

Perspectives

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The Political Promise of Public Diplomacy

by Donna Marie Oglesby

Public Diplomacy as political argument in the global public square is a hard sell. Most current Western adherents to Public Diplomacy imagine they are responding to a transformed global space in which a vastly increased number of people everywhere are empowered by globalization and technology to rise above domestic politics, national boundaries and bickering leaders to engage each other individually in seeking solutions to common problems of humanity.

Yet, people coming together internationally in the struggle to address problems and challenges does not rise above politics. It thankfully opens the space for politics in a pluralistic international society where ideas matter and are shared and modified in discussion with others. In this exchange of ideas that leads to political action, we become fully human by defining who we are and who we hope to become.

The idea of the people drowning out the shouting of national political leaders and transforming the global common into a nicely universal civil space dates in American intellectual history at least back to President Woodrow Wilson. Nearly 100 years ago, Wilson unfurled the progressive flag over the White House in search of a process of global connection designed to find the “common purpose of enlightened mankind.” He advised statesmen to follow, not lead: to listen to the voices of the people and align their policies accordingly.

This siren song of a universal civilization is not simply sung by idealistic Americans, of course. Nor can American global leadership be assumed. *American Idol*, born out of *Britain's Got Talent*, has given way to *The Voice* on the global stage as well as on television screens with-

in the United States. People, the world over, are caught up in wrenching disruptions that their national political systems barely control. Motivated by hope, fear, pride and ideals, they yearn to shape their own futures and know the stakes are high. They feel — whoever and wherever they are — that their cries deserve to be heard.

In their human imperfections, *The Voice* contestants are an authentic human sound. Viewers pay attention because of the honesty of the raw talent emitted in song from anyone of any age, shape, gender, size, or color. Contestants are the ordinary citizens in their plurality who dream and will be heard. Consequently, televised talent competition is a winning format indigenized from Afghanistan to the Middle East and North Africa. Although the format may be universal, as cultural diplomacy scholar Cynthia P. Schneider has so beautifully demonstrated, the reality shows actually stimulate a revival of interest in traditional music, poetry and song rather than leading to a homogenized Westernized global culture. The global call stimulates local response in remarkably diverse ways.

Similarly, in the media saturated crossroads of the global public square, no “clarified common thought” arises from the people. Yes, the people all want the “high things, the right things, the true things,” as Wilson believed, but there is a plurality of views among people as to what exactly is appropriate, legitimate and proper at any given moment in any particular place. Ideas change. Values clash. The process that determines the values sorting whether within nations or between them, as the recently deceased political scientist Robert A. Dahl taught, is politics. In the collision of values that cannot live together, there will be choice and there will be loss. The people know it and they care. Their engagement in public life makes them citizen political actors worthy of respect.

Because it is a hive of bodies politic and not a single universal civilization, the abstract global civil society is a discordant chorale sung in the vernacular by voices arising from six billion people collected in national societies. These human beings will fight locally and globally for their cherished values with, as political philosopher Michael Walzer writes, “both conviction and passion, reason and enthusiasm, in always unstable combination.” Politically awakened and technologically empowered citizens swarm into the now twenty-five year old World Wide Web in much the same way as their Olym-

pic teams marched into the global crossroads of the Sochi stadium out of a huge dynamic floor map of their own country. The national is transformed by the experience of global interaction, but it is not erased.

Dissident members of the punk band Pussy Riot, arrested as they say for singing a “fun song in a church,” were pardoned from Russian prison in advance of the Olympic Winter Games to create a more benevolent image of the Russian government. Free to travel, the women appropriated the Olympic spotlight to tour the United States, Asia and Europe for Amnesty International. From *The Colbert Report* to the United Nations, they sang of the plight of political prisoners of conscience in Russia and elsewhere, advocating boycotting the winter games, supporting the street protesters in Kiev, and expressing gratitude for international attention and concern while they were jailed.

