

# Diplomacy and Communication: The Transatlantic Perspective

August 9, 2012

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## Summary

On August 9, academics, government officials, diplomats and communications experts assembled to examine, under the co-sponsorship of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy, the basic questions of why governments communicate with foreign publics. The discussion took place under Chatham House rules. Under the chairmanship of GMF Senior Director for Foreign Policy and Civil Society Enders Wimbush, the group focused on the technology-driven transformation of public diplomacy, gaps in current knowledge on political implications of these changes, and steps to enhance transatlantic cooperation to respond to an increasingly complex global communication environment. Exponential changes in communications technology have opened a new field of questions on how this evolution should best be exploited for policy advancement.

The three principal commentators were David Ensor, Director of the Voice of America; Bruce Sherman, Director of Global Strategy and Research for the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors; and Dr. Philip Seib, Director of the Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California. Included in the discussion group were representatives from 22 other organizations in Washington, including senior staffers from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, representatives from six European embassies (UK, Canada, France, Poland, Netherlands, and Sweden), two representatives from the Department of State, and academicians from American University.

## Basic Questions

The conference began with an examination of the fundamental issues of diplomacy and communication:

- Why do states communicate with other societies?
- How do we think about communication in a wired (and wireless) world where some actors are investing ever more heavily to get their voices heard while others are being forced to cut back for budgetary reasons?
- Where should nations focus their communication assets?
- Are conventional notions of public diplomacy suited to the new wired world?
- What are the wild cards that could transform the public diplomacy landscape in the future?
- What do global information flows look like?
- Who is driving the information agenda?
- How can we identify common elements among transatlantic public diplomacy platforms to consider an architecture that would allow for combining and leveraging resources to accomplish shared missions?

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## Government Mass Communication – Changes and Challenges

To answer why nations communicate, one speaker said that we are experiencing a war of ideas, and recent ruthless attacks on journalists are a reminder that an ideological battle is underway on the airways and cyberspace. Nations communicate in part to challenge hate speech, extremist propaganda and enemies who would dominate the global conversation. Government communicators are most effective when they tell the truth, and most compelling when they include reporting on negative stories about their own countries, such as, in the case of the U.S., Watergate and Abu Ghraib. The best defense against the voices of extremism is fair, balanced and unbiased news and information.

For the United States, this mission continues despite a shrinking budget and an expansion of broadcasts from countries such as Russia, China and Iran. In Russia, the use of social media is exploding, with podcasts and mobile applications, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Skype. The Kremlin tightly controls television and has forced USG programs, formerly carried on local Russian radio stations, off the air. To counter this, USG broadcasters adopted a mostly-digital strategy which allowed shows to be shared throughout the market in a kind of viral distribution network.

Iran, China and Russia are investing billions of dollars on beefing up overseas programming. It is increasingly difficult for the USG and European allies to compete in very expensive media such as broadcasting. Another participant noted that the Chinese see their mission as rectifying a lack of input into the global dialogue by investing heavily in communication now – a leveling of the playing field.

Other media besides TV are still important for conveying official communication. In a few countries such as Nigeria and Burma, shortwave radio is still dominant. In Indonesia, the Voice of America has a regular TV audience of 38 million. Overall, the biggest communication revolution is the rising power of mobile phones, increasingly used as the gateway to the Internet for those without other means of access, as in Africa. There are those in the poorest countries of Africa who say they would go without food before they would surrender their cell phones. Communications strategists predict that by 2020 every new mobile will be a Smart Phone, and governments must have communication products to fit into it.

The importance of international communications seemed clear to everyone at the conference, yet the question remains that, in the U.S., the issue does not have the support within Congress to assure sufficient funding. Complicating the issue is unwillingness on the part of the USG to deal with hostile broadcasters by shutting them down, because of the constitutional commitment to freedom of the press. It was noted, for example, that China's radio broadcasts are now carried on local American affiliates, and Chinese TV can be viewed on several cable

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networks. Also, the proliferation of private U.S.-based broadcasters such as CNN seen by traveling American policy makers makes them question why the USG has to invest in broadcasting when private American enterprises are already giving the news abroad.

One participant noted that USG communicators do not do a good job “selling their products” in the U.S., to Congress and the American public. Among the reasons cited for this are legal blockages due to the Smith-Mundt Act, which forbids broadcast of USG-funded media content in the domestic United States. This legislation is so strict that, as one pointed out, Minnesota Public Radio was not allowed to rebroadcast USG-produced programs intended for Somalia to the large Somali immigrant community around Minneapolis.

