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What Is Public Diplomacy?

Fostering Cooperation, Countering Disinformation

Alan K. Henrikson

Among the various kinds of diplomacy, one of the newest to be designated with a distinct name is “public diplomacy.” This is a supportive function, for like an actor in the theatre, the *public diplomat* plays a part. It may be a significant part, but rarely if ever is it the ‘lead.’ Public diplomacy assists leaders and senior officials of governments and of international organizations by presenting and explaining their policies and, more broadly, managing the communications aspects of their strategies. Public diplomacy work—the role of which is mainly informational—nowadays has included cultural interaction and educational exchange as well. For some

countries, those functions have been handled somewhat separately, even at arm’s length, from political representation and policy promotion (e.g., the British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe Institut, Instituto Cervantes, and Confucius Institute).

Public diplomacy is *not*, I wish to emphasize, merely instrumental—a means to any end. It is a *purposeful* activity, with qualities that are inherent, the aims of which are not arbitrarily chosen. Public diplomacy is a purposeful activity, with qualities that are inherent, the aims of which are not arbitrarily chosen. There are objective standards in the world, including those of natural

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science and scholarly knowledge, to which it may owe its convincingness. Because public diplomacy operates in the judgmental realm of popular opinion, which in the globalized world of today is more and more universal in scope, it must, in order to be effective, appeal to the reason, tastes, values, and aspirations of peoples of different traditions in distant societies—over whom no formal or direct political authority is held or control exercised. Its objectives must be achieved noncoercively and for the

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most part openly, through public media and transparent private communication. It works primarily through persuasion and attraction, rather than by command, employment of force, or subterfuge. That is not to deny that manipulation can occur, as with military “information operations.” Insofar as public diplomacy succeeds in assisting a government or an organization to achieve its purposes, it is, despite its noncoerciveness, powerful. Influence over minds, from the level of the individual to that of society, is an ultimate arbiter. “Public opinion,” as Napoleon Bonaparte famously advised, “is the thermometer a monarch should constantly consult.” Today’s leaders,

irrespective of the type of regime or political form in which they operate, can rise or fall according to it.

My particular question in this essay is: what, if any, is the international legal framework within which public diplomacy is, and should be, conducted? Is there a higher normative context—a set of principles—that both inspires and constrains practitioners of public diplomacy, that both elevates and guides them? In short, does public diplomacy have a

conscience, a shared sense of right, a “normative ecosystem,” a collective ethos that influences those engaged in it?

My interrogation of the subject in what follows will proceed in five interrelated steps. The first will be to present the term *public diplomacy*, recounting briefly its origins and explicating its historically evolved meaning, and how it became governmentally established.

A second step will be to describe the range of public diplomacy activity and review major changes that have occurred within it, and also how the incidence and role of public diplomacy can vary with country size.

The third and central step is to examine the legal-normative bases and also some of the organizational foundations on which public diplomacy is, and arguably should be, conducted—both nationally and internationally.

The fourth step will be to identify the challenges within structures of the existing international political system and also in today's global communications space that complicate, and may even counteract, the progressive development of public diplomacy.

My fifth and final step is to consider current responses to these challenges, to gauge their possible effectiveness, and to suggest corrections and contributions that could be made in the conduct of public diplomacy that would strengthen the international legal order, foster comity among nations, and promote human enlightenment.

Origins and Meaning

The term *public diplomacy*, as it is commonly used today by the American and other governments, originated with

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the establishment in 1965 of the Edward R. Murrow Center for the Study and Advancement of Public Diplomacy at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, whose dean at the time was Edmund A. Gullion. A professional diplomat, Gullion had served during the Kennedy Administration as U.S. ambassador to what is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which at the time had just become independent of Belgium. He is known to have said that he might have used the word *propaganda* (instead of *public diplomacy*) for the Center he was establishing, but for the strong negative connotations of the former—then and now associated primarily with the work of German minister Joseph Goebbels but whose origins go further back to work of the Catholic Church in the Counter Reformation period (of which Gullion no doubt was aware). I suspect, therefore, that the doctrinal implication of the word could also have been a deterrent to his using it. The identification of 'public diplomacy' with propaganda has been very stubborn. It is a repurposing of a term that sometimes had been

used for describing "what Russian diplomats did," as an expert on the history of the subject Matthew Armstrong observes. For Geoffrey Berridge, a traditionalist scholar of diplomacy, public diplomacy is "the modern name for white propaganda"—distinguishable from the black variety for being essentially truthful and for "admitting its source."

