



Pathways of connection: An analytical approach to the impacts of public diplomacy



Efe Sevin

Department of Public Relations and Information, Kadir Has University, Cibali Kampüsü Kadir Has Caddesi Fatih, İstanbul, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Public diplomacy, albeit its functional similarities with public relations and other corporate communication tools, is inherently a foreign policy tool, used by practitioner states to advance their national interests and achieve their foreign policy goals. The purpose of this theoretical article is to provide a framework to analyze the impacts of public diplomacy projects by acknowledging both its communication aspect and political nature. The *pathways of connection* framework is built in two-steps. First, the public diplomacy concept is situated in international politics by evaluating the concept through mainstream international relations theories. This evaluation yields three areas on which public diplomacy projects might have an impact. Second, the existing academic and practical measurement models are categorized under these areas and two pathways per area are presented. The theoretical framework can be used to understand different outcomes of public diplomacy projects and to provide a more accurate measurement of their success.

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1. Introduction

How can we see the unseen and observe the unobservable? This question summarizes the challenges faced by the scholars and practitioners in their attempts to assess and evaluate the outcomes of public diplomacy projects. Measurement is known to be a troublesome task in public diplomacy. Projects tend to yield changes on intangible concepts – such as awareness and attitudes – and these changes occur over a long-time period and cannot be directly attributed to them (for a more inclusive list of challenges in evaluation, cf. Banks, 2011). Even though a project might be able to contribute to a more positive public opinion towards a practitioner state, this change might take place over years – or even decades – and in conjunction with other variables such as changes in world politics or other diplomatic transformations. As these changes are difficult to capture, it is not surprising to observe the lack of robust measurement mechanisms but rather the presence of attempts measuring the outputs of projects (Pamment, 2013).

Public diplomacy, despite a lack of agreement on its definition, is usually seen as a fundamental communication and public relations activity carried out by states (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013). The functional similarities among these concepts encourage the use of public relations theories and models to examine the impacts of public diplomacy projects. Yet, as it will be argued throughout this paper, such a mono-disciplinary approach has the inherent danger of becoming the proverbial “Maslow’s hammer.”¹

E-mail address: efe.sevin@khas.edu.tr

¹ Abraham Maslow is credited with the saying “To the man who only has a hammer, everything he encounters begins to look like a nail.”

The purpose of this theoretical article is to provide an inclusive framework that situates public diplomacy in a political and international environment by connecting its communication aspect with plausible impacts on foreign policy. Public diplomacy works as a tool to help achieve foreign policy goals of the practitioner countries (Djerejian, 2003) and operates within the international political environment. Practitioner countries use a variety of public diplomacy projects – such as international broadcasting and student exchanges – with the penultimate objective of reaching out to foreign publics and ultimate objective of advancing their own interests.

The theoretical arguments are presented in two steps. First, public diplomacy is conceptualized as a foreign policy tool and its expected impacts are evaluated through the lens of mainstream international relations theories. In this step, it is argued that a given public diplomacy project might manifest its impact in three different areas. Second, the existing measurement practices and academic models are categorized under these areas to create six pathways of connection between projects and foreign policy objectives.

The rest of this article is structured in four sections. First, a working definition of public diplomacy is presented for this research. Second, the definition is evaluated through major international relations theories to identify areas on which the impact of public diplomacy can be observed. Third, six pathways of connection are introduced. The article concludes by arguing for the contributions of the six pathways of connection framework.

2. Working definition of public diplomacy

The field of public diplomacy has gone through a rapid growth, welcoming contributions from a number of disciplines. It is neither necessary nor beneficial to devise a universal definition of or approach to public diplomacy as each and every discipline has its own strengths and weakness. Similarly, the definition used in this research is not proposed as a universal definition to replace the existing approaches in the literature. The objective is to highlight communication and politics-relevant characteristics of the concept by both acknowledging public diplomacy as a public relations function and emphasizing its connection with foreign policy.

