
By Nicholas J. Cull

Long gone are the days when political elites could conduct the diplomacy of nation-states primarily as a top-down articulation of policies and priorities.

The emergence of the Internet and the rise of social media networks have fundamentally altered the nature of public diplomacy, vastly multiplying the number of voices and views at play and challenging the credibility of diplomatic narratives that states once took for granted, writes Nicholas J. Cull.

OTTO VON BISMARCK famously defined political genius as the ability to listen for the hoof beats of history and leap at just the right moment to catch onto its coat as it thunders past. The implication of this observation is that in politics most people leap too late, or too early, and end up sprawled in the mud as history disappears over the horizon. It is one of the great ironies of history that the scale of change is often missed by those who are closest to it. They cling to the certainties and practices of the past and in so doing lose the opportunity to shape the shifting world to their best advantage. Such is the case with the emergence of the public dimension in international relations. While no statesman would deny the relevance of public engagement to the conduct of foreign policy — witness the breadth of activity documented in the cover stories of this issue of Global Asia — few have really absorbed its centrality and the implications for the future conduct of diplomacy. If they really understood it, public diplomacy and an associated awareness of soft power would be even more firmly established and effectively practiced than it is at present.

Public diplomacy is not new to Asia or the world. Leaders have understood the need to conduct foreign policy by engaging with a foreign public since the days when Sun Tzu emphasized the power of enemy morale or the Indian ruler Ashoka sought to extend his Buddhist faith to neighboring kingdoms. It is only to be expected that today’s governments seek to boost their standing by mounting international expositions, running branding campaigns or promoting their national language overseas.

By the same token, soft power is not new either. Analysts have understood that power lies in more than military or economic leverage since Confucius noted the value of a leader’s moral reputation. It is only to be expected that today’s governments pay close attention to international perceptions of their actions and seek to maximize awareness of their positive traits.

What is new in our time is the centrality of such concerns. In the 21st century, publics — empowered by political reform and the rapid development of communications technology — have an unprecedented role in the politics of their own countries, and as a result other international actors have an unprecedented motive and ability to reach out across frontiers to engage them. Unfortunately, the dominant practices of public diplomacy often remain those of the past.

OUR LINKS AND OUR LIKES

In the past, public diplomacy operated as a simple multiplier of traditional diplomacy: a useful extra for a state with money and time on its hands. The international actor who wished, for example, to secure an alliance or boost trade with another state would supplement a formal approach to that state’s government by addressing its people through such tools as advocacy, international broadcasting or cultural diplomacy to build awareness and even an admiration for the actor’s culture. They might even promote two-way exchanges between one another’s citizens as a way of deepening mutual understanding.

Such work was valued to a point, but it was generally seen as an optional extra and not part of the core mission of foreign policy. That perception is proving slow to disappear, hence the limited resources available to significant players like the Korea Foundation or the pioneers of e-diplomacy in India. But history thunders on regardless.

As the 21st century’s second decade gathers momentum, the new architecture of international relations is becoming plain. Several distinguishing features have emerged. The first is the new and astonishing abundance of participants in the international sphere. This is now a world of many voices, in which the dominance of the great powers and the media associated with them has been challenged by an explosion of other actors, including non-governmental organizations, corporations, international organizations, sub-national regions and cities. Even in China, which has been characterized by the most centralized concepts of public diplomacy, examples of city-level diplomacy are coming out of Shanghai, Guangzhou and Tianjin.

Yet more remarkable is the ability of new technology to allow groups of individuals who share common concerns to cohere into an online community with only a limited formal structure and no regard for borders, and become an international voice in their own right. The Al Qaeda network now exists at such a level, and who knows how many other such communities of faith or folly exist and will work for good or ill in the future.

