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# The Status Quo of Evaluation in Public Diplomacy: Insights from the U.S. State Department

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**: In recent years, expectations for demonstrating the impact of public diplomacy programs have dramatically increased. Despite increased calls for enhanced monitoring and evaluation, what texts exist on the subject suggest the state of practice is grim. However, while the current debate is based mostly on practice reports, conceptual work from academics or anecdotal evidence, we are missing empirical insights on current views of monitoring and evaluation from practitioners. Such a practice-level perspective is central for better understanding factors that may actually drive or hamper performance evaluation in day-to-day public diplomacy work. The paper seeks to update knowledge on the state of evaluation practice within public diplomacy from the perspectives of practitioners themselves.

**Design/methodology/approach**: This study assesses the state of evaluation in public diplomacy through qualitative interviews with public diplomacy officers with the U.S. Department of State—a method heretofore unused in studies of the topic. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with officers in Washington, DC and at posts around the world.

**Findings**: The interviews suggest that practitioners see evaluation as underfunded despite increased demands for accountability. Further, the results show a previously not discussed tension between diplomacy practitioners in Washington, DC and those in the field. Practitioners are also unclear about the goals of public diplomacy, which has implications for the enactment of targeted evaluations.

**Originality/value**: The research uncovers the perceptions of evaluation from the voices of those who must practice it, and elaborates on the common obstacles in the enactment of public diplomacy, the influence of multiple actors and stakeholders on evaluation practice, as well as the perceived goals of public diplomacy programming. No empirical research has considered the state of evaluation practice. Moreover, the study uses qualitative interview data from public diplomacy officers themselves, an under-used method in public diplomacy research. Our findings provide insights that contribute to future public diplomacy strategy and performance management.

**Key words**: Public diplomacy, monitoring and evaluation, measurement, goals, department of state, qualitative interviews

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## Introduction

Public diplomacy is a communication domain that involves the conveyance of information to foreign publics and the building of long-term relationships to create an "enabling environment" for government policies (Nye, 2008, p. 101). According to the most recently available data, the U.S. government spent $2.03 billion dollars on public diplomacy initiatives in 2016 (Powers, 2016). While this amount is but a small fraction of that spent on defense and social services in the United States, the billions allocated to public diplomacy nonetheless requires the demonstration of high and measurable returns to Congress and other important stakeholders (Brown, 2017). As such, monitoring and evaluation—as the U.S. State Department has labeled the practice of evaluation and measurement (Department of State, 2017)—has been positioned as vital policy connected to several public diplomacy functions, including program planning, providing evidence for the impact of public diplomacy on informing and influencing foreign publics, and, ultimately, showing support for strategic goal attainment in foreign affairs.

Public diplomacy as a field is increasingly shaped by demands for quantified performance management and evidence-based decision-making. This is a global trend that affects many other public sector domains (Christensen, Dahlmann, Mathiasen & Petersen, 2018; Van de Walle & Roberts, 2008). Especially in the past decade, around the world, calls for increased efforts in public diplomacy evaluation have grown strong (Cull, 2014; Pamment, 2012). However, recent literature on monitoring and evaluation in public diplomacy still paints a picture of low satisfaction with the state of the field (e.g., ACPD, 2014, 2018; Banks, 2011; Gonzales, 2015). Public diplomacy practitioners must demonstrate the impact of their work, but have little knowledge or resources with which to do so.

Related to this is a broader challenge in the public diplomacy field: there is often no agreement on what the goals and objectives of public diplomacy initiatives are—neither in the field, nor in specific institutions (Sevin, 2015). This is further complicated by the fact that the field or domain of public diplomacy is made up of a multitude of actors with partially diverging interests (White, 2014). Simply put, without a clear understanding of public diplomacy goals evaluation becomes difficult to effectively enact. Moreover, overlapping and competing approaches to evaluation in U.S. diplomacy across the various bureaus and operating locations of the U.S. State Department further complicate the already muddied responsibility of public diplomacy practitioners to prove the value of their work.

Given these challenges, the purpose of this article is two-fold. First, we update and add to discussions of the state of contemporary evaluation practice within the field of U.S. public diplomacy. Our approach is different than and complementary to other recent efforts in that we utilize a qualitative interview methodology to understand practice through the voices of public diplomacy practitioners themselves. While the current debate is based mostly on reports produced by the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD)—an independent office of the State Department charged with appraising U.S. diplomacy efforts—conceptual work by engaged academics (e.g., Sevin 2017; Pamment 2014), or anecdotal pieces by practitioners (Banks, 2011; Gonzales, 2015), we are missing arguments that use insights from empirical research to assess current views and perceptions of practitioners. However, a deeper understanding of this practice-level perspective is central for understanding factors that my drive or hamper performance evaluation in day-to-day public diplomacy. Second, we draw upon the perceptions of public diplomacy practitioners to better understand their views of public diplomacy goals and the challenges of executing evaluation within a multi-stakeholder environment.

