

Media as Global Diplomat

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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

More than 250 influential media professionals, diplomats, policymakers, scholars, and NGO leaders gathered at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., on February 3, 2009, for the Ted Koppel–moderated “Media as Global Diplomat Leadership Summit” sponsored by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding and the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

Recognizing the current disruptive period in media, the summit asked public and private sector leaders how the United States can best use media to reinvigorate its public diplomacy strategy and international influence in order to strengthen efforts to build a more peaceful world. Streamed live on the Internet, the summit approached the topic in a global dialogue through interactive panels, videoconferencing, a documentary screening, and the participation of bloggers from around the world. This report summarizes the findings and recommendations of the summit for a new administration to reengage the world with a public diplomacy strategy adapted to the digital age.

This is a joint publication of USIP and ITVS (www.itvs.org)
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* With contributions by Christopher Neu

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*Sheldon Himelfarb, Tamara Gould, Eric Martin,
and Tara Sonenshine*

Media as Global Diplomat

Summary

- Over the last decade, America’s image abroad has declined, and public diplomacy is often cited as the reason for that decline. According to the BBC World Service Poll in 2008 and the University of Maryland’s Program for International Policy Attitudes, publics in twenty-three countries view America’s influence in the world more negatively than the influence of North Korea. Citizens in a NATO ally, Turkey, view the United States (64 percent) as the greatest threat to their country in the future.¹
- Digital media have fundamentally changed the way Americans learn about life overseas and how foreign audiences learn about America. According to the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, in 2008 the Web became a regular and even primary destination for most Americans. The number of Americans who said they got most of their national and international news online grew 67 percent in the last two years.²
- As citizens talk to each other throughout the world, public diplomacy needs to adapt to a multidirectional media model in which there is an exchange of views between Americans and overseas audiences that promotes a democratic, global conversation.
- A new U.S. administration that understands information technologies and the power of the Internet creates new opportunities to leverage that technology to improve America’s image abroad. The United States must catalyze public-private partnerships that invite foreign perspectives through interactive and social networking media.
- Public diplomacy in today’s media climate favors a decentralized approach that reflects the fragmentation of information and builds on local partnerships that go beyond U.S. governmental broadcasting to foreign audiences. Media companies, NGOs, and third-party news outlets can reach certain communities that the U.S. government media cannot.
- Citizen-to-citizen exchanges and citizen journalism allow for more access and participation in the “grand conversation” that takes place outside government channels. The United States needs to tap the potential of citizen media and citizen networks to enhance U.S. understanding of foreign cultures and overseas understanding of America.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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Introduction

It would be tempting to pronounce American public diplomacy dead in the 21st century. Where government once served as a powerful middleman for information and access, shaping prevailing messages about the United States, now the Internet connects two billion people directly. The result is a brave new world for multilateral international communication, with unprecedented power to connect and divide, spread truth and rumor, and organize dispersed individuals for good, evil, and everything in between. The American voices that influence foreign publics belong to singers and students, expats and citizens, not the cultural attachés and media specialists who once crafted the American brand abroad.

Yet even as the old models of public diplomacy collapse, the U.S. government must find new ways to participate effectively in the new chaotic conversation. It is a conversation that famously soured after 2002, as world opinion steadily turned against the United States but has had new life breathed into it by the election of Barack Obama and the enthusiasm of citizens, NGOs, and journalists around the world. This conversation not only increasingly determines how the world sees and treats Americans—as citizens, as individuals, as potential enemies or partners in any kind of endeavor, be it commerce, conflict, or conservation—but also determines how Americans see and treat the world.

