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From "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" To "Lone Wolf Diplomacy": The New Logic of Digital PD [1]

At a recent international conference, I was asked, how does relationality help understand public diplomacy in today's world?

To answer this question, we must first characterize todays' world. It is a world that is prone to crises, a world that is marked by wars. It is a complex world, given that a crisis in one world region sends immediate ripple effects through other regions.

And, it is a world filled with rage. Not rage against the machine, but rage against the mechanisms of modern diplomacy. These mechanisms, such as the UN, are all rooted in the logic of compromise and in the adoption of a global outlook in which actors, states and people are intrinsically linked to one another. Yet, the age of rage rejects compromises; it abhors globalism; it denounces the UN; and it promises to resurrect a bygone era of splendid national sovereignty.

What is truly remarkable is how the logic of separateness has supplanted the logic of relationality in digitalized public diplomacy. When digital technologies first debuted in the world of public diplomacy, they were viewed as revolutionary tools that could foster ties between diplomats and peoples. Virtual embassies, virtual worlds, social media—all of these offered news forms of connectedness and new methods for managing relations.

Increasingly, digitalized public diplomacy celebrates estrangement from the world. It is in this sense that the logic of separateness has supplanted the logic of relationality in contemporary public diplomacy.

Yet recent trends in digitalized public diplomacy demonstrate that digital tools are increasingly used to undermine connectedness and to strengthen separateness. This is made evident when examining three current digital practices.

The first practice is that of domestic digital diplomacy in which diplomats use social media to target their own citizens. At times, diplomats seek to promote a foreign policy achievement. Other times, diplomats wish to demonstrate how they contribute to national prosperity. The problem is that in the process, diplomats narrate global events through a narrow national prism. The rhetoric of Domestic Digital Diplomacy is that of a national "US." How does the Ukraine War impact "US"? How does the Chinese real-estate market "effect" US? And with this "US" comes a disregard for "Them"—them being other nations, other people, and other

actors.

The second practice is diplomats' use of digital technologies to market, sell and beautify war. War is beautified through images that give weapons of war an aesthetic dimension. NATO, the U.S., Ukraine, Sweden, France, Lithuania all routinely share images of F-16 fighter jets surrounded by that majesty of the aurora borealis or the northern lights. In this way, beautiful war replaces sensible peace.

Ukraine, in particular, has proven adept at raising financial support from digital publics through a host of digital technologies. In all these instances, digital publics become consumers of war. They purchase a "Brave Ukraine" t-shirt while funding another drone or another surface to air missile. By making publics complicit in acts of war, diplomats reduce opposition to war. Even more troubling is the trend of wartime humor with Ukrainian government accounts mocking Russian soldiers being burnt alive; Russian digital accounts celebrating the death of children in Ukraine; or NATO and British social media accounts using humor while threatening to let slip the dogs of war.

Through all these activities, war is transformed from a regrettable last resort into a logical response to tensions between states.

The third practice is diplomats' growing adoption of a combative and derogatory tone online. In more and more countries, diplomats use social media to ridicule other states, to attack their neighbors and to blast the press. Some refer to these activities as "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy." I would call these activities "Lone Wolf Diplomacy," as these activities all undermine a collective effort to address shared challenges.

Diplomacy has been defined as the mediation of estrangement. Increasingly, digitalized public diplomacy celebrates estrangement from the world. It is in this sense that the logic of separateness has supplanted the logic of relationality in contemporary public diplomacy. The main reason for this is that diplomats view the digital world as a "buyers market." If digital publics relish images of war, diplomats will supply images of war. If digital publics increasingly reject multilateralism, diplomats will denounce multilateralism. What diplomats have forgotten in the fog of war is that they have the capacity to shape how people view their world and their nation's role in that world.

Relationality can be reclaimed by diplomats and can serve as the guiding logic of digitalized public diplomacy. But this demands that diplomats do not act as hyperactive PR agents peddling antics and one-line zingers to a digital public that is increasingly afraid and filled with rage. Moreover, diplomats must once again prioritize online interactions over strategic communication campaigns that are primarily used to influence publics and shape their perceptions of events, actors and states.