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**Social Media at State:**

**Power, Practice, and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy**

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**Abstract**

Social media technologies represent a significant development for US public diplomacy: both in practice and in conceptualization. This article analyzes policy discourse regarding social media's role in US public diplomacy to characterize conceptual development of US public diplomacy practice. It critically assesses US strategic arguments for technology and public diplomacy, the relation of public diplomacy to traditional diplomacy after the so-called "public diplomacy 2.0" turn, and how the collaborative potential of these developments complicate the utility of soft power to justify public diplomacy.

**Introduction**

New and social media technologies represent a significant development for US public diplomacy and suggest more *global* implications for the concept of public diplomacy. At the level of strategy and practice, Internet and mobile-technology platforms impose what public diplomacy scholar Bruce Gregory describes as a "challenge" to public diplomacy as it is conceived and implemented (Gregory, 2011, pp. 368-369). Such technology brings into stark relief the necessity for *conceptual* rethinking about public diplomacy – because social media technologies transform the context for international politics, transnational social organization, and intercultural relations (Castells, 2009).

Social media technologies expand the communication ecology of public diplomacy, complicating how to reach audiences, shifting genres of message composition, and constituting different kinds of *publics*. This article explores the significance embedded in the rise of social media technologies as a tool of US

public diplomacy, through an examination of strategic arguments for technology and public diplomacy, its implementation after the so-called “public diplomacy 2.0” turn, and implications for the working concepts of power in public diplomacy.

The high profile growth of social media technologies within US diplomatic activity warrants both theoretical and empirical revision to scholarly understanding of public diplomacy (Hanson, 2012; Kelley, 2010; Price, Haas, & Margolin, 2008). Social media and diplomacy have garnered the attention of the popular press (Cohn, 2011; Comenetz, 2011; Lichtenstein, 2010; Schmidt & Cohen, 2010). There is concurrent evidence of a strategic shift, revealed in formal policy statements such as the State Department’s 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) and the 2009 and 2012 National Framework on Strategic Communication documents. Yet policy and practical changes in US diplomacy are not easily disentangled from the impact of social media technology platforms outside the field of diplomatic practice. As Iver Nuemann argued in 2003, diplomacy is not an institution divorced from other significant aspects of social change (Neumann, 2003).

Technology-fueled events such as the Arab Spring highlight an irrevocable context of network-oriented, mediatized political action and organization that have impelled changed in US diplomacy (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Powers & Youmans, 2012; Seib, 2012). At the risk of some controversy, there is an arguably *deterministic* aspect to the way in which social media technologies have shifted the “material culture” of diplomatic institutions (Castells, 2004, 2007; Deibert, 1997). Such direct connection between technology and foreign policy thinking is plainly evident the following excerpt from the 2012 Update to Congress on [the] National Framework for Strategic Communication:

Events of the past 2 years have only reinforced the importance of public diplomacy and strategic communications in advancing U.S. interests... The development of new media platforms is empowering global populations to reach out and communicate with others in ways they could not just a few years ago, and social and political movements are becoming savvier at mobilizing constituencies (United States National Security Council, 2012, p. 1).

Put simply, social media technologies are increasingly inextricable from strategic formulations about US foreign policy, its methods, and objectives. This idea not new – but it is increasingly evident that such claims are more than unsubstantiated valorization of technology (Burt, Robison, & Fulton, 1998). Assumptions articulated by policy-makers about what technologies “do” are increasingly important in how they portray problems that need to be solved (Hayden, 2012)

What does this signify for public diplomacy? The emergence of social media in international politics parallels a growing consensus among public diplomacy scholars on the evolving field of public diplomacy practice. A “new” public diplomacy must contend with a transformed global media ecology characterized by networks of selective media exposure, a diffusion of diplomatic agency outward to non-state actors, and the fragmentation of media narratives that frame state action (Entman, 2008; Hayden, 2011a; Kelley, 2010; Melissen, 2011; Wiseman, 1999; Zaharna, 2007). The classical objectives of public diplomacy to inform, educate, and engage appear in new prescriptive writing to be reenergized by an ethic of collaboration, relation-building, and listening – where the “goal” of public diplomacy is transformed from the transmission of information to the building or leveraging of relations (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Zaharna, 2009).

