Winning a War of Ideals: The Neglected Use of Artistic Expression in Cultural Diplomacy

Tess Duncan
Communication Science
Elon University
Elon, North Carolina 27244 USA

Faculty Advisor: Glenn Scott

Abstract

Bombs and soldiers are not the only option when "terrorism" is the enemy. The arts offer another type of diplomatic resource. In February 2013, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton observed that art, "reaches beyond governments, past the conference rooms and presidential palaces, to help us connect with more people in more places. It is a universal language in our search for common ground, an expression of our shared humanity." This power to connect to people's humanity can alter international perceptions. The authors of the 2005 Report of the U.S. Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy noted that the power the arts have in shaping hearts and minds is so significant that they termed cultural diplomacy the "linchpin of public diplomacy." This paper critically analyzes this U.S. Advisory Committee's recommendations through a contemporary global lens, weighing applications to current diplomatic situations and introducing the need for a new era of arts-driven public diplomacy. It examines programs launched during the Cold War that highlight the U.S. ability to spread knowledge, wisdom, and empathy through cultural exchanges. Historical context and application to modern day relations reveal a precedent for reform. The U.S. has historically made arts diplomacy a major component of public policy, but that priority has slipped. This paper contends that as "soft weapons," the arts should be deployed more effectively to win the war of ideals. In much the same way that scholar and anthropologist Benedict Anderson (1983)[1] studied the development of print capitalism and the national print-language in Imagined Communities, this paper advances the concept of an international art-language and asserts that a new step in the adoption of human rights and democratic governance can occur through the promotion of artistic works.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Imagined Communities, Art Language

1. Introduction

Conflicting beliefs and ideals have sparked wars for millennia. Some battles were won with military might and economic power, but history remembers those empires that won the hearts and minds of the people. The arts are a powerful form of expression because they are a tool of persuasion. The arts connect communities and can give governments transformative opportunities.

   Take for example the visual imagery of leadership over time and the symbols employed in those artistic depictions to communicate governmental ideals and values that instill respect and obedience. The eagle, the toga, and the muscular masculine form are symbols adopted by Caesar (Figure 2.) because of their association with Greek Gods (Figure 1.). Napoleon Bonaparte (Figure 3.) similarly showed exceptional awareness of art's power, when he was depicted wearing the crown worn by Caesar. Later, George Washington was adorned with similar symbolism, evoking the positive images of Zeus. Compare Figure 4 to Figure 1. Even today's world leaders adopt the visual rhetoric of leadership. (Figure 5. and Figure 6.) This symbolism of power is intended to communicate strength not only domestically, but also internationally. The repetition of these symbols alludes to the universal language of the

arts to capture in an instant a message that transcends language-barriers, showing its diplomatic significance across geography and time.
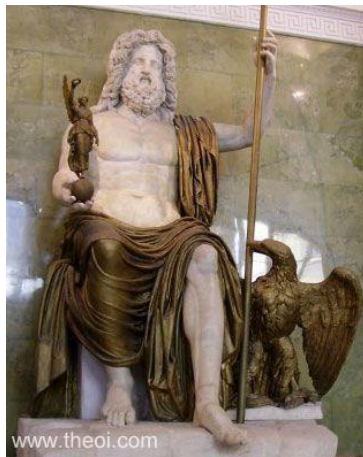

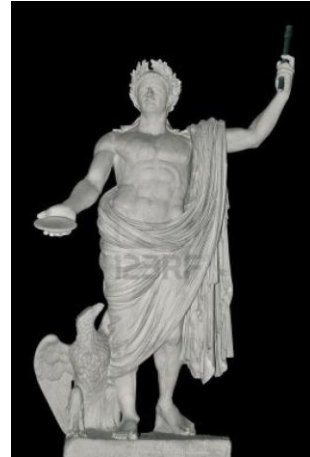Figure 1. Sculpture of Zeus.

Figure 2. Sculpture of Caesar.

Figure 3. Painting of Napoleon Bonaparte

Figure 4. Sculpture of Washington

Figure 5. Photograph of Barack Obama.

Figure 6. Photograph of Vladimir Putin.

History has played a role in the inconsistent development of art policy. For the United States of America, the Cold War was a conflict of ideals that set the tone for American diplomacy. Unlike the two world wars that preceded it, which involved dramatic deployments of military combat, the Cold War deployed cultural exchanges, as a weapon to change political objectives. These initiatives were controlled by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and showed the significance of cultural diplomacy as a part of American foreign policy.

