



## The Soft Power Differential: Network Communication and Mass Communication in Public Diplomacy\*

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### Summary

This study posits that advocacy NGOs are successfully creating soft power using relational, network-centric public diplomacy. The United States, on the other hand, struggles to wield its soft power and continues to apply the outdated information, media-driven approach to its public diplomacy efforts. This article suggests that a public diplomacy strategy that tailors itself to the dynamics of the international context will prove most effective in achieving its tactical goals. The first section highlights changes in the international arena since the end of the Cold War and their corresponding impact on communication dynamics. The second section delineates the critical features that define mass communication and the network communication approach. The third examines specific applications of both communication approaches, drawing on examples from the US's post-'9/11' public diplomacy in the Arab world and those from advocacy NGOs. The paper concludes with implications of the differences between wielding versus creating soft power for state actors.

### Keywords

Public diplomacy, soft power, mass communication approach, network communication approach.

### Introduction

In his latest book, *Soft Power*, Nye speaks of public diplomacy in terms of 'wielding' soft power.<sup>1</sup> He focuses on the perspective of nation-states, devoting special attention to the United States. Nye explains that as well-established, dominant players in the international arena, nation-states draw upon their 'soft power resources', namely, the country's culture, political ideology and policies. Nations use or 'wield' these soft power resources in much the same way as they would use or wield their hard power resources to influence others in the international

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<sup>1</sup>) Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

arena. Nye defines three dimensions of public diplomacy: daily communication explaining policy decisions; political campaigns built on a few strategic themes; and long-term relations with key individuals.

These three dimensions, along with the idea of 'wielding soft power', are readily apparent in US public diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> So far, US public diplomacy attempts to wield its soft power have proved frustrating, as public perception of the US remains overwhelmingly negative, particularly in the Arab and Islamic world — the primary target of US intensive public diplomacy efforts. As Professor Nye cautioned, 'sometimes dissemination of information can quickly produce or prevent a desired outcome', although generally 'soft-power resources are slower, more diffuse, and more cumbersome to wield than hard-power resources'. Information campaigns typically take time to yield results, and while intervening variables may have hindered US public diplomacy efforts, including the US-led Iraq War and ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, such a concentrated and sustained public diplomacy effort over a five-year period should have at least stabilized, if not reversed, public sentiment.

In contrast to the US's public diplomacy efforts to wield its soft power, non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) vigorous communication activities appear to be generating soft power. Traditionally, political scientists had tended to ignore these non-state actors because they were 'not "powerful" in the classic sense of the term'. Yet NGOs have recently demonstrated their power in setting political agendas (such as Jubilee 2000 and the G8-African debt of 2005), framing debates (global warming) and moving entrenched nation-states (such as the campaign to ban landmines). Four recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in the past decade have come from the NGO community.

Why are once relatively powerless non-state actors gaining soft power, while a communication giant such as the United States is losing it? Scholars have attributed the rise of non-state actors to technology, state sponsorship and political dynamics. This article suggests that another reason for the soft power differential stems from the mode of communication. US public diplomacy is relying predominantly on a mass communication approach to public diplomacy — the dominant or assumed mode. As Wang observed, 'In conventional public diplomacy, the prevalent mode of communication is mass media-driven, one-way communication, supported by two-way communication such as cultural and educational exchanges'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, non-state actors, which have traditionally

<sup>2</sup> These three dimensions of Nye's wielding of public diplomacy are specifically cited on page 7 of the US Government's Accountability Report of July 2007 as the prescription that US public diplomacy should be following; see *Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research*, GAO-07-904 (Washington DC: US Government Accountability Office, July 2007), available online at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07904.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Jian Wang, 'Managing National Reputation and International Relations in the Global Era: Public Diplomacy Revisited', *Public Relations Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2006, pp. 91-96, at p. 94.

lacked media control for economic as well as political reasons, have seized upon the interactive features of the new media to fashion a network communication approach. The study suggests that the network communication approach is more effective than the mass communication approach because it is more attuned to the dynamics of the international political arena.

