CPD Perspectives

Pathways for the Future of Evaluation in Public Diplomacy

By Alexander Buhmann & Erich J. Sommerfeldt

USC Center on Public Diplomacy
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Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments

This *CPD Perspectives* manuscript summarizes and builds on the results from a research project[1] conducted across 2017-2018 with public diplomacy officers at the U.S. Department of State. Herein we synthesize the findings to offer mainly practical implications and suggest pathways for the future of evaluation in public diplomacy. We wish to express our sincere gratitude for the ICA Public Diplomacy Interest Group's recognition of our research (2019, Best Faculty Paper Award), as well as for the valuable support by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy—in the form of a Research Fellowship—and for the helpful funding provided by BI Norwegian Business School for a research visit and transcription of interviews. Finally, we would like to thank the numerous public diplomacy officers from the U.S. Department of State who have contributed their valuable time in serving as anonymous interviewees in this project.

Introduction

In the nearly two decades since the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the U.S. government has noticeably increased its public diplomacy (PD) spending. In parallel, there has been a surge in demands for greater accountability and showing "value-for-money".[2] Despite this increased importance, monitoring and evaluation (hereafter referred to as simply evaluation) remains a significant challenge for public diplomacy practice.[3] Commonly cited challenges include: (1) the difficulty of providing evidence for impact on long-term intangible objectives (such as relationships, reputation or trust); (2) the lack of resources for performing sophisticated evaluation; (3) PD practitioners' lack of knowledge and skills in evaluation models and methods; and (4) the lack of interest and support from superior officials.[4] Further, increasing pressure to evaluate is evident not just in the U.S, but in various countries around the globe. Comparative studies show, for instance, that increased demands for public diplomacy evaluation are significantly reshaping the practice in countries such as the United Kingdom and Sweden, among others.[5] Ultimately, this global trend in public diplomacy is part of a much wider trend toward quantified performance management and evidence-based decision-making that shows in many other public sector domains.[6]

Related to this is an underlying problem in the public diplomacy field: there is often no agreement on what the goals of public diplomacy initiatives are—neither in the field, nor in specific institutions.[7] While individual programs may have context-specific objectives, how such programs tie into public diplomacy goals writ large remains a challenge for many practitioners. This is further complicated by the fact that the domain of public diplomacy is made up by many actors, often with partially diverging interests, programs and goals.[8] Without a clear understanding of public diplomacy goals, the evaluation thereof becomes difficult to plan and enact. Moreover, overlapping and competing approaches to program enactment across the various bureaus and operating locations of the U.S. State Department further complicate the already muddied responsibility of public diplomacy practitioners to prove the value of their work. From this arises the need to identify potential and pragmatic solutions to improve the way evaluation is perceived, planned, enacted and institutionalized, both at the level of public diplomacy research offices and those practitioners who are often shouldered with the responsibility of day-to-day evaluation responsibilities.

Recent reports, reviews and commentaries have provided insight into the state of evaluation practice in U.S. public diplomacy and have pointed to common challenges in the enactment of evaluation.[9] To overcome these challenges, offices such as the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) and the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R/PPR) (of which REU is a part) consult and assist field-based public diplomacy officers. Moreover, recent reports by the Department of State have suggested significant structural and organizational changes in order to advance evaluation practice.[10] However, to open up further pathways to improve evaluation in public diplomacy, it is vital to understand the micro context in which any evaluation approach is enacted. This calls for a closer look at the extant evaluation-related perceptions, attitudes and intentions of public diplomacy practitioners.

To address this, and to provide research-based practicable advice, we draw on a recent research project of in-depth interviews with public diplomacy practitioners in the U.S. Department of State that explored current barriers and drivers in evaluation practice.[11] While contemporary textual debate on evaluation is found mainly within reports produced by the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD), conceptual work by engaged academics—such as Efe Sevin or James Pamment—or anecdotal/observational pieces by practitioners, we add to this discussion with new recommendations derived from qualitative research looking at current views and perceptions of practitioners. This research has provided insight into the factors that challenge evaluation in day-to-day public diplomacy practice. Following a brief review of the state of evaluation and the summation of our findings, we build on these results to develop propositions for new pathways of planning, enacting and institutionalizing evaluation practices within public diplomacy.

Background: The State of Evaluation in U.S. Public Diplomacy

According to recent data, the U.S. government spent $2.28 billion on public diplomacy initiatives in 2018.[12] While this amount is comparatively quite small to that spent on defense and social services, the investment in public diplomacy nonetheless requires the demonstration of returns to congress and other important stakeholders.[13] As such, evaluation is seen as vital to most public diplomacy functions, including program planning, providing evidence for the impact of public diplomacy on informing and influencing foreign publics, and, ultimately, showing support for strategic goal attainment in foreign affairs. Evaluation has become at the heart of much of planning, budgeting and reporting in public diplomacy.

