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Drivers and barriers in public diplomacy performance evaluation: understanding attitudes, norms and control

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Abstract

While the need for evaluation has become increasingly emphasized within the global public diplomacy community, research reveals the state of the practice is grim. The few writings that exist on evaluation practices in public diplomacy are anecdotal and focus mainly on obstacles to enacting evaluation behavior. Little is known about evaluation-related perceptions, motivations, and attitudes of public diplomacy practitioners themselves. As practitioners are under increasing pressure to deliver evaluations, understanding the perspective of practitioners and their motivations is necessary. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior, this study presents the results of interviews with 25 public diplomacy practitioners in the U.S. Department of State. The results lend insight into the attitudes, norms, and behavioral controls that influence practitioners' intentions to engage in evaluation. The paper also suggests explanations as to why evaluation struggles to gain a foothold within public diplomacy, and makes proposals for improving future practice.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, evaluation, U.S. Department of State, theory of planned behavior, interviews

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Introduction

Public diplomacy, as an international communication domain, aims at building long-term relationships with foreign audiences to create an enabling environment for government policies (Nye, 2008). In addition to every day communication messaging, public diplomacy practice is focused on building and cultivating ‘soft power’ via programs of relationship-building, engagement, and dialogue (Comor and Beam 2012, Gilboa, 2008, Hayden, 2017). For such programs, usually mid-to long-term in scope, evaluation can be excessively difficult and may “seem like a forester running out every morning to see how far his trees have grown over night” (Cull, 2008, p. 44). Despite the difficulties in evaluating public diplomacy programs, calls for accountability and more sophisticated systems for evaluation have dramatically increased in many countries (Cull, 2014). While comparative research shows that “demands for accountability and value-for-money” are significantly reshaping public diplomacy practice around the world (Pamment, 2012a, p. 333), recent literature on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) still paints a picture of low satisfaction with the state of the field (e.g., ACPD, 2014, 2018; Banks, 2011; Gonzales, 2015; Sommerfeldt and Buhmann, 2019). Indeed, for most public diplomacy practitioners, M&E remains a “daunting task” (Sevin, 2017).

The fact that public diplomacy is increasingly shaped by demands for more sophisticated M&E, is part of a global trend towards evidence-based decision-making that affects many other public sector domains (Christensen, Dahmann, Mathiasen and Petersen, 2018). In the United States, the U.S. State Department has recently channeled additional resources into M&E training and the addition of evaluation support staff (cf. ACPD, 2014). This mirrors the efforts of other nations to enhance the evaluation capacity of public diplomacy (Pamment, 2012a). However, there continue to be problems in acquiring rigorous evidence demonstrating the impact of public diplomacy on foreign policy objectives (Comor and Beam, 2012; Pamment, 2012b). Recent reports and commentaries have provided insight into the state of M&E practice in public diplomacy and evidence of perceived common obstacles to the enactment of evaluation (ACPD 2016, 2018; Brown, 2017; Gonzales, 2015). While difficulties with enacting sophisticated M&E are well documented (e.g., Banks, 2011), missing from these discussions is an attempt to position the drivers and barriers to evaluation within theory—an important step towards explaining why evaluation continually struggles to gain a secure foothold within public diplomacy globally.

The aim of this paper is to empirically explicate the underlying beliefs and attitudes associated with M&E in contemporary public diplomacy practice. We focus on behavioral drivers from the theory of planned behavior (cf. Ajzen, 1985; 1991) and conducted semi-structured interviews with public diplomacy officers within the U.S. Department of State. In so doing, the study works to build theory in an applied area that is critical for advancing the role of public diplomacy in the wider international affairs domain. Specifically, the study generates important empirical insights into the key factors that drive or hamper the establishment of performance evaluation in public diplomacy practice. Thus, we contribute to the development of theory as well as provide empirical results that work to answer current challenges in the practice and inform suggestions to advance the public diplomacy field.

Literature and Theoretical Approach

Towards Quantified Performance Management in Public Diplomacy

While the general influence of public diplomacy initiatives on foreign news coverage (Zhang and Cameron, 2003), public opinion (Kioussis and Wu, 2008), or trust in foreign governments (Mogensen, 2015) is widely acknowledged, nuanced evaluation of the effectiveness of specific programs remains a significant challenge (Sevin, 2017). Evaluation has become particularly challenging in the era of “new” public diplomacy—wherein two-way communication and long-term relationship building is emphasized—as opposed to “old” diplomacy, which focused on instrumental use of one-way communication channels for image cultivation and nation branding (Melissen, 2005). Indeed, evaluation remains in an “old” public diplomacy mode, with countries around the world struggling to enhance evaluation skills to meet the demands of “new” diplomacy (Pamment, 2012a). How to evaluate the effects of long-term relationship building, dialogue, and soft power cultivation is pressing challenge in a field that still primarily relies on techniques to evaluate the one-way flow of information designed to meet short-term objectives (cf. Pamment, 2012a, p. 314).

In the United States, according to the most recently available data, the government spent \$2.03 billion dollars on public diplomacy initiatives in 2016 (Powers, 2017). This investment—while tiny in comparison to defense and social services—nonetheless requires the demonstration of results to Congress and other important stakeholders (Brown, 2017). Moreover, multi-national research has suggested that public diplomacy evaluation is now aimed at providing data that aims to support future decision-making processes (Pamment, 2012a). Structured M&E of public sector programs like diplomacy is thus increasingly at the heart of much of planning, budgeting, and reporting in nations around the world (Christensen, et al., 2018).

