NEW MEDIA AND THE NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

As public diplomacy matures, it is experiencing growing pains. It is still emerging from a period when glorified stunts are presented as innovative policy and when traditional media are heavily relied upon to deliver messages.

The rising significance of new media changes not only the mechanics of public diplomacy but also the strategies of reaching people throughout the world. This includes diasporic populations. They are parts of the transnational virtual communities that those engaged in public diplomacy must find ways to reach, and understanding issues of identity related to these communities is an important part of this facet of public diplomacy.

Parallel issues exist related to the BBC World Service, given its positioning in the realm of international broadcasting. Like its counterparts in other nations, the BBC World Service plays a de facto role in public diplomacy. Although journalists might not care to be seen as participants in public diplomacy enterprises, the fact remains that the content of international broadcasters, such as the BBCWS, has a public diplomacy function that governments must recognize.1

Definitions and historical context.

By design or not, the BBC World Service is a significant player in public diplomacy. This assertion is based on a definition that does not conflate “public diplomacy” and “propaganda,” but rather treats public diplomacy as an integral element
in the exercise of soft power. News organizations can profoundly affect how a global public perceives their countries of origin.

Definitions of such terms abound, and I offer my own interpretation for the purposes of this paper. I suggest that the distinction between the two is significant. Purveyors of propaganda -- whether directly working for a government or employed outside government -- are responsible for delivering the government’s message and furthering the government’s policies. On the other hand, champions of public diplomacy present it as an alternative to propaganda, which itself is not by definition untruthful although the word has pejorative connotations. Propaganda is widely perceived as self-serving information that is not necessarily truthful, and critics of public diplomacy argue that the difference between propaganda and public diplomacy is merely the label. One argument advanced by those who say that there is a distinction is that public diplomacy relies on “the known facts,” while propaganda is based on falsehoods mixed in with facts.²

Ethics scholar Jay Black cites some of the common themes appearing in definitions of propaganda: “A presumption of manipulation and control, if not outright coercion, that dehumanizes the audiences or intended ‘victims’ of propaganda; a power imbalance -- rhetorical, political, economic, and so forth -- between propagandists and propagandees; and a presumption that principles of science, rhetoric, semantics, and enlightened or open-minded education serve as powerful antidotes to propaganda.”³ Black also notes concerns about propaganda not being compatible with the responsibility of a democratic media system to not be manipulative and to “encourage an open-minded citizenry -- that is, a people who are curious, questioning, unwilling to accept simple pat
answers to complex situations.” Propaganda generally does not aim for open-mindedness among members of its audience but rather seeks adherence to the particular viewpoint being promoted.

Black does, however, offer a cautionary note about sweeping judgments concerning propaganda being “an inherently immoral enterprise.” He points out that propaganda can be part of the “open marketplace of ideas.” Nevertheless, he says, balance in discourse must be maintained, which means that both the providers and consumers of information have responsibilities. “A fully functioning democratic society,” wrote Black, “needs pluralism in its persuasion and information, not the narrow-minded, self-serving propaganda some communicators inject -- wittingly or unwittingly -- into their communications and which, it seems, far too many media audience members unconsciously and uncritically consume.”

The perceived integrity of public diplomacy messages is an important part of soft power strategy, which itself continues to evolve. Traditional assumptions about public opinion have been altered -- if not rendered obsolete -- by the increasing diversity and accessibility of information venues. During the Cold War, the ongoing battle for public opinion between the United States and the Soviet Union proceeded on a manageable number of fronts. Each government used its own machinery plus surrogates (some very obviously playing this role, some less so) to reach targeted audiences. With limited resources, independent indigenous media were usually ineffective competitors. The superpowers maintained hegemony in information as in other aspects of their global influence.
Today, such hegemonic influence has faded. Important information sources are no longer found primarily in New York, London, and Moscow, but also in places such as Doha, Dubai, and Caracas. Satellite television and, more importantly, the Internet have fostered a new level of information populism and have enabled more states and news organizations to significantly contribute to global conversation. The resultant diversity of this conversation’s sources and topics alters the framework for public diplomacy, as publics’ expectations and willingness to challenge content increase.

This new communications environment affects much that the BBC World Service and other purveyors of information do, including how they influence their audiences’ perceptions of events, policies, and the governments behind them.

New media and virtual states.

Linking people who share cultural, religious, or political characteristics can be done with unprecedented thoroughness by new media. When more people throughout the world gain access to these media, communities that were once just imagined will become more tangible as they expand their populations and their “citizens” assert common interests.

The effect this will have on global politics is hard to predict. Some groups may choose to keep their virtual communities relatively closed, using their media tools for intra-community purposes. Others may try to use the weight of their numbers to play a more active role on the world stage.

