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Jan 05, 2026 by [Andrew Dubbins](#)

Public Diplomacy in the News: America's 250th Birthday, Breaking News Disinformation, & Labubu's Soft Power [1]

"Public Diplomacy in the News" is a CPD Blog series by Andrew Dubbins that spotlights noteworthy stories on public diplomacy topics such as cultural diplomacy, nation branding, exchange programs, international events and conferences, digital diplomacy, and strategic global communications.

A parallel path to the Semiquincentennial. As preparations accelerate for America's 250th birthday in 2026, President Donald Trump has launched Freedom 250, a separate initiative designed to shape high-profile celebrations alongside the congressionally chartered,

bipartisan America250 commission. Freedom 250, the funding arm of a White House task force created in 2024, will back events such as a national prayer gathering, a proposed UFC match on the White House lawn, and nationwide athletic competitions, prompting criticism from some lawmakers and historians who fear politicization of a civic milestone. While America250 leaders insist the two efforts remain distinct yet cooperative, the parallel structure has revived longstanding concerns—echoing the troubled 1976 bicentennial—about how presidential influence, partisanship, and spectacle can reshape national commemorations meant to reflect shared democratic ideals.

Karissa Waddick / USA Today

Disinformation swarms Venezuela's breaking newscycle. Social media platforms were rapidly flooded with misleading and often AI-generated images, videos, and recycled footage after Donald Trump announced that U.S. forces had captured Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, highlighting how weakened content moderation and generative AI tools now amplify confusion during major geopolitical events. Within minutes of the announcement, false arrest images, fabricated videos, and old clips misrepresented as scenes from Caracas spread widely on TikTok, Instagram, and X, racking up millions of views despite being debunked by tools like Google's SynthID and independent fact-checkers. The episode underscored a familiar pattern seen after recent global crises: tech companies' slow or absent responses allow disinformation actors to exploit breaking news for engagement, while even AI chatbots offered conflicting or erroneous accounts of events.

David Gilbert / Wired

AI's breakneck pace tests global governance. Artificial intelligence is accelerating diplomacy and global decision-making, but leaders warn that speed without transparency risks compounding error and inequality. Speaking at the BRIDGE Summit in Abu Dhabi, technologists and policymakers argued that rapid AI-driven decisions are often based on information that is unverified, culturally misaligned, or unevenly distributed, underscoring the need for transparent, "interrogable" systems and clear signals of trustworthiness. Panelists emphasized that global disparities in data access—especially in Africa and the Global South—require localized data ecosystems, while geopolitical competition could fracture AI development into U.S., Chinese, or even tripolar blocs. Across these debates ran a shared concern: AI must be governed by human values, cultural sensitivity, and public accountability, or else those who fail to engage in its oversight will bear responsibility for its inequities and dangers.

Chad de Guzman / Time

Labubu invigorates China's soft power. China's soft power appeared to break into the global mainstream in 2025 as pop culture, consumer brands, entertainment, and technology reached foreign audiences in ways official campaigns long struggled to achieve. From the global craze for "ugly-cute" Labubu dolls and record-breaking animated films to binge-watched streaming dramas, viral "cyberpunk" cities, and fast-growing lifestyle brands, Chinese cultural exports found receptive markets abroad, particularly among younger consumers and in the Global South. At the same time, the picture remained uneven: enthusiasm for learning Mandarin declined in parts of the West, AI firms like DeepSeek faced geopolitical scrutiny, and new platforms such as RedNote highlighted both opportunities and risks for Beijing's image. Taken together, these developments suggest China's influence is increasingly driven

by commercial creativity and grassroots culture rather than top-down state messaging, with long-term impact still uncertain.

He Huifeng / South China Morning Post

Italy's cuisine as living heritage. Italian cuisine has been officially recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, marking the first time the organization has honored an entire national cuisine rather than a single dish or technique. The designation emphasizes not recipes but the cultural practices surrounding Italian cooking—artisanal methods, respect for ingredients, shared meals, and the social bonds formed around the table—following a five-year campaign led by food expert Maddalena Fossati and backed by the Italian government. Announced in December 2025 in Delhi, the recognition underscores food's role in preserving language, gestures, and intergenerational knowledge while promoting social inclusion and well-being, and it sets a precedent for future acknowledgment of culinary traditions worldwide as vital expressions of human culture.

Matt Ortile / Conde Nast Traveler
