The public diplomacy concept reflects an increasingly salient aspect of diplomatic practice. It encompasses a range of communication interventions intended to facilitate influence, understanding, and relation-building between states and foreign publics. The spread of new and social media technologies has also prompted new attention to the potential of publics as crucial and politically effective agents necessary to achieve policy ends. Public diplomacy is thus increasingly mediated through technological platforms. Public diplomacy’s role in managing conflicts and in conducting mediated war, however, suggests further attention to how such media platforms (from broadcasting to social media) shape its purpose and relation to concepts such as strategic communication and information operations. In practice, public diplomacy programs reflect a balance of competing imperatives, to advocate as much as to build relations of understanding. What sort of constitutive role does media technology play in reconciling or perpetuating this inherent conceptual tension in the changing strategies and practices of public diplomacy?

This chapter provides an introduction to the concept of “public diplomacy” as a range of activities employed by states to communicate with foreign publics in ways that support their strategic objectives, and describes how states deploy a variety of programs to manage perceptions, persuade, and establish credibility in the service of statecraft. Public diplomacy is considered in this chapter as a field of practice aimed primarily at shaping the symbolic and relational context within which publics constrain or enable state goals. The differing forms of public diplomacy (international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy) are argued here as challenged by mediatization in ways that illuminate new norms and purpose for public diplomacy within the field of media and conflict. Mediatization is offered here as a perspective to assess how communication platforms (technologies and their attendant practices) impact public diplomacy strategy and programs (Pamment 2014). The term does not suggest a deterministic account of media technology-driven change, but rather focuses attention on how the practices associated with a technology constrain and enable thinking about their strategic significance in the service of public diplomacy.

The chapter begins with an overview of the public diplomacy concept, and surveys the typologies and categories of practice that have informed contemporary understanding of the concept. The second section describes the constitutive impact of mediatization on
Public diplomacy, drawing on perspectives in media and technology studies to elaborate how “logics” associated with media technologies have transformed its strategy, practice, and measurement. The third section presents the mediated conflict between the United States and Russia over territorial disputes in the Ukraine in order to demonstrate how technology reveals persistent unresolved tensions in the linkages between public diplomacy and other institutions of foreign policy.

Public diplomacy: definitions and conceptual ambiguity

Gyorgy Szondi observes that the origins of public diplomacy lay primarily in the managing and prevention of conflict (Szondi 2008). Indeed, public diplomacy represents a potentially vital role in the management of conflict, given its specific mandate to manage international relations through communications with foreign publics (Cull 2009a). The term public diplomacy is largely acknowledged as American in origin, and is attributed to Edmund Guillion, who sought an alternative to “propaganda” in describing US international broadcasting, cultural relations, and educational exchange programs (Scott-Smith 2011). Yet the term “public diplomacy” has grown from its origins as a neologism to describe the organization of US activities, to a more inclusive concept that encompasses a variety of institutional arrangements states employ to communicate with publics and non-state actors to advance foreign policy objectives and national interests.

Public diplomacy has attracted widespread attention from international actors seeking to leverage communication platforms in the service of statecraft. China, for example, invests considerably in its international broadcasting capacity as well as its cultural and educational exchange presence abroad through its Confucius Institutes (Rawnsley 2012). China has also built up its research on public diplomacy, in order to facilitate better practices and to extend China’s strategic ambitions toward the amplification of its soft power (Hayden 2011). South Korea and Japan have likewise invested in a variety of programs to promote their cultural industries, both as a means of economic growth as well as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy (Akaha 2010, Otmaizingin 2007, Kim 2011). Russia, as this chapter later explores, has turned to international broadcasting and programming online, to expand an audience for its counter-Western news frames as a soft balancing media strategy. Comparative studies have only begun to account for how public diplomacy has become popularized as a component of diplomatic institutions around the world (Hayden 2011, Pamment 2012a, Sun 2012).

