Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Diplomacy: the UK Approach

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Abstract

The UK government is in the process of putting into place a new approach to public diplomacy. The aim is to have a co-ordinated programme of activities which are clearly directed towards stated goals and which are evaluated for their effectiveness. To support this processes for monitoring and measurement are being developed which recognize the complex relationship between activities and long-term goals.

In this paper the author describes the ‘logic model’ which underpins this new approach and discusses the implications for BBC World Service.

1 Introduction

At the outset I think it is worthwhile to state a principle which ought to be obvious, but perhaps is not.

Objectives determine measures of success

In other words, when you set out to measure the effectiveness of an activity what you measure should reflect the purpose of that activity. If James Bond leaps into a taxi and says to a driver “follow that car” he cannot complain later that the journey did not follow the most scenic route, as that was not the objective.

We are looking specifically here at the measures of success. There may well be other measures that you collect for different reasons: for background information, perhaps, or to evaluate
the strategy itself. These could be more broadly based. But the criteria you use to judge an activity should be derived from its objectives.

When looking at the activities of a single organisation this principle should be easy to apply; but when dealing with separate but related organisations there is a risk that one may lose sight of which objectives are in force at any one point.

2 The Carter Review

In 2005 the findings were published of a wide-ranging review of UK Public Diplomacy (PD) – the Carter Review. This review made a number of recommendations for a more effective, co-ordinated and accountable approach to PD. Two of the recommendations are particularly significant for this paper.

The first was a new definition of PD. The definition in use at the time referred only to ‘influencing in a positive way the perceptions of individuals and organisations overseas…’ Carter realised that a well thought out approach required a definition which related activities to government objectives:

‘The Review Team recommends that a better definition of public diplomacy would be work aiming to inform and engage individuals and organisations overseas, in order to improve understanding of and influence for the United Kingdom in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long term goals.’ [1]

The second objective concerned the evaluation of PD activities.

‘If an overarching strategy is to be effective, robust performance indicators for public diplomacy as a whole, and a means of measuring impact must be developed.’ [1]

The activities of the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, including its PD activities, are directed towards ten International Strategic Priorities (ISPs); these are set out in the Appendix.

Just as, through the new definition of PD, activities are related to stated objectives, so the evaluation of the effectiveness of these activities should be on the extent to which they have the intended effect; in other words, on the contribution they make to specific outcomes that lead to the stated objectives.
3 The Logic Model

In principle, there is a sequence of cause and effect with PD. Money is spent on activities which reach certain people and change their awareness and/or opinions on a given topic; eventually, shifts in opinion lead to policy changes or new initiatives by governments and public bodies.

More formally, the process can be broken down for evaluation purposes as follows:

i. **Inputs** – resources needed to deliver each proposed activity.

ii. **Outputs** – expected results from each proposed activity.

iii. **Intermediate outcomes** – the short-term changes which the programme is expected to help achieve.

iv. **Longer-term outcomes** – the ultimate impact against the ISP to which the public diplomacy programme is expected to contribute.

v. **ISP** – the international strategic priority targeted by the theme.

With this approach monitoring/evaluation can take place at each level; for example, one can monitor outputs for a specific event by recording how many people attended, and evaluate them by asking people who attended how useful it was, and so on. Intermediate outcomes can be monitored by tracking changes in opinion amongst key target groups, for example, and longer-term outcomes by noting concrete changes such as new legislation.

So the different elements of the process can be tracked. But what of the implied sequence of cause and effect?

Were the PD activities being carried out in isolation then the logic of cause and effect would be clear. But they are not: they take place in the context of everything else that is going on, including PD activities by other governments, scientific discoveries, political developments and so on. The achievements of a particular programme of activities could be overshadowed by the efforts of others or wiped out by a change of government. Identifying the impact of specific activities or programmes is a formidable challenge.

Setting out the logic model in this way allows one at least to have a clear idea of what can and cannot be achieved, by looking at the ‘linkage’ between the stages in the process. The link
from *inputs* to *outputs* is fairly clear, but from then onwards the likely contribution of external events is greater and it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute change to UK effort. However, one can at least say that a well-founded analysis will foster an attitude of realism. And it may well be possible to demonstrate that PD activities have made a positive contribution even if the magnitude of the effect cannot be quantified precisely.

It is clear from the Carter Review that, for all its apparent simplicity, the philosophy of explicitly directing PD activities to stated goals and of evaluating their effectiveness is something new, and adopting it requires a culture change in some areas. At present its adoption is still in its early stages and it remains to be seen whether it will be possible to establish cause and effect sufficiently clearly to enable judgements to be made about the relative value of different activities. However, in my opinion the systematic approach to planning can be expected to deliver benefits even if it proves to be impossible to establish strong causal links all the way along the chain from *inputs* to *longer-term outcomes*.