Public diplomacy is fundamentally a communication tool used by states to reach foreign publics (Plavsak, 2002). Public relations scholar tend to see it as an activity conducted by nations as well as other international organizations and nongovernmental organizations that entail media relations, promotional and persuasive strategies (L'Etang, 2009, p. 610). International relations scholars highlight the role of power dynamics and conceptualize public diplomacy as an instrument that governments use to “communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments” (Nye, 2008, p. 95). For the purposes of this research, a definition that acknowledges the role of communication, actors involved in the communication activities, state functions, and the expected outcomes of such activities is required. It is possible to conceptualize public diplomacy as *referring to the communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives*. Within this definition, public diplomacy is an extension of traditional diplomacy in terms of the actors and objectives, and is a foreign policy tool.

3. Impacts of public diplomacy

This study expands on Yun and Toth's (2009) work that defines realist and liberalist [*sic*] public diplomacy concepts. The authors use the aforementioned international relations theories to present expected outcome of public diplomacy project. In addition to realism and liberalism, constructivism is also introduced as the third major international relations theory to create a more inclusive picture of public diplomacy activities.

According to Yun and Toth (2009), realist public diplomacy cannot see foreign publics as the target audiences. This counter-intuitive argument is in line with the main tenets of realist theory that sees international relations primarily as a power play between states in the international system as sovereign states, ignoring the role of other actors. Public diplomacy projects are expected to change the attitudes of the foreign audiences to influence the state behavior. The main assumption is that the public is important in foreign policy only due to the capacity of public opinion to change the state behavior and not as an independent actor per se.

The public diplomacy measurement and assessment practice also supports the idea that influencing public opinion might be seen as a method to create impact in foreign policy. For instance, Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) use public opinion as a variable in their assessment of American public diplomacy and foreign policy. Similarly, the *Public Diplomacy Model for the Assessment of Performance* (PD-MAP) presented by the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) puts public opinion under spotlight. PD-MAP aims to “evaluate target audience's perception, favorability, or understanding prior to and after a [public diplomacy] effort” (ACPD, 2010, p. 26). PD-MAP posits that public diplomacy is expected to increase the understanding of the United States, favorability, and influence among foreign publics. This favorable public opinion is expected to change the behavior of the states – the only important actor in international affairs according to realism and realist public diplomacy – and subsequently to have an impact on foreign policy.

A liberal approach to public diplomacy operates under the assumption that states are not the only important actors in world politics (Yun & Toth, 2009). Liberalism theory argues that inter-state relations cannot be seen as independent from other actors in the international arena. Thus, foreign affairs and politics are not only influenced by states but also by the interactions of non-state actors that they call *transnational actors* (Keohane & Nye, 1972). States are still the dominant and

Table 1
Summary of the pathways of connection.

Areas/scope of explanation	Larger impact	Focused impact
Public opinion	Attraction	Benefit of the doubt
Relationship dynamics	Socialization	Direct influence
Public debates	Agenda-setting	Framing

powerful – probably the most powerful – actors in the international arena however they are no longer the sole actors. Public diplomacy is thus a platform to interact with the new non-state actors.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s framework for planning and evaluating public diplomacy projects includes specific guidelines for people-to-people engagement. It is argued that people-to-people engagement is a key aspect of NATO's outreach enabling the Alliance to build relationships with individuals, influencers, and the target audiences of which they are a part (Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, 2013, p. 48). The measurement practice is designed to look at the number of people reached and of individuals who keep in contact with NATO after a public diplomacy project (Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, 2013, p. B-3). This relationship-based approach also increased the interest to social network analysis as a method to measure the impacts of projects. For instance, Fisher and Montez (2011) analyzed the online networks during President Barack Obama's visit to Brazil in March 2011. The Department of State and the American Embassy in the country used a website, and several social media platforms – such as *Twitter*, *Orkut*, and *Facebook* – to promote the event and engage with the local population, thus adding a public diplomacy component to the president's trip (Fisher & Montez, 2011, pp. 8–10). The social network analysis portrayed how public diplomacy was able to engage non-state actors during the presidential visit, arguing that the digital public diplomacy engagement made it possible for the presidential visit to reach non-state actors. Thus, public diplomacy projects might be designed to increase relations with non-state actors. Liberalism argues for the importance of a multitude of actors in addition to states in international affairs. Public diplomacy establishes communication bridges with these non-state actors.

