Working Paper

R.S. Zaharna

Diversity in Publics and Diplomacy[1]

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Digital media have equipped today's diplomats with unprecedented global reach. Yet with that expansive reach comes greater diversity and new sources of potential friction.

The pressing question for diplomats: Does Western diplomacy possess a vision of *communication* capable of mediating that diversity in the public arena?

Diplomacy has readily embraced strategic communication as the means of meeting state-centric goals and enhancing soft power. Yet, how strategic is strategic communication for addressing public-centric needs, such as identity? How effective is it for communicating across diverse publics or political actors?

To meet the challenges it faces, Western diplomacy needs an expansive vision of communication to match the global reach of its communication tools.

The Appeal of Strategic Communication for States

On the surface, strategic communication is inherently appealing for enhancing national images, promoting policies, and influencing publics. Strategic communication is the gold standard for designing persuasive messaging and media strategies.

Digital diplomacy has become increasingly reliant on innovations in strategic communication. The ever-increasing sophistication of digital networking strategies and strategic narratives captures that urgency.

Strategic communication is also ideally suited to the pursuit of "soft power". As *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2017* report notes, "mobilizing soft power resources is predominantly done through effective communication."[2]

However, strategic communication only succeeds insofar as it meets a nation's military and diplomatic goals. While scholars have seen a spike in the number of states using strategic communication seeking an edge in the global soft power competition, the results do not always match either ef-

forts or investment. Nations struggle to move the needle in public opinion polls.

Rather than enhancing global relations, aggressive strategic communication may aggravate them. Nye posited that the pursuit of soft power would improve relations. Analysts now question that assumption, citing the competition for soft power among Asian countries as a driver of greater friction than friendship.[3]

Strategic Communication Effectiveness with Diverse Publics

How effective is strategic communication when it comes to diverse, global *publics*?

Perhaps nowhere has strategic communication been more urgently pursued than in efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). While there has been intensive study to develop counter-narrative strategies, their use has often produced counter-intuitive results.[4] Rather than winning hearts and minds in the Islamic world, new groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) have been successful in recruiting Western youth.

The mediation of identity and emotion in the public sphere presents a critical challenge for diplomacy. However, strategic communication's focus on persuasion may actually undermine such mediation efforts. Research suggests that the intent to influence can be met with greater resistance as attitudes are hardened rather than changed. The result is polarization. The *2017 Global Risks Report* by the World Economic Forum warned of "deepening social and cultural polarization," and even threatening to undermine democracy itself.[5]

Efforts to try to adapt messages and media to the perceived cultural values of a target public surprisingly often fall flat or even

[2] McClory/USC Center on Public Diplomacy, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2017.*

[3] Hall/Smith, »The Struggle for Soft Power in Asia«; Melissen/Sohn, *Leveraging Middle Power Public Diplomacy in East Asian International Relations.*

[4] Archetti, »Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in a Digital Age«; van Ginkel, »Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter-Narrative«.

[5] *Global Risks Report,* World Economic Forum, 2017.

backfire. Creative strategies to "engage" publics have been called an "engagement delusion."[6] Attempts by nations to bridge cultures by promoting their values can produce a "boomerang" effect when the target audience challenges the foreign values and reasserts their own in response.

Finding the Communication Keys

Ironically, strategic communication's forte – message and media strategies – may be the source of its failings with diverse publics.

Why? Because many publics are not focusing primarily on messages, or even media *per se.* They are focused on relations and relational dynamics. Relations are more about connections; less about influence.

In an era of social media and cultural diverse publics with heritages that stress relations, relational dynamics are gaining prominence in the global arena. Understanding underlying relational logics and dynamics are the key to unlocking what makes communication meaningful to diverse publics and political actors.

We can gain insights into some of these relational dynamics by looking more closely at the communication of non-Western actors and states with diverse publics.

The Relational Logic of ISIS Recruitment

ISIS's apparent success in recruiting from Western societies has been called the "dark side" of soft power.[7] But one cannot fully understand this phenomenon through a lens of strategic communication. Indeed, analysts who focused on the group's violent messaging and savvy use of social media are apt to miss what makes ISIS's communication meaningful to certain youth in search of identity, belonging, and purpose. Despite the group's lethal agenda, ISIS demonstrates a marked sensitivity to relational dynamics that address identity needs.

[6] Comor and Bean, »America's 'Engagement' Delusion«.

[7] McClory/USC Center on Public Diplomacy, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2017*, p. 135.

ISIS recruitment reveals a distinctive relational logic of communication that assumes *a priori* relational bonds. For ISIS, the assumption of bonds with potential recruits is rooted in calls to the Ummah, or brotherhood and community of Muslims. Referring to one another and potential recruits as "brother" gives immediacy to those relational ties.

The dominant dynamics of this Relational logic are not found in messaging or media strategies—but rather in practices that strengthen interpersonal bonds. These dynamics include, first, identifying *contact points* that allow a relationship to take root and grow. As J.M. Berger noted, "Before the Islamic State can groom a potential recruit, it must first make contact."[8]

While ISIS fields multiple contact points, direct contact is the strongest. Direct online contact occurs at the point when ISIS recruiters are able to move potential recruits out of public social media spaces and into private conversations on WhatsApp or Kik. Tracing offline direct contact points are even more important. Physical encounters provoke a dynamic of *co-presence*, enabling parties to observe nonverbal behaviors related to trust, dominance, and attraction.