The rise of social media among US diplomatic units is argued here to *clarify* and potentially, *limit* what public diplomacy is normatively charged with doing, while at the same time expands the domain of action and actors involved in the practice of “traditional” diplomacy (Kelley, 2010). This article builds on arguments forwarded by public diplomacy scholars who have articulated conceptual shifts toward facilitative and network oriented approaches to public diplomacy to suggest a conceptual cross-roads for public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull puts the issue in prescriptive terms: “[t]he task of public diplomacy should evolve from one of speaking to one of partnering around issues with those who share the same objectives and empowering those whose will be credible with their target audience” (Cull, 2011, p. 7). Indeed, US public diplomacy has moved toward a facilitative and invitational stance, that reconciles the strategic ends of foreign policy previously managed through persuasion and exposition, with the apparent necessity of facilitating communication among crucial publics and engaging networks of stakeholders (Hayden, 2011a). Public diplomacy, in a time of social media, is not about communication between the state and publics so much as the state providing opportunities for communication between actors relevant to policy objectives.

Ultimately, if public diplomacy is about communicating in order to forward foreign policy objectives (both in the short and long term), how is this done in ways that are amenable to the “open source” and network cultures increasingly shared by the diverse audiences or targets of public diplomacy (Castells, 2004; Fisher, 2008)? A tentative answer is that the strategic objectives justifying public diplomacy must change. As public diplomacy adapts to a logic of collaboration and exchange, the expectations for the “art of the possible” – the kind of power that US public diplomacy can cultivate or wield – may have to change as well.

But the story of US public diplomacy and social media is a complicated one – that highlights both a growing need for diplomats to engage with foreign publics and the erosion of conceptual distinction between public and traditional diplomacy. It is a continuation, in many respects, of a strategic fixation on the

potential of communication technology and the increased significance of non-state actors. The next two sections present aspects of public diplomacy and technology in the US context that have served as preface for the current crossroads.

### **Historical and Contemporary Positions**

Recent policy arguments made about US public diplomacy suggest an urgency linked to the transformative capacity of social media. Judith McHale, President Obama's first Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, has characterized challenges facing US public diplomacy in dramatic fashion. McHale's rhetoric portrays a changing context that has direct implications for US *power*. It conveys a linkage between the rise of information technologies among networked publics with a fundamental change in the social aspect of power. Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2011, McHale draws upon the imagery of the Arab Spring to illustrate a pivot point in the resources of political power, from a function of hierarchy to being derived from the citizenry writ large:

In a world where power and influence truly belongs to the many, we must engage with more people in more places. That is the essential truth of public diplomacy in the internet age....The pyramid of power flipped because people all around the world are clamoring to be heard, and demanding to shape their own futures. They are having important conversations right now – in chatrooms and classrooms and boardrooms – and they aren't waiting for us (McHale, 2011b)

McHale depicts a scenic assessment that necessitates widespread engagement – without specifically detailing what engagement means. If power is now distributed and diffuse, then the mechanisms by which states leverage that power must be equally versatile and diffuse. Historically, arguments for the necessity and reform of US public diplomacy have repeatedly been linked to the impact of technology on international relations that signal the significance of *publics* to international politics, well before the rise of new and social media technologies (*American Diplomacy in the Information Age*, 1991; Cull, 2009b; Dizard, 2001).

Indeed, arguments about the transformative nature of the Internet in 1990s sound similar to speculation about social media and diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. US public diplomacy veteran Alan Hanson argued that “the communications revolution of the last half of the twentieth century has given U.S. public diplomats a historic opportunity to deemphasize their role as propagandists and become truly modern pioneers in an endeavor that would serve U.S. interests as well as the interests of all who seek political, economic, and social development (Hansen, 1989, p. 211). Hanson's words anticipate a facilitative, inclusive purpose for public diplomacy.

