THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY CHALLENGES OF STRATEGIC STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

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“Strategic stakeholder engagement,” as a term, concept, or practice has yet to gain wide currency among public diplomacy scholars and practitioners. That gap, however, may soon close as the international arena transitions from the information age, dominated by the mass media and message-driven strategies, to the global communication era dominated by the social media and relational and network strategies. The shift represents more than a rush to incorporate the latest technology into a public diplomacy initiative. In fact, it is less about the technological tools that connect people and more about the communication strategies that provide the motivation and platform for people to want to connect with others and stay connected long after a public diplomat returns home.

For public diplomats, strategic stakeholder engagement represents a two-fold challenge. The first challenge is identifying the “who.” Who is a strategic stakeholder in public diplomacy? Within the literature, the term stakeholder is being used in ways that suggest either domestic agents or audiences. As agents, stakeholders share a political entity’s goals and may serve to augment the reach and effectiveness of a public diplomacy initiative. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), for example, lists its key stakeholder groups as think tanks, regional outreach champions, businesses, trades unions, and faith groups. This

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2 My thanks to Bruce Gregory for the label of agency and agents of public diplomacy and its link to representation in traditional diplomacy.

internal domestic constituency is similar to the principal stakeholders identified in U.S. public diplomacy reports. The term stakeholder is also increasingly being used in lieu of external audience and publics. Such stakeholders may or may not share a political sponsor’s goals. Public diplomats would need to identify potential stakeholders and find where their shared interests and goals intersect within a public diplomacy initiative.

A second challenge is the “what.” What constitutes strategic engagement? The term engagement has appeared with greater frequency but perhaps with even less clarity than stakeholder. In traditional government to government diplomacy, there are fairly clear demarcation lines of engagement that range from diplomatic isolation up the ladder to contact between senior officials to the heads of state or government. In public diplomacy, however, the term engagement has been used more broadly. It is often used to suggest audience involvement or participation in a public diplomacy initiative, including relationship-building. Prior to September 2001, an oft-cited shorthand for public diplomacy was “understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences.” In 2003, a prominent U.S. public diplomacy report added the word “engage” to the list. Interestingly, engagement is increasingly being used as a substitute for public diplomacy. In 2008, the British FCO entitled its major report on public diplomacy, “Engagement.”

British FCO’s survey of “stakeholders” involved individuals at a “very senior level” and who appeared to share the goal of “representing the UK position and interests well.”

Shortly after the start of Obama administration, a group of 70 “principal stakeholders” prepared the 2009 White Oak public diplomacy called for a “Holistic Stakeholder Approach: Public diplomacy is relevant to a broad array of strategic interests and has multiple stakeholders: military and non-military, Executive and Congressional, public and private sector. We need to identify the needs and strengths of each stakeholder and determine together how to best play to (support, staff  and fund) the strengths of each.” See, White Oak Public Diplomacy Recommendations, January 30-February 1, 2009 (available online).


U.S. Public Diplomacy Council (www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org).
