

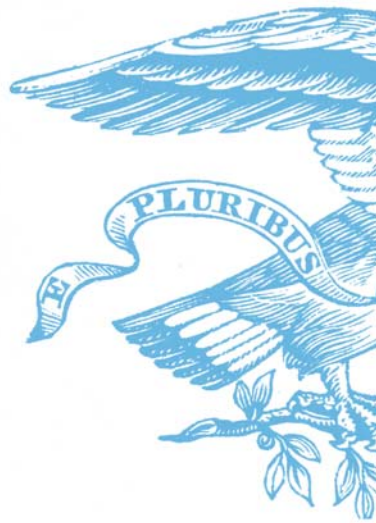


PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

Fixing Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications

By S. Enders Wimbush

Hudson Institute



Fixing Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications

By S. Enders Wimbush

American public diplomacy and strategic communications have been failing since the end of the Cold War. We are neither promoting American values effectively nor winning the war of ideas. Public diplomacy and strategic communications are perversely under-funded. They will continue to fail until the new administration establishes and delivers funding at a level commensurate with these activities' strategic importance.



Losing the War of Ideas

Since the early 1990s, the U.S. Government has largely squandered a rich legacy in effective public diplomacy and strategic communications. A complacency spawned by the end of the Cold War that it was no longer necessary to explain ourselves or our policies to the larger world affected our attitudes, while eager politicians savaged our great communications institutions in search of a “peace dividend.” After all, it was widely argued, America had won the Cold War, and no credible challengers remained; we were the sole hyper-power. Our culture had vanquished communism and most of its variants; we had reached “the end of history.”

To celebrate, we abolished many of the most effective instruments for telling America’s story, for example the U.S. Information Agency, and scaled back activities, like cultural and academic exchanges, that brought Americans directly into touch

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

with non-Americans. Our famous international broadcasters—the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and others—effectively ceased to purvey ideas and substance, scaled back their operations, eliminated many broadcast languages, and substituted American pop music and other less serious programming aimed at mass youth audiences.

Thus, within the space of one decade beginning in the early 1990s, American leaders and legislators systematically and wittingly abandoned perhaps the most successful public diplomacy program the world had seen. Its practitioners aged and left the scene; little of value filled the vacuums they left behind.

After 9/11, it became painfully evident that America needed a strong public diplomacy capability for two things: to influence key foreign audiences in ways that disposed them to support our view of the world and our policies; and to engage in a war of ideas—the traditional mission of our strategic communications instruments like the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The response of the Bush administration was an attempt to fill both vessels with the same liquid: the unabashed “marketing” and “branding” of America. The underlying assumptions of this approach were simple. America’s goodness was taken for granted. Democracy, as we defined it, was advertised as an end in itself, rather than as a means to the ends (e.g., freedom, liberty, justice) America stands for. These ideas, which continue to infect USG thinking about public diplomacy today, quickly foundered. America’s standing as a uniquely moral state plummeted, spurred by policies that much of the world disapproves of. Anti-terrorism, or fighting the “war on terror,” the defining tactic of the post-9/11 period, was elevated to the rank of a strategy. Public diplomacy, itself without strategic guidance, fell into this chasm.

Shaping Environments—Public Diplomacy/ Strategic Communications Division of Labor

During the Cold War, a key objective of America’s public diplomacy and strategic communications was to contribute toward shaping the strategic landscape in ways that favored our objectives. We made no secret of it, and those we attempted to influence—whether through USIA exhibits of kitchen appliances in Russia, broadcasts by Radio Liberty to Kazakhstan, or academic exchanges funded by the U.S. government—always understood it. Our efforts were balanced but never neutral. Today this shaping function, in everything from reaching out to “moderate” Muslims to our international broadcasting, is largely being ignored. We have embraced “neutrality,” which has caused our missions to blur and our message

to wander. An elementary starting point for formulating a new strategy for public diplomacy, therefore, would be to ask: What do we seek to accomplish? If we seek always to remain neutral, why do we bother with public diplomacy at all?

Traditional public diplomacy concentrates on explaining US policies, putting forward a positive view of American life and culture, and generally working to predispose foreigners favorably toward the United States as a way to facilitate achieving our objectives. This part of the public diplomacy mission is all about “us.”