The problem with public diplomacy as an analytical term, however, is that it incorporates a wide array of state-based activity. It encompasses a variety of communication methods, normative and ethical considerations, and timeframes of action. Public diplomacy also involves a diverse range of practitioners: journalists, cultural relations experts, educators, students, press officers, and technologists working under a very broad mandate to communicate with foreign publics. As John Brown has noted, the label public diplomacy covers kinds of activities that are potentially at cross-purposes, where the objectives of persuasion and the fostering of understanding potentially work against each other (Brown 2009). The scope of programs aimed at the promotion of culture, the provision of news, and facilitation of educational experience distinguishes public diplomacy from connotations of propaganda, and can be distilled to two primary imperatives for practice. Specifically, public diplomacy fulfills two (at times competing) roles for foreign policy institutions: to advocate messages or ideas and to cultivate relations of mutual understanding.

The inherent tension within the practice of public diplomacy is therefore not surprising, given the range of activities that increasingly fall under the term public diplomacy. Scholars
have attempted to refine the term based on its institutional legacies and ideal-types. For example, Robin Brown’s four part typology breaks down the term into four dimensions for “mapping arguments about public diplomacy,” and includes (a) public diplomacy as an extension of diplomacy, (b) public diplomacy as a matter of national projection (or branding), (c) external communication for cultural relations, and (d) external communication as political warfare. Each of these ideal-type categories describe different kinds of politics via international communication, giving the term public diplomacy a wide conceptual footprint (Brown 2012).

Nicholas Cull’s off-cited typology derives from both historical practices as well as normative imperatives, including advocacy, cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, listening, and international broadcasting (Cull 2008). Cull’s terms to describe public diplomacy combine strategic arguments for doing public diplomacy, with the institutional practices that have emerged historically among ministries of foreign affairs.

Other diplomacy scholars, however, have noted the increasing convergence of public diplomacy tools with the evolving institutional burdens of traditional diplomacy. A comprehensive report on diplomatic transformation by Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan, and Paul Sharp argues that public diplomacy has become a significant aspect of diplomacy and diplomatic institutions, because much of diplomacy involves the management and cultivation of multi-stakeholder arrangements to address transnational issues (Hocking et al. 2012). The politics of this kind of “polylateral” diplomacy requires open and transparent action to build coalitions and cultivate support among increasingly organized and informed publics, bringing public diplomacy into the fold of “traditional” diplomacy (Wiseman 2010). They describe how diplomatic ministries are increasingly required to embrace public diplomacy methods and instruments in order to carry out “engagement” to mobilize or inform around particular issues, “shaping strategies” to prompt diplomatic action by reframing the terms of an issue, “disruptive strategies” to address a foreign public opinion consensus, and finally “destructive strategies” of subversion through communication.

The fusion of diplomatic institutions and public diplomacy is warranted, in part, by arguments detailing the rise of the so-called “new public diplomacy,” which describe the growth of non-state actors as pivotal to international relations, along with the diffusion of new and social media technologies empowering such actors, as requiring new thinking about public diplomacy. Rather than serving as a euphemism for messaging campaigns and the monological promotion of culture or ideas, the “new public diplomacy” reflects the political agency of non-state actors, and the changing requirements for influence as a result of communication technology (Seib 2009). The “new public diplomacy” is not simply a description of the status quo as it is a prescription: a normative template for adapting public diplomacy to new conditions and political actors (Melissen 2011).

Similarly, Ole Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver Neumann argue that the historical mandate of diplomatic representation is now matched by the salience of governance, where diplomacy must manage distributed forms of oversight, coordinating the shared interests of state and non-state actors over issues that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state (Sending et al. 2011). Put simply, diplomats and foreign affairs practitioners must adapt their institutions to account for the larger social consequences of global communication flows that necessitate qualitatively distinct new roles for diplomats in the field of international politics, such as the coordination and management of multiple non-state stakeholders invested in the transnational governance of issues such as human rights and climate change, where communication is central to sustaining networks that support diplomatic objectives. Taken together, emergent observations among diplomacy scholars suggest that the business
of “traditional” diplomacy is both increasingly mediated and distributed in ways that blur distinctions with public diplomacy.

