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Boundary Spanners of Hope in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Already, early 2026 feels bleak for public diplomacy for many of us as we watch escalating friction among states. But what if the problem is our lens, and we're missing a key part of the whole picture? I write with a spirit of hope, and a call for needed change in public diplomacy's focus. Although states may dominate the world stage and global attention, there is a flurry of activity offstage. That's where public diplomacy scholarship needs to direct its attention, with the same drive and determination that first fueled the nascent field some 25 years ago.

States and a Dangerous World

Through the lens of states, the picture is indeed bleak. We are only a few months into the new year and already public diplomacy has taken another beating in what French diplomat Manuel Lafont Rapnouil described in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* as the "brutalization of diplomacy." Rather than being a tool for pursuing peace, diplomacy has been a cover for prolonging military operations.

Public diplomacy's link to soft power suggested by Joseph Nye posited a view of influence based on attraction rather than coercion. Nye suggested that soft power would lead to greater cooperation among states because of shared values. Instead, the race to accumulate soft power has intensified competition. In his book, *Reputational Security*, Nicholas Cull likened the current global military, economic and cultural rivalry among leading powers to the early 20th century, when rivalries boiled over into the Great War.

If we look at state behavior, states appear to view each other as the primary existential threat today. The picture is not only bleak but also portends a more dangerous world.

One might be tempted to think that success is based on the survival of the fittest, an observation attributed to Charles Darwin, the famous 19th century evolutionary biologist. The mantra suited the times. It was the dawn of the industrial era and the age of imperialism as Western powers competed in a global quest for markets, territory, and resources. The parallels of today are uncanny.

Cooperation—The DNA of Humankind

However, the expression was not by Darwin, but by his rival, Herbert Spencer. Darwin suggested the opposite: Those societies with the greatest number of "sympathies" flourished.

That observation has borne out.

The much-touted strength of the Neanderthal was impressive and still holds sway in popular expressions that valorize strength. Yet, for all their individual strength, the Neanderthal lacked the capacity for cooperation, a trait possessed by the homo sapiens. Although much

physically smaller, the homo sapiens band together to hunt prey, navigate the open seas, and eventually would send ships even to other planets. Whereas the Neanderthal died out long ago, homo sapiens' capacity for cooperation has enabled them to thrive.

At no time was that instinctive drive to cooperate and provide mutual aid more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic. People spontaneously jumped online to sing, exercise, dance, and play together, bringing comfort to themselves and others.

This deep evolutionary drive to connect and collaborate is one reason for hope.

Global Dynamics of Connectivity and Diversity

Another compelling reason for hope is that the prevailing global dynamics of connectivity favor our collaborative instincts. Nothing underscored the extent of human connectivity more than the pace and spread of the virus during the pandemic six years ago. Some researchers suggest we are hyper-connected. With that connectivity comes contact with others— and an awareness of our diversity.

"Now is precisely the time for a redirection and resilience in public diplomacy research; a new surge in research that resonates with the human DNA of cooperation."

For some, this dual dynamic of connectivity and diversity is cause for alarm. We see it in the rise of populism, strict immigration policies, and new border walls. This mindset of separateness fit with the carved-up world of the 19th and 20th centuries. That mindset is out of alignment with the connectivity and diversity that define global dynamics today. A critical insight from my study of post-9/11 public diplomacy: communication strategies that align with prevailing dynamics enjoy greater reach and effectiveness.

Ironically, even nationalist movements have intuitively tapped into the dynamic of connectivity and diversity as they seek to bond with other nationalists across borders.

While connectivity and diversity may bring friction, they are also our greatest sources of innovation, especially in problem-solving. Diversity brings different perspectives and with it, different problem-solving approaches.

This is where boundary spanners, people and organizations working together to tackle problems, offer hope. They are the off-stage players. Boundary spanners are not bridges between separate entities but connectors recognizing boundaries as points where people come together. Markets have always emerged at borders because that's where people gather. Connecting and exchanging diverse goods and ideas.

In an AI-augmented world, the authenticity and fellow-feeling that boundary spanners bring matter more than ever.

For Gen Z, climate is framed as an existential threat in the research, both by researchers and

by Gen Z themselves—not competition with other states.

Rise of the Global Community

The DNA of cooperation and the accelerating dynamic of connectivity has helped fuel the rise of the global community. This is a third reason for hope – that comes with added insight.

Harvard historian Akira Iriye documented the growth of international nongovernmental organizations from 135 at the start of the 20th century to thousands by the end—what he called a "global community" driven by "global consciousness," or a "fellow feeling" for others that transcends borders.

If we look more deeply into his research, the surges emerged in the lead-up to the Second World War and again during the Cold War. As Iriye noted in *Global Community*, it was *precisely* at the time when geopolitical tensions among states were making for a turbulent and dangerous world that the global community offstage was redoubling its efforts.

We see this same pattern today. While states have grown increasingly competitive, boundary spanners across the globe have stepped up their collaborative activities. Just last November 2025, for example, artists, activists, and cultural leaders gathered in Brazil for the Global Artivism Convening, using art to address climate change and systemic injustice. Foundation assets have reached a record \$1.5 trillion. Individuals, such as Greta Thunberg and Chef José Andrés with World Central Kitchen, demonstrate how singular efforts can spark a global movement or respond to human needs. There is even an AI for Good platform, which is leveraging the power of AI to address the Sustainable Development Goals.

While states command the stage, the activity offstage—among boundary spanners—is the most compelling reason for hope. In an AI-augmented world, the authenticity and fellow-feeling that boundary spanners bring matter more than ever.

A Unique Moment for Redirection in Public Diplomacy Scholarship

As we move through 2026, public diplomacy scholarship faces a choice. We can continue studying how states can better compete with one another, thereby fueling an increasingly dangerous cycle. Or we can shift our scholarly attention and research from the states on stage to the vigorous activity offstage. Now is precisely the time for a redirection and resilience in public diplomacy research; a new surge in research that resonates with the human DNA of cooperation, aligns with the global dynamics of connectivity and diversity, and responds to this unique moment of danger when boundary spanners historically surge. The hope is there, and the need for action is there. We just need to look through the right lens and see the bigger picture.
