

Bruce Gregory  
Director, Public Diplomacy Institute  
George Washington University  
[BGregory@gwu.edu](mailto:BGregory@gwu.edu)

***Public Diplomacy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the U.S. Experience***

Counterterrorism Seminar  
Assessing and Countering Jihadist Propaganda  
Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs  
April 28-29, 2008, Geneva, Switzerland

When invited to participate in European conferences in recent years, it is usually after reading the latest opinion polls on views of the United States. There is a moment of surprise, bolstered by alarm when I check the price of the dollar against the Euro. But I'm pleased to be here, because I learn a great deal from our conversations – this seminar is no exception – and because some of the best thinking on public diplomacy is to be found in universities, foreign ministries, and think tanks here in Europe.

I could provide a long list of examples. To cite just two. Exceptional essays in Jan Melissen's book, *The New Public Diplomacy*, from the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands make the point. As do essays by Brian Hocking, Jan Scholte, Iver Neumann and other European scholars in a book on *Global Governance and Diplomacy* to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in June.<sup>1</sup>

My topic is "Public Diplomacy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the U.S. Experience." Let me begin with two disclaimers. First, I am not an expert on Islam, on radical Islamists, or on terrorism. Most of my career has been in U.S. public diplomacy as a practitioner and now in the academic community.

Second, my sub-title is "lessons from" -- not necessarily "lessons learned." I had a professor once who made a useful distinction between "lessons taught" and "lessons learned."

I will begin with a brief public diplomacy framework – and then offer five considerations for thinking about counterterrorism based on the U.S. experience.

### ***What is Public Diplomacy?***

Public diplomacy is now part of a global conversation. But it has many different meanings. The term strategic communication also has gained traction in recent years. Some see it as more inclusive than public diplomacy and more descriptive of a multi-stakeholder environment. Last year, former Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes issued a document called the “US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy **and** Strategic Communication.”<sup>2</sup> There are strengths and limitations in this strategy. One limitation: it does not define the two terms.

I believe we can view public diplomacy as an instrument with analytical boundaries and a few broadly applicable characteristics. Public diplomacy describes the means by which states, associations of states, and non-state actors **understand** cultures, attitudes and behavior; **build and manage** relationships; and **influence** opinions and actions to advance their interests and values.

Public diplomacy differs from education, journalism, advertising, branding, and public relations. However, it imports methods and discourse norms from civil society – and it depends on deep and diverse relationships with civil society to succeed. Public diplomacy operates through actions, relationships, images, and words in three time frames: 24/7 news streams, medium range campaigns on high value policies, and long-term engagement. Its tools range from electronic media to cultural diplomacy to “the last three feet” of personal communication.

### ***The World of Public Diplomacy has Changed***

Despite great differences between the hot and cold wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the underlying factors that shaped the practice of public diplomacy were similar.

States dominated international relations. Non-state actors were few in number. “Big ideas” were secular struggles between authoritarian and democratic worldviews. Media and communication systems used analog technologies. Hierarchies were the principal organizing structure in society. National armies fought on battlefields with industrial age weapons.

But today it’s a different world. States are not what they used to be. Governance is provided increasingly by political actors above, below, and around the state. Thick globalism, non-state actors, a mix of secular and religious “big ideas,” digital technologies, and new forms of communication have transformed the old world order. Network societies challenge organizational hierarchies. Attention – not information – is today’s scarce resource. And we confront insurgents and terrorists in a new paradigm of armed conflict fought within civilian populations by contestants with local and global reach.

My principal concern regarding U.S. public diplomacy today is that its methods are rooted too deeply in 20<sup>th</sup> century models of public diplomacy, governance, and armed conflict. Now to five considerations drawn from the U.S. experience.