### **Changing Dynamics in the International Political Arena**

The origins of the apparent soft power differential stem from changing communication dynamics in the international political arena. These dynamics are defined by the political players and the way in which they communicate with publics.

Forty years ago, during the Cold War era, a bipolar rivalry between two identifiable government powers — with comparable communication capabilities and constraints — defined the communication dynamics of the international political arena. Broadcasts were limited, and could be monitored and controlled. Foreign and domestic audiences were separated geographically and politically, making it possible to speak to one without confusing or alienating the other. The prevalence of government-controlled media made the ‘free flow of information’ a cherished commodity. No matter how much information the two sides pumped out, the neatly defined bipolar context provided an overarching, ready-made framework for sorting and interpreting information. ‘Us versus them’ had persuasive power.

Within this context, the strategic-communication core of public diplomacy rested on information production and dissemination: designing the most persuasive messages and delivering them as efficiently as possible. Information dissemination was vital: the one with the most information could dominate and frame the political debate and effectively isolate or discredit the opponent. Mass media was the channel of choice as well as power. Mass media, which had only recently emerged, represented the promise of reaching mass audiences with voluminous amounts of information. Media owners, primarily governments, were eager to exploit its potential.

The intervening years since the end of the Cold War have generated their own political and communication dynamic. Several developments in particular stand out. First, the end of the Cold War has, from a communication perspective, meant the loss of the bipolar context. Information is now diffused into a multi-polar, multi-dimension context. Information dissemination based on ‘us versus them’ has lost its persuasive power.

Second, culture has emerged as the new dynamic in international relations. Culture increasingly serves as the means for defining political identity, as well as allegiance. Culture and communication are intertwined, in that culture shapes the production of information by political sponsors and the interpretation of that information by publics. Information disseminated via mass media channels is

particularly vulnerable to cultural distortions as it passes through the invisible cultural barrier. While a political sponsor may be blind to culture's influence on programming content and style, culturally diverse publics often find it glaring and even offensive.

Third, there is the combined emergence of new communication players and a proliferation of new communication technologies. New players are the non-state actors, including business corporations, NGOs and prominent individuals.

New information and communication technologies (ICT) include electronic media, mobile communication devices and the internet. These new media differ from the old media in terms of their channels of distribution, modes of composition and the relationship between media and consumer. Interactivity has emerged as a central concept in new media research. Interactivity is 'the user's ability to dynamically select, manipulate, integrate and format the information to suit particular and changing needs'.<sup>4</sup> Implicit in the concept of interactivity is connectivity. Entities must first be linked in order to interact. Interactivity not only relates to users engaged with the media, but users using the media to interact with others. Interactivity has also been cited as the greatest point of contrast between traditional media and new media.

Ronald Deibert speaks of the impact of communication technology on society, and specifically on international politics, in the context of 'medium theory'. According to medium theory, mediums of communication are not neutral vessels or simple agents, but create communication environments. Deibert asserts that shifts in technology favour the growth of some forces, while causing other trends to wither. For example, the emergence of printing technology is associated with the rise of the nation-state. Deibert contends that the new technologies of digital electronic telecommunications, which he terms 'hypermedia', will not cause the nation-state to wither away, but it has spawned several trends creating a new 'emerging world order'. According to Deibert, 'these trends point *away* from single mass identities, linear political boundaries, and exclusive jurisdictions centred on territorial spaces, and *towards* multiple identities and nonterritorial communities, overlapping boundaries, and nonexclusive jurisdictions'.<sup>5</sup> New media technology has created more than just new political dynamics. It has, as medium theory would suggest, created a new communication dynamic in the international political arena.

The interactivity and connectivity of new media, combined with the diversity of new players and the ways that they are using the media, have arguably ushered in a new global communications' era, defined by connectivity, interactivity and

<sup>4</sup> Marc Meyer and Michael H. Zack, 'The Design and Development of Information Products', *Sloan Management Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, spring 1996, pp. 43-59, at p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> R.J. Deibert, *Parchment, Printing and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

cultural diversity. The underlying dynamic has shifted from a focus on information as a product, to communication as a process. This shift is significant, because it means a parallel shift from message content to message exchange. In this new terrain, those who master and facilitate message exchange command communication power.