In this era of communications and globalization, public diplomacy is far from dead, but today it truly belongs to the public. A single organizer like Colombia's Oscar Morales can mobilize two million people in forty cities worldwide through Facebook to protest against the actions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in a way that governments could not. The handheld footage of underground Burmese journalists connects the closed country to world audiences and its own. Companies such as MTV shape dialogue about sexuality and AIDS for African youth, NGOs such as One World deliver antiparasitic drugs to Indian villagers, and YouTube players such as Video Volunteers or iJustine connect the world with voices of the poor or global efforts on drinking water. Millions of bloggers in the United States and abroad debate the issues of the day in direct and indirect conversations in a communication cycle with speeds that outstrip any known previously.

Public diplomacy, then, is no longer simply a matter of state, but of any business, organization, or individual that connects with the world beyond U.S. borders. U.S. public media organizations such as the Independent Television Service have started working with independent media makers to promote an open, international exchange of perspectives. The United States Institute of Peace partners with media nonprofits such as Global Voices Online to engage bloggers around the world for audiences in seventeen languages. Even business consortiums such as the Discover America Partnership explore economic impact strategies for improving global perceptions to stimulate tourism. Despite different end goals, the model that consistently emerges is one of aggregation, proxies, and ground-up partnerships that draw on existing voices and resources to catalyze rather than control conversations that benefit the United States.

This report is based on a program conducted in early 2009 with leading thinkers and practitioners of public diplomacy from government, business, journalism, nonprofits, academia, and beyond. In the summarization lies a roadmap for understanding the governmental and nongovernmental challenges and opportunities regarding the following key questions:

- What is the role of the U.S. government in using media to shape America's image, inform citizens, and help manage conflicts abroad?
- What is the role of the free market and commercial media in promoting better international understanding, communications, and relations?

- What new ideas for working models exist for content or distribution strategies that effectively promote American public diplomacy interests?

Citizens from around the world joined the program via online media, providing further insight into the new trends and energy fueling today's public diplomacy.

Key Themes

Ted Koppel opened the program by raising doubts about the term "public diplomacy" and its capacity to define the untidy story of global communications and public opinion. "When the public gets involved in whatever fashion, it can be helpful, it can be damaging, but it is rarely diplomacy," he said. Koppel reminded the audience of how in 1991 BBC images of starving Somalis drove public demands for humanitarian intervention by the U.S. government. Popular sentiment swung the other way in the following months, as U.S. forces became involved in the internecine fighting in Somalia, resulting in the Black Hawk Down incident, which produced iconic images of a dead Ranger being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by an angry mob. As U.S. forces were withdrawn from Somalia, an indirect consequence of the global anti-interventionist sentiment was that nothing prevented the loss of 800,000 lives in Rwanda. And from a public diplomacy standpoint, America's image was tarnished.

The Decentralization of Information and Public Diplomacy

In the 1990s, with the advent of CNN and the proliferation of cable news outlets, traditional forms of information gathering and distribution such as newspapers and television networks were challenged by the arrival of 24-hour news cycles in the United States that became accessible to viewers around the world. Those traditional forms of information dissemination were further challenged by digital distribution, social networking, and user-generated content, which usurped the role of the "gatekeeper" and eroded the sense of top-down control of media. In short, the public became the gatekeepers. According to a Brookings report, "Voices of America," more than one billion people use the Internet. YouTube—a citizen-generated online content provider—offers more than 100 million videos per day. Globally, there are approximately 184 million bloggers posting opinions daily without any network or news editor control.

The panelists debated the role of these decentralized systems of information versus the more traditional role of U.S. government-funded media such as Voice of America; Alhurra, a U.S. government funded Middle East broadcasting service; and Radio Free Liberty/Radio Free Europe. Kathy Bushkin Calvin, executive vice president and chief operating officer of The United Nations Foundation, reflected on the competition the U.S. government faces in getting America's story out. "The notion that we [the U.S. government] have control over communications that change the rest of the world is an outdated concept." Bushkin and others argued that, because globalization and digital technology have a decentralized form of power and communications, much of what develops as news is generated at the community level. "The government can no longer be the sole player or even the dominant player it once was," said Calvin.