In the simplest of terms, evaluation refers to the systematic assessment of the value of an object and can serve two purposes, based on either: (1) *reporting and accountability* (were objectives met?) and, (2) *improvement* (how were objectives met?).[14] Moreover, implicit in widely accepted approaches to evaluation is the assumption that goals are derived from the overall mission of an organization. Thus, through evaluation, practitioners can determine the extent to which their efforts contribute to overall organizational goal achievement. Practically, this is achieved mostly through presenting data on *inputs* (the resources that go into a program), *activities* (the actual tactics that the program employs), *outputs* (the tangible and intangible impacts that result from activities), and *outcomes* (the short-, medium-, and long-term changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that result from the program). For public diplomacy, program outcomes should ideally tie into larger foreign policy goals set by senior State Department officials.[15] However, the current practice of evaluation in public diplomacy is not only focused mainly on reporting (much more so than on improvement), but furthermore, the reports primarily focus on the output (not outcome) level.[16]

State Department policy requires that "all bureaus and independent offices must develop a monitoring plan for their programs or projects.... [and] should conduct evaluations to examine the performance and outcomes of their programs, projects and processes."[17] The actors that provide oversight and guidance on the evaluation of U.S. public diplomacy programs are many and varied. Much of the recent evaluation guidance on public diplomacy within the State Department has come from REU and R/PPR, but other bureaus within "R" (such as ECA) and the individual regional bureaus (EAP, EUR, etc.) and the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) also have evaluation offices and staff. Official policy also prescribes general standards for the development of evaluation plans and guidance on program design, and performance management was published in 2012 and updated in 2018.[18] Moreover, public diplomacy officers receive evaluation education from the State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI)—the "schoolhouse" and training grounds for the U.S. foreign affairs community. Little public information is available about such trainings and the extent to which they include evaluation content, save for the fact that an online course directory for the FSI includes a course called “Foreign Assistance Program Monitoring and Evaluation.” The course is two hours in length.

Further, the various offices overseeing evaluation in public diplomacy have created a wide range of tools and metrics to better the evaluation practices of the State Department and its results tracking. The Mission Activity Tracker (MAT) is the most common and standardized tool related to diplomacy practice that collects performance data on programs and generates on-demand reports that document accomplishments. Other offices distribute their own toolkits and indicators to program implementers at posts around the world. Despite the existence of multiple offices designed to support the research and evaluation activities of the State Department, and the myriad tools and tracking systems designed to abet measurement and information sharing, evaluation continues to be a challenge.

Extant reviews of and reports on the state of public diplomacy evaluation are, so far, largely based on anecdotal evidence or personal reflection.[19] Still, such efforts show that practitioners perceive they lack the competence and resources to properly evaluate programs, and many view the practice as “unmeasurable” due to the long-term nature of diplomacy programs and issues with attributing causality. This research also suggested there is irregular compliance with existing rules and that changes in political leadership also affect approaches to evaluation, leading to poor continuity in evaluation practice.[20] In 2015, Gonzales described the State Department as a “reporting culture” (focused on accountability) rather than an “evaluation culture” (focused on learning) wherein officers merely report outputs and offer "knee-jerk replies to ever increasing and overlapping data calls for numbers of activities organized, hours logged, or dollars spent, with a heart-tugging anecdote or flashy photo tossed in for good effect".[21]

While recent efforts of REU and R/PRR, among others, have done much to improve evaluation practices in public diplomacy, some roadblocks remain. To offer actionable advice to help overcome some of these impediments, and to further suggest and open up pathways for improvement, we build on qualitative insights derived from interviews on how U.S. public diplomacy officers: (a) perceive the current state of evaluation practice, (b) conceive of the goals of public diplomacy, and (c) characterize drivers and barriers in the adoption of evaluation practices for their programs.

Approach: Understanding Public Diplomacy Evaluation from the Practitioner Perspective

To address the perspective of practitioners, in our research we turned to the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as a theoretical lens through which to examine the factors driving or hampering evaluation behavior in U.S. public diplomacy. In brief, the TPB, as a general theory on social psychology, assumes the intention to engage in a behavior to be the most important predictor of actual behavior. It breaks down the antecedents of behavioral intentions into three main variables: attitudes toward the behavior, perceived norms and behavioral control (cf. Figure 1). *Behavioral attitude* captures a person's positive or negative feelings toward a behavior. *Perceived norms* capture the external or social pressure on a person to perform or not perform a behavior. Specifically, two main types of perceived norms can be distinguished: (1) *injunctive norms* denote a person's perception of what significant others think about this person performing a specific behavior, and (2) perceived *descriptive* *norms* refer to a person's idea of others' own attitudes and actions regarding this behavior.[22] Finally, *perceived behavioral control* refers to a person's perceived difficulty or ease of performing a behavior. This variable denotes a person's confidence in having the resources, opportunities and capabilities necessary for actually carrying out a behavior. Based on theory advanced in the TPB perspective, therefore, the more positive the attitude and norms, and the greater the perceived control, the greater the likelihood an individual intends to and will actually perform evaluation behaviors.

