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Focused But Unclear: A Look at Goal Plurality in PD Practice [1]

The tendency to measure outputs (broadcast hours, column inches, etc.) rather than impact on strategic goal is a commonly voiced criticism in discussions on how to "move the needle" in PD evaluation. However, measuring impact on goal attainment presupposes a clear and aligned system of goals. A saying familiar to many who work in public diplomacy goes something like this: "It is difficult to know what you have accomplished if you have no idea of where you started and what you set out to change." While numerous policy papers provide insight into the official stance of the U.S. government in terms of its public diplomacy goals, consideration of how those who actually enact programs on the ground describe the goals of public diplomacy may shed a different light on the practice.

Similarly, the academic literature has thoroughly debated the general goals and aims of public diplomacy as a function of foreign affairs (e.g., Gilboa 2008, Wang 2006, Pamment 2014), but we have heard very little from the voices of the people responsible for enacting diplomacy

programs, and their perceptions of the larger goals thereof. Fitzpatrick reviewed public diplomacy literature and suggested six functional categories of public diplomacy practice, namely: public diplomacy as advocacy, public diplomacy as communication/information, as relational, as promotional, as warfare/foreign policy propaganda, and public diplomacy as a political strategy. While such a typology is useful, it is not specifically about goals but rather general public diplomacy approaches, and it lacks insight from practitioners themselves, who may have differing views and perspectives on the overarching approach as well as more specific goals of public diplomacy—particularly when put in the context of evaluating programs.

To that end, recent research building on Buhmann's CPD Research Fellowship project has helped to uncover practitioner perceptions when it comes to contemporary goals of public diplomacy, among other aspects of evaluation in practice. Interviews with dozens of public diplomacy practitioners across the U.S. Foreign Service and the various bureaus of the State Department lend insight into how public diplomacy workers actually conceptualize the goals, which their programs should, ostensibly, try to meet.

Most characterized the ultimate goal of their work as “building influence.” How practitioners defined "influence" can be divided into two rough categories. First, practitioners saw public diplomacy as means to influence other nations and societies in order to change certain aspects of it, such as diminishing the likelihood of “embracing a violent extremist ideology,” or simply to make a country’s government more transparent and accountable. However, influence was also described as “building networks of people that support or have a deep understanding of the U.S. perspective.” Many times, building relationship networks takes the form of exposing foreign publics to U.S. culture. In this vein, many interviewees suggested that a goal of public diplomacy programs is simply to “build a relationship with people who might not otherwise been in contact with an American.” This relationship-building with foreign publics was cast as a way to advance the strategic interests of the U.S. In other words, building influence through relationships.

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But how “building relationships” can be connected to more abstract goals as well as to more concrete and measurable objectives for specific public diplomacy programs seems to be a point of confusion. As one interviewee stated, “I would say that public diplomacy has moved away from the USIA days where generalized exposure and people-to-people connections that are sort of more open and open-ended and less defined as sort of a clear set of specific goals...those days are over.” From the point of view of this practitioner, it is perhaps not enough to build “relationship networks.” That said, most practitioners are unclear as how to progress in terms of connecting their activities to larger goals. Moreover, interviewees described programs’ intent on relationship-building through cultural exchanges as long-term

projects—making the measurement of such activities' effects in the nearer term difficult. Indeed, measuring more immediate outcomes of programs was described by one practitioner as "an unrealistic goal for public diplomacy."

While influence and relationships are terms that surfaced in the discussion of public diplomacy goals, many respondents puzzled over how to articulate and specify goals further. As one practitioner stated, when asked to describe goals: "I don't know. That's a good question. I think that's one of the problems we haven't defined...but each individual, depending on where they sit in the organization, seems to have a different idea of how to define that." In fact, views on public diplomacy goals and how to evaluate programs seem to vary by the location of the individual within the State Department structure.

Overall, participants in the study agreed that current public diplomacy goals lack clarity. This, in turn, creates a problem for evaluators and practitioners who are expected to write goals and objectives and create indicators to assess their work. There was a general recognition that tying public diplomacy activities and resulting measurements to larger goals is essential in modern practice—but, no solution as how to accomplish this was offered.

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Positioning this finding generally within Fitzpatrick's categorization of public diplomacy approaches, the interviewees articulated their views of public diplomacy goals largely in line with "relational" and "informational," approaches and, to a lesser extent, in a context of "advocacy." Thus, while outside observers might describe the goals of public diplomacy as multifaceted, practitioners at least focus them within quite distinct public diplomacy approaches, depending on the role they assume and units with which they are affiliated. The general, more categorical focus within public diplomacy approaches, however, comes with diverse understandings and lack of clarity as to what these goals actually entail, how to specify and measure them, and how to tie them in with larger foreign policy goals.

This finding suggests two equally promising roads ahead. On the one hand, if the practice wants to further "move the needle" in public diplomacy evaluation, there needs to be more clarity as to what goals programs are actually moving toward. On the other hand, public diplomacy research needs to support discussion in the practice not merely by suggesting clearer taxonomies, models and goal systems, but also by exploring the emergence and role of goal plurality in context.