As for the origin of the term *public diplomacy*, Nicholas Cull's careful analysis from 2006 "bears out," as he says, "that Gullion was the first to use the phrase in its modern meaning." He found, when doing a word-search, that the phrase itself first appeared in the *London Times* in 1856. In that context its meaning was, essentially, just civility—whether in international or in domestic speech. "The statesmen of America must recollect," the *Times* suggested, referring to U.S. President Franklin Pierce, "that, if they have to make, as they conceive, a certain impression upon us, they have also to set an example for their own people, and there are few examples so catching as those of public diplomacy."

With the arrival a half century later of Woodrow Wilson as the U.S. president, the term "public diplomacy" took on a broadly

systemic meaning, indicating almost a new philosophy of international relations. There were to be no exclusive alliances or secret agreements, he argued. Governments' intentions and policies would be straightforwardly and honestly declared—and in public. Wilson's concept was most memorably expressed in the first of his Fourteen Points outlined before a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress on 8 January 1918: "Open covenants of peace openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view." As the principal U.S. negotiator at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, however, Wilson's actual methods were of necessity a mixture of private, even secret, and public diplomacy.

The idealism of the Wilsonian conception of diplomacy continued in the 1920s with U.S. sources stressing the moral duty of the news media to report international affairs accurately and dispassionately, with the aim of reducing tensions. In the inaugural edition of *Foreign Affairs*, which was published in 1922, former U.S. Secretary of State Elihu Root wrote an essay titled "A Requisite for the Success of

Popular Diplomacy” in which he argued that “war is essentially a popular business.” So, too, should be diplomacy, “if democracies are to conduct their own destinies.” It thus is important, Root added,

that the democracy which is undertaking to direct the business of diplomacy shall learn the business. The controlling democracy must acquire a knowledge of the fundamentals and essential facts and principles upon which the relations of nations depend. Without such a knowledge there can be no intelligent discussion and consideration of foreign policy and diplomatic conduct. Misrepresentation will have a clear field and ignorance and error will make wild work with foreign relations.

Thus, not only governments but also the journalist profession and the citizenry—the “public”—should know, or learn to know, what is diplomacy.

In the 1930s—partly owing to a remarkable generation of U.S. foreign correspondents—the American public did learn more of what was happening in the world, if not necessarily of the modalities of diplomacy itself. In this period, as well as during World War II, the term “public diplomacy” was seldom used, however. International communication then

largely was a battle of ideas, militantly expressed, by both sides. Wilsonian thinking was confined mostly to long-term planning for the better organization of a postwar world.

Despite a brief revival of the spirit of “open covenants of peace, openly arrived at” after World War II, when the United Nations Organization was being established, the rapid deterioration of relations between the Western powers and the Soviet Union changed the context of international public communication for the worse. The American columnist Walter Lippmann, who had been involved in opinion-influencing efforts in both World Wars, observed in November 1953 that some diplomats now “might argue that practice of public diplomacy and of propaganda and of psychological warfare had become such a plague” that key Soviet-American talks should be held in private. However, international public altercation, being easier, prevailed. Public diplomacy, as conducted in the debates at the UN, was losing its utility. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, in an attempt to restore it, said in a 1958 address, that the “value of public diplomacy in the United Nations will depend to a decisive extent on how far the responsible spokesmen find

it possible to rise above a narrow tactical approach to the politics of international life, and to speak as men for aspirations and hopes which are those of mankind.”