The second major change is the extent to which the evolution of the Internet beyond its initial structure has fundamentally changed the essential direction of communication from the old pat-
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FINDING AFFINITY
Such changes have massive implications for public diplomacy. They not only increase the importance of the foreign public and a state’s reputation with that public, they dictate the kind of public diplomacy best suited to succeed and condemn other approaches to failure. In a networked world where credibility rests with “someone like” the individual audience member, it is highly unlikely that a centralized foreign voice will enjoy much credibility. Public diplomacy has to seek out people within the network that they wish to engage who will be credible to their peers and empower them to speak. That empowerment might be as simple as preparing information that can easily be relayed (or re-tweeted) by translating, formatting or packaging it in a way that makes it easy to pass on, or it could be as complex as a large-scale investment in particular foreign individuals to ensure that they understand your country and will be able to speak authoritatively about it. That has always been the logic behind exchange diplomacy. By bringing a foreign citizen to your country you not only shape that citizen directly, you help create a special authority who is a first-hand witness to your country. Thus a wise public diplomacy strategy might shift resources to one of the most well established tools, the exchange, and actively target people with proven audiences in social media as a priority. Israel has followed this strategy by recently selecting a small number of widely read youth bloggers for exchange visits. A second approach is to use exchanges to build new international networks of people who will have credibility with one another — fellow members of the same profession, religion or academic discipline — even beyond their national identity. This approach was used effectively in the Cold War with the creation of networks of Soviet and American scientists. Although it is difficult to initiate such links solely through social media, evidence suggests that these exchange networks can be sustained and perpetuated by the new generation of social media and on-line tools.

GOING IT ALONE WON’T WORK
Such observations are only the beginning. Yet more profound are the limits that this new world imposes on its old masters. In a world of multiple actors and diffuse sources of credibility, no one international actor can get far acting alone. Successful foreign policy increasingly requires partnerships. Some nations — most prominently the United Kingdom — now include “partnership” within their core definition of public diplomacy. By defining foreign policy objectives around issues of mutual concern to a range of actors rather than narrow national agendas it is possible to enlist those actors and the networks that consider them credible into a common action. The United States has been able to use this kind of partnership strategy effectively to advance the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa, working its PEPFAR (President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) program with such unusual partners as soft-drink companies.
and the makers of TV dramas for teenagers as well as community-level structures.

Of course, similarity and affinity are not the only criteria for credibility. People will pass along messages from dissimilar strangers that appeal to them because of their inherent strength or emotional impact. Internet content thought to be funny goes further (or even “viral”) because members of networks plainly enjoy entertaining their peers.

Material that is shocking also travels widely, and here is another challenge for the traditional nation-state. The flip-side of a soft-power world in which countries are judged by their culture and values is that those who persist in using hard power (especially military force) will be stigmatized as images of their deeds circulate widely and credibly online. As both the Syrian regime and its antagonists have learned in recent months, few corners of the world are beyond sight of a cameraphone. The application of hard power has a crushing soft-power cost. The nation that accumulates strength risks being mistrusted in proportion to that strength. The nation that wields that strength against its enemy loses moral standing even as it ennobles its enemy; however different global audiences may be, they all seem predisposed to extend a special credibility to victims of suffering.

Given these trends, which nations are leaping with genius and which are floundering? The obvious response is that no nation has quite got the answer right — in Asia or elsewhere — because technology is evolving too rapidly for the clunky old nation-state to keep up. The most successful exponents of new technology in the worlds of public diplomacy and soft power are not nation-states but other voices — NGOs, international organizations and even sub-national actors — whose outreach is not restrained by being inconveniently tethered to a geographical unit that is divided by contradictory internal opinion and inconsistent behavior. It is time to seek real partnerships with these other voices. It is also clear that success requires approaching the new technology on its own terms as a mechanism for building relationships and not merely using it as yet another one-way channel for broadcasting. Finally, success begins — as with traditional public diplomacy — with listening.

It is easy to endorse listening in public diplomacy but much harder to actually listen. Real listening means engaging a foreign public through consistent, sustained and eclectic study; feeding what is learned into the policy-making procedure and changing one’s behavior (or at least one’s rhetoric) as a result. Real listening means listening not just to devise what one should say to get one’s own way, but so as to direct one’s own behavior for mutual benefit. The new media have created new opportunities for listening. Some are complex. There is a whole skill of network analysis needed to truly understand the structure of networks in which foreign audiences are now arranged. Some are simple. It is obvious that anyone seeking to use a platform like Twitter to speak to foreign audiences should also be reading what foreign audiences say in the medium, yet one still comes across diplomatic Twitter feeds where the owner is following no one.

The advantage of a moment where no actor is yet pre-eminent is that all have an advantage in listening and learning from one another, and seeking ways to use the new technology and its moment for mutual good. The articles in this cover package of Global Asia are part of that process. The hoof beats are thundering. It’s time to jump.