As early as 1993, the United States Information Agency produced strategic documents calling for fundamental rethinking of public diplomacy efforts to account for the impact of technology (Cull, 2012). This rethinking would require reconfiguration of institutional objectives and organization. Yet this was not without some reservation. As USIA Deputy Director Penn Kemble cautioned: “[t]echnology can only be a means for this Agency: our end goal is not the new electronic network, but a human community of values and interests, linked through these new technologies and in other ways, that can help us strengthen peace, democracy and prosperity” (cited in Cull, 2012). The advent of new media technologies would empower and expand the role of diplomacy and public diplomacy, as a landmark 1998 CSIS report argued, if not challenge the purpose of those institutions (Burt et al., 1998).

However, the emerging implications of the technology to shape social relations and change communication practice provoked speculation that the *institution* of diplomacy needed to change. Jaime Metzl, a key public diplomacy advisor during the Clinton administration, argued in 2001 that this emergent context required a fundamental rethinking of diplomatic practice. “Because the conceptual space of a network is global and does not fully respect traditional boundaries, preparing individuals to engage in this space requires both conceptual and organizational change” (Metzl, 2001). For Metzl, diplomacy as a set of rules, practices, and traditions needed to adapt.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the urgency of such changes became more apparent. Secretary of State Colin Powell launched the Office of E-Diplomacy within the State Department, which would go on to develop a series of digital infrastructure platforms to streamline knowledge transfer within the State Department (Hanson, 2012, p. 5). Yet in the decade after 9/11, practitioners confronted the difficulties of international message promotion that contended with the rapid dissemination of competing messages and perspectives (Corman & Trethewey, 2007; Entman, 2008). As Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes argued,

“[T]here is an information explosion and no one is hungry for information. We are now competing for attention and for credibility in a time when rumors can spark riots, and information, whether it’s true or false, quickly spreads across the world, across the Internet, in literally instants (Nakamura & Epstein, 2007, p. 10).

Despite these statements, the Bush administration’s approach to public diplomacy appeared slow to match the demands of the communication environment. A US Government Accountability Office report in 2009 warned of “a failure to adapt in this dynamic communications environment could significantly raise the risk that U.S. public diplomacy efforts could become increasingly irrelevant...” (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009, p. 31).

Donna Oglby, a former US diplomat and author of previous USIA reporting on information technology, describes the changes required in US public diplomacy as “an understanding of what is credible and politically viable in the context of other societies who interpret messages sent to them in terms of their own realities” (Oglesby, 2009, p. 8). Public diplomacy would have to be driven by the circulation of perceptions in particular contexts, and that includes the predominance of media framing on the ground.

The mounting critiques against US public diplomacy practice in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq echoed similar claims – a complicated and pluralistic global media ecology precluded the possibility of the US pushing out a message to otherwise skeptical audiences. The transparency afforded by information technologies highlighted the difficulties of message promotion and direction persuasion – especially when other actors empowered by such technologies could frame US actions at their discretion (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). US actions were wildly unpopular, and the context of internet technologies made US public diplomacy *difficult*.

The exigency for a new US public diplomacy perspective that incorporated new media technologies was readily apparent by the end of the Bush administration. In his brief tenure as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman articulated a strategic pivot that would shift the emphasis for US public diplomacy to reflect the impact of these new technologies in the lives of audiences crucial to US foreign policy. Glassman’s so-called “public diplomacy 2.0” emphasized an emergent social ethic tied to the network society; public diplomacy should strive to reflect this ethic by demonstrating a shared sense of communicative values.

