



Going for the jugular in public diplomacy: How adversarial publics using social media are challenging state legitimacy



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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, nations have viewed other nations as their primary competitors in public diplomacy (PD). In a quest to increase their effectiveness, states are applying relationship management and pursuing a more relational PD approach with publics. However, present understanding of relationships may be one-sided, focusing primarily on the state's relationship-building activities and overlooking the public's agency in defining relations. This paper uses relationalism as an analytical lens to construct a 4-quadrant model of public diplomacy based on the relational dynamics between a state and publics. The model reveals a parallel evolution of communication technology and public diplomacy initiatives that move from assumptions of no relations with publics, to favorable relations, to adversarial relations. A case study from Turkey is used to illustrate how diverse groups can use social media to form unlikely alliances to become a fluid, adversarial public capable of 'going for the jugular' and challenging state legitimacy. Aggressive separation tactics by the state to counter adversarial publics can inadvertently create a 'relational paradox' that leaves the two parties more politically divided and yet more relationally intertwined. The study implications stress the need for states to monitor their relational dynamic with publics as a precursor for developing reflective strategies.

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1. Introduction

Public diplomacy – a nation's strategic communication with publics in the global arena – may be facing a second wake-up call. The first wake-up call, sparked by the 9/11 attacks on the United States, brought home the message that foreign perceptions have domestic consequences (Hyde, 2001). Public diplomacy (PD) became the vital tool for nations to help change and shape public perceptions (Cull, 2008; Pamment, 2014).

In the decade since, there has been a surge of interest in the practice and scholarship of public diplomacy. Public relations scholars have played an important role in developing the field (Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2006). Well before 9/11, public relations scholars and practitioners made a strong case for the similarity between public relations and public diplomacy (e.g., Cutlip, 1987; Grunig, 1993; Kunczik, 1997; L'Etang, 1996; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Public relations scholars have been particularly instrumental in re-directing focus away from one-way media and messaging approaches that dominated the early post-9/11 era (Wang, 2006) to more relational approaches. This shift is captured in such phrases as

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“competition to cooperation” (Hocking, 2008), “battles to bridges” (Zaharna, 2010), and “messages to mutuality” (Fitzpatrick, 2011).

While relational approaches have clearly gained traction in public diplomacy, the relational mindset may yet to be fully appreciated by nations. In the public diplomacy equation, nations still seem to perceive themselves as having control over the communication dynamic. Relationship management is viewed primarily from the organization’s perspective; it is the nation that *manages* the public.

What appears to be missing from public diplomacy practice and scholarship is a fuller understanding of how dramatically digital media are changing not just messaging and media strategies, but the relational dynamics between nations and publics. Publics have seized upon the power of the social media and have become parallel players in defining and redefining relations. Despite the challenge that a mobilized public poses to states, public diplomacy scholarship and practice is still focused on other *nations* as their primary communication rivals – not *publics*. Viewing adversarial publics as credible threats may well represent a second wake-up call for public diplomacy.

This paper draws upon public relations and public diplomacy scholarship to explore public diplomacy from a relational perspective. It adopts relationalism as an analytical lens for developing a 4-quadrant model for analyzing the relational dynamics between states and publics. The relational PD model moves from no relationship, to favorable relations, to adversarial relations. A case study from the Gezi Park protests in Turkey is used to discuss the strategic implications of the 4-quadrant model and illustrate how adversarial publics armed with social media can challenge state legitimacy. The paper concludes with a discussion of strategic implications gleaned from the PD analysis, which may extend to counter-intuitive strategies for dealing with adversarial publics.

1.1. From messaging to building relationships, from publics to stakeholders

Over the past decade of intensive scholarship in public diplomacy, *messaging*, *relationship*, *publics*, and *stakeholders* have emerged as key concepts. Each concept evolved gradually, and more recently, the concepts are becoming interlinked. This linkage reflects a theoretical shift in public diplomacy from one-way communication perspective, to a relationship management perspective and, more recently, a network perspective.

One-way communication and messaging dominated public diplomacy theory and practice in the aftermath of 9/11. The goal was to generate support and create an understanding for state policies abroad. Wang (2006) described this early period as follows: “Conventional public diplomacy, the prevalent mode of communication is mass media-driven, one-way communication, supported by two-way communication such as cultural and educational exchanges” (2006, p. 94). Although aggressive messaging was initially seen as the answer, it soon was criticized as the problem, particularly for the United States. There was a global rupture in America’s relations as its favorability rating “plummeted” among publics of key allies (Pew Research Center, 2003a, 2003b). The dramatic rise in negative sentiment against the United States prompted a reassessment of the one-way messaging approach.

In response, a more relational approach, which highlights the importance of building mutually beneficial relationships between a state and its key publics through its actions and communication, began to emerge (Amr, 2004; Leonard, 2002; Riordan, 2003; Rose & Wadham-Smith, 2004; Vickers, 2004). One of the early advocates to spotlight the importance of relationships in public diplomacy was Mark Leonard who argued that public diplomacy “should be about building relationships, starting from understanding other countries’ needs, cultures, and peoples and then looking for areas to make common cause” (2002, p. 48). He claimed that deepening relationships through public diplomacy can achieve a hierarchy of objectives. Riordan (2003) also stressed relations as integral to the “new diplomacy.” Jan Melissen extended this relational vision to a “new public diplomacy,” which he proposed, “is first of all about promoting and maintaining smooth international relationships” (2005, p. 21). Fitzpatrick (2007) suggested that a relational approach was needed to strengthen the moral and ethical dimension of public diplomacy. She placed relationship management at “the conceptual core of public diplomacy” (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 105).

Both practitioners and scholars embraced and expanded the drive toward a more relational approach. Cultural diplomacy received renewed attention as an avenue for building relations among people (Arndt, 2005; Finn, 2003; Schneider, 2005). Both “engagement” (Lord, 2010; Murphy, 2008) and “relationship management” (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Vanc, 2012; Yun, 2006) were added to the lexicon of public diplomacy. New communication technologies further fueled the relational turn in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy experienced a surge in the use of social media tools and strategies to engage publics (Fisher, 2010; Hanson, 2012; Hayden, 2013), which in turn affected the relational dynamic between states and publics.

The trend toward a relational perspective may have also sparked changes in how the public was described in PD literature. Early U.S. public diplomacy reports (e.g., U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2003) used the term “audience,” including “target audience,” which suggest a passive view of the public as recipients. Public relations scholars introduced a more active, co-creational view of public diplomacy into diplomatic studies with the use of the term “public” and “publics” with an “s” (Fitzpatrick, 2007). These scholars emphasize the dynamic and connected nature of the publics.

More recently, with the rise of new media, the term “stakeholders” has been used in public diplomacy. In management literature, stakeholders are defined as individuals who affect and are affected by the organization (Freeman, 1984). A societal perspective suggests stakeholders have a right to establish and enforce a balance of power among the institutions of society and to grant their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). However, if stakeholders lose their “good faith and confidence” in an organization, it will lose its license to operate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 58).

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