### **Wielding versus Creating Soft Power: Mass Communication and Network Communication Dynamics**

These changes in the international political arena, from information production to information exchange, correspond to the relative effectiveness of a communication strategy or approach. In terms of strategic public diplomacy, the more closely that a communication strategy is attuned to the prevailing dynamics, the more effective it will be. This phenomenon can be illustrated by exploring more closely the underlying features of mass communication and network communication.

The mass communication approach, which is well documented in the literature and even represents a distinct major in the field of communication, has several prominent features. It rests on the premise of the sender-message-receiver model. In 1948, political scientist and communication theorist Harold Lasswell proposed a verbal model: 'Who says what to whom through what medium with what effect?'<sup>6</sup> Lasswell's model, which is still prevalent today, captures the basic elements of mass communication.

These basic elements are also evident in public diplomacy. The source is represented by an identifiable, autonomous political entity. The source bears responsibility for the communication initiative and its ultimate outcome. The entity designs the initiative and develops the message independently from the audience. The audience remains largely passive. While mass communication models allow for feedback, this feedback is characteristically delayed or indirect. The messenger identifies target audiences and crafts messages using public opinion polling and other forms of intelligence. Once developed, the message not only remains static, but efforts are made to control the message over various media platforms. Mass communication's persuasive effect rests in its control over message and medium. The expression 'staying on message' refers to maintaining control over message coherence and consistency. Messages tend to capture or reflect a nation's culture, policies and values and, in the case of public diplomacy, are typically relayed through a mass medium. The goals of public diplomacy, such as seeking audience

<sup>6</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society', in Lyman Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas* (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948), p. 37 [reprinted in W. Schramm and D. F. Roberts (eds), *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press), pp. 84-99, with the model at p. 84.

acceptance of policies, enhancing an entities image or achieving a policy objective, reflect the effect of the message.

The main strength of mass media was its audience reach. A single source was capable of transmitting a uniform message to a mass audience, literally millions of people. This phenomenon, which may seem trite compared to the ability of the World Wide Web, was the power behind mass media. The explosion of new media and alternative sources of information have effectively fragmented the audience. Rather than being the single source of information, mass media must now compete for audience attention and loyalty.

Mass media is also valued for its ability to generate public awareness and influence the public agenda. High-profile mass media campaigns are still prominent today to focus attention on an issue, albeit they are often combined with other media formats. Mass media still retains its agenda-setting function, influencing what people think about, if not how they actually think about it. Research has consistently shown that people are selective in their exposure and interpretation of information. In terms of effectiveness, interpersonal communication with trusted or valued sources remains the most persuasive medium of communication.

Using mass media to enhance a national image, which is what is often the stated purpose of international broadcasts, can be particularly illusive. In early propaganda studies, scholars noted that relations between governments correspond to the images the publics have of those states. Writing in 1963, specifically on US public diplomacy efforts (then referred to as propaganda), W. Phillips Davidson's literature review affirmed that basic attitude changes 'are brought about by changes in the social, political, or economic environment — not by propaganda'.<sup>7</sup> This finding has remained intact. In a 1999 collection of essays written on the perception of the US from around the world, Yahya Kamalipour again underscored the continuing impact that US relations with other countries had on its image in those countries:

Perhaps more than any other factor, political relations determine what citizens of other nations see, read, or hear in their domestic media about the United States and vice versa. In other words, the quality of political relations between two countries is a critical factor in the image that they portray of each other in their mass media.<sup>8</sup>

It is this ability to generate awareness — to get the message out — and inability to influence ultimately how that message is perceived that makes mass media particularly vulnerable in cross-cultural settings. It is important to note that while

<sup>7</sup> W. Phillips Davidson, 'Political Communication as an Instrument of Foreign Policy', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1, spring 1963, pp. 28-36 at p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Yahya R. Kamalipour, 'US Image and the Political Factor', in Y.R. Kamalipour (ed.) *Images of the US around the World: A Multicultural Perspective* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 35-36.

a mass medium (that is, television or radio) may be culturally neutral, the content or programming that it carries is culture-bound, or tied to the culture of its sponsor. Even domestically, the production of images by mass media has been vulnerable to misinterpretations by the audience. In international or cross-cultural settings, mass media content is particularly susceptible to distortions. An invisible cultural barrier between the sponsor and the audience serves as a filter through which the message must pass. This cultural barrier is more apt to distort, rather than simply to deliver a message that is disseminated to the intended audience.