As the foregoing shows, Gullion did not in a strict sense coin the term, but he did, however, institutionalize it—and not just at The Fletcher School itself. The term “public diplomacy” was picked up the American government, particularly within the United States Information Agency (USIA), an entity created in 1953 by the Eisenhower Administration. Further recognition of public diplomacy by official Washington came with the 1975 Report of the Panel on International Information, Education, and Cultural Relations chaired by CBS President Frank Stanton, whose preface stated that “public diplomacy is a central part of American foreign policy simply because the freedom to know is such an important part of America.” Through a process of emulation and bureaucratic replication, the term “public diplomacy” was adopted by other, mostly Western governments and also by NATO, which established a Public Diplomacy Division during this period, which directed its work mainly at the populations of its own membership. In the context of the U.S. State Department, the

older term “public affairs” (used to define its work of informing Americans and foreigners of U.S. policies and international relationships and actions) was kept. This category of diplomats stationed abroad are still known as Public Affairs Officers and they still work in Public Affairs Sections.

For technological and other reasons, the distinction between internal and external public communication has become blurred. For many countries, not only the smaller ones, the *domestic* aspect of public diplomacy—letting their people know of their diplomacy and its effects—can be almost as important as its international aspect. Diplomacy begins—and ends—at home, as the Polish scholar Katarzyna Pisarska emphasized in a 2016 book. Effective public diplomacy, known at home as well as abroad, can be a means of enhancing a nation’s self-identity, cohesive strength, and political unity.

The linguistic and organizational adoption of the idea of public diplomacy has seemed to fill a need. After a dozen years of its life, the United States Information Agency (USIA) needed a terminological update. Gullion’s innovative use of “public diplomacy,” Cull writes, “covered

every aspect of USIA activity and a number of the cultural and exchange functions jealously guarded by the Department of State.” The phrase “gave a respectable identity to the USIA career officer, for it was one step removed from the ‘vulgar’ realm of ‘public relations’ and by its use of the term ‘diplomacy’ explicitly enshrined the USIA alongside the State Department as a legitimate organ of American foreign relations.” The integration of the USIA into the State Department arguably has strengthened the diplomatic character of the public diplomacy practitioner. Public diplomacy now is formally one of the five career tracks of the United States Foreign Service. It has gained similar professional recognition within other ministries of foreign affairs, with public diplomacy officers on their less-specialized, and usually smaller, rosters. In recent years, however, with increased recognition of the need for ‘multifunctional competence’ in foreign ministries, public diplomacy is assumed to be a core competency of a multifunctional diplomatic service.

Recent Changes and Variations

What, exactly, does a practitioner of public diplomacy do? There is no standard definition of the concept or of the function. It understandably has been called, as by the cultural diplomacy specialist Richard Arndt, a “portmanteau” phrase. Edmund Gullion’s own definition, as given in a Fletcher School brochure, is actually more of a description. It is rather good, as far as it goes: “Public diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications.”

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Public diplomacy, as Gullion personally knew and lived it, was not so much the organized international communications effort of an entire government as it was the individual performance of the nation’s authorized representative. He once described the diplomat as a “man of the occasion.” This encompassed not only the public ceremonial roles that a diplomat often performs but also the handling of extraordinary demands, including those of the media, in critical situations. A subsequent Fletcher School dean, Stephen W. Bosworth, served as American ambassador in the Philippines during its People Power Revolution of February 1986 and later in South Korea. During his deanship he also was U.S. President Barack Obama’s special representative for North Korea policy and Washington’s negotiator in the Six Party Talks on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Dealing with reporters about these matters was a regular part of his job. “I really do not know what ‘public diplomacy’ is,” he once said to me in conversation, adding, “the ambassador can do a lot.”

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For many professional diplomats—not only the older ones or those at the ambassadorial level—public diplomacy is an aspect of *diplomacy itself*, not something separate from it. I myself am sympathetic to that view. Public diplomacy, nonetheless, has come to be understood as a distinct practice, with differentiated activities and roles within it. It has emerged as an academic field as well. A former senior Canadian career diplomat, Mark McDowell, who after serving as counselor for public diplomacy at Canada’s embassy in Beijing was appointed Canadian ambassador to Myanmar, has offered a graphic depiction of public diplomacy. At a Fletcher School conference in April 2008, he described a government’s public diplomacy activities as a pyramid that has three levels. At its peak, McDowell placed *advocacy*. This merits special comment, as “advocacy” is not one of the “functions” listed in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961).

