

Nov 04, 2016 by **Robert Albrow**

The Hard and Soft of Cultural Diplomacy: Networks and Stories in Global Affairs ^[1]


Amy Zalman recently proposed that “soft power” – as a conceptual frame for understanding global politics – is too narrow and has outlived its usefulness. Her provocation generated fruitful responses and suggests that we might be ready to stop treading water and move beyond our decade-long fixation with the term to new and more constructive places. Zalman rightly points to the costs of the partial privileging of the “soft” (e. g. cultural narratives, symbols, stories) at the expense of the “hard” (e. g. economic or military force), insisting that these two cannot be pried apart, even analytically, without diminishing appreciation for how power in fact works.

Complementing Zalman is Craig Hayden’s additional suggestion that her critique helps to shift attention to the myriad ways soft and hard power are connected and simultaneously expressed through the continued proliferation of diverse kinds of (often non-state) networks. The increasingly variegated facts of Castells’s “network society” make clear that networks mediate the distribution of meaning and value in ways demanding our attention.

Conjoined, these arguments present a compelling picture. They suggest the need to reframe our analysis of global politics in ways transcending distinctions of “soft” and “hard” while better accounting for the many entanglements of the “symbolic” with the “material.” This is particularly congenial to me, trained as a sociocultural anthropologist, since this discussion has been front and center in the discipline for some time. I too, have promoted doing so in my own recent writing on cultural diplomacy.

Together, one question these discussions encourage is: *How are stories meaningfully distributed across different kinds of networks and to what effect?* Instead of inferring cultural consensus when identifying specific groups, for the practice of public diplomacy such questions help us to a more realistic appraisal of the variety of cultural accounts among people otherwise related.

At this juncture we can offer the inverse of Zalman’s argument about soft power: too often, ever more ubiquitous network analyses seem to privilege the “hard” over the “soft” to the detriment of our understanding of how networks work. Certainly in security policy and studies this is the case. We have seen a flood of so-called link analyses, where the game is always to identify connections between nodes in different networks, or who is connected to whom and how. The emphasis is upon the importance of the “hard” social facts of the shape and distribution of connections within and across networks, in order to identify key “information nodes,” “information brokers,” or, in the War on Terror, the “bad guys.”

Ann-Marie Slaughter’s  recent call for more attention from U.S. foreign policy decision-makers to the ubiquity of “network centrality” is timely. But, while she notes in passing network “nutrients” – flows of goods, services, expertise, funding, and political support – she is most

interested in the density of connections and positioning of networks. Likewise, a recent study in *Nature* on social influence across networks of Facebook users concluded that more frequent interactions between friend pairs – “strong ties” – have a much greater influence than do “weak ties” on a person’s behavior. Again, it is all about the facts of connection. We can further note how behavior, composed of empirically observable actions, is prioritized over cultural meaning or belief.

More attention has been given to identifying people, their behavior, their connections, and network nodes than has been given to how information is distributed across networks or what these symbols, values or stories mean to network participants.

The *New York Times* recently ran a story about researchers who used the computational tools of social network analysis to assess the historical or fictional sources of well-known epics like the *Iliad*. In other words, they were examining the relation between epic narratives and networks. Their analysis privileged connections that were highly assortative – that is, with high frequencies of people associating with people like themselves – as one key “real-life indicator” corroborating an epic’s likely historical origin. Here and most everywhere else “hard” trumps “soft”.

Assortativity is a useful principle in epidemiology because it helps to explain the behavior of diseases as they spread through a population. But we are too prone to use viral metaphors to describe the movements of information, ideas, or beliefs through networks. Despite our fascination with social media technologies, we should not assume that a contagion model best characterizes the relationship of stories to networks. Instead, this might be a case of misplaced concreteness, to use A. N. Whitehead’s useful term.

Significant work *has* been done on so-called “knowledge-based networks” and their relevance for public diplomacy. One case is Mai’a Cross’s analysis of networks of policy decision-makers working toward security integration in the European Union. She shows how greater internal network cohesion increases network influence. For the EU case, cohesion includes the ways these decision-makers share expertise, common cultural and professional norms, and regular participation in the same meetings.

Assortative thinking encourages demonstrations of how like seeks like, while the effectiveness of knowledge-based networks is understood to turn on shared commonalities, notably, of culture. But exclusive attention to the social facts of connectivity through networks – rather than how people invest network participation with significance – means we assume that the information, knowledge, symbols, or stories that circulate through networks are shared in the same ways and mean the same things. But this is a poor assumption. Social solidarity (or, shared network participation) does not require cultural consensus.

What about when cultural information – like stories – is unevenly distributed through a given network? We are in dire need of a sharper and more grounded appreciation of how compelling ideas, values, or cultural meanings travel through social arrangements of people and how people differently relate to them. This means paying greater attention to variable interpretations of cultural information across networks beyond the shared facts of membership in networks.

Uneven distribution can take the form of stories that mean different things to different people in different locations across a given network. In the 1990s, while conducting research on political change in Bolivia, I interviewed dozens of men about the start of their political

careers. Many cited the decisive influence of radicalized high school teachers who encouraged them into joining the Bolivian Communist Party in the 1970s. These men still consorted as members of informal political networks, connected by shared political and economic ties, relationships of kinship, friendship and heritage, as well as long hours spent in each other's company. But many cited the party's ideological intransigence – especially its derision of the relevance of cultural identity in largely indigenous Bolivia – to explain their departure from it. While carrying over much of the party's discourse, they were swayed to other forms of political participation more consistent with their indigenous heritage. While each told the “story of the Left” in Bolivia to me and to one another, they did not interpret it in the same ways.

Resonant stories, particularly political narratives, can mean many things to those perpetuating them. Even “strong ties” in identified networks don't guarantee cultural consensus. In a climate of policy and research where our attention to networks is increasing, but where this work is focused on the use of computational tools to identify their shape and constituent parts, we might be neglecting the problem of cultural meaning in networks. And so we risk having little insight into the sense network participants make out of their own participation. If we confuse the facts of sharedness with a potentially nonexistent interpretive consensus, we risk missing the import of the story.
