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# 'America's "Engagement" Delusion: Critiquing a Public Diplomacy Consensus'

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# America's 'engagement' delusion: Critiquing a public diplomacy consensus

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## Abstract

The Obama administration has embraced 'engagement' as the dominant concept informing US public diplomacy. Despite its emphasis on facilitating *dialogue* with and among Muslims overseas, this article demonstrates that, in practice, engagement aims to leverage social media and related technologies to *persuade* skeptical audiences to empathize with American policies. Indeed, its primary means of implementation – participatory interactions with foreign publics – is inherently duplicitous. Through the authors' description of how engagement is rooted in long-standing public relations and corporate marketing discourses, and in light of the historical and structural foundations of anti-Americanism, this contemporary public diplomacy strategy is shown to be both contradictory and, ultimately, delusional. As an alternative, the authors argue that an ethical public diplomacy should be pursued, i.e., a public diplomacy that embraces genuine (rather than contrived) dialogue. Although this approach is difficult to achieve (primarily because it implies a direct challenge to entrenched US foreign policy norms), it constitutes a mode of public diplomacy that better reflects the idealized principles of American democracy.

## Keywords

Engagement, Facebook, foreign policy, public diplomacy, public diplomacy 2.0, public relations, social media, State Department, Twitter, Web 2.0

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After a decade of confusion, finger-pointing and, at times, ineptitude, one concept has emerged as the ‘pillar and guiding principle’ of US public diplomacy (PD) (Lord and Lynch, 2010: 3). ‘To meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of the 21st century,’ says a leading State Department official, ‘we need a foreign policy that uses tools and approaches to match a changing global landscape’ (McHale, quoted in Lee, 2010: 23). According to the Obama administration, today, it is ‘vital’ that America pursues a PD policy that connects with, listens to and builds upon ‘long-term relationships with key stakeholders’ (White House, 2009: 4). The concept that these and many other announcements, reports, and studies are referencing is *engagement*.

Public diplomacy has been defined as a ‘term to describe the efforts by nations to win support and a favorable image among the general public of other countries, usually by way of news management and carefully planned initiatives designed to foster positive impressions’ (McQuail, 2010: 568). Engagement – the process of interaction and dialogue with foreign publics – itself is not new. All forms of diplomacy, in fact, entail various strategies involving engagement (Cull, 2008: 13). However, as Richard Arndt demonstrates in his monumental history of American cultural diplomacy, *The First Resort of Kings*, dominant approaches to PD have ebbed and flowed, from ‘advocacy versus cultural communication, direct confrontation versus indirect engagement, hard sell versus soft, and propaganda versus cultural-educational relations’ (Arndt, 2005: 527). What is new, however, is the Obama administration’s emphasis on listening and dialogue using social media and digital communications technologies in the process. This is not to say that the Obama administration has abandoned efforts to discredit and delegitimize ‘violent extremist networks and ideology.’ Instead, engagement is being pursued to simultaneously build ‘mutual respect and mutual interest’ with Muslim communities overseas (White House, 2009: 3–4).

Given that this latest iteration of engagement is upon us, it is time, we think, to contextualize and critically examine its premises and implications. In this article, we argue that Washington’s contemporary embrace of engagement is both misplaced and contradictory. It is misplaced because engagement cannot do what US foreign policy officials think it can do, and it is contradictory because its likely outcome will be the opposite of what its proponents claim. Instead of facilitating understanding and trust, engagement more likely will compound the existing atmosphere of distrust between the American state and wary publics overseas.

In what follows, first, we contextualize engagement in terms of the marketing and public relations principles that inform it. We then assess the most recent means of carrying out engagement – social media, wikis, and other forms of digital communications – collectively referred to as ‘public diplomacy 2.0.’ We subsequently address engagement’s contradictions, arguing that the current consensus emerging around its deployment and potentials constitutes a dangerous delusion. In relation to this last point, in our conclusion we suggest that a difficult but necessary reformation is now crucial – moving engagement away from its predominantly marketing and public relations orientations and towards, instead, a more ethically and democratically principled approach.

## Contextualizing engagement

To repeat, engagement is fast becoming *the* guiding concept of US public diplomacy. Its current importance was underlined in President Obama's speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009: 'There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground.' To do this, Obama sought 'broader engagement' with the Muslim world in areas including education, economic development, and science and technology (Obama, 2009). 'In today's complex world,' echoed the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, 'it is critical for our countries to learn about each other, to have discussions and dialogues' (McHale, quoted in Toumi, 2010). According to the State Department's 2009 report, *A New Era of Engagement*, 'The President and Secretary of State have committed [themselves] to renewing America's engagement with the people of the world by enhancing mutual respect and understanding and creating partnerships aimed at solving common problems' (State Department, 2009: 26).