While openly advocating for a government’s interests and positions of course is something that diplomats long have long done, the explicit adoption of “advocacy” as

a formally assigned task appears to be a Canadian innovation. In April 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin announced the establishment of a public advocacy and legislative secretariat in Canada's embassy in Washington, DC. Its first head, as 'minister of advocacy', was Colin Robertson. He explained his job as involving a measure of agitation: "Advocacy is as much about getting attention as getting your message across. Get attention and your message follows." Such assertiveness may not be needed. As McDowell acknowledges, "advocacy can often be achieved by conventional diplomacy alone." Ministers, and ambassadors too, can usually be heard. However, public diplomacy can play "a supporting or leading role in advocacy by mobilizing popular support" in the target country (country B) and/or by "enlisting civil society from country A to make a more persuasive case." The Canadian government's coordinated effort, which in the end proved unsuccessful, to win American government agreement to the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel landmines is illustrative.

In McDowell's public diplomacy pyramid beneath "*advocacy*," which tends to be focused and short term, there is a second layer that he describes as "*relationship building*,"

which is broader and more diffuse. It includes the cultivation of ties with decisionmakers and opinion leaders as well as strategic networking with the various sectors of society. It is medium-term in its time horizon. The bottom layer of the pyramid is "*branding, programming, events*." These are the most "public" aspects of public diplomacy, encompassing cultural programs and academic exchanges along with special events like film festivals. The goal of this wider work of public diplomacy is familiarization, and even the occasional production of delight—cumulatively, a long-term effect, and a civilizing one.

As the foregoing basic description indicates, public diplomacy has become more operational. This is the result of its progressive institutionalization as a practice embedded in the expanding bureaucracies of governments, and also of rapid advances in the technology of communication including the digital revolution. "Digital diplomacy" now is being practiced by most of the world's governments.

With the disrupting spread of globalization and the fragmentation of the world political order that has been occurring, there are more and more centers of

consciousness, even of agency. The ease of communications has empowered these many centers—not only governments of sovereign states—to have a public diplomacy presence. For many, the smaller states especially, it is a matter of establishing and maintaining identity.

In a further graphical representation of the role of public diplomacy today, McDowell depicted three green-colored circles; a small one (S), a middle-sized one (M), and a large one (L), representing countries. Within each of the ovals he placed a red dot—somewhat like a pimiento pepper in a stuffed olive—representing the size of the country's public diplomacy apparatus. Naturally, the dot—the public diplomacy bureaucracy—'grows' with movement from smaller to larger country-circles, but *not* proportionately to the overall size of the country. The essential point is that for the world's many small states and also for middle powers, the importance the role of country's official public diplomacy apparatus may be *much* greater than for larger or more powerful countries with their bigger economies, open societies, heterogenous populations, and myriad diaspora and other links abroad.

What Hollywood or Bollywood, or Microsoft or Infosys, can do to project themselves internationally may at times eclipse what the American or Indian government's public diplomacy practitioners can do. But this raises another important question: Can private corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participate in public diplomacy? Or is public diplomacy (and not just by lexical definition) *governmental*—inevitably and properly so?

The matter has long been, and remains, a matter of debate. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr.—early proponents of greater attention to the rise of 'transnational relations'—observed in a 1970 book that for most political scientists and for many diplomats "a state-centric view of world affairs prevails." Who 'owns' public diplomacy (as the question might be posed): the State or the People—in whose name diplomacy presumably is conducted, and who might wish to do it themselves?

The answer, in my view, depends on whether those various entities (companies, NGOs, affinity groups, and even individual persons) have a serious and well-considered interest in matters of international public policy—in actual rule-making and international

governance—and are actively engaged in advancing it, and are doing so publicly.

