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Author(s): Ron Robin

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## Requiem for Public Diplomacy?

*Ron Robin*

In the mid-1960s at the height of an unpopular war permeated by unprecedented levels of global anti-Americanism, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee called for the termination of one of the country's most ambitious enterprises of public diplomacy. Enraged by the tidal wave of resentment sweeping through Europe, Congressman L. Mendel Rivers called for the dismantling of American war cemeteries in France and the repatriation of the sixty thousand bodies of those who had sacrificed their "lives to save that nation from disgraceful defeat."<sup>1</sup> Built in the aftermath of two world wars, American military cemeteries on foreign soil were quintessential, if somewhat macabre, manifestations of public diplomacy. In many ways, these vast cities of the dead ensconced the promise and limitations of this much-touted strategy to promote national ambitions by circumventing traditional diplomatic channels and appealing directly to the proverbial "people."

This quest for an unmediated dialogue with the people of Europe by means of the cemeteries was ensnared by a set of familiar issues. To begin with, prospective audiences ignored, reinterpreted, and subverted the intent of the plan's architects. In Europe of the 1960s, a critical public interpreted these signs of American commitment to the Western cause as self-absorbed; they evoked resentment rather than empathy. Given the context of the time, the sprawling necropoli were dismissed as megalomaniac and intrusive. Their sheer size, not to mention the very decision to permanently inter American remains on foreign soil, projected American imperialism rather than altruism. The iconographic elements of these sites were, as well, heavy-handed to the point of inscrutability. Created by joint government-private ventures, the cemeteries were pastiches of classical motifs and indecipherable modernism. Their architecture and art were derisive mixed metaphors, a quilt of catchy symbols and ponderous missives.

The disappointing response to this crowning project of public diplomacy—ranging from the ambivalent to the hostile—suggested that the master strategy for an unmediated engaging of domestic audiences had failed to foster the

type of understanding of American goals that its underwriters had expected. To his credit, Congressmen Rivers understood that failure had little to do with the project itself. The cemeteries were unpersuasive because of the political context of the time. Public diplomacy could not function in a hostile political climate, in which the deeds and values of the United States were rampantly unpopular.

When juxtaposed with discontents over the resonance and effectiveness of contemporary public diplomacy, the cemetery controversy appears strikingly familiar. Kennedy and Lucas survey a plethora of familiar frustrations concerning the inability to sell a wary world a product with very limited appeal. The supersized projects of present-day public diplomacy elicit disappointment, borne out of an unwillingness of the Beltway-Madison Avenue complex to acknowledge the limitations of advertising strategies in a hostile political climate.

Of course, not all of the discontents of contemporary public diplomacy are repeat performances. Kennedy and Lucas identify several compelling problems and issues directly related to recent cultural, political, and social developments. In the limited space I have at my disposal, I shall comment on two contemporary caveats—technical and epistemological—and their detrimental effect on latter-day public diplomacy. My comments are born out of an uncertainty as to the fate of public diplomacy and the appropriate tools for analyzing this enterprise. I am unsure whether we should be performing an autopsy, in which the methodological tools of historical inquiry appear most appropriate, or whether the occasional twinge and spasm suggest vital signs worthy of a broader cultural analysis.

To clarify the present status of public diplomacy, I offer my understanding of Kennedy and Lucas's analysis of the inherent tension between public diplomacy's cold war paradigms and the waning resonance of the nation-state. The challenges of nonstatist entities and the heteropolarization of the global arena, they suggest, pose insurmountable obstacles for a mechanism born and bred in the cold war. Public diplomacy is ill-prepared for the transition from a binary arena of international relations to contemporary chaotic environs.

Another major epistemological obstacle confronting latter-day public diplomacy is derived from technological innovation. Here I shall comment on the cultural significance of the blurring of borders separating audience and producer in cyberspace, and the attendant ramifications of multiple sources of information, by cyberspace, satellite TV, and other means of diffusion. The cumbersome and mostly ineffectual implementation of these tools for the construction of an international, American-dominated and global "imagined com-

munity” are indicative of the limitations of public diplomacy, perhaps even a sign of intellectual overreach among its movers and shakers.

