

## **Promoting Cosmopolitanism through Public Diplomacy: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Tensions**

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**Abstract:** Cross-cultural exchanges, as a form of public diplomacy (PD) stand as a natural and commendable instrument for fostering the exchange and appreciation of civilizations on a global scale. Yet, debates in the on PD in the fields of social science and International Relations (IR) persist regarding their compatibility with the goals of public diplomacy (PD), particularly concerning whether cultural promotion aligns with the traditional notion of PD as serving state interests or global interests. Contemporary PD research challenges the narrow conception of PD as solely serving state interests, advocating for a more inclusive and ethical approach that prioritizes symmetric dialogue and collaborative understanding among diverse stakeholders. As per the state of the art, PD is conceived as a socially responsible endeavor, can indeed harmonize with the promotion of cosmopolitanism. By transcending outdated dichotomies and embracing a holistic vision of PD, nations can foster meaningful long-term relationships and navigate the complexities of an interconnected world with greater efficacy and advance the common interests of promoting cosmopolitanism in the globalization era. While this remains valid at the theoretical level, the article argues that tensions may arise between individual and political interests (national or global) at the level of the everyday practice of PD, such conflicts do not invalidate the fundamental synergy between PD and the advancement of global understanding. This abstract calls for further exploration into the empirical dynamics shaping the intersection of private and political interests in PD practice.

**Keywords:** Cultural exchanges, public diplomacy, cosmopolitanism, Confucius Institute.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is a theory-driven contribution that seeks to identify some challenges by means of public diplomacy (PD). From the perspective of International Relations (IR) as a social science, PD is the preferred and most relevant concept and field of study that may help contribute to the discussion on globalization and cosmopolitanism. Before delving more specifically into the technical definitions of the term, PD can be introduced here as a country's dialogue and engagement with foreign civil societies aimed at promoting long-term relationships and mutual understanding [1]. PD takes many forms, involving diverse actors [2]. At their most basic, diplomacy is government-to-government communication, whereas PD is government-to-people interaction. From this basic definition, it is immediately apparent that the ultimate goal of PD is compatible with, or even corresponding to, the exchange and mutual appreciation of civilizations in a global context. Importantly, PD involves educational exchanges wherein students participate play a key role.

It is argued by PD scholars that educational exchanges, as cross-cultural exchanges, are the most advanced form of PD, thanks to the full involvement of the publics in PD and the long-term

duration of each PD program [3]. With the aim of interrogating the role of PD in promoting cosmopolitanism through exchange and mutual understanding, this paper examines the following questions: (1) What is the nature of contemporary PD as defined and advocated by scholars? (2) How do cross-cultural exchanges play a role in advancing cosmopolitanism? (3) Which empirical challenge(s) do they face?

To relate to these questions, this paper proceeds as follows: first, based on the state-of-the-art advancements in the theoretical research in the field, it characterizes the current state of PD theory and advocacy as “relational PD”; second, it demonstrates how cultural and educational exchanges are fully compatible with the goals of PD; finally, in guise of conclusion and building on the previous discussion, it contends that the real challenges to PD lie not in conceptual definitions and the politics-versus-culture dichotomy, but rather in the material conditions and the psychology of the PD participants themselves.

## **PD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

According to the relevant scholarly canon, the concept of “public diplomacy” was popularized during the Cold War by American diplomat and academic Edmund Gullion, who treated it as a whitewashed synonym of “propaganda” (a term charged in the English vocabulary with negative, war-like connotations), and defined it as a government’s activity of communicating information to foreign publics [4]. More recently, especially after 9/11, the community of PD scholars in North America joined efforts to reconceptualize and improve the appeal and effectiveness of PD in advancing national interests [5], and as a result they came up with a multiplicity – indeed, a mess – of new concepts, ideas, and definitions. The concept that gained prominence in academic and policy terminology is “new public diplomacy” (New PD).

## **SPIN-OFFS OF THE NEW PD**

The notion of new PD was canonically formalized and advanced in an edited book published in 2005 [6], where it was conceived as a paradigm shift from the traditional PD. According to its proponents, the distinction between traditional and new PD is clear-cut: the former consists of the one-way communication of information by one state or government aimed at influencing the perceptions, opinions, and behaviors of a targeted audience (the publics identified in foreign civil societies); the latter seeks two-way dialogue, it cultivates the relationship with the foreign societies and purses the mutual understanding and trust between nations as a long-term goal rather than the short-term advocacy of particular national policies [7].

