



Towards a theory of influence for twenty-first century foreign policy: public diplomacy in a globalised world

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Introduction

Look at today's biggest global issues – climate change, pandemics, energy security, terrorism and other 'shadow sides' of globalization – and it's striking that the challenges governments find it hardest to deal with are highly diffuse, involving the actions and beliefs of millions (if not billions) of people.¹

Take climate change. The difference between success and failure in this case is about the spending, investment and behavioural decisions made by countless businesses and individuals. Consider HIV/AIDS, where the long-term outlook depends on how successful states are at influencing the most personal issue imaginable: their citizens' sexual behaviour. Or think of the challenge of good governance in developing countries, where it is the nature of the political culture – as much as organizations and laws – that makes the difference.

As issues have become increasingly distributed, the way governments work is having to change too.² Diplomats are breaking out of a comfort zone within which they have focused much of their energy on talking to their peers. Soldiers are confronting the limitations of force as 'war amongst the people' overtakes the old paradigm of interstate conflict.³ Development specialists are facing the fact that, in fragile states, development cannot simply be 'bought' through large transfers of resources.⁴ In all three fields, there is a renewed focus on culture; on the power of ideas and values; and on the complex relationship between hierarchical organizations and informal networks.

But there are still hard questions for governments to consider about their role in a globalized world. What influence do they have? How can they best exert it? How do countries integrate all aspects of their hard and soft power? And how can they animate loose coalitions of state and non-state actors in pursuit of a common goal? It is these questions that lie at the heart of today's public diplomacy.

Three types of public diplomacy challenge

In thinking about these questions, we need to understand the nature of the global issues that now dominate the international agenda. Three can be used to illustrate the breadth of the challenge: first, the threat posed by Al-Qaeda, its affiliates – and in the future, no doubt, its successors; second, the need for effective states in developing countries; and third, the unprecedented risk posed by climate change.

These are different classes of problem. Al-Qaeda's global jihad represents a targeted attempt to undermine, and ultimately replace, the institutions at the heart of the current world order. The intended direction of change, from the perspective of the UK, is *inbound*.

Poor governance in developing countries can drag them into chaos – in a worst-case scenario, exporting disorder to neighbours and beyond. Outside intervention aims to help these countries escape from their development traps, and is motivated by

enlightened self-interest. Here, the desired direction of change (again from the point of view of the UK) is *outbound*.

A stable climate is a global public good. Although some parts of the world (mostly the poorer ones) will suffer disproportionately as climatic conditions become more hostile, the bottom line is a simple choice: everyone enjoys the fruits of a stable climate, or no one does. Thus change needs to flow in *all directions*, both across states and within them.

Taken together, then, this triad is a representative sample of the type of problem a new agenda for influence will need to tackle. So what can they tell us about the new public diplomacy?

Terrorism as public diplomacy

Let us start with terrorism. Modern terror movements are designed to probe societies to find and exploit their physical and psychological weaknesses. They use powerful ideologies and narratives to motivate their supporters to act. Under pressure, they adopt decentralized organizational structures and seek to develop alternative sources of authority. And they are innovative communicators, weaving together the propaganda of word and deed, and exploiting the potential of new communication channels. Perhaps most importantly, they rely on provoking their host societies into an adverse response. The state is expected to carry most of the burden of undermining its own legitimacy.⁵

The Islamist terrorist movement, with Al-Qaeda as its vanguard, has learned these lessons well. Al-Qaeda's aim is to become what David Kilcullen calls 'a holding company and clearing house for world revolution'.⁶ In his 1994 declaration of jihad, Osama bin Laden attempted to yoke a series of local grievances into a single narrative of oppression. Muslims are confronted by a Judeo-Christian alliance that believes their 'blood is the cheapest and that their property and wealth is merely loot'.⁷ Al-Qaeda, which has steadily degraded from a centralized organization to an amorphous network, has set out a simple strategy.⁸ Entangle 'the ponderous American elephant' in conflict overseas, thus radicalizing potential recruits, and creating a cycle of violence that aims to 'make America bleed to the point of bankruptcy'.⁹ Mischievously, bin Laden quotes an unnamed British diplomat speaking at Chatham House to support his assertion that 'it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team shooting at the United States' own goal'.¹⁰