## Literature Review

Evaluation is a central element of all strategic communication fields, such as public diplomacy, public relations, and health communication, among others (Macnamara, 2017). Generally speaking, evaluation refers to the systematic assessment of the value of an object and can serve two equal purposes: *accountability* (were objectives met?—often the main purpose of reporting) and *improvement* (how were objectives met?) (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). In public diplomacy practice, as recent works suggest, the focus is primarily on reporting and accountability to important stakeholders such as Congress (Gonzalez, 2015).

Practically, evaluations are commonly modeled by setting up various evaluative stages for which objectives are formulated and success measures are defined. The development of evaluation models in strategic communication domains dates back decades and all current approaches resemble, more or less, the structure of common "logic models," which, in their most basic form, distinguish between *inputs* (program resources), *activities*, *outputs* (the products that result from the activities), and finally *outcomes* (the mid- and long-term change or impact that results from the program). Implicit in widely accepted approaches to evaluation is the assumption that goals are derived from the overall mission, goals, and objectives of the organization (Hon, 1998). Thus, through evaluation, practitioners can determine and demonstrate tangible outcomes in the extent to which their efforts contribute to overall organizational goal achievement.

For public diplomacy, these outcomes ideally tie into larger foreign policy goals which, in the United States, are set by officials in the State Department (Sevin, 2015). As a strategic element of the foreign policy toolkit, public diplomacy has to help achieve foreign policy goals and advance national interests (Sevin, 2017). However, the current practice of evaluation is not only strongly focused on reporting, but furthermore, reports mainly on the output (not outcome) level (cf. Pamment, 2014). That said, part of the problem with evaluating most strategic communication programs is that they encompass many different activities, goals are complex, and objectives will vary (Hon, 1998). Comor and Beam (2012), in reviewing current public diplomacy practice geared at complex intangible outcomes (such as ’dialogue’ or ‘engagement’) on the one hand, and extant public diplomacy performance reviews done by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, criticize the often reductive evaluations based on polling or focus groups. They stressed that despite sizable investments (communication initiatives worth US$10 billion between 2001 and 2009), evidence for the impact of public diplomacy programs is limited. Moreover, as Sevin (2017) has noted, based on Pahlavi (2007) and Pamment’s (2014) findings, the “reporting culture is also observed in the design and execution stages” of public diplomacy projects—he gives a recent example:

> An illustrative project was undertaken by the Bureau of International Information Programs at the U.S. State Department to increase its social media outreach. The Bureau followed a reporting understanding, the focus was strictly limited to increasing the number of users. Relying on Facebook advertisements, over $600,000 was spent between 2011 and 2013 to increase the number of users subscribed to the State Department feeds (...) This campaign was an output success as it managed to raise the number of Facebook fans (...) however, such a success does not necessarily mean that it was effective in helping the United States advance its national interests. (Sevin, 2017, p. 883)

Such a strong focus on outputs and accountability is common to many strategic communication domains. The lack of rigorous measurement in related fields like public relations, and a general lack of monitoring and evaluation implementation, has continued despite considerable growth within the field (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2017). A central part of this problem is the continued focus on outputs, as opposed to outcomes (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2017; Wright & Hinson, 2012), the perception that evaluation is too time consuming or expensive (Gregory & Watson, 2008), or the perception that the often complex and intangible outcomes are actually unmeasurable. Such views hinder the development of public relations as a management function (Hon, 1998)—the same argument could be made for public diplomacy. Thus, despite considerable research on advancing evaluation in strategic communication domains, “evaluation has become and remains something of a “holy grail” (L’Etang, 2008, p. 26)—and given what extant writings tell us, this observation holds true for public diplomacy as well.

**Actors and Obstacles in the Evaluation of U.S. Diplomacy**

While dedicated offices for the research and evaluation of public diplomacy exist, most notably the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) within the Office of the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, official Department of State policy requires that “all bureaus and independent offices must develop a monitoring plan for their programs or projects” and that all “bureaus and independent offices should conduct evaluations to examine the performance and outcomes of their programs, projects, and processes” (Department of State, 2017, pp. 4-5). Bureaus such as Education and Cultural Affairs and International Information Programs also have dedicated research and evaluation staff, but other bureaus and independent offices do not have such offices or staffing resources. Official policy also prescribes general standards for the development of monitoring and evaluation plans, but specific guidance as to the creation of indicators, or offering common metrics, does not appear to exist. Moreover, public diplomacy officers receive evaluation education from the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute (FSI)—the training grounds for the U.S. foreign affairs community. Little is known about such trainings, save for the fact that a publicly-searchable course directory for the Foreign Service Institute includes a course called “Foreign Assistance Program Monitoring and Evaluation.” The course is two hours in length.