Virtually all scholars who have been endeavoring in the study and discussion of the specific features of PD in the twenty-first century – even those whose main discoveries and inventions preceded the coinage of the new PD concept – refer to the new PD as the context and justification for their efforts. For this reason, I treat such discussions on the features of contemporary PD as “spin-offs” of the new PD and review them as below.

## **PD as dialogical communication**

In his own chapter included in his seminal book *The New Public Diplomacy*, Jan Melissen elaborates on what makes (new) PD distinct and autonomous from related concepts and fields of study including propaganda, nation branding, and cultural relations. It is argued that “[t]he distinction between propaganda and public diplomacy lies in the pattern of communication. Modern public diplomacy is a ‘two-way street’, [...] it is fundamentally different from it [propaganda] in the sense that public diplomacy also listens to what people have to say” [8]. PD is also distinct from nation branding in as much as it is “first of all about promoting and maintaining smooth international relationships” [9] rather than simply cultivating and projecting the national image or brand.

However, Melissen recognizes a significant overlap between PD and transnational cultural relations, for both focus “on engaging with foreign audiences rather than selling messages, on mutuality and the establishment of stable relationships instead of mere policy-driven campaigns, on the ‘long haul’ rather than short-term needs, and on [...] building trust” [9]. In sum, PD is no

longer about “telling one’s own story” and make sure it is heard by the relevant audiences [10] but also about listening to what the others have to say (on their stories and our story). Telling plus listening equals dialogue, wherein the act(s) of listening play a constitutive role [11].

### **Networked PD**

The nature of the new PD is relational; hence it places emphasis on the value of connections. As connections proliferate, networks are created and expand. The application of network theory to PD generates what scholars called “networked diplomacy” [12]. Network theory owes its intellectual origin to Manuel Castells’ philosophical intuitions on the networked society, which refers to the idea that we now live in a world whose architecture is complex and made up of multi-hub, multi-directional networks connecting communities throughout the world [13].

The interconnected and interdependent character of the contemporary world renders collaboration among communities imperative to solve shared global issues. Power is no longer unidimensional but rather consists in the ability to manage and mobilize networks to tackle complex problems. Consequently, power is distributed amongst a multiplicity of actors.

PD in the era of networks acknowledges the complexity of the contemporary world; accordingly, it pursues as its primary goal the expansion and deepening of connections with multiple actors in the global world. Soft power may originate as a byproduct, but relationship-based networks are the ultimate objective [14].

### **Multistakeholder Diplomacy**

The emphasis on networks logically presupposes the existence of multiple actors which constitute the hubs and nodes of such networks. According to the much-popular globalization discourse which promises the relative decline in the power of nation-states in the contemporary international system, players such as businesses, civil societal groups (transnational or otherwise, including those concerned with culture and education), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and certain particularly influential individuals are now said to be playing a larger role in influencing global events compared to the past. That owes much to the recent advancements in the information and communication technologies (ICTs) – the Internet, instant messaging, social media, and so on – that allow everyone to generate, manipulate, and disseminate information worldwide with no constraints.

Because all these state- and non-state actors not only have the ability to shape future developments but are also affected by them, they hold stakes in the management and governance of the global commons and the issues of common interest. A PD that acknowledges and fosters relations with these global stakeholders to pursue shared goals is called “multistakeholder diplomacy” [15]. Importantly, this characterization of the new PD implies the joint efforts of international as well as domestic civil society actors fulfilling the role of PD publics [16].

### **Engagement as Participatory and Collaborative Diplomacy**

It is understood that the point of the new PD is to build and enhance relationships with a plurality of networked civil society actors at home and abroad. But what is the underlying assumption of all that? The assumption is that all these actors are no longer supposed to play the passive role of mere listeners of one-way communication. Instead, they are now called to play an active role. That applies in at least two respects.