Bin Laden is the quintessential public diplomat, not least in how he speaks *past* governments. In an address to the 'peoples of Europe' after the 2004 Spanish election (when José María Aznar was defeated in the wake of the Madrid bombing), he said:

In response to the positive initiatives that have been reflected in recent events and opinion polls showing that most people in Europe want peace, I call upon just men, especially scholars, media, and businessmen, to form a permanent commission to raise awareness among Europeans of the justice of our causes, especially Palestine, making full use of the enormous potential of the media.¹¹

Al-Qaeda's message is also segmented. Violent imagery plays an important role in radicalizing potential supporters ('the youth'), with the internet providing new avenues for the peer-to-peer distribution of unmediated communications.¹² Traditional sources of authority within Muslim societies are undermined, dismissed as 'scholars of evil, corrupt court ministers, writers-for-hire and the like'.¹³ The message to non-Muslims is a simple, if uncompromising, one: 'the road to safety begins with the cessation of hostilities'. Citizens of western countries must prevail on their governments to accede to Al-Qaeda's demands if they are ever to see peace.

In Al-Qaeda, we see an example of a minority that is trying to universalize its world-view. Promotion is therefore critical. Its communications are carefully polished, branded and presented, with even the Taleban – once careless of its image – sending members to Iraq for training in modern communications techniques from Al-Sahab, Al-Qaeda's video production arm.¹⁴ More importantly, its actions are themselves crafted to achieve influence. As David Kilcullen warns: 'Beware the "scripted enemy", who plays to a global audience and seeks to defeat you in the court of global public opinion'.¹⁵

Development as public diplomacy

Second, let us consider the need for better governance in many developing countries. On the one hand, 'developmental states' are a cornerstone of success in poverty reduction – as numerous Asian countries have demonstrated. On the other, when fragile states implode, the resulting vacuum threatens not only their own citizens, but neighbouring states too – as well as providing a haven for organized crime or terrorism, and an engine of unmanaged migration. As Robert Cooper puts it, 'We may not be interested in chaos, but chaos is interested in us'.¹⁶

But if effective states are the desired destination, we lack a clear road map that shows how to get there – as demonstrated by the intensity of recent debates over post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq and by the violence and civil unrest in Kenya at the start of 2008.¹⁷ Governance work supported by European donors tends to be relatively technical, focused on the executive branch of government, and geared towards areas like public service reform or budgetary processes. Anything overtly political is often seen as too risky to get drawn into. The United States, meanwhile, has developed a discourse of 'transformational diplomacy', but has yet to flesh out exactly what this approach means in practice.

What *is* clear is that the challenge of promoting effective states is very much about influence – and only partly about disbursing money. Indeed, given the risk that aid spending can prop up entrenched systems of corruption and patronage (as was clearly the case in Kenya), it could be argued that it is easier for money to affect governance for the worse unless aid donors have the right mechanisms in place to ‘first do no harm’.

What might a more sophisticated theory of influence conducive to good governance in developing countries look like? What international actors seeking to influence governance in fragile states need is twofold: first, a clear account of how much influence they *can* wield; and second, clear limits on how much influence they *should* try to wield.

Assessments of the former need to start from a realistic sense of the limits to how much influence external players can hope to have on states in which they are guests. Tip O’Neill famously observed that ‘all politics is local’, and this applies in developing countries as much as anywhere else.¹⁸ At best, international actors can exert influence at the margins, and usually only when they are prepared to act in concert. Only very rarely will they be able to effect a U-turn in a country’s fortunes – and when they can, it can as easily be a change for the worse as for the better.

