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Public Diplomacy: Projecting Values Through Strategic Influence

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Public diplomacy as both a concept of study and process of action inherently involves values. Indeed, all countries engage in public diplomacy in some form or manner in order to project values to a wider audience, and these actions have a unified purpose: strategic influence. However, the ways in which individual countries attempt this strategic influence varies depending on context, culture, and capabilities. In this piece, I examine three programs, the United States' Fulbright Program, Germany's Goethe Institute(s), and China's Confucius Institute(s), to gain a better sense of the values each country chooses to project to foreign audiences, as well as the pathways through which they attempt to construct strategic influence and understanding.

I will proceed as follows: first, I clarify and define my use of "public diplomacy" and "strategic influence." From there, I connect these concepts to the cases noted above. While each case is indicative of strategic influence, the processes and values that underpin that purpose varies. For the United States' Fulbright Program, this is represented by relationship-building through mutual understanding; for Germany's Goethe Institutes, it is informed by reconciling the past to move forward. Finally, I argue that Confucius Institutes are representative of the Chinese government pushing an aggressively curated culture.

Before moving forward, it is important to note that this essay is not meant to serve as an evaluation of



the aforementioned programs nor demonstrate their efficacy in achieving strategic influence by affecting foreign views of each nation-state. Measuring success in public diplomacy is a markedly complicated enterprise, difficult to produce, and wrought with still more definitional disquisitions.¹ Nor am I attempting to map *all* of the programs or activities that fall under the public diplomacy umbrella each of these actors pursue. Given public diplomacy's inherent multilayered complexity, a comprehensive survey is beyond my scope. Further, the public diplomacy programs examined here are representative of "traditional" public diplomacy in that these are examples of "... governments talking to global publics and includes those efforts to inform, influence, and engage those publics in support of national objectives and foreign policies" (Snow 2020, 8).

While I accept that individuals, groups, and others can have a similar resonant impact, governmental public diplomacy programs remain the strongest "players" in the field and are therefore the focus here. Additionally, by highlighting government-sponsored programs and the differences of governmental control/intervention found in each, we are able to illuminate a referent vantage point through which each actor projects its values to external audiences, as well as orient further analyses of additional public diplomacy programs.

Public Diplomacy and Strategic Influence: Clarifying Terms

Considering the discord among public diplomacy scholars and practitioners on the field's fundamental concepts, it is important to clarify my usage (Gregory 2008; see also Sevin 2017 and Snow & Cull [eds.] 2020). First gaining popularity in 1965 when Edmund Gullion coined the term, public diplomacy is closely linked to the concepts of soft power and indirect influence, as famously described by Joseph Nye. That is to say, instead of utilizing coercion by threats/physical force or economic inducements to "buy off" changes in behavior, powers of attraction

and co-optation persuade changes in nation-state behavior (Snow 2020).²

Persuasion is a bedrock of public diplomacy, as it necessarily involves engagement with another actor in order to influence. In the traditional sense, this is represented by nation-states *directly* engaging with foreign citizenries in an effort to influence and induce them toward a specific perspective or vantage point (Cull 2008; see also Hayden 2012). For the cases discussed in this piece, it means providing funding *specifically* to support knowledge-building for foreign citizenries and exposing them to particular values of each nation-state. In this way, public diplomacy programs serve as avatars for the political and cultural values each actor aspires to project, with the ultimate purpose being strategic influence.