But what, precisely, does this mean? Rather than pursuing multiple conversations and hoping these will yield positive outcomes, it is important to be clear that engagement is meant to be strategic rather than free-flowing; more a foreign policy calculation than an open-ended exploration. According to Lord and Lynch, engagement entails

... a planned process, based on a carefully researched understanding of the audience and of its interests, couched in language calibrated to engage the audience in the intended manner, using the best one- or two-way method of engagement ... as part of a larger strategy, and evaluated to determine if it is successful in advancing the intended goals. (Lord and Lynch, 2010: 11)

Various forms of engagement have been utilized throughout American diplomatic history. Exchange programs, embassy open houses, Voice of America phone-in shows and similar methods have been used to promote intercultural understanding. However, since the US Information Agency was disassembled during the latter years of the Clinton administration, these particular capabilities have been relatively neglected. Furthering this neglect was the Bush administration's post-9/11 reliance on mostly one-way forms of communication. Nevertheless, contemporary engagement strategies centering on digital communications first emerged with President Bush's final Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman. Under his leadership, a report titled *National Framework for Strategic Communication* was completed at the direction of Congress; it explicitly referenced 'engagement' alongside 'one-way' PD (White House, 2009).

To explain engagement's revamped re-emergence, a broader context – one transcending foreign policy debates – is useful. During the election of 2008, social media technologies played important roles in the Democratic Party's success in attracting younger voters and raising funds. In fact, this campaign mobilized 750,000 volunteers and 8000 online affinity groups. It also set records for fundraising – over US\$200 million, almost half of which were contributions under US\$200 (Norquay, 2008). Arguably, the success of integrating social media with Obama's presidential campaign constituted the conceptual bridge linking established uses of the Internet by marketing and public

relations firms with the new administration's interest in pursuing 'public diplomacy 2.0.' The relative 'newness' of the latter was reflected by a statement made by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, just days following the mass Iranian uprising in 2009. While admitting that she did not know how to distinguish 'a Twitter from a tweeter,' Clinton nevertheless suspected that 'apparently it's very important' (quoted in Morozov, 2009: 10).

The public relations and corporate marketing roots of public diplomacy 2.0 are revealed by revisiting Edward Bernays' landmark essay 'The engineering of consent' (1947). In it, Bernays explains how a 'public relations counsel' could secure public consent to preferred policies. The means to do this involved 'action based only on thorough knowledge of the situation and the application of scientific principles and tried practices to the task of getting people to support ideas and programs' (1947: 114). The engineering of consent, he explains, involves targeting specific groups in society (i.e., civic, cultural, economic, and political) and utilizing appropriate communication channels and messages to reach and shape them. In sum, Bernays depicts his approach as 'an instrument for achieving adjustment if any maladjustment in relationships exists' (1947: 116).

The tactics Bernays espoused involved listening and responding to the wants, interests, and needs of publics. In practice, however, early public relations largely involved one-way communication techniques designed to persuade – or outright deceive – audiences to adopt preferred thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Heath and Coombs, 2006). In fact, for Bernays, the techniques of 'propaganda' and 'public relations' were largely synonymous (Curtis and Kelsall, 2002). Beginning in the 1970s, scholars associated with the nascent academic subfield of public relations asserted that the propagandistic tendencies of PR practitioners were inconsistent with a more 'symmetrical' ideal that allowed persuasion to occur in both directions. These analysts claimed that stakeholders could, and should, be allowed to engage an organization's managers as a means of modifying the latter's behaviors (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

The so-called 'two-way symmetrical model' or 'Excellence Theory' or the 'Grunigian paradigm' (named after its primary theorist, James Grunig) arose during this period to legitimate public relations as an academic subfield, bolster the superiority of pluralistic market economies over Soviet-style dictatorships, and improve the image of public relations in western society more broadly (McKie and Munshi, 2007; Moloney, 2006). To help do this, Grunig and his collaborators associated their research agenda with Peters and Waterman's influential management study titled *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (1982). One result, over the past 25 years, is that Grunig's Excellence Theory has dominated public relations research (McKie and Munshi, 2007). In fact, today, it is the most widely used and researched 'co-creational' perspective on public relations – a perspective that 'sees publics as co-creators of meaning, interpretations and goals . . . [and one focusing on] long term . . . relationships among publics and organizations' (Botan and Taylor, 2004: 652). However, in 1984, Grunig himself speculated that only 'about 15% of all organizations . . . use the two-way symmetrical model' (Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 26). Such co-creational approaches continue to be applied in conjunction with one-way techniques (McKie and Munshi, 2007).