The second part, strategic communications, is all about “them.” In particular, the mission of the “surrogate” broadcasters—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and Radio Marti—is fundamentally different from that of the Voice of America and other pure public diplomacy instruments. The surrogate radios are less concerned with how or why people dislike us or with advocating for America than in spurring intelligent listeners to think about the costs to their nation of runaway ideologies and isolation from critical globalizing trends. They were designed to act as local stations where free local stations do not exist, and their mandate was to stir debate within societies like Iran, Cuba or North Korea in ways that weaken the ability of oppressive regimes to monopolize information and ideas and, hence, power.

Today these critical strategic and operational distinctions are badly eroded, and our ability to shape environments in ways favorable to our objectives through effective soft power is badly constrained.

Grasping Public Diplomacy’s New Dynamics

A number of dynamics are key to understanding both the challenges to and opportunities to be found in communicating more effectively. First, the new world of public diplomacy is awash in news and information. No part of this world is without news from many sources, most of purporting to be “unbiased,” and no government is able to restrict the inflow of news totally. The satellite dish is ubiquitous throughout the world, including in developing world, even on shepherds’ huts. Many of these satellite services deliver 50-100 channels from all over the globe, including most of the major international news channels. This is even the case in repressive societies like Iran, where dishes are hidden but plentiful.

In addition to TV and radio, Internet connectivity is increasingly widespread. Private services are available most places, and Internet cafés are abundant almost everywhere, sometimes in such numbers that it is hard to attribute any economic logic to their presence.

America’s public diplomacy efforts must reflect this explosion of sources of news and information.

Second, for many of the same technological reasons the emerging world of public diplomacy provides a tsunami of entertainment. Setting aside for the moment questions about how much entertainment America's public diplomacy efforts should provide and for what reasons, the idea that our government-funded efforts, with their limited resources, can or should compete head-to-head with the avalanche of entertainment from hundreds of sources on all media is surely fanciful. Yet this is the direction America's international broadcasting has taken in recent years.

Third, anti-Americanism is likely to remain a prominent feature of the future public diplomacy landscape for the foreseeable future, especially, but not exclusively, in the Islamic regions of the world we seek to influence. Anti-Americanism, as always, will ebb and flow with events and predispositions, but it is likely to remain persistent, perhaps even at high levels. Moreover, the explosion in communications technologies and the exponential multiplication of actors who can use this technology create conditions for anti-Americanism to spike rapidly at any moment.

Fourth, the demographics of public diplomacy is changing dramatically, raising a host of questions about what we should target and how. Demographic trends are changing the relative size of countries. Large populations of some countries will become relatively small, while smaller populations of other countries will become relatively large (e.g., Pakistan will grow larger than Russia; Iran will grow larger than Turkey; Vietnam will grow larger than Thailand; and between 1975 and 2025 China's population will grow by half, while India's will more than double). Aging will be a prominent feature across most of the public diplomacy spectrum, making any strategy targeting "youth bulges" highly questionable.

Choosing the Right Targets and the Right Messages

The public diplomacy environment we are entering will offer many target audiences, but we must be clear that all are not of equal value. If our public diplomacy operations are intended to shape environments, then the logical target audiences are those who are the shapers. History fails to report change being wrought on a society from youngsters high on American pop music, which, lamentably, is the focus of current US international broadcasting strategy. Instead, change turns on society's critical elites, some of whom might indeed be young. No issue is more important to resolve than this: Who are the agents for change, and how do we identify and, consequently, speak to them?

ues, hopes and aspirations, their optimism and can-do attitude, their creativity, their generosity, and their humility. We do not need to trumpet America's virtues; we need to demonstrate them by our actions. The medium of our public diplomacy can be a persuasive message. This is why exchanges of all kinds—academic, cultural, economic, journalistic, artistic—are such powerful tools. Our experience has been that when people come into direct contact with America and Americans, they tend to appreciate the unique qualities of our social contract and way of life.