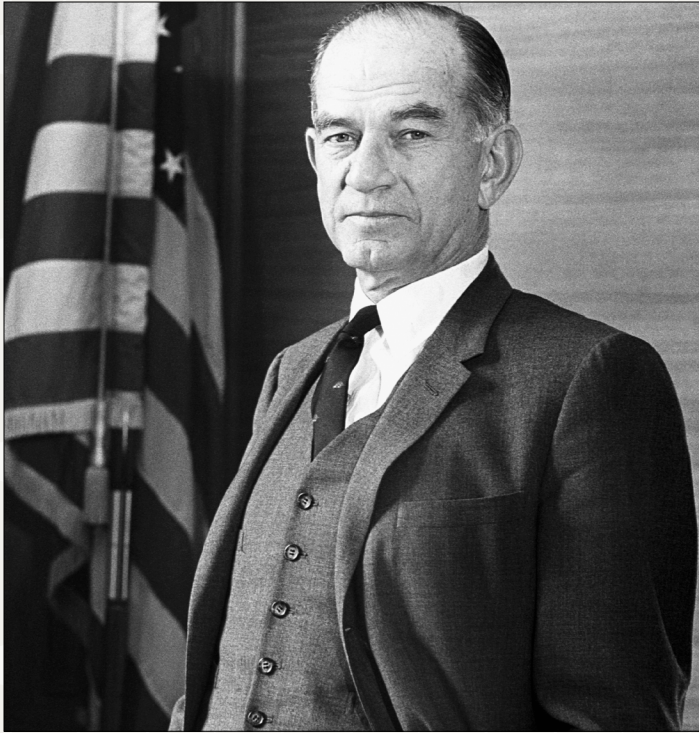
Strategic influence, I think, captures the essence of public diplomacy in a way that the other terms discussed here cannot. Necessarily situated within the framework of strategic communication, that is to say, "... a means of exercising strategic influence" (Waller 2008, 17), the term represents purposeful action on the part of a government to both expose foreign audiences to certain messaging and influence them in a way that aligns with the goals/objectives/desired outcomes/etc. of said government.³ Moreover, time horizons are important to keep in mind when it comes to strategic influence. It is not something that happens just in emergency situations, times of upheaval, or during military endeavors. On the contrary, the "war of ideas" is a continual process of action. By exercising strategic influence in public diplomacy, the intent is to achieve an alignment of perspectives between those receiving the messages and those projecting specific values.

In sum, I use a traditional understanding of public diplomacy in this essay and argue that the purpose of public diplomacy programs is best understood as strategic influence. The next section builds on these foundational terms by briefly exploring the values underpinning particular public diplomacy programs from the United States, Germany, and China.

1 See Banks 2011 and Sevin 2017 for in-depth discussions on the uses (and pitfalls) of evaluating public diplomacy programs.

2 Snow also reminds us that while soft power may be one of the most common terms used in the public diplomacy ecosystem, its pervasiveness does not mean that there is uniformity in its definition or application.

3 See Waller 2008 for an in-depth discussion of strategic influence as well as its genesis as a term in U.S. government bureaucracies following the September 11 attacks on the United States.



Former Democratic senator from Arkansas James William Fulbright developed the international scholarship program in 1946. (Getty Images)

The Fulbright Program: Relationship Reciprocity and Mutual Understanding

One of the most well-known public diplomacy programs in the United States, the Fulbright Program provides funding for approximately eight thousand awardees from the U.S. and over 150 countries to engage in educational and cultural exchanges. Emerging from the aftermath of WWII in 1946 and originally funded through the sale of U.S. war surplus materials abroad,⁴ this program was conceived by Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas as a means to promote “good will” throughout the world through student exchanges in the education, culture, and science fields (Fulbright 1946). This ideal was further clarified with the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (also known as the

Fulbright-Hayes Act), which established the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA, current administrator of the Fulbright Program) and set a goal of increasing:

... mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations ... (Fulbright-Hays Act 1961)

Here, we see the Fulbright Program’s values as well as a foundational definition for public diplomacy. By building relationships through American educational/ cultural experiences in foreign spaces and vice versa, the program intends to build cooperation on a personal level that enhances relations at the state level.

In order for this to work, the strategic influencer needs an influencee, and the Fulbright Program’s structure encourages foreign governments to “buy into” its values through binational commissions. Funded by both the United States and partner governments, the 49 Fulbright Commissions serve to coordinate program planning/implementation/decision making/ etc.⁵ between the United States and its strategic partners. It is through this process of inclusion and shared coordination that the Fulbright Program endeavors to project the values of people-to-people reciprocity and mutual understanding that are viewed as representative of the United States, while also serving as a hub for supporting U.S. foreign policy and projecting influence in the global arena (Fulbright Commissions n.d.).

Goethe Institute: Reconciling the Past to Bridge the Future

Founded in 1951 and now represented by 157 institutes in ninety-eight countries, Goethe Institutes have the stated goals of promoting German-language training and, mirroring the Fulbright Program’s goals,

⁴ While the Fulbright Program is now principally funded through a U.S. government appropriation, it also receives support from participating foreign governments and host institutions, as well as U.S. and foreign corporations and foundations. See <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/funding-and-administration> and <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/j-william-fulbright-foreign-scholarship-board-fisb/fisb-reports> for more information.

