

A CALL FOR FOCUS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

SYNOPSIS

Many European and Western states use cultural diplomacy to help open up repressive societies and provide access to information in countries where freedom of expression is not the norm. Yet these efforts often fail dismally. This paper lays out six principles that would help improve cultural diplomacy in the future.

DETAILS

This paper is an updated version of one first delivered at The Berlin International Freedom of Expression Forum – Censorship and Freedom in Traditional and New Media: The Revolution of Media as a tool of Freedom of Expression (Berlin, International Conference, February 28th - March 2nd, 2012).

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INTRODUCTION

Plenty of governments have tried to get involved in cultural diplomacy. Many of these efforts have been directed by Western states at the populations of autocracies, with the specific aim of increasing access to unbiased information and thereby fighting restrictions on freedom of expression. This is crucial work. It is therefore a problem that such efforts so often fairly disastrously. This paper examines some of the flaws in the practice of government-directed cultural diplomacy at present, and proposes a new research-led approach. It is hoped that this approach will improve government efforts to communicate information to populations whose governments deny it to them.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AT PRESENT

Cultural diplomacy, for the purposes of this paper, is a state's deliberate use of popular aspects of its own culture to increase its favorability among the population of another state.¹ It is a subset of what may more widely be termed influence, which is the marshalling of all aspects of a state's power in order to persuade a state into acting according to the first state's wishes. The theory runs that the targeted population will love this popular culture, and in turn grow to love the whole of the state, including its foreign policy – and will then somehow pressurize their government to act according to the first state's wishes.

Cultural diplomacy therefore rests on a number of suspect assumptions. First, it assumes that the targeted population will appreciate the cultural output they are offered. Often, they will simply reject it as dull or not relevant. This was largely the case with Al-Hurra, the US' Arabic language satellite channel, which was simply ignored by the Middle Eastern youth to whom it was supposed to appeal. There is no rigorous system for establishing what will appeal to the population. At best, cultural diplomacy programs are presently designed in consultation with a number of relevant experts from within and without government, plus often emigrants or exiles from the targeted country, who are divorced from their native population.

Second, it rests on a unified vision of culture, in which liking music and respecting foreign policy are simply different points on a single spectrum. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that this is not the case. For instance, research in Saudi Arabia has repeatedly demonstrated the clear divide between enthusiasm for Hollywood and distaste for US support of Israel; in China, young people dislike the US' support of Taiwan – but still fight to study at its colleges. It is perfectly possible for even the poorly educated to appreciate one aspect of a state while criticizing another, and it is a characteristic of extreme elements of a society to fail to differentiate between the two.²

Third, it assumes that the targeted population, once convinced, has some power to exert pressure on their government. This is particularly important, given that cultural diplomacy is most often practiced by liberal democratic states targeting repressive states. On some level, Vaclav Havel's view may be valid, that the smallest individual, by living in truth,

¹ Many non-state actors also practice cultural diplomacy, but the conventional view of the field is state-based. Of course, a whole range of non-state actors are involved in carrying out cultural diplomacy, including musicians, businesses, universities and NGOs.

² Extreme here refers not to those who hold certain beliefs about violence or those whose views are distant from liberal democracy, but rather those whose views are distant from those of their own society, and whose views are uncompromising and all-encompassing.

exposes a regime. However, it is undeniable that some population groups and individuals are more privileged and able to pressurize the regime. Often, the offerings of cultural diplomacy most appeal to middle class youth, who have neither the seniority nor the ideological commitment to have major influence on repressive regimes. Though they may go on to hold such influence later in their careers, it is unlikely that one rock and roll concert in their youth will hold the power to persuade them after decades of working within the system.

Fourth, cultural diplomacy is generally only tenuously connected to foreign policy objectives. Often the aim is to persuade the target population to like the state, on the assumption that they will be more receptive to any and all foreign policy initiatives that follow. In fact, the approach needed to achieve tacit consent in Jordan for US support of Israel is markedly different from the approach needed to promote active support for the PA in Gaza.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, the effects of cultural diplomacy are usually not measured. At best, measurement presently consists of measuring performance, using metrics such as number of programs broadcast, and number of people who listened to it. Neither of these measure whether the program has been successful, not just in changing attitudes, but in achieving a definite policy objective.

THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

A more effective approach to cultural diplomacy would be far more focused. It would center around six principles.³

1. **Effective influence attempts to alter behavior, not simply attitudes.** Influence should attempt to achieve a specific, measurable and unambiguous behavioral objective. Persuading Afghan Pashtuns to like Britain is a waste of money; persuading them to join the Afghan National Army is far more useful.
2. **Influence is most efficient and effective when it targets self-identifying social groups, because behaviors are determined by the social context.** Cultural diplomacy directed at Chinese people is likely to fail, and so too is cultural diplomacy directed at Chinese males aged 18-32. Far more useful is cultural diplomacy aimed at Netizens, because they have a shared culture.
3. **Influence efforts must be attuned to local culture and circumstance to have any chance of success.** Conclusions must be 'audience-centric'; they must adopt the perspective of the target audience. The best way to do this is through rigorous social science research. Three white British bureaucrats in a London office will not come up with an effective way of persuading Indians to buy British products. Asking a few British citizens of Indian origin for their opinions is only slightly better. Qualitative and quantitative research conducted by Indians in India is far more likely to generate effective cultural diplomacy strategies.
4. **Some pieces of cultural knowledge (for instance, motivations) are far more valuable than others, because they are diagnostic.** That is, they help eliminate a great many possible hypotheses and approaches, meaning that you reach the correct solution more quickly. For instance, if all Rwandans hope to own a house, then cultural diplomacy efforts focused the success of UN efforts to help people buy a car will just be ignored.
5. **A holistic understanding of a problem can often yield counter-intuitive but more effective solutions.** This means that quantitative research is not always the most useful technique. Though it can provide hard numbers that are simple to understand, it should be preceded by semi-structured qualitative research that allows for a full investigation of the society at hand.
6. **Influence efforts without data-driven and audience-centric measures of effectiveness are a waste.** Situations change, and after a few years, even the best cultural diplomacy effort may stop having an effect. Measuring effectiveness regularly means that you know when this has happened, and can make adjustments accordingly. Vitally, you must measure effectiveness – not just how many hours of programming you broadcast into Myanmar, or how many people listened to it, but how many people changed their behavior accordingly.

CONCLUSION

I borrow from the thinking of the Behavioural Dynamics Institute – and in particular that of Dr. Lee Rowland – in the principles laid out above. These six principles, if followed rigorously, have the potential to revolutionize the practice of cultural diplomacy, thereby massively boosting efforts to help the citizens suffering under the yoke of repressive states.

³ These principles are adapted from those laid out in Rowland, Lee, 'Effective Influence and Strategic Communication: Some Conjectured First Principles', Mountain Runner, 25 October 2010, <http://mountainrunner.us/2010/10/effective-influence-and-strategic-communication/#.UdvUz7vLjEU>