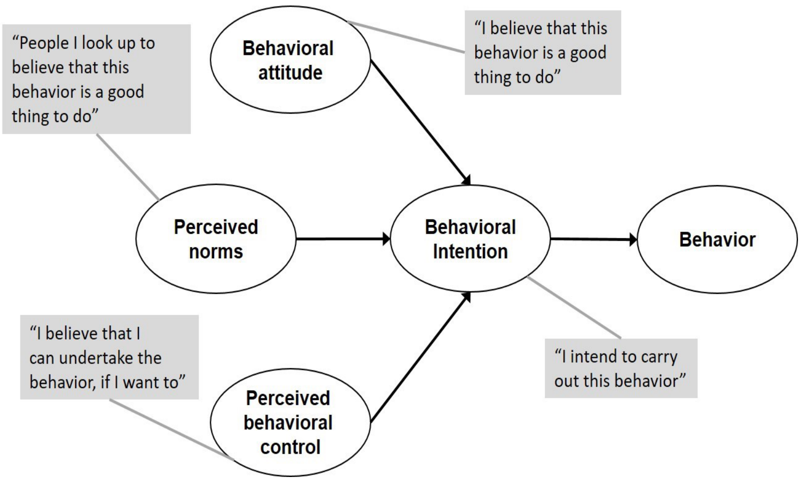

Figure 1. The theory of planned behavior (taken from Buhmann & Brønn, 2018)

In our research, twenty-five individuals working for the State Department agreed to be interviewed. Interviewees were identified via a snowball sampling technique. To help vary the sample, interviewees were asked to identify contacts at various bureaus and at posts overseas. The sample of interviewees included seven men and 18 women, ranging in age from 25 to 67 years. Study participants worked in Civil Service, Foreign Service and consulting public diplomacy positions for various bureaus in the State Department, including Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), African Affairs (AF), European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR), Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA), International Information Programs (IIP), Public Affairs (PA) and in the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. All interviewees had at least two years of experience in public diplomacy work, ranging to 22 years. The interview guide was designed to examine participants' general views of, and observations about, evaluation practice in public diplomacy, as well as their attitudes, perceived norms and perceived behavioral controls in relation to evaluation.[23] Fifteen interviews were conducted in person in Washington, D.C., and the remainder were conducted via Skype.

What the Practitioners Say

The Perceived State of Evaluation in U.S. Public Diplomacy

Practitioners' responses to questions about the state of evaluation within U.S. public diplomacy can be best represented through the following themes:

DISJOINTED SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

First, interviewees commented on the significant inconsistency in how evaluation is approached across the State Department. Because the different bureaus enact various kinds of public diplomacy programs, evaluation is approached quite differently depending on the bureau. Given that different bureaus use different indicators and metrics, and that practitioners will sometimes leave one bureau to move to another, how evaluation is to be practiced across entities of the State Department becomes a point of confusion. While the products and programs of the various bureaus may be different, there is a need for development of consistent processes of evaluation that lead to the creation of relevant goals and appropriate measurement indicators—processes that do not seem to exist or are not implemented with any degree of uniformity.

LACK OF DEVELOPMENT AND FOCUS

Practitioners do not believe evaluation to be a well-developed area of practice in public diplomacy, nor one that receives a great deal of genuine emphasis. Whatever emphasis evaluation receives from senior officers in the State Department is largely seen as "lip-service"—reinforcing the view of practitioners that evaluation is merely a "tick the box exercise" for public diplomacy. Some reported a perception that while superior officers expect regular reports of impact, when such reports are delivered they "sit on the boss's desk and collect dust." Moreover, the lack of genuine attention to evaluation is nowhere more notable than in the perceived lack of training public diplomacy practitioners received on the subject. Many of the Foreign Service officers interviewed claimed to have received minimal training at FSI—at the very most a day and a half. This training, they noted, also did not prepare them for the realities of conducting evaluations at under-resourced posts. The REU now organizes 2-3 week-long regional evaluation training workshops per month.

VALUATION OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY EFFORTS

The interviewees also expressed frustration with the perceived devaluation of public diplomacy by others within the State Department, which echoes a long-time sentiment among practitioners. The interviewees noted that many within the State Department (including public diplomacy officers themselves) do not understand the 'real goals' of U.S. public diplomacy efforts (a topic we address more thoroughly below). This devaluation is likely a contributing factor behind the perceived lack of attention to evaluation in public diplomacy. That said, one participant suggested that evaluation is one means by which the poor perception of public diplomacy within the State Department could be changed, and help to "prove" that diplomacy is more than just "jazz hands" (the implication that public diplomacy is all for "show") and demonstrate the importance of their work.

CAPITAL-FIELD TENSIONS

A further theme to emerge from the results was the perceived differences in expectations for the enactment of evaluation in public diplomacy programs between offices in Washington, D.C. and those at posts overseas. Most interviewees had served at posts abroad, and noted differences with how evaluation is discussed based on position—whether one is stationed in Washington and oversees public diplomacy programming, or whether one is on the ground implementing them. The expectations of Washington actors and the demands of the work at post contribute to problems of time allocated to evaluation at embassies abroad. Practitioners at posts are faced with being held accountable to both their direct supervisors at posts (often the head public affairs officer or the ambassador) as well as offices in Washington. Practitioners in the field are aware that there are research offices such as REU and R/PPR that exist to assist in program design and evaluation. And those interviewees who worked for such offices are eager to assist those in the field. But, the perceived distance and availability of such assistance was questioned by officers at posts abroad. Echoing this sentiment, other interviewees expressed a desire for there to be a local staff member at post to help evaluate programs.