In broad terms, evaluation refers to the assessment of the value of an object or activity, which can serve two equal purposes: *accountability* (were objectives met?) and *improvement* (how were objectives met?) (cf. Stufflebeam and Coryn, 2014). Practically, evaluations are structured by creating discrete evaluation stages, within which objectives are formulated and success measures are defined. Most current approaches resemble the structure of common “logic models” that, essentially, distinguish between three main evaluation stages: *inputs* (the resources that go into a program), *activities* (the activities the program undertakes), *outputs* (the products as a result of the activities), and *outcomes* (the short-, medium-, and long-term changes that result from the program). “Best practice” in evaluation suggests that M&E plans are part of communication initiatives from the outset of any campaign, and that measuring changes in target publics’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (rather than counting activity “outputs”) remains the ideal standard for measuring impact (Smith, 2017).

Few communication campaigns, however, will meet this standard. As Pamment (2014, 2012a, 2012b) concludes from his research on public diplomacy M&E in different national settings, evaluation activities are rarely the result of applying a “straightforward” or prescribed methodology. Instead, Pamment argues, evaluation practices are better understood by looking at the specific organizational contexts as well as the involved individuals that are influential in generating pragmatic responses to the increasing demands for evaluation and reporting.

Evaluation in the U.S. Department of State

The actors that provide oversight and guidance on the evaluation of U.S. public diplomacy programs are many and varied, but mainly situated within the U.S. Department of State—the official “home” of U.S. public diplomacy activities. Perhaps the most prominent of these actors is found within the Office of the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy (known as “R” in State Department jargon), wherein the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) of the Policy Planning and Resources Office (R/PPR) works to assess the overall impact of U.S. public diplomacy and evaluates select programs. However, scattered across the State Department exist several other offices charged with evaluating programs, found in several bureaus operating under the aegis of “R,” including: The Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau (ECA), the International Information Programs Bureau (IIP) and the Public Affairs Bureau (PA)ⁱ (ACPD, 2014). Moreover, the regional bureaus of the State Department have individual offices responsible for evaluation of diplomacy programs at posts overseas, though the structure and size of these offices vary widely (ACPD, 2016). Evaluation is also a concern of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which oversees U.S. Government spending, the Bureau of Budget and Planning (BP), which drafted the State Department’s evaluation policy, and the State Department Office of Inspector General (OIG), which audits evaluations of public diplomacy programs.

In the last decade, significant steps have been taken by the State Department to build and better its evaluation systems and methods (ACPD, 2014; Brown, 2017). The various offices and agents overseeing evaluation in public diplomacy have created a litany of tools to better the evaluation practices of the State Department, and have increased the training on evaluation practitioners receive at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). The Mission Activity Tracker (MAT) is the most common tool related to diplomacy practice that collects performance data on programs, and generates on-demand reports that document accomplishments (Pamment, 2012a). Other offices, such as R/PPR and REU distribute their own toolkits and indicators to posts around the world and assist in the planning and execution of research and evaluation campaigns.

Despite the existence of multiple offices designed to support the research and evaluation activities of the State Department, evaluation continues to be a problem within the State Department. Extant reviews of and reports on the state of public diplomacy evaluation (e.g., ACPD, 2014; Banks, 2011; Gonzales, 2015) are, so far, largely based on anecdotal evidence or personal reflection. Still, such efforts show that practitioners perceive they lack the competence and resources to properly evaluate programs, and many even view the practice as “unmeasurable” due to the long-term nature of programs and issues with attributing causality. This research also suggests there is irregular compliance with existing rules, and that changes in political leadership may also impact approaches to M&E, leading to poor continuity in evaluation practice (Banks, 2011). Pamment (2012a), commenting on U.S. Diplomacy, noted that official policy “focused on outputs, and did not explicitly discuss influencing opinions or outcomes, or how to measure them” (p. 324). At best, the State Department has what Gonzales (2015) described as a “reporting culture” (focused on accountability) rather than an “evaluation culture” (focused on learning).

Thus, despite research on evaluation in public diplomacy, little is known about M&E-related perceptions, motivations, and attitudes of public diplomacy practitioners themselves.

Practitioners are increasingly expected to deliver evaluation results, but without adequate support or training (Brown, 2017). Understanding the perspective of practitioners and their motivations in this circumstance is thus a pressing problem that research can work to solve.

Taking a Behavioral Approach

As the health communication and social psychology literature has long known, intention to enact a behavior is not driven by perceived obstacles alone. Yet, the extant research on evaluation in public diplomacy has focused only on barriers to its enactment. Thus, we turn to the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985) as a useful theoretical lens through which to examine the factors that influence evaluation behavior in public diplomacy practice. The TPB is an individual-level theory that is widely used in organizational contexts to explain behavioral drivers of managers (Cordano and Frieze, 2000), donors (Holdershaw et al., 2011), or job applicants (Warmerdam et al., 2015). Most importantly to this study, the TPB is also applied to understand behavior related to compliance/noncompliance with institutional rules and regulations (Somestad, Karlzén, and Hallberg, 2015), as well as to assess the drivers and barriers in behavior related to the evaluation of communication programs and campaigns (Buhmann & Brønn, 2018).