While some human rights supporters might see their work as universal and their members as global citizens rising above national politics, Pussy Riot is clear about the national political character of its protests: “We always insisted from the very beginning that Pussy Riot is first and foremost a political group which is using art as a way to express its political opinion because it’s impossible to do so through any legal means,” group member Nadezhda Andreyevna Tolokonnikova said in *The New York Times*. “No dialogue is possible with the Russian authorities and they have proven that again and again.”

In the new global media ecology even diplomatic dialogue has been disrupted and taken on a less scripted, less decorous tone as the ensuing barbs exchanged between the Russian and American ambassadors to the U.N. demonstrate. Taunting U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power about joining the punk band, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin called a press conference to say,

I would expect her to invite them to perform in the National Cathedral in Washington. This is my expectation. Maybe they arrange a world tour for them — St. Peter’s cathedral in Rome, then maybe in Mecca in Saudi Arabia and end up with a gala concert at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Tweeting her response, Ambassador Power used two 140 character bursts to chirp back:

Ambassador Churkin. I’d be honored to go on tour with Pussy Riot — a group of girls who speak up & stand for human rights. Will you join us?

I can’t sing, but if Pussy Riot will have me, Amb Churkin, I say our 1st concert is for Russia’s political prisoners

President Wilson might not have imagined this scenario when he advised statesmen to listen to the voices of the people and align their policies accordingly. But for any political truth to emerge, as Roger Berkowitz, Academic Director of the Hannah Arendt Center, writes, “it must go through the shadows that darken the marketplace. Persuasion and rhetoric replace the light of the sun. The winner gains not insight but power.” Not the power of control or coercion but the power to persuade and influence arising from spontaneous and authentic political speech.

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In my view, Public Diplomacy is a power wielding and seeking exercise on a very crowded, noisy global stage, whether or not we are as comfortable as Pussy Riot acknowledging that fact. Public Diplomacy should be understood to be a human political instrument used to understand, inform and influence international publics in pursuit of interests and values any actor holds dear, recognizing, with respect, that there are others who may value differently. Public Diplomacy actors do not lay the good intentions pavement for a universal civilization. They recognize that in a pluralistic international society, contesting ideas drive agendas, social movements, revolutions and policy choices. Their task, with varying levels of power and persuasiveness, is to influence the problem definition and therefore the political outcome of the issues under debate.

To maintain a space for politics, and therefore freedom, in our international society, we need to work to keep open the crossroads where ideas can be exchanged and contested. Yet, we cannot assume permanence of the current politically arrived-at international accord guaranteeing relative openness and freely flowing information that reflects a liberal preference for permeable borders and a messy global marketplace of ideas.

Those who wish to obstruct this free flow are already hard at work. And, in the eyes of some, the United States government would appear to undercut its own articulated values by approving challenges to net neutrality and monitoring global Internet communications on a massive scale. American public diplomats should be attentive to how this perceived hypocrisy accelerates the rapidly shifting geopolitics of Internet governance to their detriment.

The United States may monitor but it does not filter information flowing freely on-line. A significant number of national governments, however, do increasingly block the news and views that challenge their hold on power. In addition to arresting bloggers and journalists and trying to control satellite feeds, they are not happy with the liberal political understandings that shape the current international governance of the internet and are pushing back domestically by blocking content and internationally by advancing new regulatory ideas. They want to shrink the space for politics at home and

abroad. We can see in the success of some of these efforts that the dense competition of ideas that characterizes the current global media landscape is not technologically inevitable. The dissonance and plurality of voices we celebrate as the lifeblood of politics are grating to some in power who want to plug their ears and those of their citizens as well. Such efforts at segmenting the global common should be consistently challenged.

The premise of Public Diplomacy is that in the welcome plurality of nations, there are value refrains that echo across national frontiers and harmonies of interest that ascend, in the words of political theorist John Dunn, from the “infinite series of imponderable and bitterly contentious choices” that each particular national political community must make. Public diplomats must rise to the challenge of our age: to be mindful of the pluralism inherent in the international public realm today and give primacy to politics so that rather than unraveling, the world wide web of citizen interaction knits together ever more tightly in support of human freedom.



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