

Beyond Broadcasting: Public Diplomacy, Social Media and the Battle for Attention in a Fragmented Information Environment

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Abstract

Social media has fundamentally altered the relationship between institutions and their audiences. Governments, international organizations, political actors, journalists, and citizens now operate within the same interconnected information environment, where institutional messages compete continuously with news, entertainment, influencers, misinformation, and user-generated content for public attention.

This paper examines how the transition from traditional broadcasting to networked communication is reshaping public diplomacy and strategic communication. It argues that the central challenge facing institutions is no longer simply access to audiences, but the ability to secure attention, establish credibility, and sustain meaningful engagement within increasingly fragmented digital environments.

Drawing on public diplomacy and strategic communication scholarship alongside practitioner experience in international communication, the paper explores four interconnected dimensions of contemporary digital influence: **attention**, or the ability of communication to reach audiences within highly competitive information environments; **credibility**, which determines whether institutional communication is trusted; **localization**, through which messages acquire relevance across different cultural and political contexts; and **engagement**, which transforms audiences from passive recipients into participants in information networks.

The paper further examines how social media has weakened traditional distinctions between sender and receiver. Audiences can now interpret, challenge, redistribute, contextualize, and reshape institutional messages, making communication outcomes increasingly dependent on networks rather than the original communicator alone.

The paper argues that effective public diplomacy in the social media age requires a transition from a **broadcasting mindset to a networked engagement model**. Communication effectiveness should therefore be assessed not simply through volume, reach, or visibility, but through credibility, relevance, interaction, and the ability to build sustained relationships with audiences.

The paper concludes by proposing an audience-centred framework for strategic communication that places **attention, credibility, localization, and engagement** at the heart of public diplomacy in an increasingly fragmented global information environment.

Keywords

Public Diplomacy, Social Media, Strategic Communication, Public Perception, Digital Diplomacy, Information Environment, Audience Engagement, Media Influence.