Glassman argued for a public diplomacy that targets *where* communication is most significant in the social fabric of important demographics. Glassman deprioritized message management and the preoccupation with message consistency:

Don’t we want to maintain control of our message? Perhaps. But in this new world of communications, any government that resists new Internet techniques faces a greater risk: being ignored. Our major target audiences – especially the young – don’t want to listen to us lecture them or tell them what to think or how wonderful we are... But our broad mandate in public diplomacy is to understand, inform, engage, and influence foreign publics. All of these activities work best by conversation rather than dictation (Glassman, 2008).

For Glassman, public diplomacy was not – and could not – be about blunt persuasion. Rather, he offered that public diplomacy should reflect the shared culture of communication fostered by new media technologies. The US could

provide outlets for communication, rather than simply adapt to them for promotional ends.

Glassman continued the development of the Digital Outreach Teams, where State Department bloggers engage in discussion in Arab and Farsi web forums to debate US policy perspectives (Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2011). He also drew together partnerships with social media technology providers and civil society actors through the Alliance of Youth Movements events and the “Democracy Is” video challenge (Hayden, 2011a). The strategic distinction Glassman offered was the provision of communication; facilitation would garner influence indirectly and by example.

Glassman’s successor, Judith McHale, would continue to develop this shift in perspective. McHale explained that the US must be a credible contributor to communication and information flows:

How do we stand out and respond in such a crowded and complex environment? Our answer is simple: By taking our public diplomacy into the marketplace of ideas....Being in the marketplace of ideas means using the same venues and platforms that communities and activists use (McHale, 2011b).

McHale’s claim is really about public diplomacy offering a legitimate voice in venues that matter. Yet this insight, in itself, is not entirely divergent from previous perspectives about technology and US public diplomacy. Walter Isaacson, the Broadcast Board of Governors’ chairman in 2011, explained:

Our media tools have changed. In the 1950s, we floated weather balloons containing leaflets with news from the outside world over the Iron Curtain and into Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Today, we help information flow freely using sophisticated anti-censorship tools including satellite transmissions, web encryptions, and proxy servers to evade Internet firewalls....Whatever the media platform, and whatever the era, the idea is the same. Free media works. Accurate information empowers citizens to build a more hopeful, democratic world (Isaacson, 2011).

For Isaacson, public diplomacy (at least in the form of US international broadcasting) has always been about facilitation as much as exposition or persuasion – because the technologies provided both *demonstrate* US values as much as well as *provide* a communication good to publics.

Yet there is an unresolved tension in the way US public diplomacy policy-makers have articulated the relationship of technology to public diplomacy. While Glassman and McHale explained the demands of the contemporary media ecology – that to be credible and influential is to be *present* in social media spaces and timeframes associated with those platforms – these arguments

nevertheless imply that such technologies are *the more efficient means of dissemination available to states*. Nicholas Cull argues this emphasis remains a persistent dimension to US public diplomacy strategy. He offers that a more credible and effective public diplomacy would be squarely grounded in the concept of *listening* (Cull, 2008). The public diplomacy corrective implied in “listening” is embodied in the digital diplomacy of so-called “21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft.”

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft and Public Diplomacy**

The idea of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft is based on an inclusive, polylateral view of diplomacy, where a plurality of non-state actors are enabled by network technologies. The concept’s principal evangelist at the US State Department is Alec Ross, the Senior Advisor to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Ross describes 21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft as an “agenda” that “complements traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments that fully leverage the networks, technologies, and demographics of our networked world” (Ross, 2011, p. 452).

Such new diplomatic methods are necessary because as Ross declares, “the very clear evidence of recent years demonstrates that network technologies devolve power away from nation-state and large institutions” (Ross, p. 452). While the moniker attempts to capture a range of problems and issues and tools that US diplomacy must confront – the concept is hard to separate from its technological underpinnings. As the QDDR states, “technologies are the platform for the communications, collaboration, and commerce of the 21st century. More importantly, they are connecting people to people, to knowledge, and to global networks” (“21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft” 2012). 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft reflects an integrative attitude toward technology as both policy tool and objective.