Particularly since the late 1980s, advertisers have similarly pursued consumer-focused promotional strategies, stressing 'individual choice' as a central theme (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Zwick et al., 2009). Among many examples, the reader might

recall Apple's advertisements featuring the empowered consumer shattering a 1984-like computing dystopia and the US fast food chain Wendy's emphasis on the customer's 'right' to choose what toppings to have on their hamburgers. Over these years, marketers emphasized what they called (and still call) 'brand equity' – the recognition, shared increasingly by the culture *in toto*, that brands are themselves valuable (Harvey, 1989). One outcome has been the importance ascribed to the task of creating, sustaining, and enhancing brand identities. Thus, just one month after 9/11, it should not have been a great surprise that the Bush administration appointed Madison Avenue executive Charlotte Beers to lead the State Department's PD response to radical Islam. This initiated the White House's effort to 're-brand' America overseas centering on what it referred to as the 'Shared Values' of all civilized peoples – their mutual embrace of democracy, liberty, and private property (White House, 2002). 'We're going to have to communicate the intangible assets of the United States,' said Beers in late 2001 – 'things like our belief system and our values' (quoted in Ackerman, 2009). As then Secretary of State Colin Powell explained, 'There is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something. We are selling a product. We need someone who can rebrand American foreign policy' (quoted in Klein, 2002).

Despite the co-creational rhetoric that accompanied this campaign, it failed. Among other problems, 'Shared Values' contradicted itself, featuring, for example, one-way monologue advertisements depicting Muslim Americans *telling* audiences that in the United States they had rights, liberties, and privately owned possessions. In addition to the propagandistic tone of these messages, the fact that the US continued to support regimes in predominantly Muslim countries where human rights, civil liberties, and economic development remained, for most, distant abstractions further undermined the strategy. Such miscalculations continued for most of the Bush years, substantively improving only in the latter months of the President's second term when the administration began to embrace digital technologies that enabled moderate voices in Islamic countries to be heard *among* Muslims.

According to the official who introduced this form of engagement, James Glassman, 'The United States need not be Miss Congeniality to win the war of ideas. We just need to make moderates hate extremists more than they dislike us' (Glassman, 2009). With this in mind, before the Obama administration embraced a similar strategy, Glassman recognized the Internet to be a powerful means of interacting with audiences, linking up selected organizations from around the world in order to buoy those elements of Islamic civil society that favor non-radical forms of discourse. This approach also reflected a paring back of US PD goals – moving PD away from converting supporters of 'radical Islam' towards, instead, a more 'targeted marketing' effort. Rather than communicating to a mass audience, Glassman's brief tenure as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs sparked a shift to engaging Muslims already inclined to reject violence, as well as people who have access to interactive media (e.g., the relatively young among Islamic countries' middle classes). This shift was predictable in that successful marketing strategies almost always direct their communications at a limited number of prospective consumers – those with whom one's message will most likely resonate. Glassman also espoused a policy that coincided with soft power's emphasis on the power of attraction. Through what he called 'diversion' – 'the channeling of potential recruits

away from violence with the attractions of entertainment, culture, . . . sports' – at least some extremist anger, he thought, could be rechanneled (Glassman, 2008).

Glassman's successor, Obama appointee Judith McHale, has pursued a similar approach. As the former CEO of the Discovery Channel and an experienced broadcasting executive, she has emphasized two tasks. First, 'market research' as 'a critical component of effective mass communication' (Feulner, 2010) and, second, embracing 'Web 2.0' (social media) capabilities as an opportunity to 'engage people directly' (McHale, 2009). Today, just as marketing concepts involving digital communications (from Twitter to Facebook to wikis) have become predominate, engagement – as a strategic, targeted, and managed 'dialogue' – has emerged as a core pillar of US PD policy.

The parallels between marketing and public relations and more recent PD reforms are significant for reasons that transcend historical context. To reiterate, through the articulation of their two-way symmetrical model of public relations in 1984, Grunig and Hunt argued that 'excellent' organizations use research to understand stakeholders, foster dialogue, and create beneficial outcomes for all. This perspective 'severed the [explicit] connection between public relations and propaganda' established by Bernays four decades earlier (McKie and Munshi, 2007: 34). However, adherents of this model have only vaguely explained how symmetrical relationships can be achieved. For example, activists who have recently helped to ban cigarette smoking in bars and restaurants in various US cities use patterns of communication that do not square with images of 'symmetrical' interaction with tobacco companies (Stokes and Rubin, 2010). More to the point (and important for today's proponents of engagement in PD), examples of disempowered publics using two-way symmetrical communication to affect change are rare (McKie and Munshi, 2007). Typically, studies invoking symmetry do so from a status quo perspective, more often than not omitting the voices of others who might undermine the dominant organization's claims of mutual benefit. Following their comprehensive review of the development, use, and critique of the two-way symmetrical model, McKie and Munshi (2007: 36) conclude: 'We continue to perceive the two-way symmetrical form as one, or all, of the following: flawed, largely normative at best (and, at worst, misleading in its promise of equality of exchange amid realities of uneven power), very restricted in practice, and, to date, structured in support of socially exclusionary practices.'