Given these observations about the definition and context of public diplomacy, what does public diplomacy increasingly signify for how states turn to communication practices in the service of their interests and indeed, in how public diplomacy conveys strategic interest? What is clear, based on definitional treatments of public diplomacy, is that public diplomacy involves both short-term concerns with messaging and advocacy, and longer term horizons of symbolic inducement, where relation-building practices and acts of communication work to establish social capital and identification between the “sending” actor and the “target” audience. Public diplomacy can be both directly interventionist in shaping the opinions or considerations of its audience or it can be performative, such as when states cultivate legitimacy by the symbolic value of communicating, where governments demonstrate their credibility by “listening,” “facilitating,” and otherwise participating in how publics communicate. For example, the Department of State’s “Share America” social media platform is arguably not designed to push US perspectives on the news, but to cultivate online communities through the act of sharing stories online (Scola 2014).

In addition to well-known efforts to leverage news media to spread messages or establish exchange programs to cultivate long-term interest, public diplomacy can also be about empowering audiences through the provision of resources. This facilitative stance is exemplified in the US Young African Leadership Initiative. This program provides opportunities for entrepreneurs and civic leaders to attend educational events in the United States. However, the broader impact of the program may be manifest in the social networks of applicants, developed and sustained by the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) to foster more robust civil society and economic development.

Where the typologies of public diplomacy converge, intentionally or not, is on public diplomacy’s purpose. Public diplomacy is primarily concerned with communication-derived influence, and is predicated on the capacity of international actors to leverage communication platforms (broadcasting media, interpersonal communication, social media, cultural consumption, etc.) to otherwise transform audience beliefs and dispositions, as well as to provoke or demobilize action (Fisher 2010). Public diplomacy is thus (potentially) more than a narrowly conceived strategy of propaganda, where publics are addressed to move opinion, but is more broadly about shaping the communication environment among populations or in regions that directly impact the goals of the country. For example, this could be bolstering the communicative activities of other actors to demobilize the recruitment strategies of extremist organizations, or providing political communication resources to support democratic institutions. In this regard, public diplomacy should not be narrowly conceived as a repertoire of message promotion or cultural relations, but about intervening in the communication infrastructure of a given region, population, or nation-state.

The history of information operations and propaganda suggest that the two defining aspects of this broad vision of public diplomacy, advocacy and relation-building, are certainly not new (Cull 2009b). Yet what public diplomacy looks like in practice is often very much contingent on how international actors perceive its worth as a tool to facilitate policy objectives, and how actors perceive the exigency of the situation they confront. Thus, while some countries tend to deploy a version of public diplomacy that is largely defined by maintaining and cultivating cultural relations, others conceive public diplomacy as instrumental to goals of national power projection (Hayden 2011, Zaharna et al. 2013). How states interpret the mandate and ideal practice of public diplomacy, in other words, suggests in practice how the term is evolving in step with other institutions of international relations and foreign policy.
The case of the United States is particularly instructive. As Bruce Gregory notes, the prioritization of public diplomacy in the United States is driven primarily by crisis or some form of political exigency, rather than a deep institutional commitment to the concept (Gregory 2011). In the decade after the September 11, 2001 attacks, considerable attention was paid to revamping the instruments of public diplomacy, given that the United States Information Agency was merged with the Department of State in 1999, effectively “dismantling” the official US organization responsible for managing its public diplomacy capacity (Fitzpatrick 2010). Dozens of reports emerged from think tanks, academics, and government institutions to consider ways to reform or rehabilitate the US ability to communicate to foreign publics deemed crucial to US foreign policy interests (Lord 2008).

