

New Developments in Public Diplomacy

A roundup of the latest trends and events of significance to the evolution of public diplomacy.

By Iskra Kirova

New Technology and New Public Diplomacy

The concluding months of 2008 saw dynamic discussions about the application of new technology in public diplomacy. Government in particular entered the realm of online social networking with at least two purposes: to promote collaboration and to organize messaging campaigns. The new trend was exemplified by the U.S. Department of State's Public Diplomacy 2.0 strategy—an umbrella term for a variety of new initiatives, including:

- Contests on the video-sharing site YouTube which encourage young people around the world to explore topics of democracy and intercultural dialogue;
- A social networking website (ExchangesConnect - <http://connect.state.gov/>) for young people interested in interacting with participants in U.S. educational or foreign exchange programs;
- A series of "Blogger Forums" which allowed bloggers to ask questions directly to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy;
- A global summit of grassroots organizations from around the world to share knowledge and experience on how to use online tools against violence and extremism.

The 2.0 initiative is, on one hand, a modern application of the fundamental concept of public diplomacy as a two-way process of engagement and exchange of ideas in an interactive environment. The more noteworthy aspect of the initiative, however, is that it represents a shift in the role of government away from directly managing narratives toward acting as a mediator—thereby only indirectly shaping an environment conducive to the achievement of its goals. In this strategy of "indirection," as described by former U.S. Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James Glassman¹, new technology becomes a tool for conducting what has been described as "new public diplomacy"² that is no longer confined to promotion campaigns and direct governmental contact with foreign publics but is more focused on opening channels for conversations and facilitating networking between grassroots parties at home and abroad.

Along with this more novel approach to the conduct of public diplomacy, online networking tools have also been seized as platforms for more traditional messaging and dissemination of information. Foreign Ministries and diplomats have been venturing into the world of blogging over the last several years. More recently, however, with the explosion of social networking, the microblogging website Twitter became the new hot tool for public diplomats. Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for

Public Diplomacy Colleen Graffy, who used Twitter as a means to communicate her diplomatic agenda along with her private daily routines, argued in a December 24, 2008 *Washington Post* piece that such online tools personalize her professional interactions and enhance her impact as an official. The added value of a platform such as Twitter is its immediacy and informality that allow messages to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, and other red tape, and engage with audiences directly.

An even more concerted effort at “tweeting” information was made by the Israeli Consulate in New York which chose the microblogging website to organize a “Citizens’ Press Conference” and make the case for Israel’s recent offensive in Gaza. The unprecedented debate was attended by thousands of bloggers and generated vast media attention.³ The Consulate further buttressed its social media presence with a Facebook page, a political blog, and a lifestyle and culture blog about Israel. These initiatives were all part of an elaborate public diplomacy apparatus to get Israel’s message out and support its war effort in Gaza. Other web tools employed included a YouTube military channel set up by the Israel Defense Forces to broadcast Israel’s precision bombings in the Gaza strip. The entire information offensive which targets both traditional and new media is led by a newly established Israeli National Information Directorate, set up after a government-commissioned investigation into Israel’s communication failures during the 2006 war in Lebanon against Hezbollah.⁴

Twitter played another role in the recent conflict by enabling individual citizens to keep the outside world informed through feeds and blogs, despite Israeli attempts to control foreign journalists’ access to Gaza. Al Jazeera, the only international broadcaster with reporters inside the war zone, set up a Twitter feed and began featuring “tweets” and text message updates on its Web site. These messages could be viewed even in the U.S. where the English version of the channel is largely unavailable⁵—an indication that with the advent of social media, attempts to “control the message” are in principle futile. In another unique example of how government control over information can be circumvented, the Al Jazeera Network released hours of its unedited video footage of the war in Gaza by placing it in an online repository under the most permissive Creative Commons license, thus making it available for rebroadcasting by users and TV stations across the world.”⁶

