

FOREIGN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY POLICY: THE RHETORICAL TURN

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ABSTRACT: This article makes a case for diplomats and academics to use public relations and rhetorical scholarship to inform their understanding of the formation and implementation of foreign public diplomacy policy—that is, the branch of U.S. diplomacy that deals in communicating directly with foreign publics, not their governments. The article approaches foreign public diplomacy as public relations practice via the scholarship in the field, the advocacy of national interests via a discussion of Machiavelli, Grotius and medieval international law, and finally in promoting mutual understanding to aid in the implementation of foreign policy. The article promotes a holistic approach, based in rhetorical scholarship, to serve as a model for making the case that public diplomacy scholarship may be situated in rhetoric and

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“In contemporary politics and diplomacy, no other form better illustrates the place of rhetoric and discourse than public diplomacy.”¹ One of the most exciting aspects of studying rhetoric is that rhetoric is not philosophical solipsism. It does not simply reflect on itself. Rhetoric always has one foot in the real world, and rhetorical scholarship helps one to understand how people experience, communicate and change their lived reality. Rhetoric and diplomacy at its best makes the world a better place in which to live. This essay connects the study of public diplomacy to communication scholarship. Much of the literature examining foreign public diplomacy policy and its related issues is not found in communication and rhetorical scholarship. Only recently, and infrequently at that, scholars have sought to tie public diplomacy policy philosophically to public relations scholarship.² A rhetorical or philosophical underpinning may offer great benefit to international public diplomacy policy formation and implementation.

Much of the work in public diplomacy scholarship is done in the fields of political science, international relations and international law. Fifty years ago, Richard McKeon saw the importance of moving the discussion in the direction of rhetorical theory and ethics: “The language of ethics has become an integral part

1 G.D. MALONE, POLITICAL ADVOCACY AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: ORGANIZING THE NATION’S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY xi (1988).

2 See M. J. Dutta-Bergman, *U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East: A Critical Cultural Approach*, 30 *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 102 (2006)., and J. Zhang & B.C. Schwarz, *Public Diplomacy to Promote Global Public Goods (GPG): and Conceptual Expansion, Ethical Grounds, and Rhetoric*, 35 *Public Relations Review* 382 (2009)., and J. Wang, *Telling the American Story to the World: The Purpose of U.S. Public Diplomacy in Historical Perspective*, 33 *Public Relations Review* 21 (2007.)

of normal communication in politics, business, labor unions, and international relations".³ McKeon notes that terms like "decision-making," "policy politics," and the "engineering of consent" replace discussions of rhetoric as researchers attempt a bias-free engagement of ethics in the field of international relations and public diplomacy.⁴ Defining public diplomacy policy with a rhetorical understanding in mind that believes all communication between people or organizations is not free of bias will open up an alternate development of the term.

Zhang and Swartz⁵ cite three ways that international public diplomacy is defined in scholarship: as the cultivation of brand image, as the advocacy of national interests, and as promoting mutual understanding. This essay will examine public diplomacy as cultivating a brand image vis-à-vis the public relations literature and as the advocacy of national interests. A developed analysis of public diplomacy policy as promoting mutual understanding would require a discussion of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Mikhail Bakhtin from the communications scholarship and is beyond the scope of this paper, but some attention to the topic will be folded into the discussion of the Zhang and Swartz's first two points. By examining Zhang and Swartz's definitions, this essay will offer a constructive communication-based hermeneutics and ethics by which to understand what is meant by the term "public

3 Richard McKeon, *The Ethics of International Influence*, 70 ETHICS 187, 187 (1960)

4 *Id.*

5 Zhang, *supra* note 2.

diplomacy policy.”

Before exploring public diplomacy as one of the three strategies put forth by Zhang and Swartz and attempting a gestalt definition of the term, one must understand what public diplomacy does meta-strategically, especially in an increasingly globalized world. In a November 2010 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explains the strategy of State Department public diplomacy thus:

But increasing global interconnectedness now necessitates reaching beyond governments to citizens directly and broadening the U.S. foreign policy portfolio to include issues once confined to the domestic sphere such as economic and environmental regulation, drugs and disease, organized crime, and world hunger... The QDDR [Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review] endorses a new public diplomacy strategy that makes public engagement every diplomat’s duty, through town-hall meetings and interviews with the media, organized outreach, events in provincial towns and smaller communities, student exchange programs, and virtual connections that bring together citizens and civic organizations.⁶

Public diplomacy can be seen, then, as the work of communicating those policies with myriad foreign audiences. Malone holds: “What particularly sets public diplomacy apart from ordinary, or traditional, diplomacy is...that private individuals or publics,

