



Wilton Park



Image: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

Conference report

Putting the power in soft power?

Wednesday 12 – Friday 14 October 2011 | WP1117



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Key points

- Modern communications technologies have unlocked today's public diplomacy environment through readily accessible and far reaching platforms providing unprecedented opportunities to listen to and communicate with publics around the world.
- Although hard power and the perception of military strength are crucial means of securing the national interest, soft power offers opportunities for co-opted means of engagement in foreign policy activities. Nonetheless, it is conceptually and practically complex and paradoxical
- Measuring the effectiveness of soft power initiatives is problematic in that it requires a long-term perspective: many of the effects are intangible and not easily quantifiable. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that publics hold on to deeply ingrained perceptions of states that are very difficult to change positively. Negative shifts in perceptions, however, seem to occur more readily as is the case with the recent decline in public perceptions of the United States.
- Overt use undermines authenticity, credibility and trust yet a skilful combination of the range and blend of soft power tools can be an effective, long-term policy instrument.
- Soft power should be central to foreign policy approaches but by its very nature can be problematic for policy makers to accept unreservedly. It requires a paradigm shift away from public announcements of successful interventions, towards private operations within un-attributable space. For elected officials with a need to demonstrate achievements within a short period of time, soft power offers less scope than harder instruments to demonstrate achievement of foreign policy goals.
- Integrated approaches to soft power, in which third party actors work in partnerships to develop, disseminate or display attractive cultural assets, provide rich opportunities for achieving national interests. When seen as ways of 'being', rather than ways of 'doing', soft power interventions on behalf of governments should be about amplification, rather than creation of messages.
- Active interventions that can be publically declared without loss of credibility and authenticity concern the creation of the networks and arenas for dialogue, not the ownership or dominance of the subsequent conversations and outcomes.

How powerful is soft power?

1. The recent growth in communications technologies and social media had had a significant impact on the nature of international relations, whereby a state's ability to achieve preferred outcomes no longer works through coercion and force alone. The access to national cultures and societies created by these technologies provides a new environment for public diplomacy and international relations.
2. There is a close relationship between soft power, public relations and propaganda but they are distinctly different. The former should be seen as a discrete policy tool to achieve foreign policy objectives and as a form of strategic communication but it is

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acknowledged that there is sometimes an overlap and an interrelationship between the two. The skill is to get the balance right.

3. Soft power equates more to a state of 'being', rather than a state of 'doing'. However, the traditional approach to international relations and foreign policy relate to the exploitation of a state's assets. In other words, behaving in a directed way to achieve certain objectives.
4. Hard power has immediate to short-term impacts, whereas soft power achieves results in the long term. Ingrained pre-conceptions of a nation or community can only be changed by significant effort and over time. To facilitate any change in prejudices, the assets must also be authentic, credible and trusted by audiences. However, there is evidence to suggest that pre-conceptions rarely, if ever, change.
5. The longer term nature of soft power is problematic for elected representatives whose term of office prompts opportunistic, rather than strategic behaviours. Together with difficulties in quantifying/measuring soft power and its impacts, soft power is therefore often seen as a less attractive option.
6. Soft power requires the involvement of a number of transnational and supranational networks, as well as diasporas, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and general publics in the production, dissemination and deployment of assets. It is important to recognise that the aims of parties within these networks will sometimes differ from foreign policy objectives. In addition, many soft power assets are not owned directly by the state/government. The role of government should be to empower citizens to create, and communicate powers of attraction and then to amplify the stories to ensure authenticity, and credibility among audiences.
7. Clear definition and understanding of target audiences or communities is vital. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that many of the assets may have limited relevance for these audiences.

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How to deploy soft power assets?

8. Today's public diplomacy environment includes: an increasingly diverse set of players; new methods and hierarchies of communication; and a global set of moral values against which states are judged. Credibility derives from a sense of affinity with publics but this can be problematic if societal characteristics do not match. The risks and consequences of governments making mistakes are high.
9. Deployment of soft power assets requires serious and sustained research to understand how audiences perceive a state. However, metrics used to quantify and demonstrate changes in perception are often problematic. Use of in-bound tourism metrics, for example, cannot directly attribute tourism to attraction of soft power assets.
10. Soft power concerns development of relationships and the term 'audience' connotes a sense of telling rather than engaging in open dialogue and hearing the voices of the 'other'. The collaborative nature of soft power suggests dialogue with networks or communities to immerse the state more directly within conversations.
11. When deploying soft power assets, a focus on 'nation branding' may disconnect states from the issues which drive publics. For example, people care about the global challenges of climate change, sustainability, conflict and human rights. Soft power that focuses on these values based concerns would do much to unite.
12. Israel's deployment of soft power is intended towards positioning the country as multifaceted, progressive and innovative rather than one defined by conflict. The deployment of third party endorsements and 'conversation changers', such as the 'Birthright Israel' draw on key soft power pillars. This is not to deny conflict or historical context but to broaden the current perception of Israel.

