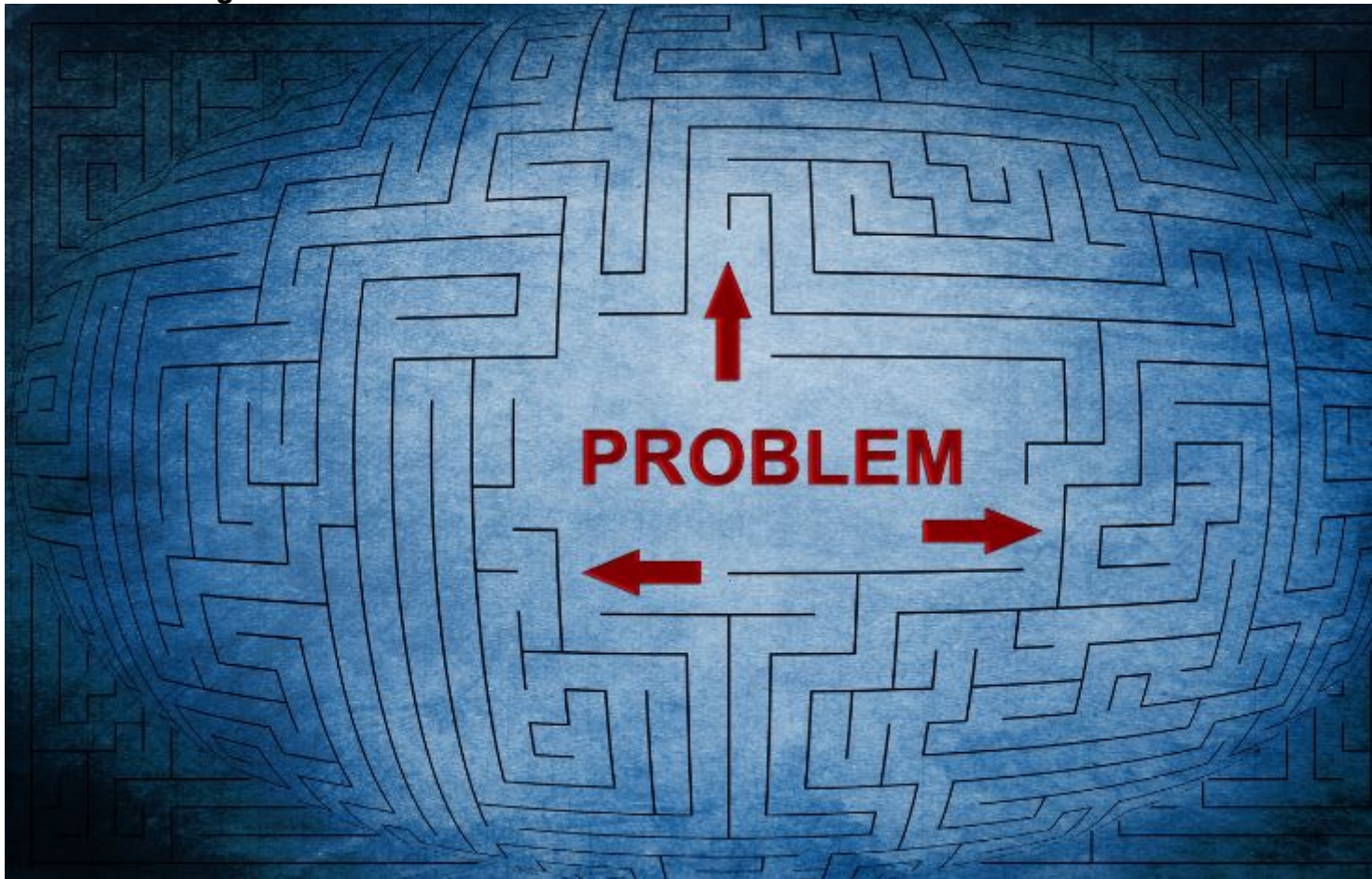


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Feb 03, 2023 by [R.S. Zaharna](#)

Public Diplomacy and Wicked Problems ^[1]

The atmospheric river floodings in California, where the Center on Public Diplomacy is located, literally bring home an overlooked aspect of public diplomacy—what to do about wicked global problems? They also call for a much-needed addition to public diplomacy’s toolbox—collaborative problem-solving.

Similar to the rapid, uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the torrential rains highlight the immediacy of problems threatening humanity and our planet. These non-traditional security threats may well define the future of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy needs to expand its vision and tools to tackle the wicked problems facing humanity and the planet.