Ambassador Edward Djerejian, who has written widely about public diplomacy, discussed the problem that U.S. government-funded news outlets face in countries and regions where there is growing skepticism about America and anything generated by governments. "Traditional one-way strategies like Alhurra, the U.S.-government created Middle East media outlet, have a credibility problem" because of their association with unpopular U.S. policies, argued Djerejian. Abderrahim Foukara, the Washington, D.C., bureau chief for Al Jazeera International, underscored the point. "It's the policy, stupid...that forms the opinions other have of us."

"The Grand Conversation"

Panelists agreed that effective public diplomacy must create what former undersecretary of state for public diplomacy James Glassman called a "grand conversation" at the international level in which multiple stakeholders are exchanging ideas. "The essence of public diplomacy, is understanding, engaging, and influencing foreign publics, and the model of conversation is ultimately very good for us [America]," said Glassman. His view was supported by James Zogby, founder and president of the Arab American Institute, who argued that "even in the Middle East, where America faces an acute image problem, a conversation is possible." Zogby explained that people in the Middle East like America, "they just don't like our policies, which can sometimes be equated with what the U.S.-government media has to say. There's no need or use in trying to 'brand America'. It's already branded, through the values we export."

Within this grand conversation, panelists explained, there is still room for the U.S. government to give speeches and talk to other publics. "Words, as Homer said, do have wings," offered Foukara, noting that President Obama effectively uses rhetoric in speaking to other countries, particularly in the Muslim world. "He touches people in all sorts of unpredictable, yet positive ways," added Foukara. Yet the panelists agreed that the Internet means that individuals all around the world are having conversations amongst themselves that can erode not only the power of official messages but the power of traditional media itself.

Andrew McLaughlin, director of global public policy and government affairs at Google, spoke of the two-way conversation that the Internet provides. "The one-to-many model of traditional television is going down," McLaughlin explained. "The average 16-year-old with an off-the-shelf laptop has a staggering amount of power to create video, write text, and speak." Online communication is growing as more people have access to phone lines and wireless forms of communications. According to the International Telecommunications Union, fifty years ago, 3 percent of the world's population were telephone subscribers. Today the number is 68 percent.³ Mobile phones, which did not exist a half century ago, are common in many parts of the developing world today, including Afghanistan. The Internet has created virtually free distribution of content, resulting in what McLaughlin calls a "democratization" of information that cannot be controlled and makes a grand conversation not only possible but inevitable.

For public diplomacy to succeed, it must take into account this notion of a grand conversation, which, in essence, said the panel, is a conversation that relies upon participation, respect, and some form of equality. To approach this grand conversation, they argued, public diplomacy must be redefined from traditional conceptions of "explaining and conducting official outreach to countries and peoples abroad," said Djerejian, into "first, as listening and learning about other cultures and, then, beginning to inform, engage, and influence."

Glassman explained how the U.S. Department of State is utilizing social networks such as Facebook and the State Department Web site to interact with citizens abroad. "People don't want to be preached at," offered Zogby. "People don't want to sit there and listen to a megaphone." The advantage of the Internet, explained Glassman, is that, "as a democratic and chaotic and uncontrolled medium, it is really an American medium. It does define us. One of the reasons we [the U.S. government] use this tool now is because we are not the loudspeaker. The image of America as a place that brings people together to talk and debate and argue...that's a great image."

"Connectivity is good for the United States," argued McLaughlin of Google and should be a high priority in public diplomacy. Calvin stated that "when we listen, we empower the voices that tell the story of countries, values, and issues." Calvin believes that through the training of more local journalists in other countries, the United States

can engage them in telling their own stories and interacting with America, thereby creating effective public diplomacy that focuses on two-way flow of information.