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13. However, this can create contradictions. Public diplomacy imperatives can create narratives that seek to refocus attention on a broader range of pillars. This may give rise to accusations of deception, distraction, or the creation of a moral smokescreen, thereby reducing the credibility of the intended message.
14. The relationship between hard power and soft power is complex and can have unintended outcomes- a particular difficulty for policy-makers. For example, the current economic relationship between Germany and Greece affects the way in which the states and their citizens perceive each other and regard their soft power attraction.
15. New media and more flexible networks provide different methods of engagement for public diplomacy but practitioners should be mindful of the limitations. For example, in regions such as the Middle East, access to these networks is often limited to elite populations. Furthermore, public diplomacy practitioners are challenged by the need to project messages into a ‘noisy’, information heavy environment. Effective deployment of soft power assets must find ways to reach mass media and television, alongside social media platforms.

A force for the good?

16. Soft power plays an increasingly important role in security. Cultural activities, media, language and education all contribute to stability, human development, innovation and new technologies. These in turn promote economic development, and assist to spread universal values such as democracy, freedom of expression and civic rights.
17. The relationship between hard power and soft power in the security arena can result in confusion and apparent inconsistencies. On the one hand, there has been an identifiable increase in military interventions in the international system since the end of the cold war; on the other hand, public diplomacy is becoming increasingly militarised as the military enters the humanitarian space.
18. Foreign policy objectives may be met most effectively by a decline in hard power relative to an increase in the use of soft power. This raises the question- who should be the key communicators? Militaries may be less effective in delivering soft power messages; their focus is on control and potential threat in conflict situations. Cultural institutions create longer term relationships and softer understandings. However, the slow fuse, difficulties in measurement and looser control inherent to soft power require a fundamental shift in thinking about the relationship to hard power. Soft power and hard power are both valid. A clear understanding of the goals may assist practitioners to understand which to apply and when.
19. Norway is a strong example of a relatively small country which maximises its reputation to position itself on the global stage. With its robust economy, core values of equality and human rights and long experience of peace-making, Norway can deploy these soft power assets to great effect, arguably ‘punching above its weight’ in international negotiations.
20. Its strong tradition of peace is built on the realisation that Norway’s particular strengths lie in the ability to build and sustain strong networks and to create the environment within which dialogue may be facilitated. The key to success is to step away from the network, avoid dominating it, be silent and allow the discussions to develop.
21. The goals of public diplomacy are best achieved through a combination of soft and hard power, the lead driver dependent on the circumstances. Ultimately, states deploy these instruments in order to progress their own interests on the global stage.

Building a trusted brand: the soft power of economic prosperity and stability?

22. Multi-national corporations (MNCs) have similar interests to those of governments, in that they both seek to manage states of mind and manage their reputations. The

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relationship between the two can be both beneficial and challenging, depending on the quality of country brand, or the business practices of the corporate. It can be difficult for MNCs to separate associations from a home nation.

23. Corporate organisations have extensive experience in influencing their environments and their publics. Their success often depends upon an ability to build and maintain networks, simultaneously cooperating and competing, with a diverse range of actors including NGOs, unions, and states. As a result, they can bring useful lessons and experiences to public diplomacy and assist states to practice soft power.
24. Many corporate brands are heavily associated with their home nations, but in the case of Shell, its Anglo-Dutch origins create different perceptions of national identity in different communities. Diversity in national heritage is advantageous lending a sense of relevance to more than one national group.
25. Stakeholders have different perceptions of the identity and reputation of a corporate brand. For example, shareholders will judge an organisation on the extent to which it meets its commercial aims, whereas communities impacted by overseas operations will make judgements based on other values, such as its corporate social responsibilities. Governments may judge on the extent to which companies meet local energy challenges. These conflicting interests may influence strategic operating decisions but ultimately corporate decisions are made on the grounds of commercial interests.
26. There are many examples of public/private co-operation to further mutual interests. However, the risks involved in close relationships between MNCs and states manifest themselves when the actions of one threaten the reputation of the other, or when either party takes a position that it is contrary to the other.
27. The relationships between corporations, nations and societies should not be oversimplified and it is important to recognise the lobbying interests of business. Lobbying by progressive corporations can serve societies well, but at the same time conservative corporations may not. Firms' activities are heavily influenced by their publics, whether that be their employees who are connected to society's values through social media, the ethical concerns of their consumers, or the commercial interests of their stakeholders.
28. Building a trusted brand is about setting an agenda from the brand's perspective. This trust is derived from three main components: that of motive, judgment and delivery.