6 Hillary R. Clinton, *Leading Through Civilian Power*, 89 *Foreign Affairs* 13, 15-16 (2010).

rather than governments, are its immediate target.”⁷

*Public Diplomacy Policy as Cultivating Brand
Image to Foreign Publics*

Definitions of public diplomacy range from a unilateral rhetoric of advocacy to two-way dialogue, with most definitions being image- and identity-centered.⁸ Likewise, Taylor⁹ observes that public diplomacy is often conceived of as a one-way communication with one nation seeking to put forth a rhetoric of image cultivation in order to build positive brand image with publics who live in another country. Grunig argues that public diplomacy “consists essentially of the application of public relations to the strategic relationship of organizations with international publics.”¹⁰

If so many definitions of public diplomacy—and practice of in the form of embassy press bureaus and media relations—rely so heavily on image cultivation, turning to scholarship on brand communication or management and image cultivation in the field of public relations will serve to anchor public diplomacy in the field of rhetoric and communication.

As early as the 1980s, attempts were made to philosophically connect the two in order to test whether the body of public relations scholarship might serve as a model for a similar discus-

7 G.D. MALONE, *POLITICAL ADVOCACY AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: ORGANIZING THE NATION'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY* 3 (1988.)

8 Zhang, *supra* note 2.

9 M. TAYLOR, *GLOBAL COMMUNICATION, INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND THE MEDIA SINCE 1945* (1997).

10 J. E. Grunig, *Public Relations and International Affairs: Effects, Ethics and Responsibility*, 47 *Journal of International Affairs* 137, 143 (1993).

sion of foreign public diplomacy policy. It is interesting to note that at around the same time, during the Reagan years, a growing confusion in the State Department was emerging about what the term "public diplomacy" actually meant.¹¹ Most public diplomacy scholarship has remained outside the discipline of communication and rhetoric. According to Yun, "In the past decade public relations scholarship has made little serious effort to test what public relations theories best transfer to the study of public diplomacy and, simultaneously, to rigorously examine proposed conceptual convergence between both spheres."¹² Public relations scholarship in brand management and image cultivation will serve to flesh out a satisfactory definition for one of three rhetorical "prongs" of a gestalt conception of public diplomacy.

Cutlip, et. al. define public relations as "the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various public[s] on whom its success or failure depends."¹³ Certainly, a major part of creating and sustaining a symbiotic relationship is wrapped up in creating and maintaining a favorable brand, especially in the case of foreign public diplomacy policy, where a given nation's brand may be largely unknown or misunderstood.

In her work on brand image, Chia-Hung examines the term "brand image" and offers that "brand image exists in the minds of consumers, as a result of how people perceive and interpret

11 MALONE, *supra* note 1 at 90-91.

12 Yun, *supra* note 11 at 287, 288.

13 S.M. CUTLIP, A.H. CENTER, & G.M. BROOM, *EFFECTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS* (1985).

the brand and the marketing activities surrounding it, thus going beyond the actual product itself."¹⁴ Implicit in her definition is an understanding of ethos. The rhetor, a given nation in this case, is interpreted as a whole brand beyond the marketing and public relations activities surrounding it. Furthermore, if public diplomacy is to be understood as cultivating a brand image, ethos must be central to the definition.

Ethos is not a quality a rhetor possesses; it is attributed to the rhetor by the audience, based on factors such as competence or believability.¹⁵ Credibility in Aristotle is conceived of as not emanating from the rhetor like logical and emotional appeals but as something bestowed upon the rhetor by his or her audience. "Aristotle's ethos may be defined as the element of speech that presents the speaker as trustworthy; or from the point of view of the hearer, as the element that makes the audience regard the speaker as trustworthy."¹⁶ Central to brand management, then, is an audience-centered rhetoric, contingent on particularity.

In sum, creating affect, trust, and loyalty¹⁷ as an agent of a nation to its various foreign publics is a deeply public relations-driven endeavor that requires the rhetorical giving of ethos by the composite audience. Clinton endorsed:

14 H. Chia-Hung, *The Effect of Brand Image on Public Relations Perceptions and Customer Loyalty*, 25 *International Journal of Management* 237, 239 (2008).

15 ARISTOTLE, *RHETORIC* (1954).

16 J. WISSE, *ETHOS AND PATHOS: FROM ARISTOTLE TO CICERO* 33 (1989).

17 A. Chaudhuri & M.B. Holbrook, *The Chain of Effects from Brand Trust and Brand Affect to Brand Performance: The Role of Brand Loyalty*, 65 *Journal of Marketing* 81 (2001).

a new public diplomacy strategy that makes public engagement every diplomat's duty, through town-hall meetings and interviews with the media, organized outreach, events in provincial towns and smaller communities, student exchange programs, and virtual connections that bring together citizens and civic organizations.¹⁸

Clinton appropriately titled her article "The New Diplomacy," and it draws largely from an implicit understanding of the nation as brand. For example, consider a town-hall meeting being organized by a public diplomacy professional in a small African village that will address a U.S. government development initiative to provide health care to that village. A public diplomacy professional would do well to keep in mind that creating affect, loyalty, and trust are subsumed into the need to gain ethos from his or her audience.