International Broadcasting

In the sphere of international broadcasting, aggressive government interventions have caused contractions in the free flow of information in certain parts of the world. In countries of the former USSR a number of international broadcasters have been forced off the air or have significantly reduced their services since summer 2008, in most cases as a result of pressure by authorities on local FM partners to end agreements. Voice of America (VOA) Russia terminated its radio broadcasts and is now an internet-only service. The BBC World Service Russia is reorienting its programming by shortening and refocusing its radio time and expanding its internet production. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia is headed in a similar direction, with the broadcaster’s offerings now only available on two local radio stations, as compared to 30 some three years ago. As a September 2008 VOA press release explaining the shut-down notes, the changes are due to intimidation by authorities of local radio stations that relay foreign broadcasts as part of a wide-spread crack-down on freedom of speech in Russia.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Russian Federation. Recently, Azerbaijan banned all foreign companies from broadcasting on its national FM frequencies, thus effectively blocking the BBC World Service, RFE/RL and VOA whose main audience tunes in to the services on FM radio. The crack-down on foreign broadcasters has been spreading in countries of the former USSR for some time now, with RFE/RL services taken off the air last year in Kyrgyzstan, and reports of journalists' intimidation proliferating throughout the region. Most of these radio stations were originally founded to serve as Western public diplomacy tools during the Cold War and the current restrictive measures barely differ in impact from the once-practiced physical jamming of the services. Although public diplomacy nowadays can and has begun to explore alternative online venues, these media still have relatively low penetration in that part of the world. However, it is also noteworthy that even in cases where there is no pressure from local authorities, foreign broadcasters have gradually started relocating to newer platforms. On September 30, 2008, VOA ceased its radio broadcasts in Hindi, Bosnian, Serbian, and Macedonian to refocus resources on the growing internet markets and television. These developments might be signaling an end to government sponsored radio broadcasting for public diplomacy as more effective venues begin to emerge elsewhere.⁷

Public Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

After a host of U.S. policy centers and senior officials commented on the dire situation of human and financial capital at the U.S. Department of State and the high-jacking of public diplomacy by the U.S. Department of Defense⁸, Secretary-of-State Hilary Clinton has signaled intentions to re-invigorate the role of diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy. During her confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Clinton vowed to use “‘smart power’, the full range of tools at our disposal— diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural—picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation” and promised to place diplomacy at “the vanguard of foreign policy”.⁹ Similar positions have been voiced by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates who recently reiterated that diplomacy and communication at the Foreign Service have been “systematically starved of resources”.¹⁰ The new administration’s plans coincide with other recent legislative and administrative actions aimed at the restructuring of U.S. public diplomacy, such as:

- U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing on “A Reliance on Smart Power—Reforming the Public Diplomacy Bureaucracy”;
- The introduction of a bill by Republican Senator Samuel Brownback to establish a National Center for Strategic Communication to advise the president regarding public diplomacy and international broadcasting;
- A Government Accountability Office report ranking U.S. image abroad as the fifth most urgent issue to be tackled by the new administration.

Other prominent figures have also affirmed the importance of synergy between public diplomacy and foreign policy making. In a speech in October 2008, European Commission Vice-President and Communication Commissioner, Margot Wallström

underlined the role of public diplomacy in the EU's external relations and described communication as "one of the important tools for building and sustaining democracy." She also defended the EU's known preference for soft power and public diplomacy engagement on issues such as the environment, energy efficiency, development cooperation, free trade, democratization and human rights.¹¹

A newly launched Commission policy called "Eastern Partnership" makes full use of these tools with the aim of drawing the EU's Eastern neighbours—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus—even closer in the Union's orbit and sending a message of political solidarity. Described by Commission President Barroso as an extension of EU soft power to the East¹², the partnership represents an ambitious example of the EU's foreign policy approach of socializing, or "Europeanizing", its near-abroad by providing incentives for the broad and deep political, social and economic transformation of its neighbours to match EU norms and values. The policy, which has been seen by some as redrawing spheres of influence in Eastern Europe after the August war in Georgia¹³, provides a good case in point to examine the scope and possible applications of soft power and public diplomacy for the achievement of greater security and stability.

