



Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting: Public Diplomacy or Propaganda?

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"The best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that."

– Edward R. Murrow

Introduction

Public diplomacy is heralded as the solution for winning hearts and minds around the world, but it is a rather vague and all encompassing term. Its goal is to educate, inform and engage foreign publics in an attempt to win their favor. States conduct public diplomacy in an attempt to sway foreign publics, who in turn could exert influence on their government's foreign policy decisions. Public diplomacy activities often include exchange programs, educational campaigns, and strategic messaging aimed at foreign publics. International broadcasting in particular is often an integral part of overall public diplomacy efforts, as it provides a media platform for one party to reach various large audiences simultaneously. Such large scale efforts at strategic messaging, or mass education, however, are often called propaganda. Many do not distinguish between public diplomacy and propaganda, saying that the former is simply a euphemism for the latter. This paper will examine this contention, and seek to define those characteristics that differentiate one activity from the other. It will then analyze Iran's international broadcasting arm, the Islamic Republic of Iran

Broadcasting (IRIB), in order to determine whether the organization is a tool of public diplomacy or propaganda.

Public Diplomacy Defined

Textbooks define traditional diplomacy as the "putting of foreign policies into practice" via "political contact between governments of different nations."¹ The roots of diplomacy trace back to the word diploma, a Greek word meaning a folded piece of paper. This folded paper implies a level of secrecy between the holder of the paper and the recipient.² The contents of the paper would be closely guarded and only shared with a small number of people. This traditional form of diplomacy was practiced by high level government ministers behind closed doors and only the results were made available to the public. Royce Ammon refers to traditional diplomacy as "old diplomacy" and says this form was practiced from the Renaissance period until World War I. Following the war, "new diplomacy" emerged, relying on newsprint and global television rather than on handwritten correspondence.³

The communications revolution that began at that time has steadily shifted, and continues to shift, the paradigm of diplomacy. Ammon argues that advances in communications have affected the way diplomacy is conducted in three ways: "first, by displacing traditional methods; second, by increasing the diplomatic influence of non-traditional sectors; and third, by accelerating diplomacy's pace."⁴ Today's version of

diplomacy—what Ammon calls ‘telediplomacy’—is characterized by its reliance on real time television. International broadcasting of radio and television has transformed diplomacy and world affairs. Global broadcasting not only defines the method of diplomacy, it also plays a significant role in shaping policy outcomes.⁵

Public diplomacy was created out of necessity in this new diplomacy context. No longer able to keep the public out of foreign affairs, world leaders tried instead to control or manage information available to foreign publics.

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The founding definition of public diplomacy comes from Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, upon the establishment of the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy in 1965. The Fletcher

catalogue described public diplomacy as:

...the role of the press and other media in international affairs, cultivation by governments of public opinion, the non-government interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another, and the impact of these transnational processes on the formulation of policy and the conduct of foreign affairs.⁶

The University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy offers an even broader definition of public diplomacy, extending its reach to include all government, NGO and private sector and cultural influencers of a foreign public. The Center:

...studies the impact of private activities - from popular culture to fashion to sports to news to the Internet - that inevitably, if not purposefully, have an impact on foreign policy and national security as well as on trade, tourism and other national interests. Moreover, the Center's points of inquiry are not

limited to U.S. governmental activities, but examine public diplomacy as it pertains to a wide range of institutions and governments around the globe.⁷

Political scientist Joseph Nye describes public diplomacy as a policy expression of what he terms ‘soft power.’⁸ Soft power, he states, “is the power of getting others to want the outcomes you want; it is the power of attraction. Instead of resorting to threats or physical force, soft power rests on the ability to seduce people into creating certain outcomes.”⁹ Nye also points to a variety of factors in addition to government policy that may contribute to soft power, including prevailing culture, attitudes, and values.

Mark Leonard, who directs the Foreign Policy Centre in London, breaks down public diplomacy into three dimensions.¹⁰ The first dimension is daily communication. At a basic level, this involves being present to offer a country’s point of view to journalists, diplomats, and the country as a whole. This ability to offer ‘our side of the story’ is essential because without it the audience is only hearing what their own government or media is telling them. If the goal is to influence or change minds of the publics, first one has to have access. In addition, the messages conveyed must be seen as credible by the audience and must be consistent with the prevailing national position. Messages that contradict peoples’ personal experiences will lead to confusion and ultimately distrust of the message sender. Perception is crucial in public diplomacy. Without the trust of the audience, the messages will fall on deaf ears.

