

Centers of Gravity in Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Case Study of U.S. Efforts in South Africa

By Amelia Arsenault



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Centers of Gravity in Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Case Study of U.S. Efforts in South Africa

Public diplomacy is at a crossroads. The rapid dissemination of new communication technologies has upended traditional mechanisms of information provision and dissemination utilized by public diplomacy practitioners. States, whether democracies or totalitarian regimes, no longer enjoy a monopoly over information. Rather, they often appear powerless in the face of sophisticated media organizations, corporations, nonprofits schooled in the arts of strategic communication, and a technologically savvy public. Rather than proactively influencing public perceptions of foreign and domestic policy, governments are increasingly reacting to the messaging strategies of entities and forces (at home and abroad) over which they have little or no control.¹ Of course, public diplomacy involves much more than one-way strategic communication and messaging campaigns. However, these changes are complicating all forms of public diplomacy, from monologic, to dialogic, to collaborative efforts at connecting with foreign publics.²

The Arab Spring was just one event (or more accurately a series of events) that highlighted the ramifications of these decentralized and often-convoluted processes of information dissemination for national reputations, international relations, and foreign policy. Uprisings that at one time might have remained purely domestic news, or more likely, a conversation structured by formal domestic and international political actors, were shaped by a complex interaction of social media, popular protests, neighboring polities,

religious movements, and domestic and transnational reform and human rights organizations. The mere fact that the protestors driving uprisings in the Arab world were sharing information and tactics with leaders of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S. is telling of the scope of change facilitated by today's modern media architecture. Of course, as many scholars have pointed out, social media was not the driving force of the Arab Spring.³ However, what is clear is that the complicated interactions between old and new media sources, leveraged by a variety of different actors, had concrete and strategic outcomes. For example, the rhetoric if not the reality of these revolutions carried to the world via social and traditional media platforms helped to undergird support for strategic intervention in Libya.⁴ Most importantly for this working paper, the events of the Arab Spring heightened governmental (and academic) preoccupation with the relationship between information and power and propelled formerly reluctant states to adopt or expand social media and other Internet technologies as tools of strategic communication and public diplomacy around the world.⁵

Several scholars have provided excellent analyses of how public diplomacy practitioners are using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to reach out to foreign publics, with varying degrees of success, in countries like South Korea, Germany, and the United States.⁶ A related group of academics have begun to examine state attempts to formulate "strategic narratives" that either support their specific policy agenda or constrain the actions of others.⁷ However, what both of these bodies of literature share is that they privilege government actors as the starting point of their analysis. This working paper takes a different tactic. It starts by looking at the broader dynamics of mediated interaction and then explores the role of public diplomacy professionals within that interaction. Using U.S. public diplomacy towards South Africa regarding recent changes to the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) as a case study, it uses a combination of network and content analysis and interviews with public diplomacy practitioners to empirically explore the dynamics of public diplomacy 2.0. Specifically, it identifies key constituents involved in the South African HIV/AIDS epidemic

and their proximity to digital conversations regarding the fact that the United States would be scaling back direct PEPFAR funding to South Africa as well as the relative voice of US public diplomats within that conversation. It hopes to uncover: (1) How are specific actors—on *both* sides of issues pertinent to public diplomacy—attempting to use old and new media tools?; and (2) To what extent do these efforts resonate within social media and other mainstream media online when compared with other voices present in the online conversation? In order to fully explore these questions, it first examines the uneasy relationship between technology and public diplomacy, arguing for an academic approach that puts audiences and/or issue publics at the forefront rather than PD practitioners. It then examines how the dynamics and trends discussed in the first half of the working paper unfold in the process of a case study of U.S. public diplomacy in South Africa.

Toward a Copernican Approach to Public Diplomacy

In the early 16th century, Nicolaus Copernicus helped to spark the scientific revolution with his heliocentric approach to the study of astronomy, putting forth the idea that the sun rather than the earth was the center around which the known universe revolved. It is certainly not my intention to equate this working paper with Copernicus's *Commentariolus*. However, I would like to stress that the Copernican analogy has relevance for both the academic study of and practitioner discussions of the role of new communication technologies in public diplomacy, or what is popularly referred to as public diplomacy 2.0. Contemporary discussions and analysis—which are more often than not focused on U.S. public diplomacy efforts run by the State Department and its constituent bodies—typically begin with public diplomacy outreach efforts and then examine how (old and new) media conversations rotate around this center. Khatib et. al, for example, assessed the efforts of the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) in the Department of State by looking at discussion threads about Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo. The websites, their main subject of analysis, were selected "on the basis of a list of popular sites supplied by the DOT and from internet searches (through Yahoo and Google)

for relevant sites where discussions of the speech took place with DOT participation.”⁸ Similarly, most formal internal assessments of U.S. State Department new media outreach efforts focus on descriptive statistics about how many people liked a particular post or photo or the popularity of a particular hashtag generated by State employees.⁹ These types of studies provide valuable insights into how particular PD practitioners conceive of themselves and foreign publics and articulate or assert influence. They also provide a means of assessing how citizens who have come into contact with particular PD messages respond to or engage with that content. In this decentralized information age, however, beginning a study of public diplomacy 2.0 with a narrow focus on the activities undertaken by self-defined public diplomacy practitioners constitutes an artificial starting point that limits and shapes the research and the findings. It misses important context. What if, for example, the DOT completely missed the right websites for engaging with the Muslim community after Obama’s speech? What if the hashtag assessed by internal State Department evaluations were completely dwarfed by a parallel one? In order to seriously engage with the role of public diplomacy efforts in today’s complex information environment, and to achieve a meaningful assessment of the role of state attempts to influence and engage with international communication networks, it is also important to start with the broader informational context and assess the role of public diplomacy activities within that sphere. To abuse another analogy, those interested in public diplomacy either in terms of theory or of practice should be encouraged to move beyond focusing on our part of the elephant.