What little else know about the state of evaluation in contemporary public diplomacy mostly comes from white papers published by the U.S. State Department itself (e.g., ACPD, 2014, 2018; Banks, 2011), or from commentaries written by experts within the public diplomacy practitioner community (e.g., Brown, 2017; Gonzales, 2015). Several challenges for evaluation practice in public diplomacy can be distilled from these recent projects. First, political fluctuations, changes in legislatures, and parallel changes in preferences and approaches to evaluation undermine attempts to establish a consistent approach. Second, there continues to be a lack of resources dedicated to evaluation (while sophisticated evaluations are time- and cost-intensive) and, at the same time, for many public diplomacy practitioners in the field there is an increasing pressure to do more with less. Third, the long-term nature of public diplomacy programs, with complex intangible outcomes, and related challenges with attribution and causality as well as possible third-factor influences make monitoring and evaluation difficult. Fourth, there is no established culture of evaluation within the State Department, and there is lack of knowledge and skills in evaluation models and methods, which heightens the general reluctance of public diplomacy professionals towards adopting sophisticated monitoring and evaluation. Finally, there are no standard monitoring and evaluation models/terminology within public diplomacy practice, resulting in a heterogeneity of approaches and activities within the broader public diplomacy domain and accordingly specialized and segregated cultures of, and approaches to, monitoring and evaluation.

**Assessing Practitioner Perceptions**

While the aforementioned obstacles provide a solid ground on which to base claims about current public diplomacy practices, nonetheless we know little about the perspectives of practitioners themselves when it comes to enacting evaluation in practice. However, gaining such perceptions are vital to better understand drivers and barriers in monitoring and evaluation practice (Buhmann & Brønn, 2018). This leads us to our first, research question: How do U.S. public diplomacy officers perceive the current state of evaluation in practice?

Obviously, the challenges facing sophisticated monitoring and evaluation practice in public diplomacy are many. However, a particularly thorny challenge for the evaluation of public diplomacy is the potential plurality and "fuzziness" of diplomacy goals. This is a problem for many public service domains, which face challenges of goal conflict and managing multidimensional performance data (Christensen et al., 2018). Furthermore, the goals and explicit functions of public diplomacy itself are varied. Fitzpatrick (2010) reviewed the scholarly literature on public diplomacy and suggested six functional categories of public diplomacy research and practice, namely: public diplomacy as advocacy, public diplomacy as communication/information, as relational, as promotional, as warfare/foreign policy propaganda, and public diplomacy as a political strategy. While such a typology is heuristically useful for empirical research on diplomacy programming and communication messages, it lacks insights from practitioners themselves, who may have differing opinions about the goals of public diplomacy—particularly when put in context of performance evaluation.

The low consistency of goals and lack of clarity in public diplomacy has been addressed from the conceptual side. Recent research has suggested several models to clarify public diplomacy objectives that can serve as a basis for improved performance evaluation. These works have suggested interrelated targets, such as soft power, reputation or relationships (cf. Pamment, 2014), as well as interrelated levels of impact, such as public opinion, relationship dynamics, and public debates (cf. Sevin, 2015). However, we do not know how these recent conceptual works relate to extant ideas around public diplomacy goals in the practice. This is relevant if we want to understand if and how such conceptual advancements can find their way into the practice. This leads us to our second research question: How do public diplomacy practitioners perceive the goals of public diplomacy?

## Method

Despite research on evaluation in related fields, such as public relations, little is known about the perceptions of public diplomacy practitioners towards evaluation and the general state of the field. To date, no empirical research on evaluation in U.S. public diplomacy—or, for that matter, any subject related to public diplomacy—has utilized the voices of practitioners themselves. Thus, we take a qualitative perspective to determine how evaluation is perceived in public diplomacy by the people who practice it.

**Sampling and Interview Participants**

Twenty-five individuals working for the U.S. Department of State agreed to be interviewed for this study. Interviewees were identified via the snowball sampling technique—a widely used qualitative method to identify samples with specialized experiences (Noy, 2008). As public diplomacy is performed across various bureaus in the Department of State, to help achieve maximum variation in the sample (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), interviewees were asked to identify contacts at various bureaus and at posts overseas whom they knew had experience with monitoring and evaluation. The final sample of interviewees included seven males and 18 females. The gender imbalance in our sample is not unusual or of significant concern, as the field of public diplomacy has become increasingly feminized (Towns & Niklasson, 2016). The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 67 years. Interviewees worked in public diplomacy positions for various bureaus in the State Department, including Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), African Affairs (AF), European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR), Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA), International Information Programs (IIP), Public Affairs (PA), and in the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. All interviewees had at least two years of experience in public diplomacy work, ranging to 22 years, and all claimed to have experience with public diplomacy monitoring and evaluation. Job descriptions of the participants ranged from public affairs officers at embassies abroad, directors of diplomacy programs, evaluation officers, and directors of research. The sample included 10 people currently overseas at posts abroad in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. Most of those interviewed in Washington had also served in public diplomacy positions outside the U.S.