Yet lack of funding for government broadcasting is not limited to the U.S. The BBC, Germany’s Deutsche Welle, Radio France Internationale, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and Radio Netherlands Worldwide, among others, are also seeing huge reductions in their budgets for international broadcasting. Those who advocate public diplomacy must answer the question of what national policy interests this form of communication is addressing in order to justify the costs.

Another issue the conferees raised is whether the explosion of media has led to greater media freedom. In China, millions of citizens have mobile phones, but the Chinese government controls the space. The question for the U.S. is how to get into this internal discussion in such closed societies; how to advocate without being seen as putting forth propaganda.

## Interactivity and empowerment

In the past, information flow was one way and on schedule: the nightly news came on at 6:30 and audiences had to adjust their schedules to watch it. In 1980 Ted Turner began broadcasting news 24 hours a day, empowering the news consumers to watch according to their own schedules.

Now an even greater change has taken place: The news consumer has become a participant thanks to social media. We are all becoming reporters and content is not as easily controlled by states. One historic example of this transformation took place in 2009 in Iran when footage of the shooting death of Neda Agha-Soltan drew international attention. She was killed during protests over the disputed election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the incident was captured on video by bystanders. It was sent to the Netherlands (to avoid Iranian online obstructions), broadcast over the Internet, and the video became what has been described as “probably the most widely witnessed death in human history.” A more current example is the ongoing crisis in Syria, where much of the information coming out of that country is via cell phone images.

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Yet these opportunities for citizen-as-reporter media content have created new problems as the amount of information now available becomes a cacophony. The consumer has to work harder to determine what is worth listening to and how to filter information. In addition, it is becoming harder to determine the accuracy or venue of what is being communicated. As an example, much of the “Twitter Revolution” content attributed to Iran was actually coming from the Iranian diaspora in places such as Los Angeles.

This mass of noise and manipulation of information means consumers need to learn to determine what is likely to be accurate and what is not. From the earliest grades, schools should train students how to corroborate information, to ask questions about what they read and hear.

As one of the participants noted, digital lifestyles and cultures are still emerging in our global markets. If we want to be more effective we can:

- Teach students smart digital consumer skills to keep them safe in using the Internet, but also help with media literacy skills.
- Engage audiences to help solve problems, whether that is improving news coverage or crowd sourcing solutions to problems (such as a virtual UN).
- Provide clear information that helps people navigate complex lives in areas such as health, education, jobs and entrepreneurship.
- Improve research of digital lifestyles in our key countries to understand behavior and interests.

In some cases, the challenge comes not from the media itself but from a lack of filters. The level of transparency has changed in the transmission of information, with much data being placed directly on line - as in the case of Wikileaks - without the mediation of journalists and editors. To what extent should this be controlled? Conferees also asked whether governmental leveraging of new media, including user-generated content, could constitute interference in the internal affairs of other states and whether states should be able to control messages coming into their borders.

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One participant noted three emerging trends in American media consumption which likely will begin to apply abroad and have implications for government outreach:

- “Best Screen Available” – people will select the best screen possible to consume video content; i.e. big screen sports. If there is a TV in the room, they won’t pick up the laptop and leave the TV off, unless the TV does not deliver the content they want to watch (i.e. no Internet connection).
- “Second Screen” – people are multi-tasking when watching traditional content; sometimes interacting with each other about the program, sometimes just doing a shopping list or answering email. There is a trend in “convergence” where television manufacturers are making their TVs enabled for the Internet, and bringing Face book, Twitter and other social platforms onto the TV screen to be not only accessible (obviating the need for a lap top or tablet), but enabling ‘social TV’ where people consume content together.
- “Cord Cutting” – where people are dropping traditional cable, broadcast or satellite service for just Internet services, such as streaming or on-demand video and audio.

Connecting the dots among all these complex changes in the media environment and in the social and political fabric worldwide—and determining how to harness or adapt to these changes in traditional public diplomacy—raised areas that require far more study and analysis.

## Questions to be answered

Conferees agreed that the discussion uncovered a need to identify the gaps in our knowledge and the priorities for filling those gaps. We recognized several areas of particular concern: how the explosion of social media is changing the way news is conveyed; the need for states to respond in order to get their messages heard; ways to help citizens interpret the increasingly massive flow of data; and ideas for better coordination among those with similar messages.