⁵ For nation-states that do not have a Fulbright Commission, the programs are administered by U.S. embassies with the cooperation of the host governments.



fostering “international cultural cooperation” (Goethe Institut Organisation n.d.). Today Goethe Institutes are funded primarily through the German Federal Foreign Office as well as the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany. While connected to the German government, the Goethe Institute is described as an overarching quasipublic service organization since it is a private association whose assembly membership includes the German government and others (Zöllner 2020).⁶

Although in modern times Germany is often regarded in positive terms for contributing to the global good, the specter of Nazi Germany and the atrocities committed before and during World War II has influenced — and continues to influence — knowledge about Germany internationally (Wood 2017; see also Zöllner 2020). From its beginning to today, Goethe Institutes serve as important hubs of strategic influence to rebuild international relationships, as well as “rebrand” post-Nazi Germany (first as West Germany, and continuing through East/West reunification in 1990) by disseminating German language and culture throughout the world.

As of October 2021, Goethe Institutes operate in nation-states with whom Germany maintains strong alliances (EU member states, the United States, etc.) as well as authoritarian regimes (Myanmar, Syria, etc.) to provide language instruction, cultural understanding, and emphasize German heterogeneity (Wood 2017). Although these activities serve to underpin projected values, not all Goethe Institutes are created equal. Conventionally (and in similar fashion to the Fulbright Program’s origins), states that offered the strongest return on investment in the form of political, trade, or economic opportunities were the most strongly targeted and held the most robust activities for foreign audiences (Wood 2017). Here, we see both the strategic nature of these institutes as well as Germany’s touted principles to specific foreign audiences in a twofold manner. By highlighting the diversity and inclusiveness found within Germany, we see an implicit rejection of the Nazi past as well as pathways to guiding foreign opinions on Germany writ large.

Thus, Goethe Institutes represent pathways of reconciliation for post-World War II Germany through building cooperation and emphasizing German heterogeneity to targeted foreign audiences through education of German language and culture. In so doing, Germany’s past history, and the atrocities therein, are consigned to a previous epoch in order to build robust partnerships for targeted foreign populations in contemporary times. Although these institutes, as well as the Fulbright Program, emphasize cultural learning and education as part of their strategic influence, the processes emphasize mutual cooperation/understanding. Host countries are key partners in these activities, and neither the U.S. nor German governments insist on maintaining austere levels of control over the programs. In this way, the effects of persuasion are more passive in nature. For Confucius Institutes, this process is more unidirectional, active, and controlled in the portrayal of China and Chinese language/culture.

Confucius Institutes: Aggressively Curated Cultures

First opening in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004, Confucius Institutes have quickly expanded to over 160 countries on six continents, with the majority of these appearing in the United States and Europe (Hubbert 2019). Confucius Institutes exist to pursue three interrelated goals: (1) developing and facilitating Chinese language instruction in foreign nation-states, (2) promoting education and cultural exchanges, and (3) facilitating cooperation between China and foreign communities (Liu 2019). While these goals mirror those of the Fulbright Program and Goethe Institute, Confucius Institutes are distinct in two key areas: (1) Chinese government control, and (2) presence in foreign higher education institutions. On the former, Confucius Institutes are managed by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (known colloquially as Hanban), and under the direction and funding from China’s Ministry of Education. Whereas Goethe Institutes emphasize autonomy from the German government (while also noting that the German government is an important stakeholder), government involvement is overtly present in Confucius Institutes.

⁶ See <https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/org.html> for English-language information on the Goethe Institute’s organizational structure and legal principles.



Moreover, Confucius Institutes operate within foreign education institutions, and community activities can also include a presence in primary and secondary schools.⁷ Higher education institutions typically receive start-up funding for an initial five-year term to establish Confucius Institutes on campuses and support Confucius Institute activities. Additional support provided by Hanban includes teacher recruitment and training, airfare and financial support for teachers being sent from China to the host Confucius Institutes, cultural programming, and curriculum material to be used in support of Chinese language and cultural learning (Hubbert 2019).

Establishing Confucius Institutes requires formal agreements to be signed by relevant parties. In the United States, for example, a college or university partners with a Chinese counterpart in an implementation agreement between the two as well as an agreement with Hanban as a signatory. Activities conducted under Confucius Institutes' auspices are governed by these agreements as well as the Confucius Institute Constitution, which states that while Confucius Institutes are required to abide by the laws of the host countries and respect the education traditions, they shall also not disregard Chinese law (Lum and Fischer 2021). Including this caveat is quite important, as it creates an opening for restrictions on free speech and open dialogue governing Confucius Institute activities that align with China's strategic influence through cultural curation.