## Interview Procedure

Fifteen interviews were conducted in-person with public diplomacy practitioners in Washington, DC, and ten with practitioners posted overseas via Skype. Interviewees consented to participate on the condition they remain anonymous and that quotes from the interviews would remain unattributed. All but two of the interviews were audio-recorded—the two interviewees not recorded consented to participate but declined to be recorded due to their position within the State Department. In these cases, extensive notes were taken. The duration of the interviews ranged from 32 to 74 minutes. We reached data saturation when the interviews began to show repetitive patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured topics guide of 12 general questions with multiple follow-up probes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The guide was developed to examine participants general views of, and specific observations about, monitoring and evaluation practice in public diplomacy. First, participants were asked to describe "their experience with monitoring and evaluation in public diplomacy" to ascertain their level of involvement with evaluation in the past, and probed as to the specific evaluation practices in which they have engaged. Participants were asked to describe the State Department's "general approach to evaluation in public diplomacy practice," as well their satisfaction with specific evaluation practices, like the conceptualization of goals and objectives, and the use of various kinds of measurement indicators. The interviewees were asked to articulate what they "believe to be the goals of public diplomacy." They were also asked about the differences in expectations for evaluation across the various bureaus of the State Department or offices charged with evaluating public diplomacy programming. Finally, they were asked about any additional opportunities or challenges they perceived for evaluation in contemporary practice.

## Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and the resulting transcripts as well as field notes were analyzed with the assistance of qualitative data software NVivo. The research questions asked after public diplomacy practitioners perceptions of the current state of evaluation as well as their views of the goals of evaluation. To address these questions, a dual-approach thematic analysis was conducted where the codes of interest emerged from the data through open coding as well as based on established concepts within existing evaluation frameworks (Blair, 2015; Boyatzis, 1998). Analysis began with primary coding to establish general themes emerging from the transcriptions, and was followed by axial coding in which the continued organizing of sub-themes emerged from the initial data reduction process (Miles et al., 2014). The sub-themes that emerged from the coding process are presented in the following section.

## Results

### Perceived State of Evaluation in Public Diplomacy

The first research question asked about the perceptions of public diplomacy practitioners regarding the current state of evaluation practice in U.S. public diplomacy. The responses to questions about the state of evaluation within U.S. public diplomacy can be best represented through the following sub-themes.

**Disjointed systems and structures.** Interviewees generally bemoaned the lack of consistency in evaluation approaches across the various bureaus and offices of the State Department. Because bureaus enact various kinds of public diplomacy programming, evaluation is approached quite differently depending on the location within the State Department. A program director located in Washington, DC observed:

> It's a hundred percent varied. It's so different. ECA [Education & Cultural Affairs] is so much more bureaucratic...The difference is it’s got these huge programs and huge budgets and a lot of them, like I said, the funding doesn't come from a central budget source. It comes from the Hill [Congress]. So with that comes different reporting responsibilities and stuff whereas IIPs [International Information Programs] programs are more central and it’s a lot more products, videos, and things like that.

Given that different bureaus use different metrics, and that practitioners will sometimes jump from bureau to bureau, the inconsistency with which evaluation is practiced across entities of the State Department becomes a noticeable point of confusion. Indeed, when asked if there are consistent approaches to evaluation, one Washington-based interviewee responded: "No, there's all kinds, because for public diplomacy, you have REU [Research and Evaluation Unit], you have ECA [Education & Cultural Affairs], which is education cultural, and then you have IIP [International Information Programs], who all do their own...I've heard there's a little turf battle on who does what." This problem becomes particularly amplified at the field level, where public diplomacy practitioners at posts may be implementing programs sponsored by different bureaus with different evaluations.

Furthermore, interviewees frequently used the term "piecemeal" to describe the efforts of their various bureaus to enact evaluation within programs. One public affairs officer at an overseas post noted:

> The offices, or bureaucracy, set up to do it is very piecemeal, disjointed, and lacks much coherency. There are individual offices, or maybe individual officers who, at a post, have been better at it, but, for the most part, it is mostly talk and not a lot of good concrete action on making programs measurable, and then actually measuring them.

Relatedly, while there may be expertise in evaluation to be found within the State Department—particularly within offices such as the Research and Evaluation Unit, located within the Office of the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy—when advice comes to programs on the ground, its utility can be questioned. As one public diplomacy officer overseas stated:

> ...in my experience, most evaluation teams, the recommendations that they provide, tend to be very topical and don't really address the challenges of operating in these environments, in these restrictive environments, in these short-term environments.