The third theory, constructivism, argues that international relations operate on structures and identities that are socially created. Material aspects of foreign affairs are not as important as the social meaning they carry. Therefore, being able to influence these social meanings can be seen as a source of power (Van Ham, 2010). A constructivist public diplomacy, thus, is based on an assumption that norms, values, and identities in international relations are not defined by material power sources – such as military power or economic infrastructure – but are social constructs (Van Ham, 2002). Public diplomacy can manipulate these constructs by encouraging and influencing discussions and is thus a tool to shape the public debate in foreign countries (Gilboa, 2008).

Public diplomacy has the capacity to change the discourse in a given country. As the study of Zhang and Cameron (2003) demonstrates, Chinese public diplomacy carries this objective in its attempt to improve the image of the country by influencing media coverage. China carried out a campaign that included a touring cultural exhibition in the United States and a series of media appearances. Zhang and Cameron (2003) argue that these projects were successful in reducing the negative coverage about China in the United States by encouraging the coverage of different aspects of China. Similarly, British public diplomacy promotes women's and girls' empowerment concepts through leadership programs and conferences in regions with gender inequality issues (British Council, 2014). Norwegian public diplomacy introduces the concept of corporate social responsibility to foreign publics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, 2009). Prior to public diplomacy projects, these issues were not necessarily publically debated among target audiences. In other words, concepts such as gender equality or democracy were not relevant social constructs in foreign policy conducts of target countries. Public diplomacy projects influence the topics in public debates.

Public diplomacy indeed is a tool in the foreign policy toolkit that makes it possible to reach a multitude of influential actors (Kelley, 2010a) to advance nation interests and to contribute to the achievement of policy objectives (Malone, 2001). The categories of realist, liberal, and constructivist approach to public diplomacy position public diplomacy within international relations paradigms and clarify the areas in which public diplomacy projects might yield impact in international affairs. These areas are namely public opinion, relationship dynamics, and public debates. The next section uses existing practices and models to further operationalize expected impacts of public diplomacy.

4. Establishing the pathways of connection

For this research, public diplomacy is defined as the communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of helping achieve foreign policy goals and objectives. Based on the conjunction of this definition with international relations theories, three areas to observe the impact of public diplomacy are presented: public opinion, relationship dynamics, and public debates. Yet, these areas fall short in connecting the penultimate objective of public diplomacy – reaching the public – with the ultimate objective – reaching foreign policy goals and advancing national interests of the practitioner countries. In this section, two such pathways of connection are proposed within each area, one with a larger impact in the said area and one with a more focused impact. The six pathways of connection are identified through a study of the literature and the practice. Table 1 presents a summary of the pathways within all three areas.

The first pathway, *attraction*, stems from Nye's concept of soft power. The soft power concept suggests that countries can change policy outcomes through attraction and co-option as opposed to through coercive hard power capabilities by using their *culture, domestic values and policies*, and *foreign policy* (Nye, 2004). A country's culture can create attraction through which foreign policy objectives can be achieved. For instance, Craig Hayden (2012) discusses how Taro Aso, the former Prime Minister of Japan, utilized Japanese popular culture items – such as manga, anime, and J-pop – to increase Japanese presence in the international arena. Additionally, a country's domestic political values and its ability to uphold such values can create attraction. China's problems with attraction in and foreign policy towards the Western world is usually attributed to its domestic values and policies, such as human rights violations and the single-party system (Wang, 2008, p. 261). Last, a country's foreign policy decisions are influential in creating attraction. Vickers (2004) introduces the example of Canada. The country's multi-stakeholder understanding in its foreign policy is argued to be instrumental in gathering support when Canada asked for a more inclusive United Nations Security Council in late 1990s (Vickers, 2004). Subsequently, the Council invited members of academia and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to its meetings for consultation. In short, the *attraction* pathway sees public diplomacy is seen as a tool to broadcast soft power resources to target audiences *en masse* (Nye, 2011). Public diplomacy increases a country's attraction and creates a general favorable public opinion towards it by increasing the exposure of foreign publics to its soft power assets. Foreign policy influence “happens via. . . views among the mass public” (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012, p. 560).

