Staff Report on the Public Meeting of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy

May 17, 2011

A Discussion of the State Department's Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy
and the activities of the Broadcasting Board of Governors

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Introduction

Since 1948, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy has been charged with providing oversight of and advocacy for U.S. Government activities intended to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics. The Commission has also been charged with increasing support for and understanding of public diplomacy in an increasingly dynamic human and information environment. This is accomplished through reports and recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, the Congress, and the public.

To adapt to the needs of the various communities the Commission directly or indirectly informs and empowers, including those that direct, practice, or authorize public diplomacy, the Commission is working to provide more frequent, timely, relevant, and actionable advice. This is the first analysis of the Commission's operational framework to fulfill its mission to identify, understand, prioritize and solve, whenever possible, the challenges, issues, and successes of U.S. global engagement. This Staff Report is intended to help identify positive (or negative) organizational characteristics and practices related to understanding, informing, and influencing and explain public diplomacy practices and programs to the American public.

Executive Summary

On May 17, 2011, the Commission convened a public meeting at the State Department to hear an update on the State Department's "Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy" from the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The Commission also asked the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) for an update of its activities and to discuss whether U.S. international broadcasting was striking the right balance when engaging youth, elite, online or offline audiences. The meeting was open to the public and included discussions with Dawn McCall, Coordinator of the Bureau of International Information Programs and presentations by Ms. Betsy Whitaker, Strategic Communications Officer, Office of the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and Mr. Jeff Trimble, Executive Director, Broadcasting Board of Governors.

This meeting reviewed the progress made on the State Department's Strategic Framework on Public Diplomacy five major imperatives: shaping the narrative, expanding and strengthening people-to-people relationships, combating violent extremism, better informing policymaking, and deploying resources in line with current priorities. The meeting highlighted the success of incorporating Deputy Assistant Secretary level positions for public diplomacy in every regional bureau, the expansion of the State Department's video capacity, the use of new media, and the robust partnerships between the Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and its parts: Public Affairs, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), and the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP). Although funding was determined as a key hurdle for many activities, the State Department was recognized as working hard to better align resources with requirements and priorities in the field. For example, ECA has engaged with the Peace Corps, DOD, BBG, USAID and others on English teaching programs and has put together a working group to determine the roles of each entity to find ways of consolidating materials and collaborating approaches to make the best use of taxpayer dollars.

The current situation of broadcasting and the BBG was also discussed. The BBG is currently undergoing a comprehensive strategic review initiated by its leadership to correct major organizational inadequacies and increase or create operational efficiencies. These changes intend to ensure that the BBG functions smartly, smoothly, and effectively in the face of future challenges. The BBG continues to maintain a close partnership with the State Department through a co-sponsored independent research project on digital media. It was noted that the BBG is responding to new technologies quickly, and that BBG's New Media Index has already begun to assess the readiness of various markets for consuming new media.

Transcript Analysis

Four questions framed this cursory analysis of the meeting transcript.

1. What does the language used in the meeting indicate about the mindset surrounding public diplomacy?
2. What principles guide these engagements?
3. What are the core processes relevant to public diplomacy?
4. How are public diplomacy structures aligned to conduct those processes?

The discussion framed public diplomacy with terms of openness, interaction, and information. Certain words, including subtle variations, were often repeated: "community" (7 times), "conversation" (18 times), "engagement" (17 times), "interaction" (9 times), and "outreach" (6 times). In contrast to the language of interaction however, the terms "communications" and "communication" (without the "s") were used interchangeably and often (19 times) even though they often refer to distinctly different schools of thought, theory and practice (the former is based on the medium and the latter on social or personal). People engaged through public diplomacy were consistently described as "targets" (11 times) and "audiences" (30 times). That is, they were described as people to whom we deliver messages to rather than people with whom we interact. Taken together this may indicate a mindset in which the desire to interact with foreign publics conflicts with the longstanding practice of delivering information to the same publics.

Several phrases were used interchangeably as strategic imperatives and principles of public diplomacy:

1. Shaping the narrative
2. Expanding and strengthening people-to-people relationships
3. Countering violent extremism
4. Better informing policymaking
5. Deploying resources in line with current priorities.

These five priorities may serve as a reliable guide for senior leaders and planners in context of the overarching goal of furthering U.S. national interests and guide personnel at all levels in day-to-day public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy by the State Department and Strategic Communication by the Defense Department were identified as similar or related activities. Public diplomacy was described as central to the State Department. Panelists indicated there is reasonable success through interagency cooperation. However this success was attributed in part to the ability of the two

Departments to interact at the operational level with a minimum of interference from Washington.

Structures and sub-organizations related to public diplomacy are being re-worked in order to better align resources with requirements. However, as described, much of this restructuring seems to be focused on the area of media relations and media research.

Questions

The staff of the Commission suggests the following question to help guide future inquiries and reports based on the meeting. The Commission welcomes input from the community on these questions and for other suggested questions and lines of inquiry.

1. What is the status of the restructuring launched by or indicated in the State Department's Strategic Framework on Public Diplomacy published early in 2010?
2. What can be done to increase unity of effort through incorporation of public diplomacy concepts and terms into thought and language throughout the State Department?
3. How might the public diplomacy lexicon be formalized to guide the mindset regarding public diplomacy within the State Department and other agencies away from targeted delivery and toward engagement, exchange and interaction?
4. What are the similarities and differences between the State and Defense Department planning processes to understand, inform and influence foreign publics?
5. What steps are being taken to focus public diplomacy research and activities on understanding and interacting with foreign publics rather than on media content and venues?
6. How can public diplomacy practices and processes be more effectively integrated into planning and operations across the State Department?

To read the meeting transcript: http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/minutes/172064.htm
Audio from the meeting is available on request.

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