**Lack of development and focus.** In public diplomacy, monitoring and evaluation is regarded as not a particularly well-developed area of practice, nor one that receives a great deal of emphasis. Whatever emphasis it does receive from top brass in the State Department is largely seen as “lip-service,” which reinforces a general view that evaluation is a “tick the box exercise” for public diplomacy. Some reported a perception that while superior officers might emphasize the importance of evaluation and demand regular reports of impact, when such reports are delivered they “sit on the boss’s desk and collect dust.” Moreover, the lack of emphasis on monitoring and evaluation is nowhere more notable than in the perceived lack of training public diplomacy practitioners received on the subject. Many claimed to have received minimal training at the Foreign Service Institute —at the very most a day and a half. This training, they noted, also did not prepare them for the realities of executing evaluations at under-resourced posts.

The interviewees also often compared public diplomacy to development communication, claiming that entities which administer and measure development communication programs, like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have a far easier time engaging in evaluation due to the arguably more concrete outcomes of development activities (e.g., number of wells dug, vaccinations given, radio stations built, etc). As a consequence, practitioners believed development communication to be more advanced in monitoring and evaluation practice than in public diplomacy.

**Devaluation of public diplomacy efforts.** The public diplomacy practitioners interviewed expressed a general frustration with a perceived devaluation of public diplomacy by others within the State Department, they noted, is likely a contributing factor behind the lack of focus and attention to evaluation in public diplomacy. Furthermore, the interviewees noted that many within the State Department, including public diplomacy officers, do not understand the ‘real goals’ of U.S. public diplomacy efforts (a topic we address more thoroughly below). As a result, after more than 20 years since the United States Information Agency—the entity formerly responsible for diplomacy programs—was merged with the

State Department, there is still an unclear view of public diplomacy's place within the institution. One Washington, DC-based participant satirically described the views of others towards public diplomacy in the following way:

> Oh, they're just gonna go and do another party. Oh they're doing another reception. Oh, they're just sending another person on exchange. That's nice. That's great.' But it's hard for people who focus on other things to sort of see the policy imperative. So one of the areas where I feel like public diplomacy practitioners need to spend a little time, or that the thinkers back here in Washington need to think about is how can we make sure that everyone else is seeing the value of what we do.

Though practitioners continually struggle to enact rigorous evaluation, they recognize that monitoring and evaluation is a means through which they can escape their derogated position. One participant suggested that monitoring and evaluation can actually help to shift the poor perception of diplomacy within the State Department, proving that diplomacy is more than just "jazz hands" and show the importance of their work.

Moreover, while public diplomacy work may be misunderstood and devalued within the State Department at large, it is also sometimes subjugated in the field at the embassy level. While public diplomacy is seen as "touchy-feely" and devalued in Washington, DC and at posts abroad, "[public diplomacy] wouldn't be as hard a sell if we could actually gather like this massive amount of data and prove it."

**Lack of resources.** A common theme in texts describing evaluation practice in public diplomacy is the lack of dedicated financial and staff resources. Our research echoes those previously identified problems (Banks, 2011; Gonzales, 2015). Practitioners lamented the funds available for evaluation, and some questioned why they would spend money on evaluation research when they could use such funds for more program development. Time was also frequently noted as a hindrance to engaging in evaluations, as practitioners are regularly overwhelmed with responsibilities, and evaluation therefore takes a "lesser priority." Relatedly, the mere number of staff at some U.S. embassies was noted as a restriction to enacting evaluation, not to mention conceiving and executing programming. As one senior-level DC-based participant claimed: “Take little Moldova. We have three American officers there, Russia has 1,600 people on the ground.” With such vast differences in staffing resources being channeled to certain posts, practitioners noted there is little way for evaluation to make much headway in practice. At many posts, there is  “one officer doing everything.” Given these pressures, evaluation was often noted as one of the first things to be “put off” or “shelved.”

**Capital-field tensions.** An unexpected theme to emerge from the discussion was the perceived differences in expectations for the enactment of evaluation in public diplomacy programs between offices in Washington, DC and those at post overseas. Most of those interviewed had served at posts abroad, and noted differences with how evaluation is discussed based on position—whether one is stationed in Washington and overseas public diplomacy programming, or whether one is on the ground implementing them. For one, the expectations of Washington actors coupled with the demands of the work at post contribute to problems of time allocated to evaluation at embassies abroad: “We do things that Washington wants us to do, things that the embassy wants us to do, and then things that we have planned for ourselves, this means that there's not a lot of time for monitoring and stuff.” Practitioners at posts are faced with being held accountable to both their direct supervisors at posts (often the head public affairs officer or the ambassador) as well as offices in Washington.

