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A Valuable Resource for Exploring Public Relations Approaches to U.S. Public Diplomacy

‘The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy’ is a welcome addition to critical studies within the field of public diplomacy (PD) by public relations (PR) scholar Kathy Fitzpatrick. The monograph aims to untangle many of PD’s historical misconceptions and contribute to the development of its conceptual foundations through an examination of the U.S. experience. In truth, the interaction between the discussions of concepts and the discussions of the U.S. experience are disjointed; on the one hand because many of the key conceptual issues can only really be resolved through comparative analysis, and on the other because the U.S. material demands a stronger conceptual framework. Nonetheless, as a whole this work is an important contribution to the PD field for a variety of reasons, and will be of practical use to graduate students, researchers, and policymakers.

The first section reviews the history of PD during the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, the 1990s, and post-9/11. As a short contextualization of U.S. PD history, it ticks all the boxes. The post-9/11 chapter is probably the most valuable summary and contains the odd moment of genuine insight, such as an all-too-brief discussion of the impact of gender on PD leadership (pp. 58-59). Overall, the historical chapters run through the familiar story of the rise and fall of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and the various missteps taken following 9/11, whilst maintaining a structural focus on the Cold War USIA model. This represents a missed opportunity since the rest of the book argues for a conception of PD based around relationship management – the pursuit of mutually beneficial relations – and it would have made sense for these chapters to explore this as an alternative explanation of U.S. PD history. A concluding chapter draws together ten lessons, which neatly round off the first section and helpfully summarize a decade of debate in U.S. PD scholarship.

In the second section, entitled ‘Advancing the Debate,’ Fitzpatrick conducts the admirable task of engaging with some of the key issues in PD scholarship. Chapter 4 provides a dizzying list of alternative definitions of the term, which raise important questions about what PD is and does, who conducts it, who is targeted by it, and whose interests are served by it. Chapter 5 promises one of the most important contributions the book has to offer by leveling well-deserved criticism at the term ‘soft power’ and exploring the relevance of the public relations research field to PD. Fitzpatrick builds her argument around a questionable definition of PD’s ‘central purpose’ that surprisingly fails to engage with or build upon the key theoretical problems from the preceding chapter on definitions: ‘Public diplomacy’ s fundamental purpose is to help a nation establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships.
with strategic foreign publics that can affect national interests’ (p. 105). While the discussion of soft power never really delivers, the subsequent literature review of conceptual overlaps between PD, PR and relationship management theory is outstanding and represents a genuine contribution to the field.

Chapter 6 has the aim of ‘sort[ing] out the nation branding controversy’ (p. 131), and as a review of relevant literature it may well be the best currently in print. Fitzpatrick continues the argument from the preceding chapter that relationship management theory can provide a framework for explaining PD. Her contention that PD is about improving a nation’s relations rather than reputation begs the question for whom? Likewise, the argument that the two fields are incompatible because PD is about mutual understanding while nation brands are about reinforcing national competitiveness deserves to be reframed as an empirical question drawing on comparative cases. Chapter 7 examines structural and organizational issues quoting the opinions of over 200 USIA alumni as well as a number of other reports. Chapter 8 on evaluation succeeds in linking back into the core argument through a valuable discussion of how the PR field has begun approaching the task of measuring relationships. Despite engaging with wide-ranging literature on PD evaluation, the chapter surprisingly does not discuss the actual methods used by the State Department. Finally, Chapter 9 gives an overview of ‘the new public diplomat’ summarizing reports into training programs and lamenting the lack of cachet PD receives as a Foreign Service career stream.

The third and final section, ‘A Way Forward,’ summarizes the results of a USIA alumni survey and makes suggestions for the future of the field. Fitzpatrick argues for a ‘relational framework’ or ‘relational paradigm,’ which rejects a power-based view of PD and instead focuses upon mutuality (p. 247). It seems that the relational paradigm of PD is most useful for explaining the USIA’s work, cultural diplomacy, and what the British Council call ‘cultural relations,’ but is barely explored in the context of other aspects of PD such as political advocacy or military PD. The overall focus on the USIA throughout the book limits the breadth of the discussion, and Fitzpatrick’s thesis would have been better served by engaging with other PD functions, and indeed other national and international structures. Clearly, though, there should be little doubt that a relational paradigm can be important to conceptualizations of the field.

Overall, it is unfortunate that the opening historical survey and one or two other chapters do not sufficiently engage with the relationship management approach. The effect is that the study hesitates between being a full-blooded reconceptualization of PD aimed at scholars and a recommendation for the future of U.S. PD aimed at policymakers. The USIA survey supplements the study with decades of collective wisdom but could have been more fully integrated into the framework; this contributes to the sense of disjointedness between chapters and in purpose. Some of the discussions will surely be indispensable to PD debates for both target groups, while others are worth consulting primarily for the comprehensive literature reviews.