RELIANCE ON OUTPUTS, ANECDOTES

The primary way in which participants described enacting modern public diplomacy evaluation efforts is by reporting a few output indicators alongside positive anecdotes of participants' experiences in a program. Practitioners noted the relative straightforwardness of gathering output indicators like participation rates or monitoring social media metrics. Such indicators were the ones most frequently reported by practitioners because, by their own admission, these indicators are the easiest to acquire and report. Personal stories and anecdotes are also frequently used as evidence of impact, as practitioners believed such stories would satisfy superiors' demands for program accountability and sufficiently persuade lawmakers. Indeed, in many cases, utilizing anecdotal quotes, likes and comments was noted by a public affairs officer overseas as "about the best we're doing on some of our evaluation for a specific program."

Perceptions of Public Diplomacy Goals

The primary way in which practitioners characterized the goals of public diplomacy centered on "building influence." Influence, however, has several dimensions. First, practitioners desired to influence other nations to fundamentally change certain aspects of it, such as diminishing the likelihood of "embracing a violent extremist ideology," or simply to make a country's government more transparent and accountable. Second, influence was described as "building networks of people that support or have a deep understanding of the U.S. perspective." Such network building often occurs through public diplomacy programming that exposes foreign publics to U.S. arts and culture that, purportedly, "opens people up to seeing that we're friendly, and we like to get to know them, and we want to share our culture and the great things about the United States with them." Thus, while some practitioners suggested that a significant goal of public diplomacy programs is simply to "build a relationship with people who might not otherwise been in contact with an American," most often relationship building was seen as a way to advance the strategic interests of the United States. These goals are not necessarily incompatible, but were described independently and dichotomously by the participants. "…the goal is to achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives abroad by creating connections between the people of the U.S. and the people of other countries as well as creating greater understanding of the United States among people of other countries so that our foreign policy is more likely to be successful in those countries."

This description is consistent with many academic definitions of public diplomacy.[24] But, how "building relationships" can be translated into specific objectives for public diplomacy programs remains a significant point of confusion. While influence and relationships are terms that surfaced in the discussion of public diplomacy goals, many respondents puzzled over how to further describe and clarify the goals of modern public diplomacy. As one DC-based program officer working for a regional bureau, when asked about the goals of public diplomacy, stated, "I don't know. That's a good question. I think that's one of the problems we haven't defined…but each individual, depending on where they sit in the organization, seems to have a different idea of how to define that." To that effect, and perhaps unsurprisingly, views on public diplomacy goals and evaluation seemed to vary by the location of the individual within the State Department structure. Generally speaking, participants agreed that public diplomacy goals lack clarity. Consequently, how to articulate appropriate measurement indicators also suffers.

Attitudes Toward Evaluation

Interviewees expressed a wide range of positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes toward evaluation practice. Across these emerged four main subthemes that get at potential drivers and barriers to evaluation.

GENERAL PERCEIVED VALUE

Practitioners generally see worth in evaluation and want to do more of it. Positive attitudes were particularly apparent when interviewees referred to evaluation as an activity domain *in general*. Put another way, positive attitudes toward evaluation were expressed when they discussed the (unused) potential of evaluation to the further institutionalization of public diplomacy as a foreign policy tool (through accountability) and to adjusting practices and developing more effective programs (improvement).

ACCOUNTABILITY VS. IMPROVEMENT

Interviewees held differing perspectives on evaluation based on purposes for accountability or actual learning and improvement. When evaluation is thought of in terms of accountability, interviewees stated that evaluation is means by which to demonstrate the value of public diplomacy. Evaluation was seen as a way to “tell good stories” about the success of programming, and as the means by which practitioners are able to “prove what we do.” Similarly, focusing on evaluation done for purposes of improvement, participants expressed positive attitudes and appreciation. Thus, despite the obstacles to enacting evaluation (to be discussed later) there is an innate desire to use evaluation for program improvement.

In contrast, negative attitudes were expressed toward evaluations *solely* for purposes of accountability. In comparing it with an approach designed to inform improvement, one interviewee stressed, "I've never seen anything on that [insights]. Should we be improving the program? I don't know. I've never seen anything on it....But all this other stuff, it just goes into the ether ..." As exemplified in this quote, there was widespread belief among public diplomacy practitioners that senior officials have no real intention to use results for program improvement.

IDEA VS. PRACTICE

While there was a general positive attitude toward the notion of evaluation, negative attitudes dominated the discussion of *how* evaluations are actually being performed in contemporary practice. There was common recognition that measuring mere outputs (over outcomes) is widespread, and this appeared to coincide with a negative attitude toward such behavior. Participants disparaged the value of output evaluations, and commonly saw them as "pseudo evaluations" or even labeled them "caricatures" of what evaluation should be—even though they acknowledge that they, themselves, sometimes offer such evaluations. Similarly, negative attitudes emerged when discussing evaluations reliant on anecdotal evidence—meaning they are not systematic or are without "hard data."