A more radical view is that of, for example, the sociologist Manuel Castells, author of *The Theory of the Network Society* (2006). In an essay titled “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” Castells, who envisions “de facto global governance without a global government,” logically contends that public diplomacy is, quite simply, “the diplomacy of the public.” That public diplomacy is, or should be, “People’s Diplomacy” is rhetorically attractive. It is not merely utopian. For Americans especially, from the time of Benjamin Franklin through the Revolution, foreign policy has been appropriately understood as being that of the People, not of the State. What this concept—the republican ideal—should require, however, is that the People (general public) themselves, as Elihu Root urged back in 1922, learn what diplomacy—informed and civilized discourse, premised on mutual respect, about larger issues of public policy, both between societies and within them—actually is. To learn the business, and engage responsibly in it.

Normative-Legal Bases and Organizational Foundations

This brings me to the central question of whether there is an existing international normative framework for public diplomacy, or whether it takes place in a moral void. A starting point is the Charter of the United Nations (1945), a document that expresses in its Preamble the determination of “THE PEOPLES” of the United Nations “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours,” and “to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest.”

The organizational structure of the UN itself, when established, was a mechanism for peace. The historically older institution of diplomacy was given newly codified form by the UN Conference on Diplomatic Intercourse and Immunities, which was held in Vienna in 1961. Although negotiated during a period of high East-West tension, the resulting Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR) has stood the test of time remarkably well.

The text of the VCDR expressed a belief that the Convention would “contribute to the development of friendly relations among nations, irrespective of their differing constitutional and social systems.” More concretely, Article 3(1) on The Functions of a Diplomatic Mission includes on its list, as the final item: “Promoting friendly relations between the sending State and the receiving State, and developing their economic, cultural and scientific relations.” While a “function” is not a mandate, the verb “promote” and adjective “friendly” are dynamic and positive in meaning, and connote an intention, if not an obligation.

That being said, there is nothing in the VCDR about communicating with the public—i.e., public diplomacy. At the time, amidst the Cold War, such openness would hardly have been generally welcomed. Still, Article 27 of the VCDR requires the receiving State to “permit and protect free communication on the part of the mission for all official purposes,” with the further provision that “in communicating with the Government and the other missions and consulates of the sending State, wherever situated, the mission may employ all appropriate means, including diplomatic couriers and messages in code or cipher. However, the mission may

install and use a wireless transmitter only with the consent of the receiving State.”

This last provision touches upon the International Telecommunication Convention (1932), which accords host governments supervisory authority over the use of wireless facilities located within their territories. As a leading scholar of diplomatic law, Eileen Denza, points out in her 2016 book, that VCDR provision reflected anxiety within some delegations that “diplomatic wireless” might lead to radio broadcasting which, if done from within the space of the host country, could much more easily reach its domestic population than the state of technology at the time permitted. During the Cold War, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) were located on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, in Munich. A further provision of the VCDR that carries a potential for restricting a sending state’s exercise of public diplomacy is Article 11, which allows the receiving state to “require that the size of a diplomatic mission be kept within limits considered by it to be reasonable and normal”—a plausible legal basis for the expulsion, without needed explanation, of members of an embassy or consulate. When this occurs, it can lead to the well-known pattern of “tit

for tat” retaliation by the sending state. Although a negative rather than a positive expression of reciprocity, it is an effective means—a “diplomatic” means—of enforcing the VCDR, and has helped to give it endurance.

More broadly and less technically, when considering the “normative ecosystem” within which public diplomacy is practiced, one should note the language of the founding document of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the Preamble to its 1945 Constitution, the participating states parties, on behalf of their peoples, declare “that a peace based exclusively upon political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace that could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.” Accordingly, “believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge,” the states parties “are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples,” and, in consequence, “create the United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.” UNESCO was assigned the lead role for the UN system in what one of its later documents calls “the dialogue among civilizations and cultures,” a multi-faceted programmatic effort aimed at “attaining justice, equality and tolerance in people-to-people relationships.” Without using the name, this is an ambitious multilateral commitment and undertaking in public diplomacy.

Especially noteworthy as well in the present context is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 19 of which articulates the norms of intellectual freedom and unrestricted access to information. It reads: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media or regardless of frontiers.”

