



The pandemic's wake-up call for humanity-centered public diplomacy

R. S. Zaharna¹

Revised: 20 September 2021 / Accepted: 26 September 2021 / Published online: 27 October 2021
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Abstract

The pandemic is re-shaping the global public's perspective of state-centric public diplomacy in a way that prioritizes the shared connection of humanity and a humanity-centered public diplomacy. This piece explores the gaps of where public diplomacy is and public diplomacy's new global mandate for collaborative problem solving for the global good.

Keywords Global mandate · Soft power · Humanity-centered public diplomacy · Empathy

Iver Neumann observed that “humanity shapes diplomacy, and diplomacy shapes humanity” (2018, p. 4). The surge of interest in public diplomacy following the 9/11 terrorist attacks underscores Neumann's observation. The attacks were a wake-up call that the perception of foreign publics mattered. Diplomacy responded to the oversight with a shift from traditional diplomacy as statecraft, to a renewed focus on public diplomacy. The pandemic appears to be another wake-up call. This brief essay explores how the pandemic has exposed a growing gap between state-centric and humanity-centered public diplomacy, perceptions of soft power as well as needed additions to public diplomacy practices.

State perspectives of Covid-19, public diplomacy and soft power

In looking at the pandemic, the state perspective appears focused on public diplomacy and soft power repercussions of how effectively they managed the virus compared to other states (Leng and Lemahieu 2021). *Socially Distanced Soft Power*, for example, focused on “the pandemic's impact on the reputation of given countries and regions” and “the global balance of soft power” (McClory 2021). Efforts to

help others were framed in terms of how they enhanced a state's image. “Vaccine diplomacy” was added to wikipedia.

This focus on state interests and power has long been part of the DNA of public diplomacy, from the early works of Joseph Nye (2004) and Jan Melissen (2005) to more recent scholarship (Chitty 2020; Hayden 2012; Pamment 2016). As Nancy Snow observed, public diplomacy is “inevitably linked to power” (2020, p. 4). Yet even more basic than the assumption of power is the presumed focus on the individual actors and their relations to other actors. Soft power exemplifies the individual-level perspective of public diplomacy and its inherent competitive nature.

The pandemic offers an opportunity to question this individual-level, power-focused, and competitive perspective of public diplomacy. How are publics viewing states, public diplomacy and soft power during the pandemic?

Public perspectives of the pandemics and state soft power

Perhaps the most striking difference between state and public perspectives is that for publics there is not one “pandemic” but multiple, compounding crises.

First came the Covid-19 virus. For global publics, Covid-19 was a “mortality shock” (Verdery et al. 2020). What were statistic and logistics for states, were loved ones for families. The emotional toll multiplied when pandemic precautions separated family members and arrested the grieving process. As governments focused in public health measures to contain the virus—lockdowns, quarantines, social

For special issue—Ilan Manor and James Pamment.

✉ R. S. Zaharna
zaharna@american.edu

¹ School of Communication, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20016-8017, USA



distancing—researchers warned of a second, impending “psychiatric pandemic” (Abbott 2021; Mortazavi et al. 2020).

A third, related crisis of Covid-19 was the financial toll not only on states’ tourism and economies, but people’s livelihoods worldwide (OECD 2021). The loss of jobs, income, and sense of worth compounded the emotional strain on families. Domestic violence increased globally, creating a “shadow pandemic” (Vaeza 2020).

Then, in May 2020, the video of a police officer kneeling on the neck of a Black man, George Floyd, lit an emotional fire that spread worldwide. The pandemic exposed health and economic disparities targeting people of color (Laurencin and Walker 2020). As many protest signs read: “Racism is a pandemic.”

These multiple pandemics affecting global publics sparked not only an awareness of shared global problems but also a shared feeling of connection with others around the world. Emotional connection or global fellowship is at the heart of a humanity-centered perspective of public diplomacy.

This emotional connection surfaced as the prism for viewing the actions of nations and soft power. As writer Sundeep Khanna (2020) voiced in a biting analysis of how traditional soft powers had failed: “It wasn’t just how they dealt with the virus at home but *how in this moment of civilisational crisis countries dealt with the rest of the world* that will have a long-term impact on how we see them.” Similarly, an editorial from City/Nation/Place.com (2020) argued: “The ideals of global citizenship and camaraderie were put to the test, and the world’s purportedly most open and democratic states responded by closing up shop.”