What is the purview of diplomacy under this agenda? The business of US statecraft is increasingly one of orchestrating and facilitating policy solutions made possible *through technology*. According to Ross, a “growing ecosystem of technology and developers” can be leveraged to achieve policy gains (Ross, 2012). Social media and the social networks they foster function to direct diplomatic attention and drive the coordination of services and governance. Ross argues that the US can look to “civil society to identify pressing problems, and then match these actors with technologists to develop solutions” (Ross, 2012)

To justify his claims, Ross paints a sweeping portrait of a world transformed in which US diplomacy must operate. Technology has accelerated movement-making, as evidenced by the use of social media tools for political change. The information environment is also disrupted by such technology to destabilize the centrality of state actors in using information technology to manage the international environment (Schmidt & Cohen, 2010). The US must contend with



the “hyper-transparency” of networked politics that transgresses entrenched political hierarchies and state borders.

High profile efforts of 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft include the recruitment of university students to aid in new media efforts of the State Department known as the Virtual Student Foreign Service, collaborative events such as the Tech@State series of conferences that draw together technology developers and other non-state actors, the Apps for Africa competition to develop mobile technology solutions for regional development, and other initiatives to promote women and mobile finance solutions in developing countries (“21st Century Statecraft,” n.d.; Comenetz, 2011; Lichtenstein, 2010). 21<sup>st</sup> Century statecraft is visible as *foreign policy* through the Internet Freedom agenda, in which the US promotes the open access to the social, political, and economic benefits of information technology (McCarthy, 2011).

But Ross has demurred on the subject of *public diplomacy* and its relation to 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft. During a presentation in 2012, Ross argued that 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft should not be equated with public diplomacy. Rather, he offered that traditional public diplomacy “doesn’t work in the digital age” (Ross, 2012). Ross’s perspective on public diplomacy appears grounded in a more traditional and historical view of public diplomacy as propaganda and monological, persuasion oriented communication.

Instead of public diplomacy, Ross suggests diplomacy can benefit from creating dialogue with non-traditional interlocutors and should focus on ways to “bring people in.” “We can do all the communications we want,” Ross argues, but “actions speak louder than words” (Ross, 2012). Despite this sentiment, the mandate of 21st century to build relationships across stakeholders shares many aspects with what is understood as the “new” public diplomacy (Melissen, 2011). This conceptual convergence is expressed in how Secretary Clinton describes the mission of US diplomacy after the QDDR:

[T]he department is broadening the way it conceives of diplomacy as well as the roles and responsibilities of its practitioners...But increasing global interconnectedness now necessitates reaching beyond governments to citizens directly and broadening the U.S. foreign policy portfolio to include issues once confined to the domestic sphere, such as economic and environmental regulation, drugs and disease, organized crime, and world hunger (Clinton, 2010).

### **Public Diplomacy and Social Media**

If public diplomacy is conceptually distinct from “21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft” – then how has the practice of US public diplomacy changed due to social media? In

the wake of Glassman's declaration of "PD 2.0" – what kinds of tools and objectives have emerged to define public diplomacy in the context of social media?

Within the State Department, International Information Programs (IIP) and Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) can point to a number of initiatives that demonstrate the potential of social media for public diplomacy to engage publics. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been promoted heavily – both in developing interest in centralized sites produced in Washington, and for social media forms tied to posts. As of May 2012, the State Department's main public diplomacy units maintain over 288 Facebook pages, nearly 200 Twitter accounts, and 125 YouTube channels. As Fergus Hanson argues, the State Department's public diplomacy amounts to a "global media empire" of over 600 platforms for engagement (Hanson, 2012). Meanwhile, US Ambassador to Japan John Roos, Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, and Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul have captured considerable press attention for their extensive use of social media in reaching publics (Kelemen, 2012; Sternberg, 2011).