Two years earlier, the principle of “freedom of information” had been recognized by the UN General Assembly, when in December 1946 it adopted Resolution 59, titled “Calling for an International Conference on Freedom of Information.” This document called “freedom of information” a “fundamental human right,” which in turn

“implies the right to gather, transmit and publish news anywhere and everywhere. The same document defined this right to be an “essential factor in any serious effort to promote the peace and progress of the world,” which “requires as a basic discipline the moral obligation to seek the facts and to spread knowledge without malicious intent.” Factuality and benignity thus were made imperative.

The freedom of information principle is embedded in many international legal instruments, including regional ones. One example is the Council of Europe’s European Convention on Human Rights (1950), whose implementation is overseen by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Another is the Helsinki Final Act (1975), which is the basis of the existence of the OSCE. Within its so-called Third Basket, under the heading Information, there is recognition of the importance of “the dissemination of information” from participating states and of “the better acquaintance with such information” within them, with a specific emphasis on “the essential and influential role of the press, radio, television, cinema and news agencies of the journalists working in those fields.” Cooperation between such entities working in the field of information on the basis

of “short or long term agreements or arrangements” is expressly encouraged.

Considering the close, even symbiotic, relationship that diplomats can have with foreign correspondents, as Edmund Gullion experienced professionally and noted in his description of “public diplomacy,” one may conclude that the 1975 Helsinki documents—a goal of which was more openness of diplomatic interaction in East-West relations—are part of a normative, even legal, framework for public diplomacy, still today.

Contemporary Challenges

The most fundamental challenge to the unconstrained practice of public diplomacy is the structure of the international political system itself—its interstate character, the segmentation of the globe by borders. As political scientist David Held observes in *Democracy and the Global Order* (1995), “territorial boundaries demarcate the basis on which individuals are included in and excluded from participation in decisions affecting their lives (however limited that participation might be) [...]. The implications of this are considerable.” One implication of this divided jurisdictional reality is that

it is usually through diplomacy—including public diplomacy, that decisionmaking in other countries can be influenced, whether in support of “democracy” or for any other positive, or negative, purpose. As McDowell reminds us, “public diplomacy is by nature transparent, but it cannot be contrasted with traditional diplomacy as an activity which by definition serves only good ends.”

The present international legal order, which mirrors the political map (whose pattern it has helped to shape), is a further constraint on international communication, notably anything that could be deemed “interference” in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Article 2, paragraph 7, of the UN Charter lays down this limiting condition clearly, with the exception of possible collective-security action:

Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII.

Only if and when a majority of the 15 members the Security

Council, including its five (veto-holding) permanent members, decide upon enforcement measures, can “intervention” in a country’s internal affairs be considered legally valid—however ‘legitimate’ it, nonetheless, might be viewed by much of the world.

Article 2(7) of the UN Charter also provides member states with a normative justification for resistance to outside influences and pressures, including those that might be exerted by means and methods of public diplomacy. Article 2(7) is reinforced by the UN Charter’s Article 51, which recognizes “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence”—an inalienable right of self-help that cannot be impaired, except as a result of a Security Council decision to authorize “measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.”

More immediate challenges to the exercise of public diplomacy are many. Some of them are not new. First of all, there is *jamming*. The Soviet government during the Cold War jammed broadcasts, not sent directly from the United States but from Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty from transmitters located in West Germany, as noted above. The Voice of America, also sometimes

jammed, was popular in the Soviet Union, partly because of its jazz program hosted by Willis Conover, a long-time VOA contractor with a slow delivery and accessible English.

The Voice of America, a basic purpose of which was to *counter* propaganda, may have seemed to listeners in the Eastern bloc somewhat propagandistic itself, but less so than RFE and RL, which arguably were aimed at liberation (its role in agitating Hungarians to rise up in 1956, with the implicit promise of concrete Western assistance and even intervention, has been well-documented). Jamming by Moscow continued for many years, despite agreed-upon language in the Helsinki Accords supporting the “expansion of the dissemination of information broadcast by radio.” The Soviet government regarded jamming as a legally justified response to Western broadcasts that it considered contrary to the Accords’ purpose of meeting “the interest of mutual understanding among peoples and the aims set forth by the Conference,” as one formulation described it. Moscow also held that the Accords required only the facilitation of the flow of information, not the implementation of it. During the current Russia-Ukraine war, both sides are jamming each other’s communications.

