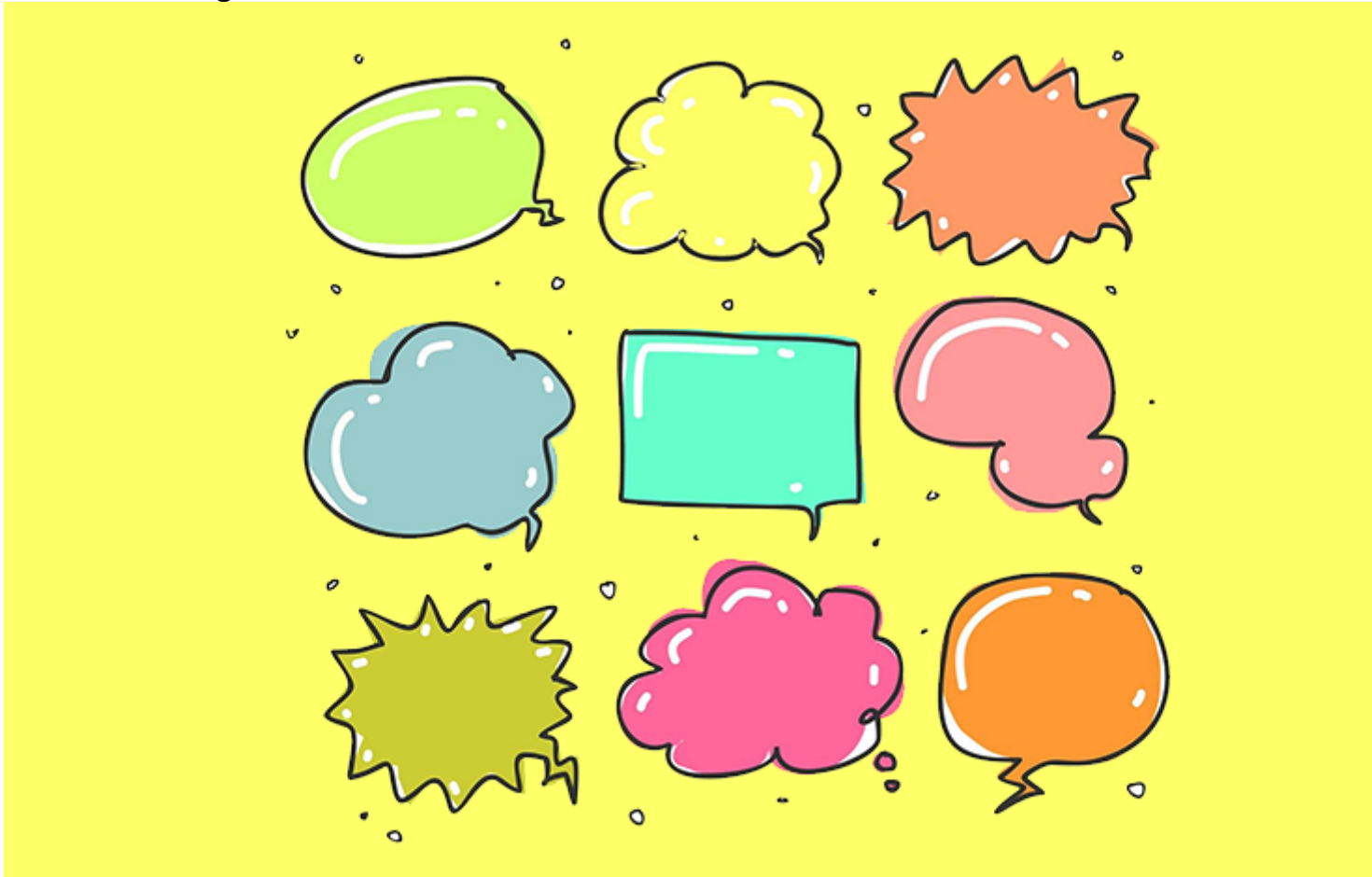


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May 11, 2020 by [Vivian S. Walker](#)

Talking to Strangers: Public Diplomacy at a Distance ^[1]

Here's a sobering truth for our hyper-networked age: we can't make sense of the people we don't know, which compromises our ability to communicate with them. And yet, in today's borderless information space, communication with strangers is as essential as it is unavoidable. During a sustained period of crisis-driven social distancing such as we are now experiencing, in which even our friends and allies have become temporary strangers, the need for mutual understanding and constructive dialogue is especially acute.

