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Public Diplomacy Disrupted: Six Imperatives for Practicing Soft Power ^[1]

Public diplomacy encompasses a range of ways for nations to engage with their foreign publics in search of improved understanding and desired relationships. It creates soft power, an indispensable currency in contemporary global affairs.

But profound and influential societal changes are disrupting public diplomacy. As the practice is essentially a set of communication-centric activities, we see several overarching transformative, interwoven trends along every key aspect of the enterprise.

First and foremost, the broader geo-political and geo-economic context for communication on the global stage is changing. On the one hand, the rise of China and other major emerging economies are engendering tectonic power shifts in world affairs. On the other, there is sharpening domestic discord, especially in the West, on the nature and extent of a nation's global engagement and commitment. In the meantime, according to a [2017 McKinsey report](#), global economic growth in the coming decade will mainly come from regional markets, including India, China, Africa, and Southeast Asia (ICASA). So uncertainties abound as the global political and economic order evolves.

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Likewise, the audiences for public diplomacy are also changing. Much of the change is a result of basic demographic shifts, from population ageing in developed economies to youth bulge in developing countries. The overall audience is becoming more urban, and the population mix in many Western nations is undergoing ethnic re-mapping due to massive migration. We now have more people than ever in human history joining the global middle class, and they turn to digital platforms for news and information, and social interaction. We also face an impassioned public at home and abroad. In this respect, what's old is new again. The rising populist fervor in many parts of the world is only the latest manifestation of the tensions between the two fundamental human forces of interests and passions in social decision and human action.

Admittedly, digital technology is transforming the tools and platforms for public diplomacy. Digitalization and advanced analytics are changing the way people seek information and stay connected; AI and automation are revolutionizing communication placements with precise targeting. The acceleration of digital technology has dissolved the boundaries between domestic and abroad, making the interaction of national concerns and international engagement ever more dynamic and interdependent.

Another important aspect of the disruption is that the stakeholder communities on the global

scene have broadened. Non-state actors and diverse institutions, such as cities, multinational businesses and civil society organizations, are increasingly engaged in confronting local and global challenges. Not only have these stakeholder communities for public diplomacy expanded, but they are also empowered by digital technology.

In short, these conditions and dynamics point to the basic reality of growing diplomatic fluidity and a fast-changing communication landscape for public diplomacy. Indeed, the disruptions are so sweeping that there is no existing playbook to guide the practice. And they compel us to rethink the key components of the practice in at least the following six areas.

1. Making public diplomacy more strategic through a deeper understanding of “theory of change”

While the digital space provides us with voluminous observational data in terms of people’s online behavior, the bigger challenge is to develop a firm grasp on the psychological underpinnings of communication behavior in this networked environment, including motivations, incentives and preferences for communication. To design effective public diplomacy programs, it becomes ever more important to delve deeper into the underlying logic of communication given the sprawling complexity of the information eco-system.

2. Striking a balance between the digital and the physical

As one’s digital life interacts ever more with the physical realm in this tech-dominated environment, we need to not only build a distinct digital voice and digital identity in public diplomacy efforts, but also to maintain the human touch through direct person-to-person contact. After all, physical presence represents a more elemental form of communication and a transcultural human condition.

3. Communicating across platforms with authenticity and directness

Contemporary public diplomacy demands communication approaches on a range of platforms that are compelling in content, style and placement. In this age of information abundance and mobility, communication attributes, such as transparency, authenticity, exclusivity and convenience, are elevated to greater prominence.

4. Taking a network view

Nowadays, individuals and organizations can easily develop horizontal or vertical networks of interactions, with the potential to reach a large and even a global audience. Focusing on relationships rather than merely messages, a network approach allows us to see a nation’s position in its operational environment, and to identify and mobilize key influencers both online and offline to achieve scaled and sustained impact.

5. Driving toward performance and accountability

We need to put a stronger emphasis on accountability in public diplomacy efforts; that is, defining and assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and activities. For any organized practice, it is crucial to develop credible and efficient means to capture and

evaluate impact that will help inform strategic planning and operational innovation.

6. Investing in public diplomacy reskilling and upskilling

Capacity building is essential to advancing public diplomacy, especially in key functional areas, including visual and social storytelling, integrative community management, information architecture, and analytics and impact. The skills and capabilities required for effective global engagement need to be constantly reexamined and refreshed based on the evolving assessment of current and future practices.

The fundamental impact of globalization, societal changes and digital technology is reshaping the practice of public diplomacy. The communication task that underlies public diplomacy work is getting far more challenging. While much is uncertain and unsettled, we lay out these six areas to underscore the importance of reconfiguring our framework and to inspire new thinking and experimentation for practicing soft power.