**1. *Abandon the message influence strategy.*** Responses by U.S. officials to the attacks of 9/11 assumed that failure to communicate effective and consistent messages was the central problem in American public diplomacy. Soon after 9/11, the White House created an Office of Global Communication to “ensure consistency of messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad.” In 2002, then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice created a Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee “to develop and disseminate the President’s messages across the globe.” The top public diplomacy recommendation of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission stated: “The U.S. Government must define what the message is, what it stands for.” In 2006, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley created a new interagency Strategic Communication Coordinating Committee. Its purpose: “to disseminate the

President's themes and messages across the globe in the most effective way." And the mission of the Counterterrorism Communications Center now headquartered in the Department of State is "developing messages and strategies to discredit terrorists and their ideology."<sup>3</sup>

The message influence strategy holds that public diplomacy is primarily a matter of deciding on the right message and disseminating it to others consistently and often. This strategy overlooks two important considerations in how people create meaning. *First*, they interpret messages through their culture, history, language, influence relationships, and personal needs. *Second*, people make assumptions about the intentions and motives of communicators. And they do so in complex mediated environments that we often do not understand.

As Arizona State communications scholar Steven Corman puts it, "The message influence model assumes, incorrectly, that communication is the transfer of 'meanings from person to person' and that the message sent is the one that counts." Decades of communication research demonstrate that "the message *received* is the one that really counts."<sup>4</sup>

The invasion of Iraq, conflation of Al Qaeda and Sadaam Hussein in the political rhetoric of U.S. leaders, and a counterterrorism strategy that framed "winning the war on terror" by promoting democracy have been interpreted by many as efforts to impose Western values on Muslims. The U.S. message, "would you rather fight them there or here," led to misunderstandings among those who are "there." Other messages also created vulnerabilities. Examples: rendition, secret prisons, Guantanamo, so-called "enhanced interrogation procedures," fortress embassies, and words such as "crusade," "Islamofacism," and "Axis of Evil."

Messages do matter of course. Governments show respect for the opinions of global publics when they state their policies clearly and credibly. Messages should be consistent at home and abroad. And messages are effective only

when they are consistent with actions – as the U.S. may be learning from what some have called the “say-do” gap in American public diplomacy.

The point is that public diplomacy occurs in complex interdependent systems. Messages – when they are not ignored or lost in white noise – are construed on the basis of our mental filters, emotions, and interpretations of the sender’s intentions. As Walter Lippmann wrote nearly a century ago, most people don’t choose between true and false messages, they choose between trustworthy and untrustworthy messengers.<sup>5</sup>

*In public diplomacy, deep comprehension of the interpretations and expectations of others matters more than defining the right message.*

**2. Change the ideological frame.** The U.S. framed its response to the attacks of 9/11 as a “war on terror.” The war was described as a “battle of ideas” with an “ideology of terrorism.” According to the U.S. National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, this is an ideology in which “Islam has been twisted and made to serve an evil end.”<sup>6</sup>

The global war on terror became a master narrative for America’s strategy and its public diplomacy. It defined a problem. It set the agenda. It identified the source of security threats. It conveyed moral judgment. And it offered solutions. But this narrative has had far greater consequence for stirring anxieties and building political consent at home than for effective public diplomacy and engaging political consent abroad.

Many experts argue that militarizing counterterrorism – other than to deny sanctuary – has strategic limitations. It triggers moral outrage and gives glory and warrior status to terrorists. It falls short as public diplomacy, because it allows terrorists to frame the discourse to advantage.

There are deficiencies in a strategy framed as a “war” with an ideology that has “twisted Islam” – a war fought as a “battle of ideas” through the advancement of democracy. First, linking counterterrorism to contested interpretations of religion puts the U.S. into the arena of religious war that it seeks to avoid. Why should Western leaders and diplomats tell Muslims what is or is not extremist or moderate Islam? The Princeton Project on National Security concluded: “The best way to start is to take Islam itself out of the equation.”<sup>7</sup> Nobel laureate Amartya Sen adds that praise for moderate Muslims or certain religious books magnifies religious authority and overlooks the richness of achievements in other fields. Those who prioritize religion and insist on single identities, Sen argues, diminish us all and make the world more flammable.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, making democracy promotion the long-term strategy for winning the “war on terror” undermines the credibility of U.S. public diplomacy and the considerable value of democratization as a separate enterprise. That terrorism occurs in democracies is only part of the problem. Espousing democracy at the point of a gun in Iraq, support for authoritarian regimes where election outcomes are preordained, and turning away from election winners in Gaza and Algeria creates skepticism for a public diplomacy strategy based on democratization.