Citizen-to-Citizen Communications and Public Diplomacy

As discussed earlier, the proliferation of Web sites, Internet access, and digital media has enabled ordinary citizens to play the role of producers rather than simply consumers of content. As Sally Jo Fifer, the president and CEO of Independent Television Service, noted, ten years ago independent and citizen media played a much smaller role in domestic and international affairs. Today, in the United States and around the world, independent citizens' voices are viewed as the most credible and compelling voices on the media landscape because they are considered genuine and free of government or institutional bias. Public diplomacy, in order to be viable, must tap into this citizen-to-citizen dialogue to bring these voices together. To this end, the State Department tapped into the ITVS Global Perspectives Project, an exchange program of independently produced, award-winning documentaries by American and international filmmakers supported by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The State Department is also experimenting with Twitter and other forms of social networking to open up the process so that communications can flow to foreign audiences in ways they use.

The Case of Oscar Morales

The power of citizen-to-citizen communications is evident in the story of Colombian Oscar Morales, an engineer, who mobilized people via the Internet to protest the actions of FARC, an insurgent group in Colombia. Through Facebook, a citizen-driven, interactive Web site, Morales used Internet activism to galvanize two million people in forty cities worldwide to protest against the actions of FARC in a way that public diplomacy, in the traditional form of government-funded broadcasting, could not. Morales spoke via satellite at the program about the power of the Internet. Bloggers from around the world were able to hear Morales and to participate in the program through Global Voices, an international blog aggregator site for citizen journalists.

Of course, communications is a double-edged sword. The Internet and Facebook-type social networking sites can be used to open dialogue, activate citizens, reconstruct relationships in a positive way—or harness negative energy such as using the Web to recruit terrorists, spread propaganda, undermine public confidence, and even to coordinate terrorist operations. A recent United States Institute of Peace publication, *Terror on the Internet* by former senior fellow Gabriel Weimann, examined how the same technology that can create moderate voices can also incite undemocratic values and behavior.⁴ In the end, it is not the technology, but those who use the technology who participate in the information revolution.

Public-Private Partnerships and the Economics of Public Diplomacy

Free market/commercial media play an important role in the export of images and ideas from America to the rest of the world, but their role in public diplomacy has received less attention than the role of government-funded media. Edward Borgerding, chief executive officer of Abu Dhabi Media Company, spoke about the importance of bringing stories from the Arab and Muslim world to American audiences to bridge cultural understanding. "The Internet and digital media have created a fundamental shift in the market, casting into doubt existing business models for content and creating a period of uncertainty about what the new models will be," said Borgerding. Changes in advertising on traditional media, and now Internet media, are creating confusion and



dislocation in terms of revenues that support content generators. “The days of network news and news magazines turning a profit are largely behind us,” argued Koppel. “And there are more cutbacks in foreign bureaus and international coverage.” That means that Americans know less about the rest of the world, which can create disinterest or misunderstanding—making the job of public diplomacy harder. Borgerding explained how decentralization of media is tied to the narrow targeting of individual groups for advertising dollars—an obsessive focus on products that target the 18–35 age group. “In this paradigm, content faces more commercial pressures than ever before to produce measurable results—pressure that does not necessarily promote content that serves the interests of public diplomacy,” said Borgerding.

Carol Giacomo of *The New York Times* conceded that financial pressures on the news industry can affect how content reaches audiences. The newspaper continues to produce robust international coverage, but it is not clear how future financial models will evolve given the advertising pressures and the power of the Internet, where content is still largely available for free. Borgerding explained how, in places like the Middle East, the challenge of financing news is even more acute. “The television advertising market earns 25 cents on the dollar compared to the U.S. market, and all the hundreds of free-to-air satellite channels lose money. As ‘advertising 4.0’ comes of age and more dollars move online, there may be new opportunities for niche content that both serves public diplomacy and is commercially viable. At the same time, commercial-public partnerships that improve the image of the United States brand may be particularly effective at the street and community level,” said Borgerding.