My thoughts on both these issues are derived from two important documents: the report of the Defense Science Board on “strategic communication,” and the Aspen Institute report on the “rise of netpolitik.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, contrary to these documents, I see no redeeming quality in the elaborate recommendations for administrative and conceptual reform. I am, of course, wary of the folly of gazing into the future; historians should probably stick to predicting the past. Nevertheless, my prognosis suggests the presence of terminal problems rather than temporary ailments to be solved by vigorous measures. It is with these thoughts in mind that I shall address Kennedy and Lucas’s interrogation of American studies as the ultimate tool for coming to terms with the meaning and significance of public diplomacy.

### **The Iron Curtain Syndrome**

By all accounts, contemporary public diplomacy appears trapped in a time warp. Its architects are creatures of cold war triumphalism. Having achieved their moment in the sun with the collapse of the Soviet Union, they are captives of the strategies born out of this conflict. Self-satisfaction and an attendant unwillingness to acknowledge changing global circumstances have eclipsed any compelling reason to revise paradigms in accordance with new circumstances. Driven by a cold war mentality, advocates of public diplomacy continue to think in terms of a battle between statist actors and binary oppositions, while ignoring the reality of global networks, multiple identity politics, and internal religious schisms driving unrest throughout its major target group, the Muslim world.

The waging of a war of words and images against a coherent and singular totalitarian nemesis—perhaps the most dominant paradigm of the cold war public diplomacy—is alive and well. The war on terrorism has replaced communism as the clear and present danger. An axis of evil provides the necessary geographical target in lieu of the Soviet empire, while a changing parade of arch-villains fulfill the role of totalitarian predecessors. To paraphrase Søren Kierkegaard, the country’s public diplomacy establishment may indeed desire to live forward, but appears condemned to thinking backward.

Foreign policy in general, and public diplomacy in particular, are also ensnared by what Edward Tenner has called “the monster metaphor,” the impulse to assign to one diabolic person or entity the source of all evil, with Stalin and world communism being replaced by Osama Bin Laden and the

amorphous Al Qaeda. The monster metaphor impedes a clarification of root causes of complex global issues. Its adherents facily personalize fundamental ideological clashes, thereby precluding a meaningful fulfillment of the ultimate goal of public diplomacy: engaging in a battle of ideas rather than chasing phantom enemies. A paradigmatic shift is difficult because, as Tenner reminds us, “monsters are notoriously resilient, as viewers of horror film sequels will attest.” Removing the specter of the political equivalent of a Frankenstein monster “is like the famous psychological experiment of not thinking about a white bear for 10 minutes. Only other vivid images can displace the unwanted one.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Stalin is replaced by Osama Bin Laden, his partner-in-crime Saddam Hussein, or any other variation.

Critics agree that the metanarrative of terrorism—a continuation of the cold war logic of single-causation—marginalizes, if not effaces, significant issues and opportunities, such as “Islam’s internal and external struggle over values, identity, and change.” The Islamic world’s “cacophony of competing and crosscutting groups, sub-cultures, and whole societies” is glossed over, the net result being allowing “a man in a cave [to] out-communicate the world’s leading communications society.”<sup>4</sup>

Wedded to an analog vision of cold war bipolarization, the texts of public diplomacy ignore the digital diffusion of authority. The dismemberment of national narratives—the result of what Paul Bové has described as the “transformation from territory-based power to network-based power”—has yet to affect U.S. information management. The fact that the bipolarity of the cold war has not been transformed into a unipolarity of a hegemonic America, but rather into “the advent of heteropolarity” characterized by “the emergence of actors that are a different kind . . . connected nodally rather than contiguously” still eludes public diplomacy.<sup>5</sup>

