

Review - New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century

Written by Sue Jansen

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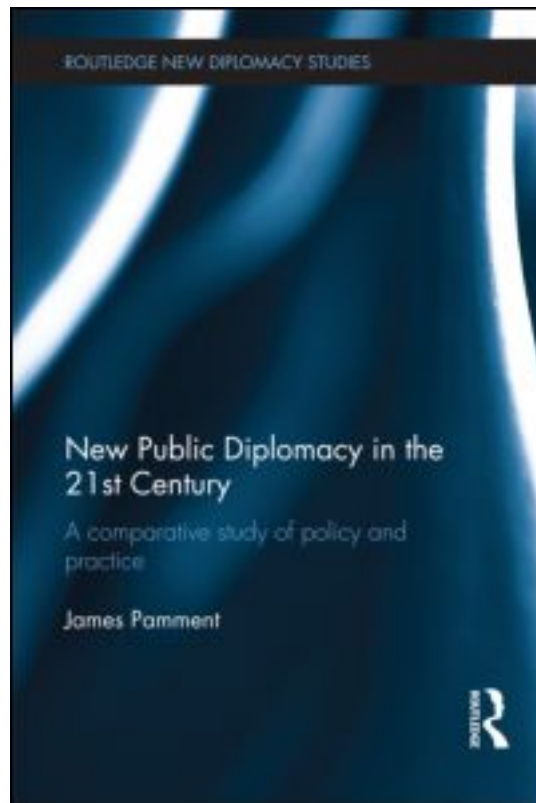
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SUE JANSEN, AUG 26 2013

New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Comparative Study of Policy and Practice

By: James Pamment

Routledge, 2013



Public diplomacy (PD), traditionally defined as state-sponsored communications that strategically target citizens of other nations, has a long and controversial history. However, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States triggered an urgent rethinking of the theory and practice of PD: an effort that soon expanded beyond the United States (U.S.), now involving academics and practitioners from many nations. James Pamment's book contributes to this reassessment.

Pamment's work represents the inaugural volume in the Routledge series, New Diplomatic Studies, edited by Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobt. He distinguishes between traditional, gatekeeper and mass-mediated models of PD as well as newer approaches which take into account twenty-first century market-based globalization as well as new digital and satellite media environments. Contending that the 'new public diplomacy' (NPD) represents a paradigm shift in political communication theory, Pamment compares NPD theory to actual PD practices using case studies from three countries: the United Kingdom (U.K.), Sweden and the U.S. He offers systematic assessments of

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each case examining national policies, objectives of specific campaigns and evaluation methods, use of official documents, campaign artifacts, secondary accounts and interviews with senior diplomats, campaigns managers and measurement and evaluation consultants. The early chapters of the book distinguish between traditional PD and NPD, engage in extensive definitional exercises and examine some of the factors motivating the paradigm shift. They include a brief history of PD, an overview of NPD's theoretical challenges, a critical assessment of PD evaluation methods and a preliminary examination of the theory-practice tension. Pamment then devotes a chapter to each of the three aforementioned countries and concludes with a provocative synthesis of his findings, which he uses to assess the future prospects of NPD theory.

Pamment adopts Bruce Gregory's definitions of traditional PD and NPD and positions his own work firmly within the NPD camp. According to Gregory:

Public diplomacy in the twentieth century was viewed as a state-based instrument used by foreign ministries and other government agencies to engage and persuade foreign publics for the purpose of influencing their governments. Today, public diplomacy has come to mean an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values (Gregory quoted, p. 2).

New Public Diplomacy and Communication Theories and Technologies

Early impetus for the development of NPD came from a 2002 Council of Foreign Relations task force, chaired by billionaire businessman and investment banker, Pete Peterson, a staunch advocate of privatizing PD. The Council's report called for "a new public diplomacy paradigm." "The challenge," it said, "is not simply to adjust U.S. public diplomacy, but to revolutionize it" (p. 8). In short, it recommended free-market shock therapy for PD.