Strategic communications is the second level of public diplomacy, according to Leonard. In order to ensure consistency, a single theme or strategic message must be projected by all official outlets. Strategic messages are usually conveyed and reinforced through a series of events and messages. In this phase, it is crucial that the message is constant and consistent.

Finally, at the heart of public diplomacy lies the third dimension, the development of long term human relationships. These relationships are built over long periods of time through

exchanges, training exercises, conferences, scholarships, and access to media channels, among other activities.

In addition to direct government public diplomacy efforts, there is also indirect public diplomacy. The brands and representatives of a country's companies often are more available to people around the world than are government officials.¹¹ American culture as conveyed by Hollywood, McDonald's, or Tiger Woods, for example, often has a significant impact on the way foreign publics view America. Real time television can also exert an indirect effect on policy; global television can first shape public opinion, which may subsequently influence foreign policy.¹²

Iran's Public Diplomacy

Iran is actively involved in public diplomacy, attempting to win hearts and minds abroad. However, unlike in the United States, where the government is expressly forbidden from using public diplomacy tactics on its own domestic residents, no such distinction exists in Iran. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the broadcasting arm of the Iranian regime, broadcasts both domestically on television and radio channels, as well as internationally on several radio channels and on the internet in over 24 different languages. According to the IRIB official website, the network pursues the goal of "familiarizing different world nations with Iran's history and culture as well as its different regions and historical sites." In addition, the Voice of Justice program is a "campaign against the U.S. interventionist policies."¹³

In its use of IRIB, Iran is actively involved in all three stages of public diplomacy as defined by Leonard. First, it dedicates all television, print, radio and internet sources to daily dissemination of the government messages and news. Second, it crafts consistent strategic messages and conveys them through those channels, a task that is facilitated by the government's control over virtually all legal media outlets in the country. Third, Iran participates in international exchanges, dialogues, conferences and other long-term relationship-building exercises, welcoming

foreign groups of students, sports teams, and artists to come to Iran and learn about its culture. In addition, the IRIB website provides a significant amount of material about Iran's culture and history.

The IRIB also fits with the explanation of public diplomacy offered by Monroe Price, co-director of Oxford University's Program in Comparative Media Law and Policy. Price argues that states have an interest in political stability and require citizens to 'buy in' to their messages in order to maintain control. Public diplomacy, he explains, is the crucial tool by which states compete in a 'market of loyalties' for the hearts and minds of citizens. This interchange occurs in what Price describes as a market as divided between 'sellers' and 'buyers' of information. The sellers control the means of communication and are able to convert myths, dreams, and history into power by crafting an identity that includes a loyalty to the state as a key element. Meanwhile, market buyers receive this information and adopt, or 'pay,' for this identity with 'loyalty' or patriotism that creates stability and allows the buyer to maintain control.¹⁴

This market is all the more essential in a dictatorship or closed society. Leaders rely on selling their messages domestically and abroad in an effort to maintain power and sustain the loyalty of their people by projecting a sense of identity to the buyers. In Iran, the IRIB is the primary market tool for selling the Iranian government's messages both internally and externally, in the hopes that it will pay off by creating stability. The government-sponsored network is comprised of seven domestic radio stations; 40 provincial radio stations broadcasting from Iran's 26 provinces; an international radio service with programs in more than 24 languages; eight domestic television channels; and satellite channels in Persian, Arabic, and several European languages. The IRIB also

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publishes its own newspaper, *Jaam-e Jam*. The English language service began broadcasting in 1956 and gained a higher priority after the 1979 revolution as a means for “elaborating on the revolution’s stances and the ideals of the Islamic system.”¹⁵

Propaganda

The question is then whether Iranian international broadcasting efforts also share elements of propaganda tactics. The American Heritage Dictionary defines propaganda as:

1. The systematic propagation of a doctrine or cause or of information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such a doctrine or cause.
2. Material disseminated by the advocates or opponents of a doctrine or cause: *wartime propaganda*.¹⁶