Unfortunately, cultural diplomacy became so associated with the single-minded objective to end the Cold War that once the Soviet Union, and the communist forces within the Soviet bloc countries, fell, so too did funding and support for artistic and cultural exchanges unrelated to ending the Cold War. According to Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor and one of the lead researchers on power and diplomacy, author of *The Decline of America's Soft Power*, while 70-80% of Eastern Europe were tuning into the radio program Voice of America at the peak of the Cold War, only 2% of the Arab world was listening to Voice of America on the eve of September 11, 2001.[2] Without cultural exchanges there was limited cross-cultural understanding; that in addition to other factors, means modern day combat against another "ism" – terrorism. The United States government has sponsored a variety of diplomatic initiatives to counter spreading "anti-Americanism". While the election of Barack Obama in 2008 brought with it an initial optimistic surge in foreign opinion, there has been no enduring diplomatic fix to international tensions. Support of cultural and artistic exchanges remains low.[3]

The conceptual arguments of several scholars and reports will be examined throughout this paper to evaluate the historical precedent and modern need for revitalized arts diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is made up of two components, (1) media messaging and (2) cultural & educational exchanges. They both take many forms, but this paper will focus on arts diplomacy, which is a sub-category that merges media messaging with cultural exchanges. In a globalizing world, art diplomacy has the potential to be an effective tool in cultural diplomacy because it eliminates language-barriers between foreign countries– depending upon the visual image instead of the written word, to persuade, educate and inform. Art is inspired by the human condition, and is the product of a diverse range of human activities and emotions. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, the "arts" will refer to a broad definition of the visual arts, i.e. paintings, sculpture, photography, and film.

The guiding theory of an imagined community created through visual rhetoric sets the tone of the paper and lays the groundwork for the final assertion: these cultural exchanges produce an international art language, which facilitates communication for resolving international conflict arising from ideological differences. Benedict Anderson, an anthropologist and scholar, observed the creation of "imagined communities" through print-capitalism. He believed that the spread of a common language increased literacy and empowered the populace to rebel against tyrannical governments. Since the late eighteenth century, communication evolution from the printing press, to radio and TV, to the Internet and social media has brought about democratic revolution. But today, as nations globalize, language becomes a more ominous obstacle in the evolution of communication. Language differences are not as great an obstacle to the communicative power of the visual arts, allowing them to become a new tool for cross-cultural conversations. The development of an international arts-language could launch the world into a new age of cross-cultural awareness and understandings that should be both funded, through public grants, and then measured for their results in the war of ideals.

2. Research Questions

The three following research questions will guide the paper. They will first seek to explore the precedent of the governmental employ of art diplomacy. Then, they will look at the modern day use and suggestions for American diplomacy. And the final research question will prompt hypotheses about future implications.

1. What precedent has been set to prove the utility of arts diplomacy?
2. Is the linchpin of modern diplomacy cultural diplomacy?
3. How do the arts create imagined communities? How is this relevant to international relations in a globalized world?

3. Method

This research begins with a review of salient literature, it evaluates arguments by several scholars and policy makers on the topic of cultural and arts diplomacy. It focuses on secondary sources. It first looks at public diplomacy through the United States Information Agency and the Advancing American Art Project failure. Next, the paper

outlines the evolution of the international community's feelings on the U.S. since 2001. It then aims to achieve the next stage of synthesis by analyzing the recommendations and utility of the seven-year-old report, *Cultural Diplomacy the Linchpin of Public Diplomacy,* by the U.S. Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy. These recommendations and historical evidence are used to bolster assertions about the evolution of human communication as a diplomatic tool. Benedict Anderson's theories of print capitalism's impact on imagined communities will be used to illuminate a relationship between communication and democratic revolution and the importance and potential of arts diplomacy. The research achieves original insights and suggestions when it concludes with recommendations for the U.S. government to employ the arts as a way to reverse the declining international perceptions of the country, win the *War on Ideals*, and create the next communication forum for the world's citizens, making an international art-language that encourages democracy, human rights, and healthy cultural exchanges.