According to the TPB, the intention to engage in a behavior is the single most important predictor of actual behavior. The theory breaks down the antecedents of behavioral intentions into three main variables: attitudes towards the behavior, perceived norms, and behavioral control. *Behavioral attitude* captures a person's (positive or negative) feelings towards a behavior. A statement such as "I believe that performing evaluations of our programs is a valuable thing to do" taps into this dimension. The behavioral attitude towards M&E strongly predicts practitioners' actual intentions to perform evaluation (Buhmann and Brønn, 2018). *Perceived norms* capture the external or social pressure on a person to perform or not perform a behavior. Specifically, two main types of perceived norms can be distinguished (Rivis and Sheeran 2003): while perceived *injunctive norms* denote a person's perception of what significant others think about this person performing a specific behavior, perceived *descriptive norms* refer to a person's "perception of significant others' own attitudes and behaviors in the domain" (ibid. p. 219). Statements such as "my boss thinks evaluation is a valuable thing to do" would denote a descriptive norm (more indirect pressure), while "my boss expects me to evaluate our programs" would denote an injunctive norm (more direct pressure). Finally, *perceived behavioral control* refers to a person's perceived difficulty or ease of performing a behavior. This variable denotes a person's confidence in having the resources, opportunities, and capabilities necessary for actually carrying out a behavior. A statement such as "I feel I don't have the training to carry out proper evaluations" would denote such a perception of behavioral control.

In summary, while behavioral attitudes represent general disposition toward a behavior, the perceived norms (descriptive and injunctive) capture direct environmental influences, and behavioral control relates to differences in a person's ability to control the performance of a behavior. The more positive the attitude and norms, and the greater the perceived control, the greater the likelihood an individual will intend to and actually perform a behavior.

Over the last decade, public diplomacy has, ostensibly, embraced a more sophisticated practice of evaluation. But, given the slow rate of evaluation capacity building, current

scholarship, as well as the actors involved in such practices—namely policy makers, public diplomacy practitioners, and their managers—would benefit from a deepened understanding of the factors influencing practitioners to adopt (or not) evaluation in their work. Based on our review of the recent debate on M&E in public diplomacy, we thus ask the following research question: what drives or hampers public diplomacy practitioners in the adoption of M&E for their programs?

Method

There is little understanding of how the personal perceptions of public diplomacy practitioners influence their behavioral intentions to engage in M&E. We therefore took a qualitative approach in this study as such methods are appropriate for exploratory research (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Most studies based on the TPB use quantitative approaches and have illustrated the usefulness of the TPB in predicting behavior. However, as Zoellner et al. (2012) proposed, qualitative research using TPB is equally important as it helps to better understand the underlying beliefs and contexts associated with certain behaviors.

Sample

Twenty-five individuals working for the State Department were interviewed for this study. The snowball sampling technique—a widely used qualitative method to identify samples with specialized experiences—was used to identify participants. As public diplomacy is performed across various bureaus in the State Department, to help achieve maximum variation in the sample (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014), interviewees were asked to identify contacts at various bureaus and at posts overseas. The final sample included seven males and 18 females. The age of interviewees ranged 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. Moreover, all claimed to have experience in evaluating public diplomacy efforts. While the sample included 10 foreign service officers currently overseas at posts abroad in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America, some of those interviewed in Washington had also served in public diplomacy positions outside the U.S. as well. Four of those interviewed in Washington were also foreign service officers, 10 were civil service officers, and one was a contractor providing research and evaluation support for diplomacy programs.

Procedure

Fifteen interviews were conducted in-person with participants in Washington, D.C., and ten with those posted overseas via Skype. Participants agreed to be interviewed on the condition they remain anonymous and their comments would be 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 rank and position within the State Department. In these cases, extensive notes were taken. The duration of the interviews ranged from 32 to 74

minutes. Data saturation was reached when the interviews began to show repetitive patterns (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured topics guide (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). The guide was developed to examine general views of evaluation practice in public diplomacy, as well as to ascertain their specific attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral controls in relation to evaluation. Other than in quantitative applications, where the TPB is tested for predicting concrete and time-bound behaviors, the explorative, qualitative setting of this study led us to inquire about evaluation as a domain of behavior, or “aggregates of specific behaviors” (Ajzen, 1991) related to performance evaluation. This also acknowledges that public diplomacy is still not a clearly defined practice and, hence, there are few common ideas about public diplomacy goals and appropriate routes to their evaluation (Sevin, 2017).

To uncover behavioral attitudes, practitioners were asked about the extent to which they were “happy about the way evaluation is done” in the State Department, and the extent to which they believed “monitoring and evaluation of public diplomacy is valuable.” To assess perceived (descriptive and injunctive) norms, practitioners were asked about the extent to which they believed peers “think M&E is valuable and are actually doing it,” the extent to which they felt peers “think that I should regularly engage in evaluation” and whether evaluation is done for “purposes of accountability or for future program improvement.” Behavioral control was assessed by asking questions about practitioners “confidence in their ability to routinely engage in evaluation,” and if they had the skills, resources, and time to do so. Finally, they were asked about any additional opportunities or challenges they perceived for evaluation in practice.