On the latter point, international actors need a clearer story about sovereignty, and what they will and won’t do. Where outside countries are considered to be meddling in internal affairs, they risk strong push-back. In these cases – and there are many of them – *unintended* public diplomacy undercuts official policy goals. The experience of the United States in Pakistan, where America has haemorrhaged legitimacy, is a good example: less than one in ten Pakistanis now believe the country should cooperate with the United States in the war on terror, down from nearly half just 18 months ago.¹⁹

As with terrorism, the key need here is for international actors to begin by understanding the context in which they are operating: who has influence, which ideas and narratives have traction, and what sort of leverage they can hope to exert.

Climate mitigation as public diplomacy

Climate change poses even greater dangers to our collective security than fragile states. Faced with a problem of such unprecedented scale and difficulty, it is remarkable that the world has come so far in developing a collective understanding of the issues. That it has is testament to the effectiveness of some powerful examples of non-traditional diplomacy.

Take the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a mechanism for institutionalizing the part played in the climate debate by a non-governmental community – climate scientists. It has played a crucial role in creating a deliberative platform for international engagement with the issue. The Stern Review on the

economics of climate change, in turn, has helped bring together the economic and environmental narratives, shaping a debate about the respective costs of action and inaction. Together with Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, it helped create the political space for the international community to begin negotiations on a new post-Kyoto climate deal.

At the same time, considerable effort has been devoted to disrupting an emerging consensus against urgent action, which hardened in the United States in the wake of President Bush's repudiation of Kyoto. New players were brought into the debate, with a particular focus on energizing faith, scientific and business communities, and directing attention towards political structures at state and city level. The climate 'agreement' struck between the UK and the State of California epitomized this work, with Tony Blair and Arnold Schwarzenegger posing for the cameras as a group of senior business leaders looked on.

In the wake of the Bali climate summit, we have reached a critical point. Focus is now switching from the relatively settled 'problem debate' to a 'solutions debate' that is still immature and muddled.²⁰ A new 'game' is about to begin, one that has the opposite dynamic to chess. With every step that is taken towards an endgame (painful cuts in emissions; proposals for international agreement; new types of regulation, market mechanism, or tax), the number of pieces on the board will grow, not shrink. *Swarming* behaviour will become increasingly evident, as factions of all kinds are suddenly, and with unpredictable effect, galvanized into a passionate attempt to protect their interests.

The game is also asymmetric, with deal-makers needing to 'win' (get a deal internationally, legislate domestically, etc.), while deal-breakers only need to stop them (a stalemate suits them fine). Failure is inevitable if governments allow themselves to focus too much energy on the negotiating 'bubble'. Governments that are committed to a global deal have to find a way of influencing the evolving debate in tens, if not hundreds, of countries, while using domestic policy to indicate the strength of their commitment. Success relies on building coalitions and keeping them focused on the big picture, whether that is the extent of the collective dangers we face or the opportunities that lie in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The public diplomacy challenge

So what commonalities can we identify across our three global challenges?

The most fundamental point is the obvious one: when policy-makers deal with the primary global issues of the twenty-first century, they are – by extension and by definition – engaging in public diplomacy. The ability to understand, engage with and influence non-state actors is central to making progress on all three of the issues discussed above.

Second, we should note fundamental difficulties in understanding problems and describing solutions. On issues as multifaceted as climate change, development or terrorism, there is no one agency, government or area of expertise that has the whole picture. As a result, part of the challenge for tomorrow's public diplomats is about how they synthesize information – and how they share it with allies. In Pakistan, for instance, internationally funded polling provided a yardstick for measuring extraordinary shifts in opinion in the run-up to the February 2008 election. This resource could potentially evolve into an open-source knowledge-bank that helps to coordinate efforts to support the country's frail democracy.

Third, if the challenge of 'jointness' and harmonized collective action applies strongly to information-gathering, then the same is doubly true when the actual exertion of influence is considered. Here too, there are real limits to how much any one government (or agency, or individual) can achieve on its own. Indeed, since 9/11 the West has been remarkably poor at uniting behind a set of common set of values and ideas, and its 'brand' has suffered both at home and abroad. Instead, as Al-Qaeda shows, the key is working in *coalitions* that could include governments, media, civil society groups and many others.

