

Nov 04, 2016 by *Craig Hayden*

“Engagement” is More Convenient than Helpful: Dissecting a Public Diplomacy Term ^[1]

Matthew Wallin of the American Security Project posed an interesting question in a recent blog post titled “Engagement: What does it mean for public diplomacy?” This question touched a nerve for me, because there are no ready definitions for the term – despite the fact that it appears across statements articulating the purpose of U.S. public diplomacy. As Wallin argues, “missing from the discourse about engagement and its attractiveness as a term is a substantial discussion of exactly what it means.” Indeed, so why should we care about this term? Two reasons stand out for me: (1) It’s a somewhat confusing term that doesn’t necessarily prescribe a specific kind of action and (2) it highlights some key tensions for how



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The term “engagement” is a floating signifier; its meaning is typically embedded in the context of the articulation – who is saying it, in what venue, to serve a particular argument claim, etc. It’s a form of jargon that informs practice, and helps to rationalize acts of public diplomacy into the larger strategic language for U.S. diplomacy. We need only look to the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review to see how a broader strategic mandate for “engagement” animates U.S. strategy. Naming this as jargon, however, is not necessarily enlightening, as diplomatic practice is crowded with a lot of jargon.

The term engagement matters because it implies a specific practice, to facilitate a certain objective or outcome, and yet it doesn’t actually identify a practice. And as Wallin notes, it’s hard to discern engagement in relation to public diplomacy if we don’t have some standards or definition. Public diplomacy watchers and scholars may “know it when they see it,” but I’m not sure how this helps provide constructive critique.

Wallin’s essay is not the first intervention into this term. In 2010, Kristin Lord and Marc Lynch argued that U.S. policy-makers should opt for “strategic public engagement” rather than rely on older ambiguous terms like “public diplomacy,” “public affairs,” and “strategic communication.” They argue that these terms have become “tarnished and loaded.” Public

diplomacy is what the State Department does. Strategic Communication is what the Department of Defense does.

For Lord and Lynch, public diplomacy is “defined as the promotion of national interests through efforts to engage, persuade, and influence foreign publics, traditionally focused on long-term relationship building and a few core activities such as broadcasting, exchange programs, and publications.” To fix the way in which this practice is often disconnected from strategic intent, Strategic Public Engagement offered. They define it as:

“the promotion of national interests through governmental efforts to inform, engage, and influence foreign populations. We prefer this term because it leapfrogs definitional debates and gets past bureaucratic turf wars, allowing policy makers to focus on what the U.S. government should be doing and how rather than who should be doing it.”


Lord and Lynch are right to note that the practice of public diplomacy may be disconnected from strategic imperatives. It is a call to think about public diplomacy as not an “end in itself” but a means to policy objective. But as is evident, the definition seems not all that different. Strategy is implicated in practice, whether implicit or explicit. It seems that in the case of “engagement,” the meaning is almost always deferred, implied, or left open to suit the argument of the moment. I don’t think this helps build a broader constituency for the practice of public diplomacy.

This little diversion into deconstruction is important, because I think the term “engagement” conceals as much as it reveals. It implies distinctions between efforts of persuasion and relation-building, yet retains the connotation of influence. “Engagement” also amounts to a bit of rhetorical rehabilitation for the ethics of public diplomacy. To engage is better than to advertise, message, or brand. “Engagement” is a kind of image repair for public diplomacy itself.

Yet the ambiguity of engagement also provides cover for policy-makers seeking some relief from the mandate of measurement and evaluation. One of Wallin’s argument’s is worth quoting at length:


"If anything, using the term engagement can sometimes provide the user with a perceived ability to forgo one of the most difficult parts of public diplomacy—that is demonstrating metrics which indicate whether or not one’s efforts are succeeding at influencing the target audience. In other words, the user of “engagement” may feel as though they needn’t actually explain the effects of their activities because they are “engaging” by nature of the word."

If “engagement” is something that unfolds over time, and involves a number of intervening moments that cumulate into something like influence – it doesn’t fit neatly into existing measurement models that test specific theories of persuasion, attitude change, or whatever the “user” wants out of engagement. But just because measurement is hard doesn’t mean we shouldn’t think clearly about how acts serve the strategic ends of public diplomacy.

Wallin offers one route to evaluation – whether or not an act, an event, or the content of a message involved with a public diplomacy program was “engaging.” This is actually a testable proposition. For example, the Elaboration Likelihood Model  offers a dual-process concept of persuasion, by examining “central” and “peripheral” routes to persuasion. The key term is

“elaboration” or the “systemic thinking about” a topic or issue. How audiences to public diplomacy attend to a topic or key argument is something that can be measured.

Yet understandably, public diplomacy policy-makers and practitioners are not often versed in theories of influence. I don't think that's a huge problem. What is a bigger problem is that the term “engagement” conceals two visions for influence that are somewhat conflated. Engagement apparently can mean both acts of persuasion and acts of relation-building. If policy-makers and critics are concerned about making sure public diplomacy is guided by strategic purpose – that it serves some policy-end in a way that makes it open to post hoc evaluation – then we need a firmer definition of engagement.

Current ambiguity highlights a more pervasive tension in the strategic mandate for public diplomacy. Persuasion and relation-building are often at cross-purposes, yet there is a tacit understanding that the purpose of public diplomacy is ultimately to shape the attitudes, dispositions, and indeed behaviors of target publics. For a good survey of the arguments about persuasion and the broader family of influence concepts that operate within public diplomacy, see Ali Fisher's "[Looking for the Man in the Mirror](#)" essay . Suffice to say, engagement as a public diplomacy term provides both an open-ended license for definition and a shifting warrant for making claims about influence.

I think this tension is readily apparent in efforts to use social media for public diplomacy. Case in point – how does the use of Facebook or Twitter constitute engagement? Does the larger base of people who “Like” an embassy page indicate a successful campaign of engagement? Or, does it reflect a productive use of advertising techniques to recruit “likes,” while not necessarily providing the implied more meaningful connections that social networks can sustain? When an ambassador uses Twitter, does this constitute a robust effort to sustain dialogue with publics, or, does it represent a kind of performance that humanizes the chief of mission? I'm not suggesting one is better than the other. What I am saying is that there are few clear parameters for what constitutes “engagement.” In my research on U.S. digital public diplomacy, I have heard a lot of critiques about what is being done from a practical standpoint, but not so much on the bigger question of “why.” What does this mean for practitioners?

For starters, it makes it harder to design the kind of formative research needed to plan an effective public diplomacy program that takes into account both the contextual factors and the strategic needs that the program will serve. The conceptual ambiguity also makes it difficult to pin down how and when a program can be deemed effective in post hoc evaluation.

While I readily acknowledge that measurement and evaluation imperatives can ultimately distort the practice of public diplomacy or even conceal the less democratic forms of communication involved in public diplomacy outreach, I think it's also important to acknowledge that the ambiguity of a term like “engagement” makes it potentially about everything – all the touch-points, communications, and connections that are involved in public diplomacy. I don't think this helps practitioners, policy-makers, or commentators. Instead, it perpetuates jargon, and elides more persistent questions about both the purpose and the operative theories that underscore efforts to reach foreign publics.