Traditional Threats and Public Diplomacy

States still appeared focused on each other as the main security threat. Public diplomacy research and practice have mirrored this focus—their traditional functions concentrate on advancing the interests, goals and images of individual nations.

Over the past years since the CPD's founding, the public diplomacy tools and strategies to promote the interests of individual states have grown increasingly sophisticated. We see this clearly in the upcoming [CPD workshop on strategic narratives](#). In the early years of CPD research, the focus was on messaging strategies via the mass media. The rise of social media and networks expanded the focus from messages to narratives. As RAND scholars David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla succinctly [stated](#), what counts on the information battlefield is whose story wins.

Perhaps nowhere is the growth of public diplomacy for traditional security threats, including “reputational security” that [Nicholas Cull highlighted](#), more evident today than in Ukraine. Observers have lauded the sophisticated and multipronged public diplomacy successes that enabled President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to address parliaments and media audiences in Europe and the U.S. Yet, it was only in 2011, a study entitled “Ukrainian Public Diplomacy Lacks Organization, but Hold Promise” that won the [CPD Best Student Paper](#).

Addressing Wicked Global Problems

Can public diplomacy achieve similar growth and sophistication in addressing non-traditional security threats? I believe so.

A first step in doing so may be to grasp the urgency of wicked problems. The floods—not just in California—but in Pakistan, Australia, China and Europe, highlight the accelerating frequency and severity of these non-traditional threats. It would seem that public diplomacy would be an ideal tool for addressing wicked problems. The question may be: How can we get wicked problems on public diplomacy's radar screen? What roles can public diplomacy play in addressing wicked global problems?

Tame versus Wicked Problems

Beyond the urgency, a second step is appreciating the complexity of [wicked problems](#). Wicked problems are qualitatively different from tame problems. States are used to tame problems that are solved linearly, from identifying a problem, studying its causes and planning and executing a course of action to problem resolution. Tackling tame problems has been an important asset in an actor's public diplomacy toolbox. Japan, as part of its public diplomacy strategy, has lent its formidable experience in constructing bridges by building “Friendship Bridges” for countries facing rising waters.

Tame problems can often be solved by states individually or by partnering with other like-minded state or non-state actors.

Wicked problems, such as rising sea levels that erase villages, represent a different type of beast. Bridges cannot save the villages. Wicked problems defy linear logic. Wicked problems are often so complex that efforts to 'solve' them can create more problems. Rather than chipping away at the problem, individual actions can instead compound and perpetuate the problem.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically demonstrated the interconnectivity of how a wicked problem can spread to global proportions. The individual actions of countries to tackle the virus did little to contain the pandemic. Instead of achieving a secure haven from the virus threat, vaccine nationalism and vaccine diplomacy allowed the virus to mutate and spread from the unvaccinated back to the vaccinated.

Collaboration and Innovation: Levering Diversity

Because of the complexity of wicked problems, a third step is exploring different problem-solving strategies and partnerships typically found in public diplomacy initiatives. Whereas tame problems can be solved by like-minded actors working cooperatively, wicked problems often require unlikely partners and even adversaries to work collaboratively.

Why? Diversity.

Like-minded actors tend to see a problem from the same vantage point or use similar problem-solving strategies. Wicked problems require seeing and approaching complex, interconnected facets of the problem from multiple angles. The key to solving wicked problems is learning how to work differently with different others. It is what Scott Page wrote in *The Difference* as "leveraging diversity" to achieve creative solutions.

The challenge for public diplomacy is learning to leverage diversity for collaborative problem-solving.

Wicked Problems: A Call to the Boundary Spanners

In mid-2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was ravaging the globe, one diplomat asked, "Where was public diplomacy?" It appeared all but absent. Public diplomacy as a tool for state and non-state actors working in the global arena still appears ill-equipped to collaboratively address wicked global problems.

As I have written in *Boundary Spanners of Humanity*, the pandemic, floods and other aspects of climate change are a call to the global boundary spanners to expand the vision and toolbox of public diplomacy. Research needs to move beyond relational public diplomacy to collaborative public diplomacy. What are the factors that facilitate or undermine collaboration? What are the distinctive features of collaborative public diplomacy? Ali Fisher's pathbreaking work is part of collaborative public diplomacy research.

Today, we may not have the tools for addressing wicked problems. But given public diplomacy's demonstrated potential for growth, there is indeed promise.