**Social Media:** The emergence of social media has altered the ways people are seeking to become informed. How do governments or other actors respond to news fast enough now that it is reported at the speed of events themselves? One conferee pointed out that the U.S. has lagged in appreciating the importance of Twitter, Facebook, Google, YouTube and other sites in galvanizing discontent in the Arab world by giving voice to the disaffected and spreading real-time images of atrocities. With information being transmitted by multiple, dispersed sources as it happens, how do we make public diplomacy agile enough to respond to real-time action? How should the response itself be shaped by the dynamics of these new media platforms?

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Discussion also centered on whether social media actually contains ideas and generates serious analytical content or is simply a vehicle for mobilizing individuals or groups to take action. Among the unknowns is the level of effectiveness of social media once the political dust has settled. One speaker noted: “You can Tweet a revolution but not a transition.”

The rise of social media as a primary source of information also raises issues of corroboration, sourcing of information, and peer review. The absence of oversight and a code of conduct for new media could lead to a loss of credibility, yet there is no widely-accepted set of guidelines for social media ethics.

**State-sponsored Public Diplomacy:** Primary among those who must work to maximize interaction between social and traditional media in getting out their messages are nations communicating with foreign audiences. Conferees noted that many more nations are engaging in public diplomacy, with varying degrees of success, truthfulness and funding. The need to identify motives is paramount, to determine the strategic objectives of communication programs, whether to persuade, engage, create a friendlier environment or counter disinformation.

A related discussion revolved around the meaning of “credibility” in government communication and the challenge for states to build it. We need to know more about how technology opens up diplomatic possibilities. Changes in the media have created an expectation that states will communicate. Citizens have the capability to receive information through an array of channels, and countries that don’t transmit will be left behind.

Not only states are using public diplomacy effectively now. Non-state actors are increasingly effective in reaching audiences and nations must adapt to compete. The pan-Arab television network Al-Jazeera has become popular with viewers because it innovates quickly, spotlighting user-generated content. Extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban have proven adept in messaging in technically sophisticated and persuasive ways.

States should reach out more to “domestic diaspora” populations for help in advancing messages overseas, suggested one conferee. Another advised that democracies with a commitment to freedom of the press should provide more journalism training to local reporters in emerging countries such as Algeria and Burma.

**Increased Coordination:** Conferees agreed on the need for greater coordination among allies to maximize effectiveness in communicating shared messages, particularly on big ticket items such as broadcasting, while acknowledging that national interests make this kind of “common cause” difficult.

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Areas for potential improved coordination:

- Between public diplomacy specialists on both sides of the Atlantic. It was noted that currently no forum exists for discussing common issues, sharing information or identifying opportunities for cooperation.
- Between states and communication intermediaries, such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, who stand between government messages and audiences;
- Among state broadcasters (VOA, BBC, DW), by carrying common programs in different languages to reduce costs, or by sharing facilities and transmission resources. International broadcasters are already sharing research on a limited basis;
- Between State Department public diplomacy operations and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. One conferee said that State Department public diplomacy officers no longer think of broadcasting as part of PD and that both sides are unaware of the work and capabilities of the other. The State Department has an interest in promoting U.S. foreign policy goals and achievements, along with U.S. values. VOA, on the other hand, does not see its charter as one that promotes U.S. policy per se, but rather "reports the news and global events in an unbiased and objective manner."
- Between state communicators and those who fund it. Those who implement public diplomacy need to educate appropriators of its value to national interests, especially as the U.S. and European nations weather recession;
- Among USG agencies, all of which have public outreach: DOD, AID, State. The U.S. needs national leadership to coordinate among them, pool resources and reduce duplication.

**Listening and Measuring:** A key area for further exploration involves understanding the audience and the impact of public diplomacy on intended listeners. Knowing how listeners and viewers interpret data is essential to measuring effectiveness in communication, knowing that the intended message was received.

**Conclusion:** There was a consensus that communication is an ever-more powerful aspect of diplomacy and a vital means of influence. The global movement towards more wired communities presents opportunities for advancing policy goals, countering extremist groups and autocratic regimes, and promoting understanding among societies. Yet questions on diplomacy and communication far outstrip the answers, even as public diplomacy is emerging as a dynamic area of scholarship. This is a field in which policy institutions and universities could collaborate profitably to advance the base of knowledge and provide policy recommendations in the interest of transatlantic democracies. We urgently need to identify areas where efforts by public diplomacy professionals on both sides of the Atlantic could be connected and combined in this era of recession to counter challengers increasingly intent on steering the global narrative.

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