuasive power and reach, but building a viable network can take time.

Deciding which approach to use and how to use it depends on a variety of factors, including the goal, context, audience, time frame, and possible communication contenders. In a crisis scenario, control over message and image are critical. A forceful official statement delivered via the media may be exactly what is needed to stop rumors from circulating in public networks.

Multiple Perspectives & Approaches

As public diplomacy takes a relational turn it is important to keep perspective. Relational approaches, including networks initiative may offer more communication mileage than a mass media approach in today's political arena. However, that advantage is conditional to some, not all scenarios.

More importantly, relational approaches are inherently limited as a global approach. Why? Because it constitutes only one approach. In today's political arena no single approach is sufficient to meet the multi-cultural perspective of the audience or circumstances. As part of our journey of exploring different perspectives and styles, a coming Culture Post will look at the features, advantages and applications of a predominantly non-relational approach – assertive public diplomacy.
