Articulating influence: Toward a research agenda for interpreting the evaluation of soft power, public diplomacy and nation brands

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A B S T R A C T

While the terms *soft power*, *public diplomacy* (PD) and *nation brands* have cemented their place in academic discourse during the early 21st century, the evaluation of these activities has not been given anywhere near the same level of attention. When describing how campaigns are evaluated, scholars tend to make assumptions based on the goals or outputs of an initiative rather than on the basis of reliable, empirical data on its results. Strong positivist tendencies within current scholarship usually lead to evaluation being considered in terms of methodology and best practice, typically with the assumption that certain preferred outcomes will be demonstrable if an ideal model is followed. Most significantly, such approaches seem to underplay the interests and objectives that inform and constrain choices surrounding modes of communication and evaluation. I argue here that PD activities are rarely the product of rational choices about communication options, and nor is PD evaluation the result of applying the "best" methodology. Rather, questions of PD and evaluation practices are bound together in complex organizational and power structures that generate pragmatic responses both to the "problem of influence" and the reporting of results. Through use of the concept of *articulation*, this article outlines a framework for interpreting evaluation practices from a contextualized perspective, which grasps how and why soft power practices assume certain forms.

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While the terms *soft power*, *public diplomacy* (PD) and *nation brands*[1] have cemented their place in academic discourse during the early 21st century, the evaluation of these activities has not been given anywhere near the same level of attention. The number of studies that consider the methods used for the evaluation of soft power and their theoretical grounds remain few compared to the number that discuss policy goals or campaign outputs (see Banks, 2011 for an extensive overview). When describing how campaigns are evaluated, scholars tend to make assumptions based on the goals or outputs of an initiative rather than on the basis of reliable, empirical data on its results (Heath & Coombs, 2006: pp. 184–187). Strong positivist tendencies within current scholarship usually lead to evaluation being considered in terms of methodology and best practice, typically with the assumption that certain preferred outcomes will be demonstrable if an ideal model is followed (e.g. Pahlavi, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2010). This fits with broader trends within PD scholarship of producing ideal "taxonomies"

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[1] See Szondi (2008), Kaneva (2011) and Hayden (2012) for thorough discussions of the distinctions between terms. Public diplomacy (PD) is the preferred term in this article for describing activities and campaigns aimed at exerting soft power and expressing brand identities (this is discussed further below).

or "components" of communication options, which implicitly position soft power activities as the rational selection of tools (e.g. Fisher & Bröckerhoff, 2008). Theories of soft power and evaluation have tended, therefore, to emphasize rational and ideal functions over real structures and relations; approaches that profoundly impact upon our ability to understand why and how practices assume certain forms.

Most significantly, such approaches seem to underplay the interests and objectives that inform and constrain choices surrounding modes of communication and evaluation. My discussion of evaluation in this article intends to provoke debate around this problem. It aims to bring into question *why soft power is seen to be a useful tool of policy*, *how influence supposedly takes place*, and *why certain evaluation procedures are followed*. I will argue here that PD activities are rarely the product of rational choices about communication options, and nor is PD evaluation the result of applying the "best" methodology. Rather, questions of PD and evaluation practices are bound together in complex organizational and power structures that generate pragmatic responses both to the "problem of influence" and the reporting of results (Hayden, 2013; Pamment, 2013; Potter, 2010; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). Through use of the concept of *articulation*, this article outlines a framework for interpreting evaluation practices from a contextualized perspective, which grasps how and why soft power practices assume certain forms.

The article begins with an introduction to what an interpretive approach to evaluation can bring to the debate, and the principle arguments pursued. The second section provides a literature review of the taxonomies created to categorize soft power and PD activities, before the third section argues the need for these categories to be "activated" with the concept of *articulation*. Following this, the fourth section introduces the basic tools of PD evaluation and outlines four articulations of evaluation tools: outputs, outcomes, perceptions and networks, together with some short case studies designed to elucidate the usefulness of the concept of articulation when considering evaluation practices. The concluding section draws the main themes together and makes suggestions for how the main principles argued in this article may be utilized in future research.

1. Interpreting evaluation practices

The underlying scientific problem in this paper is about *explanatory* versus *interpretive* theories of knowledge (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Geertz, 1973). This controversy has been expressed within literature on Public Relations, with the *Excellence* tradition of PR representing a mode of analysis emphasizing functions and processes. The Excellence approach prefers positivist, explanatory modes of analysis which take the view that there is an objective reality that can be explained by universal laws. Such approaches support the argument that there is a "best practice" for PD and its evaluation which should be adopted by PD actors if they wish to be successful (e.g. Banks, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2010; Pahlavi, 2007). However, the PR field can also draw on *Rhetorical* and *Critical* perspectives, which provide alternative means of interpreting how meaning is made within complex power structures. These interpretive approaches foreground the subjective views of those who experience a phenomenon, thereby situating knowledge within a context of diverse social relations and structures (Everett & Johnston, 2012; Toth, 2009; Wimmer & Dominick, 2000: pp. 103–105). Such an approach enables the contextualization of practices of evaluation within their structural constraints, and hence encourages the analysis of why and how certain practices emerge in certain places at certain times. This can be used to support the view that evaluation is not simply a function conducted more or less well in relation to best practice, but more importantly represents a struggle over meaning, power and knowledge within and between soft power organizations, their stakeholders, and their target publics.

An interpretive approach is valuable because the choices motivating evaluation practices reflect complex power structures related to how institutions justify their work. In recent years, *objectives*, *outcomes*, *impact*, *accountability* and *efficiency* have become buzzwords within soft power institutions around the world, and PD practitioners are now expected to demonstrate the relevance of their campaigns to diplomatic priorities, the efficacy and value-for-money of their methods, and their concrete impact upon target groups (Hall, 2012; Pahlavi, 2007; Pamment, 2013). Most importantly, evaluation data is produced in order to be used in annual reports which are the subject of scrutiny by internal and external stakeholders. Many organizations receive future funding based on perceptions of their performance by these stakeholders, for which the data produced in PD evaluation provides essential evidence (Smudde & Courtright, 2011). Or, as Pigman & Deos put it, "In order to create a metric that is appropriate to measure for each client, the PR firm must understand what the client views as the most important metric. Each client focuses on something different" (2008: p. 90). It is therefore not simply a question of producing data to solve a theoretical or methodological problem, but of producing pragmatic data which meets very particular expectations, in the appropriate format and on time. The idea that certain evaluation best practices will lead to "success" implies both that PD campaigns function a particular way and that all soft power activities are conducted for the same reasons. These assumptions ignore complex structural and organizational concerns surrounding why and how PD activities are conducted, evaluated and justified; assumptions that need to be contextualized and interpreted on a case-by-case basis.

Debates surrounding PD evaluation have struggled to conceptualize questions of methodology within organizational contexts. Banks (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of academic, practitioner and think-tank contributions to the debate during the first decade of the 21st century; the vast majority of which may be said assume a positivist approach. Even though his primary contribution was a detailed literature reveal, Banks also explained the basics of why evaluation is important, outlined some best practice, and highlighted some of the structural constraints in the US context. Notably, however, these areas of discussion were kept separate, thereby underplaying the extent to which they inform one another (2011: pp. 15–24). Perhaps the most important analytical contribution has been Pahlavi's 2007 article in the *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, in which he recognizes that a key shift occurred during the mid-2000s; namely the increased interest by