4. Conceptual Argument

4.1. Historical Precedent

4.1.1 united states information agency

The United States Information Agency (USIA) existed as the U.S. agency devoted to public diplomacy.[4] President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the USIA with the mission "to understand, inform and influence foreign publics in promotion of the national interest, and to broaden the dialogue between Americans and U.S. institutions and their counterparts abroad".[5] It became the world's largest full-service public relations organization, spending over $2 billion per year to highlight American cultural achievements.[6]

   The Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 abolished the USIA, and in 1999, their programs were broken up and folded into the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the U.S. Department of State. The State Department created the Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs to oversee these new responsibilities. Some of the USIA crowning achievements are: (1) authorizing the Voice of America Program, which, as of February 1999, "broadcasted 660 hours of programming weekly in 53 languages,"[7] (2) the Fulbright Scholarship Program, and (3) other projects targeted within approximately 150 different countries. For example Project Pedro, a USIA funded project that portrayed Communism unfavorably in Mexico during the 1950s.[8] These historical examples demonstrate USIA successes, which can be referred to for the implementation of future programs.

4.1.2 advancing american art project

Not all USIA initiatives were successful. The Advancing American Art Project was a failed public diplomacy initiative launched by the Department of State in 1946. After World War II, as the United States was taking over as a world leader, it was also taking over as the global art hub with New York City replacing Paris. With artists like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock the country launched the modernist and post-modernist era. The goal of the Advancing American Art Project was to send works that "exemplified the freedom of expression enjoyed by artists in a democracy while demonstrating America's artistic coming of age."[9] With these clear objectives, the state began acquiring modernist paintings by contemporary American artists, but just months after its exhibition tours began, controversy erupted.

   Many critics in American media, government forums, and public discourse lambasted the paintings and the artists themselves, as "un-American" and "subversive". Congress intensely disapproved of the program and with the prospect of losing all funding for its cultural programs abroad, the exhibition was recalled.[10] This failure was a sharp blow. The State Department had made some significant flaws in the structuring of the exchange, as well as a flawed framing of the exhibit, which in the eyes of many did not justify the use of taxpayer dollars on such an initiative. This failure highlighted public concern for state sponsored art messaging. Given prior successes, this overreaction triggered blow back to programming that is still visible. Art exchange programs did not cease after this incident, but an element of intimidation was added. Into this hesitant environment of guarded cultural exchanges entered the terrorist attacks at the turn of the century.

4.2 The Linchpin Of Modern Diplomacy

After the terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, a 9/11 Commission was formed to write a report and advise statesmen on how to react. One of the most compelling recommendations in their final report stated, "Just as [the United States] did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideals abroad vigorously… If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us."[11] Despite this initial recommendation, the U.S. has defended itself vigorously with military might, but less so with cultural persuasion. And American involvement in the Middle East resulted in increasingly negative perceptions of America.

Pew Research has polled citizens and conducted research since the start of the phenomena. They published countless reports on the topic, overall tracing an increasingly negative opinion of the U.S. Although Barack Obama's election spiked international optimism, opinions fell shortly after. Ultimately the failure to compose an American identity, values, and purpose in the Middle East hurt national perceptions. A 2001 Pew Research article showed that, "while popular support [was] reported in most regions of the world, the U.S. [was] seen as overreacting to the terrorist attacks…and [opinion leaders thought] the U.S. [was] conducting the war on terrorism without taking into account its allies' interests."[12] This concern about the U.S.'s lack of interest in the opinions of other nations is a primary factor in the growing negative international opinions.[13][14]

In 2005, the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, published a report titled, *Cultural Diplomacy the Linchpin of Public Diploma*cy. It is one of the most influential state sponsored analyses of the situation. The report critiques the steady, but significant decline of the budgets for cultural diplomacy over the past 20 years. Reporting that, "since 1993, budgets have fallen by nearly 30%, staff has been cut by about 30% overseas and 20% in the USA, and dozens of cultural centers, libraries, and branch posts have been closed."[15] Despite a routine of financial neglect, the Advisory Committee demanded reformation. The title of their report itself alludes to the ability of the arts to reveal the "soul of a nation." Culture is the "linchpin," the axis upon which public diplomacy pivots. Therefore cross-cultural education demands to be a primary focus of the state.