American embassies were once highly personalized public diplomacy instruments. Our diplomats were considered to be the most open and accessible anywhere—especially in contrast to the “stuffy” Europeans. Unfortunately, in much of the world where we need the personal ministrations of our diplomats most, American embassies have been removed from city centers and rebuilt as blockhouse fortresses surrounded by barbed wire or stuck in diplomatic enclaves remote from the local people. Far too many diplomats seldom leave these compounds, sometimes for legitimate security reasons, but often not. We are losing this powerful public diplomacy tool.

Creating and Managing a Coherent Public Diplomacy Strategy

The words “public” and “diplomacy” contradict one another as would the musical notation to play the same chord loud and soft simultaneously. Diplomacy is affairs of state conducted by official government representatives. It has its own jargon, levers, and rules. Influencing large foreign publics requires different skills and is best accomplished by addressing audiences directly. Experts may argue over whether technology is shifting the execution of foreign policy from its traditional practitioners, diplomats, toward mass communicators. But the current war of ideas as well as shooting wars in the Middle East where popular opinion is key to success on the ground—as well as the certainty of more failed states, and irregular warfare—makes effective strategic communications critical to the success of American foreign policy.

Yet today America's public diplomacy has no center of gravity. Parallel and even contradictory efforts are spread across many departments of government. No comprehensive strategy exists that embraces all of these parts, or that even identifies what all of the parts are. (Some of the most impressive communications capabilities are owned by units of the US military, yet few executives in other government branches are even aware that these capabilities exist.) Many potentially valuable

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

instruments remain distant from public diplomacy goals, for example the powerful people-to-people influences of USAID. Missions are not clear, operations are not precisely defined, and coordination is absent. To the contrary, each institution claiming a public diplomacy or strategic communications function is responsible for designing and implementing its own strategy.

No one is in charge of this vast universe. No executive mechanism exists to establish political priorities for public diplomacy, or, for that matter, to hold everyone accountable to the same standards. In the past, nominal coordination has been assigned to a junior NSC officer or a State Department undersecretary; more frequently, coordination simply fails to take place, the inter-agency process lacking the capacity to bring together so much in any meaningful way. No strategy welds our diverse public diplomacy instruments, and nothing—no office, no person, no directive—attaches them strategically to U.S. foreign policy.

One bright spot: the current Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James, K. Glassman, has used his short tenure to begin important corrective measures, understand the new public diplomacy landscape, and assess the yawning opportunities for creating a government-wide communications strategy. He would be a great asset to the new administration.

Funding the Fix

Public diplomacy and strategic communications are woefully under-funded. All of its various pieces, including our international broadcasters, currently receive less than \$1.5 billion, that is about 1/365th of the Pentagon's budget. Given the importance of this vital soft power, funding public diplomacy at the level of one percent of Pentagon operations seems reasonable. Even at one-half of one percent, the current budget for public diplomacy and strategic communications nearly doubles. Yet in a perverse emphasis of under-funding, the Defense Department recently awarded \$300 million to private U.S. contractors to produce news stories, entertainment programs and public service advertisements for the Iraq media, a sum that equals nearly half the entire budget of U.S. international broadcasting. What's wrong with this picture?

Today, despite widespread agreement that our public diplomacy is in crisis and our efforts in the war of ideas are failing, virtually all debate surrounding public diplomacy and strategic communications centers on what to cut, not on what we wish to achieve and how we might achieve it. Recent efforts to cut VOA's English broadcasts, as well as strategic broadcasts to key fronts like Central Asia, Russia, Asia and Africa, suggest

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

that we are not yet serious about fighting the war of ideas. We will not win the war of ideas if we continue selective surgery on many of its most vital parts. ■

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION



HUDSON INSTITUTE

HUDSON INSTITUTE IS A NONPARTISAN
POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION
DEDICATED TO INNOVATIVE RESEARCH
AND ANALYSIS THAT PROMOTES GLOBAL
SECURITY, PROSPERITY, AND FREEDOM.
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
HUDSON INSTITUTE, VISIT OUR
WEBSITE AT WWW.HUDSON.ORG.

1015 15TH STREET, N.W.
SIXTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005
TEL: 202-974-2400
FAX: 202-974-2410
WWW.HUDSON.ORG