Several new initiatives have also been launched in the sphere of nation branding. "United Russia", currently the largest political party in the Russian Federation, has put forward a proposal to create a PR service that will 'brand' Russia to the West. The envisioned government communications agency would promote the Russian language as a communications and cultural tool for the preservation of a unified cultural space for Russian-speaking countries. New Russian cultural centers would also be launched worldwide to promote Russian classical literature, poetry, ballet and theater. Among the premier national brands, United Russia further listed former Russian President Vladimir Putin and current President Dimitry Medvedev as exemplary national symbols, followed by the football team Chelsea (which is owned by Russian oil magnate Roman Abramovich) and gas giant Gazprom.¹⁴ Other recent nation-branding initiatives include the appointment of a high-level delegation to develop a country brand for Finland and the establishment of South Korea's Presidential Council on Nation Branding.¹⁵

Cultural diplomacy

The impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on China's global image, has been much debated in public diplomacy spheres with competing interpretations of the extent of its beneficial consequences for China's standing in the world. Most recently, an assesment by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made headlines by praising the execution of the Olympics and acclaiming their positive impact on press freedom, the environment and public health in China.¹⁶ Despite the widely publicized suppression of domestic protest, media censorship or the contaminated milk scandal, IOC members justified their findings as reflecting a long-term social change trend that had been set in motion after China's exposure to global scrutiny during the Olympics. According to one national Olympic Committee CEO, the fact that Chinese authorities were forced to deal with controversial issues in the glare of media attention was, in itself, an influence for change. While cultural diplomacy events as the Olympics are usually seen as an outlet for national projection to the world, such an examination of their potential to open venues for change internally may help to enrich our understanding of the role of the Olympics

spectacle as a public diplomacy tool. [For further analysis see **Case Study: Beijing Olympics** on page 71]

Academic developments

Public diplomacy has further gained prominence in terms of academic development. In October, a comprehensive tome on public diplomacy featuring some of the preeminent scholars in the field was published by Routledge. Entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, the publication provides an extensive overview of public diplomacy, national image and perception management, from the efforts to foster pro-West sentiment during the Cold War to the post-9/11 campaign to “win the hearts and minds” of the Muslim world. The last few months have also seen the issue of several substantial reports and recommendations on public diplomacy by prominent American think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institution [The authors of these reports make recommendations to the new administration in **Memos to Obama** on page 12]. Added to the diversity of developments in the policy world, these events shape the growing and vibrant field of public diplomacy study and practice



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NOTES

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² Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillann, 2005.

³ Jillian York, “The Global Twittersphere Discusses Gaza,” *The Huffington Post*, December 29, 2008, Media Section, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jillian-york/the-global-twittersphere_b_153989.html (accessed January 22, 2009).

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⁴ Rachel Shabi, “Special spin body gets media on message, says Israel”, *The Guardian*, January 2, 2009, World News section, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/02/israel-palestine-pr-spin> (accessed January 22, 2009).

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⁶ Al Jazeera Press Release, “Al Jazeera Announces Launch of Free Footage under Creative Commons License” <http://>



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⁷ For a detailed outline of international broadcasters closures and restructuring see *Kim Andrew Elliott discussing International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy* <http://kimelli.nfshost.com/>

⁸ "Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century", The Brookings Institution, November 2008.

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⁹ Transcript Of Clinton's Confirmation Hearing, NPR, January 13, 2009, Nation, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99290981> (accessed January 22, 2009).

¹⁰ Interview with Robert Gates, Charlie Rose Daily Highlights, December 17, 2008

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¹² Reaching out to the East, President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/president/focus/eastern_partnership/index_en.htm (accessed January 22, 2009).

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¹⁶ The assessment is available upon request on the International Olympic Committee's website <http://www.olympic.org/>