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Introduction: Debating Public Diplomacy's Future

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Introduction
Debating Public Diplomacy’s Future

As its title — Debating Public Diplomacy — indicates, this special issue of The Hague Journal of Diplomacy (HJD) is more debate-focused than HJD’s previous thematic issues, which form a hallmark of the journal. It intends to stimulate new thinking on public diplomacy in our turbulent world. There are many definitions of public diplomacy, which, for the purposes of this special issue, we generally describe as a country’s efforts to create and maintain relationships with publics in other societies to advance policies and actions. The twelve essays collected in this volume seek to reflect on recent developments in the global information sphere that present new challenges for public diplomacy practitioners and, indeed, for academic analysis in the years ahead. If any consensus exists among the authors, it is that the present state of affairs across the globe constitutes a crisis, which is above all fomented by resurgent geopolitical rivalry and technological change impacting on international politics and state–society relations — and hence on the practice of public diplomacy. The articles are more argumentative than regular research papers; they are shorter and forward-looking.

We have commissioned the essays in this issue from thought-leaders, senior scholars and up-and-coming writers in the field, and we have pressed the authors to consider observable trends affecting public diplomacy strategies and practices. The analyses look at public diplomacy from multiple thematic angles, and this volume includes the sui generis case study of China as the world’s most prominent emerging power. China’s perspective serves as an important reminder that not all states see public diplomacy and state–society relations as a practice governed by the same principles or even aiming at comparable goals. References to Russian practices in this volume also suggest that public diplomacy is unfolding in different ways in different places, and explains how this factor is complicating international relationships in a much more citizen-centric world. Making sense of what is going on now, and what may be next in public diplomacy, is as relevant for rising powers as it is for declining states. It matters to powers big and small, and those in the middle or occupying policy niches, as it does to an array of non-state actors. Complex, transnational state–society dynamics confront all and challenge public diplomacy strategists as much as coalface practitioners. Still, in a broad sense, we believe that this special issue provides a better sense of where public diplomacy is going. It also gives the informed reader sufficient food for thought for upgrade a broadly shared understanding of public diplomacy that dates back to the ‘new public diplomacy’ literature of the first decade of this century.

One corollary of diplomacy’s progressive societization, in terms of the issues on the diplomatic agenda and the requirements of contemporary diplomatic practice involving multiple stakeholders, is that public diplomacy, also when it goes under another name, is becoming a more rather than less relevant component of diplomacy. This is not to be confused with an argument in favour of public diplomacy, which would be tantamount to being for, or against, the weather: academic students of public diplomacy have no evangelical cause. There are equally good analytical reasons for not conflating the practice of public diplomacy and academic analysis. Put simply, the articulation of policy problems in the minds of officials is different from the formulation of questions for research. The intrinsic motivation for studying public diplomacy cannot be reduced to the consultants’ mission of making organizations robust and resilient. Many researchers have nevertheless drawn inspiration from the prospect of change in practice and better policies and strategies, and social relevance can therefore be an important driver for research.

Public diplomacy, also when called by a different name, requires a reconceptualization of diplomatic practices to keep up with evolving models of public–private collaboration and communicative behaviours in the increasingly distributed system of states and global society. The progressive mainstreaming of principles of public diplomacy within governments and their foreign services, and the growing sense that this kind of diplomacy is regarded as the ‘new
conventional’, have turned it into a practice that is harder to localize within departments with circumscribed communication tasks. Generally speaking, there is less and less diplomacy without at least an element of public diplomacy, thus making the challenge of identifying its boundaries less relevant. For early 21st century foreign ministries at the centre of national diplomatic systems, doing public diplomacy well has necessitated greater familiarity with key public relations principles and communication techniques. It also implied the considerable and continuing task of successfully incorporating a variety of actors in their external relations, and understanding and meeting the requirements of engagement with not just foreign, but also domestic and ‘in-between’ diaspora publics. For other actors of growing consequence in the global system — including subnational actors, international institutions, multinational businesses and civil society organizations — public diplomacy principles and tools provide a valuable framework for their international interactions.