First, the participation of the private actors in the PD dialogic interaction results in the co-construction of the national image of the country engaging in new PD. Assumedly, the PD publics dialogically respond to our image-projecting messaging, thereby they play an active part in reshaping our initial message. Therefore, “the promotion of ideas and values, or national images, cannot be the responsibility of one body alone, state or non-state. It must be a collaborative effort by all aspects of civil society, state and non-state actors alike, and all levels of governance” [17].

Secondly, by virtue of their participation in the dialogue on the global problems of shared concern, both the actors and publics of PD de facto co-participate in the framing of the given issues and thereby co-determine the ways in which such issues will be addressed.

The new PD recognizes these facts of today's world and, accordingly, it invites a host of players in civil society to participate and collaborate in the public diplomatic effort. This activity is called engagement, it requires action through social practices, thus it goes beyond simple act of communication (two-way or otherwise) [14].

### **THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF PD**

The new PD, which was promoted by its early theorists and advocates as a true paradigm shift in thinking and conducting PD, is characterized as relational, networked, multistakeholder, collaborative diplomacy. It is indeed a state-of-the-art innovation in the study of PD and, as a matter of fact, no fundamental innovations have been advanced so far beyond the new PD. The one important element that characterizes the new PD and distinguishes it from other forms of transnational communication is its ethical orientation – also called social responsibility. Virtually all scholars who have been endeavoring in the study and discussion of the specific features of PD in the twenty-first century – even those whose main discoveries and inventions preceded the coinage of the new PD concept – refer to the new PD as the context and justification for their efforts. For this reason, I treat such discussions on the features of contemporary PD as “spin-offs” of the new PD and review them as below.

#### **Empowerment and ethics**

The newly gained ability of non-state actors, as PD audiences, to speak out their own voices in the context of PD dialogue, and to collaboratively frame and address issues of shared concern in the interconnected and interdependent arena of the globalized world, is indeed a significant form of empowerment of those who were once disempowered in earlier times – that is, before the (supposed) coming of globalization.

This empowerment of the once-disempowered, the giving the voice to the once-voiceless, is an ethically connoted development that puts (new) PD on a moral high ground. Conceived as such, PD is no longer about increasing and wielding soft-power resources (defined in terms of attractive national features including culture, political values, and policies) to elicit positive attraction and achieve “desired outcomes” (i.e., national interests) [18], but a matter of win-win engagement for the shared interests of all players involved [19]. PD thus goes well beyond mere soft power in as much as it tendentially assumes the socially responsible role of taking into account the interests of stakeholders and invites their participation in the collaborative framework of new PD.

#### **Distributions of agency**

The move away from soft power is relevant to the notion of “social power”, which Peter van Ham regards as the foundation of PD [20]. No matter how softer and praiseworthy compared to its harder counterpart, soft power is an actor-centered concept that is concerned with the power of one single actor to elicit the attraction of others. Nation A's Soft-power initiatives boost and project the (supposedly) attractive features of Nation A with the expectation that the foreign publics in Nation B will be attracted to them. The foreign audiences of Nation A's soft-power initiatives are thus seen as passive receivers who possess no agency in the process of deciding what constitutes a soft-power feature of Nation A. Unlike soft power, (new) PD understands agency as socially distributed, so that all relevant actors and audiences in both Nations A and B are to some extent engaged in the co-construction of Nation A's image and attractive features. They also converge in the collaborative framing of international issues.

In sum, the underlying logic of the new PD is a partial shift (decentering) of agency from the actor to the (state as well as non-state, foreign as well as domestic) audiences of the PD process. This shift is said to be enabled by the material advancements in ICTs, and it is charged with an ethical role in terms of social responsibility.

These tendencies are what render the new PD distinct from not only the ethically doubtful propaganda but also the agency-centering concepts of soft power, nation branding, and one-way communication (traditional PD). For this reason, in the remainder of this paper I will refer to the new PD as PD (without specifying that it is the new PD as contrasted to the traditional PD), for the distribution of agency and ethical orientation (social responsibility) constitute the single variable that allows for separating the new PD from all similar concepts of transnational communication.

### **THE ROLE OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES IN PD**

The ethical, socially responsible orientation of PD makes a strong theoretical case for PD to serve the goal of promoting cosmopolitanism. PD seeks relationships and trust as its ultimate goal by means of dialogue, which will result in the mutual understanding and appreciation of different cultures and civilizations. Dialogue can occur in various forms. From the perspective of cosmopolitanism, culture and education can be regarded as the most appealing fields where PD can take place.