Analysis

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and the resulting transcripts and field notes were analyzed using the qualitative data software NVivo. A dual-approach thematic analysis was conducted where the codes of interest were derived from the TPB literature but also emerged from the data through open coding (Blair, 2015). Analysis began with primary coding to establish themes guided by theory, 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).

Results

Behavioral Attitudes Towards M&E

Following the TPB, attitudes were analyzed as feelings towards PD evaluation activities. Interviewees expressed a wide range of positive, negative, and ambivalent attitudes towards evaluation practice, within each emerged several subthemes.

General perceived value. Generally speaking, practitioners saw value in evaluation, and exhibited a desire to do more of it. As one participant put it: “monitoring and evaluation is the thing. It’s the thing that we needed to do. The thing that we should be doing for all of our programs.” Positive attitudes were particularly apparent when interviewees referred to evaluation as an activity domain *in general*: When the focus is more generally on the (unused) potential of evaluation to the further institutionalization of public diplomacy as a

foreign policy tool (through accountability) and to adjusting practices and developing more effective programs (improvement), expressed attitudes were widely positive.

Accountability vs. improvement. Interviewees held differing perspectives on evaluation based on purposes for accountability or actual learning and improvement. When discussing accountability, interviewees emphasized the value of evaluation as means to demonstrate the value of public diplomacy: “I do think the evaluation has got to be a key piece of [demonstrating value], because we’ve got to figure out how to make sure that our PD programs really are moving our foreign policy goals forward in meaningful ways.” Evaluation was seen as a way to “tell good stories” about the success of programming, and as the means by which practitioners are able to “prove what we do.” These positive attitudes centered around accountability through M&E in as much as they were about showing impact on policy and “proving what PD does.” Similarly, focusing on M&E done for purposes of improvement, participants expressed positive attitudes and appreciation: “I do absolutely think we need to be evaluating effectiveness of what we’re doing and then making adjustments. I would like that to happen.” Despite the obstacles to enacting evaluation (to be discussed later) there is a desire to use evaluation for improvement.

In contrast, negative attitudes were expressed towards evaluations *solely* for purposes of accountability. In comparing it with an approach designed to inform improvement, one interviewee stressed “I’ve never seen anything on that [insights]. Should we be improving the program? I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything on it. But all this other stuff, it just goes into the ether.” As exemplified in this quote, there was widespread belief that evaluations disappear with no clear intention to use results for program improvement.

Idea vs. practice. While there was a general positive attitude towards the notion of evaluation, and the benefits it could bring to public diplomacy, negative attitudes dominated the discussion of *how specific* evaluations are being performed in practice. There was common recognition that measuring mere outputs (over outcomes) is widespread, and this appeared to be matched with a negative attitude towards this behavior: “they’re just getting out information about the services they provide. Which, to me, is not at all what we should be measuring.” Participants disparaged the value of output evaluations, and commonly saw them as pseudo evaluations or even labeled them “caricatures” of what evaluation should be:

I worry that maybe because it’s easier to measure some of this other stuff that it’ll actually pull us further from what PD programs are supposed to do. Things we’ve talked about, building influence, moving our foreign policy goals forward, but if the evaluation keeps us in this world of, “We had 77 people in this class” and 77 people came in the next day and they’re...I mean, it’s just...it’s a caricature.

Similarly, negative attitudes clustered around evaluations reliant on anecdotal evidence — meaning not systematic or without ‘hard data’. That said, some interviewees were also appreciative of more *ad hoc* evaluations, but commonly connected to the condition that such evaluations came from “trusted sources” in the field with long-time local experience:

I think practitioners who are involved in public diplomacy, have a pretty good sense oftentimes, of what works, and why. And they can learn to sort of quantify that a bit,

and get a little more deep down, and verbalize why it is they think that certain things work, and why it is they think that other things don't work. And that is a type of evaluation. And I think for a busy practitioner, that's probably a pretty good type of evaluation that's actually effective and useful.

Time is a widely used justification when expressing positive attitudes toward evaluations relying on anecdotal evidence or “gut feelings.” Some thought this approach to be associated with an “older” generation of diplomacy practitioners, who inherited a more lax approach to evaluation from the “USIA days” of public diplomacy.

Attitudes towards specific measurement approaches. While most of the positive attitudes clustered around the general potential of evaluation, the more ambivalent or downright negative attitudes were voiced specifically in relation to extant M&E approaches in the State Department. The most openly negative attitudes clustered around concrete tools and metrics, and the perceived lack of flexibility and sensitivity to local circumstances in the foreign service (at post level). As one participant concisely put it regarding the MAT tool: “I've hated [MAT] since the beginning because I tend to sort of hate things that force you into specific categories of thinking.” Other participants similarly commented on the tools and indicators distributed by “R” as inappropriate to their circumstance, and indicated a desire for more locally-adaptable tools.

Another attitude that surfaced centered on what to measure and the perceived limits of quantifiability. While participants held negative attitudes towards anecdotal approaches to evaluation (with the notable exception mentioned above), they also expressed negativity regarding a ‘distorting’ effect of invalid quantitative indicators. As one interviewee stated: “we’re kind of putting a quantitative spin on what is hard to measure.”