Fourth, it should be clear that the quality of content is everything in effective public diplomacy. Only compelling narratives and visions of the future can animate networks over the long term. So are our stories more powerful than those told by the other side? This is why seizing the initiative and constantly emphasizing the big picture is so important. On climate change, the European Union – itself a coalition – has used the offer of a pre-emptive cut in emissions to attempt to force the pace on a new global deal. But Europe's approach also offers a cautionary tale. European governments are yet to start behaving as if they expect to make the fast and deep cuts that a deal will require. This creates uncertainty, weakens the coalitions they need to build, and saps their influence at the negotiating table.²¹

Public diplomacy's goals

All this leaves public diplomacy at a crossroads. On the one hand, its mission has never seemed so important. Governments face a series of sprawling and complex challenges in an international sphere they no longer monopolize. State-to-state diplomacy is still of great importance, of course, but it holds only some of the answers – especially as governments find that their power is shifting both upwards to the international level and downwards to non-state actors.

But confusion abounds about what public diplomacy is and what it can do. Again and again, governments are lured into quixotic attempts to burnish their countries' images, as if a superficial and short-lived marketing campaign could shift the tectonic plates beneath a national brand.²² Or they attempt to spin otherwise unpopular policies, in the vain hope that actions no longer speak louder than words. Public

diplomacy is seldom used *strategically*. Governments rarely align all their deeds, words and resources behind the impact they wish to achieve.

So what types of goal should be set for public diplomacy in a globalized world (see figure 1):

Shared operating systems	A framework for a collective response to a joint problem
Shared platforms	Networks of state and non-state actors who campaign for a collective vision or preferred solution
Shared awareness	A common understanding of an issue around which a coalition can coalesce

Figure 1: Goals for the new public diplomacy

First, public diplomacy is about building *shared awareness* – a common understanding of an issue around which a coalition can coalesce. The task here is not simply to accumulate information, which often exists in abundance, but rather to invest in analysis, synthesis and dissemination. Are state and non-state actors using the same data? Has a common language emerged? Is there a hub for discussion and debate?

Shared awareness should be the precursor to the construction of a *shared platform*. The new public diplomacy will usually – perhaps invariably – be a multilateral pursuit. The objective is to build a network of state and non-state actors around a shared vision or set of solutions: something a bilateral programme will seldom be able to do. This vision or solution need not be provided by a particular government and then ‘sold’ to its partners. The approach is less top-down than that: a really compelling vision will in itself have sufficient power to draw together a network and motivate it to campaign for change.

The end point is institutionalizing this network’s beliefs, thinking and structures into a framework for managing a particular problem. Given the amorphous and dynamic nature of the challenges we face, this framework will seldom be a permanent one. Rather, it will involve the creation of a *shared operating system* that distributes our response to a risk, and is flexible enough to evolve as that risk evolves. The result should be a change in the structure of globalization, a rewiring of our ability to act together in the face of a collective challenge.²³

Public diplomacy strategy

It is helpful to think of four distinct ways in which these goals can be achieved. Together, they form a typology of generic *influencing strategies* (see figure 2).

	Engagement	Shaping	Disruptive	Destructive
When to do it	Unformed debate – content lacking, energy low	Sterile or diffuse debate – no ideas, lack of direction	Unwelcome consensus – deadlock, no way through	Insuperable differences – debate not an option
Aims (content)	Inject new thinking and ideas; create shared resources; promote dialogue; fashion a common language	Create a fresh perspective; develop new concepts; change the language	Probe points of weakness; exploit wedge issues; redefine the terms of the debate; create a counter-narrative	Use misinformation to sow confusion, fear and panic
Aims (networks)	Build networks, add capacity at key points	Bring new players into the game, build unexpected alliances	Galvanise allies; divide, co-opt, or marginalize opponents	Encourage dissension and defection; isolate enemies
Organization's role	Convenor – mobilize others	Campaigner – catalyse change	Director – act behind the scenes	Director – act in covert and deniable ways
Programme style	Multilateral, cooperative, consensual	Focused pursuit of shared interests	Unilateral but making tactical use of alliances	Subversive and coercive
Climate example	IPCC	The Stern Review	The 'California' climate strategy	Industry-funded climate disinformation