Creating affect, loyalty, and trust in working toward managing and growing the U.S. brand abroad finds tactical legs in public relations scholarship. Curtin and Gaither¹⁹ propose a cultural-economic model of international public relations practice based on the circuit of culture.²⁰ Their model provides a public relations method of practice by "encompassing the infinite points in which culture and power meet in a complex dance between

18 Clinton, *supra* note 6 at 13, 15-16.

19 P.A. Curtin & T.K. Gaither, *Privileging Identity, Difference and Power: The Circuit of Culture as a Basis for Public Relations Theory*, 17 *Journal of Public Relations Research* 91 (2005).

20 P. DU GAY, S. HALL, L. JANES, H. MACKAY & K. NEGUS, *DOING CULTURAL STUDIES: THE STORY OF THE SONY WALKMAN* (1997).

situational particulars and larger cultural practices.”²¹ Privileging cultural particulars in their public relations tactics and practice, Gaither and Curtin provide a public relations answer to Hall’s assertion that “culture is threaded through all social practices.”²²

By adopting a set of public relations tactics that privilege deference to the other’s culture in explaining and promoting U.S. objectives, public diplomacy officials may be better able to cultivate the American brand by building the three components of brand management. While this may take various forms depending on the specific nation and rhetorical situation in which a diplomat finds himself or herself, Curtin and Gaither privilege discursive practices as central to the ongoing process of meaning making, and by doing so, open up foreign public diplomacy policy formation to a sensitivity toward the temporal and specific cultural mores that comprise a given intercultural public relations diplomacy moment.²³

Likewise, Myers elucidates the complexity of creating trust as part of brand management in public diplomacy.²⁴ He offers that the success of a diplomatic rhetorical act “depends upon the ability to establish trust with a composite audience, while at the same time communicating the terms of a negotiation, over which there will be subsequent bargaining.”²⁵ He calls for a public diplo-

21 Curtin & Gaither, *supra* note 21 at 91, 117.

22 S. Hall, *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms*, 2 *Media, Culture and Society* 57, 58 (1980).

23 Curtin & Gaither, *supra* note 21 at 91.

24 F. Myers, *The Rhetorical Construction of Sincerity in International Negotiations: Great Britain’s First Application for Admission into the Common Market*, 2 *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 431, 431 (1999).

25 *Id.*

macy policy of transparency by subsequent press release and news conference to a meeting or speech act for those members of the audience not in attendance at the actual event. He also offers that diplomats should illustrate their commitment to the outlined objectives, whatever those objectives may be, echoing Isocrates' maxim that "the argument which is made by a man's life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words."²⁶

Defining foreign public diplomacy policy strictly in terms of public relations, however, is not enough. Malone cites a disenchantment among public diplomacy practitioners when compared to public relations professionals.²⁷ While issues of policy advocacy and creating mutual understanding may be tantamount in public relations practice, it is important to remember that the work is still the work of advocating the national interests of the U.S. abroad.

Toward a Rhetorical Constructive Definition

The rhetorical purpose of American public diplomacy policy is to promote policy goals and earn trust and cooperation while attending to others through a good public relations strategy situated in a rhetorical-philosophical understanding of discourse and dialogue.

Malone adds a check here, pointing to history and cautioning against a weak foreign public diplomacy. He argues that an approach that emphasized "dialogue" by the Carter Adminis-

26 W. L. BENOIT, ACCOUNTS, EXCUSES, APOLOGIES: A THEORY OF IMAGE RESTORATION STRATEGIES 69-70 (1995).

27 MALONE, *supra* note 1.

tration in the 1970s is historically regarded as a weak approach, and that the strategy of foreign public diplomacy should be both intercultural dialogue and advocacy of U.S. policies in equal measure.²⁸

In her discussion of public diplomacy, Hillary Clinton provides a point of practical application. In inviting dialogue with foreign publics, Clinton underscores what this strategy might look like. "I have held town-hall meetings with diverse groups of citizens on every continent I have visited...because the durability of partnerships abroad will depend on the attitudes of the people as well as the policies of their governments."²⁹ For the diplomat, then, public events such as these should be approached as "guest," that is to say they should be approached as an opportunity to learn about the other in such a way as to communicate the United States' interests more effectively as well as to be sensitive to cultural and national alterity.

A rhetorical definition of public diplomacy offers a rich body of knowledge by which to achieve policy goals and engage foreign publics. The field of public relations finds its historical roots in the public diplomacy initiatives of the German and British governments.³⁰ Moreover, public relations scholarship offers constructive ways in which to situate the tactical work in relation-

28 *Id.* At 95.