R.S. Zaharna argued that to revamp its public diplomacy, the US needed to move away from broadcast-oriented models of public diplomacy thinking, and embrace the relational potential of public diplomacy to defuse conflict and to cultivate mutual understanding across cultural divides (Zaharna 2009). In particular, media platforms were no longer available as easy routes to the cultivation of opinion or messaging. Middle East audiences for the US perspective could choose from a variety of new satellite news outlets, and had little incentive to select US-based information outlets (such as the Al-Hurra satellite news channel established in 2004) in order to gain the US view on its foreign policies and actions. There were diminished opportunities to leverage a purely broadcasting-based approach to achieving the influence goals of public diplomacy, because the field of potential media framing was already dominated by well-established and trusted news sources, such as Al Jazeera (Entman 2008).

By 2008, the US attitudes toward public diplomacy shifted toward a facilitative stance, where the emphasis was no longer on burnishing the image of the United States, but on the provision of communication outlets to potential audiences for the US message, and towards achieving the goals of foreign policy over specific audience-centric objectives. James Glassman’s 2008 speech on the rise of “public diplomacy 2.0” embodied this strategic shift. Citing the impact of social media on political organization, Glassman touted new efforts at public diplomacy that leveraged the affordances of the medium, such as the “Democracy Video Challenge,” a contest to invite contributors to submit their own vision of democracy via video, and the Alliance for Youth Summit, an event co-sponsored with US technology partners to bring together youth civil society change agents from around the world (Glassman 2008).

During the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s notion “21st century statecraft” further effaced the distinction between public diplomacy and diplomacy, by articulating the need for a new form of diplomacy that embraced transparency and outreach to new, critical demographics for US diplomacy efforts, including youth, women, and Muslim constituencies around the world (Clinton 2010). The master trope of this strategic turn is perhaps best embodied in the term “engagement,” featured prominently in the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review. Engagement signified efforts to connect with the audience for diplomatic communication, in ways that invite response or participation. To engage meant, at least theoretically, more than simply “pushing a press release” through new media channels, but to leverage communication platforms to build more robust relationships with publics – to counter misinformation, improving understanding of US policies, and build up social capital among populations that would impact US foreign policy objectives (Hayden 2013).

US public diplomacy’s turn to technology embodied much of this emerging ethos. The Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the Department of State launched
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the department’s first social media platform, *Exchanges Connect*, in 2008. By 2013, ECA had expanded its portfolio on exchange and cultural promotion to include supporting Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platforms for English language instruction, and the development of a video game distributed online. Under the authority of IIP, the Office of Innovative Engagement used social media and Short Message Service (SMS) text-based applications to promote US presidential visits to Ghana in 2008 and Brazil in 2011. These efforts extended the traditional reach of the US embassy in building connections to populations not normally visible to traditional practices of public diplomacy, and invited feedback to US presidential communications. By 2011, social media properties managed by US embassies, and coordinated by IIP had become commonplace. The United States was lauded for its ambitious embrace of social media platforms in the service of public diplomacy, and with building what Fergus Hanson described as a “global media empire,” based on the number of Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and other region-specific platforms for “engagement” (Hanson 2012, Paris 2013).

Yet the rhetoric of such new initiatives did not necessarily mirror the prescriptive implications of the “new public diplomacy” scholarship, which claims the necessity for a relational public diplomacy focused on the cultivation of networks and relations in order to facilitate foreign policy objectives (Zaharna et al. 2013). While US public diplomacy, broadly speaking, remained committed to the long-term relation-building efforts of cultural and exchange-based diplomacy, its strategic discourse and practices to utilize new and social media platforms convey a more direct concern with the capacity of communication platforms to secure routes to persuasion and advocacy. Official US strategic communication doctrine, for example, says little about “understanding,” and strongly emphasizes the “synchronization” of messaging across government outlets. In practice, new initiatives taking advantage of media technologies are concerned primarily with the reach of communication to promote US perspectives, and less with the deliberative qualities of the communication to inform US policy (*Update to Congress on National Framework for Strategic Communication* 2012).