Even the most polished public diplomacy messages can easily become lost in the ever more crowded communications universe. That is part of the new media reality that
confronts all its users, ranging from international satellite channels to terrorist Web sites to individuals’ blogs. Over time, this universe will attain a kind of order as information consumers gravitate with some regularity to offerings they consider most interesting, truthful, and useful. Everyone will still be able to have her or his own say on blogs, Web sites, and the like, even if their audiences are minuscule. Freedom and self-imposed orderliness should be able to coexist.

One of these groups is diasporic Muslims, for whom the digital minbar, or cyber-pulpit, is of special importance. It should be noted that even in far-flung centers of Muslim immigration such as Paris, London, and New York, imams and mosques quickly establish themselves, and so Muslim residents there do not need to depend solely on a virtual connection for religious sustenance. As a platform for globalized Islam, however, online offerings may have special allure: a connection to a nostalgia-misted past and a remedy for homesickness.

In reality, economic hardship and political conflict may have made this earlier life far less attractive than it appears in memory. Nevertheless, new media may create such a convenient bridge across distance and time that a Web site or a satellite channel can become cherished as a tie to real or imagined “home.” Peter Mandaville noted that “new media are likely to play an increasingly important role among young Muslims born and raised in the West as they search for spaces and languages in which to shape an Islam that is both relevant to their socio-cultural situatedness and free from the hegemony of traditional sources of interpretation and authority.” Mandaville also observed that “more than anything else, the Internet and other information technologies provide spaces where
Muslims, who often find themselves to be a marginalized or extreme minority group in many Western communities, can go in order to find others ‘like them.’

How this will affect diasporic communities remains open to question, although it seems certain that these matters influence the relative insularity or integration of many diasporic communities.

The new environment for the BBC World Service and other broadcasters.

Global audiences are exposed to an unprecedented amount of information from an ever-expanding universe of sources. These audiences have become more discriminating in their judgments of these sources, applying new standards in this process. At this time there is a buyers’ market in which traditional criteria for selling information products have been refined and sometimes superseded. The traditional touting of news products as being valuable because they are “objective” has been pushed aside by efforts to establish credibility. In many parts of the world, “objectivity” has little history, meaning, or intrinsic value related to communications media. Much more precious to a general audience in many parts of the world is an information source with its credibility grounded in being indigenous and (relatively) independent.

For long-established information providers such as the BBC World Service, anti-hegemonic sentiment is a fact of life. It is one of the new factors in global media competition -- a mix of political and commercial elements that are important to an increasingly discriminating audience.

More significantly, media with transnational reach are altering political sensitivities. Newer media -- satellite television and Internet-based communication --
open up some channels of communication that were previously clogged by government products and create others that are brand new. In the Arab world, for instance, where there once were just a handful of satellite television channels there are now close to 400.

Beyond the basic arithmetic of the expanded media population are changes in the way people see their world. Communications media can make the remote seem proximate, particularly when news is presented in a steady stream, often in real time, and is delivered by so many providers. In this way the Palestinian becomes a neighbor of the Indonesian, and within the global village a neighbor’s circumstances attract much interest. That is not to say, however, that a single political outlook will take hold throughout the Muslim world or that priorities will be uniform.

Prospects for media-based cohesion are enhanced by the nature of the Internet and satellite television. Members of dispersed groups, wherever they are, can collect information from sources ranging from Al Jazeera to individual bloggers. In addition to people in predominantly Muslim countries, deracinated Muslim communities in Europe and elsewhere may be particularly eager to connect to media offerings that engender a sense of belonging and provide electronic ties to home and religion.

How this affects assimilation of Muslims who live in largely non-Muslim environments is not yet known. It could provide a reassuring comfort zone that makes their new home amidst a different culture seem less threatening because links to the larger Islamic world can be maintained through media. Or, those virtual connections might make that former homeland seem close enough at hand to make integration into the new community appear less necessary or desirable.
While satellite television is transterritorial, the Internet may be considered *supraterritorial* because boundaries within and among states are not merely inconsequential, they need not, in the cyberworld, be acknowledged at all. An example of how this theory takes shape in practice can be seen in the success of Islam Online (www.islamonline.net), which provides news, general information about Islam, “*shari’ah corner*” featuring “live fatwa”, and much more, all available in Arabic and English. (The Arabic and English sites have different staff members, content, and audiences, and one rarely translates material from the other.) The site lists among its goals: “To strengthen the ties of unity and affiliation between the members of the Islamic community and support informational and cultural exchange. To expand awareness of important events in the Arab, Islamic and larger worlds. To build confidence and a spirit of hope among Muslims.”

In early 2006, Islam Online was attracting an average of about 13 million page views and 1.5 million unique visitors per month, and its management wants to expand this audience by offering content in additional languages, such as French and Turkish. It employs about 300 staff members, most working in Cairo, and uses material from approximately 1,500 correspondents, Islamic scholars, and other contributors, many of whom are not Muslims. For the English-language version, which attracts 25 percent of the page views, about half the audience is in the United States.