The Public Good

In a commercially competitive media age, observers of digital media are concerned about whether news and content providers are willing to offer content that serves the “public good.” Mika Salmi, president of global digital media for MTV Networks, addressed the issue of positive social programming. There are opportunities, said Salmi, citing MTV’s role in raising awareness about AIDS in the United States, Africa, and around the world to promote a positive image of America abroad, even while building profitable global business platforms. Sydney Suissa, executive vice president of content for National Geographic Channels International, explained the company’s editorial interest in environmentalism, which has resonance in both the commercial and public spheres. “One of the strongest voices in the world of television is public television,” said Suissa. “Even in the commercial media, it is important to have public broadcasting as a counterbalancing power between the public system and the private system.” Smita Singh, director of the global development program at The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, added that the balance is between government funding and private funding. “There are things the government can fund—at arm’s length.” Foundations can catalyze content to create partnerships between the public and private sectors.

Independent film is a good example of the power of public and private partnerships. ITVS’s Global Perspective Project brings international documentaries made by independent filmmakers to U.S. public television, cable, and online audiences and also gets documentaries by U.S. independent filmmakers to national television audiences in places such as Bahrain, Malawi, Peru, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Afghanistan, and Indonesia. Films enable citizens to grapple with difficult cross-cultural issues in ways that traditional public diplomacy cannot, explained Tamara Gould, vice president of distribution for ITVS. “From a public diplomacy standpoint, these artistic storytellers have incredible value and credibility and a deep commitment to their stories and communities” that registers with audiences. “With support from foundations and through partnerships, ITVS has brought eighty-two international documentaries to America from sixty-two countries, half of which have already been broadcast and seen by fifty million viewers.” Gould offered this as an example of how a relatively modest investment of



a few million dollars per year could be leveraged into a project with major impact on helping Americans better understand the world. “Strategic investment has the power to build the marketplace of these films.” In the international marketplace of ideas, American independent media makers become valuable, unofficial ambassadors with documentaries that tell personal, diverse, and complex stories about the United States, and foreign filmmakers can make difficult stories about complex situations come to life.

During the daylong program, the audience watched the film, *Waltz with Bashir*, an animated documentary about the role of Israelis in the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in Beirut, Lebanon.⁵ The Sony Pictures Classic film was supported by the ITVS Global Perspectives Project. Calvin Sims, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, which provided funding for the film, explained the power of film to contextualize situations and create understanding in ways that resonate with viewers, reflecting again on the two-way street.

Yvette Alberdingk Thijm, executive director of a project called Witness, focused on how films can change behavior and policy in ways that governments sometimes cannot. “What is important is not necessarily wide distribution but that these kinds of films get seen by the kinds of people who can actually make a difference, such as a film about war crimes that is shown to the International Criminal Court.” Thijm’s point relates back to the role of the citizens who produce films and the citizens who watch them and how those decentralized models can create change. Witness enables citizens to produce videos about human rights abuses. This project creates a catalyst for interest and action in ways that traditional one-way public diplomacy cannot. The challenge for initiatives such as the Global Perspectives Project, Witness, and others is the lack of a systematic approach to capitalize on what independent producers and citizens can bring to the work of public diplomacy. While the State Department provides some start-up funding for these kinds of projects, the need for an articulated strategy that helps turn private citizens into public diplomacy assets still exists.



Conclusions

Based on the day’s panels, the conference conveners recommended five strategies that should be included in any new public diplomacy efforts that the Obama administration may consider:

1. **Promote credible voices over perceived propaganda.** The United States must enlist commercial and independent content providers to bring their own credible and diverse perspectives on America to increasingly sophisticated and skeptical audiences. The summit recommends designated funding for third-party content that serves the interests of public diplomacy.
2. **Increase investment in educating the American public about international affairs.** Cutbacks in American news coverage of international affairs undermine the vital need for a well-informed citizenry. The summit recommends U.S. funding to seed public-private partnerships that bring foreign perspectives and greater coverage of international affairs to American audiences.
3. **Recognize the value of local partners over official outlets.** The full-service studio/station model of official broadcasting needs to be reevaluated in strategic parts of the world. The summit recommends pursuing local partnerships with existing media companies, channels, and brands to bring credible public diplomacy media to their hard-to-reach audiences.
4. **Adapt to the new media landscape and enlist citizens in creating and disseminating content.** The summit recommends that the U.S. government invest in Internet media strategies that tap the public diplomacy potential of citizen-to-citizen connections.