Practitioners in the field are aware that there are research offices such as the Research and Evaluation Unit that exist to assist in program design and evaluation. And those interviewees who worked for such offices are willing and eager to assist those in the field. But, the perceived distance and availability of such assistance was questioned by officers at posts abroad. Echoing this sentiment, other interviewees expressed a desire for there to be a local staff member at post to help evaluate programs. Currently, most U.S. embassies and other types of posts do not have a resident evaluation specialist. As one public affairs officer abroad noted,“...in a perfect world, I would love for every embassy to have a social scientist or a regional social scientist who was, you know, could really help us be shaping [evaluations] on a regular basis.”

Interestingly, one interviewee based in Washington suggested that it is not the “job” of public diplomacy practitioners at post to evaluate programs, believing they are not equipped with the skills or resources to do so. Refuting this point, most public diplomacy officers abroad believed they have received increased pressure from “Washington” to demonstrate impact and satisfy important stakeholders.

Finally, the interviewees stressed an awareness of the political winds that shape public diplomacy goals as well as funding priorities. While some speculated that quality evaluations were necessary to “prove the value” of certain public diplomacy programs and thereby preserve funding, others believed evaluations play little to no role in funding decisions. As one participant claimed:

> Political will defines budgeting. And frankly, if you're looking at the DC versus post dichotomy, it's all about how much money you've got, or how much staffing you get, or how much support you get, or who you get out to visit. And that has to do with political will and the events of the day. It doesn't have to do with someone looking at your post-project evaluations and saying you did a great job.

**Reliance on outputs, anecdotes.** While some practitioners indicated a desire to use sophisticated evaluation metrics of attitude and behavior change, the primary way in which participants described modern public diplomacy monitoring and evaluation efforts is in the reporting of a few output indicators coupled with positive anecdotes chronicling participants experiences in a program. Practitioners noted the relative ease with which output indicators are gathered through tracking participation rates or monitoring social media metrics. Such indicators were the ones most frequently reported by practitioners because, by their own admission, these indicators are the easiest to acquire and report. Most participants showed a familiarity with outcome measures of attitudinal and behavior change, but believed they lacked the time, resources, and skill to plan and execute such metrics.

Anecdotes are also frequently used as evidence of impact, as practitioners believed such stories would satisfy superiors' demands for program accountability and sufficiently persuade lawmakers. Furthermore, like output indicators, anecdotes require relatively little time and skill to gather. As such, these are the forms of evidence most frequently used in public diplomacy evaluations. Indeed, in many cases, utilizing anecdotal quotes, likes, and comments was noted by a public affairs officer overseas as "about the best we're doing on some of our evaluation for a specific program." Indeed, the only consistent "metrics" or reporting schemes that could be discerned across all of the evaluation programs discussed by the participants appeared to be the use of anecdotal quotes and basic output indicators such as likes and shares.

Even in the rare cases when outcome indicators like attitude and behavior change are tracked, they occur only in the short term, and are not linked to larger public diplomacy goals. As one interviewee at a post overseas explained:

> Most often our outcomes measure the PD programs, so in the short term people's eyes were opened to something new, it changed their attitudes, they have a greater appreciation of anything from human rights to transparency to fighting corruption and things like that. But then we don't typically have actually what would be more direct outcome that we'd like to measure, which is, they've actually supported some sort of legislative reform that makes it harder to commit corruption, or that makes it easier to investigate corruption. Something like that.

So, while practitioners might rarely identify short-term outcomes of public diplomacy programming, there is still a lack of connection to larger policy goals. As one participant elaborated: "People struggle with what are the real outcomes here? Where's the beef? Where's the real substance of why this was important?" Until practitioners can describe the "real outcomes," reliance on outputs and short-term changes will likely continue to be the norm.

**Perceptions of Public Diplomacy Goals**

The second research question concerned how public diplomacy practitioners perceive the goals of modern diplomacy practice. Setting clear goals and objectives is a well-accepted part of communication planning and evaluation. The primary way in which practitioners characterized the goals of public diplomacy centered around "building influence." Influence, however, was thought of in several different ways. First, practitioners desired to influence other societies to fundamentally change certain aspects of it, such as diminishing the likelihood of "embracing a violent extremist ideology," or simply to make a country's government more transparent and accountable—in other words, influencing a society to promote democratization and good governance.

Second, influence was cast as "building networks of people that support or have a deep understanding of the U.S. perspective." Such network building often occurs through public diplomacy programming that exposes foreign publics to U.S. arts and culture, that, purportedly "opens people up to seeing that we're friendly, and we like to get to know them, and we want to share our culture and the great things about the United States with them." Thus, while some practitioners suggested that a significant goal of public diplomacy programs is simply to "build a relationship with people who might not otherwise been in contact with an American," most often relationship building was seen as a way to advance the strategic interests of the United States:

> ...the goal is to achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives abroad by creating connections between the people of the U.S. and the people of other countries as well as creating greater understanding of the United States among people of other countries so that our foreign policy is more likely to be successful in those countries.