Though not specific to the practice of public diplomacy, Malcom Gladwell's new book, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know*, offers useful insights for crisis messaging. As Gladwell notes, faulty assumptions about key audiences result in potentially destabilizing threats to social cohesion. Unfortunately, in today's complex media environment, we rarely have the luxury of knowing our key audiences, especially those we want to influence in the service of short-term strategic interests—and whose values,

beliefs and perceptions differ from ours. At the same time, the imperative to remain relevant and influential in a competitive global information space has never been greater.

Gladwell identifies three factors that contribute to our failure to understand and thus effectively communicate with people we don't know. The first centers around a "default to truth:" people gravitate to information that they believe to be true because it conforms to what they already know—and makes them feel safe. The presumption of truth telling, according to Gladwell, is driven by a desire to preserve community cohesion—a mutually reinforced set of beliefs that decrease the potential for conflict, and social disruption.

All too often we insist on applying our own interests, values and socio-economic legacies to our interpretation of worlds inhabited by others.

Next is what Gladwell calls the "illusion of transparency." We assume that people's external behaviors and expressions are authentic to the degree that they mirror our own responses in a similar situation. This is especially true when we encounter people we don't know or with whom we cannot easily communicate. The tendency to map our own patterns of reaction upon the behaviors of strangers creates a false presumption of understanding.

Finally, Gladwell notes that the failure to understand the specific context in which our audiences operate serves as a major contributor to misunderstanding. All too often we insist on applying our own interests, values and socio-economic legacies to our interpretation of worlds inhabited by others. This creates a set of misconceptions that skew messaging content and ultimately compromise the ability to communicate effectively.

So what can Gladwell's insights teach us about the practice of public diplomacy, especially during a pandemic-driven period of heightened isolation and mistrust? First, the presumption of truth is essential to messaging effectiveness. Outreach content must be accurate, consistent and objective in tone. Why? Because facts invite credibility, and credibility paves the way for influence. By contrast, the failure to communicate truthfully compromises the power of the message. Once audiences believe that they have been lied to, or otherwise lose trust in the source, message impact is significantly diminished, if not completely discredited.

Moreover, in pandemic messaging, or indeed any crisis communication, the truth hurts, but there is no avoiding it. We cannot shy away from information about rates of contagion and mortality, calls for the necessary but painful limitations on individual behavior and social interactions, or reports on the devastating economic and social consequences of the disease. The only way to mitigate the harshness of the message is to emphasize the universality of the threat. No individual community, region or nation is immune, and no measures of response can be taken in isolation. Effective messaging can transform the mutual vulnerability of key audiences into a collective strength.

Indeed, we must learn to revisit our conception of what it means to be a “stranger” in the global information space.

At the same time, nothing is more damaging to effective public diplomacy messaging than the assumption of mutual transparency—that our target audiences share or even mirror our own experiences, beliefs and underlying values. We cannot reliably transform the stranger into someone whom we can readily influence. There are deep and sometimes unmanageable gaps between message content and audience. These gaps are based on fundamental differences in perceptions and outlooks. Effective crisis messaging requires acknowledgement of these limitations, and continually refreshed assessments of audience attitudes and interests to assure impact.

Indeed, we must learn to revisit our conception of what it means to be a “stranger” in the global information space. Yes, we are all “foreign” to one another. But the recognition of difference—in opinion, outlook or experience—can be a powerful force for good. It is, in fact, the first step toward mutual understanding. We need to get beyond the necessary but limited defense and projection of our national interests to comprehend different, even competitive outlooks—especially during a global pandemic. This not the time to stop listening to—and learning from—strangers.

Understanding and acknowledging divergences of opinion or outlook are powerful steps toward the management of its consequences, but we can’t stop there. Effective public diplomacy, in the form of longer-term educational and cultural exchanges, can mitigate difference through sustained outreach, information sharing and dialogue. Public diplomacy programs can also build a body of shared knowledge around and provide context for prevailing threats to our interests—whether local, national or international.

There will be other global crises on the scale of the current pandemic that will threaten social cohesion and make us strangers to one another. Let’s strengthen our public diplomacy platforms with the lessons learned from this one.