The contingent implosion of ideological and religious rifts, compared to the comfortable communist-capitalist divide, offers an additional obstacle for a coherent campaign of public diplomacy. A plethora of narratives, identities, alliances, and schisms permeate Islamic society, all of them the result of crumbling borders, political, cultural, and social. Yet, by most accounts, public diplomacy in the target Middle Eastern arena is still wedded to the cold war “concept of ‘huddled masses yearning to be free.’” According to the Department of Defense’s own investigations, public diplomacy reflexively compares “Muslim ‘masses’ to those oppressed under Soviet rule. This is a strategic mistake. There is no yearning-to-be-liberated-by-the-U.S. groundswell among Muslim societies—*except to be liberated perhaps from what they see as apostate tyrannies that the U.S. so determinedly promotes and defends.*”<sup>6</sup>

## From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting

The power of cold war paradigms affects as well both the content and strategy for communicating ideas. Guided by an understanding of how, in a previous era, the printed media had provided the glue for the national imagined community, advocates of public diplomacy envision that a skillful use of electronic and digital media will forge a transnational “imagined community of the free world.”<sup>7</sup> Television, radio, and finally the Internet will lead to a free flow of ideas, and the ultimate triumph of modernization, American style. However, these visionary theories have not been able to remove themselves from the procrustean bed of a previous conflict and its irrelevant insights.

American public diplomacy still adheres to a defunct theory of information paucity. The principal strategy of cold war public diplomacy was the inundation of target populations with information, mostly because their adversaries restricted public access to media beyond carefully monitored official channels. “Fifty years ago,” observes Joseph Nye, “political struggles were about the ability to control and transmit scarce information.” Such strategies have little bearing in a media age dominated by “the paradox of plenty” in which “a plentitude of information leads to a poverty of attention.”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of such marked communication developments has not made its mark on the public diplomatic mechanism, which is still wedded to Voice of America/Radio Free Europe clones seeking to funnel information to an information-hungry public. U.S. public diplomacy appears unwilling to acknowledge the shift in information culture and the fact that, unlike the cold war enemy, contemporary adversaries depend and thrive on open channels rather than censorship.

By all accounts, the mechanism of public diplomacy appears oblivious to the fact that media-savvy opinion leaders within public diplomacy’s main target area have fostered two seemingly incompatible trends. On the one hand, personalized media has encouraged a Muslim version of balkanized identity politics that challenges the cosmic construct of Arabness and the Muslim Ummah. “The Internet and television have not homogenized the world’s cultures into a unitary culture”; instead, the Aspen report notes, “the emerging global network is an instrument used by subnational communities to advance their own geopolitical interests,” even as other transnational forces seek to impose conflicting constructions of identity.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, popular satellite networks, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya allow “Arabs in the region and in Arab diasporas throughout the world” to see and “read the same information” with significant consequences for cre-

ating a pan-Arab imagined community.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Lina Khatib argues, Islamic fundamentalists employ the Internet as a “portable homeland,” an “enabling tool through which Islamic fundamentalists” create potent, globe-spanning, imagined communities that counterpoise American globalism with an alternative global force.<sup>11</sup>

This diffusion of identity, on the one hand, and the creation of globe spanning imagined communities, on the other, has had no obvious affect on the broadcasting strategies of public diplomacy. Very much attuned to beaming messages to coherent, geographically stable entities, cold war broadcasting strategies still rule the roost, with most attention being paid to regional duplications of the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, such as the Middle Eastern Radio Sawa and the TV broadcast Al Hurra. An archaic concept of broadcasting lingers on despite the implosion of information, on the one hand, and the rise of narrowcasting, in which Muslim media consumers bypass obsolete tools of persuasion.

