

AMERICAN OUTLOOK ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Public diplomacy (PD) has always proved to be an intriguing though not necessarily rewarding subject. This time the Hungarian public had the opportunity to gain insight into the current issues and dilemmas of the American, and partly the Central-East European public diplomacy, with the help of Dr. Philip Seib. He is the Professor of journalism, public diplomacy and international relations, and he is the director of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. In November, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited him to lecture on public diplomacy. Hence this study is based on his lecture on 22nd November at the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs titled “The Case for Public Diplomacy”, and another organized by the Euro-Atlantic Club two days later. The narrower focus of the lectures was the development of media diplomacy, therefore, it is useful to give an overview of its evolution in the United States in the XXth century. After that, we make a very short detour touching upon the current tasks of Hungarian public diplomacy.

The evolution of the notion

Public diplomacy was at work when Anwar Sadat, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing or Helmut Schmidt among many other national leaders visited the United States under the educational exchange programs, or when the Latin Americans viewed a film on drug trafficking on their TV sets they were watching a product made by the USIA. And again, when millions could listen to Neil Armstrong on his landing on the Moon, it was Voice of America, the radio service of the USIA, that carried his voice. Or it is the U.S. Embassy’s press attaché who are to the help of journalists when an American official makes a public statement.¹

The notion of public diplomacy can only be approached in a somewhat amorphous way as there is no universally accepted definition to it. Moreover, it was only in the 1960s when it had acquired its current meaning, when Edward Guillon the Dean of Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, a former diplomat, founded the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy the first of its kind in 1965. An early brochure of the Center provided the following not too precise definition: “By public diplomacy we understand the means by which governments, private groups and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise influence on their foreign policy decisions.”² More recently, Alan K. Henrikson Professor of Diplomatic History, and another of the Center’s prominent teachers gave the following definition in 2005: “Public diplomacy may be defined, simply, as the conduct of international relations by governments through public communications media and through dealings with a wide range of nongovernmental entities (political parties, corporations, trade associations, labor unions, educational institutions, religious organizations, ethnic groups, and so on including influential individuals) for the purpose of influencing the politics and actions of other governments.”³

These examples well illustrate the ever growing influence of the media over the public, as well as the intricate interrelationship between the media and public diplomacy. An expert, Nicholas Cull designates five

¹ Public Diplomacy. <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm#traditional>. Retrieved: 21/11/2010.

² The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy at The Fletcher School <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/murrow/pd/definitions.html>. (20/11/2010.)

Prior to that, the concept of public diplomacy was used in reference to open and transparent diplomacy much like the first of Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points.

³ Ibid.

major public diplomacy elements: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and international radio and TV broadcasting.⁴ For public diplomacy to be efficient it needs to keep pace with the transformation of the international environment, and the political, cultural and technological development of the target community.

The definition and the usage of the concept is rendered delicate by the fact that the borderline between the well-bred public diplomacy and the much less acceptable propaganda is rather porous. In the U.S. – and elsewhere – it was during the time of the two world wars and the cold war when the efforts to denigrate the avowed enemy and to glorify American values and interests were prevailing. After the cold war, the global war on terror initiated by George W. Bush brought bred new life into propaganda and caused a lot of inconvenience to American foreign policy elites. Experts and practitioners of public diplomacy strive to distinguish it from propaganda. One critical feature in that regard is credibility. Advocates of public diplomacy emphasize that propaganda is often disinformation. Edward Murrow is respected as the father of PD in the Anglo-Saxon world had been the leading war correspondent and journalist during WWII, an who was often cited by professor Seib too, said: "... truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful."⁵ Nevertheless, public diplomacy is undeniably aims at influencing public opinion, manipulating mass media and discrediting (the ideological) adversaries. In the words of John Brown, a former diplomat:

"At best, public diplomacy: Provides a truthful, factual exposition and explication of a nation's foreign policy and way of life to overseas audiences; Encourages international understanding; listens and engages in dialogue. At its worst, propaganda: Forces its message on an audience, often by repetition and slogans; Demonizes elements of the outside world; Simplifies complex issues and history; Misinterprets the truth or deliberately lies."⁶

Accordingly, the major difference between PD and public diplomacy lies in the degree of credibility, sophistication, and the two-way nature of communication.

