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Influence Without Persuasion: Public Diplomacy as Legibility Infrastructure ^[1]

Influence is often treated as the reward for persuasive communication. In practice, it is more often the result of being consistently readable over time.

Public diplomacy is still often evaluated as if persuasion is the main outcome . But the sequence has flipped: before persuasion can work, meaning has to hold—long enough to be recognized—and audiences have to remain willing to interpret you.

That is why the problem is not messaging. It is what messaging now lands inside. It lands inside an ecosystem of overlapping publics and intermediaries where meaning is recut, re-ranked, and reinterpreted before it can persuade.

The environment changed—and the sequence flipped

In practice, public diplomacy is still often designed and assessed through a persuasion lens. Operationally, “effectiveness” is most often tracked through reach, engagement, satisfaction, and perception—rather than whether an actor remains readable under stress (ACPD ). Those indicators can capture message performance while missing the deeper question the field increasingly faces: whether interpretation itself is still stable enough for influence to take hold. That assumption held longer than most theories admit, in part because the channels that carried meaning were relatively stable.

That stability is gone. Messages detach from their original setting almost immediately. They move across domestic and foreign publics at once, get reframed by intermediaries, and return carrying meanings the sender never offered. What once looked like a communication challenge is now a structural condition. Audiences are no longer discrete; context no longer travels intact. What scholars describe as context collapse helps explain why. And the baseline definition of public diplomacy itself emphasizes outreach and engagement beyond formal state-to-state channels (State Department). In this environment, persuasion can underperform—not because arguments are weak, but because audiences are no longer meeting the message as an argument in the first place.

They are reading the actor.

Legibility is the scarce resource

Before people decide whether they agree with what a state says, they decide how to read the state itself. Is it consistent or improvisational? Principled or pressured? These judgments rarely announce themselves, but they sit underneath every attempt to persuade. When they harden, persuasion starts to bounce. When they soften, persuasion becomes almost effortless.

This is why credibility is too blunt a term. The sharper variable is legibility: whether an actor

can be read coherently over time. Legibility is not likability, and it does not require agreement. It means that words, actions, and silences still add up to something audiences can recognize without constantly reinterpreting intent.

When legibility weakens, a predictable pattern appears. Explanations multiply—not because communicators become careless, but because meaning no longer arrives intact. The tone shifts: more clarifying, more defensive, more urgent. At the same time, the returns thin.

Volatility in how you're read

This is what volatility in interpretation looks like. The same act reads as reassurance in one setting and as threat in another. Silence reads as restraint to some and evasion to others. This is not ordinary misunderstanding. It is the disappearance of a shared baseline for how to read the speaker.

Once volatility sets in, persuasion becomes a poor diagnostic of influence. Attention can rise. Engagement can spike. Sentiment can even lift briefly. None of that guarantees influence when decisions involve cost, alignment, or risk. Cultural familiarity can spread without altering how an actor is interpreted when stakes rise—one of the dynamics often discussed under soft power.

These efforts are not failures. They are boundary markers. They show where persuasion ends and where interpretive conditions begin.

When influence is built into defaults

Influence forms differently. It accumulates when an actor's words, actions, and silences align often enough that audiences no longer need constant explanation to know how to read them. Over time, that alignment produces a stable interpretive frame. Disagreement can persist inside it, but meaning does not collapse. What disappears first is not support, but legibility.

"Messages detach from their original setting almost immediately. They move across domestic and foreign publics at once, get reframed by intermediaries, and return carrying meanings the sender never offered."

This is why influence can arrive without persuasion at all. Sometimes it is embedded rather than performed. It shows up as an operating reality others adapt to, not as an argument they must accept. In those cases, behavior changes first and explanation becomes optional. The logic is well captured in the Brussels Effect and its earlier articulation (2012).

Sometimes influence is visible. Sometimes it is infrastructural.

The triage pattern

This also explains why persuasion often intensifies precisely when influence weakens. Over-explanation can read as anxiety. Rapid-response habits can read as reactivity. When an actor

is already being read as unstable, more messaging can amplify doubt rather than settle it.

Communication turns into triage: more frequent, more emphatic, less effective with each round, as institutions try to stabilize interpretation rather than advance an argument.

In these moments, persuasion does not fail because it is poorly executed. It fails because interpretation has already shifted. You can see how quickly a program becomes the message when legitimacy questions attach to the structure itself, as reflected in U.S. government discussion of Confucius Institutes ([GAO](#); [CRS](#)).

Withdrawal from interpretation

What these cases share is sequence. Influence depends on interpretive stability. When stability exists, persuasion can be light, indirect, sometimes barely visible. When it erodes, persuasion becomes louder and more visible—often with diminishing returns. The escalation itself is revealing. It signals strain in how meaning is being received.

There is a deeper failure mode public diplomacy discussions often miss because it is quieter than backlash. Interpretation itself is participation. Publics do not only decode messages; they decide whether an actor is worth the effort of interpretation at all. When legibility erodes over time, the risk is withdrawal from interpretation. Audiences stop investing attention in signals that feel unstable, self-justifying, or exhausting. The broader information environment is already tracking rising selective avoidance ([Reuters](#)).

When withdrawal takes hold, persuasion does not merely fail. It stops registering.

That is the moment when more communication is often the wrong instinct.

Public diplomacy as legibility infrastructure

None of this argues against persuasion. It argues for sequencing. Persuasion works best when legibility is intact—when audiences still know how to read the actor and still consider the actor worth reading. When legibility degrades, persuasion becomes louder, more visible, and less reliable as a tool.

Public diplomacy is better understood, then, not as a messaging function, but as legibility infrastructure: the work of sustaining readable patterns over time so disagreement does not collapse into distortion. Influence becomes less something achieved than something maintained.

Persuasion is what states do when legibility starts to fail.

That line is not a provocation. It is a diagnostic. It names the moment many institutions recognize but rarely articulate: persuasion surges when meaning stops holding.

In an environment where context moves faster than intention, influence tends to accrue less to the most polished actor than to the one that can still be read—clearly, consistently, over time.