From its inception, Pamment maintains that NPD theory has had "normative leanings" (p. 8). he does not interrogate the ideological forces pushing privatization or unpack the Orwellian oxymoron, 'privatized public diplomacy'. Rather Pamment treats Gregory's description of today's PD uncritically as a *fait accompli* (which it may well be at least in the world's wealthy democracies). NPD theory focuses on "'ideal' approaches to public diplomacy" (p. 9), not on how it is actually practiced. For Pamment that ideal involves engagement, two-way dialogue, listening, debate and relationship building.

To locate hospitable epistemological grounding for this normative approach, Pamment guides the reader through a highly compressed account of the history of communication research. Positioning Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz's 1955 campaign study, *Personal Choice*, as representative of the 'effects' tradition in communication research and characterizing the approach as simplistic and linear, Pamment contrasts it with what he describes as the work of "post-effects communication scholars such as James W. Carey" (p. 19). Carey distinguishes between the 'transmission' (effects) model of mass communication and a 'transactional' or 'ritual' model, which emphasizes the social and cultural processes involved in communication and community building, casting his own lot with the latter. Pamment contends that midcentury PD practices are consonant with the effects tradition, while Carey's cultural approach more closely aligns with the aspirations of NPD. He does not claim that Carey's programmatic statement has led to the development of a 'ritual' or cultural theory of PD, but he does maintain that it is the kind of approach NPD should take. Pamment acknowledges that other NPD scholars have looked to the work of Jurgen Habermas, Stuart Hall and Ien Ang in developing socially oriented communication models, although he does not explore these efforts.

Cooperative Public Diplomacy in the U.K., Sweden and the U.S.

Unlike much recent PD scholarship, Pamment chooses not to focus on the post 9/11 conflicts. Rather he examines cooperative, routine and peaceful political advocacy that takes place among friendly nations. This is both a strength and a limitation of his approach: a strength because as Pamment rightly notes (i) emphasis on conflict has skewed the conceptualization and development of NPD theory, and (ii) unlike the zero-sum stakes of Cold War and War on Terror PD, friendly collaborations, he reasons, should be more open to NPD and therefore provide viable test cases

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for assessing the influence and efficacy of NPD theory. These assumptions make methodological sense but they extract a toll. Combined with the focus on discrete campaigns of relatively short duration, the research design tends to skew the available data on sources of practitioners' resistances to NPD. Specifically, it relies primarily on micro-analysis of organizational dysfunction: bureaucratic stasis and mismanagement. While Pamment demonstrates that such dynamics do exist, there are broader structural issues which are not addressed that impinge on the agency of PD practitioners, at least among those representing major global powers like the U.S. and U.K. For example, promoting Scottish whiskey and direct airline routes between Scotland and Sweden may be cooperative ventures, but they are located under the recent historical umbrella of the global impacts of the Clinton-Blair Washington Consensus and the deceptive U.S.-U.K. rationale for invading Iraq. Minimally this context raises issues of trust even if it does not openly invite critique of neoliberalism.

Macro, not micro-analysis is required to get to the root of PD practitioners' resistances to the normative idealism of NPD scholars, and deeply entrenched resistance to NPD idealism is what Pamment encounters in his interviews with PD practitioners. They see their work as instrumental exercises in the world of real politics: as an unnamed British Ambassador makes clear, even collaborative engagement involves management of discourse:

Very often as a government you'll have a set of objectives and a particular view about an issue and you will have to move your collaborators' minds to allow them to participate in the way that you want them to, and we should be completely clear about this, diplomacy is about interests and we're about promoting our interests in the world....Public diplomacy is about helping to persuade, engage, influence, inform as to permit the process to happen (p. 42).