For example, in 2013, IIP was criticized by the Office of the Inspector General for “buying likes” on Facebook, a practice of building followers via social media through advertising (*Inspection of the Bureau of International Information Programs* 2013). How this kind of emphasis on building social media followers translated into substantive engagement involving the exchange of opinion and viewpoints on US foreign policy remained less obvious. In US strategic discourse, the term “engagement” was deployed less as a means to describe a new form of public diplomacy, than as a way to reframe traditional approaches to message and communication control. Engagement, in other words, became a catch-all term to describe contact between the State Department’s communication and its touchpoints. This is evident in internal measurement and evaluation methodologies. Since the advent of a new “strategic template” for public diplomacy strategy in 2010, the emphasis on “shaping the narrative” and influencing “conversations” remains prominent (McHall 2013). Despite the rise of “relational” public diplomacy concepts then, much of US public diplomacy remains committed to securing attention and managing communication flows. While some scholars argue as much in critical treatments of public diplomacy, this also suggests a consequence of public diplomacy moving more solidly into the orbit of traditional diplomacy and its mandate to sustain and achieve foreign policy objectives (Comor and Bean 2012).

Public diplomacy scholar James Pamment observes in his comparative study of public diplomacy that upon close scrutiny, much of contemporary public diplomacy practice remains grounded in more narrowly construed conceptualization of influence. Rather than encouraging a more robust international public sphere or promoting substantive dialogue...
between and among international audiences, Pamment argues that 21st century public diplomacy reflects “propaganda in the age of strategic communication,” rather than an idealized form of dialogue or collaboration driven communicative action (Pamment 2012a). What explains Pamment’s observations? Despite the widespread recognition among policy-makers that new communication environments can transform the practice of public diplomacy towards more inclusive and collaborative environs for relation-building, the tension between advocacy and mutual understanding remains tilted towards the management and control of narratives and media frames that sustain perspectives about a country’s foreign policy and actions. Public diplomacy’s move toward the “mainstream” of diplomatic institutional thinking certainly provides one explanation for this shift, in that we would expect to find public diplomacy programs now more directly concerned with practices that effect changes among audiences that impact foreign policy. Yet there may be less obvious impacts derived from perceptions about the media used in the service of public diplomacy. Manuel Castells argues that politics in general is not merely increasingly reliant on media, it is primarily carried out on and through media (Castells 2007, p. 242–6). This broad claim invites consideration of the sort of consequences media technologies might have on conceptual thinking and practice related to public diplomacy, and provides an opportunity to draw upon theoretical concepts in media and technology studies in order to understand how public diplomacy is evolving from strategic logics to practice.

Mediatization, media logics, and public diplomacy

The growth of conceptual and typological assessments of public diplomacy readily acknowledges the context of media technologies as significant to the “new” public diplomacy or “relational” approaches to public diplomacy practice (Kelley 2010). The impact of media technology is visible in the diffusion of political agency of foreign publics, non-state actors, and transnational advocacy networks – and how nation-states accommodate these developments in their respective public diplomacy programs.

Yet it is unclear how the ubiquity of media technology among public diplomacy’s traditional stakeholders and constituents has left its imprint on the conceptualization of public diplomacy, including its normative and strategic dimensions. While much of the rhetoric surrounding the rise of networked publics and newly empowered non-state actors has sparked more attention to the strategic significance of public diplomacy, it is less certain whether this represents a serious rethinking of the purpose of public diplomacy, the fundamental assumptions about its role as a tool of statecraft, or how public diplomacy offers opportunities for the extension of other aspects of diplomatic institutions. Do arguments for a “new” public diplomacy propose something qualitatively distinct from previous episodes, a shift in the “art of the possible” for public diplomacy as a field of practice?

As diplomacy scholars continue to grapple with the question of institutional transformation, emerging perspectives among media and technology studies may offer insight into the constitutive effects of media and communication technology that address the “materiality” of public diplomacy. Insights from these fields speak directly to how perceptions of technological affordance shape, transform, or reaffirm the practices of public diplomacy across international contexts. The notion of affordance is crucial: it accounts for how certain activities and meanings reflect the properties of the media technology in question (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). Affordance signifies “the physical properties or features of objects and settings that ‘invite’ actors to use them in particular ways” (Lievrouw 2014, p. 23). Following Latour, affordances are both the “permission and the promise” of a thing (Latour
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2002, p. 250). So what does the irrevocable context of media technology promise for public diplomacy?

