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# Listening as a Best Practice in Advancing Public Diplomacy and Soft Power <sup>[1]</sup>

The late Joseph Nye wrote eloquently and often about the role of soft power in winning hearts and minds to advance U.S. interests. I would add another essential element of public diplomacy (PD): listening. In my experience as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), all successful PD overseas needs to start with listening.

A former PD colleague of mine, Kerri Hannan, penned a Linked-In piece recently, titled "Messaging Across Borders," in which she noted that effective messaging to foreign audiences "requires deep listening first." When I asked Kerri, currently a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, to elaborate, she noted: "Deep listening is the intentional act of fully attending to another, beyond words, into tone, context and meaning. It respectfully fosters trust, reveals shared values, and opens the door to authentic connection."

Before I joined the Foreign Service, I had an advertising/sales job in Manhattan, marketing U.S. textbooks to overseas schools. In corporate America, I learned, sometimes the hard way, that customers are king, smart and demanding, and that no amount of slick messaging from us would resonate with them unless we first understood their side. And so, during my many years in PD, I made it a point to call on contacts face to face, to get to know them and their organization a bit, to listen first, and talk policy and politics after.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all FSO's had to take a Behavioral Science or Experimental Psychology course before being sent overseas? Today's PD officers are great at explaining or defending policies in different languages, organizing public affairs campaigns, and countering disinformation. We're less great at finding out how foreign contacts view current Domestic Issue X or U.S. foreign policy Y.

**"To have any hopes of partnership and reaching consensus, therefore, we all have to be good listeners, or at least try to in between our text messaging."**

In her book *You're Not Listening*, Kate Murphy points to about a dozen reasons why listening has gone out of vogue in post-modern society. And in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, edited by USC Annenberg's Nicholas Cull, there is a whole section on listening. The unfortunate reality, though, is that most FSOs focus on messaging out, and hitting our pre-set policy talking points one by one, regardless of how they're being received. Robert Banks, another former PD colleague of mine who went on to teach PD at USC, tells me that, because of the tech revolution, "the last three feet will be forgotten in favor of the cost-saving prospect of reaching vast audiences with a single tweet or post."

U.S. politicians and policymakers recognize that selling U.S. policy abroad entails at least some (half) listening on their part. Hence, the large numbers of Congressional delegation (CODEL), Staff Delegation (StaffDel) and Cabinet-level visits that our U.S. Missions host and support every year. And we've even seen some VIP visitors expressly describe their trip as a "Listening Tour," as one senior Bush PD official, Karen Hughes, did post-9/11. The problem is, no matter how attentive or willing, VIP visitors don't have sufficient time on the ground to get a good sense of what different influencers overseas think about the U.S.

PD officers do have time to make sense of things, but it seems no one in Washington, especially these days, wants to know. We hire professional pollsters, but we seldom act on the findings. We count the number of online followers and likes on our social media posts, and we report numbers as evidence of PD success. But how many of us read the online comments that our posts generate, or respond to online comments to bridge divides?

Before Internet, virtual meetings, and smart phones, there was no way around two-way listening. In the 1980's and 1990's, my PD colleagues and I used to spend hours composing "Memcons" (memorandums of conversation) and atmospheric reports for our Mission and area bureau superiors to digest, so that they could have direct quotes from key opinion leaders to consider. And outside of work hours, we'd follow TV talk shows and radio banter to get a read on what mattered most to people. We dutifully reported back positive comments about the U.S., but also knew to avoid generalizations or jumping to conclusions, recognizing the complexities of our audience and environment.

Listening as diplomats and reporting officers is a tad more than just politely staying silent and letting the foreigner do his or her spiel. We have to find out what's important to them, follow up every few moments with relevant questions and comments, have a sense of humor, and show that we understand where they're coming from, even if and when we disagree.

U.S. universities, as well as the State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI), offer some great courses on cross-cultural communication. But as far as listening goes, they assume we already know to dialogue diplomatically. Truth is, aside from the very few of us who studied the art and science of persuasion, we on the front lines have to figure things out on our own, through trial and error. I still remember the lone (frustrating) "Intro to Psych" course I took in undergrad, sitting in a lab with headphones, trying to hear audio signals distorted by electronic noise. The idea was to test how much and how fast a typical human brain could receive a message, amid differing frequencies and volumes of noise.

Today, regardless of whether our source for news and opinion is cable, or podcasts, or late night comedy, all of us in the U.S. invariably have one thing in common with our foreign interlocutors. We all, globally speaking, have to sift through competing signals and noise to reach informed conclusions. To have any hopes of partnership and reaching consensus,

therefore, we all have to be good listeners, or at least try to in between our text messaging.

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