Strategies that privilege religion and democratization also neglect a wide variety of terrorist motives and agendas. Terrorism is used by networks and nationally based insurgent groups with many diverse goals – and by groups of marginalized young Muslims motivated less by doctrine than by anger, moral outrage, and intense loyalty to a wide variety of groups based on friendship or kinship.

As counterterrorism consultant Marc Sageman wrote recently, “Let us not make the mistake of overly intellectualizing this fight. It is indeed a contest for the hearts and minds of potential terrorists.” But it is more about feelings and emotions than an “intellectual debate about the legitimacy of an extreme interpretation of a religious message.”<sup>9</sup>

**3. Rethink government-sponsored international broadcasting and adapt to new media.** Americans “rediscover” public diplomacy in wartime. U.S. international broadcasters responded to 9/11 by creating the Arabic-language Radio Sawa and Al Hurra Television networks, and by shifting the focus of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to Iran, Iraq, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Broadcasters used the “war on terrorism” to make the case for additional resources, and Congress was quick to comply. The U.S. international broadcasting budget is roughly equivalent to the funding for all State Department information and educational exchange programs.

Like all broadcasters, however, government broadcasters are challenged by splintered audiences for multiple television channels and new forms of information flow on the Internet. They compete not only with Al Jazeera and other global media, but also with many successful local and regional broadcasters. Market density is a good predictor of success or failure in government broadcasting: the more competitive the market, the higher the signal to noise ratio and the higher the costs.

The Internet is breaking the one-to-many broadcast model. The Internet’s “long tail” – meaning a few dominant sites with an unlimited number of smaller sites all transmitted at almost zero cost – vastly increases user choice. Open source software enables wiki applications and content creation by users. Viral connectivity allows information to spread like an epidemic with multiplier effects through different media forms. And new social media such as YouTube, MySpace, chat rooms, video games, and virtual worlds are changing media habits, especially among the young.

Governments must consider whether the priority they give to message transfer through broadcasting can be sustained in a media environment dominated by user choice and new media forms. Wise decisions require an understanding of

media trends and more willingness by the broadcasters to supplement their market research with research on the impact of their broadcasts.

That terrorists and insurgent groups use the Internet to advantage is well known. Experts vary in their assessments, however. For many, terrorists are seen to have an edge due to their greater flexibility, decentralized leadership, and a strategy that gives top priority to the political possibilities of new media. But others, such as RFE/RL's Daniel Kimmage in his new report on *The Al Qaeda Media Nexus*, contend that Al Qaeda and its affiliates are stuck in Web 1.0 while the world moves to Web 2.0. Kimmage argues that because they "fear the intrusion of free-thinking, content generating individuals, they maintain strict message control." They resemble "the stodgy structures of traditional mainstream media" in a world "run wild with self-created content and interactivity."<sup>10</sup>

Whether governments can compete in Web 2.0 remains to be seen. Duncan MacInnes, a senior American diplomat, recently told Congress the U.S. needs "new tactics to counter an elusive and decentralized non-state foe who uses the Internet and new technologies to spread its ideology of violence." He called for a shift in resources from elites to "a broader audience" that includes potential recruits to terrorism and those who are "young, marginalized or disaffected and hostile towards and suspicious of the United States."

Public diplomacy's new tools include coordinated web hosting, streaming video and blogging. The State Department's Digital Outreach Team uses diplomats with strong Arabic-language skills to post entries on influential Arabic-language blogs. They challenge misrepresentations and provide information about U.S. policies and American society. According to MacInnes, "These bloggers speak the language and idiom of the region, know the cultural reference points and are often able to converse informally and frankly rather than adopt the usually more formal persona of a U.S. government spokesperson."<sup>11</sup> This departure in U.S.

public diplomacy requires new skills and cultural sensitivity. It is labor intensive. And its impact remains to be evaluated.

**4. *Emphasize net-centric actors and actions.*** Stovepipes and tribal cultures have long dominated U.S. public diplomacy. Hierarchies and concentrated expertise have their place. But today's technologies and social structures favor networks, hybrid institutions, and flexible practitioners in and out of government. Imaginative voices in public diplomacy are calling for mindsets that emphasize actions and a multi-stakeholder approach.

