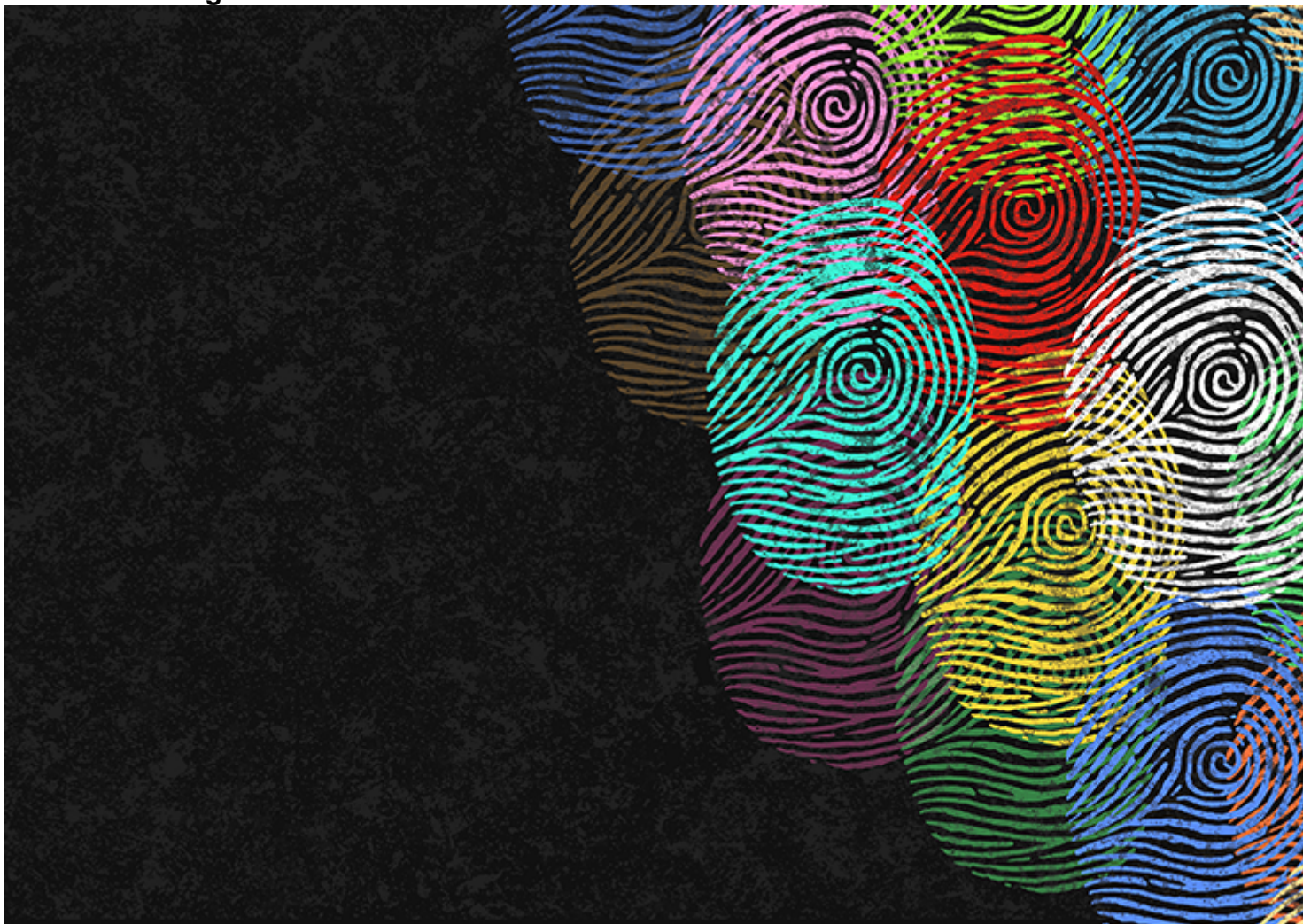


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Feb 05, 2024 by [Hailun \(Helen\) Tian](#)

Restoring the Human Touch to Public Diplomacy ^[1]

The prevailing narrative of PD as "winning hearts and minds" could use an update, its zero-sum game framework replaced with coexistence. Grounded in acknowledging the human element at the heart of public diplomacy (PD), this article proposes a set of human-focused principles for the field. These principles for PD are encapsulated in the acronym **RREP**: **R**espect, **R**eflect, **E**ngage, and **P**ersonify.



Respect

Before embarking on a journey, the traveler must acquire knowledge of the landscape. Similarly, the principle of respect requires practitioners to be outwardly mindful of the challenges in the heads of the audience.