According to the principles of contemporary PD, the youths are active players in the exchange and promotion of cultures. In the context of cross-cultural exchanges (whether in the form of academic exchanges or otherwise), they are not only passive recipients of education from the teaching institutions, but, as discussed in the previous part, they are also endowed with some degree of agency in the PD process. Since with agency comes responsibility, it follows that the youths are also responsible for contributing to the inheritance, promotion, and innovation of culture.

In this second part of the paper, I explore the possible roles of people exchanges across cultures (cross-cultural exchanges) as form of PD. This is a preliminary step to evaluate whether the promotion of cross-cultural – and, by implication, cross-civilizational – knowledge and understanding on the part of the youth is in any way compatible with PD.

### **THREE PERSPECTIVES ON CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES**

The role of educational exchange programs in PD is a much-debated issue among the relevant scholarship. One strand considers that the problematic position of exchange programs in PD is mainly due to the “interpersonal nature of the exchange experience, coupled with its inherently private character,” [21] which is supposed to be incompatible with the state interests advanced by means of PD. We may call this strand the “realist strand”, for it assumes the realist perspective of international politics based on interstate competition and zero-sum game. Another strand holds the “liberal view” that exchanges and interpersonal contact will in the long run develop a shared sense of international community. A third strand, called the “critical strand”, stresses the failure of exchanges to achieve the goals of both the realist and the liberal views.

#### **The realist perspective**

Participation in educational or cultural exchanges is regarded as the respectable personal pursuit of intellectual growth and development on the part of (usually) young individuals. As such, they have nothing to do with politics and the interests of governments, even though exchanges are oftentimes financed by government funds. However, it has been recognized by scholars that “[e]xchanges may well be utilized as a form of strategic communication, which refers to the tailoring and directing of information at specific target audiences in order to generate a specific (policy) response” [22]. This derives from the understanding that, “After all, diplomacy—cultural or otherwise—has generally been understood as a governmental activity” [23].

The logic that explains how cultural diplomatic exchanges serve the government interests is simple and clear-cut, as it assumes the two-step flow model of communication. Exchange participants from foreign countries are treated as potential opinion leaders upon their future return to their home societies. They are therefore seen as targets of strategic communication and information dissemination “multipliers”. In this view, host educational and cultural institutions shall administer the foreign students with a positive image of the hosting nation in a calculated

fashion. Exchanges thusly fulfil a function akin to (public) diplomacy in the traditional sense, or, in blunter terms, propaganda.

### **The liberal perspective**

The liberal view considers that “exchanges are (ideally) the most two-way form of public diplomacy, opening up spaces for dialogue and the interchange of alternative viewpoints” [21]. For Ali Fisher, educational exchanges provide the best ground for “individuals [to] collaborate through relationships” [24].

As they bridge cultural differences and reduce misunderstandings, exchanges are regarded inherently as forces for good, they are “benign, two-way, mutually beneficial activities in which the participants gain an appreciation of other cultures, impart positive stories of their encounters with others upon their return, and, crucially, take these formative experiences forward with them into a future career” [25].

That being so, the countries and institutions that offer such opportunities are showcasing philanthropic goodwill. In terms of diplomacy, “[e]xchanges are a symbolic act of signalling peaceful intentions between nations” [26]. In the long run, the end result will be a genuine sense of shared global community or civilization that is fostered from the bottom-up by the people who in their young age had the chance to meet and appreciate foreign cultures in the context of educational or cultural exchanges.

### **The critical perspective**

Mainly stemming from empirical findings, an increasing number of scholars are focusing on the shortcomings of exchanges in achieving either the national self-interests of the realist view or the liberal vision of global citizenship. The arguments of the critical view mainly derive from considerations on the contingent character of the specific material condition and personal motivations of exchange participants.

On the one hand, it has been shown that the beneficiaries of international exchanges are in general individuals coming from privileged backgrounds in their countries of origin; as such, they already hold cosmopolitan worldview prior to the exchange experience, at best, or have vested interest in maintaining the status quo of existing power relations, at worst [25].