Benefit of the doubt is the second pathway explaining a more focused impact of public diplomacy on public opinion. The pathway proposes that public diplomacy projects and messages change the general attitudes of the host country by shaping the perception of the interests of the practitioner country. Similar to the *attraction* pathway, *benefit of the doubt* is about the perception of target audiences. Unlike the attraction pathway, the objective is not to increase the attractiveness of the practitioner country in the eyes of the public. Rather, the objective is to introduce a 'shared interest' understanding between the practitioner and host countries. Benefit of the doubt understanding is commonly invoked by practitioners to emphasize the role of public diplomacy projects, especially in the broader framework of American foreign affairs. Public diplomacy projects are expected to encourage “other people to give the United States the benefit of the doubt on specific policy issues or request for collaboration” by establishing a presumption of mutual interests in the host countries (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2005, p. 16). Practitioners do not necessarily try to “create a sympathetic interest in [a country's] policy. . . [but to] induce influential parts of the host country's public to give. . . the benefit of the doubt” (Glade, 2009, p. 241). Thus, in the lack of full evidence – which is likely to be the case in foreign affairs – the audience will have a favorable judgment towards the practitioner country. When Hassan Rouhani was elected as president in Iran, the country was considered unfriendly and deemed not trustworthy (Mogensen, 2015). Public diplomacy projects focused on demonstrating that Iran had similar foreign policy interests with the rest of the world (Mogensen, 2015). President Rouhani publicly shared such messages in a letter published in the Washington Post and other high-profile speeches (Mogensen, 2015). Given the fact that there is no complete information about the motives of Iran in the international arena, these projects aimed to encourage foreign publics to consider the better alternatives or explanations. Foreign policy influence occurs based on the audience perception that practitioner and host countries, more often than not, have similar policy interests.

Socialization pathway argues that the output of public diplomacy projects change the way the practitioner country interacts with other actors in the host society. Unlike the public opinion methods, the main aim is not to make country more favorable in the eyes of the public. The objective is to change the nature of relationship between the practitioner and host country by undertaking projects. Public diplomacy projects help practitioner countries to undertake new functions in the host society and to increase their levels of activities. Socialization is based on a social network analysis understanding where the quality and quantity of interaction between actors are important and posits that public diplomacy can be used to increase the volume and breadth of interaction between a practitioner country and target audiences. For instance, the European Union's Youth in Action program is such a public diplomacy project. The program funds civil society activities bringing young Europeans from different countries together to work on problems that affect their countries (British Council, 2011). The local civil society groups, thus, interact with the European Union as a potential partner and founder for their activities. The Union becomes an important support of youth and civil society activities, as opposed to a supranational organizations and a regulatory body. Moreover, these projects also enable the European Union and its representations in other countries to establish relations with the actors in social life. Socialization pathway argues that public diplomacy projects change the relationship dynamics between the countries by increasing the volume or level of activities and breadth or topics of interactions. Foreign policy influence is created through these new relationships and new functions undertaken by the practitioner countries.

Direct influence explains a smaller impact and underlines the role of elites, individuals holding important positions in policy relevant decision-making processes, in generating outcomes. Public diplomacy, as explained by this pathway, attempts to communicate with these elites directly and influence their thinking (Gilboa, 2008, pp. 64–65). For instance, shortly after its declaration of independence, Kosovo hired consulting companies to help communicate directly with public officials to get international recognition (Wählisch & Xharra, 2011, p. 18). Direct influence campaigns also target individuals who have personal access to political leaders and other decision-makers, therefore are able to contribute to policy outcomes (Graham & Kelley, 2009). In this pathway, public diplomacy becomes closer to lobbying and advocacy activities in which practitioners aim to influence the decisions made by the legislators. Direct influence pathway argues that public diplomacy is a tool to reach the policy-makers in a host country. Public diplomacy yields an impact on foreign policy by changing the minds and attitudes of elites.

Table 2
Summary of the pathways of connection.

	Model	Public diplomacy works by...
Public opin-Relationship dynamics	Attraction	Influencing mass public opinion
	Benefit of the doubt	Creating the perception that practitioner and host countries have similar policy interests
	Socialization	Creating new relationships and new functions undertaken by the practitioner countries
	Direct influence	Changing the minds and attitudes of elites
Public debates	Agenda-setting	Introducing a given issue or increasing its salience in media or public agendas in target audiences
	Framing	Changing the coverage of an issue and highlighting more favorable aspects

