

---

PAPERS

---

# Public Diplomacy at the Crossroads: Definitions and Challenges in an “Open Source” Era

Mark McDowell

---

Over the past decade, as there has been more discussion of public diplomacy, there has been less agreement on what exactly it is and who exactly can “do” it. In this paper I offer some thoughts about defining and defending the role of government in public diplomacy and briefly outline some challenges faced by public diplomacy practitioners worldwide and how they might differ from state to state.

When the term “public diplomacy” (PD) was coined in the 1960s, it was seen as “the actions of governments to inform and influence foreign publics.”<sup>1</sup> This marked a clear formulation and a tidy parallel with traditional diplomacy, the aim of which was to directly inform and influence foreign governments. A much broader definition is used today by some proponents of PD to include the transnational impact of all government or private activities “from popular culture to fashion to sports to news to the Internet—that inevitably, if not purposefully, have an impact on

---

*Mark McDowell is on leave from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. Currently a Fellow of the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Kennedy School of Government, he is a member of the Board of Advisors of the Public Diplomacy Collaborative at Harvard University. The author thanks the Fulbright Foundation and Foreign Affairs Canada for their generous support. Views expressed here are solely the author’s own.*

---

foreign policy and national security as well as on trade, tourism and other national interests.”<sup>2</sup> By encompassing everything that one country might know about another country, this definition seems to conflate PD with soft power, a matter to which we will return later.

We know that PD takes place in *public*, but for it to be *diplomacy*, it has to entail a role for the state.<sup>3</sup> There must be an element of government intention and participation—not necessarily undertaking the entire conception and execution of a project but at least playing a role, working with civil society partners, funding, coordinating, and/or directing. Public diplomacy also has to have a clear goal or message. In the absence of these two elements—a government role and a conscious message—we are merely talking about the background noise of international communication.

### A SIMPLE MODEL

Below is a diagram to aid in our thinking about public diplomacy. In Figure 1 we have two states, A and B, with their respective governments and publics. Let’s think about how A might act upon B. The black arrow represents traditional diplomacy, the attempt of government A to directly influence government B through demarches, discussions, and other such formal means. The public in B is not engaged.

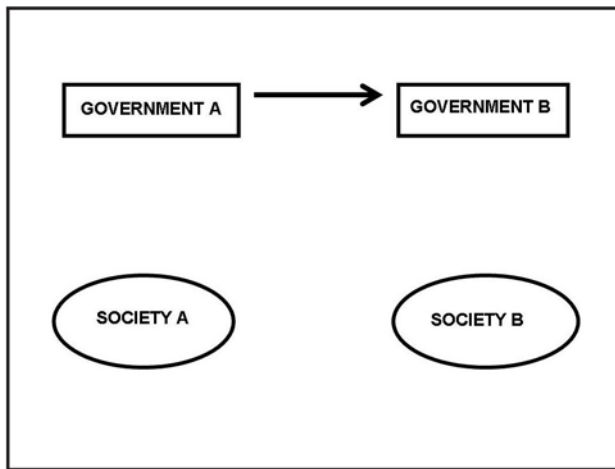


Figure 1. All graphics courtesy of author.

In Figure 2 we add the blue arrow, which represents the attempt by government A to directly inform and influence the public of B. This could be an end in itself (i.e., to promote trade, or to attract tourists, investors, students, and immigrants), or it could also be a means to influence government B indirectly (shown here as the dotted blue line).

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE CROSSROADS:  
DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN AN “OPEN SOURCE” ERA

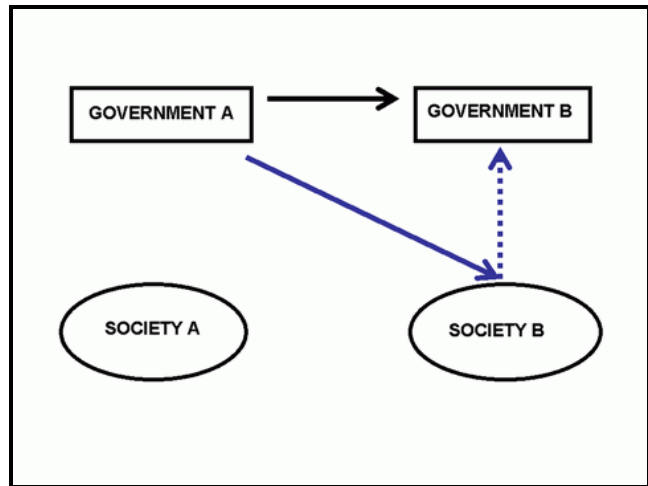


Figure 2.