First off, the act of listening itself is a show of respect. In his book *American Avatar*, Sanders proposed that the relationship between the United States and other smaller nations is never balanced. By using the example of American soldiers regularly consulting with village elders in Iraq, he illustrates the importance of not ignoring the weaker partner. However, this show of respect must come off as genuinely appreciative instead of condescending.

Additionally, listening helps take note of the preexisting opinions and predispositions of foreign publics that may damage the image of a country, a vital information-collecting step before the formation of any program.

Furthermore, the principle of respect underscores the importance of localized efforts that exhibit historical and cultural sensitivity. For instance, the distribution and marketing of American films in foreign countries require deciphering aesthetics and culture, as seen in the redesigning of Hollywood movie posters in China using traditional art forms.

Reflect

To reflect is to conduct an inward inspection of oneself. PD programs should be inwardly mindful of how their practices match their rhetoric. On top of that, PD programs should be constantly monitoring their ongoing evaluation.

The principle of reflection should be followed for the sake of credibility. It should force practitioners of PD to look within and ask themselves, can I be trusted? Credibility is a multidimensional construct and is often in the eye of the beholder. It is more easily achieved for lesser-known nations due to few existing predispositions about them and few threats associated with them. For countries of higher status, whose power moves undoubtedly elicit unwanted fear and controversy, credibility should be nurtured through the consistency of "walk" and "talk" and the ability to only advocate for ideals they themselves abide by.

Secondly, the principle of reflection should be applied during the process of program evaluation. Instead of making evaluation a synonym for "budget cut" and leaving it at the very end of a program, reflection should start at the beginning and be viewed as an ongoing process. This is especially important in the age of social media, where "vanity measures" such as clicks and views are gradually eroding the importance of collecting qualitative data and conducting serious self-inspections.

Engage

Engagement—a word often criticized as overused jargon—demands careful definition and application. It addresses where the message spreads, to whom, and how far. It needs to either ensure that the audience is actively listening in or directly let the audience in on the action. True engagement demands a clear definition of the target audience, creating a balance between the general masses and influential individuals and based on the program's objectives.

Interaction is one form of engagement. Getting foreign publics to be interested requires careful calculation and design. Encasing information in attractive "candy wrappers" activates the priming effect, which, according to Kahneman, leads to cognitive ease and causes the audience to be superficial in their thinking. The dropping of personalized leaflets in an amnesty program carried out by the U.S. military in Central Africa, targeted at rebel fighters, exemplifies successful engagement by appealing to individual emotions.

Collaboration is another form of engagement. Not only does it include dialogue between the participating sides, but it also contains specific objectives that offer a foundation for building long-lasting partnerships. One notable example would be the Youth Innovation Competition on Lancang-Mekong Region's Governance and Development (YICMG), which is partially funded by the Chinese government and co-hosted by Fudan University of Shanghai alongside established universities across Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The competition focuses on important initiatives surrounding development in the region and is hosted in different countries each year. The main participants targeted in this competition are high-achieving college students with the potential to become future opinion leaders.

By embracing the principles of RREP in conducting public diplomacy, countries may foster understanding, build meaningful connections, and contribute to a more interconnected global community.

Personify

To personify could be defined as portraying the image of the international actor in an intimate, human-like fashion.

First, it points to endowing universally admired traits and values to countries to make them more relatable. These traits and values depend on the international actor's current assets and diplomacy goals. For small nations, the symbols and characteristics they pin themselves to are usually less ambitious. When it comes to big nations, the job is much trickier since they are expected to shoulder more responsibility. "It is the necessary result of having power, even legitimately attained power, over other people's futures," Sanders writes. The Special Olympics is a perfect example of successful personification for larger nations since it advances the value of inclusion. Such an unalloyed good is less likely to raise suspicions of ulterior motives.

Second, the personification principle points to the utilization of individual human agents as advocates. A prime example would be using personal stories to gain sympathy in situations characterized by asymmetrical power. In his book *War in 140 Characters*, Patrikarakos points to the example of Farah, the girl who "tweets about her individual story of suffering." Unlike government-funded campaigns, personal narratives are apolitical and more emotionally compelling.

The Human Touch

Public diplomacy emerged as a subject because of the spread of democracy, causing the minds and opinions of ordinary people to gain power. It is time to look back and embrace those humble roots. At its core, PD revolves around the human being – complex, susceptible to misconceptions, but open to change through gentle yet assertive nudges.

Instead of increasing the divide and caving into the pressures of geopolitical competition, PD practitioners should try to narrow the divide.

In a world grappling with uncertainty, infusing a human touch into public diplomacy may bring people some comfort. By embracing the principles of RREP in conducting public diplomacy, countries may foster understanding, build meaningful connections, and contribute to a more interconnected global community.
