



Pathways of connection: An analytical approach to the impacts of public diplomacy



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ABSTRACT

Public diplomacy, albeit its functional similarities with public relations and other corporate communication tools, is inherently a foreign policy tool, used by practitioner states to advance their national interests and achieve their foreign policy goals. The purpose of this theoretical article is to provide a framework to analyze the impacts of public diplomacy projects by acknowledging both its communication aspect and political nature. The *pathways of connection* framework is built in two-steps. First, the public diplomacy concept is situated in international politics by evaluating the concept through mainstream international relations theories. This evaluation yields three areas on which public diplomacy projects might have an impact. Second, the existing academic and practical measurement models are categorized under these areas and two pathways per area are presented. The theoretical framework can be used to understand different outcomes of public diplomacy projects and to provide a more accurate measurement of their success.

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1. Introduction

How can we see the unseen and observe the unobservable? This question summarizes the challenges faced by the scholars and practitioners in their attempts to assess and evaluate the outcomes of public diplomacy projects. Measurement is known to be a troublesome task in public diplomacy. Projects tend to yield changes on intangible concepts – such as awareness and attitudes – and these changes occur over a long-time period and cannot be directly attributed to them (for a more inclusive list of challenges in evaluation, cf. Banks, 2011). Even though a project might be able to contribute to a more positive public opinion towards a practitioner state, this change might take place over years – or even decades – and in conjunction with other variables such as changes in world politics or other diplomatic transformations. As these changes are difficult to capture, it is not surprising to observe the lack of robust measurement mechanisms but rather the presence of attempts measuring the outputs of projects (Pamment, 2013).

Public diplomacy, despite a lack of agreement on its definition, is usually seen as a fundamental communication and public relations activity carried out by states (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013). The functional similarities among these concepts encourage the use of public relations theories and models to examine the impacts of public diplomacy projects. Yet, as it will be argued throughout this paper, such a mono-disciplinary approach has the inherent danger of becoming the proverbial “Maslow’s hammer.”¹

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¹ Abraham Maslow is credited with the saying “To the man who only has a hammer, everything he encounters begins to look like a nail.”

The purpose of this theoretical article is to provide an inclusive framework that situates public diplomacy in a political and international environment by connecting its communication aspect with plausible impacts on foreign policy. Public diplomacy works as a tool to help achieve foreign policy goals of the practitioner countries (Djerejian, 2003) and operates within the international political environment. Practitioner countries use a variety of public diplomacy projects – such as international broadcasting and student exchanges – with the penultimate objective of reaching out to foreign publics and ultimate objective of advancing their own interests.

The theoretical arguments are presented in two steps. First, public diplomacy is conceptualized as a foreign policy tool and its expected impacts are evaluated through the lens of mainstream international relations theories. In this step, it is argued that a given public diplomacy project might manifest its impact in three different areas. Second, the existing measurement practices and academic models are categorized under these areas to create six pathways of connection between projects and foreign policy objectives.

The rest of this article is structured in four sections. First, a working definition of public diplomacy is presented for this research. Second, the definition is evaluated through major international relations theories to identify areas on which the impact of public diplomacy can be observed. Third, six pathways of connection are introduced. The article concludes by arguing for the contributions of the six pathways of connection framework.

2. Working definition of public diplomacy

The field of public diplomacy has gone through a rapid growth, welcoming contributions from a number of disciplines. It is neither necessary nor beneficial to devise a universal definition of or approach to public diplomacy as each and every discipline has its own strengths and weakness. Similarly, the definition used in this research is not proposed as a universal definition to replace the existing approaches in the literature. The objective is to highlight communication and politics-relevant characteristics of the concept by both acknowledging public diplomacy as a public relations function and emphasizing its connection with foreign policy.

Public diplomacy is fundamentally a communication tool used by states to reach foreign publics (Plavsak, 2002). Public relations scholar tend to see it as an activity conducted by nations as well as other international organizations and nongovernmental organizations that entail media relations, promotional and persuasive strategies (L'Etang, 2009, p. 610). International relations scholars highlight the role of power dynamics and conceptualize public diplomacy as an instrument that governments use to “communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments” (Nye, 2008, p. 95). For the purposes of this research, a definition that acknowledges the role of communication, actors involved in the communication activities, state functions, and the expected outcomes of such activities is required. It is possible to conceptualize public diplomacy as *referring to the communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives*. Within this definition, public diplomacy is an extension of traditional diplomacy in terms of the actors and objectives, and is a foreign policy tool.

3. Impacts of public diplomacy

This study expands on Yun and Toth's (2009) work that defines realist and liberalist [*sic*] public diplomacy concepts. The authors use the aforementioned international relations theories to present expected outcome of public diplomacy project. In addition to realism and liberalism, constructivism is also introduced as the third major international relations theory to create a more inclusive picture of public diplomacy activities.

According to Yun and Toth (2009), realist public diplomacy cannot see foreign publics as the target audiences. This counter-intuitive argument is in line with the main tenets of realist theory that sees international relations primarily as a power play between states in the international system as sovereign states, ignoring the role of other actors. Public diplomacy projects are expected to change the attitudes of the foreign audiences to influence the state behavior. The main assumption is that the public is important in foreign policy only due to the capacity of public opinion to change the state behavior and not as an independent actor per se.

The public diplomacy measurement and assessment practice also supports the idea that influencing public opinion might be seen as a method to create impact in foreign policy. For instance, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) use public opinion as a variable in their assessment of American public diplomacy and foreign policy. Similarly, the *Public Diplomacy Model for the Assessment of Performance* (PD-MAP) presented by the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) puts public opinion under spotlight. PD-MAP aims to “evaluate target audience's perception, favorability, or understanding prior to and after a [public diplomacy] effort” (ACPD, 2010, p. 26). PD-MAP posits that public diplomacy is expected to increase the understanding of the United States, favorability, and influence among foreign publics. This favorable public opinion is expected to change the behavior of the states – the only important actor in international affairs according to realism and realist public diplomacy – and subsequently to have an impact on foreign policy.

A liberal approach to public diplomacy operates under the assumption that states are not the only important actors in world politics (Yun & Toth, 2009). Liberalism theory argues that inter-state relations cannot be seen as independent from other actors in the international arena. Thus, foreign affairs and politics are not only influenced by states but also by the interactions of non-state actors that they call *transnational actors* (Keohane & Nye, 1972). States are still the dominant and

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