Perceived Norms about M&E

Perceived norms denote how an individual’s intentions to engage in M&E are shaped by the perceived beliefs of others towards M&E behavior. Thus, in addition to individual attitudes, evaluation behavior is also influenced by the “surrounding” attitudes and expectations of significant others. Accordingly, norms were explored by gauging the perceived social pressure to perform M&E that was expressed by the interviewees both in terms of other people’s attitudes towards M&E (descriptive norms) as well as other people’s ‘M&E demands’ towards colleagues in particular (injunctive norms).

Descriptive norms. Interviewees believed there was a positive normative culture around evaluation that serves the purpose of accountability—showing the “impactfulness” of public diplomacy programs. Similar to the personal attitude that evaluation is important to demonstrating value, interviewees believed this to be a widespread attitude among fellow practitioners: “I think most of my colleagues who are PD practitioners in the field right now are hugely interested in showing the impact of our labor.” However, it is almost exclusively the positive (even ‘promotional’) side of accountability that is referred to here, for within these positive norms that see M&E as accountability, emerged a theme where M&E is merely a tool for “marketing” programs: “You’re very careful of how you characterize the performance of a particular program... they always ask ... Can you re-word this this way? Or

re-word this that way?” The learning aspect of M&E, in turn, is where the more negative attitudes clustered: “there is still a resistance to the learning part of evaluation.” On the other hand, strong personal dedication was linked with positive norms when it came to generating M&E insights, i.e., learning (for *yourself*) how to improve:

I see people are really dedicated to what they're doing, and so they want to know, hey, we think this is a great program, and we've tried to do these modifications based on things that we've heard. But holistically, we'd like to know how we can make this program even stronger.

While the learning aspect of M&E is where indeed the more negative norms about M&E clustered, these aspects were related to positive attitudes when they were seen as completely under the control of those being evaluated—rather than “top-down” evaluations.

Another related perceived norm emerged around the notion that M&E is something highly personal, as in: “...I think people take any feedback as personal feedback.” On the one hand, this highlights a norm that is almost, by default, negative towards evaluation: “People do get very invested and...they get very protective of them and I think that's maybe something that if you're evaluating the people also feel like maybe you're attacking them ...” Especially those programs in which people are personally invested get protected/shielded from evaluation: “Clearly, sometimes you have a favorite program that some leader is really promoting a particular program, and therefore they're not always interested in evaluating that program.”

Injunctive norms. When discussing who sets such norms, or imposes ‘M&E demands’ on practitioners, the answers tended to cluster around a set of main actors in the State Department. The first, and most basic “actor” (in an organizational sense) are extant documents and rules regarding evaluation. Evaluation, as a norm, is a formal requirement. But, as our results suggest—one with relatively low standardization. As evaluation practice is tied closely into the department’s grant structure, every State Department grant requires an M&E plan. A common rule of thumb is that around of 5% of the grant budget should be spent on M&E. This has implications for perceived injunctive norms regarding grants of different sizes as smaller grants will struggle to “break even” in terms of their M&E budget. When funding/prioritization of M&E is tied to the total grant budget, the perception is that small grants do not merit M&E while M&E remains a formal requirement nonetheless, making M&E a “farce.” Given that grants less than \$20,000 make up the bulk of US public diplomacy programming, this cultivates an impression of a low priority given to M&E in general, which shapes practices also in some of the larger grants. For larger grants, while there seems to be more of a priority on M&E, the focus remains on accountability and there is little pressure to use M&E results for improvement.

Beyond the formal requirements in the grand structure, injunctive norms were expressed in relation to “Washington in general” as well as specific actors. Referring to Washington in general, many expressed clear perceptions of injunctive pressures: “Measuring and evaluation is a huge part of what we were required to do, reporting back to Washington about the impact of our programming...” However, this pressure, when felt, is commonly tied to the more “promotional” aspects of evaluation mentioned above: “they expect us just to do a good job, and they want to hear about good results. I mean no one has ever said, ‘we want to hear about

when things fail,' right?" So, for many, evaluation for purposes of learning is often more dependent on individual attitudes and motivations rather than injunctive norms:

We are not often asked what our results were. So, I would say it's mainly for me. Washington doesn't say, "okay, give us a formal evaluation report." I've never been asked for a formal evaluation report...No one ever followed up and said, "okay, by the way, you owe us this report." It never happened. So, it's very, I would say it's ... We have a lot to learn about evaluation.

When relating injunctive norms to specific actors, congress appears as the main actor connected to injunctive norms about M&E for accountability: "Congress wants to know if they should keep giving us money," or more specifically: "We are doing it also for accountability...to prove to the political side of our government system that we're not wasting taxpayer money, that we're not just out here having parties and doing froo-froo events."

Another actor that emerged is the secretary of state, who is seen to shape the general tenor of the M&E discussion: "I remember that before [Rex] Tillerson came on, discussions about, yeah, he's a data guy and so people kind of got ready for that, right? There was an expectation of that's what he would want to see, numbers and more hard results." Or : "Secretary Pompeo in fact just had a staff town hall...and he even said, I want to see people fail, because we're trying new things, and we can learn from those things." An additional level of pressure comes from the Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy: "I feel like the pressure mostly from R. R is the one who's always like the steady drumbeat of, 'You must evaluate. You must evaluate'."

