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# Broadcasting Democracy? Matching Foreign Policy Goals and Messages

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Two recent international dilemmas have led to growing calls for renewed and revamped public diplomacy. The first: the deteriorating international opinion of the United States since September 11, 2001, as demonstrated in a wide array of public opinion polls, has made the American public increasingly aware of the divide between the U.S. and foreign populations. The second: America's standing in the so-called war of ideas has framed this divide in terms of the familiar "war" theme—for example, the "war on drugs"—reminding the American public that there is a negative force to defeat. The hope is that by revitalizing public diplomacy, both crises will be remedied, first by winning the "war of ideas" and thereby improving international public opinion.

If nothing else, these problems have lit a fire under those interested in public diplomacy. The Cold War's end initiated a sleepy time for public diplomacy—concerns about international influence subsided and the

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United States Information Agency (USIA) went limp inside the larger bureaucracy of the U.S. Department of State. A 2006 study by *Foreign Policy* and the Center for American Progress of more than 100 U.S. foreign policy experts, including former Secretaries of State and retired military and intelligence officers, rated U.S. efforts at public diplomacy lowest of all policy initiatives since September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> Public diplomacy is now viewed as the stepchild of American policymaking tools. Putting the pieces of public diplomacy back together will be both an important and challenging initiative for a new generation of diplomats, bureaucrats, scholars, and business leaders.

Crafting a new public diplomacy strategy will be difficult, especially when public diplomacy is defined in varying ways. Jarol B. Manheim

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explains that public diplomacy intends to “influence public or elite opinion in a second nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation to advantage.”<sup>2</sup> According to this definition, it is a tool used in support of foreign policy goals. While this is not the only goal of public diplomacy, it is indeed an important and necessary one.

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 To revitalize public diplomacy, particularly the organizations funded by the U.S. Government, the message and the messenger must be understood together. As such, this paper will examine two important American organizations engaging in public diplomacy—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America—in order to evaluate each’s support of American foreign policy through broadcasting. By studying the message of the American international broadcasters together with U.S. foreign policy goals, the tool of public diplomacy can be better defined and molded for the purposes it aims to serve—purposes which are today undeniably important.

### THE STARTING POINT: PUBLIC OPINION CRISIS

America’s image problem is real. One recent poll of world public opinion found that the image of the United States “is bad and getting worse.”<sup>3</sup> According to Pew Charitable Trusts, “between 2002 and 2007 favorable views of the United States fell from 60 to 30 percent in Germany, from 61 to 29 in Indonesia and from 30 to 9 in Turkey.”<sup>4</sup> Not only is opinion deteriorating in the Muslim world but also throughout Europe.

But all news is not bad. A recent poll conducted by the BBC World Service demonstrates that opinions of the United States are finally improving. Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, explains that “It may be that as the U.S. approaches a new presidential election, views of the U.S. are being mitigated by hope that a new administration will move away from the foreign policies that have been so unpopular in the world.”<sup>5</sup> According to the report by the BBC World Service, in the 23 countries polled, from Brazil to China, “the average percentage saying that the U.S. is having a positive influence has increased from 31 percent a year ago to 35 percent today while the view that it is having a negative influence has declined from 52 per cent to 47 per cent.”<sup>6</sup> The numbers are moving in a positive direction, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

Despite the slight improvement in opinion, there continues to be a belief that America is not successful in convincing the world of its message. In a 2007 *New York Times* article, James Traub argued that “We are locked once again in a war of ideas. And public-diplomacy enthusiasts would have us gird ourselves once again with the weapons of advocacy. But the political weapons of the cold war are as antiquated today as the military ones.”<sup>7</sup> According to Traub, the current state of public diplomacy is ultimately ineffective in waging the war of ideas it was intended to fight: “The radio and TV stations and glossy magazines that we have propagated across the Muslim world have accomplished almost nothing, but the American military’s swift mobilization to help victims of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan did wonders for our image (if briefly).”<sup>8</sup>

Apparently, the effectiveness of American public diplomacy messages in the war of ideas continues to be debated. But first we must ask: what is America fighting for? What is victory in this war? It is hard to win a war of ideas if it is unclear which idea the United States is fighting for. If these questions are to be answered by looking to the foreign policy goals of the Bush administration, then democracy promotion must be a central feature of the war of ideas.

#### THE MESSAGE: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Democracy promotion is undeniably a dominant U.S. foreign policy message. As Michael Mandelbaum points out, “The President devoted his second inaugural address to the subject . . . and the White House has launched a series of initiatives designed to foster democracy across the globe, not least the military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>9</sup> The

National Security Strategy of the United States also articulates democracy as a primary goal, guiding the U.S. to “expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy.”<sup>10</sup> In a speech given at Georgetown University unveiling the State Department’s new concept of transformational diplomacy, Condoleezza Rice explained that the global democratic vision of the U.S. is “to work with our many partners around the world to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people—and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.”<sup>11</sup> Democracy is very much a central ideal influencing U.S. foreign policy statements.

A closer look at those deteriorating public opinion polls demonstrates that opinion of democracy is generally low. According to the 2007 findings of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 75 percent of Nigerians and 72 percent of Kenyans “like” American ideas about democracy, demonstrating a favorable opinion across Africa, which is mirrored in Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, and Ethiopia. But turn to the Middle East and South Asia and you find that 81 percent of Turks, 72 percent of Pakistanis, and 71 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza “dislike” American ideas about democracy. This is particularly concerning coming from Turkey—an example of a secular, democratic, Muslim state. Apparently, promoting favorable opinions of democracy is not only a goal of the Bush administration; it is also a necessary ingredient for improving international opinion of the United States.

Ideas about democracy are often separated from other beliefs about the U.S. In other words, opinions of the U.S. are “multidimensional,” and it is possible to have a favorable opinion of American universities,

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entertainment and products, while simultaneously demonstrating less favorable opinions of the American ideals of freedom and democracy.<sup>12</sup> As Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane explain in their recent study of anti-Americanism, ultimately “a somewhat favorable opinion of the United States may coexist with more skeptical attitudes about what America stands for.

... Likes and dislikes extensively coexist in people’s minds as they evaluate the multifaceted nature of America.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that the German Marshall Fund’s most recent Transatlantic Trends Survey has found that “Europeans continue to distinguish between their views of

President Bush and their views of the United States more generally.”<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, public diplomats need to focus not on opinions in general, or a war of ideas in general, but on opinions of democracy and freedom. A strategy shift that acknowledges the need for, and role of, democracy promotion in public diplomacy will lead to more focused messages. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell perhaps best articulated this connection: “We are selling a product. The product we are selling is democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

### BROADCASTING DEMOCRACY: A LOOK AT RFE/RL AND VOA

The role of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy is heavily debated in the academic community. Gideon Rose explains that this debate is between “exemplars” and “crusaders:”

‘Exemplars’ are wary of the costs associated with a messianic foreign policy and skeptical about U.S. ability to effect true political change in other countries. They prefer to cheer history along from the sidelines. ‘Crusaders’ are more optimistic about the possibility of shaping political development elsewhere and more willing to bear costs in the attempt.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Carothers, typically associated with crusader democracy promotion, argues that a policy focused on spreading the idea of democracy, supporting civil society, and opening the political landscape can strategically “move non-democratic countries to the starting point of what democracy promoters hope will be a subsequent sequence of democratization.”<sup>17</sup> He further explains that while the effects of democracy promotion efforts are often unclear, the process is what matters: “. . . the value of democracy programs is often not in their specific effects on institutions but the way they reshape the attitudes or ideas of individuals.”<sup>18</sup>

On the other side of the democracy promotion debate is Fareed Zakaria, who has written about the failure of democratic values in permeating democratic regimes. He explains that “democracy is flourishing; liberty is not.”<sup>19</sup> Zakaria’s strategy for supporting the values of democracy is by example. Other scholars, such as Michael Mandelbaum agree. He argues that liberty cannot be imposed from the outside: “Not only does the apparatus of liberty take time to develop, it must be developed independently and domestically; it cannot be sent from elsewhere and implanted, ready-made. The requisite skills and values can be neither imported nor outsourced.”<sup>20</sup>

Public diplomacy fits well into this democracy promotion debate. However, it is missing from much of the academic literature, which focuses

more heavily on non-media tools of democracy promotion, such as aid and election monitoring. Despite this oversight, the American international broadcasters do engage in democracy promotion—both as exemplars and crusaders. And democracy promotion is a central component of the missions of both Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America (VOA). However, these organizations demonstrate different styles of democracy promotion: RFE/RL has adopted both crusader and exemplar-style democracy promotion tactics, while VOA favors exemplar-style democracy promotion. Regardless of style, both organizations frequently report on issues closely related to democracy—from exposés on corruption to investigative reports on human rights abuses.

For VOA employees, the organization's Charter guides daily tasks. The Charter argues that "to be effective, the Voice of America must win the attention and respect of listeners." Therefore, it calls on VOA to be "accurate, objective, and comprehensive" and to "present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively."<sup>21</sup> The crux of VOA's mission is to act as an example of free media—demonstrating exemplar democracy promotion. Like VOA, RFE/RL attempts to promote democracy as an example of free media, but unlike VOA, it simultaneously uses the influence of the media to promote the values and institutions necessary for successful transitions to democracy. The goals of RFE/RL are explained in the organization's mission statement: "to promote democratic values and institutions by disseminating factual information and ideas." Therefore, as countries in Eurasia attempt to "overcome autocratic institutions," RFE/RL will strengthen "civil societies by projecting democratic institutions."<sup>22</sup> As such, RFE/RL, unlike VOA, is guided by a mission of direct and overt democracy promotion.

In their own words, employees of RFE/RL and VOA generally view democracy promotion as an element of their work. But how important this element is will depend not only on the mission of their organization but also on employee interpretation of that mission. Generally, interviews with employees at VOA demonstrate a strong connection to the VOA Charter. Elez Biberaj, VOA's Eurasia Director, says that "almost every decision is guided by the Charter."<sup>23</sup> Biberaj explains that when covering a story, reporters must present a balanced view to show various perspectives and must find interview subjects that demonstrate this wider view. He argues that VOA employees believe in open media but not in direct (or crusader) democracy promotion. VOA's Associate Director for Program Support, Gary Thatcher, explains: "We are not at all shy about saying that we bring Western journalistic practice, bringing both sides of the story, bringing the

traditions of fairness and openness to doing the tasks of journalists.”<sup>24</sup> But at the end of the day, Letitia King, Acting Director, Office of Public Affairs, explains that the goal of VOA is to report “what’s news, not what advances democracy. We do not stay on message.”<sup>25</sup> This is true exemplar democracy promotion—the values of democratic practices dictate internal work, but resources are not used to support foreign political change. The news of the day trumps the American political agenda.

RFE/RL takes a different approach. Biberaj believes that the difference between VOA and RFE/RL is that VOA “cannot lobby. This is not the case for RFE; they can lobby on their own and the Director of RFE is more free.” This freer approach is one factor that has guided RFE to “go native,” explains Biberaj:

They may have about 10 or 15 people in their Moscow bureau who write about local government. We also report about massive developments in Russia, but that’s not the main thing we do. If you travel, as I have, and tune into RFE/RL, you can hardly tell the difference between them and a local station.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, RFE/RL offers a different flavor of exemplar democracy promotion, functioning as a “surrogate station,” demonstrating what local media could be in a more open political landscape. According to Kenan Aliyev, Senior Multi-Media Producer for RFE/RL’s Azerbaijan Service, the idea is for RFE to “sound local” because if you “sound foreign, people reject it.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, RFE/RL acts as a shining example of free media, with local voices speaking the language of free press. The difference between RFE/RL and VOA is subtle, RFE/RL is a surrogate version of exemplar democracy promotion, while VOA demonstrates the broader example of American open media.

RFE/RL works not only towards exemplar democracy promotion but also to influence political change through crusader-style democracy promotion. Aliyev explains that “promoting human rights, democracy, free press” are very much part of the “mission oriented”

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work of RFE/RL. He further explains that the biggest roadblock is the “repressive [and] authoritarian” local government, and thus RFE/RL’s ultimate challenge is changing the political landscape. Kambiz Tavana, the Deputy Director of Radio Farda, the Farsi language service at RFE/RL, explains that

“the mentality of trusting media in the East is not the same,” and it is this mentality that first and foremost RFE/RL attempts to change.<sup>28</sup> By providing an example of free media, Tavana hopes to change values and perceptions of the public, anticipating that change will work up the ladder to the authoritarian government of Iran.

For Liz Fuller, a Regional Analyst focusing on the southern Caucasus at RFE/RL, the guiding principle of her work is accuracy. She is able to use facts to create a political message: “I will point out when the Georgian Prime Minister says something pro-democracy but that contradicts himself in a recent crackdown.”<sup>29</sup> Fuller says she can “play things up,” such as election rigging, as broadcasting tone is “left to the discretion of the analyst.” This is the freedom and potential of international broadcasting as a tool of public diplomacy, in support of U.S. foreign policy goals. But despite the mission statements of RFE/RL, Fuller said, “newline is not out specifically to promote democracy.” Although she has used the media to promote democracy in the southern Caucasus, she does not view democracy promotion as central to the goals of her work. This contradiction is neither unusual nor new. Perhaps it is because there is a tendency to separate public diplomacy from democracy promotion, which permeates the academic literature as well as employee perceptions of their jobs.

This is also the case for VOA employees, despite recent additions to broadcasting that appear to mirror U.S. foreign policy objectives in democracy promotion, such as a show called “Today’s Woman” on the Persian News Network and additional hours of broadcasting in Burmese and Korean. VOA’s \$172.4 million budget cannot be equally distributed to all 45 languages of broadcast, and therefore providing open media in democratically-challenged countries is a priority from a strategic point of view, regardless of employee discomfort with the notion of democracy promotion.

#### **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION: THE HISTORIC DISCOMFORT**

Public diplomats have historically failed to see democracy promotion as central to their work, despite the mission statements of the organizations of American international broadcasting. In a recent study examining attitudes and opinions of former USIA employees, democracy promotion ranked low on the list of objectives for U.S. public diplomacy.<sup>30</sup> These former USIA employees ranked democracy promotion sixteenth out of 20 priorities guiding U.S. public diplomacy—more important were objectives such as creating “a positive image for the U.S.,” “an understanding

of American life,” and countering “disinformation campaigns.” However, taking a closer look at the study shows that many of the objectives given higher priority than democracy promotion are part of, or furthered by, promoting the ideals and values central to democracy, such as “advancing U.S. foreign policy” and “defending U.S. ideals abroad.”<sup>31</sup> Actual democracy promotion is not part of the dominant understanding of the work of public diplomacy according to these former USIA employees, although it is undeniably linked to other favored objectives.

In the same study, democracy initiatives were ranked twentieth in a list of 23 effective public diplomacy initiatives, indicating a belief by former USIA employees that democracy promotion is either not a focus of efforts or is not worth focusing on due to ineffectiveness.<sup>32</sup> In this study, only “psychological warfare,” “disinformation campaigns,” and “paid advertisements” ranked lower than democracy promotion efforts (ranked twenty-first through twenty-third), indicating the disfavor towards promoting democracy, despite its central role in U.S. foreign policy objectives, both today and during the Cold War.

Employees can be guided by missions while simultaneously viewing their day-to-day work in another light. As Kathy Fitzpatrick, the author of the study, explains: “Despite conventional wisdom that American public diplomacy’s primary mission during the Cold War was to defeat commu-

nism, this specific objective ranked eleventh on this list of objectives considered by former USIA officers to be most important to the primary mission of public diplomacy during the Cold War.”<sup>33</sup> This study is important to consider in the efforts to revamp public diplomacy for the current crisis in international public opinion. Despite the central role of democracy promotion in statements coming from Washington, it cannot be assumed that democracy promotion is central to the work of public diplomats, even with mission

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statements that apparently support democracy promotion work. Changing the perceptions of public diplomats, and articulating the importance of democracy promotion, may be a crucial step in aligning public diplomacy with U.S. foreign policy goals.

## GOING FORWARD: STARTING BEFORE THE CRISIS

Former USIA Director Edward R. Murrow believed that public diplomacy must be included in policy “take offs,” not brought in at times of crisis for the “crash landings.”<sup>34</sup> The current calls for revitalized public diplomacy were sparked by a public opinion crisis; they were too late. Of course, public diplomacy is about more than just chasing polls. Public diplomats must work together with U.S. foreign policymakers both to consider effects of policy on foreign opinion from the outset and to coordinate communications and support foreign policy goals.

Vague calls for more public diplomacy, while bolstering the debate, have left those engaging in the practice with little in terms of strategy or measurable goals. Defining the message of U.S. public diplomacy is a good

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..... first step to remedy this trend. While democracy promotion is not the only policy message, it is indeed a central one and has a large role to play in public diplomacy. While various strategies of democracy promotion—both crusader and exemplar—influence the work of public diplomacy in general and international broadcasting specifically, public diplomats, both past and present, seem to have a discomfort with democracy promotion. Employees of VOA and RFE/RL who are skeptical about their involvement with democracy promotion should be reassured that promoting open media, and pursuing truth in journalism, is in fact the work of democracy promotion. Democracy promotion and the news are not at odds. But when democracy promotion and public diplomacy are at odds, both suffer. Engaging in a conversation about the actual goals of public diplomacy, reassessing missions, and evaluating how missions translate into actual messages are the necessary steps to truly initiate the revitalization of public diplomacy. By doing so, Murrow’s advice may finally be heeded, and public diplomacy can claim its place at the policy table. ■

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