More than forty years have passed since Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy popularized the term “public diplomacy”, sanitizing what had previously passed as “propaganda”. At the same time, the new term added shape and form to niche study of the intersection of policy, international communications, and diplomacy. It did not, however, prevent long and complicated discussions amongst public diplomacy scholars, who have yet to settle on a concise definition of what it is. There is much ground yet to be covered empirically. Should public diplomacy be domestically or internationally focused? What is the relationship between public diplomacy and propaganda? And who can claim specialization in public diplomacy these days – official diplomats or a new class of actors from the global public domain?

Without a concise definition on which most can agree, it may be a simpler task to interpret public diplomacy through its associated activities, thereby concentrating not on what it is but rather on the question of what its practitioners do (i.e. we know it when we see it). A few close observers have been bold enough to submit general categories of activity: (1) information management and distribution with an emphasis on short-term events or crises; (2) longer-term persuasion campaigns aiming to effect attitudinal change amongst a target population (sometimes referred to as “moving the needle”); and (3) building relationships.
also over the long-term, to cultivate trust and mutual understanding between peoples (be they groups, organizations, nations, etc.).

If one accepts that this encompasses the vast majority of public diplomacy activities, then one may also discover two distinct but interrelated features with implications for the process and the practitioner respectively. In the first instance, there is a dichotomous relationship between communications activities on the one hand, and relationship-building, or what are now commonly called “engagement” activities, on the other. Communicators generate information either by relentless persuasion or the more nuanced pursuit of information/education by way of exchanges. Alternatively, engagement is less concerned with informing or persuading than understanding. This is why public relations scholars differentiate “one-way” (monologic) communications from “two-way” (dialogic) communications.

Transferring this conception to the act of public diplomacy, the practitioner straddles two roles for which he is responsible. The pure communications components of persuasion and information underlie the activities of the advocate, who is charged with conveying a message, portraying an image, and acting as the mouthpiece for the generating party. In an engagement mode the practitioner’s communication imperative is more indirect. Here, he instead assumes the part of an intermediary possessing information from interlocutors which he can then use to educate each one about the other.

Time is an essential factor for distinguishing between these two roles. When acting as advisors, public diplomacy practitioners are not unlike intelligence operatives or regional experts; they have access to privileged information that they use to inform the judgment of policymakers at the point of policy formulation. Conversely, practitioners acting as advocates become germane to the discussions of policymakers after decisionmaking has occurred. In light of the decision reached, advocates then develop a strategy for building foreign public support

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