The story of social media within IIP is a telling example of the adaptation called for by experts and policy-makers, while the organization attempts to remain relevant to the objectives of US diplomacy. ECA has traditionally been concerned with the relation-building capacities of exchange programs. Their ExchangesConnect online forum for exchange program participants reflects a deployment of social media that readily fits with the relational, facilitative strategy that has emerged alongside the rise of social media. IIP's charge of information dissemination, however, seems less obviously compatible.

In 2011, IIP Coordinator Dawn McCall announced the conclusion of an extensive internal review of IIP's programs (Hayden, 2011b). One of the reviews' principal recommendations was the closure of the *America.gov* website, an ambitious if somewhat unfocused effort to communicate content to foreign publics about issues, policies, and culture from the United States. Instead of *America.gov*, McCall claimed the IIP would be reoriented to providing content and communication capacity to posts and foreign publics. Rather than "pushing" stilted or decontextualized messages, this content would be driven by the needs of the post.

Tacit awareness of the social media ecology underscores a broader concern with developing platforms for engagement with local audiences. IIP made a significant push to promote its own Facebook websites: eJournal USA, Global Conversations: Climate (now *Global Conversations: Our Planet*), the *Democracy Video Challenge*, and the *Con.Nx* page (now known as *Innovation Generation*), to demonstrate the potential of the Facebook platform.

Yet these pages remain difficult to categorize as a public diplomacy success beyond the raw metrics of followers and downloads. Outside of the *Global Conversations: Our Planet* Facebook page, much of the participatory content posted on these pages is unfocused and does not feature significant deliberative response from the social media audience. Many of the comments fields are littered with ASCII artwork, short denunciations of US policy, or serve as vehicle to link to unrelated topics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that post-driven social media have been more obviously “successful.”

What social media signifies for the public diplomacy of IIP appears to be its capacity to connect traditional diplomats with new and existing constituents at the post or embassy level in more efficient ways. IIP has attempted to refashion itself as a kind of new media consultancy, charged not only with producing content in Washington for distribution but also advising embassy staff and press officers how to better communicate with local constituencies.

This transition for IIP has worked to increase communication between the embassy posts and those operating in Washington – a frequent point of criticism among public diplomacy watchers in the academic and practitioner community. According to a media strategist working within IIP the capacity to increase “listening” through social media platforms has been one of the greatest successes of recent organizational shifts. More importantly, advisory efforts have lead to an increase in locally, user-generated content.

Whether or not the US maintains a public diplomacy “media empire” of social media pages generated in Washington, the most impactful efforts are likely to be those that leverage the relation-building capacity at the local level (Copeland, 2009; Fisher, 2010; Zaharna, 2009). The challenge for practice has been to train US foreign service officers who may not be proficient in social media or, are not posted long enough to understand the cultural dimensions of the local communication infrastructure of interpersonal and media communication. IIP now attempts to identify opportunities, working with local personnel to augment best practices (Undisclosed, 2012). In other words, changes in *practice* for US public diplomacy and social media is not the seamless translation of sweeping strategic arguments by high-level policy-makers. Rather, emergent wisdom about social media best practices is as much a product of the *post* as it is a trending strategic imperative.

### **The Contradictions of Social Media and Social Power for Public diplomacy**

The use of social media platforms for US public diplomacy can potentially provide a multitude of connections with stakeholders, opinion leaders, and publics otherwise crucial to US foreign policy objectives. In simple terms - social media expands the number of contacts with people. It is a “force amplifier” for public diplomacy.

This does not necessarily mean amplification in a positive direction for the popularity of the United States and its policy positions. Edward Comor and Hamilton Bean argue that the US focus on *engagement* as a public diplomacy framework elides the instrumental and influence intentions that are loaded into this term (Comor & Bean, 2012). Comor and Bean note the rise of the “engagement” imperative in US strategic discourse is an outgrowth of attempts to leverage new communication technologies to diminish the appeal of extremism in Muslim countries and to foster some form of “mutual respect” (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 204).