The most openly negative attitudes focused on tools, metrics, and the perceived lack of flexibility and sensitivity to local circumstances in the Foreign Service at post level. As one participant concisely put it regarding the MAT tool: "I've hated [MAT] since the beginning because I tend to sort of hate things that force you into specific categories of thinking." Other participants similarly commented on the tools and indicators distributed by offices within "R" as inappropriate to their circumstance, and indicated a desire for more locally adaptable tools. Thus, there appears to somewhat of a paradox in that practitioners desire standardization as well as adaptability in measurement approaches.

Perceived Norms About Evaluation

Evaluation behavior is influenced by the "surrounding" attitudes and expectations of significant others. Insights on such norms emerged around interviewees' perceived social pressure to perform evaluation both in terms of other people's attitudes toward evaluation (descriptive norms) as well as other people's "evaluation demands" toward colleagues in particular (injunctive norms).

DESCRIPTIVE NORMS

Interviewees believed there was a positive normative culture around evaluation for accountability—showing the successes of public diplomacy programs. Similar to the personal attitude that evaluation is important to demonstrating value, interviewees believed this to be a widespread attitude among practitioners: "I think most of my colleagues who are public diplomacy practitioners in the field right now are hugely interested in showing the impact of our labor." However, it is almost exclusively the positive (even "promotional") side of accountability that is being discussed here, for within these positive norms that see evaluation as accountability emerged a theme where evaluation is merely a tool for "marketing" programs: "You're very careful of how you characterize the performance of a particular program... they always ask ... Can you re-word this this way? Or re-word this that way?" The learning aspect of evaluation, in turn, is where the more negative attitudes clustered: "there is still a resistance to the learning part of evaluation." On the other hand, strong personal dedication was linked with positive norms when it came to generating evaluation insights, i.e., learning (for *yourself*) how to improve.

INJUNCTIVE NORMS

When discussing who sets such norms, or imposes "evaluation demands" on practitioners, the answers focused on a select group of actors in the State Department. The first and most basic "actor" are documents and rules regarding evaluation. Evaluation is a requirement for public diplomacy programs, but—as our results suggest—one with relatively low perceived priority and minimal standardization. Every State Department grant requires an evaluation plan. A common rule of thumb mentioned by participants is that around of 5% of the grant budget is suggested and expected to be spent on evaluation. This has implications for perceived injunctive norms regarding grants of different sizes, as smaller grants will struggle to justify their evaluation budget with so little money to go around. When funding/prioritization of evaluation is tied to the total grant budget, the perception is that small grants do not merit evaluation while evaluation remains a formal requirement nonetheless, making evaluation a "farce." Given that grants less than $20,000 make up the bulk of public diplomacy programming, this cultivates an impression of a low priority given to evaluation in general, which shapes practices also in some of the larger grants. For larger grants, while there seems to be more of a priority on evaluation, the focus remains on accountability and there is little pressure to use evaluation results for learning and improvement. While many public diplomacy grants may be given to local foreign institutions to carry out programs that meet the policy priorities of a post—meaning grantees are required to conduct evaluations and not the post itself—a lack of expertise of on the part of those overseeing or receiving said evaluations remained a concern. Beyond the formal requirements in the grant structure, injunctive norms were expressed in relation to "Washington in general" as well as specific actors. Referring to Washington in general, many expressed clear perceptions of injunctive pressures: "Measuring and evaluation is a huge part of what we were required to do, reporting back to Washington about the impact of our programming…" However, this pressure, when felt, is commonly tied to the "promotional" aspects of evaluation mentioned above: "they expect us just to do a good job, and they want to hear about good results. I mean no one has ever said, 'we want to hear about when things fail,' right?" So, for many, evaluation for purposes of learning is often more dependent on individual attitudes and motivations rather than injunctive norms.

Congress appears as the main actor connected to injunctive norms about evaluation for accountability, specifically: "We are doing it also for accountability…to prove to the political side of our government system that we're not wasting taxpayer money, that we're not just out here having parties and doing frou-frou events." Another actor that emerged is the Secretary of State, who is seen to set the general tone of the evaluation discussion. An additional level of pressure comes from the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy or "R": "I feel like the pressure is mostly from R. R is the one who's always like the steady drumbeat of, 'You must evaluate. You must evaluate'." Finally, in contrast to projects initiated at the local level by practitioners themselves, for big "flagship projects," the evaluation pressure is perceived as high.

Perceived Control and Competence in Evaluation

In relation to perceived behavioral control, the interviewees hold a variety of beliefs, which can be represented through three primary themes.

CONCEPTUAL AND TIME-BOUND RESTRAINTS

Public diplomacy practitioners are inhibited in engaging in evaluation behavior by an inability to conceptualize and measure the outcomes of diplomacy, and by the perceived challenge of measuring long-term accomplishments in a short timeframe. Most interviewees struggled to articulate the actual goals of public diplomacy as described above and connected the inability to conceptualize those goals to the difficulty enacting evaluation. As related above, participants variously claimed the purpose of public diplomacy was to influence foreign actors, build positive relationships, "make people feel good about America stuff," and advance foreign policy objectives. However, none were able to articulate how such lofty goals translate to measurable, program-level indicators. As one participant put it: "It's just not clear how you evaluate some of these things because you have to know what to evaluate it on." Very often, then, participants described programs as "one-offs" with no clear connection to larger diplomacy goals.