Two final themes emerged around programs at the field level. First, in contrast to projects initiated at the local level by practitioners themselves, for big "flagship projects," the M&E pressure is perceived as high:

For us it was a lot of times Washington's interest in a program. I constantly get messages about from Washington, a program that I'm pursuing that Washington has very much so expressed interest in and is constantly asking me about, then I'll be sure to really emphasize reporting back. Programs that we sort of initiate at posts, that Washington maybe doesn't really care about, we could be more lax in, and not necessarily monitor or evaluate at the end.

Finally, at field level, ambassadors are seen to "set the tone" for the way injunctive M&E norms are enacted locally. If the ambassador was a former public diplomacy practitioner or had a research background many suspected there would be more emphasis on evaluation. Still, participants mostly expressed minimal pressure to perform M&E at this level:

The truth is though, the vast majority of ambassadors don't ask for that sort of thing. Many of them see PD programs as sort of the fluff, fun stuff on the side. They just want to make sure they're getting their local press interviews and press statements out, or Facebook posts about their visit to some town out of the regions or whatever. They aren't thinking beyond that in terms of PD.

Perceived Control of M&E Behavior

Perceived behavioral control refers to a person's perception of the relative ease or difficulty of performing a behavior. The interviewees experience many different kinds of control related to evaluation in PD practice, which can be represented through three primary themes:

Conceptual and time-bound restraints. Public diplomacy practitioners are inhibited in engaging in evaluation behavior by an inability to conceptualize and measure the outcomes of diplomacy, and by the perceived challenge of measuring long-term accomplishments in a short timeframe. To the first point, most struggled to articulate the actual goals of public diplomacy work, and connected the inability to conceptualize those goals to subsequent difficulty enacting evaluation. Participants variously claimed the purpose of public diplomacy was to influence foreign actors, build positive relationships, "make people feel good about America stuff," and advance foreign policy objectives. However, none were able to articulate how such goals translate to measurable, program-level objectives and indicators. As one participant put it: "It's just not clear how you evaluate some of these things because you have to know what to evaluate it on." Very often, then, participants described programs as "one-offs" with no clear connection to larger diplomacy or foreign policy goals.

A theme on which the interviewees appeared to agree was the long-term nature of public diplomacy work and a perception they cannot adequately evaluate the impacts of programs within a practical amount of time. Most public diplomacy officers are given two or three year assignments at a post abroad before rotating to a different assignment. The limited time officers spend at a post was frequently regarded as an obstacle to evaluation behavior:

...on assignments that are one year or less, it is very hard to be in a job for...if you figure you get there and it takes two months to figure out what your job actually is. And a month or two before you leave, you start checking out, and it's a one-year assignment, that gives you eight months on the job where you can try to make a difference.

The perceived inability to measure the long-term effects of diplomacy programming was also regarded as an obstacle to evaluation. Many commented on the length of time it takes to alter deeply held attitudes: "Right after a program you do that survey and you see, 'Oh yeah, we like America now.' What we want to know is in 20 years do you still feel that way?" The important outcomes of public diplomacy are likely to occur many years after a program, yet the interviewees felt pressured to immediately demonstrate the impacts of their work:

[public diplomacy] a long-term investment. So, I worry that we have a results-focused view, almost bordering on transactional, where in reality public diplomacy requires lot of effort over a long period of time, and measurement many years later in order to really see what true results are.

Thus, in addition to the need for additional training, practitioners would "like to see some acknowledgment of the limited timeframe that we're looking at."

Lack of capacity. Practitioners felt ill equipped with the skills to engage in evaluation, nor do they feel they have the money and time to do so. Some discussed the limited training in evaluation received at the Foreign Service Institute as inadequate for the realities of evaluation faced on the job. At most, participants claimed to have received a few days of training on the subject. Some noted they had the knowledge to engage in evaluation best practices, but doubted that others had such skills. The limited training was noted as both a perceived control of evaluation behavior, but also as a problem when reviewing others' evaluation proposals:

Sometimes people are trying to design something to evaluate a program, but they don't have a real deep enough background. And the background they need, they probably couldn't get in as short a time as they have for it. And so what they do is ... we've seen where people have put together proposed evaluations that have some basic design flaws. And ultimately, you sort of go, 'Gee that's great. I'm glad you took the time to do this. However, it does us absolutely no good.'

As implied by this participant, the lack of training on evaluation has resulted in deeply flawed evaluations that might falsely portray the impacts of public diplomacy programming.

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned controls are the lack of funds for evaluation efforts coupled with the limited time available in which to perform evaluations. The interviewees agreed that few funds are made available for evaluation, despite institutional pressure to engage in evaluation practice. Some were reticent to spend any money at all on evaluation when grant money might be “better spent” on program participants. Moreover, as many programs have their funding renewed by Congress every year it was noted that “how do you plan to do all the evaluations you need to do in a longitudinal way?” when funding may change year-by-year.