A similar critique can be leveled in relation to claims made supporting contemporary engagement. For example, the Obama administration's arguments generally parallel those made by 'symmetrists' in that effective PD requires both listening and dialogue. When engagement is operationalized, however, the realities and complexities of communication undercut the concept's ideals. Stakeholders – whether they are publics or consumers – take part in a process that is inescapably influenced by their own subjective experiences and intersubjective cultural biases. How people think about and process their interactions, therefore, can be modified, not just by what is communicated but also *through the communication process itself*. It is in this context that the billions of dollars being funneled into PD (like the hundreds of billions spent on marketing each year) is *not* an investment being made to enable Muslims and Americans to simply interact. Like the corporation that welcomes consumer feedback on its branding efforts but not its role in global warming, exploiting labor, or supporting corrupt governments, Undersecretary

McHale says that America wants to ‘create an *environment* in which people can debate . . . as friends. They can get angry at each other but not necessarily end up hating each other’ (McHale, 2010; emphasis added). However, engagement cannot sidestep the presence of power asymmetries in international and intercultural relations – asymmetries that shape and structure interactions between the American state and foreign publics. For example, in 2010, the Obama White House was compelled to decline invitations by civil rights groups to monitor elections in Egypt and, thus, give candidates backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and other militant Islamic organizations the opportunity to win an otherwise rigged process. In this regard, both US strategic interests in the Middle East and American liberal biases regarding the legitimacy of prospective governments in other cultures trump American political principles and, frequently, PD messages.

Just as individual consumers do not autonomously recognize their long-term collective interests – at least not in the organized ways needed to significantly modify the menu of commodities available to them (Barber, 2008) – the promise that an engagement-centered PD will yield mutually beneficial outcomes is disingenuous. Engagement therefore is perhaps better understood as *a relatively participatory form of persuasion*; a form of persuasion crafted to generate some amount of tolerance for otherwise entrenched US policies. In Washington, to carry this argument forward, the discourse of engagement soothes American policymakers (and publics) who seek the symbolism of dialogue yet find some kind of psychic security in the fact that its outcome will not destabilize the status quo. Indeed, the first page of the Obama administration’s *National Framework for Strategic Communication* (2009) prescribes engagement because, to quote it directly, it instrumentally ‘allow[s] us to convey credible, consistent messages, develop effective plans and to better understand how our actions will be perceived’ (White House, 2009: 1).

## The ascent of public diplomacy 2.0

To repeat, engagement has been accompanied by a growing enthusiasm for social media/Web 2.0 developments. Importantly, Web 2.0 itself is not a technology, nor even a new Internet-based application. Instead, as Vincent Manzerolle explains, it is ‘a set of marketing discourses regarding the interactive and personally empowering nature’ of ICTs. Specifically,

Web 2.0 reflects a concerted effort to re-brand the commercial opportunities of the web, advocating its incorporation into professional and social settings via an assemblage of interactive, networked, and digital media. In addition to the perception of empowered users across a variety of technologically mediated settings, . . . [it] reflects a new web-based marketing approach that strategically employs user-generated content in the production and targeting of commercial messages. (Manzerolle, forthcoming)

Web 2.0 reflects the promotion of a less regulated online marketplace alongside more consumer choice. Indeed, the discourses now pervading Web 2.0 effectively fuse myths concerning individual empowerment through technology with the political ideals long propagated in *Wired* magazine, namely its version of Jeffersonian democracy (Barbrook,



2007). This is worth remembering as innumerable analyses of the turn to social media by PD officials often reduce it to unprecedented capabilities associated with digital communications. In other words, to fully comprehend the potency of relating Web 2.0 to its PD binary, the historical, social, and political power it implies needs to be recognized.

During McHale's confirmation hearing in 2009, she emphasized the PD potentials of the Internet. 'New technology,' she explained, 'used effectively and creatively, can be a game changer... [as it provides] the opportunity to move from an old paradigm, in which our government speaks as one to many, to a new model of engaging interactively and collaboratively across lines that might otherwise divide' (McHale, 2009). The basis of this 'game changing' strategy stems, at least indirectly, from a similar crisis facing marketers involving audience inattention (and sometimes even resistance). Co-creation and what is called 'prosumption' emerged in response to economic problems facing corporations over the past few decades.<sup>1</sup> These include, first, an increasingly cynical consumer distrustful of commercial culture and its false promises; second, the difficult task of being heard in an ever more cluttered promotional environment; and third, in more general public relations terms, the potential for organizations to lose the trust of publics, especially in an information-rich culture characterized by the use of the Internet to widely and instantaneously disseminate news, rumors and, occasionally, outright fabrications (Botan and Taylor, 2004).

Using new technologies – social media and mobile devices in particular – corporate strategists have responded by engaging publics and prospective customers with fun, interactive, and ego-enhancing pursuits, encouraging people to take part in developing 'their' brands by participating in a range of activities. A core goal of co-creation and prosumption, therefore, is to engage people; not just to impel them to produce components of the commodities they buy, but also to involve individuals in ways that entail closer connections with particular brands.