A novel legal question arose during the 1994 civil violence in Rwanda, partly incited by Radio Télévision Libre du Milles Collines (RTL), as to whether jamming could be internationally authorized, on humanitarian grounds, as a collective counter to “genocide.” The question has not been resolved.

Then there is *physical violence* against diplomatic facilities themselves, such as occurred with the student demonstrators’ takeover of the U.S. embassy during the Iranian revolution in 1979 and, more recently, with the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, which led to the abandonment by the U.S. government of most of its assets there. The *blocking of websites* is a more calculated obstructive measure, favored by some governments (e.g., North Korea and China, with its ‘Great Firewall’ of censorship). It is a practice as well of the Russian government, which also limits access to information by the use of restrictive *regulation and licensing*.

A more aggressive form of disruption is *hacking*—i.e., the unauthorized breaking-into of computer network security systems so as to gain control of them for illicit purposes, including the sowing of political confusion. Outright *disinformation* and its spread, by electronic and other

means, is an especially pernicious challenge to the norms of public diplomacy. At present, during the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, a country supported by the United States and most other Western countries, this has amounted to *hybrid warfare*. The conscious spread of outright lies, conspiracy theories, and charges of “fake news” has entered in the realm of diplomacy. It is on this basis that some Western governments have justified blocking certain Russian websites.

As Nicholas Cull has wisely suggested, what we need is “disarmament” in the field of public diplomacy, similar to that developed earlier in the field of arms control, along with positive confidence-building measures. He contends that “just as an excess of conventional arms requires a disarmament process, so the weaponization of media should be met with an information disarmament process.” This will require responsible leadership, not only on the part of governments but also from within international society—the global public. The truthfulness of information must be protected. It also must be promoted. The more alert populations are to disinformation, the more likely such widespread awareness will engender corrective, and preventive, action by activists

along with authorities. Diplomacy itself, both official and unofficial, is a model and a means.

Effective Responses

The final step in this exploration of the role of public diplomacy in the modern world—particularly the legal and normative context in which public diplomacy, in its many manifestations, is being conducted—I must consider, first, defensive responses, aimed at the protection of information and networks through which it is increasingly being communicated. This must be undertaken initially at the domestic level, by national governments.

The United States during the Biden Administration, for example, has given high priority to cybersecurity, which is the designated responsibility of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). At the regional level, the EU also has acted firmly, with the establishment of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and, through the passage of the European Union Cybersecurity Act, a strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. NATO has made Cyber Defense one of the Western military alliance’s core tasks of “collective defense.”

At the global level, too, efforts have been made to contribute to cybersecurity resilience. The International Telecommunication Union is now offering Cybersecurity Certificates through a training program. The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism conducts a Cybersecurity and New Technologies program. During its two-year existence, the ad hoc Global Commission on the Stability of Cyberspace, chaired initially by the Estonian diplomat Marina Kaljurand, worked to “promote stability in cyberspace to build peace and prosperity.” It defined a set of Principles with supplementary Norms, the first of which is non-interference with “the public core” of the internet, the general availability and integrity of which, it asserted, is essential to the stability of cyberspace.

There obviously is positive purpose as well in these protective efforts. This is not only to facilitate international communication but also to build trust and foster cooperation. The development and maintenance of *relationships* is the proper object of diplomacy, including public diplomacy. Too often it is just the defense and promotion of *interests*, national and even international, that is considered to be what diplomacy is for and mainly what diplomats do. Diplomacy—not just in the

conduct of negotiations—is inherently relational. It involves, more broadly, management of “relations of separateness,” as the diplomatic theorist Paul Sharp argued in a 2009 book.