Figure 2: Strategies for the new public diplomacy

Engagement strategies are public diplomacy's bread and butter. For most important international challenges, a response of sufficient scale is lacking. Effort is therefore needed to energize the debate, thus increasing attention paid to an issue, developing solutions and increasing capacity to respond. Public diplomacy's task is to create analytical resources, promote dialogue and build coalitions. This requires substantial resources. Public diplomats must find multiple ways to initiate, feed and broaden a conversation – and sustain it until a tipping point is reached.

What, though, if a broad range of actors is engaged in an issue, but this is not leading towards a solution? What if the conversation has become stuck at some point short of resolution? In this case, a *shaping* strategy is needed to focus the conversation and drive it towards a consensus that can support action. Shaping strategies involve a deliberate attempt to 'reframe' the debate. Public diplomacy's task is therefore to inject new content, change the composition of key networks, or do both simultaneously – given that a new narrative is the best way to bring new voices into a debate. Shaping strategies focus on solutions not problems, and aim to achieve a particular result. Public diplomacy, in other words, takes on a *campaigning* guise.

Disruptive strategies must be employed when a consensus has been reached on an issue, but a government finds this consensus opposed to its interests (or what it interprets as the wider interest). This is a more confrontational form of public diplomacy. The aim is to marginalize or co-opt opposing interests, or fundamentally to shift the terms of a debate. The pre-existing consensus must be dissolved or rendered irrelevant, clearing space in which a new one can be constructed. Disruption demands discipline and tolerance for risk. It is not easy to force a change in the rules of the game, especially from a position in the middle of play.

Finally, we reach *destructive* strategies which are deployed against declared adversaries. They are used only when further debate is not seen as an option and the aim of public diplomacy is to deny an opponent space, sow dissent and encourage defection from his ranks. This is public diplomacy as propaganda or psy-ops. Deceptive tactics can be used to confuse and undermine the adversary. Alternatively, we may see a refusal to accept that a group has any legitimacy, as it is ignored, belittled and otherwise marginalized.

The new public diplomat

These generic strategies sit along a nice–nasty continuum, where 'nice' strategies are consensual, open and transparent, and 'nasty' strategies are covert, controlling and one-sided. Nasty strategies *always* have a cost and should be used only when there is no alternative. In an interdependent world, a collaborative approach will usually make most sense.

But this does not mean that governments can afford to be passive, stuck in a 'listening' mode that becomes an excuse for delay and inaction. Quite the opposite. Effective public diplomacy is an active pursuit. It requires bold and determined action to reframe debates, and to circumvent or attack obstacles to change – as well as a clear understanding of the different tools available.

What we are reaching for is a *theory of influence* for contemporary international relations, with the new public diplomacy at its heart. The new public diplomat should therefore not be seen as a particular *kind* of diplomat, but rather, simply, as *tomorrow's* diplomat. He or she understands that other governments are one of many

target audiences (albeit an especially important one), is at ease with the chaotic, fluid nature of today's global issues, and tends naturally towards a search for the strategic synthesis. This diplomat is constantly looking both inwards, at our policy stance – is it coherent and compelling? – and outwards, at whether people are joining forces with us, or with other tribes.

The new public diplomat brings to the task a willingness to pull together all the tools of international relations and mix them together to create a coherent whole. The aim is to blend analysis, policy-making and communications; the focus is more on what the country does than on what it says. And with the job comes a new investment mindset. Instead of behaving like a bank manager – with a large portfolio, low risk appetite and a desire for incremental returns – the new public diplomat acts like a venture capitalist, focusing on a smaller portfolio, tolerating risk and aspiring to achieve transformational change.