29 Clinton, *supra* note 6 at 16.

30 See R.E. HIEBERT, *COURIER TO THE CROWD: THE STORY OF IVY LEE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS (1966)*, and K. SRIRAMESH & D. VERCIC EDS., *HANDBOOK OF GLOBAL PUBLIC RELATIONS (2003)*.

ship-building.³¹ Dutta-Bergman echoes Clinton in pointing to a rhetorical turn in public diplomacy based on relationship-building as the cornerstone tactic to advancing U.S. foreign policy within a rhetorically situated understanding of the other culture:

Communication scholars and practitioners working on public diplomacy can facilitate the development of relationship and work toward the creation of platforms that allow opportunities for developing mutual understanding... Tactically, the culture-centered approach builds on community-based strategies that focus on exploring mutually meaningful points of entry into the discursive space and include participatory methods of communication. For instance, town hall meetings and public discussion forums can serve as important tools for promoting mutual understanding through dialogue between cultures... Central to relationship-based public relations is the very idea that both participants in the relationship can be equally affected; that both participants are open to the possibilities of change based on the lessons learned from engaging in the relationship.³²

Dutta-Bergman's tactical suggestions are important in an age when nations like the United States "find themselves more and more in the area of public relations as they attempt to influence the opinion of foreign publics".³³

31 See J. Zhang & B.C. Schwarz, *supra* note 2 at 382., and Yun, *supra* note 12 at 287., and M. J. Dutta-Bergman, *U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East: A Critical Cultural Approach*, 30 *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 102 (2006).

32 Dutta-Bergman, *supra* note 55 at 121-122.

33 B.H. Signitzer & T. Coombs, *Public Relations and Public Diplomacy: Conceptual Convergences*, 18 *Public Relations Review* 137, 146 (1992).

A holistic rhetorically-situated definition of foreign public diplomacy policy privileges public relations-based mutual understanding that moves beyond a monologic tactic of promoting a brand but employs good public relations for dialogic understanding in order that in the work of promoting U.S. policy objectives, diplomats may find a philosophical ground for why they go about their work in such a way as they do. Public diplomacy officers are then the agents to move foreign relations from monologue, which seeks to gain influence over the receiver, to dialogue, which in being attentive to another's culture and customs, also serves to advance the communication of U.S. policy goals.³⁴

Clinton cites public relations tactics that move beyond one-way communication such as press releases and radio broadcasts to tactics that invite face-to-face dialogue, like town-hall meetings and increased funding for exchange programs and development initiatives.³⁵ Peterson argues that public relations tactics that privilege dialogue are important in understanding that "image problems and foreign policy are not things apart."³⁶ Peterson argues for the centrality of public diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy to mitigate the terrorist acts of non-state actors.³⁷ He argues for a rhetorical turn in public diplomacy, especially at a time when the United States is fighting a war against non-state actors, thus requiring the U.S. to be more effective at communicating with

34 R. ANDERSON, K.N. CISSNA, & R.C. ARNETT EDs., *THE REACH OF DIALOGUE: CONFIRMATION, VOICE, AND COMMUNITY* (1994).

35 Clinton, *supra* note 6 at 13.

36 P.G. Peterson, *Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism*, 81 *Foreign Affairs* 74, 75 (2002).

37 *Id.*

broad publics before non-state terrorist actors recruit them against America. “This requires a deeper understanding of foreign attitudes and more effective communication of U.S. policies. It also means fully integrating public diplomacy needs into the very foundation of American foreign policies in the first place.”³⁸

A rhetorical turn in foreign public diplomacy policy situates diplomacy professionals in a position to act, not only as communicators and advocates of American foreign policy, but also to close the feedback loop in providing constructive information about the narrative structures and traditions of foreign cultures. The public diplomacy officer communicates back to his notion the alterity of the other in order to more effectively develop and implement policy with foreign publics through an effective utilization of public relations tactics.

Conclusion

This essay sought to illustrate that the formation of international public diplomacy policy—that is, how American diplomacy communicates directly with the publics of foreign countries and not with the governments of those countries—can find much currency in the rhetorical and communications scholarship.

Perhaps a rhetorical turn in public diplomacy might yield what Buber³⁹ would call a “unity of contraries”—a strong America attentive to its own best interests and the best interests of the other, especially in an age when public diplomacy is now arguably

38 *Id.* at 75

39 M. BUBER, *BETWEEN MAN AND MAN* (1947).

more important than ever in this postmodern historical moment as U.S. diplomats are required to engage not only with foreign governments but with reticulate public spheres in order to mitigate competing rhetorics, many from non-state actors wishing to influence the populace of their own nations.⁴⁰

40 G.A. HAUSER, *VERNACULAR VOICES: THE RHETORIC AND RHETORICS OF PUBLIC SPHERES* (1999).