Even more frequently mentioned was the perceived lack of time to engage in evaluation. Nearly all interviewees mentioned that public diplomacy officers are overworked and overwhelmed, resulting in evaluation becoming a “lessor priority.” Frequently, public diplomacy officers feel beholden to the demands of multiple superior officers—including the ambassador at a post abroad, the head public affairs officer, or from supervisory offices in DC. Thus, while public diplomacy officers recognize the value of evaluation, staffing challenges and multiple obligations/pressures result in the lack of dedicated time for program evaluation. One participant neatly summarized this quandary:

When I started working at the State Department I basically felt like we're told we need to do it, but we just don't have the time. We don't have the time, we don't have the resources, we don't have either monetarily, or in terms of staff capacity. I feel like our programs do a lot more than we give them credit for. They have a huge impact. They're extremely valuable, but we don't prove that in any substantive way.

Structures, actors, and systems. A third significant control to evaluation behavior emerged from the perceived disparity with which evaluation is structurally enacted throughout the State Department, and the offices and systems in place related to evaluation. First, many bemoaned the lack of standardized set of practices on evaluation or a singular authority that directs how evaluation should be done. Participants noted there are various research offices

across the bureaus which offer resources and advice on evaluation, and noted ECA and REU as primary information providers. The indicators and methods offered by these offices were described as “piecemeal,” and often “[coming] into conflict with each other.” Often, practitioners felt “overwhelmed with resources.” As one participant expressed: “There’s no unified monitoring and evaluation system in the state department today.” The systems that are in place to record and track evaluations, such as MAT, are irregularly used and misunderstood by many—which leads to a sense that the tools being offered to assist in evaluation might actually be a hindrance to making evaluation more accessible to practitioners unfamiliar with the practice.

Discussion

While our data comes from one country and institution (the U.S. Department of State), our implications tie in with the international debate on public diplomacy comparing other cases, such as the United Kingdom and Sweden (Pamment, 2012b) or Switzerland, France, and Japan (Cull, 2008). These studies have stressed that the evidence on actual developments in M&E on the level of different organizations—including prevalent attitudes, norms and capacities—is patchy. And they have emphasized the fundamental gap “between the quality of data available and how that data is used to inform upon policy and delivery” (Pamment, 2012b, p. 334). Our insights on attitudes, norms and capacities further inform the discussion on understanding this “gap.” The present research also adds specifically to the recent literature on the M&E practices of the State Department itself. Whereas the State Department has maintained that “much of the success of research and impact evaluation depends on leadership that consistently signals that data-driven strategies and tactics are important” (ACPD, 2014, p. 56), our research explored the relevant “behavioral environment” with which such signaling would resonate (or not). That said, as our data come from the U.S., research should work to uncover if and how cultural variables influence public diplomacy practitioner attitudes towards evaluation, as extant research suggests that cultural may indeed influence how evaluation is perceived (Sommerfeldt and Xu, 2015).

To a certain extent, evaluation behavior in public diplomacy is mandated—practitioners have no choice but to evaluate programs. But, as the interview data showed, the intention to engage in evaluation is far from an either/or proposition. People do not always follow the rules or recognize or feel normative pressure to comply. Practitioners may be required to evaluate, but the sophistication of evaluation, and conformity to rules is likely to vary based on attitudes, norms, and perceived controls. This is in line with other behavioral domains where compliance to rules has been discovered to be an intricate issue negotiated between individual behavioral drivers (Sommerstad et al., 2015).

While it may be tempting to bifurcate attitudes towards evaluation as either positive or negative, the results suggest that the perceived goal for which evaluation is undertaken serves as an important antecedent of attitudes towards evaluation. A strong focus on accountability seemed to drive a culture of mere “reporting”—and of reporting mostly positive results to stakeholders in Washington. At the same time, practitioners tended to hold negative attitudes towards this “accountability approach” to evaluation as it is dominated by *ad hoc* approaches and output indicators. Interestingly, though, the perceived descriptive norms indicated accountability rather as a good thing as it allows practitioners the ability to prove what they

do to others within the State Department, and that they are more than just “fluff” or the “jazz hands” of U.S. diplomacy—terms frequently used by interviewees. However, this of course remains far from showing that what they do has the desired impact on larger policy imperatives.

The analysis of attitudes revealed that *ad hoc* evaluations are appreciated when they come from highly trusted sources. As recent policy advice has emphasized the value of providing “more contextual data to determine impact” (ACPD, 2014, p. 57), one way to harness *ad hoc* evaluations could be to keep them out of core objective measurements but still use them to deliver insights on the contextual factors “around” such core results. This is not to say that contextual data should not be quantitative. However, given the state of the practice, it seems to be a meaningful step to concentrate quantification first on core objectives indicators and at the same time focus the valued insights provided by “veteran” practitioners on the context of such results—a step for which concrete qualitative tools could be also established. In other words, anecdotal evaluations should remain as an existing competency, rather than be mainly “replaced” by quantitative approaches. This may lead to the emergence of an “ambidextrous” approach (Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst, and Tushman, 2009) to evaluation, through which existing (anecdotal) competencies can still be used while new research-driven opportunities are explored.

Further, concerning behavioral attitudes, our research unearthed an important paradox that highlights the difficulties of implementing a more “straightforward” evaluation regime in public diplomacy. Within the grant and funding structure in the State Department, practitioners attached a “dual risk” to evaluations: if evaluation results are bad they may fear cuts to programs and negative effects for their careers; if they are good they may fear a ‘takeover’ by other actors. Any structured attempt to further a “culture of research in U.S. public diplomacy” (ACPD, 2014, p. 56) would have to take such paradox fears into account and help manage them.