One striking example of this strategy is the public relations firm Ketchum's work with the Doritos brand. In a campaign that won a 2009 Silver Anvil award for excellence from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Doritos promoted its consumer-created content by airing fan-made Super Bowl commercials in 2007, 2008, and 2009. In 2009, Doritos offered US\$1 million for the fan whose commercial became the first-ever to reach No. 1 in *USA Today*'s ad meter (which ranks Super Bowl advertisements from most to least favorite among national audiences). The day following the Super Bowl, *USA Today* revealed Doritos was No. 1, thus 'turning the unemployed winners into millionaires and media darlings over night' (Public Relations Society of America, 2009: 1). As a cautionary tale, US officials now deploying similar techniques (such as the State Department's 'Democracy Is' annual video competition) might want to note the fact that the winning Doritos' 'homemade' advertisement in 2009 depicted an office worker throwing a snow globe at his boss's genitals. Visitors to the 'Democracy Is' website are told that their 'challenge' is to 'create a short video that completes the phrase "Democracy is . . .".' One of the winners of the 2010 competition, Yared Shumete, an Ethiopian, argued in his video that democracy is 'fair play' by depicting two teenage boys equitably collaborating and participating in a game.

Another inspiration for co-creation and prosumption is the success of wikis – online sites with content that almost anyone can add to or modify. The largest of these is the

online encyclopedia called Wikipedia. Although the most commonly cited motivation for contributing to Wikipedia is an interest in sharing information, the site routinely is used to promote commercial and political interests. And while wikis sometimes are portrayed as transcending the instrumental logic of capital accumulation (rekindling, for some, a pre-capitalist ‘commons’ or ‘gift economy’), marketers see a different future. The owner of Wikia, Inc. thus far has established (or has hosted the co-creation of) more than 1500 specialized wikis. The most popular of these concern movie franchises and video games, all of which generate revenue by linking niche market consumers to corporations, enabling the latter to engage prospective customers, utilize their unpaid labor, and exchange information with them in order to pursue ever more personalized marketing strategies (Comor, 2010; Parfeni, 2009).

Similarly, social media sites such as Facebook (whose executives, along with other Web 2.0 champions, now act as consultants for US PD agencies including the State Department) strive to engage people online, encouraging them to network with their ‘friends’ as a means of generating precise and timely data for marketers (Zwick et al., 2009: 168–171). Public diplomacy officials in Washington are pursuing similar strategies, aiming to forge ‘relationships’ with targeted Muslims and others around the world, profile them, monitor their views and activities, and, of course, develop the means of dialoguing with them. To quote Facebook executive Elliot Schrage:

... the question is how do you build an audience? How do you establish a community of interests? That’s as true for the maker of laundry detergent as it is for someone who has a stimulus package for economic growth... [I]t’s about communicating a message, finding a community, and building that community, engaging that community. So, do I see Facebook as being an incredibly valuable tool for public diplomacy? Absolutely. (Schrage, 2009)

For the Obama administration, whether America’s engagement is government-to-government or citizen-to-citizen, low-tech or high-tech, the goal is not to truly democratize PD. Instead, it is to use more engaging forms of public diplomacy to promote American perspectives, including liberal democratic values. According to Schrage, the very accessibility and use of social media itself communicates a powerful message. In keeping with Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism, ‘the medium is the message,’

I’d say Facebook and sites like it do three things that are really important. First, we create an opportunity for people to see the world through the wisdom of their friends. The information they get is culled not by some distant, remote editor, but by... the opinions and ideas of their friends. Point number two is, Facebook and sites like it create a real premium on authenticity. Who are you, and how do you express who you are in a way that I can understand it?... And third, they create a whole new level of accountability, because I get to see what you care about, what you’re thinking about, and it’s not just static, but you see it over time. (Schrage, 2009)

Thus, as with the Web 2.0 co-creation or prosumption of a commercial brand, US efforts to engage via ‘public diplomacy 2.0’ are not just about talking and listening. After all, *the dialogue that is being promoted is itself a technique crafted to foster authenticity and trust.*

## Engagement's contradictions

Supporting 'public diplomacy 2.0' are several studies and reports recommending the formation of public-private partnerships or quasi-public organizations charged with conducting audience research, analyzing foreign preferences and opinions, and producing and disseminating co-creation/prosumption-related policy advice and PD resources (Lord, 2008; Peterson et al., 2003). Thus, while non-government organizations and commercial interests have long been involved in funding and administering PD programs (Gregory, 2008), to some extent it is the private sector's marketing expertise, its innovative use of communications technologies, and its rapidly emerging capabilities related to co-creation that inform much of the enthusiasm for online modes of engagement among American PD officials. Private sector organizations involved in PD have a vested interest in maintaining their leadership positions (Fitzpatrick, 2009).