I argue that this geocentric approach to examining public diplomacy evolved out of the convergence of four trends: (1) Consistent acceptance of largely arbitrary bureaucratic practices in shaping the academic study and formal evaluation of public diplomacy; (2) The legacy of technological determinism that assumes rather than tests the ability of new technologies to reach and influence intended audiences and related beliefs engendered by America’s historic role as the primary axis of global media flows during the Twentieth Century mass media era; (3) A push towards

datafication and evaluation of efficacy, particularly since 9/11; and finally, 4) The meteoric diversification and fragmentation of the global media environment, which coincided with a depolarization of international geopolitics following the end of the Cold War.

The Bureaucrat Framework

In countless conferences, symposia, and dialogues, current and former public diplomacy practitioners have responded to academic evaluation and discussion of public diplomacy with comments to the effect of, “But that’s not public diplomacy.” Numerous articles and reports have debated definitions and suggested limiting the subject of analysis to particular practices, practitioners, and definitions of PD.¹⁰ In a list compiled in 2010, Kathy Fitzpatrick, for example, identified no less than 150 different definitions of public diplomacy.¹¹ I have personally participated in numerous roundtables and meetings where the question of “how public diplomacy literature can be made more relevant to practitioners” arose. While I am all for research and analysis that reaches outside the Ivory Tower and has relevance for practitioners, a central frustration is that academic studies of public diplomacy are too often bounded by bureaucratic definitions of who is a public diplomat and what constitutes public diplomacy. In reality, citizens on the ground pay little attention to whether outreach comes from USAID, Public Affairs, International Information Programs, etc. Defining what constitutes public diplomacy is of limited importance. More germane, both theoretically and practically, is identifying the range of different actors concerned with influencing foreign publics in the international system in service of particular projects, world views, identities, etc. and the relative position of state actors within that cacophony.¹² In order to assess how public diplomacy as a practice permeates the broader public sphere in the context of today’s diffuse and dynamic media ecology, we must first start with a question or issue related to foreign policy and then work backwards. This means identifying a broader issue public and then exploring which agencies, individuals, and voices involved in public diplomacy can accurately be labeled as “influencers.” This approach also sheds light on the extent to which public diplomacy

practitioners are successfully reaching and engaging with relevant communities and resonating in broader conversations.

Visions of Technology

Numerous scholars have documented the relationship between the dispersal of media technologies and public diplomacy techniques. Jan Melissen, for example, considers the communications revolution and the subsequent dispersal of media platforms as the primary reason that “public opinion [is] an increasingly important component of international relations.”¹³ And Eytan Gilboa has argued that “interrelated revolutionary changes in politics, international relations, and mass communication have greatly expanded the media’s role in diplomacy.”¹⁴

Even before its emergence as a world power, the U.S. exercised its political, economic, and political interests both at home and abroad largely through information networks. This dates back to the American Revolution, when the fledgling government sought to develop a nationwide communication system (e.g. the introduction of a national postal system) in order to unite a politically, geographically, and economically dispersed group of colonies into a United States of America. These domestic reforms also helped to facilitate its emergence as a world power. As Paul Starr persuasively argues in *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication*,

[even] in the early nineteenth century, when the United States was neither a world power nor a primary center of scientific discovery, it was already a leader in communications—in postal service and newspaper publishing, then in development of the telegraph and telephone, later in the movies, broadcasting, and the whole repertoire of mass communications. . . . The American framework of communications has been a remarkable engine of wealth and power creation, so much so that its

influence now extends over not merely a continent, but the world.¹⁵

Some go so far as to argue that while the United States never amassed a colonial empire in the traditional sense of the world, it has in many ways operated as the center of a de facto empire, built not on traditional colonial and mercantilist relationships, but upon trade agreements, cultural cache, and hard power capacity, undergirded by and unparalleled influence over the means of international networked communication.¹⁶ It has been a world leader in the deployment and control of undersea telegraph cables, telephones, cinema, and mass communication broadcast technologies, not to mention the center of Internet and mobile telephony development and deployment. Not surprisingly, America's privileged position at the center of global communication networks has translated into shifts in public diplomacy efforts as well as foreign policy in general. Film played a central role in U.S. public diplomacy efforts during World War I and World II. In the 1950s, the USIA provided one of the largest global circulators of American cultural products through its mobile cinema units and cultural programs. International broadcasting, first in the form of radio, then in television moved to the center of public diplomacy efforts, coinciding with the global expansion of these technologies. Most recently, in 2010, Hillary Clinton announced that the Internet freedom agenda would take center stage in U.S. foreign policy.

Visions of technology and public diplomacy have always been inextricably intertwined. Each new generation of communication technology seems to bring forth a promise of more targeted communications that looks at U.S.-foreign relations as either a monologue moving from point A to point B or a dialogue consisting of two bounded and easily identifiable parties. As Nicholas Cull observes, it also brings a challenge of adopting notoriously resistant bureaucratic systems, practices, and attitudes developed during previous technological regimes to the new communication technology of the moment. The emergence of Web 2.0 and social media technologies suggested a turn towards more relational,

dialogic, and two way forms of communication that were not necessarily easy transitions for many public diplomats who cut their teeth during a mass communication era.¹⁷ It also fit nicely with a broader societal turn toward datafication, metrics, and evaluation.