The dynamics of these basic elements of the mass communication approach, which focuses on information production and dissemination, are dramatically different from a network communication approach that focuses on information exchange. The following analysis is based on the growing body of scholarship about the activities and strategies of transnational advocacy networks, as well as the tactical materials produced by these network organizations.

The network communication approach consists of three interrelated components: network structure; network synergy; and network strategy. At the heart of each component is message exchange.

First is the network structure. Networks are widely recognized as the most efficient organizational structures for message exchange. Among the major advantages of the network form over hierarchical forms are flexibility, adaptability and speed of response. Linking together individuals facilitates message exchange and enhances the flow of information.

Second is network synergy. Network synergy, or energy multiplier, is a result of relationship building and incorporating diversity. Whereas the process of linking may occur naturally or mechanically in networks of inanimate objects such as power grids, achieving connectivity and interactivity in human networks entails relationship-building.

Relationship-building in transnational networks occurs on an external and internal level. Internally, within a network, relationship-building activities such as exchanging emails or voicemail, volunteering or completing tasks, help to transform a group of individuals into a team. When network members work together as a team, they create a self-perpetuating type of energy that can grow exponentially. Externally, relationship-building activities — specifically, coalition-building among networks — add to the wealth of resources and expand the network. As Bourdieu observed,<sup>9</sup> the more interconnected that actors in a network are to one another, the more those actors trust one another and are able to exchange resources (tangible and intangible), thus benefiting the network overall.

Network synergy also derives from diversity. Diversity, one of the hallmarks of team dynamics, expands perspective and generates innovative ideas. While

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Social Capital', in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-258.



coalition-building helps to build diversity in networks, the combination of 'local roots' with 'global links' serves as the most obvious source of diversity in transnational networks. Culture — rather than being an impediment or liability as in the case of mass media — is an asset for transnational networks. By incorporating culture into the dynamics of the network, the network itself gains an additional supply of synergy. Speaking of an initiative that spanned from the Philippines to Chile, Nicaragua and Mexico, Arturo Santa Cruz observed: 'It was precisely the synergy created by domestic and transnational actors that made the rapid consolidation of the international election-monitoring transnational advocacy network possible'.<sup>10</sup> Diversity in transnational networks can be particularly valuable for generating novel solutions to complex or long-standing problems.

The third dimension of the network communication approach rests on how networks use and exchange information, rather than simply disseminate it. Transnational advocacy networks strategically *use* information to co-create credibility, identity and master narratives. Information is the lifeblood of networks. Members circulate information and those that hoard it are bypassed in a network. Information-sharing is a key component of 'information politics' in transnational advocacy networks. Information politics is defined as the ability quickly and credibly to generate politically useable information and move it to where it will have the most impact. Information also serves as a tool to establish credibility. The quantity and quality of credible information that a source can supply is directly related to its value and persuasiveness.

Information is also used to create a coherent storyline or master narrative. The storyline defines the problem, villain, victim and solution. Keck and Sikkink speak of this in terms of the strategic portrayal of a 'causal story'.<sup>11</sup> Arquilla and Ronfeldt called it the narrative function of networks.<sup>12</sup> In social movement literature, it is often referred to as 'framing'. The storyline is important for creating a sense of shared purpose and identity. As Martin Kearns explains in his discussion of network-centric advocacy:

The story perpetuates attraction to the network and bolsters commitment of workers and volunteers [... U]nifying the common story adds strength to the social ties, reinforces participation and helps individual participants to create additional message volume.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Arturo Santa Cruz, 'The Emergence of a Transnational Advocacy Network: International Election Monitoring in the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua and Mexico', *Portal*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 2004, pp. 1-31, at p. 27, available online at <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/view/56/33>.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy*, MR-1382-OSD (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), available online at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1382/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382/).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Kearns, 'Network-Centric Advocacy' (version 4.0), 2007, at <http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org>.