They argue that attempts to reach these audiences may have the unintended effect of increasing distrust. Sophisticated techniques to locate crucial populations and speak in localized vernaculars can do more harm than good – in part because the ethic of communication that makes such social media technologies so powerful is based on norms of reciprocity and reflection. Social media are a means to demonstrate legitimacy, which means the consequences for their cynical appropriation are counter to the objectives of public diplomacy.

Comor and Bean argue that the marketing-derived techniques used to conduct public diplomacy via social media platforms to “engage people directly” may have the capacity to manage dialogue and create new means of exposure to US perspectives, but this may ultimately alienate (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 208). The use of locally relevant communication platforms to promote the interest of an external power may be invasive and threatening – a point well-articulated in Jancie Bially-Mattern’s critique of soft power as “representational force” (Bially Mattern, 2005). Social media are culturally significant precisely because they are *not* interpenetrated by asymmetrically powerful actors like the United States.

Specifically, Comor and Bean question the ethics of this kind of socio-culturally mindful use of technology to conduct public diplomacy – because it *intervenes* in the capacity of media to sustain relations within target audiences. For Comor and Bean it infiltrates the practices in which people communicate –in the language, the norms, and the technologies susceptible to state manipulation: “[h]ow people think about and process their interactions, therefore, can be modified, not just by what is communicated but also *through the communication process itself* [emphasis in original]” (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 208).

They point to the US National Strategy on Strategic Communication and statements from the State Department that proclaim the “game-changing” quality of such technologies to facilitate engagement and open up new venues for collaboration and interaction (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 210). US strategic discourse reveals the intent of persuasion by other means – peripheral routes to influence that mask the goal of the United States to achieve its own strategic ends. The invocation of “dialogue,” in their critique, masks the instrumental will to power in a technologically facilitated public diplomacy.

Comor and Bean suggest a corrective: an invitational ethic to define the concept of engagement. They draw on the work of rhetoric scholar Robert Ivie, to argue that the objective of US public diplomacy should be to authentically demonstrate the democratic ideals the US aims to promote (Comor & Bean, 2012, pp. 214–215). A commitment to a democratic ethic of communication in public diplomacy would be to assume some degree of reflexivity – to truly listen is to entertain the notion that your positions are open to change.

To “engage” is also not to diminish the presence of agonistic communication, but rather to acknowledge it. As Donna Ogsby has argued, public diplomacy must acknowledge the positions and experiences of interlocutors who may disagree with the United States (Oglesby, 2009). The “rhetorical approach” to public diplomacy advocated by Comor and Bean replaces a thin concept of communication with one predicated on the risks of disagreement. Alec Ross has stated, you cannot “sprinkle on” the Internet, if the objective is to use social media to simply promote US policy objectives (Ross, 2009). Yet Comor and Bean’s critical argument is predicated on the assumption that US public diplomacy exerts a considerable communication power. Does the “media empire” of US public diplomacy truly constitute a substantive exercise of power?

### **Conclusion: Translating Collaborative Power for US Public Diplomacy**

Perceptions of strategic exigency and crisis underscore much of the arguments by policy-makers for more social media in US public diplomacy and diplomacy in general. As the 2012 National Framework for Strategic Communication declares, “the continued rapid evolution of global communications is creating a landscape where our ability to engage and communicate with actors across societies is essential” (United States National Security Council, 2012). Attention to networking technology is necessary because the nature of international actor-hood and agency has changed. *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen wrote in a recent op-ed, “There are many more networks in our future than treaties” (Cohen, 2011). Given this strategic perception, what kind of politics is possible given the social media tools available to diplomatic institutions?

In 2011, Anne Marie-Slaughter, the former Director for Policy Planning at the State Department described the rise of “collaborative power” as “the networked, horizontal surge and sustained application of collective will and resources” (Slaughter, 2011). For Slaughter, collaborative power represents “the power of many to do together what no one can do alone” in contrast to the “relational” concept of soft power – a kind of “power over” that is “the capacity to do things and in social situations to affect others to get the outcomes we want.” Collaborative power is “power with” that derives from collective legitimacy rather than a preponderance of resources.