More to this point, the education material provided by Hanban/Confucius Institutes to host institutions often ignore, and in some cases warp, contemporary Chinese issues and post-Chinese Civil War history. For example, discussions of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution are often absent, as are discussions of the "three T's" (Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen) at Confucius Institutes' events (Fulda 2019). Furthermore, controlling the hiring and training of Confucius Institutes' teachers, often with little to no involvement of host institutions, as well as

control of the Confucius Institutes' funding gives the Chinese government a powerful conduit to shape the pedagogy around Chinese language instruction and the means for indirect censorship on the part of host institutions who may be reliant on that funding stream⁸ (Hubbert 2019).

Having a presence on foreign HEI campuses, and the capacity for overt strategic influence that affords, is what separates Confucius Institutes from the other public diplomacy programs discussed in this piece. Whereas both the Fulbright Program and Goethe Institutes provide funding for foreign audiences to engage in educational and cultural learning and promote their respective values, the processes through which these activities occur are much less assertive. Admittedly, both the Fulbright Program and Goethe Institutes portray their home cultures in positive terms. But there is still a willingness in both the U.S. and German cases to engage in the negative aspects of their histories/cultures, as opposed to a purposeful omission. It is here that the values being projected by Confucius Institutes are on full display and we get a more robust view of their aggressively curated culture.

Public Diplomacy: The Beat Goes On

Although public diplomacy involves a multitude of actors and agents in the 21st century, I maintain that nation-state governments remain the essential actors in the field. What I have attempted to show in this piece is that while values may shift depending on culture and context, the pervasive purpose of these programs remains centered on strategic influence. Moreover, in order to achieve some sort of impact, the intended audience needs to "buy in" to the program through cooperation and collaboration. While each of the programs discussed here have similarly stated goals, how to define the terms "cooperation" and "collaboration" is dependent on each actor's values and the mechanisms through which programs emerge, expand, and, in some cases, contract.

7 In fact, two-thirds of Hanban-managed Chinese language programs take place in "Confucius Classrooms" at the primary and secondary levels (Hubbert 2019).

8 In addition to this, Hanban has attempted to negotiate Confucius Institutes as well as funding for host universities with qualifications for purposeful omissions. One oft-cited example is Hanban offering Stanford University four million dollars to create a Confucius Institute as well as an endowed professorship with the requirement that the professor not discuss "sensitive issues." Stanford refused, so Hanban pivoted to funding a professorship in classic Chinese poetry (a field believed to not likely discuss these issues) while also funding the Confucius Institute (Hubbert 2019). While a number of Confucius Institutes in the United States have closed in recent years, Stanford's Confucius Institute remains.



To be clear, assuming that foreign audiences passively accept *all* aspects of these programs is myopic at best, offensive at worst. Confucius Institutes, for example, have seen a recent backlash against their presence in higher education institutions. This is especially prevalent in the United States, where a number of Confucius Institutes have closed in recent years as various political leaders and government officials have raised concerns about Confucius Institute activities (Redden 2019a).⁹

Despite this reduction in U.S.-based Confucius Institutes, the number of institutes continues to grow globally. When the United States passed the National

Defense Authorization Act in 2019 that prohibited CI host colleges and universities in the United States from receiving Department of Defense funding for Chinese language study (Redden 2019b), that same year Hanban opened 27 new Confucius Institutes with eight countries establishing their initial Confucius Institutes (Xinhuanet 2019).¹⁰ Putting aside conversations on strategic persuasion/competitions between the United States and China, what this controversy demonstrates is that although criticisms and in some cases hostility can materialize in response to specific public diplomacy mechanisms, the goals of projecting values to foreign audiences through strategic influence remain the same. □

⁹ Debates have also emerged in relation to the Fulbright Program and Goethe Institutes. For instance, Senator Fulbright stated in 1986 that a CIA agent approached a Fulbright student in Paris and offered free housing in exchange for reporting on Vietnamese students, and that this use of Fulbright participants in such a manner could be a continued issue (New York Times 1986); and the Goethe Institute in North Korea shut down its reading room due to severe censorship concerns in 2009 (Bowen 2009).

¹⁰ These are: (1) Haiti, (2) Central African Republic, (3) Chad, (4) North Korea, (5) Commonwealth of Dominica, (6) East Timor, (7) the Maldives, and (8) Saudi Arabia.



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