What the interviewees appeared to agree on was the long-term nature of public diplomacy work and the perception that they cannot adequately evaluate the impacts of programs within a practical amount of time. Most public diplomacy officers are commonly given three-year assignments at a post abroad. The limited time officers spend at a post was frequently regarded as an obstacle to evaluation behavior. The perceived inability to measure the long-term effects of diplomacy programming was also regarded as a related obstacle to evaluation behavior. The most important accomplishments of public diplomacy are likely to occur many years after the implementation of a program, yet the interviewees felt pressured to immediately demonstrate the impacts of their work. Hence the emphasis on outputs as a "substitute" proxy measure.

LACK OF CAPACITY

Practitioners felt ill equipped with the skills to engage in evaluation, nor do they feel they have the money and timelines to do so. Some discussed the limited training in evaluation received at FSI as inadequate for the realities of evaluation faced on the job. Some noted they had the knowledge to engage in evaluation best practices, like writing "SMART" objectives and operationalizing appropriate indicators, but doubted that others had such skills. The limited training was noted as both a perceived control of evaluation behavior, but also as a problem when reviewing others' evaluation proposals. Potentially, the lack of evaluation training has resulted in flawed evaluations that might falsely portray the impacts of public diplomacy programming.

The most frequently mentioned perceived controls are the lack of funds and limited time. The interviewees agreed that few funds are made available for evaluation, despite institutional pressure to engage in evaluation practice. Some were hesitant to spend any money at all on evaluation when grant money might be better spent on activities and resources for program participants. Nearly all interviewees mentioned that public diplomacy officers are overworked and overwhelmed, resulting in evaluation becoming a "lesser priority." Frequently, public diplomacy officers feel beholden to the demands of multiple superior officers—including the ambassador at a post abroad, the public affairs officer, or from supervisory offices in DC. Thus, while public diplomacy officers recognize the value of evaluation, staffing challenges and multiple obligations/pressures result in the lack of dedicated time for program evaluation.

STRUCTURES, ACTORS AND SYSTEMS

A third control to evaluation behavior emerged from the perceived disparity with which evaluation is structurally enacted throughout the State Department, and the offices and systems in place related to evaluation. First, many bemoaned the lack of standardized set of practices on evaluation or a singular authority that directs how evaluation should be done. Participants noted there are various research offices across the bureaus which offer resources and advice on evaluation, and noted ECA, IIP (now merged with PA to form the Bureau of Global Public Affairs) and REU as primary information providers. The indicators and methods offered by these offices were described as “piecemeal,” and often “[coming] into conflict with each other.” Often, practitioners felt “overwhelmed with resources.” Some, in contrast, desired more local flexibility and control over evaluation, ideally with the assistance of a resident research and evaluation expert. Finally, the systems that are in place to record and track evaluations, such as MAT, are irregularly used and misunderstood by many—which leads to a sense that the tools being offered to assist in evaluation might actually be a hindrance to making evaluation more accessible to practitioners unfamiliar with the practice.

Pathways for Improving Evaluation Practice in Public Diplomacy

The results presented above have provided some new—and some familiar—themes on the state of evaluation practice in contemporary U.S. public diplomacy. Based on the insights of public diplomacy practitioners summarized above,[25] we can derive and develop propositions for potential change in approaches and procedures for public diplomacy evaluation.

Specifying Structures for Evaluation Consistency

Existing structures within the State Department pose some challenges to enacting common approaches and indicators for evaluation. The variety of offices and bureaus that enact public diplomacy activities lead to significantly different approaches in the planning, execution and evaluation of programs. This presupposes that consistency in evaluation is always desirable, which may not be the case. Diversity in evaluation approaches could be an advantage, as long as evaluations of those programs are developed and executed on a local/unit level, assuming local actors have the time and skill to do so. Ideally, evaluation specialists would be present at every post—a desire that many interviewed practitioners expressed. Absent this resource, specific guidance as to when evaluation is to be bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, should be offered. Often, more turbulent environments require more situational adaptivity, which may provide a starting point for policy on how evaluation plans are to be developed and structured.

For those bodies, however, that approach evaluation from a "central perspective," such as REU and R/PPR, it is challenging to identify meaningful areas of fruitful integration for evaluation purposes. Furthermore, even if such areas were clearly identifiable, interviewees suggested that REU does not have the capacity to collect and analyze a larger corpus of evaluations reports from across the different bureaus and offices that enact public diplomacy programming. One potential path forward is to charge a cross-unit task force that works to identify when/where evaluations are best kept local (and inconsistent across different offices and bureaus) and when/where approaches and indicators can best be "pooled" and improved, led by the central oversight and expertise of offices like R/PPR and REU.