Government A may be promoting a positive self-image with the population of B in order to pressure government B to take some action that benefits country A. An early example of this is the effort of Great Britain circa 1940 to tell their story of the unfolding war in Europe to the public of the then-neutral United States. Radio and news reports of British heroism and social solidarity created sympathy for the United Kingdom, a condition that emboldened Franklin Roosevelt to provide military aid to the Allies. With some common PD activities such as cultural exchanges it may not be clear (even in the minds of the organizers) whether the ultimate goal is to influence society B or government B. A national branding campaign may be aimed at making country A more attractive as a tourist destination and to increase interest in its products, or it may—in a more diffuse, long-term way—be attempting to build amity between the two nations for geopolitical reasons.

The weakness of PD of the Figure 2 type is that it can stray into the realm of propaganda. The British in 1940 facilitated the efforts of American reporters to frame the issue of World War II in a way that benefited the British. But Axis attempts to influence U.S. opinion were tightly controlled by Axis governments and were heavy-handed by comparison. Any government attempt to broadcast directly to another society—literally or figuratively—runs the risk of this drift into propaganda. In practice, it seems that PD works better when government

---

*Any government attempt to broadcast directly to another society—literally or figuratively—runs the risk of this drift into **propaganda**.*

---

A is a democracy, perhaps because totalitarian states are not faced with the necessity to communicate persuasively with their own civil societies and thus are not good at messaging to other civil societies.

Here we come to the essence of the debate about who “owns” public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is most lively and diverse—and most credible—when it is conducted by governments in cooperation with civil society. In Figure 3 the green arrow represents the influence of society A on society B. This arrow could signify a touring dance troupe or film festival, or it could also be an NGO or professional association from country A speaking to its counterpart in country B. Certainly such activities can take place in the absence of government, but they become PD only when they are part of an overall plan conceived by (or at least agreed to by) government and are directed at a particular goal.

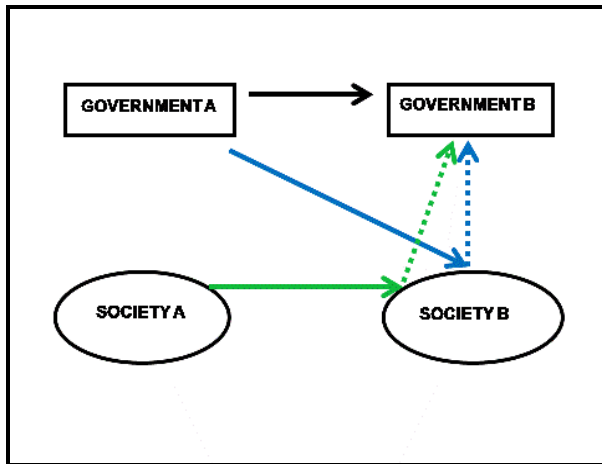


Figure 3.

PD works best when the blue, green and black arrows are coordinated. For example, the U.S. and Canada have been at odds for several years over U.S. plans to exploit energy resources in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). While there was advocacy at the government-to-government level on the issue (black arrow), Canadian Consulates in the U.S. also conducted an active public diplomacy campaign to inform the American public of the adverse effect that exploitation of ANWR by oil companies would have on the ecosystem and inhabitants of the region. To do this, the consulates collaborated with Canadian Aboriginal groups to convey pro-conservation messages. To an American audience, Aboriginal peoples were more credible than Canadian government spokespersons, were more able to speak with

**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE CROSSROADS:  
DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN AN “OPEN SOURCE” ERA**

first-hand knowledge, and were a unique moral authority. The Canadian government contributed by organizing initiatives, such as a 2002 speaking tour in the United States by Aboriginal people from the Yukon<sup>4</sup> (green arrow) and by disseminating information about the tour (blue arrow).

We should note that PD works best when B is a democracy, where communication represented by the blue and green arrows (from A to B) encounters few barriers and where society B can directly influence government B. But the dotted arrows can also be important whenever the government must heed the mood of its citizens.<sup>5</sup> In non-democracies, the mechanisms of PD work differently. For example, Cold War–era Voice of America broadcasts were aimed at strengthening democratic opposition to repressive communist regimes.