In both cases, individual factors overshadow the expected role of the exchange experience in influencing the worldviews and preferences of the participants toward desired outcomes.

On the other hand, ethnographic work points out that, in the case of educational exchanges, exchange participants are motivated mostly by the very trivial prospect of enjoying a touristic leisure experience in a foreign country [27]. Such a touristic attitude trumps the role of exchanges as PD in either the realist or liberal senses.

### **EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION: THE CASE OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES**

It is possible now to observe how certain scholars who discussed cultural exchanges as PD from the perspective of specific empirical cases adhere to either the liberal or realist views outlined above. It is sufficient for us to focus on the case of China’s Confucius Institute (CI) to have a grasp of this pattern.

In a recent contribution, Zhao Alexandre Huang highlights the positive role of a CI in Africa in fostering cross-cultural understanding and bridge differences. The unique and special quality of CI lies in the intimate human-to-human connection between Chinese teachers and local students, a relationship that goes beyond the specific language-teaching moment in the classroom [28]. This dynamic fulfils the PD ideal of long-term relationships that promoting mutual understanding across civilizations.

From another perspective, a trio of China-based authors contend that the role of CI in PD should be limited [33]. Their argument is based on the underlying assumption that PD is mainly

concerned with politics, whereas CI is eminently about culture. It is implicitly assumed that these two areas should be kept apart.

This is especially a warning to those Western critics of CI who tend to conflate CI's cultural mission with political issues. Although the role of the Chinese government in funding and defining the top-level organization of CI are not denied, CI by nature deals with cultural promotion and exchanges and is not involved in political matters.

To strengthen this point, the joint-venture character (also known as 1+1 model) of the single CIs in the hosting countries is emphasized as a factor that trumps the role of the Chinese government in influencing the inner workings of the individual CIs.

In contrast, Laura Mills mobilizes the critical concepts of governmentality and performativity to reveal how non-American (non-Western) exchange participants are subjected to hierarchical power relations embedded in the public diplomacy programs. These inhere in the conducts of exchange diplomacy and prescribe the participants to simultaneously perform the fixed subjectivities of (domesticated) foreign Others (as "cultural ambassadors") and good cosmopolitans. These Orientalist and essentializing practices betray the very clichés of cosmopolitanism, openness, and inclusivity that inform much discourse of cultural exchange.

Mills' critique highlights the empirical tension between the individuality of the PD participants and the public interests of global politics [34]. An application of this critique to the case of CI reveals that, at the level of the everyday practice of PD, there is a tension between the private interests of the individual and the advancement of cosmopolitanism through PD.

## CONCLUSION

There is hardly any chance to reasonably disagree with the conviction that cultural (or educational) exchanges are the most natural, commonsensical, and laudable way to promote the exchange and appreciation of civilizations in a global context. However, disagreements exist on whether cultural promotion is compatible with the goals of PD and, accordingly, whether it can occur as a form of PD. If PD is held to be an instrument which serves, as its ultimate purpose, the political interests of the state (i.e., PD in its traditional form or propaganda), then it must be concluded that PD and the promotion of cosmopolitanism though culture must be kept apart.

But, as has been explained at length in the first part of this paper, the formulation of PD as an instrument that solely serves the state interests is a primitive conception of PD and global politics.

As the state-of-the-art advancement in PD research suggests, the only PD that survives and works in the contemporary world is the one that embraces a global vision, engages multiple private and public stakeholders connected in networked communities through symmetric dialogue, and invites them to join the collaborative construction of mutual understanding and issue framing. Long-term relationships are the ultimate goal of PD, which is an intimately ethical endeavor. PD is socially responsible, and a PD which is not socially responsible cannot be properly defined as PD. Different conceptualizations of PD lead to theoretical confusion – and most likely to practical failure.

Thus, in principle, there is no theoretical incompatibility between PD and cosmopolitanism. National interests are the starting point but are not the end. What in this paper has been exemplified as the realist-liberal controversy regarding the role of cross-cultural exchanges in PD is thus revealed to be a false debate (for the realist position does not apply to the contemporary discussion on PD).

However, this article suggests that a tension between the private individual interests of PD participants and the political interests of the advancing cosmopolitanism exists at the level of the everyday practice of PD. This empirical question therefore deserves consideration for future research.

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