5. **Create a two-way public diplomacy media strategy.** Better strategies for listening are an essential part of better international communication. The summit recommends that the U.S. government help international media makers reach domestic audiences to ensure that America is listening—and worth listening to.

Findings

- Expand public-private partnerships that use independent and citizen media to tell America's story abroad and bring the world's stories to America.
- Invest in new media infrastructure and online spaces that increase connectivity and support international exchange and interaction.
- Favor third-party partnerships with international partners, both public and private, over centralized efforts generated and executed from Washington.
- Pursue targeted efforts to influence the U.S. distribution marketplace for content that promotes public diplomacy while enlisting private sector U.S. companies in joint public diplomacy efforts abroad.

Appendix A: List of Participants

Hosts: Sally Jo Fifer (President and CEO, ITVS) and Richard Solomon (President, USIP)

Moderators: Sheldon Himelfarb (USIP Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding), Ted Koppel (Broadcast Journalist)

Panel 1: "Public Diplomacy 2.0: Rethinking Official Media"

Kathy Bushkin Calvin, Executive Vice President and COO, The United Nations Foundation

Edward Djerejian, Founding Director, the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy

Abderrahim Foukara, Washington, D.C., Bureau Chief, Al Jazeera International

James Glassman, former Under Secretary of State Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

Andrew McLaughlin, Director of Global Public Policy and Government Affairs, Google

James Zogby, Founder and President, Arab American Institute

Panel 2: "The Global Media Marketplace"

Edward Borgerding, Chief Executive Officer, Abu Dhabi Media Company

Carol Giacomo, Editorial Board Member, The New York Times

Mika Salmi, President of Global Digital Media, MTV Networks

Smita Singh, Director, Global Development Program, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Sydney Suissa, Executive Vice President of Content, National Geographic Channels International

Panel 3: "Independent Documentary and Participatory Media"

Tamara Gould, Vice President of Distribution, Independent Television Service

Calvin Sims, Program Officer, Media Arts & Culture, Ford Foundation

Yvette Alberdingk Thijm, Executive Director, Witness

Bloggers and Online Participants:

Rebecca MacKinnon, co-founder, Global Voices Online

Oscar Morales (through video Skype), founder, One Million Voices Against the FARC

Ivan Sigal, Executive Director, Global Voices Online

Joel Whitaker, Senior Adviser, USIP Center of Innovation for Science, Technology and Peacebuilding

Notes

1. "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 22, 2006. Available online at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>.
2. "Internet Overtakes Newspapers as News Outlet," Pew Center for the People & the Press, December 23, 2008, as cited in "The State of the News Media (2009)," Available online at http://www.stateofthenews-media.com/2009/narrative_online_audience.php?cat=2&media=5#.
3. For more information, see International Telecommunication Union Web site at <http://www.itu.int/net/home/index.aspx>.
4. Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 2006).
5. *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), directed by Ari Folman. Running time: 87 minutes.

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

Of Related Interest

- *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan*, by Roy Gutman (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008).
- *Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story*, by Yll Bajraktari and Christina Parajon (Special Report, July 2008)
- *Developing Media in Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations* by Yll Bajraktari and Emily Hsu (Special Report, October 2007).
- *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* by Gabriel Weimann (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).
- *Arab Media: Tools of the Governments; Tools for the People?* (Virtual Diplomacy Series, July 2005)
- *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations* by Warren P. Strobel (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997)



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