The IRIB’s stated objective of “familiarizing different world nations with Iran’s history and culture as well as its different regions and historical sites” fits with this definition, especially the Voice of Justice program described as a “campaign against the U.S. interventionist policies.”¹⁷

The network could equally well fit under the definition of propaganda by Paul Linebarger, an expert in psychological warfare, who in 1954 wrote that, “...propaganda consists of the planned use of any form of public or mass-produced communications designed to affect the minds and emotions of a given group for a specific purpose, whether military, economic, or political.”¹⁸

This definition, however, is problematic in that it overlaps with definitions of public diplomacy. What, then, differentiates one activity from the other? The *Economist* notes that the word propaganda “has come to have a derogatory meaning, of the dissemination of untruths.”¹⁹ If this is the case, are both only aspects of the same activity, and perception the only real difference, with propaganda evoking a distinctly negative reaction and public diplomacy a more favorable one?

Public Diplomacy vs. Propaganda

Terry Deibel and Walter Roberts address this question by breaking public diplomacy down into two different schools of thought. What they term the ‘tough-minded’ school “hold[s] that the purpose of public diplomacy is to exert an influence on attitudes of foreign audiences using persuasion and propaganda,” while the ‘tender-minded’ school, “argues that information and cultural programs must bypass current foreign policy goals to concentrate on the highest long-range national objectives. The goal is to create a climate of mutual understanding.”²⁰

Mark Leonard provides an example of the tender-minded school when he writes:

Public diplomacy is about building relationships: understanding the needs of other countries, cultures and peoples; communicating our points of view; correcting misperceptions; looking for areas we can find in common cause. The difference between public and traditional diplomacy is that public diplomacy involves a much broader group of people on both sides, and a broader set of interests that go beyond those of the government of the day. Public diplomacy is based on the premise that the image and reputation of a country are public goods which can create an enabling or a disabling environment for individual transactions.²¹

Edward Kaufman, a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, argues the more tough-minded side, stating:

Military power alone is often insufficient to resolve modern conflicts and will likely be unable to end this current war against terrorism. Effective broadcasting to ‘win hearts and minds’ strengthens the traditional triad of diplomacy, economic leverage, and military power and is the fourth dimension of foreign conflict resolution.

Particularly in times of crisis, the United States must deliver clear, effective programming to foreign populations via the media.²²

Thus, the tough minded see propaganda as an *aspect* of public diplomacy that is essential for winning hearts and minds. For the tender hearted, however, the distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda is more pronounced—they are more in favor of exchanges and dialogues, and less likely to rely solely on mass media broadcasting techniques. This is not to say that tender-hearted diplomats see no role for mass communication. As British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden aptly stated in 1937, “It’s perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best of diplomacy policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern communications impose.”²³

Regardless of which school of public diplomacy one ascribes to, there is another element that differentiates propaganda from public diplomacy. The Arabic Media Outreach coordinator at the Office of Strategic Communications Center in Baghdad highlights the interactive nature of public diplomacy. He argues that “propaganda can be a public diplomacy tool, but public diplomacy generally implies greater involvement of people on both sides.”²⁴ Public diplomacy has shifted over the years since its creation after the Second World War, and has gradually evolved to provide a greater role for dialogue and understanding. Whereas propaganda has strictly been the communication of one-way messages from one party to another, public diplomacy has included in its mission the desire to learn from the ‘other side’ and understand their needs as well.

Perhaps the clearest distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda is ‘spinning’ versus lying. Heritage Foundation analysts Stephen Johnson and Helle Dale argue that propaganda, in contrast to public diplomacy,

...is information deliberately propagated to help or harm a person, group, or institution, regardless of whether the information is true or false. To many not aware of its exact meaning, propaganda suggests disinformation. Public diplomacy and public affairs officers have always maintained that any information they convey must be truthful. Propaganda or not, it must deal with the facts.²⁵

This definition helps explain the negative connotation often associated with propaganda but less present with public diplomacy, and raises the idea of ‘the truth’ in conveying information to mass audience. While both public diplomacy and propaganda seek to convey information and persuade audiences, only public diplomacy maintains an adherence to conveying ‘facts.’ John Matel, Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. State Department, writes that “while advocacy (and ‘spin’) is definitely a part of [U.S.] public diplomacy, deception is not. In my nearly twenty years in the business, I have never been a part of a campaign that systematically distorted facts.”²⁶ This cannot be said about the IRIB.