The Evaluation Turn

Particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century, each evolution of media technology has invited concern with documenting and evaluating the messages carried via these platforms. During the 1930s, the State Department measured the success of its outreach efforts to foreign journalists in terms of column inches in foreign newspapers.¹⁸ The Federal Communications Commission established the Foreign Broadcast Monitoring Service at the behest of the U.S. State Department in 1941 to analyze and monitor the shortwave propaganda radio stations emerging around the world.¹⁹ Until the rise of social media, however, research into mediated public diplomacy took two bifurcated paths, dictated in part by technological restrictions. On the one hand, there was the projection of information via such sources as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and general press releases, and speeches designed to attract media attention. The principal concern with research into those broadcasts was: who was listening and to what effect? On the other hand, U.S. government programs such as the Foreign Broadcast Monitoring Service were designed to collect information about what foreign media were saying about the United States. Social mediated public diplomacy offers at least the promise of collapsing these two mechanisms, of creating an integrated system of mediated action and reaction that integrated messages out and messages in and provided a quantifiable means of reaching out to foreign publics and media organizations as well as engaging with those constituencies in real time.

It is no surprise that this was the case, because the rise of social media also coincided with broader calls for demonstrating governmental efficacy. Over the last two decades, governments and multilateral organizations around the world have expressed a greater

interest in program and performance monitoring and evaluation (M&E).²⁰ Calls for M&E of U.S. public diplomacy efforts expanded in earnest in the mid-2000s, after a series of a series of high-profile reports commissioned in the wake of September 11 highlighted the need to “move the needle forward” in terms of enhancing America’s image abroad.²¹ Components of government concerned with public diplomacy, once primarily considered a long-term component of diplomacy, began to feel greater pressure to demonstrate the efficacy of short-term initiatives and programs. It was against this backdrop that social media emerged as a new platform for transnational social engagement. Where many public diplomacy activities are difficult to quantify, social media platforms—digital networks comprised of quantifiable and scalable human nodes around the world—on the surface might appear comparatively easy to monitor and evaluate. Every Tweet, every Facebook like, every Instagram follower can be quantified and analyzed in real time. Those familiar with social media metrics, of course, realize that it’s not that simple. Social media analytics methods are still nascent and often surface-level, inside and outside of government. Raw numbers of followers and friends do not equal engagement. Following the 2011 reorganization of the U.S. State Department’s International Information Programs (IIP) and moves to expand social media usage in the wake of the Arab spring, there was a push to expand the State Department outreach base using paid advertising. According to a 2013 report by the Government Accounting Office, IIP spent approximately \$630,000 on the two campaigns, which increased the number of fans for the English Facebook pages from about 100,000 to more than 2 million for each page.²² In the aftermath of public revelations about State use of social media advertising, this practice has disappeared, and there is increasing recognition among teams responsible for social media monitoring and usage that engagement and reach are not necessarily commensurate.²³ However, in both evaluation units and in academic research, focus on descriptive statistics (e.g. number of likes, retweets, etc.) remains dominant. This is partially attributable to a rapidly changing media ecology where the complexity of information flows makes sheer quantification one of the only accessible metrics tools. This trend is aggravated by continuous revisions to the terms

through which outsiders may access social media platform data (e.g. Twitter regularly revises its API rules) and by legal restrictions on the government collection of personally identifiable data (even if that data is public, as is the case with most social media platforms).

The Changing Media Ecology

The exponential increase in the size, scope, and community of interests involved in the circulation of media products has altered how public diplomatic outreach is conceived and articulated. Particularly following the Arab Spring, countries around the world began to shift resources from programs that *presented* public diplomacy messages to those that attempted to utilize social networks and Internet and mobile technologies to form *relationships* with foreign publics. In April 2011, for example, the State Department archived its America.gov website, an ambitious digital information portal launched in 2008 to “foster two-way conversation between American and people in other countries.” Instead, it redirected its digital resources towards a “more proactive” web engagement strategy. As Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Information Programs Duncan MacInnes explained, “The new paradigm... is people don’t visit you, you have to go to them.”²⁴ This trend is not limited to the United States. In October 2010, for example, Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-Hwan’s inaugural address announced a paradigm shift to “total and complex diplomacy,” which engages both diplomats and the private sector in “digital network diplomacy...to enhance mutual understanding and our [Korea’s] national image.”²⁵

Despite the popularity of social media in modern day public diplomacy, there is growing awareness that social media is not a magic bullet. For many users, Internet tools serve (and will likely continue to serve) as little more than a unidirectional information provision system, and one that rarely reaches its intended targets. In other words, just because a diplomat tweets doesn’t mean that anyone cares. As social media reaches maturity (or its next evolution) and social mediated public diplomacy 2.0 efforts experience mixed results, we are seeing a shift away from a PR/media-based approach

