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Does Technology Persuade (Part II): Looking to Media Practices for Insight [1]

How does what we know about information and communication technology (ICTs) and persuasion help practitioners makes sense of how to integrate technology into the mission of public diplomacy? We know that ICTs can be:

A) Persuasive by its ability to facilitate or enable other attempts at persuasion.
B) Persuasive as a transmission vehicle (the medium endows some form of credibility or legitimacy).
C) Persuasive as a kind of context for communication - an intermediary - that enables the

influence potential of social ties.

Have such insights been leveraged for U.S. public diplomacy? The State Department's Office of Innovative Engagement, for example, has been busy probing the potential of such technologies for particular contexts. Their work aims to build up a pragmatic sense of the knowledge necessary for technology integration. For example, an embassy might make great use of Twitter, but not need a costly investment in a platform like Pinterest. This kind of "contextual intelligence" (to borrow from Nye), can make the crucial difference between building unprecedented connections to an audience and a pointless social media campaign.

Yet some critics continue to point to the failures of U.S. public diplomacy's use of "digital" diplomacy tools by how they are disconnected from strategic goals, as if the State Department is using such tools simply to be present on Twitter, Facebook, or some trendy platform. Likewise, these tools are themselves criticized for not directly facilitating a policy objective (as if a media platform should directly achieve an outcome).

Others question the worth of seemingly trivial online games, polls, or activities put on US websites to facilitate engagement. While yet others fear that the cost-saving advantages of virtual platforms might discourage funding of proven programs that accrue benefits (e.g. - the mutual understanding often tied to cultural diplomacy or education exchange).

While there may be some merit to the multiple critiques lodged against U.S. digital diplomacy efforts, I think they must be matched by a serious consideration of how publics live online, and, how this reality yields opportunities for what we might call "engagement" in ways that serve diplomatic ends. This kind of insight was expressed in the 2013 Office of the Inspector General report on the activities of the International Information Programs bureau, but the specifics of strategy were not articulated. Rather, the report indicated that there should be a strategy .

Thinking about practice

The kind of "probing" I suggest about technology can be accomplished by interrogating the *expectation gaps* between what policy-makers say about new media platforms and the insights gained from a practice-oriented approach to how audiences use such technologies in their everyday lives. "Practice" theorists, such as Nicholas Couldry, have championed ethnographic audience research that reveals the kinds of things we do with platforms like Twitter, Facebook, etc. that sustain social ties, mitigate influence, and enable personal agency. These kinds of insights are also present in the cyberculture research by scholars such as Danah Boyd, Nancy Baym and many others examining how ICTs are enmeshed in the fabric of personal, communal, and larger network relations. This kind of research doesn't upend the big social theory assumptions about politics, power, and human nature (the kind of claims Morozov is keen to debunk). Rather, it zeros in on the meaning-making practices that signal how communication technologies are important to people, and why. This is the kind of actionable intelligence that I think public diplomacy practitioners have always needed.

I use the term "expectation gap" to illustrate how the underlying assumptions about public diplomacy (what it can accomplish, its ethics, its best methods, etc.) become apparent in the failings or successes of a particular mode of technology. When we argue about the effectiveness of a particular technological platform for public diplomacy, we also implicate the ambitions of public diplomacy in the uneven, stratified, and often culturally-defined terrain of

ICT diffusion among foreign publics.

What does this means for practitioners? It does not mean a retreat from tech. Yes, there will be hiccups. Integrating the insular, bureaucratic culture of communication within diplomacy, with all its disincentives for open and transparent communication, with the material culture of netiquette among foreign publics is not something obvious or easy. US public diplomacy has been dubbed a “cauldron of innovation.” To live up to this label, it must engage in more pilot programs, mine the localized knowledge of the communication infrastructure, and remain aware of the work being done outside the context of diplomacy. As an interface between diplomats and publics, public diplomacy must leverage knowledge of how people, publics, and organizations live increasingly mediated lives, where politics are shaped by media connections or facilitated by politics uniquely engendered by media contexts. Indeed, the history expressed in public diplomacy memoirs reveal Foreign Service officers doing these very things all along. Now, as before, public diplomacy practitioners and policy-makers need to be better consumers of knowledge production about media technology (though perhaps less so the systemic debates that define international relations theory). This is not new, and it’s admittedly a little unfair to heap yet more onto the plate of public diplomats struggling to thrive in a broader diplomatic culture that may not take for granted the necessity of public diplomacy. Yet, when an ambassador wants to start tweeting, we need better justificatory narratives and evidence that illustrate how and why technology matters to extend the potential of diplomacy, where it is needed, and importantly, where it is not needed.

And importantly, we need to be honest about the subjects of our critique. Is it about the deployment of technology or the strategy of public diplomacy itself?