4 Where the BBC fits in

The editorial independence of BBC World Service from the government which pays for it is well known and much trumpeted, and it is clear to even a casual observer that this does not sit well with a philosophy which seeks to direct PD activities to the achievement of specific goals. This remains true even when the goals are less simplistic than, say, improving the image of the UK.

The ‘arm’s-length’ nature of the relationship between the World Service and the FCO, which administers its funding, is clear from the Broadcasting Agreement which governs that relationship. In this agreement the aims of World Service are summed up as follows:

‘The BBC’s Global News Division, which includes the BBC World Service, aims to be the world’s best known, most creative, and most respected voice in international news, thereby bringing benefit to the UK, and to the whole BBC.’ [2]

That little word ‘thereby’ is the key to the subtlety of the relationship. It is accepted by both sides that if the BBC is well-known, creative and respected then it will bring benefit to the UK, but there is no attempt made to define what that benefit is or to quantify it. As Carter says:

‘Public diplomacy is arguably not the primary objective of the World Service, but it is inevitable that in providing an internationally renowned and highly valued service that there will be positive public diplomacy gains for the country associated with that brand.’ [1]

The Broadcasting Agreement sets out six key principles which underpin the relationship
between the FCO and the BBC World Service, including these two:

i. ‘the World Service has full editorial and managerial independence and integrity;

ii. the FCO will define the external broadcasting service it requires clearly through robust objectives and performance measures.’ [2]

Crucially, the actual objectives, targets and measures deal only with awareness, reach and reputation – the headline target is ‘BBC World Service to enhance its position as the best-known and most respected voice in international radio and online broadcasting.’ There is no required impact on users’ opinions of anything except the BBC itself.

The Broadcasting Agreement pre-dates the Carter Review, and the latter explicitly recognizes that the editorial independence of the BBC remains paramount. This is reflected in the involvement it has in the systems being developed to monitor performance. It is understood that the BBC’s activities form part of the context within which the other PD agencies operate, and that in some way their impact needs to be taken into account. The BBC’s broadcasts may well contribute towards the achievement of some of the ISPs even though they are not actually directed toward that end: for example, people who listen to BBC programmes which deal with the issue of Climate Change may come away with the feeling that it is not a good thing and that something should be done about it; on the other hand, if the BBC presents the counter-arguments fairly then it is possible that some people will find these more convincing, and it is not within the FCO’s power to compel the BBC to do anything to avoid that. In fact, the distance between the BBC and the ‘active diplomacy’ approach is greater even than that. Because it has a news agenda which is not dictated by the FCO there is no way to relate its allocation of resources (ie inputs) to specific ISPs. So even at the first stage in the process there is little information to feed in about BBC activity. The same applies to outputs – the BBC can measure the reach of specific services and possibly evaluate perceptions of them, but it would be very difficult to assess the impact of its coverage of issues related to specific ISPs because that coverage is not necessarily located in single identifiable programmes but spread across the broadcasts and websites; and the nature and quantity of coverage of specific issues varies widely according to events: one large hurricane may generate more debate about climate change than there would be in six months of normal weather.

And it is at this stage of the process that the BBC takes a back seat. It may be possible to measure changes in public opinion and to assess whether the opinions of BBC users have changed more than the opinions of non-users, or in different ways. But the BBC would be have very cautious about involving itself in such an analysis, and would need to ensure that it was not linked to assessment of its performance; to do so would risk compromising its independence and would clearly violate the principle that ‘objectives determine measures of success’.

There is a certain irony to this, since it may be the case that the BBC’s activities do more to affect public opinion on topics like climate change and democracy than all the other UKPD activities put together: but this would not be something which the BBC could strive for or claim
However, this ‘arm’s length’ relationship is essential if the BBC is to do its job properly.

In this context it is worth drawing attention to another aspect of performance measurement: the cost and effort that it entails. The World Service is entrusted with the task of carrying out its own research and delivering the results to the FCO, and that is a trust that its research team take very seriously. But research is expensive and time-consuming. The World Service has a program of research and analysis directed to informing strategic decisions, improving programmes and so on – in other words, to helping the BBC to do its job properly. Ideally, the task of collecting performance measurement should not be an additional burden. If the measures of success are determined by the objectives then it should be the case that the data required to demonstrate effectiveness are a subset of the data collected for internal use. To date this is largely the case with the performance data that the World Service provides.

5 Another approach: the USA

The use of the ‘logic model’ in the evaluation of government-funded activities is well established in the USA and has been advocated by the GAO [3]. Until now it has not been used systematically in the evaluation of PD; but this is changing. In 2006 the GAO reported of the State Department that

‘The department also plans to institutionalize the use of the ‘logic model’ approach endorsed by GAO and others, which could have a significant impact on the department’s program design, implementation, and evaluation efforts.’ [4]

and earlier this year it reported that ‘State has begun to incorporate the model into its program design and evaluation efforts’ [5].