What has not changed with time is the target of PD, that is the population or the public opinion of the targeted country. The array of the mediating channels and means, however, has broadened greatly. During the two world wars and the cold war, posters and newsreel were common devices of PD, but the most prevalent, as well as, the most efficient and cost-effective public media device was radio. In 1953, president Eisenhower established the United States Information Agency. The USIA employs a wide range of instruments to convey its message including personal contacts, radio and TV broadcasts, exhibitions and English language lessons. Back in those times, USIA was the largest and most effective full-service public relations organization in the world with the biggest budget. As Seib pointed out, much behind the success of American PD during the cold war was that it had a very limited number of competitors. The major one was Radio Moscow. For countries in the Eastern block the only reliable and genuinely international news resource was embodied by Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America. Consequently, it was sufficient to neutralize the negative depiction from communist propaganda, and to popularize American values and way of life.

Current Challenges

Ever since the 1980s, due to the accelerating development of information and news technology media has an increasing influence on public opinion, thus the public also has a growing opportunity to exert influence on foreign policy. Philip Seib refers to a proliferation of the mass media. At the same time, the 24 hour TV broadcasting has become an integral part of diplomatic reporting, as well as foreign policy decision making. As a consequence, decision makers complaint, they no longer have the opportunity to distill the proper decision behind closed doors. Undoubtedly, they have to take into account the so called CNN effect⁷, however, its real extent is controversial. The real question is how well the foreign policy elite can make use of and keep pace with these new technologies and the agenda setting role of the media, since the media encompasses a different set of priorities.

⁴ The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 2008 616: 31, Nicholas J. Cull Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_diplomacy#cite_note-25. (19/11/2010.)

⁵ Public Diplomacy: <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm#traditional> (2010.11.11.)

⁶ John Brown:http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2008/0709/comm/brown_pudiplprop.html Letöltve: 2010.11.10.

⁷ Cable News Network (CNN) is a U.S. cable news channel founded in 1980 by Ted Turner. Upon its launch, CNN was the first channel to provide 24-hour television news coverage, and the first all-news television channel in the United States. Critics of CNN effect claim that it can only work if the decision makers are inapt.

Next, we outline the dilemmas proposed by Professor Seib. First, governments have to decide between the traditional news media and the new media, online community sites or file sharing sites for example, because each has its own audience and uses different instruments to reach them. It also needs to be decided whether to use the media of their home country or that of the target country. For instance, the war on terror is viewed from a different angle in Afghanistan and Pakistan where the focus is rather on the victims of the American drone strikes, or in the U.S. where almost nobody is interested in it anymore.

American public diplomacy today has several competitors. At present, there are 64 satellite TV channels most of them with online access. These new global or regional channels, like Al Arabia, have no needs for external resources neither in terms of finances or news, and they serve as the primary information source for the diasporas as well. It is not only that the American international mass media has lost its global monopoly, but in certain matters it has also become unreliable. Al Jazeera, for example, is considered a much more credible source than CNN especially in the Middle East. That is because there is no governmental control over it, it has huge staffs in Washington and London and provides a genuine forum for national opinion leaders and decision makers, for example, there have been several interviews presented with Obama and Hillary Clinton.

In comparison, Al Harra (The Free One) is an Arabic satellite channel financed by the American government with 800 million dollars per year with an audience close to zero. According to Seib, that is a perfect example for the American PD thinking still working in the cold war mode. It disseminates brainless documentaries about the enviable life Arabs living in the U.S.

Competition does not only come from the Arab world. It is the Chinese PD that has the most powerful techniques. More than 100 Chinese cultural institutions work all over the world, primarily in the resource rich countries and the USA. The Chinese CCTV manages a budget of 6 billion dollars.

Entertainment media is influential too, exemplified by the soap operas originating in Far Eastern countries such as China, India or South Korea, or in Turkey.

In all these areas American PD is lagging behind, and it is incapable of renewing itself. A further difficulty is presented by the verification of the new media sources. Seib is of the widely held opinion that the users must be educated in critical thinking.