The discourses of engagement and 'public diplomacy 2.0' are evident within the *National Framework for Strategic Communication* (White House, 2009). This document lists three objectives for current US PD efforts. First, it stresses the need for foreign audiences to 'recognize areas of mutual interest with the United States'; second, it wants to enable foreign audiences to 'believe the United States plays a constructive role in global affairs'; and third, it hopes foreign audiences will come to see the United States as a 'respectful partner in efforts to meet complex global challenges' (2009: 6). These objectives, in turn, reflect a number of more specific developments accompanying Obama's election in 2008. One is the *re*-recognition that exchange and local outreach programs tend to break down cultural barriers. Another is that new social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter constitute valuable resources that (somehow) need to be utilized. Finally, Obama's victory marked an opportunity to re-ignite US PD through a multilateral approach to foreign policy, intercultural dialogue, and, indeed, 'Brand Obama' himself.

As discussed, engagement implies genuine discussion and listening. Equally important is the fact that it involves an occasional policy response, reflecting the fact or impression that others have been heard. Such *responses* or, as Admiral Michael Mullen (the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) puts it, *actions*, speak louder than words. 'We need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions,' said the Admiral in 2009, 'and much more about what our actions communicate' (Mullen, 2009: 3). To extrapolate, 'the product' – US foreign policy – ultimately must 'deliver' in that components of the American state's activities will need to be reformed in response to what foreign publics want.

As with building a brand or the pursuit of an effective public relations strategy, engagement itself is being built on fostering dialogue, listening to audiences, and building trust in the pursuit of 'mutually beneficial' outcomes. In this regard, branding, public relations, and engagement also involve the establishment, maintenance, and sometimes even the transformation of the communicating organization's actions vis-a-vis public expectations. 'Every action that the United States Government takes sends a message,' says the Obama White House, 'actions well beyond those managed by the communications community have communicative value and impact' (White House, 2009: 3).

The fact that such principles were only sporadically followed by the preceding Bush administration should not surprise us as *genuine* dialogue has never been, *nor is it*

*currently*, on the agenda. Just as commercial invitations to participate in co-creation are delimited by the structural parameters of what corporations must do to maximize profits, to imagine that significant pillars of American foreign policy – particularly those that anger Muslim publics overseas – will be modified through engagement is, in practice, a fantasy. According to Rami Khouri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, the most important of these policies for anti-American Muslims are Washington's support for autocratic regimes, its application of double standards in relation to both its own activities and Israel's, and, more abstractly, US policies that support the structural conditions (e.g., neoliberal globalization) that are perceived to be behind the ongoing poverty experienced by millions around the world (Khouri, 2003).<sup>2</sup>

'Does a great corporation,' asks Richard Arndt, 'blame its public relations or its ad agency for an inferior product?' Fundamentally, he concludes, 'no amount of ingenuity in "getting the story out" can paper over a bad story . . . All these reports, looking to the panacea of propaganda [or PD], forget that image is a surface manifestation of what lies beneath' (Arndt, 2005: 545). Yet, if the products (i.e., the policies) are, indeed, openly debated, the outcome might well contradict US public diplomacy's strategic purpose. In the words of Bruce Gregory, 'Shared understandings may not overcome deep disagreement on interests and issues. Exchanges [and other such modes of engagement] may reinforce hostilities and competing values, particularly if others experience an America that is myopic, hubristic, and uniformed about the world' (Gregory, 2005: 10–11).

Adding to the disingenuousness of the Obama administration's embrace of engagement is its domestic public opinion implications. For example, in the Fall of 2010, the administration faced broadly based criticism because it was perceived to be listening to foreign concerns with regard to an American pastor's threat to burn Qur'ans in response to a proposed Islamic cultural center being built near 'ground zero' in New York. If nothing else, this instance underlines the fact that, even if foreign views are 'heard,' US policymakers are unlikely to credit such dialogues for their decisions. As with most national governments, the American state surely could not admit that its engagement with foreigners substantively modified its sovereign policy-making process.

Additionally, for the foreseeable future the US will remain dependent on foreign oil. As a result of this and other strategic priorities, US foreign policy officials will remain active in their support of authoritarian and corrupt governments. The American state also will continue to use its political-economic resources to defend its national interests almost regardless of how these impact lives in other countries. In light of such realities, the goal of engagement becomes clearer. Engagement is not being pursued to promote understanding and trust *between* Americans and foreign Muslims. Instead, the objective is to *foster an environment in which Muslims themselves may come to understand US policies in ways that delimit negative associations*. This objective, we believe, has a dangerous implication. Specifically, engagement, as it is now defined and being operationalized, reproduces the notion that American policies will not have to change (at least not substantively) for Islamic publics to one day empathize with US activities.