The stakes, after all, are high. Globalization has brought with it a series of ever more complex challenges. Above all, therefore, the new public diplomat must be genuinely at ease with discussion of values (rather than mere interests), understanding that without clearly stated principles – and consistent adherence to them – it will be impossible to animate coalitions of state and non-state actors, and even harder for members of that coalition to work together to deliver a common goal.

About the authors

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About the collection

This essay was published as part of a collection that was commissioned by Jim Murphy MP, former Minister for Europe and for Public Diplomacy, and published by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The publication aims to generate debate and stimulate thinking on public diplomacy among policy-makers, practitioners and experts, and to engage all with an interest in this field.

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- ¹ This essay draws heavily on work completed as part of our Demos project, 'The New Public Diplomacy', and our forthcoming pamphlet on the subject, which discusses these issues in greater detail.
- ² Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Fixing the UK's foreign policy apparatus: a memo to Gordon Brown', www.globaldashboard.org, April 2007. See also Alex Evans and David Steven, 'How to fix the Foreign Office', <http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk>, 8 May 2007.
- ³ Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).
- ⁴ Department for International Development, *Making governance work for the poor* (London: DFID, 2006).
- ⁵ For a good historical account that emphasizes the continuities between Islamist terrorism and previous waves, see Michael Burleigh, *Blood and rage: a cultural history of terrorism* (London: Harper Press, 2008).
- ⁶ David Kilcullen, *Countering global insurgency*, version 2.2, 30 Nov. 2004, available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf>.
- ⁷ Osama bin Laden, 'Declaration of jihad', 23 Aug. 1996, in Bruce Lawrence, ed. *Messages to the world: the statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 25.
- ⁸ As Marc Sageman has shown in a recent study, the Islamist threat continues to evolve in this direction, as Al-Qaeda the *organization* degrades into Al-Qaeda the *movement*. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
- ⁹ Abdel Bari Atwan, *The secret history of al-Qa'ida* (London: Saqi Books, 2006).
- ¹⁰ Osama bin Laden, 'The towers of Lebanon', 29 Oct. 2004, in Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the world*, p. 242.
- ¹¹ Osama bin Laden, 'To the peoples of Europe', 15 April 2004, in Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the world*, p. 235.
- ¹² For a good discussion, see Daniel Kimmage, *The Al-Qaeda media nexus: the virtual network behind the global message* (Washington DC: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, forthcoming 2008).
- ¹³ Osama bin Laden, 'Among a band of knights', 14 Feb. 2003, in Lawrence, ed. *Messages to the world*, p. 196.
- ¹⁴ Steve Tatham, UK Defence Academy Advanced Research Group, pers. comm.
- ¹⁵ David Kilcullen, 'Twenty-eight articles: fundamentals of company-level counterinsurgency', *Military Review*, May–June 2006, pp. 103–8.
- ¹⁶ Robert Cooper, *The breaking of nations: order and chaos in the twenty-first century* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2004).
- ¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama has dubbed this the problem of 'getting to Denmark': see Francis Fukuyama, *State-building: governance and world order in the 21st century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).
- ¹⁸ Tip O'Neill, Thomas O'Neill and Gary Hymel, *All politics is local* (London: Crown, 1994).
- ¹⁹ Pakistan public opinion poll, conducted 19–29 Jan. 2008, International Republican Institute, Washington DC.
- ²⁰ Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Climate change: state of the debate', in Michael Mainelli and Jan Peter Onstwedder, eds, *The London Accord: Sustainable Finance and Climate Change, Final Report* (London: City of London, 2007).
- ²¹ Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Beyond a zero-sum game', in British Council, ed, *Talking transatlantic* (London: British Council, 2008).
- ²² This is a fruitful way of seeing the intersection between nation branding and public diplomacy. See the essay by Simon Anholt in this volume.
- ²³ Alex Evans and David Steven, 'Shooting the rapids: multilateralism and global risks', paper presented to the Progressive Governance summit, London, 5 April 2008.