The most important feature to note about the network communication approach and the three interrelated components is their sequence. In contrast to the mass communication approach that *begins* with a predetermined message, the network paradigm *ends* with the message or story. Rather than trying to design a message that is distinct from the intended audience and then using mass media as a communication channel to cross the cultural barrier, networks *first* establish the structure and dynamics for effective communication channels, *then* members collaborate to craft the message. Because the message or story is co-created across cultures, it is not culture-bound, or tied to any one culture. Also, because the co-created story incorporates culturally diverse messages and perspectives, networks are able to respond readily to cultural distortions through the interactive process of message exchange. Rather than being a barrier or impediment, culture is incorporated into network dynamics and becomes a rich source of team-coalition synergy. With the addition of network synergy, a local story can evolve into a global master narrative, carrying with it the soft power that it needs to attract and persuade across national and cultural borders.

### **Summarizing the Strategic Differential**

The differences inherent in these two approaches define the strategic differential between wielding and creating soft power. The mass communication approach — the dominant approach in public diplomacy used by nation-states — is inherently information-centred in that it focuses on information production and dissemination. Mass communication is used to wield soft power. The network communication approach, which has been created and employed by advocacy NGOs, is inherently relations-centred in that it focuses on message exchange, relationship-building and network creation. NGOs are using network communication to create soft power. Creating soft power is more strategic today for several reasons.

First, creating soft power has the advantage of matching communication strategy with prevailing communication dynamic. The relations-centred approach is now a much closer match to the underlying dynamics of global communication, which emphasize message exchange over message dissemination. Those who master the exchange of information will command power in the global communications' era. In this regard, network communication trumps mass communication. In terms of the efficiency of message exchange, the multi-directional capability of network exchanges is vastly superior to mass media channels, which are primarily uni-directional with filtered feedback.

Second, a large part of creating soft power is achieved through the different view of 'messaging'. The mass communication, information-centred approach of wielding soft power relies on predefined, static messages that are crafted by the

source and delivered to a passive receiver. The source tries its best to anticipate and respond to the audience's reaction to the message but, once the message leaves its source, the creator has very little, if any, control over how it is received. In contrast, the network communication, relations-centred approach views 'messaging' as a creative, participatory process that blurs the distinction between sender and receiver, source and audience. The message is co-created and dynamic. Because the message is not tied specifically to any one source, message credibility can span across sources. Mass communication messages, in contrast, tend to be tied to the sponsor.

Third, creating soft power draws upon culture as a positive force. Network connections serve as boundary spanners across cultures. From the perspective of wielding soft power, culture acts primarily as a challenge or obstacle to be overcome. As the earlier situation illustrated, messages delivered over mass media are particularly vulnerable to distortions that rebound off the cultural barrier.

Finally, creating soft power can generate its own campaign momentum. The audience is active and participatory and the heightened degree of cultural diversity also adds its own synergy. In contrast, wielding soft power requires the sustained efforts of the source to try actively to control or maintain campaign momentum. On rare and fortunate occasions, a campaign can generate a 'buzz' in the audience that accelerates the communication mileage of the campaign. However, most campaigns require the source to keep the campaign going and audiences engaged.

### **Case Analysis: Mass Communication and Network Communication Approaches**

This third section looks at specific applications of both the mass communication and network communication approaches, drawing on examples from the US's post-'9/11' public diplomacy in the Arab world and from advocacy NGOs.

#### *The United States and its Mass Communication Approach*

The US's post-'9/11' public diplomacy illustrates the mass communication approach of 'wielding' soft power that relies on carefully crafted *messages* disseminated via *mass media vehicles* to a *target audience* with the goal of *changing attitudes or behaviour*.

