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DISSERTATION

Between Slogans and Solutions

A Frame-Based Assessment Methodology for Public Diplomacy

Michael Egner

This document was submitted as a dissertation in December 2009 in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the doctoral degree in public policy analysis at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. The faculty committee that supervised and approved the dissertation consisted of Eric Larson (Chair), Gery Ryan, and Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how a frame-based assessment methodology can mitigate analytical weaknesses in the design and evaluation of U.S. public diplomacy campaigns. Public diplomacy – informing, influencing and engaging key international audiences – can support U.S. coalition strategies by reducing international opposition to American policies. By viewing public diplomacy as a system that produces and distributes frames – cues or arguments that emphasize particular aspects of a policy, such as financial benefits or moral dilemmas – U.S. policymakers can better design, monitor, and refine messages in support of U.S. policy objectives and in response to policy critiques. For illustrative purposes, we apply this methodology to a specific policy issue – the 2002-2003 U.S. push for UN resolutions supporting the use of military force in Iraq. We conclude that U.S. messages were often not aligned with the key frames driving policy support among foreign publics, and the frame-related statements and positions of foreign political leaders ultimately mattered much more than what was said by U.S. officials themselves. Accordingly, we recommend a country-by-country messaging strategy relying on local advocates, rather than a uniform global campaign rooted in the messages of U.S. officials.

Chapter 1 sets forth this methodology in greater detail, dividing a public diplomacy campaign into discrete steps for assessment. These steps include: (1) baseline target audience research in support of initial frame design; (2) frame dissemination by the U.S. government (USG) and others; (3) the promulgation of these frames by foreign media and opinion leaders; (4) the acceptance of these frames by foreign publics; and (5) the impact of these frames on public support for U.S. policy. These steps will be analyzed in separate, subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 provides necessary background on two topics. The first is a review of previous literature on framing, including the analytic process of identifying frames in media, and the relationship between

framing and public opinion. The second topic is a review of public diplomacy history, with particular emphasis on the issue of Iraq.

Chapter 3 uses the Iraq example to explore the first step of frame-based analysis: baseline target audience research to assess the potential effectiveness of alternative frames. We conclude, based on a statistical model using data available from the Pew Global Attitudes Project (GAP) in July 2002, that certain frames appeared particularly promising for generating policy support in specific countries (e.g., in France, framing U.S. policy as furthering the goals of the UN). Based on this same model, we also conclude that the impact of news consumption on policy support often depended on one's attitude towards local political leaders. This is of key policy significance: it suggests that the influence of media on policy-related public opinion may operate in conjunction with cues from local leaders, making such leaders an essential part of an effective communications strategy.

Chapter 4 evaluates the intermediate step of how well particular policy-relevant frames penetrated foreign media coverage. Through detailed analysis of media content in four key European countries, we conclude that (1) frames emphasized by local leaders were far more likely to be emphasized by a country's media than frames that were not, (2) "pro-USG" frames were generally put forth by US officials rather than by local leaders, and (3) the distribution of "pro-USG" frames did not match that of corresponding "anti-USG" frames, resulting in attacks on the U.S. position that went relatively unanswered. These findings are significant in that they alert policymakers to budding problems in the messaging campaign, such that shortcomings in message content or in local message advocacy could have been addressed.

Chapter 5 tests whether positive frame coverage in a country's media was associated with acceptance of the frame's underlying argument by that country's public (which we refer to as "frame resonance"). We conclude that country-level media coverage of a frame – measured as the percentage of statements in a country's media using a particular frame to discuss a particular issue – did have a significant association with the resonance of that frame in that country, based on a model predicting frame resonance from media coverage and other variables. However, the

association between media coverage and frame resonance was strongest when the media measure excluded USG statements, suggesting that the direct statements of U.S. officials were relatively ineffective in fostering frame resonance. The effect of media was also limited by the effects of political sophistication and individuals' self-identified political ideology, likely because sophisticated individuals were better able to selectively reject media messages they disagreed with in favor of those associated with their natural political leaders. This further emphasizes the advantages of using local advocates and country-by-country messages over a strategy of centralized message distribution by the USG.

Chapter 6 turns to the link between accepting the argument of a particular policy-related frame and actually expressing support for the policy. We again find that individual-level political variables and local political discourse exert important effects on policy support. By developing a model predicting policy support from frame resonance and other variables, we conclude that some frames drove policy acceptance more than others, and that certain frames relating to the consequences of – and motivations behind – U.S. policy may have been underutilized. This type of analysis provides direct policy recommendations regarding what to say about a policy, where, and to whom. We also conclude, based on low correlation among frame resonance variables, that it is not likely that reverse causality (policy support driving stated frame resonance) was at play.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by taking a step back from the Iraq example and discussing general design principles for future public diplomacy campaigns. These principles include (1) early identification of baseline attitudes and frames that are strongly associated with policy support among target audiences; (2) ongoing monitoring and diagnostics, such as identifying where in the framing process a problem occurred or may occur; and (3) refinements to strategy based on the importance of local political discourse and individual-level political variables in moderating the effect of frames on policy support.