

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

Culture Posts: Five Critical Roles of the Domestic Publics in PD ^[1]

A previous Culture Post explored cultural assumptions about who is the ‘public’ in public diplomacy and suggested an expanded vision of “the public” that includes the domestic, diaspora, and foreign publics. Failure to see a public and the role it plays can leave a nation vulnerable to blind spots in its public diplomacy.


This Culture Post takes a closer look at five critical roles of the domestic public in public diplomacy. Because traditional public diplomacy has focused primarily on foreign publics, the role of the domestic public may have been overlooked rather than absent. In that sense, the roles may not be new. What is new is the perspective to see it.

1. Nation Branding Image & Identity

Many nations promote their national images by showcasing their people and culture. In Thailand, it may be the people’s smiles. For Australia, it may be their easy-going spirit.

Few campaigns, however, include the domestic public in the initial design or actual implementation of the initiative. Ironically, the domestic public may have the final word on the campaign’s success or failure.

The graveyard of nation branding campaigns is filled with examples of those that died at the hands of the domestic public. The British were less than amused with “Cool Britannia.” “Sparkling Korea” didn’t sparkle for the South Korean public. The failings of “Kosovo, the Young Europeans,” were detailed in an issue of CPD Perspectives  by Martin Wählisch and Behar Xharra. The € 5.7 million campaign won top foreign awards for its artistic design. Yet, it failed to engage the domestic public: “It was purely a project of the government.” The mismatch between image and identity sparked counter campaigns from the domestic public.

South Africa is a notable exception in including the public in nation branding efforts. From the outset back in 2002, the government-initiated campaign sought to “build support domestically and internationally for the South African brand” (See, Youde 2009 ). The Brand South Africa strategy includes a diaspora component (Global South Africans) and a domestic mobilization component to “build and sustain national pride and patriotism.”

“Play Your Part,” for example, is a recent national initiative that “encourages all South Africans to contribute to positive change in the country.”

"Neither Government Nor Business Can Solve South Africa's Challenges Alone. Play Your

Part."

2. Positive Partnerships

Domestic publics have been playing a more prominent “partnership” role in PD initiatives. “Successful foreign policy increasingly requires partnerships,” as [Nicholas Cull](#) wrote recently, “Going it alone won’t work.” He noted the addition of “partnership” to the core definition of U.K. public diplomacy.

Potential partners included business, civil society, academics, as well as prominent individuals, such as celebrities who share national public diplomacy goals. The power of partnerships adds a people-to-people dimension that can personalize an initiative as well as help extend reach and credibility.

A creative example of partnership was the British initiative [Think UK, China](#) conducted in China from April 2003 to January 2004. The initiative was promoted as a “relationship building campaign” and featured partnerships on multiple levels. For example, more than one hundred Chinese and U.K. partner organizations worked together to develop and coordinated thirty in-country events. Those events featured British and Chinese scientists, sculptors and writers teaming up for public concerts, exhibitions, competitions, and discussion forums.

While domestic organizations can provide an entrée into societies where direct government activities may be unwelcomed, the political, media, and development activities of “foreign-funded” non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society have come under increased scrutiny from countries across Asia, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe. This is a PD area ripe for more research.

3. Our domestic, Their diaspora

Thanks to technology and perhaps changing attitudes about mobility, immigrant and diaspora populations are becoming increasingly visible and active in public diplomacy. Immigrant populations play an important bridge-building role as the domestic public of one country and the diaspora of another country.

When the earthquake struck Haiti in early 2010, [Canada](#) turned to the Haitian diaspora to help spearhead rebuilding efforts. As the dated picture below shows, these bridging efforts began early.

U.S. public diplomacy has also reached out to the diaspora within its borders through “International Diaspora Engagement Alliance” or [IdEA](#). Among the many roles diasporas play is providing information during crisis situations in other countries.

Diaspora publics are also playing a role in building bridges with publics whom the U.S. public diplomacy is trying to reach.

One can see from the Somali flag (below) why the color and star of the “[I am a Star](#)” campaign carries symbolism for Somali-Americans.

4. Adversarial Strategic Stakeholders

However, not all of the roles played by the domestic public are positive. The domestic public may include adversarial strategic stakeholders who actively work against a PD initiative. Stakeholders are individuals or groups who feel they have a stake or interest in the key issue (environment, human rights, etc.) of a PD initiative. Strategic stakeholders have the potential to advance as well as threaten or undermine a PD initiative. It is critical that they be accounted for in the public diplomacy calculus.

Attempts to dismiss or discredit a strategic domestic stakeholder may be counter-productive, especially if the groups have greater perceived credibility than the government. Such attempts may also backfire by inadvertently triggering a defense reaction in the domestic or foreign publics. The most difficult, but perhaps best approach is to identify and anticipate adversarial stakeholders and creatively work them into the initiative – before the initiative is launched.

5. Expand the Policy Bandwidth

A fifth but not final role, has to do with the “P” word: policy. As the lines between domestic and international become increasingly blurred, domestic publics are finding the impact of foreign policy hitting closer to home. Policy debates are no longer neatly divided between domestic and foreign. The domestic public may play an important role in expanding a nation’s policy bandwidth.

Some countries specifically target the domestic public to educate them and bring them into a nation’s foreign policy dialogue.

When Japan joined peace keeping efforts in Iraq, public diplomacy efforts included a third pillar to promote better understanding of the Middle East among the Japanese public. The Japan Foundation held a series of cultural events, including bringing the Iraqi soccer team to Japan.

Nearly a decade ago, Canada sought to engage its domestic public in a “[Dialogue on Foreign Policy](#).” Other countries, including China, Finland, India and Nigeria, have developed policy dialogues specifically on public diplomacy. The effort of these and other countries were documented in a 2012 report “[Domestic Public Diplomacy](#)” by the [Australian Institute of International Affairs](#).

Active PD Participants

The traditional focus on foreign publics as the critical public in public diplomacy may have inadvertently fostered a view of the domestic public as “passive observers” in a nation’s public diplomacy. As is hopefully evident in this Culture Post, the critical roles played by the domestic public suggest that they are active PD participants.

Looking ahead, much more attention is needed to understand the variety of publics and their roles – both positive and negative – in public diplomacy. To that end, I am thinking of the next circle on the PD relational sphere ... the role of diaspora publics.