The last two pathways focus on public debates. *Agenda-setting* pathway refers to two different understandings of ‘agenda’. First, it refers to the media agenda and the role of media in shaping the political reality in choosing and displaying news (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Public diplomacy projects can change the news chosen and displayed in foreign media. The underlying assumption is that “issues receiving the most attention in the media will be perceived by the public as the most important” (Gilboa, 2008, pp. 63–64). In mediated agenda-setting, the countries might use their own international broadcasting agencies, op-eds, interviews, celebrities, and high-level visits among many other mechanisms to increase the salience of a given issue in foreign media landscape. For instance, Russia uses its own broadcasting network, Russia Today, to promote agenda items that are important for their foreign policy goals (Simons, 2014). Russian President Vladimir Putin (2013) published an op-ed piece on the New York Times to “speak directly to the American people” and to put increase the importance given to the conflict in Syria within the American public. Second, independent from media, an abstract concept of agenda might be defined including all the important subjects discussed in the public sphere and actors seek the privilege to set this agenda by introducing issues that are deemed important by them (Kelley, 2012). In other words, agenda-setting is not necessarily only about increasing the awareness of a given population but rather to ignite action. For instance, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) started at a point where the issue of landmines was not even on international agenda and managed to bring it to the attention of international society (Kelley, 2010b). ICBL was instrumental in drafting and advocating for the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction or the Ottawa Treaty (Cameron, 1999). Public diplomacy might help achieve foreign policy goals by introducing a given issue or increasing its salience in media or public agendas in target audiences.

Framing analyzes which elements of a given issue are included and excluded in discussions (Entman, 1993) and is the “media selection, exclusion of, and emphasis on certain issues and approaches to promote a particular definition, interpretation, moral evaluation, or a solution” (Gilboa, 2008, p. 64). Given the fact that it is possible to change the way a given issue is covered in media channels, public diplomacy can be seen as a country’s attempts to exert as much control as possible over the framing of policy issues in foreign media platforms (Entman, 2008, p. 89). More often than not, it is possible to frame an issue in different ways. For instance, a military intervention can be framed as a peace operation or an invasion. The framing hypothesis argues that frames encourage audiences to accept “some assumptions over other, and imply some questions while ignoring others,” which therefore might make certain policy options more plausible in the eyes of the public (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 6). Golan and Carroll’s (2012) study of op-eds in international newspapers show that governments, political figures, as well as other politically active actors have tried to frame the 2011 Egyptian revolution differently. The American contributors have attempted to present replacing the Mubarak regime as a plausible outcome whereas Egyptian contributors have focused on the need to change the role of Islamic groups in the society. Despite the lack of an organized public diplomacy campaign from either side, Egyptians and Americans presented contending frames of the issues with the objective of harnessing international support. Public diplomacy, within this aspect, might consist of “targeted messages directed at attitudinal drivers of policy support or opposition” (Egner, 2010, p. 99), and work through changing the coverage of an issue and by highlighting more favorable aspects.

Succinctly stated, the six pathways of connection presented in this paper constitute a framework that connects public diplomacy projects with foreign policy objectives. As shown in Table 2, public diplomacy projects are carried out with the penultimate objective of communicating with foreign public. The impacts of these communication attempts can be observed in three different areas. The ultimate objective of contributing to the achievement of foreign policy goals can be linked with the communication component of public diplomacy through six different ways.

5. Conclusion

This paper started out with an argument that current scholars and practitioners are limited to respectively their disciplinary models and to project outputs when assessing public diplomacy projects. These existing measurement attempts do not present a comprehensive picture, as they tend to disregard the complex nature of public diplomacy and global politics. By utilizing mainstream international theories, first the paper delineated the areas on which public diplomacy might demonstrate its impact. Subsequently, the existing theories and models of assessment were reevaluated to create ‘pathways of connection’ – statements that connect public diplomacy with its ultimate objective.