## Reforming engagement

According to the Pew Research Center, the approval ratings for both Obama and the US in predominantly Muslim countries have plunged as the optimism generated by the President's election has faded. Of particular concern are ongoing US policies concerning Afghanistan, Iran, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In response to Pew's core question – 'Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the international policies of President Barack Obama?' – the declines from 2009 to 2010 have been precipitous. In Egypt, for example, this approval figure went from 38% to 17%. In Jordan, it fell from 27% to 15%. More revealing, perhaps, are the declining approval figures related to the administration's handling of Iraq. Despite Obama's commitment to withdraw all but 50,000 troops, 79% of Egyptians and 74% of Jordanians 'disapprove' (Pew, 2010). Publics in predominantly Islamic countries generally know that in addition to 50,000 US troops, 100,000 private military contractors and at least 6000 'security contractors' also will remain (Corcoran, 2010). To quote one op-ed piece from the Cairo-based newspaper *Al-Ahram*, 'it still remains the case that if Obama is to improve the U.S.'s image in the Arab world he has to change those policies and attitudes that were directly responsible for sowing anti-U.S. hatred' (Abdel-Atti, 2010).

As implied throughout our analysis, engagement, as it is now conceptualized and practiced, is not going to work. We agree with Shelton Gunaratne, who argues that PD, as it is currently practiced, 'is a battle that neither party [the US government nor its rivals] can win in the long run' (2005: 766). Does this mean that a return to more unidirectional, monologue-based forms of public diplomacy is inevitable? We hope not. Instead, we propose radically revising the policy of engagement with a rhetorical approach – a rhetorical approach based on ethical communication.

At its root, an ethical communication strategy maintains that people have the right and prospective ability to obtain and judge messages and make decisions that affect them (Heath et al., 2009). This perspective requires that good communicators must, first, be good listeners – listeners who want 'to know, appreciate, and respect what others believe and think – and why they hold those positions' (Heath, 2009: 19). But more than merely listening and understanding, this approach requires *entering into spirited debate to instantiate the democratic process*. In effect, it 'presumes that any position voiced in public must be sufficiently compelling to withstand vigorous critiques by other [speakers] who believe their compelling ideas have merit' (2009: 21).

Here, however, is where a rhetorical approach to PD becomes, for American officials, politically risky. Such an approach, after all, requires Washington to consider the real possibility that its thinking, policies, and actions might be wrong – certainly an anxiety-producing situation for US officials unaccustomed to debating policies in the context of a *global* public sphere. Here, engagement is not a debate crafted to give the *impression* of dialogue but, instead, one designed to *genuinely engage*. As rhetorical scholar Robert Ivie puts it,

Exercising U.S. power without translating democratic values into actual practice forfeits America's best chance to mitigate the underlying causes of support for terrorism in a global information age that makes imperative the accommodation of competing interests and

perspectives. Pluralism on a global scale is the reality with which America must learn to cope constructively. (Ivie, 2005: 145–146)

Ivie argues that adequately coping with the underlying sources of terrorism involves developing a ‘political culture to acknowledge, deliberate, and constructively respond to the competing interests of domestic and foreign Others’ (2005: 144). For Ivie, this political culture would embrace the ideal of ‘agonistic pluralism’ (conflict among ‘consubstantial’ adversaries) rather than deliberative democracy’s emphasis on egalitarian consensus. Ivie’s perspective, integrating the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe and literary theorist Kenneth Burke, recognizes that social cohesion and tolerance are promoted by people ‘acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another. It does not assume that agonistic politics are inherently self-correcting or that their potential for realizing democratic ideals is easily fulfilled’ (2005: 39).

As an idealized image of democracy, however, Ivie notes that this rhetorical approach to public diplomacy remains only on the margins of America’s political consciousness. Since the earliest days of the republic, democratic deliberation has been a negligible component of US foreign policy. Arguably, this norm stems, in part at least, from the historical circumstances surrounding executive powers, constitutional authority, and the latitude legislators have given the President to conduct foreign affairs (Zegart, 1999). A rhetorical approach to PD nevertheless would go far beyond the White House’s current objectives to promote some kind of universal ‘recognition’ of mutual interests, ‘belief’ in America’s ‘constructive role,’ and ‘seeing’ issues and developments in ways that officials based in Washington would prefer. Instead, it would require that US officials engage others by consistently practicing the ideals upon which their democratic republic was built. We suggest that Ivie’s ideal should constitute a goal or standard, one that at least counter-balances the neorealist strategic norms that pervade contemporary foreign policy.

Having said this, however, even an ethically informed mode of engagement cannot sidestep power asymmetries in international and intercultural relations (Shinar and Bratic, 2010). These no doubt will continue to shape and structure interactions between representatives of the American state and foreign publics. Arguably, many of the policies that US officials cannot or will not change constitute the very underpinnings of the long, deep, and violent history now informing militant anti-Americanism. At the very least, following Obama’s claim in Cairo that ‘I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world,’ for engagement to mean more than just a more sophisticated effort at manipulation, official Washington will need to recognize its own policy contradictions. This would entail explaining not just to the world *but also to itself* the reasons for its repeated hypocrisy concerning human rights, its political-economic priorities in the Middle East, and its ongoing support of corrupt and oppressive regimes around the world. For example, as Khouri recently explained in *The New York Times*, ‘One cannot take seriously the United States or any other Western government that funds political activism by young Arabs while it simultaneously provides funds and guns that help cement the power of the very same Arab governments the young social and political activists target for change’ (Khouri, 2010).

