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Moving Away From DC: the Power of Local Nonprofits ^[1]

Over the last century, public diplomacy has reinvented itself many times over. Whatever the case may have been in the past, public diplomacy is now widely accepted to include the work

of certain nonprofits. At a minimum, it includes those nonprofits whose mission is to bridge the various divides between their local community and those overseas. These nonprofit organizations might even be said to be at the forefront of public diplomacy and cultural relations in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, these nonprofits face a wide range of challenges when engaged in such activities. In the United States, one of the most unfortunate is the pressure to base their operations in Washington, DC. Although there are a number of good reasons why some nonprofits choose to base their operations in the capital, there is no good reason why *so many* of these nonprofits have done so. We therefore need to take a step back and ask why this is happening.

Consider the 2015 University of Pennsylvania think tank rankings. There, we find that nine of the top twenty international think tanks and nonprofits are based in the United States. And all but two of these organizations are headquartered in Washington D.C. The rankings also reveal that within the United States, sixteen of the top twenty domestic think tanks are based in Washington D.C. While not all of these nonprofits are engaged in public diplomacy and cultural relations, many are.

Why are so many of our nonprofits engaged in public diplomacy and cultural relations are based in the capital?

Let me put forth what seems like one reasonable hypothesis. The geographic concentration of these organizations around the capital might be closely correlated with the lack of support such nonprofits on the periphery often receive from local officials and others in their respective locales. The apparent apathy is concerning. For if local officials are not interested in supporting global initiatives, where can nonprofit organizations with a global focus gain traction? The answer, of course, is Washington, DC.

If this hypothesis holds, does it then follow that this lack of support from local officials really is a problem? In other words, does the concentration of nonprofits around the capital negatively impact American public diplomacy? I believe that it does, for a couple of reasons.

On the one hand, the lack of support from local officials for nonprofits contributing to international issues outside of the capital undermines the very diversity that defines American public diplomacy. If participation in public diplomacy is limited to persons and organizations in a handful of cities, countries – particularly multicultural ones like the United States – risk sacrificing the power of plurality that organizations and communities in the periphery offer.

On the other hand, the saturation of nonprofits with "influence" in international issues also results in narratives and initiatives being tied to the same biases, values, and judgements. This threatens the very diversity upon which strong democracies are built. Without the range of differing opinions nonprofits outside the political loci offer, the country's capacity for engagement and representation on international decisions is severely limited.

For the past two years, my experience in a leadership role at an international nonprofit seems to support this hypothesis. Our nonprofit's mission is to respect, inspire, promote, and empower islanders around the world. Since our founding, we have focussed mainly on islanders in the Asia-Pacific. Unfortunately, our organization has found it incredibly difficult to garner any support for our programs from our local officials on Hilton Head Island, South

Carolina (where we are based). Despite multiple attempts to reach out to the mayor and the elected members of the town council, we still have yet to receive any support from these local officials. Instead, we have had to rely on the support of national officials, including our elected officials in United States Congress. In practice, this means that we have had to mostly rely on Congressional staff working in Washington, DC.

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Of course, I cannot speak for all nonprofits. That would require a major research project – one that I think is long overdue. Instead, I can only speak from my own experience – although I very much doubt that we are the only American nonprofit engaged in public diplomacy and cultural relations to face such challenges.

From those experiences, I think that we desperately need to redress the disconnect that persists between local officials and nonprofits engaged in American public diplomacy and cultural relations, so as to ensure greater representation (and therefore legitimacy) in these fields.

Although local officials will always need to be focused on their immediate surroundings, they must take a step back from what may bring more votes to the ballot box and see the bigger picture. If anything, we must recognize that the boundaries of "local" and the mechanisms by which we measure the impact of our decisions are outdated if we continue to believe they are bound by our respective communities and geographies.

If we want to unlock the power of the periphery in American public diplomacy and cultural relations, local officials need to become champions of local nonprofits with a global focus. In doing so, they will help pave the way for a broader discourse in public diplomacy – one that will ultimately aid in revitalizing the relevance of rural communities in public diplomacy and thus expand civic engagement across the whole country.

If local officials fail to accept this challenge, I believe that the strength and appeal of American public diplomacy and cultural relations will suffer as a result. It is only by creating an environment in which nonprofits engaged in public diplomacy and cultural relations can thrive in local communities around the country that the United States can ever hope to realize the full potential of American public diplomacy and cultural relations. The distance of nonprofits on the periphery from major cities needs to stop being misunderstood as a disadvantage. Instead, it is time for local officials to champion local such nonprofits as a necessary nexus in the ever-shrinking gap between communities around the world.

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