Another argument could be made for the specification of the (appropriate) structures needed for improving evaluation, is the need to clarify where evaluation competencies need to be built up, especially across hierarchies—better aligning officers at post and their managers in Washington. As evaluation practice (and expectations for evaluation outcomes) is an intricate game played out between account-givers and account-holders, it is necessary that (changed/improved) skills and expectations develop equally across levels. In other words, both managers and evaluation practitioners require education on what constitutes effective, rigorous evaluation. In our data, there have been indications that simple output indicators and anecdotes have been sufficient to satisfy superiors in some cases who may outwardly push for accountability through rigorous and regular reporting, but actually lack training in evaluation and thus regularly compromise on their own standards. Interviewees also noted an increasing reliance on professional evaluation contractors for evaluation at the expense of educating members of the Foreign and Civil Service in evaluation methods. While using contractors may or may not result in more satisfactory evaluations, the perception of overreliance on contractors does not help to change existing attitudes toward evaluation by actual State Department professionals. While contractors provide much-needed expertise, outsourcing does not help with building internal evaluation capacity required for many public diplomacy practitioners to perform their work.

Rethinking Evaluation Planning and Reporting at Post Level

A theme that has not, to our knowledge, been previously identified in the public diplomacy literature is the potential tensions that may arise between the expectations of Washington, DC stakeholders and practitioners in the field.

Washington-based offices often oversee public diplomacy programming, or assist in the research and evaluation of programs at the post level. These actors regarded Congress or the Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy ("R") as the only stakeholders to which they felt beholden The Digital Analytics research office in the Bureau of Global Affairs provides regular reports to DOS leadership (including the Secretary), at the latter's request. Global media trend read-outs on key policy issues are a daily product. REU sees its main client as the Embassies, suggesting their perceived direction of accountability is largely linear. In contrast, practitioners in the field felt they must juggle the expectations of, and report to, offices back in Washington. Public diplomacy field officers—not to mention the ambassador and public affairs officer(s) for whom they directly work—rarely report to Congress.

While consideration of management officials and stakeholders at the level of Congress is unavoidable for many public diplomacy practitioners, to advance evaluation practice public diplomacy officers should be able to identify the specific goals of programs at both the short- and long-term level. While practitioners may know their goals for a specific public diplomacy initiative in the short term, they remain unaware of how such programs tie into long-term public diplomacy goals. The result of this being that anecdotes and short-term output indicators are the standard by which practitioners communicate accountability. They have little conception of how to provide evidence that speaks to the larger and longer-term goals of public diplomacy.

Relatedly, perceived accountability to multiple stakeholders has muddied the ability of public diplomacy practitioners to offer clear results and connection to shared goals. Basic output indicators and anecdotes are simple to collect and appeal to a broad audience, which makes them the primary way practitioners have attempted to show results. Yet, these methods are recognized to be overly simplistic and lack real insight into program success. One possible solution to both of these issues at the post level is to clarify with whom evaluation goals and objectives are to be set, and to whom evaluation reports are to be delivered. If a program's objectives are developed to meet the perceived demands of multiple account-holders (if objectives are actually developed at all), the direction and focus of an evaluation and its objectives are unlikely to be clear. If, however, goals and objectives are set in partnership with one primary account-holder, objectives are more likely to be clear, and the results are more likely to demonstrate a connection to a shared larger goal. While this may be unlikely to happen given that most programs will have multiple account-holders, when program evaluation design is structured toward the accomplishment of clearly articulated public diplomacy goal(s), consistency is more likely to be achieved.

Connecting Theory and Practice for Goal-Setting

Without clear strategic goals that point to measurable objectives, there is no straightforward way for public diplomacy officers to show meaningful impact. Conceptualizing and executing evaluations in a context of insufficient goal clarity or goal conflicts will be detrimental not simply to the reports that are being produced but to the morale and motivation of the practitioners being evaluated and conducting evaluations. Recent academic literature has come a long way in defining and structuring the dimensionality of goals in public diplomacy.[26] In practice, however, the results suggest these goal systems are not being used to derive value drivers, measures, or performance indicators that meaningfully tie into these dimensions. The growing efforts to train and educate around evaluation could profit from examining these frameworks, perhaps empowering practitioners to apply them and derive appropriate evaluation approaches and measures. This could strengthen both their planning capabilities as well as bolster the alignment between public diplomacy programs and foreign policy goals. In our data, there was a clear tendency of practitioners to situate the goals of their programs within only two of the goal categories identified by Fitzpatrick,[27] namely informational and relational goals. Based on broader, holistic goal frameworks, such as recently proposed by Efe Sevin,[28] practitioners might see more opportunities to develop alternative metrics to show a broader and more sustainable contribution to realizing strategic goals in foreign relations.