The role of supra-national networks and non-state actors

29. Non-governmental organisations and supra-national networks influence governments and civil societies through a combination of: building accessible communication platforms; providing objective information and data; direct lobbying; and providing aid to those in need.
30. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has set up a soft power index based on objective global ranking systems and information on governmental achievements in key global areas. Whilst some governments may not welcome the findings of such initiatives, others may seek to improve their ranking and be encouraged to take on different behaviours. This is legitimate provided that any ranking system is transparent and objective.
31. Examples of the OECD's soft power initiatives include the anti-bribery convention and current discussions on tax transparency. The development of a new global ranking, 'your better life' index, places the public at the heart of developing public policy. These examples highlight the organic global influence of institutions such as the OECD, which often extend beyond their country membership.
32. The soft power of many NGOs lies in their independence from national governments, their values base and the legitimacy derived from their representation of civil society. However, in order to achieve some of their strategic imperatives, they often work

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closely with governments and this can sometimes be perceived as collusion. The complex relationship is compounded by the fact that, in many cases, the government is a main funder.

33. International NGOs, such as Oxfam, will seek to use their influence in the debate about the politicisation or securitisation of aid. For example, they will use opportunities to lobby donors to give on the basis of need, rather than in support of foreign policy objectives.
34. In the context of the growth of a global aid ‘industry’, its leadership has traditionally been based in the West. However, NGOs recognise that greater internationalisation is crucial to ensure continuing relevance to their core communities and to enable them to respond appropriately to concerns regarding commercialisation of aid.
35. The dissemination of soft power assets relies heavily on networks, including those provided by non-state actors. For example, Facebook offers an inherently soft approach which can open and facilitate dialogues in new ways between states and communities. Facebook can also serve to soften the perception of traditionally hard institutions, such as police forces, and make them appear more accessible, responsive, less bureaucratic and more transparent.
36. Effective social media strategies involve a degree of experimentation but there are a number of key considerations that should underpin all such developments. For example, it is important to demonstrate authenticity by entrusting actors beyond the public diplomacy or public relations spheres to communicate directly with publics. This can also result in publics communicating directly with the organisation, thereby facilitating easy access to otherwise bureaucratic bodies.
37. However, the use of social media platforms, whilst opening access to a diverse range of people, does not guarantee inclusiveness of all: access is not universal. Social networking has both positive and negative aspects. During the 2011 UK riots, it was argued that social media was used to incite behaviour. On the other hand, it was also a tool by which communities organised themselves to challenge behaviour and organise the clean-up of streets. Amidst the wave of democratic uprisings throughout the Middle East, social media has been a powerful means of communication for activists. At the same time, oppressive regimes have hacked social networking sites, deleting and controlling messages while anti-regime bloggers have been arrested and tortured.
38. Social networking sites should be proactive in responding to the dilemmas posed by the interface between free speech and issues of personal or national security. They have a responsibility to develop appropriate responses to these fast emerging challenges, to be transparent and to ensure they are committed to protecting the data of users

Soft power in action: sharing expertise

39. In a challenging global environment with a decreasing level of resources, foreign policy practitioners nonetheless have a range of creative and innovative soft power programmes available to assist them in communicating with publics. These provide opportunities to reach out with images and ideas which could serve to reduce stereotypes and modernise and broaden the perceptions of states.
40. India’s public diplomacy initiatives seek to *explain* India, projecting images and stories of the nation, through use of social media such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter as well as commissioning of books and documentaries, and having a presence at global economic forums such as Davos.
41. The images and stories selected to represent the modern India focus on the unconventional, seeking to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypical images. For example, the India Africa initiatives for young visionaries launched in 2011, reaches out to university campuses around Africa, as well as promoting India as the solution to

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world economic issues through its talent base, and opportunities for new markets in one of the largest populations in the world.

42. Social media has successfully opened up the operations and internal workings of the Indian government to communities. For example, it was used to highlight the plight of Indian nationals subsequently evacuated safely from Libya. .
43. The UK is seeking to exploit the unprecedented soft power opportunities created by recent high profile events such as the Royal Wedding, and the forthcoming Olympic Games. Working with soft power partners such as the BBC World Service, the British Council, and Visit Britain, the FCO has developed a toolkit to be used by overseas missions to play to Britain’s strengths, and portray key messages.
44. The toolkit promotes British values in sustainability and inclusivity through eg. global support for sports for children and for the Paralympic Games. It is being widely used by FCO practitioners ‘in the field’ providing a series of ‘hooks’ to be used with overseas audiences. Third party ambassadors well known in the world of sport have been recruited as communicators of the key messages to maximise audience reach and credibility.
45. The Olympics are also seen as an opportunity to promote British business with the aim of ensuring a trade legacy that supports the UK growth agenda.
46. There are some key lessons for practitioners seeking to deploy their soft power assets. An overt country narrative about its place on the world stage may be regarded as a mere advertising campaign thereby undermining the sincerity of the message. A more effective campaign seeks to build an affinity with publics and thereby build confidence in the nation. Overall, the message should be clear and consistent and recognise that publics are not audiences: the most valuable discussions are based on authentic dialogue.

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