![Figure 1: Example of State Department Logic Model](image-url)
To examine the implications for US international broadcasters we must first look at their relationship to PD. The international public service broadcasters are under the aegis of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The BBG’s mission is

‘To promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding by broadcasting accurate, objective and balanced news and information about the United States and the world to audiences abroad.’ [6]

Already we can see a difference in approach from the UK – broadcasting accurate and objective news is not an end in itself but is directed explicitly towards a PD objective. When the BBG sets out its plans in more detail this becomes even clearer. The first of its three ‘Broadcast Language Priorities’ is ‘to provide accurate and objective news and information to priority areas in support of the war against terrorism’ and amongst its ‘Strategic Goals and Objectives’ is to ‘pioneer anti-terrorism broadcasting’. This points to a much closer link between the broadcasting activities and government objectives than is the case in the UK.

The fact that the broadcasting activities are directed towards a PD objective makes it much easier to contemplate framing performance measurement in terms of PD outcomes; and as a result in discussions about the effectiveness of US international broadcasting it is possible for politicians and commentators to talk of direct impact on public opinion. For example, the 2003 report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World¹ contains this assessment of Radio Sawa:

‘The view of the Advisory Group is that Sawa needs a clearer objective than building a large audience. To earn continued financial support, it must show, through continuous research, that it can change attitudes of Arab listeners toward the United States, that is, “move the needle” toward what the State Department, in its mission statement on public diplomacy and public affairs, calls “influence,” which comprises “understanding,” “constructive disagreement,” and “active support.”’ [8]

The oft-used phrase “move the needle” is a telling one: in the language of the Logic Model this would appear under intermediate outcomes; the research called for by the Advisory Group would need to examine the degree of linkage between broadcasting outputs and PD outcomes, and deal with the question of whether the impact of broadcasting can be separated from other, possibly stronger, influences (in one direction or another).

There is room for debate, however, on the question of whether the BBG should, in fact, be expected to “move the needle”. Its mission is ‘to promote freedom and democracy…by broadcasting accurate, objective and balanced news and information…’ This is not a double-headed objective (‘promote freedom…and broadcast news’) but one objective nested in another

¹The present Chairman of the BBG was a member of the group and has subsequently repeated this recommendation. [7]
– with an implicit assumption that the one leads to the other. Using the principles outlined in this paper, the primary objective – the one which should determine the measures of success – is to broadcast accurate, objective and balanced news and information. Any measures of change in opinion would serve only to test the assumptions underlying the mission statement.

The BBG itself stresses that its stated mission puts it in a special position:

‘According to BBG officials, the agency’s specific mandate of broadcasting accurate and objective news and information sets it apart from other strategic communication efforts.’ [5]

6 Discussion

The Logic Model offers increased clarity of analysis at all stages of the PD process. Its full implementation is still at the early stages in the two countries discussed here, and it remains to be seen how far practical considerations will limit the ability to establish ‘linkage’. It may turn out that the confounding influence of external factors will be so great that it proves impossible to establish a meaningful chain of cause and effect. Nevertheless, the exercise is worth the effort because the discipline of explicitly relating activities to purpose is beneficial in itself.

There is also a concrete benefit from applying this analysis to the design of measurements. In an ideal world, just as one says of measurement that ‘objectives determine measures of success’, one would say of activities that ‘objectives direct effort’. In practice this is not so: the truth is that ‘measures of success direct effort’. The more measures there are, and the more people are judged by them, the more those people will direct their efforts towards success in terms of the measures. Hence if the measures do not accurately and comprehensively represent the objectives then there is a danger that effort will be misdirected. Further, it is important to distinguish between measures of success and information collected for other purposes.

For those international broadcasters who have an element of editorial independence built into their relationship with their paymasters it is almost inevitable that the PD objectives will not be the only ones they have. If that is the case then it is essential to set out clearly the part that their activities are meant to play in PD and to set performance targets accordingly. To this end I offer another maxim:

The secret of performance measurement is knowing when to stop
Appendix: UK International Strategic Priorities

In 2006, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) set out its ten ‘strategic international priorities’:

- making the world safer from global terrorism and weapons of mass destruction
- reducing the harm to the UK from international crime, including drug trafficking, people smuggling and money laundering
- preventing and resolving conflict through a strong international system
- building an effective and globally competitive EU in a secure neighbourhood
- supporting the UK economy and business through an open and expanding global economy, science and innovation and secure energy supplies
- achieving climate security by promoting a faster transition to a sustainable, low carbon global economy
- promoting sustainable development and poverty reduction underpinned by human rights, democracy, good governance and protection of the environment
- managing migration and combating illegal immigration
- delivering high-quality support for British nationals abroad, in normal times and in crises
- ensuring the security and good governance of the UK’s Overseas Territories

References


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2In its White Paper ‘Active Diplomacy for a Changing World’ [9], issued in March 2006, the FCO listed nine priorities; in June of that year [10] a tenth (on climate change) was added.


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