Moving to Incentivize Learning

When Secretary of State Pompeo assumed leadership of the State Department an interview participant recounted the Secretary made a point of emphasizing that evaluations should be undertaken with the purpose of generating insights and learning, stressing to officers that he wants "to see people fail and try new things." If new things are indeed being tried, failure is part of a natural process of learning and improvement. Our data, however, suggested that such executive appreciation for reporting failures for the purpose of learning has not trickled down to the officers at the field. Not only did interviewees fear cuts to programs as well as detrimental effects on their careers when reporting negative results, but they expressed hesitance to report overly positive results as this might result in a 'hostile takeover' of programs by other actors. This suggests that a desired "culture of research in U.S. public diplomacy" has a long way to go.[29] One way ahead could be the establishment of a system that explicitly incentivizes the provision of learning-focused data and evaluations. This may work to counterbalance officers' understandable hesitation to contribute insights that—while allowing to make evidence-based changes and improvements in future programs—may reflect badly on their own abilities.

Considering a Nested Approach to Evaluation

Efforts in evaluation are often associated with rather central structures of control and oversight. This seems only natural, especially when evaluations are done for the sole aim of accountability. Our data suggest, however, that central control might be an obstacle to growing from a culture of reporting and accountability to a culture of evaluation and learning. If the State Department actually "wants to see people fail" (As Secretary Pompeo has asserted), that is, to go beyond mere reporting to learn from failures and the insights they provide, reform and new approaches need to take into account that there appear to be significant negative attitudes related to the learning purposes of evaluation. Our research finds these especially clustered around descriptive norms. However, there are notable exceptions, and they all emerge in conversations around one common theme: Attitudes seem to be much more positive when the prospect of learning through evaluation is envisioned clearly at the post level. This leads us to suggest that in an incremental path toward a more learning-focused culture of evaluation, a sensible step may be to first invest in building structures and processes for insights at the local level only. This would mean that both the gathering and the analysis of the data remain more or less independent of any attempts for central oversight. While the tools for this could indeed be developed and provided through central support, their application is merely for local purposes. (However, this approach may of course still be met with some resistance, based on a lack of time, resources and expertise reported for the local level.) Such a 'nested approach' does not have to be the means to its own end, but could serve as a step toward successful implementation of central tools for aggregating and augmenting insights “at the top” in the long run. However, before a culture of evaluation is established at post level, any top-down attempts to facilitate learning-focused evaluations may be doomed to fail. Attitudes toward current evaluation practices are currently negative, and the practice may tend to use new tools with an outdated frame of mind that focuses on evaluation as just another opportunity to “market” the success of programs.

Rethinking the Rule of Thumb

Our research suggests that implicitly suggested standards for evaluation spending—a minimum of 5% of the grant budget—may actually (and unintentionally) reinforce a culture where evaluation is seen as a “farce” and an unattainable ideal. Many of those practitioners interviewed work with grants that are arguably too small to justify spending 5% of the budget on evaluation. Practically, this suggests that evaluation funding should be decoupled from grant size. This may not only allow smaller programs to deliver insights for the department, but also bolster the “culture of evaluation” through an even stronger signaling of the value placed in evaluation.

It should be acknowledged that the evaluation efforts by R, R/PPR and other actors to assist specific public diplomacy posts and programs are funded independently from resources previously allocated to a specific program, and in some cases the budget for such evaluations are greater than the project itself. This illustrates the commitment of specific offices to enhance evaluation practice—but such efforts are the exception and have not yet impacted practitioner attitudes toward evaluation at large, or the broader perception in the State Department that assistance with evaluation is readily available.

Leveraging the Potential of Locally Employed Staff

Our research suggested that at the field level, expectations for Foreign Service officers to perform evaluation can be very low. Norms recognize the difficulties in terms of workload but also turnover at posts with people “coming and going” every two or three years. As suggested by several of the interviewees, this reality should shift attention more toward locally employed staff, who were called an “underutilized resource.” Many posts employ staff that remain in place for years, even decades. Such people, while often not American citizens or members of the Foreign Service, are in a much better position to oversee and implement long-term evaluation plans. Such individuals are likely more familiar with local history and context, and would thus be invaluable in the construction of evaluation objectives and development of locally meaningful indicators. Yet, no interviewee mentioned that locally employed staff are involved in the construction or execution of evaluations. Moreover, these staff are even more likely to lack evaluation training and expertise. The question, then, may become how to better harness the continuity and regional expertise of locally employed staff to feed into mid- and long-term evaluations.

Conclusion

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, public diplomacy budgets in the U.S. have increased significantly. This has resulted in a stronger focus on evaluation both in Washington and at post level. Different offices in D.C. now provide various resources for field offices to conduct evaluation of their programs. But while our data suggest that practitioners view evaluation positively, execution is still lacking. In this article for *CPD Perspectives* we have—based on the insights from our research—attempted to outline some potential measures and approaches that might enable better execution. While our data comes from one specific country and institution (the U.S. Department of State), the above points may tie in with the international debate on public diplomacy comparing other cases, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, France and Japan.[30] These studies have stressed that the evidence on actual developments in public diplomacy is patchy. And they have emphasized the fundamental gap between the quality of data that is available to public diplomacy practitioners on the one hand, and how practitioners are using this data to inform public diplomacy practice as well as policy on the other. Our data and discussion pertaining to prevalent attitudes, norms and capacities of practitioners in the realm of public diplomacy evaluation work is designed to further inform the debate on understanding this fundamental gap.

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