Emotion is a critical communication dynamic in the Relational logic. But emotion is much more than an instrumental persuasive

[8] Berger, »Tailored Online Interventions«.

appeal. It is a connection, a feeling of to-getherness, and belonging. Images of fight-ers with their pet cats are relational. Images with fellow recruits "suggest camaraderie, good morale, and purposeful activity."[9]

Despite every appearance of the opposite, ISIS recruiters ironically exhibit such traits as *perspective taking* and *empathy*. Recruiters "listen and respond to [recruits] personal concerns and the details of their lives, mak-ing them feel valued and cared for and cre-ating a sense of warmth, inclusion, and be-longing."[10] Incremental expressions of fel-lowship, responsibility, commitment, and ultimately allegiance serve to slowly tighten the relational bond of a potential recruit with ISIS. This *reciprocity* is a powerful dy-namic of ISIS's Relational logic.

Ultimately, it is the connection itself, the dynamics of strengthening of "the ties that bind," which animates and defines ISIS re-cruitment. Creating counter-narratives misses the point for a youth in search of relational bonds that give meaning and identity.

The Holistic Logic of China

Chinese diplomacy, exemplified by such initiatives as the Confucius Institute and "One Belt, One Road", offers a glimpse into another set of relational assumptions and dynamics that may resonate with diverse publics.

The distinctive "Chinese features," as some scholars call them, exhibit a Holistic logic of communication.[11] Relations span across a constellation of relations. Commu-nication dynamics work within this all-encompassing relational universe.

Such a Holistic logic rests on a communi-cation dynamic of *complete interconnectivity.* Many of China's diplomacy efforts focus on multiple actors (rather than one targeted

public), who then become linked in ever-expanding network structures. Such is the Confucius Institute initiative. Relational network weaving expands outward and in-ward. China assumes its own domestic pub-lic, not just foreign publics, in its public diplomacy equation.

A Holistic view of relations encompasses the full range of relational possibilities as co-existing together. This includes seemingly relational opposites, as Qin Yaqing noted.[12] Even competitors are intertwined, as one defines itself against the other. China-U.S. Relations may fruitfully be seen in this light.

By the Holistic logic of Chinese diploma-cy, even hostile relations are seen as tem-poral; hence the tendency to try to alter rather than sever strained relations. For ex-ample, after the July 2016 arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines and against China in the South China Sea, China further pur-sued relations with the Philippines.[13]

This Holistic logic of complete connectivi-ty implies a dynamic that stresses *intertwined fates,* based on a belief that what happens to one can happen to all. This assumption finds expression in the often-cited "win-win" goal of Chinese diplomacy – even if appearances sometimes suggest otherwise in China's quest for energy sources.

China's eye for viewing the larger rela-tional constellation gives it a powerful edge in envisioning and executing complex, in-tertwined relational strategies. The "soft balancing" among competing nations is but one example. Yet China remains compara-tively weak in the assertive verbal strategies. China appears sensitive to this gap, and hence the drive to build its "discourse pow-er"[14] or strategic communication so prized in Western diplomacy.

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[9] Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*.

[10] Wilson, »Understanding the Appeal of ISIS«, p. 4-5.

[11] Incidentally, not only China, but other Asian and African nations, as well as transnational activist networks, exhibit many of relational dynamics of the holistic logic.

[12] Qin, »International Society as a Process«.

[13] Rabena, »China's Diplomatic Strategy and Ex-panding Philippines-China Political Coopera-tion«; Zhang, »Assessing China's Response to the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling«.

[14] Zhao, »China's Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy«.

Implications and Recommendations

The challenge facing the 21st century diplomacy is how to match the global reach of digital tools with a global understanding of what makes communication meaningful for diverse publics and political actors. Technology may be the driver of current diplomatic change. However, the human dimension will ultimately be the critical leverage point in enhancing diplomacy's effectiveness. Several steps can move diplomacy in that direction.

Avoid the Strategic Communication Treadmill

In the soft power competition between states, contemporary diplomacy relies heavily—perhaps too heavily—on the tools of influence in strategic communication. Diplomacy may be caught on a communication treadmill of creating ever-more sophisticated media and messaging strategies that do little to advance diplomacy with diverse publics. Digital diplomacy cannot follow in this pattern. If digital diplomacy is to achieve in the public domain what traditional diplomacy has achieved behind closed doors, it must move beyond state-centric strategic communication aimed at influence.

Develop an Eye for Public-Centric Needs

Diverse publics and political actors are integral to the public diplomatic space. Their needs are part of the diplomatic calculus. Diplomats must develop a "public-centric" eye for the full range of publics (foreign, domestic, and diaspora), as well as their varying needs for identity, emotion, and participation. In order to innovate, diplomacy must continue to develop instruments for mediating identities and negotiating conflicts in the public domain.

Explore Diplomacy Diversity

No nation can rely exclusively on any one logic of communication and expect success in communicating across the diverse range of publics and political actors in the global arena. Expanding the vision of communication is critical for expanding diplomacy's effectiveness. Diplomacy should pursue the goal of understanding what makes communication meaningful to diverse publics with the same intensive attention it devotes the tools. In the end, the reach of the tools are only as expansive as the vision and creative imagination of the one holding those tools.

About the author

Dr. R. S. Zaharna is Director of Global Media program in the School of Communication, American University in Washington, D.C. and faculty fellow with the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. Her books include *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2010), *The Cultural Awakening in Public Diplomacy* (Figueroa Press, 2012), and *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2013, with A. Arsenault and A. Fisher).

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