

Public Diplomacy

KARL TH. PASCHKE

Ambassador and former Under Secretary General at the UN

A NEW DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY? A NEW WORKING METHOD FOR FOREIGN services, a new fad, a priority now which may be considered less relevant in a few years?

Probably not. The term 'Public Diplomacy' has only become popular and widely used some twenty years ago, but it describes one of the key activities of the modern diplomat in many parts of the world today.

What is known as Public Diplomacy nowadays has existed in some form since the early days of international relations, even though for centuries, the work of diplomats used to be conducted primarily 'behind closed doors', in discreet contacts with the governments to which they were accredited. For many people today, this perception prevails and the words 'public' and 'diplomacy' seem like a contradiction.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the modern ambassador is no longer what he was in former days: a negotiator and interpreter of the foreign policy interests of his home country vis-à-vis the host government. In an era where contact between governments, at least those which are close to each other in alliances or other communities, quite frequently are managed directly and not necessarily through the respective embassies, the main business of the ambassador is no longer focused on discreet and confidential dealings with the foreign ministry, but rather by continuous efforts to explain and to canvass support and understanding for the foreign-policy goals of his home country in the host country at large, among government circles, the legislative bodies, the political parties, the business

community, the social partners, the media, and the academic community—in short: the entire political class of his host country.

Why is that so? Why has it become so much more important to try to influence international public opinion, to be concerned with the foreign policy image of one's own country, to actively promote good news and counteract negative perceptions and prejudices abroad?

Well, because in the past two decades, our globe has changed considerably, not only because of the fundamental political changes, the dissolution of the two blocs and the rise of a more multi-polar world, but for a number of additional factors: Technological progress in many sectors has been phenomenal, most particularly in the field of information technology. The computer has revolutionized international trade and business, but also public administrations worldwide. Globalization has increased international interdependence. The trend towards more democracy in the world has led to a more intensive interaction between governments and civil society, which in turn has caused public opinion to expect more transparency and accountability for all governmental activities. International relations are no longer the domain of a chosen few, but are of concern to the general public. News travels fast and people understand that what happens in one part of the world usually has repercussions in distant lands as well. The quantity—not necessarily the quality—of international news coverage is overwhelming, the media battle for the hearts and minds of news consumers is as fierce as ever, but this has not reduced the impact and relevance of stereotypes, clichés, prejudices, and half-baked truisms on relations between nations.

This is where 'Public Diplomacy' comes in. The modern ambassador must ask himself almost daily: how is the country which I represent perceived in the country I am accredited to? Are the foreign policy goals of my government well understood and appreciated? What can my staff and I do to correct misperceptions, and to disseminate positive information? How can we win more friends for our country amongst the host nation?

It is true, earlier generations of diplomats have also been concerned with such questions. The reputation of a successful envoy always rested largely on the extent to which he was 'well plugged in' with the key people in his host country and on his ability to make friends. However, the challenge of today's Public Diplomacy is continuous and wider, it is not a by-product of other diplomatic activities but an end in itself. Public

Diplomacy ranks high in every diplomat's job description. Words like 'Lobbying', 'Networking' or 'Outreach' aim in the same direction, with slightly different connotations.

To meet this challenge, the ambassador must build up and cultivate a dense and stable network of connections in all areas of society. To be credible and convincing in representing his country, he must of course be conversant and up-to-date on all major issues of his home country's agenda. Beyond that, a great deal depends on his personal communication skills. And wherever possible, the ambassador should be sufficiently fluent in the partner country's language to be able to deliver public speeches, give interviews, participate in discussions etc.

Thus, to offer a general definition of the term, Public Diplomacy may be described as 'reaching out to people in the host country, actively communicating through ongoing dialogue with all sections of the informed public in order to generate interest in and understanding for the bilateral and multilateral concerns of the envoy's home country'.

It goes without saying that Public Diplomacy today is not only the responsibility of the head of mission and his press and public affairs officer. As a matter of fact, the challenge to be active and successful on this stage applies to all professional staff of the embassy. Whatever their area of responsibility is, they must always ask themselves the question: how can I 'sell' my topic under the auspices of Public Diplomacy? Is there a public angle in what I am doing which can be exploited? This is perhaps the most innovative aspect of Public Diplomacy: While the ambassador, because of his rank and stature, has a particularly visible role to play, the entire mission has to engage in reaching out to the public in the host country.

Reaching out means actively seeking contact and dialogue, using every opportunity for public appearances, participating in public events and showing a prominent profile. To build up and maintain a network of contacts requires sustained effort, not just a haphazard approach: the public diplomatist must repeatedly demonstrate interest in his partners in order to establish mutual trust. Who are these partners? For obvious reasons, diplomatic networking cannot be indiscriminate, but must select and set priorities. However, one has to keep in mind that at least in democratic countries, public opinion is formed by many, if not all segments of civil society. Therefore, a wide net must be cast and the messages must be tailored and adapted to the various constituencies. Ambitious

intellectual discourse is not always called for, but sometimes a relaxed, laid-back approach suffices; a simple, sympathetic communication may be more appropriate to create attention, understanding, and goodwill among the general public. To generate a better understanding and more knowledge about his home country is, of course, the principal goal of any envoy's public diplomacy work. And in this regard, a realistic appreciation of what people in the host country know about other countries is imperative. One should not have illusions about that. In spite of open borders, foreign travel, television, and the Internet, many nations remain pretty much strangers to each other, and clichés and prejudices still abound. Public Diplomacy must seek both to create a more informed and balanced picture of the ambassador's home country and to demonstrate an active interest in the host country. That makes for goodwill.

The power of today's media in shaping public opinion is recognized in most countries. The first thing politicians do when they come out of a meeting or have just concluded a decision-making procedure, is to speak to the press. In order to respond to the requirements and constraints of TV news, they routinely limit themselves to short statements, so-called 'sound bites' which may not always do justice to the complexity of the issue at hand, but offer the only chance to be broadcast and reach a larger audience.

Ambassadors will find themselves only occasionally in such situations, but if they occur, they must be prepared for that, too. For embassy representatives doing public diplomacy work, journalists are a most interesting and rewarding constituency nevertheless, albeit from a more long-term perspective. It goes without saying that an informed journalist is a better journalist. In the past, the large news agencies and the more weighty national daily papers used to employ so-called 'diplomatic correspondents', journalists who specialized in foreign policy issues and covered the foreign relations of their home country on a permanent basis. In today's media scene, such correspondents have unfortunately become a rare breed, but they still are the most attractive contact partners for ambassadors and press attachés. A background talk with one of them may be more useful than a dozen embassy bulletins. Equally valuable is a trustful relationship with members of the editorial board of an influential paper. Catering to journalists may not bear fruit in tomorrow's edition of their publication, but if it only influences their thinking and the interest which they take in the subject the envoy had discussed with them, then

one can call it successful public diplomacy. After all, journalists are the most effective multipliers and opinion leaders.

Finally, a relatively new public diplomacy tool must be mentioned which has revolutionized the dissemination of information: the Internet.

Most foreign ministries today run extensive, well-documented, and frequently interactive websites; millions of information-seekers make use of this service regularly. When dramatic international developments occur, the number of daily hits skyrockets, clearly indicating to what extent news-gathering and information consumption has changed and intensified through computer technology. A well-organized embassy today cannot succeed in public diplomacy without an attractive homepage, either. It must display a wide array of facts, figures, photos, and reliable information about the country it represents, but also pertinent topical news—which means that the embassy must ensure daily maintenance and updating of its Internet appearance, another important challenge in the growing field of Public Diplomacy.