This fundamental fact can be obscured by the current emphasis, almost a fashion, on “narrative.” The trend is especially evident in discussions of public diplomacy. A seminal study in 1999 by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation titled “The Emergence of Noopolitik: Toward an American Information Strategy” posited that it is no longer military or economic power that prevails in international competition. Rather, it is a matter of “whose story wins.” Such “stories,” while they can indeed be somewhat inclusive of others, are basically told from a single point of view—a nation’s, a government’s, or even an individual political leader’s perspective.

An example of the foregoing is the narrative that the current Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, is telling about the origin of Russia as lying within present-day Ukraine, which he does not consider to be “a real country.” Ukraine, of course, has its own narrative, which has been greatly strengthened by the invasion of its territory by the Russian army on 26 February 2022. Although clearly it

was the Russia side that made the first, aggressive move, the Russian government has represented its action as “defense” against the expansion of NATO, which it claims amounts to a “defense” of Russia itself.

This continues a line of argument developed by the Russian government during the Crimean crisis of 2014. A one-sided narrative such as this, if backed by power, can be bought into and bolstered by others who, for their own reasons, may choose to accept (if not believe) it as truth. Thus, at a three-way summit in Tehran in July 2022 at which the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, met with Putin and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and reportedly said to Putin: “War is a violent and difficult endeavor, and the Islamic Republic is not at all happy that people are caught up in war. But in the case of Ukraine, if you had not taken the helm, the other side would have done so and initiated a war.” Khamenei also spoke of NATO as a “dangerous entity,” adding that “if the road is clear for NATO, they know no boundaries or limits.” The Russian narrative of the war’s causation thus was, by this addition, not only confirmed, but was augmented. Thus,

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built upon by Iran, the Russian “story” of preemptive defense was internationally stronger.

The Iranian government does have a basis for complaint. Along with the severe economic sanctions being applied to Iran by the United States and its NATO allies, there evidently has been a disruptive social media campaign being directed against it. The White House, concerned about decisions by Facebook and Twitter to remove, as ostensibly “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” some accounts attributable to the Trans-Regional Web Initiative of the Defense Department, instructed the Pentagon to conduct a review. The White House concern, as reported by the *New York Times* in September 2022, was that “clandestine programs could undermine American credibility even if the material being pushed was accurate.” The top Pentagon spokesman, Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, said that it was the Department of Defense’s policy to conduct information operations in support of “national security priorities.” He further stated that “these activities must be undertaken in compliance with U.S. law and [Department of Defense] policy.

We are committed to enforcing those safeguards.”

The very fact of the White House concern and the Pentagon audit being reported (first by the *Washington Post*) increased the likelihood of stories told abroad by the Pentagon henceforth being both authentic and accurate, if not also governed by international norms.

Overcoming Dangers

Narrative and power are closely related. The former can be a cover for the latter—its presence or its absence. In the lexicon of diplomacy, in my judgment, the word “power,” even in the benign term “soft power,” is badly out of place. In international as well as interpersonal relationships, if they are genuine, the word rarely is mentioned, whatever inequalities there actually may be within them. True relationships involve dialogic interaction, continuous two-way conversation. Thereby facts are tested, and truth is determined as well.

As Edward R. Murrow said when he headed the USIA, “truth is the best propaganda.” Public diplomacy, if there is a too-heavy emphasis on “messaging,” can devolve into monologue, even solipsism. This is a danger, too, in the current focus on ‘narrative,’ which may be interesting,

but not actually engaging. The emphasis of public diplomacy, as with diplomacy generally, should be on engendering cooperation.

That is possible. There is an existing framework for it: the international legal order. Principles relating to the flow of ideas and information that are found in the UN Charter, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the UNESCO Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Helsinki Final Act, and also some of the functionally-focused transgovernmental regulatory regimes can be seen to provide partial answers to the question of the existence of a normative framework for public diplomacy. So, too, can national legislation and actual and proposed measures to control the scope and content of state media and government influence operations.

The more that publicly sponsored international communication, as well as policy-oriented ‘transnational’ communication—whether by private corporations, NGOs, academic institutions, or interested individuals—is guided, even inspired, by international law and the higher principles and norms surrounding it, the more likely it is that cooperation will result, and the planet (as well as the people on it) will benefit. **BD**