

**Thumbnail Image:**



Jan 20, 2022 by [Ilan Manor](#), [Alicia Fjällhed](#), [Tania Gomez Zapata](#)

## **Has the Advent of StratComms Removed the "Public" from Public Diplomacy?** <sup>[1]</sup>

**Note from the CPD Blog Manager:** *This post is based on a June 29, 2021 debate co-organized by the International Studies Association's [International Communication Section](#) and the International Communications Association's [Public Diplomacy Interest Group](#), which can be viewed [here](#).*

What is the role of the public in public diplomacy?

This question was extensively deliberated at two recent conferences: the 2021 yearly meetings of the International Studies Association (ISA) and the International Communications Association (ICA). Some scholars asked if diplomats now view publics as audiences. This change may be profound as diplomats *engage* with publics and *speak at* audiences. Other scholars, such as [Alina Dolea](#) and [Cesar Jimenez Martinez](#), asked if the public is now a problem that diplomats must manage. A public that can derail nation branding campaigns

through social protest movements, or a public that must be protected from digital disinformation. This is also a profound question, as when governments view the public as a problem, their approach to public engagement and public accountability may change. Lastly, scholars such as Efe Sevin asked, who is the "public" in public diplomacy? As digitalization now blurs the borders of nation states, diplomats may increasingly be targeting the national citizenry and not just foreign populations.

This question was also discussed in a recent debate co-organized by the ISA's International Communication Section and the ICA's Public Diplomacy Interest Group. The debate centered on the following question: Has the advent of strategic communications removed the "public" from public diplomacy? Notably, when public diplomacy scholars hear the term "strategic communications," they often cringe, assuming that strategic communications amounts to influence campaigns that center on shaping the beliefs and actions of foreign publics rather than engaging with foreign publics in two-way conversations. For some, the term strategic communications is contradictory to the very spirit of public diplomacy that is supposed to favor engagement over influence as diplomats listen to foreign publics.

In the debate, Alicia Fjällhed, a PhD student in the Department of Strategic Communications at the University of Lund, offered a very different definition to the term strategic communications. Her main argument was that strategic communications is an umbrella term for a host of communicative acts that aim to achieve some kind of goal. As such, public diplomacy falls within the realm of strategic communications as diplomats hope to influence the worldviews of foreign populations. Fjällhed asserted that what distinguishes communicative acts is not the goal of influence but rather the ethical dimension. For instance, diplomats may listen to social media users and read their comments, or they may surveil digital publics hoping to anticipate future shocks to the international system. While a state's interests may be identical in both cases, the methods vary dramatically. Moreover, covert government communications, the deliberate spread of fake news or the dissemination of state-authored disinformation are all examples of non-ethical strategic communications as opposed to government communications that openly target foreign populations.

---

***When public diplomacy scholars hear the term "strategic communications," they often cringe, assuming that strategic communications amounts to influence campaigns that center on shaping the beliefs and actions of foreign publics rather than engaging with foreign publics in two-way conversations.***

Tania Gómez Zapata of the University of the Americas Puebla argued the opposite: that strategic communication refers to attempts to produce messages that resonate with audiences, while public diplomacy is rooted in the attempt to foster positive perceptions and leverage ties with foreign populations to obtain foreign policy goals. In this sense, strategic communication is a complement of public diplomacy, but it should not be confused with public diplomacy per se. Citing the American public diplomacy model, Gómez Zapata stated that

public diplomacy has evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries due to the advent of digital technologies. Yet these are mere tools used to obtain traditional public diplomacy goals: relationship building. Gómez Zapata also stated that while some countries have been practicing public diplomacy for centuries, countries in the Global South are only now adopting this approach, which is hindered due to lack of resources and training. Lastly, Gómez Zapata argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has led diplomats to rely heavily on digital tools. This process many have led diplomats to focus more on strategic communication activities instead of public diplomacy.

Participants in the debate such as Paweł Surowiec suggested that the advent of strategic communications, and its eager adoption by foreign ministries, is the result of the 'corporatization' of diplomacy. The term strategic communications refers to a host of practices, including measurement and assessment, that were developed in the corporate world and were later adopted by diplomats who have traditionally struggled to measure the actual impact of public diplomacy activities. This Achilles Heel is supposedly overcome thanks to the use of corporate mentalities including targeted campaigns and audience segmentation.

Others suggested that what separates strategic communications and public diplomacy is the public that is targeted: while public diplomacy focuses solely on foreign populations, strategic communications relate to government attempts to interact with the national citizenry. The problem with this distinction is that digitalization blurs the distinction between domestic and foreign publics. For instance, are migrants and diasporas domestic audiences, or foreign ones simply because they reside abroad? Similarly, are foreign workers in a given state considered foreign audiences and thus the target of public diplomacy activities, or domestic publics and thus the target of strategic communications? Even more confounding is the fact that diplomats now actively court domestic publics online and seek to develop a domestic constituency so as to safeguard their shrinking territory within governments.

Finally, participants suggested that the two terms are emblematic of a wider discussion in public diplomacy that examines the centrality of the "public" in diplomatic activities. Scholars know very little about the "public" as both strategic communications and public diplomacy focus empirically on diplomats and their communicative strategies rather than the public and its needs.

While the aforementioned debate did not conclude with a consensus, it did shed light on several areas that require the attention of public diplomacy scholars. First, a clearer articulation of the relationship between the terms "public diplomacy" and "strategic communications." Second, a clearer understanding of which publics form the constituency of public diplomacy. Third, an ethical approach that can help map the different communicative strategies employed by states. Finally, a better understanding of how digitalization blurs the distinction between the global and the local. Hopefully this debate will stimulate such academic work.

The full debate can be viewed [here](#).

---