Built as a bypass to the people, public diplomacy is itself the victim of personalized technologies that allow hastily constructed but powerful networks to evade traditional sources of information control. Public diplomacy, as an intermediary for alternative sources of information, appears trapped in the headlights of bipolarism and irrelevant grand narratives that no longer appeal to digitally mediated, grassroots network structures jostling for attention in the borderlands of rapid communication and instant imaging. Public diplomacy appears to be incurably ignorant of the surge of cross-cultural information jet streams affecting the climate of public opinion “beyond conventional political governance and jurisdictions.” The cumbersome mechanism of public diplomacy lacks, as well, the speed and the ability to converge disparate media formats. “The speed with which information becomes available to the global audience, the convergence of means . . . (visual, audio, print, etc) in a single digital format, and the ability to get that information to a global audience” are indicative of the issues confronting a digitally challenged public diplomacy. “Often the first information to reach an audience (a global audience that is really a galaxy of niche audiences) frames how an event is perceived and discussed—and thus can shape its ultimate impact as well.” An image captured and relayed to millions by a nimble blogger is the type of “startling development” that a cumbersome public diplomacy has yet to comprehend.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, one of the most obsolete functions of public diplomacy is the emphasis on the message rather than the medium. As noted by participants in the netpolitik conference, “new technologies do not just change how we communicate. They change some of the ways in which we construct personal identi-

ties, consciousness, and culture” while altering “some of the processes by which we create and interpret meaning.” The implementation of a novel technology or mode of dissemination is at times more significant than the content of its messages. Irrespective of content, technologies constantly re-create and unsettle concepts of role, identity, and community.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Tracing the fortunes of public diplomacy, even in the best of times, has always cast a shadow of doubt over the value of this aspect of international relations. Reservations concerning its efficacy at any given time and place are usually allayed by metaphors of looplike processes of “reinvention, reorganization, and retreat.” However, such implicit metaphors of regeneration used to describe vacillations in this prominent aspect of American soft power are unpersuasive. There is little disagreement that public diplomacy in present-day America fails spectacularly in its attempt to capture the radical departure from the past. Yet contrary to its apologists, I would argue that the conceptual blindness of public diplomacy appears more terminal than temporary. No grand paradigmatic shift in public diplomacy, no amount of theoretically sophisticated implementation of soft power, no bold technological innovation will assure regeneration. Neither public diplomacy nor any other facet of soft power can overcome the fallout from the present-day use of hard power. By Kennedy and Lucas’s own account, the presence of a “global information sphere that can swiftly expose and interrogate contradictions of declared values and apparent policies and actions” undermines the illusion of “reconciling interests and ideals.”

Kennedy and Lucas’s article is, in fact, permeated by the uneasy feeling of flogging a dead horse. Yet, at the same time, they resist closure, earnestly pleading the case of the cross-disciplinary enterprise of American studies as a particularly appropriate podium for revealing a wealth of theoretical insight into the machinations of empire. It is here that I part company with their approach. I fear that Kennedy and Lucas are trying to have it both ways: they appear critical of heavy-handed attempts to consolidate an American hegemony by means of public diplomacy, while at the same time casting doubt on the efficacy of this dubious tool. They offer critical comments on the role of public diplomacy in contemporary global affairs, yet, in the same breath, they studiously avoid an engagement of its effects and reception. They hint at the eclipse of the nation-state as an epistemological framework, but appear unable to reject entirely the still-resilient statist paradigm.



Kennedy and Lucas's existential quandary reflects a persistent and uncomfortable dilemma within American studies in general. Despite tenacious institutionalized attempts to despatialize American studies, its practitioners are unable to reject a coherent geographical and cultural understanding of the United States as "the animating idea of American Studies."<sup>14</sup> To be sure, most of us would have little trouble agreeing with Thomas Peyser that the American imperial enterprise is not a linear incorporation of the multipolar other into the American "same." After all, the course of empire never leaves the "Same the same either."<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite a perfunctionary acceptance of this self-evident truth, mainstream practitioners of American studies are reluctant to deprive American society and culture by submerging this enterprise within a cacophonous heteropolar world.

A critical American studies, Janice Radway pleaded in her 1998 ASA Presidential Address, should seek to "complicate and fracture the very idea of an American nation, culture, and subject."<sup>16</sup> For most practitioners of American studies, life is somewhat more complicated. As Kennedy and Lucas demonstrate, we may, at a certain intellectual level, accept such remonstrations, but at the same time we find it hard to relinquish an embrace of the centrality of the American nation-state, be it imagined or otherwise.

#### Notes

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9. *Netpolitik*, 25.

10. *Strategic Communication*, 18.
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16. Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 20, 1998," *American Quarterly* 51.1 (1999): 17.