
Roundtable: *The “Relational Turn” to the Hard Questions in Public Diplomacy*

Abstract: Over the past decade since its reemergence, public diplomacy has experienced a progressive shift from one-way, unilateral approaches to more interactive, relational approaches to engage with publics and achieve policy goals. Such relational approaches often carry with them the public expectation of greater levels of mutuality, transparency and even trust in order to foster dialogue, build relationships and achieve collaboration. While this shift represents a change in how public diplomacy initiatives are designed and implemented, that shift in practice is only one aspect of the “relational turn” in public diplomacy. This Panel/Roundtable moves away from the positive and even idyllic visions of relationship building to explore how and why to apply a relational perspective to the hard questions in public diplomacy. What place does a relational perspective have in the contentious and often volatile global political arena?

The “Relational Turn” to Practice, Politics, Power in PD?

Remarks as prepared for Friday, March 28, 2014: Donna Marie Oglesby

At its simplest level, I think of public diplomacy as purposeful communication abroad.

Like the foreign policy from which it flows, PD is activity designed to achieve objectives which can range from the achievement of national security policies to the provision of global public goods. Because the range of possible objectives is so broad and the action possibilities so numerous, practitioners must choose which actions to take based on some prioritization of objectives determined by policy makers.

Choice is limited by time, resource constraints, by the domestic politics that determines what is a legitimate, proper and desirable expenditure of public funds, and by what is doable or thought to be achievable given the particular realities of the field in which the activity is designed to take place.

What a public diplomat — as foreign policy actor — chooses to do then depends on what capacities they have (read power as both legitimacy and material) and what ideas they have about what public diplomats as foreign policy actors do. These ideas are shaped both by the political culture the public diplomat represents, by the institutional culture in which she is embedded and by the norms and expectations of the external milieu in which she acts. Implementation is a complex and fully political activity: a boundary process that connects actors to the domestic and foreign environments by the pursuit of a foreign policy.

Whether to act through information and influence campaigns, dialogue or collaboratively (relationally) involves choice and that choice is constrained by institutional legacy or habit, skill sets and the ideas in vogue at the time.

It is not clear to me that the assumptions made by this panel are true:

I do not know that *“public diplomacy has experienced a progressive shift from one-way, unilateral approaches to more interactive, relational approaches to engage with publics and achieve policy goals.”*

Take the current Ukraine crisis for example:

This is a clear case of public diplomacy as political argument in the global public square.

Whatever Rick Stengel had planned to do as the new Undersecretary for PD in the U.S. State Department, [He had communicated intentions at the societal level to the broader PD community on taking office] he has spent his time reacting to Russian policy initiatives that have moved the political/military sphere to the top of the agenda.

Time constraints, the reactive nature of the news management challenge and the absolute necessity for clear speech on the part of policy makers at a hinge moment in the international order have led foreign policy actors to choose information as a strategic resource in an effort to clarify their policy positions and mobilize publics to support their interests, goals or objectives.

- Speeches, statements, press conferences on the part of presidents and prime ministers from their capitals (including Moscow) and at the UN are used to frame the issue to their advantage
- Fact sheets debunking Russian or Western claims engaging in point by point debate are efforts to clear up misperception or disinformation and seize the narrative
- Dueling narratives are pushed
- Trips by Western leaders to symbolic sites in Kiev to demonstrate solidarity and well publicized trips to the EU, particularly border NATO nations by American officials including the president are intended to buck up and reassure allies. Putin's speech from a symbolic site in Moscow makes the nationalist claims he voices as does well publicized visuals of placing the Crimean flag in the Russian Federation line-up.
- State steps up a digital Russian language feed to try to penetrate a controlled media environment
- State creates a Ukraine specific Twitter handle to highlight information and correct misperceptions

There is no question that there are multiple and complex audiences with varying interests and values processing the information and judging it credible or persuasive in layered ways. Feedback loops are important for refining messages, frames and communication strategies. Relationships (contacts) within the coalition of Western nations coordinating their policy response to Russian action are key to management of communications. Within the United States State Department, Stengel is responsible for both Public Diplomacy (external audiences) and Public Affairs (domestic audiences) & it would appear that given the domestic politics of the issue, the functions have merged. Is this what Secretary Kerry meant when he said "there is no foreign in foreign policy?"

The whole approach may resemble "cold war" PD paradigm but the complexity of the media environment and consequently the 360* arc of politics can not be overstated. Given the West's choice of economic sanctions against specific Russians, economic support for Ukraine and naming and shaming of Putin (based on an assumption that the Russian public has a desire to integrate with the rest of the world) as instruments of foreign policy, publics are central. Were economic sanctions to become more severe, there could be economic repercussions on Western economies for example. Given the economic logic of global integration (structures of production, trade, investment) the support of domestic publics within key EU states for policies

taken would be critical to the internal political stability necessary to act externally with strength and conviction.

As the crisis mode passes, a more proactive strategic communication effort is likely on the part of all concerned powers given their sudden recognition of the competitive political/military relationship between Russia and the West. The competition goes to the heart of normative assumptions about the “rules of the international game.” This shift in thinking will play out in the East (China) that has abstained in critical UN votes and distanced itself from Russia, India which had signaled recognition of Russia’s legitimate sphere of influence and the Middle East ranging from highly linked policy issues like Syria and Iran nuclear proliferation as well as Egypt (given its new pact with Russia.)

Thinking geopolitically again, will probably not privilege the longer, slower relationship building approaches contemplated by the “relational turn” which I think was based on assumptions of shared international norms, rules and institutions governing the expectations of behavior on the part of international actors who could arrive at optimal solutions to mutually defined problems collaboratively. What now is the “international” like? How is the “global” defined? Are we seeing a new age of nationalism?

Ukraine shows us that there are particular people, living in particular places with palpable histories of their own. In these contexts — and neighborhoods — values driven programs centered on concepts like “democracy,” “free-market capitalism,” and “human rights” are hardly apolitical. Underlying all these formulations — at least on the part of the U.S. — is a strong and distinctly American belief — held to be universal — in the autonomy of the individual and a commitment to political liberty and limited state power. This is an ideological package that Russia and some other states reject.

In a world where weaker states from the Baltics to the Black Sea are suddenly looking East with renewed concern and seeking assurances of protection from greater Western powers, physical place matters once again. Geography matters. The logic of politics (which is the competition over how the world is to be organized and resources allocated) will certainly displace the logic of knowledge that had assumed that there was a “global” within which transnational actors could deliberate and act for humanity above the political strata seen to be so 20th century old school. Perhaps now we will actually see the rebirth of diplomacy.