The international perception of the United States slipped from a "beacon of hope" to a "dangerous force to be countered."[16] The Advisory Committee states that, "the erosion of our trust and credibility within the international community must be reversed if we hope to use more than our military and economic might in the shaping of world opinion. Culture matters."[17] To this end they present data they found on a fact-finding mission, first that exchange creates a foundation of trust, and neutral platforms for discussion while demonstrating and affirming American values such as family, faith, and the desire for education. Secondly, exchange is flexible and can reach youth, non-elites, and audiences with a language barrier. And finally, exchange also informs Americans, limiting misunderstandings, hatred, and terrorism. This fact-finding mission confirmed assumptions about the significant impact cultural diplomacy has.

4.3 Imagined Communities

Cold War diplomacy and findings published in the *Linchpin Report* show that the private citizen and face-to-face communication is the best mouthpiece for the country.[18] Ultimately when parties communicate face-to-face there is more acceptance and rapid change in perceptions. Art exhibits and the artists themselves serve as one part of this couple. The change seen in this type of communication often reflects an emerging view that similarities far outweigh differences. And remaining differences can be viewed as enriching rather than threatening. The arts foster communication, acceptance, and change. And in times of conflict, art puts a face on numbers.

Benedict Anderson wrote the book Imagined Communities in 1983. He developed the theory of "imagined communities" to explain the modern nationalist revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By outlining societal developments through print-capitalism, Anderson made a compelling argument for the impact communication evolution has on the development of nations.[19] In his book, Anderson argues that the imagined community is documented in the written word and spread through a capitalist marketplace, a process he termed print capitalism. This process creates a national print-language, where common ideals and values are shared across large masses of land through a common printed language. This evolution of communication sparked democratic revolutions in America, France, and throughout Europe in the late 1700 and early 1800s.

Communication media evolved and broadcast soon replaced print as the dominant source for public debate and information exchange. Despite the new medium, Anderson's observations about the impact of print language held true for a new broadcast language. Television and radio were incredibly significant weapons during the World Wars and the Cold War era. They disseminated news, propaganda, and all manner of information to the world at unprecedented speeds and depth. Marrying image with news launched television beyond radio and became the

primary tool in denouncing tyranny and championing democracy and human rights. As print had unified communities, broadcast began to unify nations, providing a very stark contrast between the allies and the axis powers.

Commercialization and popularization of the World Wide Web launched the most recent phase of communication media. The Internet boom and creation of social media sparked further struggles towards democracy. Speculation on the reason behind the Arab Spring attribute the rebellion to frustration with the rule of local government, and to some extent wide gaps in income,[20] but ultimately it arose from discontent brought to public attention by social media. These parallels between communication and democracy are striking. Anderson focused on the power of print, but technology and globalization have pushed his theories further.

As the world globalizes and different cultures are thrown together the effectiveness of face-to-face communication may stall without a jump to a new communication forum. The production and promotion of the arts can overcome linguistic obstacles. As a trans-national broadcast language developed, so too can an international art-language. The example of the shared symbols of leadership can serve as an example of what this may look like. Greek, Roman, French, American, and Russian leaders throughout history were able to tailor artistic symbolism to their own culture. Similar ideas were shared domestically as well as internationally showing similarities that unite, or at the very least provide common ground for diplomatic efforts.

5. Conclusion

Before an international art language can be achieved, the United States must reform current policies. There are a variety of areas that should change and would benefit from change, but there are three distinct areas of note that will be paramount to the success of further diplomatic communication advancement. First the United States must reinvest in public diplomacy in general and arts diplomacy in particular, empower artists to become watchdogs of democracy, liberty, and the human spirit. Second to combat the fragmentation of responsibility for public diplomacy post-1999 a cohesive focused program responsible for the development and promotion of cultural exchange and media messaging should be created. The arts are a different weapon than soldiers and money, but they never the less have impact, so thirdly, they need to be framed as a defensive tool paramount to United States leadership.

The United States of America has tried for over a decade to fight ideas and beliefs with soldiers and capitol, but this kind of intimidation diplomacy is only one half of a necessary "smart diplomacy" action. The country must seize control of the situation and reform or be pulled deeper into a war of ideals.

The task is imperative and difficult, but it is not unachievable. The United States image in the world can be restored, through a carefully coordinated arts diplomacy effort, one emphasizing dialogue and exchange. Proper use of the arts and other elements of public diplomacy can reverse the declining international image of the country, win the *War on Ideals*, and create the next communication forum for the world's citizens, making an international art-language that encourages democracy, human rights, and healthy cultural exchanges.

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