Leonard argues that those who treat the term public diplomacy as a mere euphemism for propaganda miss the point. Simple propaganda often lacks credibility, and this is counterproductive as public diplomacy. Conveying information and selling a positive image is part of public diplomacy, but public diplomacy also involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for the carrying out of government policies.”²⁷

Moving Beyond Propaganda – Building Credibility

Public diplomacy has shifted over the years since its creation after the Second World War, and has gradually evolved to provide a greater role for dialogue and understanding.

It is credibility that is the key to effective public diplomacy, according to Lee McKnight, former head of the Edward R. Murrow Center at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Iran, however, is consistently ranked as one of the least trusted news sources in the world by international news monitoring agencies. The 2003 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Iran Report states, “the news provided by state television and radio is biased and inaccurate and the entertainment available there is not appealing.” In addition, it cites a Freedom House survey released on December 18, 2003, which placed Iran in the “Not Free” category. On a scale of one to seven, with seven being the least free rating, Iran earned a six for political rights and civil liberties.²⁸

Leonard argues that the first step in moving beyond propaganda to meaningful public

diplomacy is understanding the audience and listening to their needs in the hopes of persuading them to change their minds, rather than with the goal of proving that one side is right.²⁹ The experience of the listener should matter as much as the message being sent.³⁰ The IRIB does not seem to have an active listening component by

which it could understand, much less respond to, the audiences which it is trying to reach.

Building relationships, the third dimension of public diplomacy, is also crucial to moving beyond propaganda and making messages relevant to their intended audiences. Opening a dialogue of understanding is a much more effective tool for proving the relevance of a country to a foreign audience than the broadcasting campaigns of the IRIB, which can be easily dismissed as state-sponsored propaganda.

To gain credibility, the IRIB needs to host dialogues that engage the audience, acknowledge another side of the argument, and highlight common ground.

Joseph Nye argues that soft power, and public diplomacy as an expression thereof, rest on some shared values. Since soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, that requires understanding how the other side is hearing your messages, and fine tuning it accordingly.³¹ The IRIB appears to be less focused on listening and understanding their audiences to adjust messages than on the messages themselves. Consequently, it has been unable to build the credibility necessary to move from propaganda to public diplomacy.

Conclusion

Public diplomacy exists to provide information and broadcast ‘our side of the story’ internationally, while also engaging in meaningful dialogue and fostering understanding of both sides. Propaganda, in contrast, is a one-way conversation carried out from the pulpit of mass media platforms directly appealing to the emotions of mass audiences. When public diplomacy efforts are perceived as propaganda campaigns, they not only become ineffective, but they actually backfire and may cause mistrust and resentment of the sender.

While Iran does engage in some forms of public diplomacy including exchanges and dialogues, the IRIB is a classic tool of propaganda. Apparently unconcerned with who is actually listening on the other end, the IRIB exists exclusively as a vanity broadcaster proclaiming the message of the government both internally and to foreign publics. Lacking any reference to understanding the needs or interests of their audiences, and disinterested in any sort of dialogue, the IRIB cannot be seen as anything more than a tool of propaganda.

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¹ Donald Snow and Eugene Brown, *The Contours of Power: An Introduction to Contemporary International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 486, as cited in Royce Ammon, *Global Television and the Shaping of World Politics* (Jefferson, NC: London, 2001), 8.

² Alan Henrikson, “Public Diplomacy and U.S. Foreign Policy,” remarks at the World Boston Great Decisions Series, Boston Public Library, April 20, 2004.

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- 4 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 6 Hans Tuch, *Communicating with the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 8.
- 7 USC Center on Public Diplomacy Website. www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org. Accessed December 7, 2004.
- 8 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 18.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 5-6.
- 10 Mark Leonard, *Public Diplomacy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002), chapter 3.
- 11 Nye, *Soft Power*, 114.
- 12 Ammon, *Global Television*, 143.
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- 22 Edward Kaufman, "A Broadcasting Strategy to Win Media Wars." *The Washington Quarterly* 12 no. 2, 115.
- 23 Anthony Eden, quoted in Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 50, as cited in Nye, *Soft Power*, 101.
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- 29 Mark Leonard, *Public Diplomacy*, 46.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 31 Nye, *Soft Power*, 111.