on the one hand and a person-to-person “last three feet” approach on the other hand. Instead, we are seeing the rise of a “marketplace of ideas” approach, perhaps best encapsulated by former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale: “These new challenges force us to ask, how do we stand out and respond in such a crowded and complex environment? Our answer is simple: by taking our public diplomacy into the marketplace of ideas.”²⁶ However, unlike corporate and nonprofit models of social media outreach, various organizations within the U.S. government are responsible for the types of marketing efforts described by McHale. These include entities within the State Department such as: the Office of Web Engagement, the Office of Innovative Engagement, and the Office of CO.NX/DVC in the Bureau of International Information Programs ((IIP); the Office of Digital Engagement and the Rapid Response Unit (which also looks at traditional media) in the Bureau of Public Affairs (PA); the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA); the Office of eDiplomacy, and the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication. While not often the focus of public diplomacy literature, these DOS e-diplomacy efforts are complemented by those of a host of governmental entities ranging from the US Agency for International Development to the Department of Defense, not to mention individual accounts maintained by individuals representing myriad U.S. government organizations. As much as public diplomacy practitioners, and to a certain extent PD scholars, would like to examine and isolate “official” public diplomacy efforts practiced by “public diplomacy professionals,” these distinctions have little meaning for target populations. While conceiving of the contemporary media environment as a “marketplace of ideas” is problematic in that it conflates a complex range of processes through which states can and should reach out to foreign publics (e.g. in the form of one-way communication, dialogue, and collaboration) with commercialization and the buying and selling of ideas, it still has utility. If we take the metaphor to its logical conclusion and use it to examine public diplomacy, we are left with the conclusion that states, particularly global powers, are not unitary sellers in the marketplace of ideas. Rather they are umbrella organizations, constituted by a

host of actors, each with a slightly (or sometimes radically) different idea to “sell,” not to mention methods of making “the sale.” There have been larger overtures made toward these trends, such as the Social Media Working Group (SMWG) that Under Secretary Tara Sonenshine and Senior Advisor Alec Ross convened in October 2012 to “identify ways to advance the Department’s strategic use of social media for 21st century statecraft.” The following section includes a case study of U.S. public diplomacy towards South Africa regarding PEPFAR reforms. It begins not with a focus on PD practitioners, but with the context (what McHale might term the marketplace of ideas) surrounding contemporary negotiations and discussions about solutions to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the corresponding role of the American government within those efforts.

U.S. Public Diplomacy in South Africa: An Ecosystem of Communications

South Africa has been identified repeatedly as a “pivotal African state” for American foreign policy in Africa.²⁷ It is the only African state listed by the U.S. Commerce Department as one of the 10 key emerging markets; and it represents approximately 88 percent of all market capitalization in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸ The Africa Advisory Panel Report commissioned by Colin Powell in 2004 cautioned, “It is likely that South Africa will be a necessary partner in any operation in Southern Africa.”²⁹ And the 2002 National Security Strategy for the United States, in the first of its “three interlocking strategies for the region,” stressed that “countries with major impact on their neighborhood such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia are anchors for regional engagement and require focused attention.”³⁰

The United States has played an equally important strategic role for South Africa. Commercial trade between the two countries began in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, these trade connections were firmly established. Americans wore South African leather on their feet, dressed in South African wool products, and adorned themselves with South African diamonds.

American entrepreneurs flocked across the ocean, drawn by South Africa's gold and diamond fields and other mining opportunities. In 1917, J.P. Morgan and future president Herbert Hoover helped to secure the start-up capital for the Anglo-American corporation, which became one of South Africa's largest mining companies. Conversely, South Africans drove American plows nicknamed the Yankee and the Eagle; lived in towns called Florida, Denver, and Cleveland; rode in American stagecoaches; and eventually watched American movies and television, listened to American music, and used American typewriters and computers.³¹ During the Cold War, these relationships intensified. The United States needed access to sea routes around the Cape and depended on South African uranium and other minerals considered essential for its military arsenal. South Africa leveraged these strategic assets in return for U.S. technology, military hardware, and corporate investments, which were much needed in the face of global boycotts and condemnation.

In terms of private sector flows, American cultural products have dominated the South African market for over a century. Even under British colonial rule, American movies, radio programs, etc., filled the theaters and the airwaves. Some of the most popular forms of entertainment for nineteenth century white South Africans were American-style minstrel shows and ragtime music. In the 1890s, Orpheus McAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers, a group of African American performers, made waves among the South African black population when they toured the country.³² In the 1920s, vaudeville troupes routinely made the trip down South. Columbia Music established a South African subsidiary in the 1920s. In 1913, an American immigrant named Isadore W. Schlesinger opened the African Film Trust in Johannesburg, a company that would maintain a virtual monopoly over South African film production and distribution through the Second World War. MGM also established a subsidiary in 1933.³³ In 1925, Schlesinger launched the African Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), South Africa's first radio station.³⁴ After the National Party legalized television in 1976, the vast majority of its programming was American commercial programming. By the early 1990s, seven out of 10 of the most

popular programs on South African television were American,³⁵ and, ironically, *The Cosby Show*, a program about an upper middle-class African-American family living in Brooklyn, was the top-rated show on television.³⁶ African-Americans have provided a continuing cultural influence in South Africa since the 1790s, when a small band of tradesman arrived in search of work in the diamond mines and in the British South Africa Company's military operations. Hubert "Yankee" Wood founded the Kokstad Advertiser in the Eastern Cape in 1881, a newspaper and printing service still in operation today. The African-American presence expanded in the late 1890s, when the Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and the National Baptist Convention (NBC) both established missions. The presence of African-Americans also initiated an ongoing diplomatic debate between the United States and South Africa about whether South African racial laws should extend to black Americans. The American diplomatic mission required all African-Americans to register and receive a passport (if they did not already have one) in order to receive honorary white status. American entertainers like Bill Cosby, Stevie Wonder, Quincy Jones, and Harry Belafonte were vocal proponents of the cultural boycott against South Africa in the 1980s at the same time that they were becoming the leading icons among the South African black community. High profile black intellectuals such as historian John Hope Franklin also maintained close relationships with revolutionary groups and members of the black South African clergy. African-Americans who had participated in the anti-apartheid movement were also some of the first Americans to establish business activities in South Africa following the release of Nelson Mandela. The history of formal governmental public diplomacy efforts is almost as long.