The definition offered above is consistent with what many academic texts would agree is the explicit purpose of public diplomacy—building relationships with foreign publics so as to ease the facilitation of American foreign policy objectives in that nation (Cull, 2014; Nye, 2008). But how "building relationships" can be translated into manageable goals and objectives for specific public diplomacy programs remains a significant point of confusion for public diplomacy practitioners: “I would say that public diplomacy has moved away from the USIA days where generalized exposure and people-to-people connections that are sort of more open and open-ended and less defined as sort of a clear set of specific goals...those days are over.” As illustrated in the preceding quote, it is not enough to build support and “relationship networks” in contemporary public diplomacy, but practitioners are unclear as how to progress further. Moreover, relationship building and cultural exchanges were thought only to yield dividends in the long term—making the measurement of such activities effects in the short term quite difficult. Indeed, measuring immediate outcomes was called “an unrealistic goal for public diplomacy.”

While influence and relationships are terms that surfaced in the discussion of public diplomacy goals, many respondents puzzled over how to articulate the goals of modern public diplomacy. As one DC-based program officer working for a regional bureau, when asked about the goals of public diplomacy, stated, “I don't know. That's a good question. I think that's one of the problems we haven't defined...but each individual, depending on where they sit in the organization, seems to have a different idea of how to define that.” To that effect, and perhaps unsurprisingly, views on public diplomacy goals and evaluation seemed to vary by the location of the individual within the State Department structure. But, generally speaking, participants agreed that public diplomacy goals lack clarity. As a consequence, how to articulate objectives and propose appropriate measurement indicators also suffers. Still, there was recognition that tying public diplomacy activities and resulting measurements to larger goals is required in modern practice. A diplomacy officer overseas commented:

> Public diplomacy is now expected to support policy and to be clearly tied to specific policies and/or mission goals. And we can no longer say we're going to take a bunch of American artists and Tunisian artists and put them together for two weeks and we know, ‘we have faith’ that good things will come out of this.

But, while practitioners recognized that evaluation must be tied to policy goals, no clear solution as to how accomplish this was offered. One final quote offered by an  illustrates this struggle:

> What people want to know is how public diplomacy is advancing foreign policy, right? That's what it's all about. That's our banner. Yet the way in which we approach evaluation, it really is focused a lot more on the outputs ultimately and very intermediate kind of outcomes that don't get it back….we are going to have a hard time telling that story of really wide public diplomacy is relevant advancing foreign policy without more substantive evaluations. I just don't think we're set up to do that right now.

## Discussion

As noted earlier, extant empirical research on public diplomacy in general, and evaluation in public diplomacy in particular, has not considered the voices of the people responsible for enacting diplomacy programs. While policy papers and statements from high-ranking government officials provide evidence of the official stance of the U.S. government in terms of its public diplomacy goals, the ways in which those who execute public diplomacy describe its enactment sheds a different light on the practice of public diplomacy. We believe this approach has pointed out several implications and future directions for public diplomacy research.

### Structure Hinders Evaluation Consistency

The structure of the U.S. State Department and the various bureaus and offices that execute public diplomacy programs has no small amount of influence in how the purpose of public diplomacy is perceived. Indeed, as the participants reported, how the goals of public diplomacy are articulated and measured depends, to a great extent, on the bureau for which they worked, or on whose behalf they executed programs. The disparate nature of these programs, and the expectations of those overseeing them, pose no small amount of difficulty in enacting common metrics and indicators.

The interviews revealed that while there is an ostensible “central” monitoring and evaluation body for public diplomacy in the State Department (Research and Evaluation Unit), this office has limited resources, oversight, and influence on programs executed outside the diplomacy branch of the department. Moreover, the Research and Evaluation Unit lacks the resources to collect and analyze evaluation reports from across the various bureaus of the State Department, let alone the programs executed under the Department’s dedicated diplomacy arm. This hinders the capacity of the Research and Evaluation Unit to work towards uniformity in evaluation procedures for evaluation programming. Moreover, as much of the evaluation of diplomacy work occurs on the ground, by overworked practitioners without the assistance of a local monitoring and evaluation office, the quality of evaluations and their consistency is unsurprisingly varied.

Moreover, enthusiasm for evaluation and the expected level of sophistication also varied. The Education and Cultural Affairs bureau in particular was criticized for overly simplistic evaluations of long-standing diplomacy initiatives like the Fulbright Scholarship Program. That said, others suggested that output indicators and anecdotes were enough to satisfy superiors—who might, on the surface, stress accountability through regular evaluation reports, but might also have a similar lack of training in evaluation. Accountability is perhaps currently “enough” for superiors and stakeholders, suggesting that actual “learning” through evaluation and examination of program outcomes is yet to occur, nor is it likely to in the foreseeable future.