Our analysis of descriptive norms showed that, while the learning purposes of M&E were associated with clearly negative attitudes, positive attitudes towards learning emerged when insights were seen to serve on the micro level and be under the control of the individual unit or practitioner. This may suggest that a first step to more learning-based M&E may be a ‘nested approach to insights’ in which tools are provided on post level and remain mostly under local control. Our results suggested that any top-down approach to insights and learning (such as Secretary Pompeo’s “I want to see people fail”) would be met with some significant opposition when it is not developed at post level.

Concerning injunctive norms, our research suggests that the aspired funding structure (minimum of 5% of the grant budget should be spent on M&E), even if it was applied more widely and followed more strictly, may reinforce a culture where M&E is seen as a “farce”—as many practitioners work regularly with grants that are too small to “break even” in terms of evaluation at a 5% level. Practically, this may suggest a partial decoupling of M&E resources from grant size (e.g., through a parallel funding scheme for M&E). This may not only allow smaller programs to deliver insights for the department, but also bolster the “culture of evaluation” by placing support for M&E on a wider footing. It should be acknowledged that the evaluation efforts by R and the REU unit to assist specific programs are independently funded, and in some cases the budget for such evaluations are greater than

the project itself. This illustrates the commitment of specific offices to enhance M&E practice—but such efforts are the exception and have not impacted practitioner attitudes towards evaluation writ large, or the perception that assistance with evaluation is readily available.

Our research suggested that at the field level, expectations for foreign service officers to perform M&E can be very low. Norms recognize the difficulties in terms of workload but also turnover at posts with people “coming and going” every two or three years. As suggested by several of the interviewees, this reality should shift attention more towards locally employed staff. The question may become how to harness the continuity and regional expertise of locally employed staff to feed into mid- and long-term evaluations?

Regarding control, largely our research confirms that time, money, and lack of skills are the most prominent perceived obstacles to the enactment of evaluation in public diplomacy practice. Such themes have been reported in prior research (e.g., Banks, 2011). Practitioners are facing increased pressure to evaluate, but do not have the adequate time, resources, or training to do so. To a large extent, the theory of reasoned action, from which TPB was derived, assumed that human behavior is under volitional control. The TPB included the notion of perceived behavioral control as it recognizes that not all behaviors may be under volitional control, and thus instead might be better conceived of as perceived control over behaviors that lead to the accomplishment of a goal or mandate (cf. Ajzen, 2002). Thus, while practitioners may be required to evaluate no matter what, their perceptions of the processes that lead to the enactment of a required action may affect how that action is undertaken.

The influence of perceived controls in this case, however, are not universally prohibitive. Generally speaking, practitioners believed they had the knowledge and skills to “report” output indicators that answer demands that a culture of accountability behests—indeed, they often have no choice but to do so. As noted earlier, this behavior—rather paradoxically—is viewed by practitioners as both negative, in terms of their attitude toward the behavior itself, but also positively in that enacting evaluation behaviors influences social and professional norms about the role and contributions of public diplomacy within the State Department. Controls appeared to be much more influential when discussing learning focused evaluation and the use of more sophisticated evaluation planning methods and indicators. If the State Department is to move beyond a culture of accountability (cf. Gonzales, 2015) to one of learning, a shift in the perceived purpose for which evaluation is undertaken must occur. When norms about evaluation shift to “we need to learn,” rather than “we need to report results” there may be potential for accompanying attitudes toward evaluation behavior to shift. Such conditions would suggest that two of the three predictors of behavioral intention would dramatically improve. Without accompanying resources, however, this change is not likely to occur.

Conclusion

Sophisticated evaluation methods are part of “the new public diplomacy” globally, and bringing evaluation to the fore is an essential step in building capacity for this new diplomacy (Pamment, 2012a). Demands for greater accountability and “value-for-money” are continuing to reshape the practice of public diplomacy worldwide. Specifically, in the U.S., the road

ahead for public diplomacy is an uncertain one. Still, there remains potential for M&E to flourish as a constructive part of public diplomacy practice, despite or precisely because of resource pressures. Practitioners value evaluation and want more of it—they demonstrate an appetite for learning about M&E and its applications to proving program impact and improved future performance. Efforts by research offices such as the REU to consult and assist local public diplomacy staff signal commitment on behalf of DC-based evaluation staff to assist those in the field. Nonetheless, there remain significant material and attitudinal obstacles to that potentiality:

I feel sometimes like we're... it's rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic in a way....I see the value in having the data and the quantitative assessment...but the realities of what we have to face, I just...I fear that we're going to lose the bigger battle.

In this paper we argued that “winning the bigger battle” necessitates taking an integrative view of the practice, a view that—next to the structural and organizational issues emphasized in recent reports (ACPD, 2018)—takes into consideration the extant perceptions and attitudes that serve as the micro context in which any M&E approach and policy will be interpreted and implemented.

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ⁱ In May 2019, the State Department announced the merger of the PA and IIP bureaus to create the new Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA). As the data was gathered several months before the creation of this new bureau, we herein refer to PA and IIP because of their mention by, and relevance to, the study participants at the time.