History of U.S. PD in South Africa

U.S. diplomatic efforts in South Africa date back to 1799, when the first American Consulate on the African continent was established in Cape Town, although formal diplomatic relations did not begin until 1929. The Voice of America (VOA) broadcast Afrikaans content during World War II in order to combat Nazi influence,

and later developed a special two-hour jazz special VOA program specifically targeting South Africa.³⁷ The continent-wide VOA Africa service formally launched in 1959. The VOA has remained a constant presence in South Africa since then, and maintains a news bureau (one of four in Africa) in Johannesburg.³⁸ In March 1991, the short-lived U.S. Television broadcasting arm, WorldNet launched *Africa Journal*, an hour-long program linking experts in the United States with viewers in sub-Saharan Africa to discuss a variety of topics, including current events, politics, economics, media, the environment, human rights, and women. VOA TV took over the program, which maintains a small but loyal audience on its South African syndicates. In addition, VOA produces *Straight Talk Africa*, a weekly program broadcast on radio, TV, and the Internet, which remains one of the most popular programs in the Africa service, covering such topics as politics, health, social issues, and conflict resolution.

Broadcasting was not the only source of experimentation in South Africa. In 1947, while de facto and de jure segregation still dominated American race relations, the USIS opened the first integrated library in South Africa in Johannesburg, followed by branch offices in Durban and Cape Town. During the 1960s, the USIA also invited controversy when it opened another branch in an Anglican Church in Soweto, which was first disguised as a “music appreciation club” run by a USIS officer. Later, they expanded the program to include a separate building with a satellite dish where WorldNet Television programs were available for viewing.³⁹ U.S. efforts in South Africa expanded rapidly in the early 1990s as democratic transition appeared imminent. Part of this flurry of interest originated from the fact that there was, at that point, no certainty about whether South Africa would look East or look West. Another part was because South Africa—already an economic heavyweight on the continent—was poised to become an important social and political regional power, a cornerstone for US foreign policy Africa-wide.

Conduit for the continent

A number of scholars have documented the tendency of middle power states to rely upon the conduct of public diplomacy as a soft power alternative to hard power-based foreign policy.⁴⁰ Analysis of U.S. public diplomacy strategies towards South Africa suggests that the reverse trend is perhaps more critical: middle powers are a particularly important target for public diplomacy because they may serve as conduits and/or obstacles for messaging strategies. U.S. officials target South Africa in service of country-specific agendas, but more often than not, they realize that (1) they need to permeate the South African media sphere in order to carry their messages to the broadest possible audience and (2) they need South African support to achieve broader objectives in sub-Saharan Africa.

While Nigeria and Kenya now rival South Africa as regional hegemony, in terms of English language media, South Africa still dominates. Two buildings, 1 Park Road (home to the VOA) and the Richmond Building, located just a few miles from each other, house almost all the major media organizations represented in Africa, including the AP, *The Los Angeles Times*, Reuters, CNN, the VOA, CBS, Deutsche Welle, and *The Economist*. Countless other stringers and freelancers sit in coffee shops and/or live in houses in nearby Melville. As Hannerz also points out, a significant percentage of all (traditional) news that flows into, out of, and around the African region emanates from these two buildings.⁴¹ All the major African media outlets are similarly headquartered in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, including Interpress Service Africa, Nigeria News Service, Globecast, and others. Because South Africa is the home to numerous regional and global media actors, it provides a conduit for public diplomacy regionally and as a boomerang for informing U.S. media outlets about U.S. government activities in South Africa. In other words, if you can get the right message into the South African media, it may reverberate across the continent, and vice versa.

In recognition of that fact, in 2009, under the initiative of Mary Deane Connors, former Minister Counselor for Public Affairs,⁴² the

U.S. Embassy in Pretoria opened a regional media hub,⁴³ the goal of which was to:

Increase official US voices and faces on African television, radio and other media, so that the US government message is visible, active and effective in advocating US policies, priorities, and actions with African audiences.⁴⁴

Paula Caffey, the International Broadcasting Bureau's Regional Marketing Director, is also based in Johannesburg, although she operates independently from the embassy and the regional media hub. Her territory extends from the Horn of Africa, to the Congo, to the Great Lakes, to Madagascar.

U.S. Public Diplomacy 2.0 in South Africa

In the post-apartheid era, funding for U.S. public diplomacy towards Africa has increased slightly, but unfortunately (if not surprisingly) lags behind allocations for other regions. As the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy 2014 annual report highlights, when it comes to Public Affairs Sections in Africa, they are notoriously understaffed and Officer positions are normally given to entry-level officers.⁴⁵ However, while small when compared with the Middle East or Europe, PD programs, particularly in South Africa, abound and include person-to-person efforts like the Mae Jemison US Science Reading Room (American Corner) in Pretoria and the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) American Corners in Cape Town and Pretoria.

As a testing ground for PD 2.0 initiatives, Africa in many ways appears counter-intuitive, but fits in more broadly with a longer-term history of experimentation with public diplomacy on the continent. Table 1 provides an overview of the major social media accounts maintained by the U.S. government that target South Africa, including those with a broader African scope. Shading indicates that the account mainly targets South Africa.