We should also consider the fact that PD may involve working against the policies or even interests of the host government, whether it is Canada partnering with U.S. environmental groups to stop acid rain, or Western governments working to strengthen human rights NGOs in developing countries, or Taiwan and China jockeying for the sympathy of overseas Chinese communities. In working with civil society actors PD can bring the embassy into a gray zone, under the radar of the host country’s foreign ministry. As PD becomes more widespread and its potency better understood, will we start to see more pushback from foreign ministries? The difference between PD and espionage is that PD does not break local laws; its activities are public not clandestine, yet its goals may be no less subversive, for good or bad. PD is by its nature transparent, but it cannot be contrasted with traditional diplomacy as an activity which by definition serves only good ends.<sup>6</sup>

---

*PD is by its nature  
transparent, but it cannot be  
contrasted with traditional  
diplomacy as an activity  
which by definition serves  
only good ends.*

---

The rise of globalism—particularly information technology and massive flows of international communications and travel—has facilitated movement along the double-lined arrow. NGOs from A influence their counterparts in B; and there is a continuous dialogue of interest and ethnic groups, academics and artists, businesspeople and activists. In fact, the double-lined arrow has become increasingly important, and its influence has grown in some cases to dwarf the gray one. All of this international contact, intentional and incidental, has had an impact on what PD can accomplish.

## SMALL/MEDIUM/LARGE

While much writing on public diplomacy treats PD as a similar challenge for all states, there are many different kinds of public diplomacy. Here I will draw attention to the different tasks of the small, medium, and large state.<sup>7</sup>

One might at first think that a large state would have an advantage in PD: a large state might have a big foreign service, a specialized information agency (such as the United States Information Agency, or USIA), or a chain of international cultural centers (like China's Confucius Institutes or France's Alliances Françaises), all backed by large financial resources. We might think of the comparative PD strength of small (S), medium (M), and large (L) states like this:

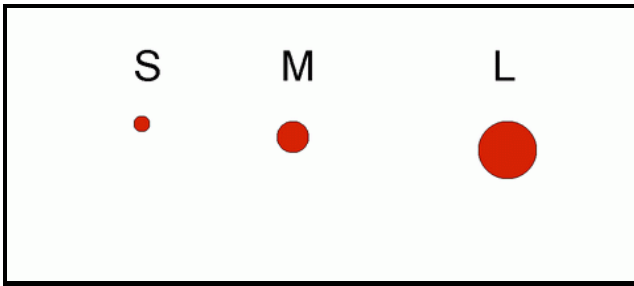


Figure 4.

But the irony is that despite the larger government's greater resources, the small country may be at an advantage because it can control its message. L struggles against broadly held stereotypes, as well as a flood of cultural, economic, and other information flowing from the home country that may be

---

*... despite the larger government's greater resources, the small country may be at an advantage because it can control its message.*

impossible to channel. Think of the fortunes of Chinese PD over the past decade: in the wake of 9/11 the U.S. was alienating friend and foe alike with its security concerns, while optimistic, dynamic China's "charm offensive" seemed unstoppable.<sup>8</sup> But over the course of one short year all that has been unraveled by exports of tainted foods and dangerous toys, as well as news coverage of renewed

violence in Tibet. For L there is just too much information, too much culture, too much trade—too much stuff—to be able to keep an audience focused on

any one particular message.<sup>9</sup>

While L fights against broadly held stereotypes and the chatter of the information age, S (a Brunei or a Bhutan, for example) might be able to do much to shape foreign perceptions. In Figure 5 the PD capacity of S, M, and L governments are represented by the red dot, while the green represents all of the information about S, M, and L that is readily accessible to the target population.

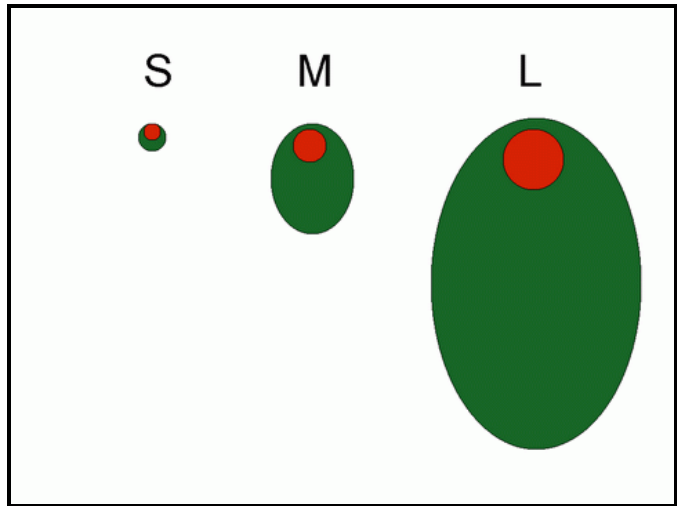


Figure 5.

Working on a tabula rasa, S can have more ambitious goals for making an impact on its target population. For S, the danger lies in the lack of inertia behind perceptions. Think, for example, of the bizarre effect that the film *Borat* had on perceptions of Kazakhstan. In reality, Kazakhstan is a forward-looking, prosperous, multicultural society, but one movie could preempt that image in the West due to the lack of other images of Kazakhstan.

### SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

From the discussion above we can sense that soft power and public diplomacy are related, but how exactly? Soft power (SP), in Joseph Nye's famous formulation, is the ability to get others to do what they would otherwise not do, to act the way you want them to act without coercion or payments, carrots or sticks.<sup>10</sup>

Nye suggests that SP has three sources: a country's culture, its values and ideals, and its policies. From a PD point of view, we can see that the government has a limited impact on the first, acting as one of many promoters of national culture overseas. Normally, the government does not craft

values and ideals although it can disseminate and publicize them overseas. And while the third element—policies—are generated by the government, they are usually not created with an eye to how useful they may be in public diplomacy. Thus we can imagine a series of concentric circles, with PD forming a subset of diplomacy, which is itself a subset of government activities, which is just one element of a country's soft power.

To return to the question of what public diplomacy can hope to accomplish, let us think of current American efforts to win favor in the Muslim world. The United States has been expending tremendous effort to clarify and explain its values and ideals—for example, in publicizing the equality and freedom of Muslim American citizens. But unfortunately for the

---

*. . . PD practitioners can contribute to a nation's soft power through long-term dissemination of culture and values, painstaking explanation of policies, and above all coordination with civil society to deliver credible messages.*

---

U.S., the brake on its soft power in the Middle East (according to survey data) is not a poor understanding of U.S. culture or values but is U.S. policy itself. Practitioners of PD can explain and “sell” a policy, but they do not get to choose the content of the product.

Nonetheless, PD practitioners can contribute to a nation's soft power through long-term dissemination of culture and values, painstaking explanation of policies, and above all coordination with civil society to deliver credible messages.

Perhaps most nebulous but most important is the role of PD, in combination with traditional diplomacy, in relationship building. Here advocates of PD, SP, and “smart power”<sup>11</sup> are all on the same page, echoing the apparently forgotten lesson of Robert McNamara, speaking over forty years ago: “The decisive factor for a powerful nation—already adequately armed—is the character of its relationships with the world.”<sup>12</sup>

## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN PRACTICE**

Unfortunately it is exactly a long-term, diffuse objective such as relationship building that is most difficult to justify in quantitative terms. Whenever PD practitioners gather, they inevitably bemoan pressure from their governments to justify their activities. The ability to quantify and measure results is often crucial in the competition within the government for



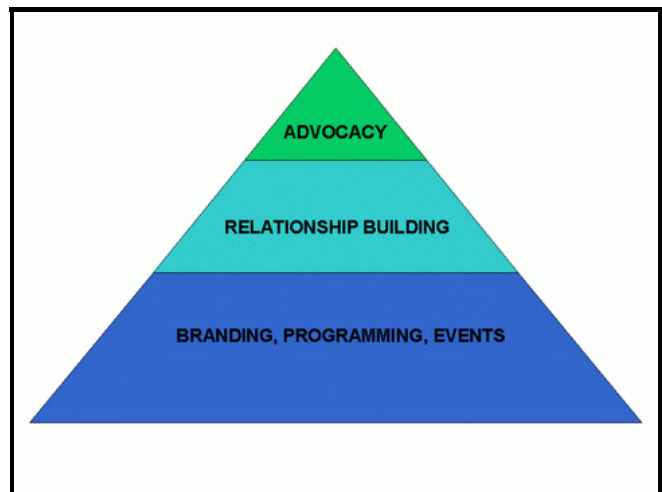
**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE CROSSROADS:  
DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN AN “OPEN SOURCE” ERA**

scarce funding, so how can we measure the effects of PD? Let us first try to disaggregate PD into some of its component parts.

The clearest, shortest-term PD goal is advocacy—the attempt to persuade another government about a specific issue of interest. Going back to our first set of diagrams, advocacy can often be achieved by conventional diplomacy alone. However, PD can also play a supporting or leading role in advocacy by mobilizing popular support in country B and/or by enlisting civil society from country A to make a more persuasive case. Advocacy is usually directed toward a specific goal and the criteria of success can be clearly articulated. What is not so clear is the role of PD and if it made a significant difference in that success.<sup>13</sup>

A more diffuse, difficult-to-measure goal is relationship building—the cultivation of ties with decision-makers and opinion leaders from various sectors of society. Traditionally this could have been done on the cocktail circuit, but power in modern societies is much more distributed and networking has to be more active and more strategic. Measuring success here would entail measuring access to, and gauging the disposition of, the target group. Even more long-term and diffuse in purpose are the most “public” events of PD: cultural programs and academic exchanges, outreach, media relations, and the activities that would be gathered under the out-of-favor term “branding.” If you host a film festival, you can quantify the publicity received and the audience in attendance, but the effect of such events is cumulative and “payoffs” are long-term.