In order to move the research agenda forwards, but falling outside the scope of this special issue, we believe that the study of public diplomacy is in need of methodological precision, more theory, and that it would benefit from engagement with debates in disciplines and fields such as political science and international relations (IR), and others such as sociology, psychology, or communication studies. More cumulative, theory-oriented research on public diplomacy is a condition for analytical rigour and academic legitimacy. Yet the papers in this special issue have another objective. They aim at an expanded understanding of the practice of public diplomacy against the backdrop of current social, political and technological trends and some of the most salient trends in the global informational sphere.

The fifteenth anniversary in 2018 of the Center on Public Diplomacy (CPD) at the University of Southern California was one of two factors that prompted the initiative to compile this special issue. It has been the CPD’s aim throughout this period to service the field through professional education, policy analysis and scholarly research. Another incentive was our impression that, ten years after the 2008 publication of the influential volume dedicated to public diplomacy of The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, there is a need for highlighting some of the best thinking on public diplomacy. Like the 2008 Annals volume, our selection for The Hague Journal of Diplomacy is largely one of work written in the English-speaking world, with North America exerting considerable influence on the transnational market of ideas. The observation that other cultural perspectives enrich global public diplomacy scholarship, also in this journal, may seem obvious, but remains an important argument to make — in favour of intellectual diversity and to compensate for the forces that facilitate US and anglophone dominance in the study of international relations. Such considerations aside, other developments suggest that public diplomacy studies should be more diverse and less parochial. These include critiques on the relative importance of soft power or sharp-power practices challenging openness as a norm in public diplomacy and undermining democratic procedure.

This special issue ranges from a fundamental discussion of soft power (Nye) and public diplomacy principles (Cull), to the challenge of deep-rooted Westphalian perspectives on culture (Zaharna). It includes re-examinations of public diplomacy’s contribution to countering extremist violence (Seib), and relations with hostile non-democracies (Wiseman), as well as an argument on human behaviour driving the sharp-power campaigns that are turning traditional public diplomacy practices upside down (Nisbet and Kamenchuk). Two contributions aim to offer a better grasp of the impact of new technologies on state–society relations, organizational processes and diplomatic conduct (Bjola, Cassidy and Manor; Duncombe). Two other essays introduce novel concepts and new thinking, with an appreciation of the important widening of social and political communities beyond state boundaries (Brinkerhoff) and attention for the effects of the populist turn in contemporary politics (Cooper). One essay reflects on the role of Indo-Pacific leaders in public diplomacy (Byrne) and, as mentioned above, the article on China (Zhao) shows how it can be top-down and, going against the conventional wisdom in the literature, emphasizing telling rather than listening as one of its key principles. As guest editors, our aim is to offer authoritative, thought-provoking papers. Simultaneously, we would like to underscore our argument by building a more robust corpus of knowledge, including theoretical
tools and attention for the variety of public diplomacy practices outside the Western world, of which we still have too patchy a picture.

All of the following essays have been written by academics, therefore looking from the outside-in, rather than reflecting or extrapolating from personal experience. The perspectives in this issue build on accumulated knowledge since the turn of the century. As this special issue is looking forward rather than backward, it does not make a balance sheet of the early 21st-century evolution of public diplomacy. Nevertheless, there are numerous 'lessons learned' in the spheres of soft power and public diplomacy, many of which are summarized in the two scene-setting contributions. Essential soft-power features and core principles of public diplomacy, Nye and Cull suggest, remain valid and of significance in a world facing new crises.

The abstracts at the beginning of each essay provide a short summary of the main arguments. Their conclusions maintain an eye for policy implications. Although the interests of The Hague Journal of Diplomacy as an academic journal on diplomacy are, of course, by no means limited to the study of public diplomacy, the journal published 55 research articles and practitioners' essays on this subject from 2006 to 2018. In this way, it has contributed to the development of a sizeable quantity of resources on public diplomacy that is now available to researchers, as well as professionals honing their public diplomacy skills. This special issue of The Hague Journal of Diplomacy will hopefully inspire new research and provide stimulus for debate on what is one of the most remarkable early 21st-century developments in diplomacy and one, for that matter, that has challenged practitioners as much as theorists of diplomacy.
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