| Feed | Platform | Managing Agency | # of Followers (in thousands) |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| @USAfricaMediaHub | Twitter | Public Affairs (State) | 2.17 |
| USMediaAfricaHub | Facebook | Public Affairs (State) | .348 |
| @VOAAfrica | Twitter | VOA (BBG) | 99.8 |
| @patrickgaspard | Twitter | U.S. Ambassador to SA | 9.84 |
| @StateAfrica | Twitter | Bureau of African Affairs (State) | 16.7 |
| @USEmbassySA | Twitter | U.S. Embassy (State) | 40.9 |
| USEmbassySA | Facebook | U.S. Embassy (State) | 128 |
| @USAID_Africa | Twitter | USAID | 3.547 |
| USAID.Pretoria | Facebook | USAID | .152 |
| @CDCAfrica | Twitter | CDC | .007 |
| @CDCSouthAfrica | Twitter | CDC | 690 |
| @PEPFAR | Twitter | State (& inter-departmental) | 38 |
| @YALINetwork | Twitter | IIP | 29.6 |
| YALINetwork | Facebook | IIP | 81 |
| DOSAfricanAffairs | Facebook | Bureau of African Affairs | 31K |

Although still small when compared with other middle powers, the South African Internet sphere has expanded rapidly in recent years, growing from 14% in 2008 to 46% as of January 2015.⁴⁷ Social media applications like Twitter and Facebook have also proven immensely popular. Overall, only 9% of sub-Saharan Africans hold active social media accounts, compared to 22% of South Africans.⁴⁸ Of those with

active social media accounts, the time spent on social media sites (mobile and Internet) is approximately 3.5 hours a day, among the highest in the world.⁴⁹ Digital diplomacy experimentation by U.S. public diplomats in South Africa is not limited to the traditional social media platforms. U.S. diplomats were among the first in the South African diplomatic community to experiment with MXit, a platform that combines mobile SMS technology with social networking, that until recently has been one of the most popular social media platforms in South Africa.⁵⁰ Despite a disproportionate focus on the role of Twitter in political and social change in the MENA region, social media usage in sub-Saharan Africa has largely been ignored. While penetration was hampered by connectivity issues, in the wake of expanded Internet access made possible by the landing of undersea telecommunications cables, social media usage across the continent has skyrocketed. Even at the height of the Arab Spring protests, South Africa remained the most active tweeting population on the continent.⁵¹ Unity for Africa, which uses Ushahidi⁵² technology, has also become a popular site for NGOs to document reports of xenophobic violence around the country, beginning with the anti-Zimbabwean refugee riots in May 2008.

While social media, Internet, and mobile usage are still not comparable to that in places like the U.S. or Western Europe, it is increasingly critical in South Africa, particularly in urban centers and among civil society. A 2009 survey conducted by SangoNet (The Southern African NGO Network) found that over half of NGO workers already regularly used social media and Internet sources to advocate on behalf of their organizations, even if their organizations had no formal Internet presence.⁵³ Not surprisingly, the HIV/AIDS NGOs in South Africa are heavily networked and rely on the Internet for networking as well as fundraising and awareness campaigns. They are, potentially, critical public diplomacy targets of and collaborating partners for PEPFAR and related HIV/AIDS efforts in the country.

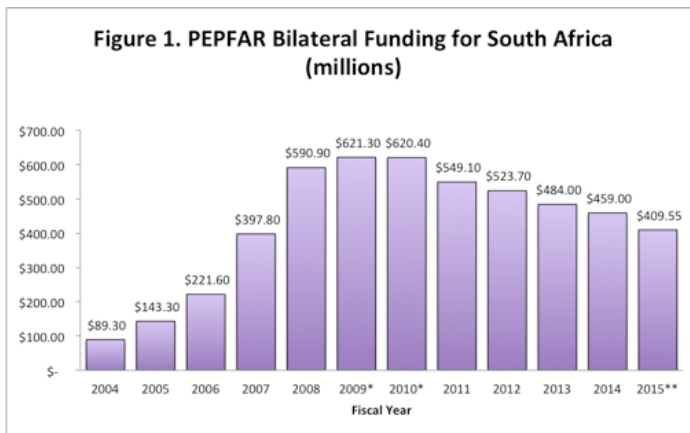
PEPFAR to the Rescue

Approximately 5.7 million (16.6% of adults 16-49) South Africans have HIV, making South Africa home to the largest HIV epidemic in the world. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has been at the forefront of national politics as well as bilateral U.S. relations, particularly since the early 2000s. Particularly in the waning days of the Bush administration, the government advertised its Africa policy as Bush's greatest success. Part domestic resurrection of his legacy, part public diplomacy strategy, Bush's Africa policy hinged upon what might be called HIV/AIDS Diplomacy. Coinciding with almost global opposition to the impending Iraq War, the administration surprised many by unveiling the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), one of the most ambitious programs for Africa in U.S. history. The initial program pledged \$15 billion dollars over five years towards combating HIV/AIDS. PEPFAR was such a success that it continued under the Obama administration; since its inception the program has enacted \$59 billion in bilateral assistance, and remains the largest health program in history.

PEPFAR launched under the tenure of South African President Thabo Mbeki, who is widely credited for delaying proactive South African responses to the disease. Under his administration, South African hospitals were forbidden from providing HIV/AIDS drugs. As a consequence, diplomatic missions in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town shifted focus towards promotion of the Bush "humanitarian agenda" in Africa.⁵⁴ All told, South Africa received over \$5.109 billion (see Figure 1 below) in PEPFAR funds between 2003 and 2015. PEPFAR is widely credited as a major factor in turning the South African HIV crisis around, and with ameliorating former President Thabo Mbeki's (1999–2008) indifference regarding the disease during his tenure.⁵⁵ However, beginning in July 2012, the Obama administration began the process of scaling back direct PEPFAR assistance by announcing a "Partnership Framework Implementation Plan," which gradually will shift financial and implementation responsibilities for clinical care and treatment services into the South African government public health system, halving total U.S. annual support for HIV/AIDS by 2017. The

following year, in September 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that after a decade of being one of the prime beneficiaries of this program, South Africa (along with Rwanda and Namibia) would transition into being a Country Health Partnerships—“a new model of collaborative work” characterized by “co-investment” and shared responsibility (i.e. a movement away from a donor/recipient relationship towards greater financial and administrative commitment from South Africa to combat HIV/AIDS). Since late 2012, this has entailed a gradual ratcheting down in direct contributions to South Africa, as depicted in Figure 1. In practice, that meant a 15% reduction in adult treatment and elimination of antiretroviral (ARV) drug budgets.⁵⁶