Before she stepped down, former Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes began to speak of a public diplomacy strategy grounded in a "diplomacy of deeds." Actions such as providing health care, education, economic opportunity, food and shelter, and help after disasters, she argued, "can communicate values and beliefs far more effectively than all of our words."<sup>12</sup>

So too can actions that eliminate symbols of an intolerant and unjust America. As a bipartisan report on *Smart Power*, led by Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage, urges, the U.S. should start planning to close Guantanamo now.<sup>13</sup>

A recent Defense Science Board report on *Strategic Communication* looked at a variety of civil society initiatives such as *One Laptop Per Child*, an organization founded by MIT's Nicholas Negroponte to provide poor children with durable, inexpensive laptop computers; *Sesame Street's* international co-productions; and *Developing Radio Partners*, an NGO that supports independent radio stations in developing countries. The Defense Science Board also examined traditional government funded activities ranging from Fulbright scholarships, to the Peace Corps, to foreign assistance, to the U.S. Navy's hospital ship visits.<sup>14</sup> Some of these activities receive no more than moral support from political leaders. Some receive government seed money. Others steady stream public funding.

A key lesson for public diplomacy, the Defense Science Board concluded, is that these and other initiatives by government and civil society actors enhance trust and credibility. They deserve higher priority than disseminating information and getting the message right.

Public diplomacy requires unusual leaders and flexible practitioners willing to take risks. Whether we keep the term “public diplomat” for the next generation or adopt new labels -- political entrepreneurs or even guerrilla diplomats have been suggested -- practitioners must learn to operate in the space between state and non-state actors on multiple issues in constantly changing patterns of interaction. Governments need people who can adapt quickly in a world where networked adversaries, new technologies, and low probability, high impact events will have unforeseen impact. This is not work for your grandparent’s public diplomacy.

**5. Leverage deep comprehension – and knowledge, skills, and creativity in civil society.** Understanding mindsets and cultures has long been part of public diplomacy. Opinion polls, focus groups, and embassy reports on host-country attitudes have been used for decades, although budgets for this work are tiny. U.S. public diplomacy still spends less on opinion research than most major American political campaigns. The State Department’s annual opinion research budget is roughly \$10 million.

Polling and reporting are essential. But media analysis deserves higher priority. Media frames set agendas and shape much of what people know about news and global events. Political actors go to great lengths to influence the media frames of publics and competing elites. There are other tools also. Internet mining and automated sentiment analysis tools can be used to monitor opinion changes. Social network analysis software can identify key players and their connections as a basis for developing public diplomacy strategies.

Anthropologists and psychologists also have much to offer. David Kilcullen – an anthropologist who advised General Petraeus in Iraq and now advises the Department of State – argues the importance of human psychological and social factors in what’s happening in counterterrorism. “The Islamic bit is secondary,” he says. “This is human behavior in an Islamic setting. This is not Islamic behavior. People don’t get pushed into rebellion.”<sup>15</sup>

Political leaders and public diplomats talk more about “listening.” But the talk is entirely too casual. Listening means deep comprehension of cultures, attitudes, beliefs, media filters, and social systems. It means seeing how others see us – and how they interpret our motives and actions. Importantly, it means understanding non-elite networks and youth sub-cultures – and understanding communication flows that are bottom up and many-to-many.

To strengthen public diplomacy, we need to take government collaboration with civil society to a new level. Academic, scientific, and research communities offer untapped resources in knowledge domains, languages, training, and evaluation. The commercial sector has a competitive edge in media production and information technologies. Civil society organizations often are more credible and more agile than governments. Leveraging civil society can strengthen discourse norms and shared values. And it sits more easily with the logic of networks and 21<sup>st</sup> century changes in global governance.

Creating an independent, Congressionally-funded Center for Global Engagement as a means to link government and civil society is attracting attention in the United States. Groups as diverse as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Defense Science Board, Business for Diplomatic Action, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies have written reports recommending such an entity.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently called for “new thinking about how to integrate government capabilities with those in the private sector, in universities, [and] in other non-governmental organizations, with the capabilities of our allies and our friends.” He also made news by calling for greater investment in the instruments of soft power rather than relying disproportionately on military power.<sup>16</sup>

These proposals differ in their details. But there is broad agreement that public diplomacy requires critical skills and knowledge to be found outside government. And there is general agreement as well that recreating a government hierarchy – the US Information Agency or a new version of USIA – is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century solution.

## **Conclusion**

One final thought. This conference is about “assessing and countering jihadist propaganda.” It’s an important topic. By painting on a broader canvas, I don’t mean to minimize its importance. But I do find persuasive the view that terrorism is not an existential threat to the United States. That overreaction to terrorism can be destabilizing and play to terrorist agendas. And that we run a considerable risk if we focus exclusively or even predominantly on the so-called “war of ideas” or “war on terrorism” -- or on fighting Al Qaeda and radical Islamists, or on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The “strategic buffet” we face is enormous – nuclear proliferation; asymmetric threats from many non-state actors who are not terrorists, failed states, the growing power of states in Asia; famine, disease, and genocide in Africa; global pandemics; trade; emerging scientific, environmental, and energy issues.

Public diplomacy is relevant to each. By focusing with myopic intensity on counterterrorism we dilute public diplomacy and other instruments of statecraft. We should think about public diplomacy in a very broad context.

I have suggested five considerations in thinking about public diplomacy and lessons from the U.S. experience in counterterrorism.

1. Abandon the message influence model.
2. Change the ideological frame.
3. Rethink government international broadcasting and adapt to new media.
4. Emphasize net-centric actions and actors.
5. Leverage deep comprehension and the knowledge, skills, and creativity in civil society.

I welcome contrasting views and look forward to our conversation.

Bruce Gregory  
Director, Public Diplomacy Institute  
Adjunct Assistant Professor of  
Media and Public Affairs  
George Washington University  
805 21st Street, NW - Room 410  
Washington, DC 20052  
(202) 994-0389  
[BGregory@gwu.edu](mailto:BGregory@gwu.edu)

---

---

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Melissen, Jan, ed., *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005; Andrew F. Cooper, Brian Hocking, and William Maley, eds., *Global Governance and Diplomacy: Worlds Apart?* Palgrave-Macmillan, (publication forthcoming, June 2008). See also Geoffrey Cowan and Nicholas J. Cull, eds., “Public Diplomacy in a Changing World,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC), U.S. Department of State, June 2007, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, *Executive Order Establishing the Office of Global Communications*, January 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030121-3.html>; Condoleezza Rice, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Memorandum, “Establishment of the Strategic Communication Policy Coordination Committee, September 10, 2002; *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, W.W. Norton & Company, 376; <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf> Stephen J. Hadley, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Memorandum, “Establishment of the Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications Policy Coordination Committee,” April 8, 2006; *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, June 2007, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and Bud Goodall, *A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas: From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity*, Report #0701, Consortium for Strategic Communication, April 3, 2007, 7. <http://www.comops.org/article/114.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, (Free Press Paperbacks, 1997, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006, 10, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/nsct2006.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Final Paper of the Princeton Project on National Security, September 27, 2006, 41, <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, W.W. Norton & Company.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, 157

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Kimmage, *The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message*, RFE/RL Special Report, March 2008, [http://docs.rferl.org/en-S/AQ\\_Media\\_Nexus.pdf](http://docs.rferl.org/en-S/AQ_Media_Nexus.pdf).

---

<sup>11</sup> Duncan MacInnes, Principal Deputy Coordinator, Bureau of International Programs, Department of State, *Strategic Communication and Counter Ideological Support for Terrorism*, statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, November 15, 2007.

[http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/TUTC111507/MacInnes\\_Testimony111507.pdf](http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/TUTC111507/MacInnes_Testimony111507.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, June 2007,

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007,

[http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071106\\_csissmartpowerreport.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Defense Science Board Task Force Report on *Strategic Communication*, January 2008,

[http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2008-01-Strategic\\_Communication.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2008-01-Strategic_Communication.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in George Packer, "Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redefine the War on Terror?" *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2006, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact2).

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Gates, U.S. Secretary of Defense, *Landon Lecture*, Remarks Delivered in Manhattan, Kansas, November 26, 2007, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>.