The main premise of the six pathways of connection framework (cf. Fig. 1) rests on two arguments. First, it is accepted that the roots of public diplomacy are in the persuasion industries (Snow, 2007, p. 9). In its essence, public diplomacy is the “application of PR to strategic relationships of organizations with international publics” (Grunic, 1993, p. 143). Yet,

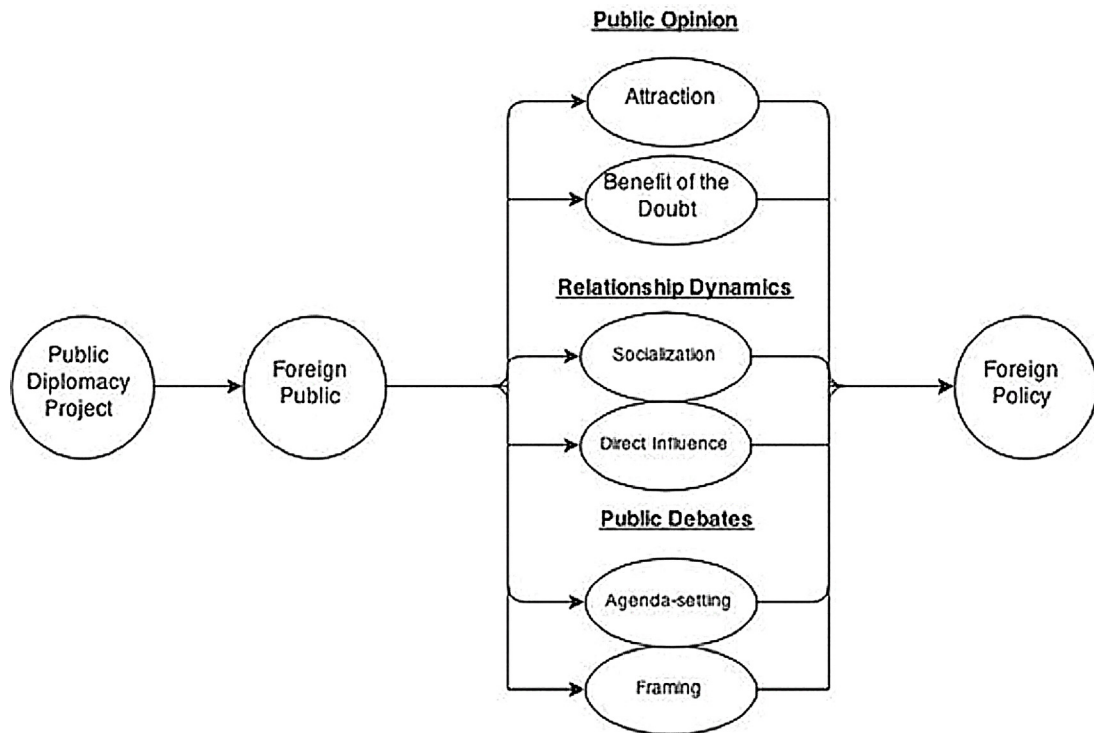


Figure 1. Six pathways of connection.

public diplomacy is not only public relations or persuasion. Therefore, the second argument introduces a multi-disciplinary approach. Specifically speaking, public diplomacy carries the label 'diplomacy', signaling its inherent connection to international politics and relations. An inclusive approach to public diplomacy should both acknowledge its communication and persuasion nature as well as its link with the overall foreign policy goals and objectives.

The six pathways of connection framework highlights two significant contributions of this research. First, it should be noted that public diplomacy projects attempt to change policy through public relations and communication functions. The ultimate objective is to advance national interests and achieve – or help achieve – foreign policy goals. The environment in which public diplomacy operates is different from corporate communication functions. The functional similarities between public diplomacy and public relations should not overcome their differences. Public diplomacy is a foreign policy tool and cannot be conceptualized outside the international relations context.

Second, even though the outcomes of public diplomacy projects are unobservable per se, it is possible to track their impacts. The three areas of impact – public opinion, relationship dynamics, and public debates – are suggested as places to observe such impacts. As the various case examples given throughout the paper suggest, these impacts might be observed in any one or more of these areas. For instance, a broadcasting project is unlikely to change relationship dynamics but might be more effective in public debates or public opinion. A short-term exchange project will not change the public opinion in general however might influence the relationship dynamics. The pathways of connection should be seen as a template to observe the unobservable. By explaining the link between foreign policy and communication, these pathways facilitate the understanding of how public diplomacy works.

In short, public diplomacy is a concept that has been developed by various disciplines. Notwithstanding the intellectual diversity brought in by this inter-disciplinary endeavor, it is of uttermost importance to steer away from stretching the analogies between public diplomacy and other similar functions, including public relations. This article proposes an analytical approach that recognizes the contributions from other disciplines but nevertheless treats public diplomacy as a unique phenomenon.

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