Figure 1: PEPFAR Bilateral Funding for South Africa (millions)⁵⁷



PEPFAR provides an ideal case study to examine the extent to which new media outreach equals engagement for multiple reasons. First, it has been a top priority for U.S./SA relations for over a decade. Second, numerous agencies, from U.S. diplomatic missions, to USAID, to the CDC have been involved in its deployment. Finally, recent changes to the framework allow us to see how U.S. outreach translates into off and online engagement in a relatively condensed period of time. PEPFAR and public diplomacy related to HIV/AIDS have remained a cornerstone of U.S. outreach in South Africa, both in terms of traditional and 2.0 outreach.



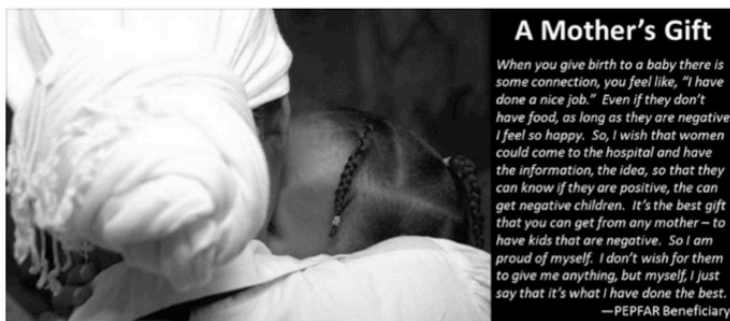
US Embassy South Africa

May 12 at 6:27am · 🌐

A post [#MothersDay](#) message

*Anna, an HIV-positive mother who followed the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV treatment guidelines, captures exactly how many of the HIV-positive mothers of the over one million babies born HIV-free around the world feel about giving life and inspiring hope for an [#AIDSFreeGeneration](#). Anna and her baby are beneficiaries of the many HIV initiatives supported by the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Such programs can only be successful with family and community support. Are you playing your role in ensuring an AIDS-free generation? [#MomAndBaby](#) [#AIDSfreegen](#) [#ZeroStigma](#) [#ZeroDiscrimination](#)



Like · Comment · Share

👍 32 people like this.

Most Relevant ▾

How then can we understand U.S. digital efforts in the context of the trends described above? Following the plan outlined in the first half of this paper, we start with an overview of the issue network rather than specific U.S. government efforts. Figure 2 provides an overview of the general network of the U.S. Embassy South Africa's position within the broader South African Internet community.

Figure 2: U.S. Embassy in Pretoria Web Network

In Figure 2, we can identify the U.S. Embassy South Africa website in the bottom right hand corner of the network. This figure expresses the embassy's relative position in the broader issue network, not limited to South African URLs. From this image, we can see that the U.S. Embassy SA is, not surprisingly, embedded within a sub-network of U.S. government properties (i.e. those with .gov URLs such as grants.gov, usa.gov, USAID.gov, etc. in the bottom right of Figure 2). While the embassy links to a number of SA sites, including South African government sites (i.e. those with gov.za URLs in the top half of Figure 2) and nonprofits (e.g. Media Institute of Southern Africa), these links are not reciprocal. We can also identify that Twitter is the most critical node in the U.S. Embassy SA's immediate network, suggesting that it is a key intermediary between actors in this network.⁵⁸ The Followerwonk social authority index provides a small indication of this discrepancy; as of January 12, 2015, 64.9% of @StateAfrica followers have a social authority index of less than 10 out of 100 (with 100 being the highest), while only 8.7% of the users that @StateAfrica follows have a similarly low score. This social authority index is calculated by a combination of user

activity and retweets, and provides only a loose indication of Twitter behavior. However, what it does indicate is that @StateAfrica is chasing followers more than those followers are chasing them. Now let us look at the position of U.S. properties in the issue network specifically surrounding HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

Figure 3: South African HIV/AIDS Issue Network



Figure 3 provides an overview of the general community of actors focused around HIV/AIDS in South Africa. This network map was constructed by taking the seventy-five crucial HIV/AIDS organizations headquartered in South Africa (i.e. South African organizations only) as documented by the Centre for AIDS Development Research and Evaluation.⁵⁹ A co-link analysis was conducted using Issuecrawler in order to identify common websites members of the initially identified issue network. The larger the node in Figure 3, the more central the site URL is to the network of links surrounding the network of HIV/AIDS advocates in South Africa. U.S. government URLs with the strongest links to the network included PEPFAR.gov, USA.gov, USAID.gov, and CDC.

gov. The USEmbassySA.gov website lagged far behind. However, again, Twitter provides a central node in this network (identified with an arrow in Figure 3). So let us turn to the Twitter conversation surrounding #PEPFAR and AIDS.