The two British campaigns that Pamment examines reflect this realist, goal-directed, approach. For example, the second British campaign that Pamment analyzes was an attempt to influence U.S. domestic policy on climate in anticipation of the 2009 United Nations meeting in Copenhagen. The strategy involved engaging key U.S. senators and geographical regions of the country that campaign planners calculated might be able to influence energy legislation. It addressed all stakeholders using traditional and social media; Pamment notes that in this case, the British approach was actually remarkably similar to its pre-World War I propaganda campaign that was designed to bring the U.S. into the war. While the climate campaign failed to produce legislation in the Senate, the British team believed that it succeeded in broadening the terms of the climate debate in the U.S. Pamment contends that the campaign modeled a multiple-pronged approach that targeted diverse groups simultaneously with multimedia messages tailored to the specific interests of business leaders, conservatives, labor groups and the general public.

Pamment's assessment of British evaluation methods is informative and incisive –indeed, his examination of PD evaluation methods generally and in the individual case studies is a great strength of the book. From a democratic perspective, a disturbing aspect of British strategy and evaluation is that, “In many respects, British approaches have recognized that it does not matter what people think as long as they behave in the way the organization would prefer them to.” Pamment concludes, perhaps ironically, that this “represents a uniquely British contribution to new public diplomacy strategy” (p. 98).

The Swedish cases directly involve nation branding. The objective of *Brand Sweden*, which began with branding consultations in 2005, is to enhance global visibility, and to promote economic growth and employment. Nation branding takes an instrumental view of culture and *Brand Sweden* is no exception. Much of the Swedish initiative followed the familiar script of nation branding promotions; however, two innovative campaigns set it apart. Sweden integrated the construction of its new embassy in Washington into its promotional efforts, framing the House of Sweden, as a “place for Sweden and Europe to meet in America” (p.113): the building was designed to showcase the country, its commerce, culture, science and diplomacy. The House of Sweden is open to the public, hosts conferences, seminars, stage performances, exhibitions, and rooftop parties for young people that promote Swedish music. Pamment describes the House of Sweden as:

“a material structure embodying symbolic values and aesthetics associated with *Brand Sweden*...emphasizing experience over information and establishing a multidimensional *space of communication*” (p. 114).

He analyzes a related campaign, the Second House of Sweden, which involved an online Second Life, virtual reality,

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representation of the Embassy. The Second House hosted interactive events and activities. It was an attempt to reach out to young, educated and techno-savvy audiences. Overall, Pamment faults Swedish discourse management and secrecy. But he cites Marshall McLuhan's axiom – "The media is the message" – to describe the House of Sweden initiatives, which do seem to move the Swedish nation branding in the direction of NPD theory by prioritizing experience.

With regards to U.S. PD, Pamment and others see it as old school, instrumental, monologic and largely focused on branding: a stance that he contends compounds longstanding problems with U.S. P.D. Nonetheless he considers a George W. Bush era U.S. campaign, *One Big Thing!*, effective. An initiative of the American ambassador to Sweden Michael Wood, the campaign sought to promote post-Kyoto environmental efforts by establishing cooperative ties between U.S. business interests and the Swedish clean technology industries to promote trade, entrepreneurial ideas and sharing of expertise. Pamment acknowledges that "it could perhaps be argued that collaboration on clean energy was a Trojan Horse for partial Americanization of the sector," but as the "perhaps" suggests, he distances himself from an overtly critical stance (p. 65). Pamment does, however, note that the public-private partnership that West brokered with Volvo was uncharacteristic of Swedish PD; and I think he describes 'One Big Thing!' accurately as "an attempt to harness the trajectory and credibility of others to boost American perceptions and activities in the clean energy sector" (p. 67). Overall, Pamment concludes that despite unclear policies and strategies guiding American PD, *One Big Thing!* demonstrates that individual embassies can carry out effective PD. When he asked a director of U.S. P.D. how this is possible in the absence of coherent policy, the director responded, "We just do it. We've set our own course" (p. 67). Pamment blames America's polarized domestic political climate for the absence of a unified policy on foreign communications. However, I wonder if a unified policy would not make U.S. PD even more instrumental and monologic and preclude innovative efforts like 'One Big Thing!?'