Information dissemination via mass media was prominent: the US State Department's fact book, *The Network of Terror* (December 2001); an Arabic youth pop music station, Radio Sawa (March 2002); the first international US advertising campaign, the 'Shared Values' initiative (October 2002); the Arabic youth lifestyle magazine, *Hi* (July 2003); and an Arabic-language television station, al-Hurra (February 2004).

The core of the US's message rested on US soft power resources, namely, American culture, values and policies. In laying out the goals of US public diplomacy in early 2002, then Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers defined the first priority of American public diplomacy: 'to inform the international world swiftly and accurately about the policies of the US government', and then to 're-present the values and beliefs of the people of America, which inform our policies and practices'.<sup>14</sup>

The language illustrates the prominence of message design. As Nye noted, 'By definition, soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your message, and fine-tuning it accordingly'.<sup>15</sup> The search for the 'right message' has been a continuing and consuming concern of US public diplomacy. However, US public diplomacy conceived and produced the message content in the United States for an audience that was culturally different. Radio Sawa, which was developed for Arab youth, was written, produced and broadcasted from Washington DC. Similarly, *Hi* magazine was written and edited in Washington, and al-Hurra television was produced in a Washington DC suburb.

It is also important to note that the messages aimed to inform and influence the target audience. This goal of persuading an audience, as opposed to establishing credibility with an audience, is significant. US public diplomacy appeared to overlook the importance of credibility in terms of policy contradictions and creating its own mass media outlets. Policy contradictions were evident by the on-ground reality checks that audiences routinely perform. The US-controlled media were also launched in a region with a long tradition and scepticism of such outlets, which are rarely perceived as credible. In late 2004, a Pentagon advisory panel highlighted the US credibility crisis, saying that US public diplomacy was without a 'working communication channel' for reaching the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>16</sup>

Initiatives also inevitably ran up against the cultural barrier. Arab commentators and the public dismissed US public diplomacy initiatives, particularly the message content, as 'naive', 'condescending', 'patronizing' and 'arrogant'. Rami Khouri of Lebanon's *The Daily Star* captured the sentiments of many when he asked: 'Where do they [US public diplomacy] get this stuff from? Why do they keep insulting us like this?'<sup>17</sup> Analyst Michael Vlahos said: 'America's vision of the

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Beers, Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, 'US Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds', remarks at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 7 May 2002, available online at <http://www.state.gov/r/us/10424.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> 'Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication', chaired by Vince Vitto, September 2004, available online at [http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic\\_Communication.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Rami G. Khouri, 'The US Public Diplomacy Hoax: Why Do They Keep Insulting Us?', in *The Daily Star*, 11 February 2004, online edition at [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_ID=10&article\\_ID=4274&categ\\_id=5](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=10&article_ID=4274&categ_id=5).

situation and cultural context was just plain wrong', allowing 'the enemy to turn our own work against us'.<sup>18</sup>

### *The ICBL and its Network Communication Approach*

In contrast to the US's public diplomacy initiatives, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines' (ICBL) approach in the 'Ottawa Process' is illustrative of the major elements of the network communication approach that created soft power.

First is the network structure, as ICBL assumed a network structure that facilitated information exchange. ICBL was formed in 1991 by six prominent NGOs working together and by 1996 had attracted more than 1,000 NGOs from more than 60 countries as participants. However, as Bobby Muller of ICBL remarked when informed of the Nobel prize: 'ICBL is a name given to the collective action of a lot of organizations. It doesn't exist as an organization. There is no president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer; there's no board of directors'.<sup>19</sup> This absence of hierarchical positions, while working as a 'collective', is characteristic of the all-channel network organizational typology, the most efficient information-exchange structure.

ICBL also illustrated features of network synergy. Relationship-building occurred both internally among network members and externally to build coalitions. Trust was an important part of the relationship-building. As Williams stated, 'And it was, again, the follow up, the constant communication, the building of trust. Trust, trust, trust'.<sup>20</sup> Initially, members communicated via telephones and facsimile machines. When they began using the internet in the mid-1990s, it was first for communicating internally, then for external communication, then for the media. The internet was used to coordinate events and committee functions, distribute petitions and action alerts, raise money and educate the public media. Relationship-building entailed gaining the support of nation-states, and Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy soon headed a group of 'like-minded' small and medium-sized nations.