As previously mentioned, beginning in July 2012, the U.S. began to make public plans to reduce PEPFAR spending in South Africa by an average of 15% per year. The rationale for this change lay largely in South Africa's relative level of development and the ability of the South African government to take on a larger responsibility for treatment (remaining American dollars would also be redistributed toward prevention and training rather than treatment). The Twitter conversation about #PEPFAR has been relatively continuous. However, between July 2012 and December 2014, not one URL shared on Twitter regarding this conversation directed readers to a U.S. government property, except for @USEmbassySA's link to John Kerry's June 4, 2014 speech about the PEPFAR transition and a USAID blog on June 2, 2014. Moreover, none of the organizations identified in the seventy-five central South African members of the HIV/AIDS issue network utilized the hashtag or participated in the conversation.

We can surmise benefits. #PEPFAR is a longstanding and continuous hashtag used by HIV/AIDS organizations around the world. Overall, social media traffic is overwhelmingly positive. Within the social media conversation, #PEPFAR is a concern only in its absence, rather than its presence. Negative posts come only regarding the ramifications of decreases in #PEPFAR funding. There are few initiatives or U.S. programs—military or non-military—less controversial in their effect. However, we are left with questions as to the relative position of public diplomacy efforts in this case. PEPFAR is by all accounts a wildly successful program, one that commands its own hashtag. U.S. public diplomacy efforts surrounding PEPFAR, however, seem to be negligible both in media coverage (as confirmed by a survey of all South African newspaper coverage of PEPFAR during the same period) and in the social media conversation.

Conclusion

As this working paper has sought to demonstrate, in this decentralized information age, beginning a study with self-defined public diplomatic activities constitutes an artificial starting point that shapes and limits research into public diplomacy 2.0 efforts. In today's distributed and multi-modal media environment, in order to identify the relative reach and import of particular PD efforts, not to mention beginning to assess the extent to which those efforts represent a genuine dialogue or relationship with the *relevant* community of actors, we must first start with the network of organizations invested in a particular question or issue critical for public diplomacy and then work backwards, or adopt what I have termed a "Copernican" approach to studying PD. Of course, identifying the size, scope, and constitution of the broader issue public is challenging, if not impossible; the complexities and inter-relationships between on and offline communications precludes precise measurement. Even if we can only identify key actors in the network, however, we can better assess the position (or absence) of various formal agencies, individuals, and voices involved in public diplomacy vis-à-vis that network.

As the previous section demonstrated, when looking at web and social media-based connections between the constellation of actors invested in the U.S. PEPFAR initiative, U.S. public diplomacy 2.0 efforts remain tangential, even though there is ample evidence that the PEPFAR program has in itself had a major impact. What can we conclude if state-initiated social media efforts remain marginal, even in regards to initiatives deployed by that same state? Can we simply dismiss social media efforts as symbolic, but generally ineffective, responses to technological and bureaucratic transformations in the conduct and perception of international relations? Concrete answers remain elusive. However, sustained and self-conscious outreach via social media and Internet sources in the form of public diplomacy 2.0 likely will not hurt, even if they appear minor in comparison to the public diplomacy effect of development programs like PEPFAR and the accompanying partnerships and dialogues.⁶⁰ Often times,

attempts at dialogue, regardless of the communication medium, are important symbolic gestures regardless of whether they reach their intended audiences. Even when public diplomacy 2.0 practitioners are not central to the digital conversation of interest, the activities (PEPFAR being a case in point) of major powers are often important instigators of social media conversations. More work is also needed that compares the relative influence of 2.0 engagement efforts with 2.0 collaborative efforts.⁶¹ In other words, while most PD research has focused on PD 2.0 efforts, perhaps the more appropriate focus is the 2.0 conversation surrounding concrete programs and initiatives. It may be more important to identify what social media actors are speaking about than to focus on who is doing the talking, dictating the relevant hashtags, or accumulating the most shares and likes. Moreover, quantity is not necessarily commensurate with quality of connections or outreach efforts; this is true regardless of whether those efforts take place digitally or via face-to-face interactions. The goal of this working paper is not to suggest that social mediated public diplomacy is irrelevant. Rather my intent is to highlight that the same technological and bureaucratic boxes that limit public diplomacy practitioners have impeded research approaches to public diplomacy in the new media environment. Only with a more realistic approach can we assess the real and ideal position of public diplomacy practitioners in the online environment and the extent to which certain types of PD 2.0 efforts influence power relationships and either support or undermine transnational dialogue, collaboration, and understanding.

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Author Biography

Amelia Arsenault is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Georgia State University and serves as the Media and Democracy Research Fellow at the Center for Global Communication Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School. She is currently working on a book project that explores the nascent industry of digital “information warriors” who provide contract services to political actors seeking to influence the online media agenda. She also serves as the co-Managing Editor of the open access, peer reviewed journal *Media Industries* and as a research advisor to the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in the Department of State. She teaches courses in new media, network theory, and communication and power. Her scholarly work has appeared in the *International Journal of Communication*, *International Sociology*, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, and *Information, Communication, and Society*. She is also co-editor (with Rhonda Zaharna and Ali Fischer) of *The Connective Mindshift: Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy*.

In complement to her academic research Arsenault remains actively engaged with the community of practitioners and policy makers involved in strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media development activities around the world. In this capacity, she has authored several commissioned reports such as “State Department: Digital Media Evaluation In the International Information Programs Bureau (IIP/Analytics) And Public Affairs Bureau (PA/ODE),” part of the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy’s report to Congress, *Data Driven Public Diplomacy: Progress Towards Measuring the Impact of Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Activities*. Since 2010, she has also organized the annual Milton Wolf Seminar on Media Diplomacy in Vienna, Austria.

She holds a B.A. in Film and History from Dartmouth College, an MSc in Global Media and Communication from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a PhD from the University of Southern California Annenberg School. Prior to her academic career, she spent several years as the film coordinator for the Zimbabwe International Film Festival Trust, a non-profit visual literacy organization in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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