**Conflicting Views of Washington’s Influence**

A theme heretofore unexplored in the public diplomacy literature is the potential tensions that may arise between the expectations of Washington, DC stakeholders and practitioners in the field. Washington-based officers often oversee public diplomacy programming, or assist in the research and evaluation of programs at the post level. Thus, they often regarded Congress or the Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy as the only stakeholders to which they felt beholden, suggesting their perceived direction of accountability is largely linear. In contrast, practitioners in the field must juggle the expectations of, and report to, offices back in Washington, Congress, as well as the ambassador for whom they directly work.

While consideration of management officials and stakeholders at the level of Congress is a key focus for public diplomacy practitioners, to advance evaluation practice, public diplomacy officers should be able to identify the specific goals of programs at both the program and societal level. While practitioners may know their goals for a specific public diplomacy initiative, they remain unaware of how such programs tie into larger public diplomacy goals or of programs' long-term social impacts. The result of this being that anecdotes and short-term output indicators are the normal standard by which practitioners communicate accountability. Some practitioners believed that producing insightful and quality evaluations has no impact on future funding (instead tying funding to political will), and others believed the opposite.

**Goal Articulation and Evaluation Capacity**

Setting clear goals and objectives is a well-accepted part of communication planning and evaluation (Smith, 2013). It is difficult to know what you have accomplished if you have no idea of where you started and what you set out to change. Without concrete, measurable objectives, the ability of public diplomacy practitioners to assess the true effects of their work is limited. While the academic literature may have reached a relatively shared view of the general purpose and function of public diplomacy, the explicit goals of public diplomacy are less clear among practitioners when it comes to the various specific 'day to day' programs.

Indeed, practitioners are less than clear—and even confused—about the actual goals of public diplomacy, particularly in the context of assessing the contributions of their work the State Department based on measurable objectives. Positioning this finding generally within Fitzpatrick’s (2010) categorization of public diplomacy goals, the interviewees articulated their views of public diplomacy goals as largely “relational” and “informational,” and to a lesser extent, as “advocacy.” Thus, while outside observers might describe the goals of public diplomacy as multifaceted, practitioners possibly view the function to be much more focused—depending on the specific role they assume and units with which they are affiliated.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The road ahead for public diplomacy is an uncertain one. Budget cuts to the State Department, and proposed mergers of the PA and International Information Programs bureaus (Gramer, 2018) do not portend development on monitoring and evaluation anytime soon. Despite the many challenges for enhancing evaluation practice in public diplomacy, it should be noted that some interviewees believe the practice to be improving: “Were getting better about it every year. I think when I first got here, it wasn't so good 10 years ago. I think it's better. We are coming up with results that mean something.” Practitioners value evaluation and want more of it. Thus, there remains potential for monitoring and evaluation to flourish as a constructive part of public diplomacy practice.

Our study is not without limitations. Though generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, we cannot guarantee our results represent the views of all public diplomacy practitioners, particularly those outside the United States. Snowball sampling, while a useful technique to gain access to individuals with specific knowledge sets, may also have reduce the range of views represented. Future work should also carefully consider the educational and professional backgrounds of public diplomacy practitioners, as education, training, and experience with evaluation often arose as an indicator of practitioners’ level of comfort with monitoring and evaluation.

Our research has focused on the State Department specifically as the single main institution of U.S. public diplomacy. To a degree, however, we argue that our insights can contribute to recent comparative work, looking of further cases such as the United Kingdom and Sweden (Pamment, 2012). Specifically, these works have highlighted that the literature is still lacking organizational-level insights into monitoring and evaluation practices—something that our results on practice-level perceptions in the State Department helps address. However, in a wider view of the practice, which includes also non-state (corporate) actors that may work in consort with government entities (cf. White 2015), the questions addressed here are complemented with yet another layer as evaluations then may involve the (potentially incommensurable) goals of multiple entities. In light of the recent conceptual work on public diplomacy goal frameworks (e.g., Sevin 2015, 2017; Pamment 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2010), our findings suggest that one current emphasis in the practice could be to apply and 'break down' these more macro-level concepts for the plethora of different projects and programs that are run by the Department of State. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine how academic descriptions of public diplomacy targets (i.e. Fitzpatrick, 2010) are interpreted and applied in the agencies and on field level. As our findings also point to a perceived disconnect between the center and periphery of the practice ('DC vs. post'), it is also important to understand if such more 'holistic' stories about diplomacy goals have the potential to improve the alignment between the levels of civil and foreign service.

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