Public diplomacy scholar Ali Fisher has written extensively on this subject in his call for a more “open-source” approach to public diplomacy. He observes the considerable reservoirs of influence to be gained from the ability to aggregate individual preference and experience, demonstrated in the success of retailers like Amazon and E-bay (Fisher, 2012). These organizations have succeeded, in part, by facilitating collaboration among motivated individual actors to create communities. Fisher identifies how networked social forms have exerted considerable “power” to foster innovation, shape social norms, and generate political change.

Fisher and Slaughter’s arguments are warranted by the rapid political upheaval during the Arab spring, as well as established network marketing techniques – but they represents something of a quandary for traditional institutions of diplomacy. Social media platforms can cultivate political agency and constitute a form of “power” – but can this power be yoked to the parochial strategic preferences of the sovereign state?

Consider Slaughter’s provocative claim that “[c]ollaborative power...is not held by any one person or in any one place. It is an emergent phenomenon -- the property of a complex set of interconnections. Leaders can learn to unlock it and guide it, but they do not possess it” (Slaughter, 2011). This statement seems at cross-purposes with the increasing “culture of measurement” within US public diplomacy practice, charged with demonstrating effectiveness more than performing a cosmopolitan ethic (Banks, 2011). Swedish digital diplomacy expert Stefan Geens explains that: “it is important to remember that collaborative power is not the ability to command a network; rather it is the ability to align with a trusted network so that common ideals can be fought for and achieved far more effectively” (Geens, 2011). In this view, the context of social media is biased toward collaborative power – not the agent-centric instrumentality of soft power.

This makes the “engagement” burdens of a social media-based public diplomacy an uncertain prospect. Public diplomacy scholar John Brown notes that the State Department still seems to be of two minds, promoting social media while also trying to control the message and keep tabs on personal blogs of foreign service officers (Kelemen, 2012). While writers like Fisher call for a public diplomacy strategy of influence by cultivating positions of credibility within networks – the historical inertia of US national security priorities may preclude the kind of policy reflexivity required for collaborative power through public diplomacy.

This is not to suggest that collaborate power is not available to the United States as a tool of statecraft. The salience of collaborative power corresponds with an emergent trend in diplomatic practice. Ole Sending, Vincet Pouliot, and Iver Neumann argue that diplomacy - as a social institution - is increasingly involved in *governance*, which conditions the traditional diplomatic tasks of *representation* (Sending, Pouliot, & Neumann, 2011). When policy-makers like Alec Ross touts the benefits of technology-based development projects and the ability to involve

wider networks of interlocutors, he demonstrates what Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann identify as diplomacy based on changing other actor's behaviors through the "enrollment and participation of a greater number of actors and the use of different types of judgment and expertise" (Sending et al., 2011, p. 539) In this sense, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft" is not public diplomacy, it is polyilateral, collaborative diplomacy in public.

What does this leave for social media and US public diplomacy? The practical domain of diplomacy increasingly relies upon social media to engage and enlist a diverse range of stakeholders into diplomatic action. The traditional diplomatic communication of representation, including the explanatory and persuasive mandate of public diplomacy, appears eclipsed by the fact that a diplomacy defined by governance *involves* publics as key participants. Interlocutors are not simply audiences or part of a dialogue - they are active agents in a digital diplomacy of "21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft" that blurs the lines between public diplomacy, development work, and traditional diplomatic communication.

Social media thus appears to be a catalyst to rethink the role that public diplomacy plays in the broader structure of US diplomatic institutions. While certain aspects of public diplomacy – such as exchange programs and international broadcasting – may be methodologically impacted by social media, public diplomacy's distinction of listening and advocacy appears to have inspired a wider set of changes. The rise of social media across other aspects of diplomacy signals an ironic success for public diplomacy: social media and international communication warrant innovation in US diplomatic practice, yet it remains uncertain how traditional public diplomacy institutions can adapt to the collaborative communication ethos of the medium.

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