Future Prospects for New public Diplomacy

My sparse descriptions of the five campaigns and three nations' PD policies presented in his book do not begin to do justice to the thoroughness and rigor of Pamment's assessments. The book includes an admirably tight organization, careful if prolific definitional exercises, heightened methodological vigilance and constrained prose that hints at but resists the temptation to tell good stories. For example, his description of the hijacking of a PD site by pornographers or backfire against the Second House of Sweden by Danish activists and other Second Lifers protesting Sweden's invasion of their community space. Pamment's prose always cuts directly to the chase. This often serves the reader well, but in places editors should have intervened on Pamment's behalf. For example, although his interviews yielded rich primary data the quotes he includes are sometimes reduced to the bare bones. Moreover, readers have to consult the endnotes to discover the name of the interviewee, then go back to the Acknowledgements to match names and affiliations, and finally, if they have the fortitude, consult the Internet to determine interviewees' positions. Words are saved, but readers' patience is spent.

I cite these biographical and textual particulars as a prelude to discussing Pamment's concluding chapter where happily he breaks free of the qualifiers and cautions that punctuate most of the text, allowing his own voice to prevail. To be sure, he remains in the thrall of NPD theory, but he realistically recognizes the formidable obstacles that stand in the way of its implementation. He offers constructive suggestions for reforming PD: including more public accountability and transparency; scholarship that produces better understandings of the forces that shape policy and strategy formation; data-driven decision-making; and openness to qualitative methods in planning and evaluation including discourse analysis, storyboarding and network analysis. He recommends abandoning utopian views of the efficacy of social media for PD, which may provide more contact points with the public, but in most cases reaches the same public as traditional media. While Pamment remains committed to the values of a cultural approach to PD, he acknowledges that the NPD "has not emerged in any meaningful sense" in practice (p. 136). His sober concluding sentence says it all: "The new PD is still *propaganda in the age of strategic communication*; but it could be so much more" (p. 136).

Pamment is a meticulous scholar who provides a methodologically rigorous assessment of current PD practices. As is surely clear, I am a skeptical about the viability of NPD theory. The normative values NPD theorists embrace are admirable, but even James Carey acknowledged that his ritual approach to communication is not applicable on a

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national, let alone international, scale. Carey concedes that his Deweyian model of 'communication as communion' can only work in situations where everyone who wishes to engage in dialogue has opportunities to do so. A ritual orientation may have some uses in cultural diplomacy, e.g. citizen exchanges, visits, performances and other person-to-person forms of engagement intended to create general goodwill among nations. Pamment seems to sense this and does recommend more cultural initiatives, but he also seems to recognize that PD and cultural diplomacy have different agendas, with PD functioning directly as a tool supporting a nation's foreign policy.

Despite accolades to Carey and to critical theorists like Habermas, Hall and Ang, the discourse of NPD theory bears a remarkable resemblance to vintage PR rhetoric. Early in the last century, Edward L. Bernays, the erstwhile 'father of public relations,' proselytized on behalf of PR as a 'two-way street' that involves listening, relationship building, data driven campaigns and evaluation. Although, in practice Bernays excelled in discourse management and instrumental manipulation. Given the increasing privatization and consequent outsourcing of so much PD, it is not surprising that the languages of PD and PR are merging.

We cannot expect governments or corporations to undertake non-instrumental 'listening' campaigns because campaigns are, by definition, agenda driven undertakings. Occasionally instrumental listening may produce improvements in the lives of citizens or consumers; but under the discipline of neoliberalism, listening is deployed within a hegemonic framework of discourse surveillance and management. Unless NPD theory critically interrogates and effectively addresses the broader structural issues that shape international relations under neoliberalism, its idealistic advocates, such as James Pamment, are in danger of becoming ideological courtiers in service of the propaganda they seek to dismantle.

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