We can now look at PD activities as a pyramid with more focused, short-term activities at the top and more diffuse, long-term activities at the bottom.<sup>14</sup>



*Figure 6.*

The activities on the bottom tier serve to facilitate relationship building, which in turn facilitates advocacy, but the causality does not work the other way. In soft power terms, the activities in the bottom tier increase SP, a potential that can be leveraged into successful advocacy at a later point in time. Practitioners of PD have often attempted to justify themselves by focusing on their advocacy activities and accomplishments, but this is short-sighted: a focus on advocacy to the exclusion of the pyramid's base may or may not be sustainable in the long run, but it certainly is a risky strategy. It is better for country A to have a multifaceted relationship with society B in

---

*The sole focus on short-term quantitative results is the diplomatic equivalent of not looking beyond quarterly financial results . . .*

---

order to sustain the relationship between the two countries in the event that the relationship at the diplomatic or political level sours.

Programming for PD should certainly be reined in to the extent that it focuses on embassy and national priorities, not the inclinations of individual ambassadors and cultural officers.

But perhaps the pendulum of performance measurement and “results-oriented management” has swung too far. The sole focus on short-term quantitative results is the diplomatic equivalent of not looking beyond quarterly financial results, and it handicaps the organization's innovation and growth potential in the long run.

### THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC DIPLOMAT

The narrowing of global vision caused by the so-called Global War on Terror, combined with an increasingly quantitative, immediate-results orientation in government, has also narrowed conceptions of public diplomacy—what it is and what it can do. But we need not long wistfully for the good old days of Edward R. Murrow's USIA, the Golden Age of U.S. public diplomacy. Today's constraints will eventually be overcome, and meanwhile, the tremendous growth of civil society actors and increasing globalism is providing the PD practitioner with an ever richer, more complex, and yet more chaotic environment in which to work. We have seen above that public diplomacy can take many forms; we are likely entering an age where the PD practitioner may have less and less control over the external environment, but that will not make public diplomacy less important—just less hierarchal, more fast-changing, more challenging, and ever more interesting.

**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE CROSSROADS:  
DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES IN AN “OPEN SOURCE” ERA**

**ENDNOTES**

- 1 Website of the Edward R. Murrow Center for Public Diplomacy, The Fletcher School, <<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/murrow/>> (accessed March 30, 2008).
- 2 Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, <[http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/about/whatis\\_pd](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/about/whatis_pd)> (accessed March 30, 2008).
- 3 I thank Professor Alan Henrikson of the Fletcher School for this distinction.
- 4 “The Gwitchin of Old Crow,” Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada, <[http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/aboriginalplanet/750/archives/may2002/art5\\_main-en.asp](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/aboriginalplanet/750/archives/may2002/art5_main-en.asp)> (accessed January 30, 2008).
- 5 This was recognized as early as the Congress of Vienna, where England’s Lord Castlereagh noted the new diplomatic environment created by the rise of mass nationalism. See Sir Charles Webster, *The Congress of Vienna* (London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1934). By contrast, his Austrian counterpart, the Prince von Metternich, would probably have thought “Public Diplomacy” to be an oxymoron.
- 6 I thank David Mulroney of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada for raising these issues.
- 7 Two writings which focus on the relationship between state size and public diplomacy are Alan Henrikson, “Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena: the Global ‘Corners’ of Canada and Norway,” in Jan Melissen, ed., *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 67-87, and Ivan Rasmussen’s analysis of why countries turn to public diplomacy, presented at the Murrow Conference on April 14, 2008.
- 8 See Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 9 The good news for a large country is that deeply held positive impressions of a country may also be difficult to dislodge. Erica Marrero, in her paper presented at the Murrow Conference on April 14, 2008, writes of the inability of the Chavez government to dent Venezuelan affections towards the U.S.—affections built on family ties, baseball, and pop culture.
- 10 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).
- 11 Smart power, the effective blending of soft and hard power, is described in the 2007 “Smart Power Report,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, <<http://www.csissmartpower.org/ReportFinal.pdf>> (accessed March 30, 2008).
- 12 “Security in the Contemporary World,” speech by Robert McNamara before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Montreal, Canada, May 18, 1966.
- 13 An example would be the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines, where governments, policy networks, alliances with NGOs, and other civil society actors operated sometimes in parallel, sometimes linked, to mobilize support that led to the signing of the Ottawa Convention.
- 14 A similar schematic has been used in Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs.