
 INTRODUCTION

“Credible Public Diplomacy”: Truth and Policy, Persuasion and People

ALAN K. HENRIKSON

Inspired by Edward R. Murrow’s statement that “truth is the best propaganda,” students, faculty, staff, and alumni and alumnae of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy—together with colleagues from other parts of Tufts University and also friends from Harvard University—organized and carried out a two-day discussion of the theme “Credible Public Diplomacy: A Lesson for Our Times” at the 100th Anniversary Edward R. Murrow Memorial Conference held at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy on April 14–15, 2008. “To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful,” Murrow memorably said in May 1963 when he was Director of the United States Information Agency (USIA). “It is as simple as that.”

Fundamentally, this is surely correct—as well as wise. America’s first diplomat, Benjamin Franklin, himself advised, “Honesty is the best policy.” The actual articulation and administration of a diplomacy based on truth is, however, anything but simple. A nation’s diplomacy is based on self-interest as well as on the particular values and historical experiences that shape its identity. Identities are unique; “truth,” by contrast, is arguably universal—valid irrespective of nationality, culture, religion, or other differentiating factors among peoples, whose minds are assumed to make the same inherent observations.

Alan K. Henrikson, Director of Diplomatic Studies at The Fletcher School, chaired the 100th Anniversary Edward R. Murrow Memorial Conference. He is author of What Can Public Diplomacy Achieve? (Clingendael, 2006).

One need not resort to a philosophy of relativism to realize that persuasion in international relations, especially in the highly mediatized public sphere of today, depends on more than fact or logic. Chäim Perelman in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* stresses the relation of argument to audience: it is the audience's adherence, rather than the speaker's demonstration, that ultimately makes an argument persuasive. This applies to a verbal defense of a country's foreign policy as well as to an academic

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exposition. Close attention to others' beliefs and opinions is essential and respectful. Audiences are specific, with very different preoccupations and receptivities. Selection of data and what Perelman calls "presence"—that is, points acting directly on listeners' sensibility—are needed for effective argument.

In diplomacy, the United States and many other countries, including smaller ones with little or no physical power to rely on, have focused on generating positive images of themselves in the minds of others through "place branding" and other advertising and marketing techniques. Another, more argumentative approach is to try to gain narrative dominance—to displace existing accounts of a conflicted history or a disputed current event with the country's or group's "own story." Even non-state actors, with ready access to electronic and other channels of communication, can make winning arguments in today's global public arena.

Real intellectual conviction may depend, as Murrow famously said, on "the last three feet"—on direct representation through international exchange, in face-to-face meeting, and through conversation. "Credible public diplomacy," in the last analysis, connects people and joins minds. Traditional diplomacy does this; public diplomacy can do so as well. Murrow, when an Institute of International Education officer, a CBS broadcaster, and then USIA Director, did this brilliantly. His example is still influential and inspirational, as the pieces in this special issue of *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* admirably attest. ■