A final point to be made concerning the Obama administration’s embrace of engagement involves, again, its marketing and public relations lineage. Rather than evaluating

America's dialogue with the world in terms of a democratic exchange, the effectiveness of US public diplomacy is gauged in terms of America's 'positive' or 'negative' image and reputation. Evaluating complex opinions and perspectives increasingly is being left to polling, focus groups, and, occasionally, the interpretive analyses of Washington-based regional specialists. Nevertheless and, in part, because of these 'metrics,' the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently found that, in return for US\$10 billion worth of communication initiatives (its estimate of total PD and strategic communications spending since 2001), 'limited data exist on the ultimate effect of U.S. outreach efforts' (US Government Accountability Office, 2009: 2). This ambiguity, not coincidentally, parallels that surrounding the evaluation of public relations strategies more broadly (Moloney, 2006).

The 2009 GAO report tells us that 'agencies cite three inherent challenges in measuring the effectiveness of their strategic communications [and PD] efforts. First, strategic communications may only produce long-term, rather than immediate, effect. Second, it is difficult to isolate the effect of strategic communications from other influences, such as policy. Third, strategic communications often target audiences' perceptions, which are intangible and complex and thus difficult to measure' (US Government Accountability Office, 2009: 16). Despite these difficulties, the GAO recommends means of assessing PD that parallel what marketers use to assess brands: 'private-sector measurement techniques that are used to measure results include the use of surveys and polling to develop baseline data, immediate follow-up research, and additional tracking polls to identify long-term changes over time' (2009: 17).

Nowhere is consideration given to how these techniques make sense in light of the structural conditions within which anti-US extremism has emerged. Nor is the time-frame of its analysis – evaluating extremism as something born on September 11, 2001 – reflective of the historically entrenched nature of 'the problem.' In response, we ought to consider the possibility that these narrowly defined means of measuring anti-Americanism and the (in)effectiveness of PD *may themselves entrench the myopic norms that characterize US encounters with foreign publics*. If, after all, PD policies and the problems they supposedly are responding to are assessed using such limited snapshots of measurable opinions, McLuhan's insight that sometimes the medium is the message takes on yet another meaning. The medium, in this instance, is the public relations–marketing ontology now pervading public diplomacy, and the message is that anti-American extremism is a problem best understood through the lens of measurable perspectives and opinions, not power asymmetries, history or, for that matter, the absence of truly ethical modes of communication.

## Conclusion

Despite today's engagement consensus, it seems clear that US foreign policy will remain largely determined by the country's perceived political, economic, and military needs instead of the outcome of ethically structured modes of communication. One last example – America's strategic priorities in light of Iran's efforts to build a nuclear device – may be used to summarize this point: 'We [the United States] have to be willing to sit and listen and evaluate,' says Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, 'without giving up what

we view as a primary objective of the engagement, which is to do everything we can to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state' (Clinton, 2009).

The contradictions entailed in engagement's conceptualization and applications are, not surprisingly, recognized by many foreign critics but not, it seems, its many domestic enthusiasts. This disjuncture, we suggest, reflects the fact that engagement entails a dangerous self-delusion. The result is a PD that can neither achieve its overly ambitious goals, nor accurately assess why so many foreign nationals are aggressively anti-American (or, when the country's image ticks up for a moment – as in the months following Obama's Cairo speech – why it falls again just as quickly). Nevertheless, the influence of marketing and public relations techniques remain pervasive – so pervasive that they delimit Washington's intellectual capacity even to recognize the entrenched policy conflicts that may well be at the heart of extremism's ongoing influence.

The policy of engagement's hollow promises of meaningful dialogue only underscore America's deep-rooted insecurity, fear of foreign influence, and (despite the Obama administration's reforms) its persistent unilateralism. Americans and their elected officials will need to come to terms with these conditions if any public diplomacy effort is ever to achieve its lofty goals. John Foster Dulles stated in 1946, 'There is no nation which has attitudes so pure that they cannot be bettered by self-examination' (Dulles, quoted in Williams, 1959: 207).<sup>3</sup> We agree.

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## Notes

1. Prosumption is defined here as the blurring gap between producers and consumers (Tapscott, 1996). As Tapscott noted, 'Every consumer on the information highway becomes a producer by creating and sending a message to a colleague, contributing to a bulletin-board discussion group, altering the end of a movie, test driving a virtual car, or visualizing the brain of a patient across the country' (1996: 63).
2. Khouri is also editor-at-large of the *Daily Star* newspaper in Beirut.
3. Tragically, as Williams notes, 'Dulles . . . mislaid his own advice in subsequent years' (Williams, 1959: 207).

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