ICBL's relationship-building spanned national and cultural boundaries, adding the element of diversity. Williams' description of how members implemented action plans demonstrates the degree of diversity and teamwork within the ICBL network:

<sup>18</sup> M. Vlahos, *Culture's Mask: War and Change after Iraq* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2004), p. 49, available online at [http://www.jhuapl.edu/POW/library/culture\\_mask.pdf](http://www.jhuapl.edu/POW/library/culture_mask.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Online citation from the Nobel Conference, at <http://www.virginia.edu/nobel/>.

<sup>20</sup> Jody Williams, 'International Organization in the International Campaigns to Ban Landmines: Discussion', Nobel Peace Laureates Conference, University of Virginia, 6 November 1998, at <http://www.virginia.edu/nobel/transcript/jwilliams.html>.

At every meeting, the group developed an action plan [...] that our people know what they should do next. They could choose to either do it in a big way or in a little way, but we were always clear about the next steps. It's a combination of letting them be free and giving them a little guidance.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned earlier, diversity plays a critical role in generating novel ideas and creating network synergy.

Network synergy is one of the most notable features of the ICBL and 'Ottawa Process'. In contrast to other conventional arms treaties that took a decade or more, the ICBL treaty moved through the process in an astounding eighteen months. The momentum created by network synergy is echoed in Davis's depiction: "The [Ottawa] process was very much like the departure of a train; it was set in motion by a coalition of pro-ban states, and undecided nations were encouraged to board the train or risk being left behind at the station. The train was moving fast..."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the ICBL's case demonstrates network strategy of using and circulating information to establish credibility, identity and a master narrative. ICBL had network members on the ground in affected areas as well as in political discussions. Members on the ground provided first-hand accounts, testimonies and statistics for the other members to use in policy discussions. Members used information strategically to create a storyline. Whereas the issue of landmines had earlier been a military defence issue, ICBL transformed it into a humanitarian issue. As a humanitarian issue, the basic storyline became: landmines kill people (problem), people killed by landmines are the victims, those who use landmine are villains, and governments across the globe ought to ban landmines (solution).

In 1996, 123 countries signed the treaty to ban landmines. It became international law on 1 March 1999 and, as of 16 September 1999, had been signed by 135 countries and ratified by 86. In 1997, Jodi Williams and the ICBL were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the soft power differential between the mass communication approach and the network communication approach that are used in public diplomacy. For a public diplomacy strategy to be effective today, it must align itself with the political and communication dynamics of the modern world. Yesterday's information-centred, mass communication approach, which focused on message content, is no longer strategic. In what is arguably a new global communications' era — defined by connectivity, interactivity and cultural

<sup>21</sup> Williams, 'International Organization in the International Campaigns to Ban Landmines: Discussion'.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Davis, 'The Campaign to Ban Landmines: Public Diplomacy, Middle Power Leadership and an Unconventional Negotiating Process', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 6 July 2004, available online at <http://jha.ac/articles/a134.htm>.

diversity — those who master message exchange will command communication power. In the global communications' era, a network communication approach creates communication soft power.

The shift in communication dynamics from message content to message exchange poses unique challenges for the practice of public diplomacy. Not only do most national governments have a hierarchical structure, but, more importantly, their public diplomacy still tends to focus on message content and to neglect message exchange. They also tend to rely heavily on a mass communication approach.

In contrast, many of the new actors gaining access to the world stage have seized on the importance of message exchange. The new players, unlike nations with a history of mass media ownership and predetermined mass audiences, have exploited the interactive features of the new technologies to create their own audiences. Publics are not passive recipients of information, but rather active participants. By focusing first on message exchange, and then co-creating message content, these actors are able to retain the currency of the message content as it crosses national and cultural borders, and, in the process, to generate a master narrative and dynamic synergy.

Whereas mass media magnifies cultural differences, network communication structures tend to absorb and integrate cultural diversity. This ability to span cultural diversity, in an era of heightened cultural identity, is what gives network communication the edge over mass communication channels. Mass media may remain the power players in the global arena, but network structures have emerged as the power brokers.