The act of subordinating the USIA under the State Department in 1999 symbolizes the process by which PD has been marginalized in the American foreign policy making. According to Seib, PD has lost its punch also because too many people work in this field by now. The president is still the main public diplomat, but he is lacking in backup.

Foreign policy government hinges on soft as well as hard power. The U.S. was painfully reminded to this lesson on 9/11. In its aftermath, George W. Bush put the famous question in Congress “Why do they hate us?”, or Richard Holbrooke asked a key question in the Washington Post “How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world’s leading communications society?”, which sent a waking call to the government. As a result, an intensive campaign was launched in PD and public relations, however it was still according to cold war logic.⁸ Between 2005 and 2007, Karen Hughes Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was the leading figure charged with the project. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the causal background of the project’s ineffectiveness, but its failure and sometimes even counterproductive results were acknowledged by its creators themselves.

Seib contends that the U.S. has still not realized the true significance of public diplomacy and the changes needed in it. As he spelled out, the whole approach needs to be transformed if the U.S. wants to enhance the country’s popularity and influence. American PD must be much more innovative and imaginative, offering pragmatic solutions. For example, “water diplomacy” proves much more effective in developing countries than any other media campaigns. The so successful Obama-effect will not be productive if it is not backed by deeds. PD is much more than advertising.

⁸ The campaign focused on the propagandistic promotion of American “universal” values.

PD has a special role in Central-East Europe in putting these countries on the map for the public of the rest of the world. The EU has much to do as well, says Seib. Another important role for PD is establishing new relations between governments and regions. Eastern Partnership is such a process. It needs to be added, however, that the EU is losing much of its attractiveness as a result of political inaction.

Hungarian EU presidency

Speaking about the role of public relations touch upon the forthcoming Hungarian EU presidency. It sets a particularly difficult task for the Hungarian government to simultaneously communicate into different directions. Communication towards the group of international correspondents in Brussels requires a completely different technique than the Hungarian public. Moreover, the official Hungarian broadcasting culture is very different from that in Western-Europe (or in the U.S.). "Up until recently, it was lacking in proactive thinking, namely in communicating towards the press in order to achieve political goals well defined beforehand" said Zoltán Gyévai, Brussels correspondent.⁹ Ferenc Robák Government Commissioner for preparation and operational tasks related to Hungary's upcoming presidency said they are perfectly aware of the challenges, and that it is not enough to successfully perform the tasks of the presidency, but how the results are communicated is at least that important.

Efficacious presidency will be a huge advantage in terms of the future Hungarian interest promotion. Outward communication will be managed by a Foreign Ministry staff.¹⁰

Finally, here are a few words about the media response of the Pécs Hungarian Capital of Culture. The author has had the opportunity to monitor and analyze the English speaking media response of the events throughout the year. Despite the well known organizational drawbacks, the events received a positive reaction. Nevertheless, Pécs, except for two peak periods in January and July/August attracted rather little attention. At the time of the opening ceremony several foreign news agencies, for example the Chinese and American, devoted considerable notice to the programs and the city itself, however, later on this intensity has diminished greatly. Still it was a good opportunity for Pécs to get its 15 minutes of fame and to get out from the overwhelming shadow of Budapest. The foreign media appreciated the cultural and ethnical richness of Pécs, therefore the organizers image of "the borderless city" got across. The lack of greater attention is also due to the size and significance of Istanbul, the peer Capital of Pécs and Essen.

Conclusion

To conclude briefly Seib's lectures, the American PD in spite of its leading position during the first half of the twentieth century today the U.S. is lagging behind. In the face of a diminishing power position both in terms of absolute and relative power it has to reconsider its foreign policy instruments by augmenting its soft power. In the EU, the systematically organized PD is in an infant stage, therefore here is much to do as well. The same is true of Hungary that has to cope with this aspect of the EU presidency too, but effective communication and PD can do a lot to promote the country's European standing.

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⁹ Gyévai Zoltán: „Imázs vagy blamázs?” In: *Figyelő*. Vol.42. p. 35.

¹⁰ Nagy Iván Zsolt: „Eladni Európát, eladni a magyarokat.” *ibid.* p. 36.