States did more than just fail the Covid-19 test; they failed the humanity test. Increasingly, publics expect governments to act in the global interest. The *2018 Soft Power 30 Report* noted this trend before the pandemic: “the area that has the largest impact on international perceptions of a country—is whether people believe that a given country will “do the right thing in global affairs” (McClory 2018, p. 165). Simon Anholt made a similar observation about the effect of moral behavior on the perception of countries: people admire countries who do good (2020, pp. 117–118). In 2014, he founded the Good Country Index.

Public diplomacy must address this gap between global publics’ concern for pressings issues that affect humanity—many of which the Covid-19 pandemic exposed or exacerbated—and states’ concern with individual power.

A growing chorus of scholars have highlighted this imperative. Castells spoke of “the diplomacy of the public” that promoted the value of public interests over private ones. Zhang and Swartz (2009) suggested “public diplomacy for Global Public Goods.” Fitzpatrick (2017) proposed “public diplomacy in the public interest.” As Villaneuva noted,

“attending to the international common good makes for sound diplomacy” (2010, p. 46). I have written on humanity-centered public diplomacy elsewhere and it is the subject of a forthcoming book, *Boundary Spanners of Humanity* (Zaharna 2019, 2021). All of these writings call for expanding public diplomacy from its narrow focus on the needs, interests, and goals of individual actors to include the broader needs, interests, and goals of humanity.

Expanding the public diplomacy’s functions

As we expand public diplomacy’s vision to a humanity-centered perspective, we must also reassess or add new functions to public diplomacy’s toolbox. Several areas stand out.

Develop response strategies

Public diplomacy is somewhat peculiar in assuming that states have agency and can even target publics. What happens when states lack agency, such as with the pandemic? What happens when instead of states targeting publics, publics target states? Social media amplifies this possibility, “forc[ing] soft power strategies to become more reactive than in decades prior” (Snyder and Sindyukov 2020). The pandemic’s compounded crises were flash points for states. “Rage is a powerful sentiment, and the pandemic set it off up and down the country,” observed one commentator in Peru (Lane 2021). Castells (2012) warned earlier about “networks of rage.” The urgency of developing crisis response strategies is superseding the luxury of designing strategic initiatives. As the pandemic demonstrated, how a state responds communicates volumes to observing publics.

Move from listening to perspective-taking

In developing effective response strategies with a humanity-level perspective, public diplomacy actors need to move beyond listening to perspective-taking. Cull (2008, 2019) and Di Martino (2020) have greatly sharpened public diplomacy’s focus by prioritizing the importance of listening. My fear now is that the pandemic has shaken communication dynamics so profoundly that listening, or taking in information, is no longer enough. Perspective-taking goes to the next step of processing that information from the other’s perspective, including a humanity-level perspective.



Empathetic public diplomacy

Whereas empathy may be a fuzzy concept for rational state actors, for publics it is a critical release valve in crisis situations when fear and uncertainty become overwhelming or even explosive. The pandemic offers a brilliant demonstration of empathetic diplomacy. In April 2020, Queen Elizabeth made a rare, televised speech. Rather than focusing on the virus as an enemy to fight, as other leaders did, she spoke to the feelings of the people. She opened with empathy, legitimizing public fears and the pain of separation. She gave solace to grief and a promise of hope: “We will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again.” The Queen’s speech, intended for the Commonwealth, resonated around the globe. Empathy is a vital function in a humanity-level response to global publics.

Public diplomacy’s global mandate for collaborative problem solving

The most critical public diplomacy function, and the one at which states failed most miserably at during the pandemic, is collaborative problem-solving. The 2021 soft power report noted the difference between scientific research teams as “exemplars of international cooperation” and the collective failures of the world’s political leaders (McClory 2021, p. 16). This difference reveals the limitations of the inherently competitive individual-level perspective set against an expansive humanity-level perspective that assumes connectivity and by extension, collaboration. Awareness of a shared fate may have also spurred scientists to focus on problem-solving rather than their team’s own prestige (soft power). Going forward, publics—like the scientists—may also sense their shared fate in global problems. Public diplomacy may be “inevitably linked to power,” as Snow suggested. However, public diplomacy is fundamentally about publics—humanity. The global public’s concern about the growing frequency and severity of crises affecting humanity and the planet may be shaping public diplomacy’s new global mandate for collaborative problem-solving for the global good. Humanity, may once again, shape diplomacy.

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R. S. Zaharna is a professor in the School of Communication, American University, Washington, D.C. and Faculty Fellow, with Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California. She received the 2018 Distinguished Scholar Award in International Communication by the International Studies Association. Her books include *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11* (Palgrave, 2010) and *Boundary Spanners of Humanity: Three Logics of Communication and Public Diplomacy for Global Collaboration* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