The strategic power of networks has become the new model of global persuasion in a global communications' era defined by global connectivity, interactivity and cultural diversity. Manuel Castells, among the most prominent and prolific writers on the rising network phenomenon, called networks 'the new social morphology of our societies'.<sup>23</sup> Van Dijk predicted that the twenty-first century will be the age of networks: 'Networks are becoming the nervous system of our society'.<sup>24</sup>

Network communication is the catalyst fuelling the comparative *communication* soft power differential between state and non-state actors. Whereas states are relying primarily on a mass communication approach to wield their soft power resources, non-state actors, with comparatively few initial soft power resources, are using a network communication approach to *create* soft power.

The network communication and relations-centred approach used by non-state actors to create soft power offers valuable insights for how nations can

<sup>23</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economic, Society and Culture, Vol. I* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 469.

<sup>24</sup> Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society* (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2000), p. 2.

enhance their public diplomacy. Many US analysts remain focused on mass communication elements: the media (that is, how to defeat al-Jazeera), and messages (how to frame the message) or image (how to raise the US's favourability rating). The more critical elements today are networking and relational elements.

Understanding the underlying dynamics is particularly important for identifying emerging threats. Jodi Williams of ICBL described the 'Ottawa Process' as a 'new model of diplomacy [...] that makes smaller and mid-sized countries working together with civil society a potential superpower'.<sup>25</sup> Lester Salamon points out that contrary to popular belief, relations between these two actors 'has been characterized more by cooperation than conflict'.<sup>26</sup> Others do not see the relationship as so harmonious or non-state actors as benign. As Castells quipped: 'Networks, as social forms, are value-free or neutral. They can kiss or kill; nothing personal'.<sup>27</sup> Davenport, who discussed the ICBL campaign as part of an emerging form of new diplomacy, cautioned that 'those who are practising the new diplomacy have won major victories and are not likely to stop now'.<sup>28</sup>

Nearly a decade ago, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt asked, 'What if there is a revolution in diplomatic affairs?' Arquilla and Ronfeldt were not referring to public diplomacy so much, as to the network phenomena and the advent of 'netwars' — 'a spectrum of conflict defined by the use of network forms of organization, doctrine and strategy'.<sup>29</sup> Jamie Metzl, writing on 'network diplomacy', cautioned that governments 'have not yet come to fully appreciate the redistribution of power resulting from the rise of networks', and that while they may take comfort in comparing themselves to their counterparts in other foreign ministries, what they do not recognize is that 'the competition is not coming from other states, but from other forms of organization altogether'.<sup>30</sup>

In an era of network connectivity and interactivity, the greatest potential threat that the United States faces is being blindsided by highly networked transnational advocacy NGOs that will isolate and force the United States into an exposed or vulnerable position. Should this happen, US public diplomacy's reliance on

<sup>25</sup> Jody Williams, '1997 Nobel Lecture', 10 December 1997, available online at [http://www.waging-peace.org/articles/1997/12/10\\_williams\\_nobel-lecture.htm](http://www.waging-peace.org/articles/1997/12/10_williams_nobel-lecture.htm).

<sup>26</sup> L. Salamon, *Partners in Public Service: Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 120.

<sup>27</sup> Manuel Castells, 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, January/March 2000, pp. 5-24, at p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> David Davenport, 'The New Diplomacy', *Policy Review*, no. 116, December 2002/January 2003, pp. 17-31, at p. 30, available online at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3458466.html>.

<sup>29</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 'What If There is a Revolution in Diplomatic Affairs?', *Virtual Diplomacy* (Washington DC: United State Institute of Peace, 25 February 1999), available online at <http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/reports/ronarqISA99.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Jamie Metzl, 'Network Diplomacy', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, winter/spring 2001, pp. 77-87, available online at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&cid=681&prog=zgp>.



wielding its soft power will be lost to those who have learned to create soft power through a network communication approach. Yet this threat is as likely politically as the al-Qaeda network already is militarily.

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