For IslamOnline and other such media organizations, translated material is an essential part of reaching a truly global audience. Al Jazeera made its name through its Arabic newscasts and then attracted much attention when it began Al Jazeera English. There was considerable public discussion, especially in the non-Islamic world, about how
this channel’s content and political tone might differ from that of the Arabic channel, and
how it would be received by Western audiences and governments. Because of the
hostility toward Al Jazeera from some quarters -- notably the U.S. government -- the
potential expansion of Al Jazeera’s influence was viewed with concern, despite the new
channel, as it was unveiled, looking more like CNN or the BBC than its Arabic sibling.

Effects of globalized media influence may be enhanced by the disillusionment
some Muslims feel toward secular citizenship in their own states. As Olivier Roy asked,
“What is a true Muslim land, in a time when many radical Muslims consider that all the
regimes ruling Muslim countries are illegitimate?”8 For Muslims who feel greater loyalty
to Islam itself than to any particular homeland, the ummah as superstate may be the “true
Muslim land,” tangible or not. New media provide the connective tissue for such lands.

In a virtual community, wrote Jon Anderson, the Internet serves as “a new public
space, which enables a new class of interpreters, who are facilitated by this medium to
address and thereby to reframe Islam’s authority and expression for those like themselves
and others who come there.” The virtual space, said Anderson, “does not facilitate the
spokesperson-activists of established institutions, but draws instead on a broader range of
new interpreters or newly visible interpreters of Islam.”9

With the Internet providing information in many languages, particularly English,
dependence on Arabic is reduced and the audience expands. Jocelyne Cesari noted that
abandonment of Arabic and other ancestral languages “has led to the growth of
‘vernacular’ forms of Islam in Europe and America, where sermons, religious literature,
and public discussions are increasingly in English, which has now become the second
language of Muslims all over the ummah.”10
Traditionalists may lament the disincentive to learn Arabic, but an increased number of languages used in information dissemination could enable more people to feel that they are truly part of the *ummah* and could contribute to the cohesion that new communications technologies may foster. This acceptance of linguistic diversity is particularly important for Web sites and blogs, which within a short time have grown spectacularly in their number and range of outlook.

Whatever the language of online content, the Internet is bringing added religious and political depth to existing or new constituencies. In Indonesia, reported Merlyna Lim, “the Internet has played a key role in creating and sustaining political legitimation, resistance, and identity projects among Islamic fundamentalists….The Internet is becoming a major factor in identity formation -- one that can allow users to access global sources of information while interpreting that information in local identity contexts through key nodes and sources.”\(^{11}\)

**The new media environment, the BBC World Service, and soft power.**

As actors in the more competitive and more political world of new media, the BBC and like organizations will be invaluable mechanisms of soft power. Al Jazeera, for example, is involved in public diplomacy at two levels: as a means for its bill-paying parent, the government of Qatar, to enhance its global clout; and as a pan-Arab (and, some would say, pan-Islamic) presence.

For the BBC World Service, serving as a soft-power tool is nothing new. Its annual report has stated its purpose as “bringing benefit to Britain” by being “the world’s best-known and most-respected voice in international broadcasting.” That implies
benefit deriving simply from stature. But Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher spoke of the World Service “promoting our world-view and policy,” which seems to presume a quasi-political role for the broadcaster. That may grate on the journalistic sensibilities of some who work for the World Service, but the “promoting” that Thatcher referred to can take place without any overt proselytizing. Simply providing a credible news product reflects the values of a democratic political system and that advances British interests. It does not require the World Service or other information providers to cross the line between reporting news and championing policy.

Barry Fulton of George Washington University’s Public Diplomacy Institute wrote: “Public diplomacy is not, and should not be, somehow considered as camouflage for public policy. Public diplomacy is describing public policy, but it doesn’t improve on it, change it, or misrepresent it.” When policy information is available to be disseminated and when a well-designed system exists to do so, public diplomacy can be a significant part of political communication. Its targeting of mass publics counteracts the efforts of governments to control the information that reaches those publics.

As with other elements of democracy, even robust public diplomacy is susceptible to infection by unethical practices -- spreading false information, using communication tools to defame or provoke, interfering with transparency, and other tampering with the foundations of honesty. Temptations to stray from truth may arise, but public diplomacy, like journalism, must be conducted ethically or else it will certainly fail.

Joseph Nye’s discussion of soft power included this observation: “If you believe that my objectives are legitimate, I may be able to persuade you to do something for me
without using threats or inducements. It is possible to get many desired outcomes without having much tangible power over others.”

The BBC World Service does not need to proselytize -- or propagandize -- to help convince people that British “objectives are legitimate.” By facilitating the work of the World Service, the British government indirectly reaches publics throughout the world. That is the essence of public diplomacy.

1 Some sections of this paper have appeared in different form in Philip Seib, “The Ethics of Public Diplomacy,” in Kathy Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Bronstein (eds.), Perspectives on Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy (Sage, 2006) and in Philip Seib, The Al Jazeera Effect (Potomac, 2008).
7 www.islamonline.net/english/aboutus.