Thumbnail Image:

Nov 07, 2019 by Soft Power 30

Public Diplomacy and Our Digital Future [1]

Given the seemingly inexorable force of technology, diplomacy today can hardly be practiced without an element of the digital. When the terms "digital" and "public diplomacy" come together, there are generally two broad meanings. One conversation is familiar to all of us in the field, focusing on how to develop and apply digital capabilities to public diplomacy efforts, commonly referred to as "digital diplomacy." The other is the road less traveled: what public diplomacy means for advancing the digital economy and society.

Both underlie the dynamic intersection where digital technology meets global affairs and public communication. We can call the former "digital for public diplomacy" and the latter "public diplomacy for the digital" to clarify the two related yet different threads of discussion. As technological change continues to accelerate, both domains of practice will challenge and reshape the field of public diplomacy in the years to come.

Digital for Public Diplomacy

Advancements in digital technology have transformed platforms and tools for communication and engagement. They are turning traditional public diplomacy practices upside down. Doing public diplomacy well these days requires greater familiarity with communication principles and techniques in a rapidly evolving information landscape. For instance, in both developed and emerging economies, many more people now turn to social networking sites for news and information, bringing about a platform-based media ecosystem that is both fragmented and interlocking.

In this age of information abundance and mobility, communication attributes, such as transparency, authenticity, exclusivity and convenience, are elevated to greater prominence. Empowered by digital technology, users now often find themselves in the driver's seat, signifying a power shift from producers to users; and audiences are now simultaneously communicators. Virtual reality and augmented reality tools are poised to redefine how people experience their worlds. AI and automation are revolutionizing communication placements with precise targeting. Indeed, as Silicon Valley shakes up the marketing communication sector through its prowess in data collection and advanced analytics, digital technology is posing existential threats to a host of traditional players from advertising to public relations.

To successfully navigate this fast-moving, ever more

complicated, transnational policy arena requires unprecedented international cooperation and cross-sector collaboration.

Furthermore, 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. These trends and developments call for not only [capacity building for practitioners](#) on the frontlines of public diplomacy in key functional areas of [data analytics and storytelling](#), but also a reexamination and reconfiguration of the operating model as well as analytical frameworks of public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy for the Digital

At another level, [digital innovation](#), from the Internet of Things to the sharing economy to automation and the future of work, is also demanding a new set of global public policies to facilitate these technological advances as well as safeguard the rights of the public. Nations and governments have not yet caught up to the fast-changing pace of technology as far as policymaking and policy communication are concerned. Meanwhile, there is a global backlash against tech firms on a range of matters that challenge the business models that made them superstars in the first place.

To successfully navigate this fast-moving, ever more complicated, transnational policy arena requires unprecedented [international cooperation and cross-sector collaboration](#). If public diplomacy is generally understood as a country's efforts to create and maintain relationships with publics in other countries to advance policies and actions, the question then becomes in what ways public diplomacy may contribute to forging a path forward in [expanding the benefits of digital innovation](#) while alleviating the downsides of digital disruption.

The policy challenges concerning digital technology mainly lie in three areas. The first is data governance, from data collection and ownership, to their usage and dissemination. The key debates surrounding data governance center on data privacy, security, censorship and freedom of speech. The second policy challenge concerns the future of work as a result of the advancements in AI and automation, which are set to reshape the labor market, the skills required of workers and alter the dynamic between employment and leisure. The third policy focal point deals with the concentration and centralization of power among a few tech firms and the associated debate on antitrust ramifications.

As technological advancement and globalization continue to intensify, so will the interaction between digital technology and public diplomacy.

Two important caveats are worth noting here. One is that these days every company is in varying degrees a "tech company," given how embedded digital technology has become in any business process. While the public spotlight shines on a few tech giants, these policy matters affect virtually all types of businesses and organizations. Second, contemporary technological disruption is coupled with and indeed compounded by geopolitical disruption, especially in light of the rise of China, which is currently the only country that has created the types of tech giants that can rival those in the United States.

There are no existing regulatory frameworks and tools to adequately address the potentials and practices of digital innovation. As digital technology is increasingly an elemental part of daily life, public concerns about the aforementioned challenges are mounting. And the dystopian vision of digital life, through popular culture, is capturing the imagination of a wider public that is growingly weary of the pace and direction of digital change.

The role of the private sector in public policymaking and communication has evolved over time, yet this role has remained primarily a domestic one. Given current disruptive technologies and the nature of globalization, businesses must now broaden their policymaking to be transnational in scope. They must develop new capabilities and new partnerships in order to address the growing concerns over digital technology and its social and geopolitical consequences. This policy enterprise involves governments of sovereign states as well as networks of the broader public. For global businesses, public diplomacy principles and tools provide a valuable framework for their international interactions, as they take on aspects of the roles traditionally played by diplomats to navigate the complex international public policy arena. In short, the transnational nature of the digital economy and the urgent necessity of global policy engagement has created a new, yet-to-be-explored, (public) diplomatic space.

As technological advancement and globalization continue to intensify, so will the interaction between digital technology and public diplomacy. These shifting dynamics engender much uncertainty in state actions and policy priorities. On the one hand, public diplomacy must reinvent itself in the face of transformative technologies to be relevant and impactful. On the other hand, now, more than ever, robust and creative public-private partnerships are critical in maintaining a stable marketplace and world, and diplomatic competencies and tools in modern statecraft are valuable for developing an effective engagement framework for a dynamic, complex global environment. This is an exciting moment for the study and practice of public diplomacy, as the worlds of public diplomacy and digital technology are increasingly and inextricably linked.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece, written by CPD Director [Jay Wang](), originally appeared in the [2019 Soft Power 30 report]().*

Jay Wang is the Director of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy and an Associate Professor at the [USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism]().