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FYI, below are the brief remarks I made before a discussion about Public Diplomacy at CFR. My attempt to briefly summarize what we have been trying to do and why I believe it is so important in today's world.

Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World: A Review of U.S. Public Diplomacy

Remarks

Judith A. McHale
Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
Opening Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations
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To say we live in a changing world is either the greatest understatement of our time, or the most frequently made statement by public officials today.

Both may be true. But in the context of public diplomacy, it cannot be stated enough.

We live in a changed and changing world. We inhabit a moment of uncertainty and possibility that allows for and requires entirely new ways of thinking.

In January 2010, seven months after I assumed my position, Bono shared ten ideas to kick off the new decade on the op-ed page of the New York Times. One of the accompanying graphics really stood out for me.

For most of human history, power has been held by the privileged few sitting atop an ever-widening base of people in a pyramid of systematic social control. In Bono's conception, and that of the New York Times' art department, that pyramid has been upended: Wide tiers of people, their arms raised in active participation, narrowed to a point. And together, they bear into the bent back of a strongman, straining to hold up under the weight of the empowered masses.

Eighteen months later, in the midst of the Arab Spring, and with all the events happening in Egypt, the idea of a pyramid turned on its head is an even more fitting metaphor.

In a world where power and influence truly belongs to the many, we must engage with more people in more places. That is the essential truth of public diplomacy in the internet age.

But it is not just a diffusion of power that necessitates greater engagement. The landscape of actors looking to influence that power has broadened as well.

In years past, we were content to wait for the world to come to us. We expected that they would. And when we were the most attractive option, perhaps they did.

Not anymore.

Today we must contend with an increasingly savvy and motivated set of influencers on a global stage, each armed with a vast array of affordable and adaptable tools to spread their message.

Powers such as China, Brazil, and Iran are flexing their economic and political muscle and establishing their own networks of cultural centers and language instruction around the world. We also have to counter lone extremists who pump their ideas into circulation as easily as legitimate actors.

These new challenges force us to ask: How do we stand out and respond in such a crowded and complex environment?

Our answer is simple: By taking our public diplomacy into the marketplace of ideas.

The pyramid of power flipped because people all around the world are clamoring to be heard, and demanding to shape their own futures. They are having important conversations right now – in chatrooms and classrooms and boardrooms – and they aren't waiting for us.

If we want to be part of the deliberations, we must go to them. We must be out there in as many ways as possible, and at every hour of every day. So that's what we have worked to do – starting with President Obama and Secretary Clinton and extending out through every officer at our Embassies.

Being in the marketplace of ideas means using the same venues and platforms that communities and activists use. So we have worked to find the important conversations and respectfully add our voice. To proactively engage with global media, and to push back against inaccurate information. To tell our own story where others are telling stories about us.

In all things, we have instructed and empowered our officers to pursue their work through the lens of a consumer. For many years we looked at foreign publics through a political or an economic lens. We aimed for the top of the pyramid – for political, military, and labor leaders, and the economic elite. Which means we missed the young, the unaffiliated, the unemployed, and anyone else who didn't fit neatly into one of those boxes. We missed some of the very people who are driving the change we see all around us.

The inverted pyramid makes integrating a consideration of the attitudes and opinions of foreign publics an essential component of the foreign policy decision-making process in the 21st century.

Policy making and public diplomacy were at one time seen as separate and far from equal disciplines of our foreign policy apparatus, and the organization was structured accordingly. For years that undercut our outcomes from the start.

The great newsman and the first head of the U.S. Information Agency, Edward R. Murrow, in a moment of frustration, best illustrated this point. After being asked to put a positive spin on the Bay of Pigs crisis, Murrow fumed: "If they want me in on the crash landings, I'd better damn well be in on the take-offs."

For the past two years, ensuring public diplomacy is there at the take-offs has been one of our guiding principles. We have brought public diplomacy perspectives in at the highest levels, and emphasized innovation in the field to support our foreign policy directives. We have worked aggressively to reform the structures and processes of the State Department to enable better outcomes.

Recent events in Tunisia illustrate why this approach is so critical today. Only months ago, the set of actors who mattered in Tunisia was extremely limited. Whether in business or politics, a small group held the keys to power. Broader outreach was virtually impossible. And our Embassy and programs were largely designed to operate effectively in that world.

Then, in a matter of weeks, the system turned on its head. Where a small set of voices once determined the direction of the country, 11 million proud Tunisians now eagerly participate in shaping their future—from elections to education to economic development. More importantly, for the first time, they are able to access the information and tools they need to do so.

Tunisians are forming political parties and strengthening their civil society. They are expanding freedom of expression and bolstering education and job-skills training. They are sparking business growth and job creation. And we stand ready to aid these efforts if the Tunisian people ask us for our support.

To help Tunisians seize this tremendous opportunity and ensure a successful transition to democracy, we need to radically alter our model for engagement. We need to go far beyond government ministries to engage deeply and broadly across Tunisian society. The upended pyramid requires a fundamental reorientation of our diplomacy.

Just as Tunisia ignited a wider trend in the Middle East, it is a bellwether of what is happening globally. Citizens around the world are increasingly driving political, social, and economic trends, and we must adapt.

In this rapidly evolving landscape, as we seek to advance our foreign policy and enhance the security and prosperity of our world, our approach must have public diplomacy—and the citizens it seeks to engage—at its core. Thank you.

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