To be clear, this question does not prompt a deterministic response – media technologies are not necessarily the “cause” of any transformation in the normative and strategic conceptualization of public diplomacy. Rather, thinking about the constitutive impact of technology invites the straightforward question of what has changed, particularly in how practitioners and policy-makers seize upon the perceived affordances of the media technology available. Public diplomacy is an expansive term that accounts for a variety of differing practices, yet are there implications that can be specifically located in media technology’s growth among public diplomacy practice and programs: from cultural relations to information operations?

One way to approach this question is through the concept of mediatization. The mediatization concept is well-established in media and communication studies, and offers a way to articulate media’s impact on public diplomacy by focusing on the ideas and practices associated with media outside the context of diplomacy (Couldry and Hepp 2013). In particular, mediatization focuses attention on how the logics associated with media use have impacted institutional perspectives. Indeed, the notion of a “media logic,” an early approach to the study of mediatization, described and critiqued how political actors changed their communication practices to accommodate the “the selection, organization, and production of issues according to criteria of competitiveness” (Landerer 2013). “Media logic” therefore describes how the practice of political communication is increasingly distorted by the imperatives that drive corporate media’s attention to audience share, speed, and message composition to meet such needs. Mediatization, likewise, describes the encroachment of media logic into fields of practice not traditionally governed by commercial media or private journalism. The “mediatization of politics refers to the ‘predominance of audience-oriented market logic’ over normative logic in political actors’ behavior,” which describes how a competitive disposition associated with the commercial media is transposed into other fields, displacing norms of practice and purpose (Landerer 2013, p. 240).

Attention to mediatization is not simply a focus on technology, but on how attitudes towards a media technology are imported from other institutions in ways that reconfigure the norms and strategy of communication. Mediatization may not provide a totalizing diagnosis of what has changed in the context of public diplomacy, as public diplomacy is already a field defined by competing logics and imperatives, where perspectives of media professionals, cultural affairs experts, and public relations officials are situated within the demands of states seeking to cultivate influence and the inertia of older institutional cultures of diplomacy. Rather, mediatization is offered here as a way to consider how the practices of public diplomacy reflect emergent or enduring frameworks.

Some scholars have already noted the intrusion of such media-derived logics into the strategic discourse of a broadly construed public diplomacy. James Pamment argues that the measurement and evaluation imperatives that now frame much of government attention to public diplomacy has irrevocable consequences for the kind of public diplomacy programs eventually developed (Pamment 2012b). Thinking about public diplomacy, in other words, is constrained by how it can be measured and demonstrated as providing concrete effects. Similarly, Rasmussen and Merkelsen (2012) describe the rise of marketing approaches to branding as narrowing the way in which public diplomacy has been incorporated into strategic thinking. They cite the Danish response to the Jyllands-Posten cartoon crisis in the 2009 as emblematic of a shift toward “reputation management” and the minimization of risk as the primary purpose of public diplomacy within a national security framework.
Locating strategic reasoning within the affordances of media is also plainly evident in US policy-making discourse. In 2011, Secretary Clinton argued before the US Senate on the necessity of increased resources for public diplomacy and international broadcasting. The language frames the strategic necessity of media in stark terms:

We are in an information war and we are losing that war. Al Jazeera is winning, the Chinese have opened a global multi-language television network, the Russians have opened up an English-language network. I’ve seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive.

(Cited in Lubin 2011)

Clinton presented US public diplomacy in securitized rhetoric, made necessary in comparison to the media instruments of other countries. Strategic necessity is inferred from the possession of broadcasting capabilities, serving as a marker of information dominance under a presumed condition of mediated “war.”

Public diplomacy reflects mediatization in that governments seize upon the competitive, zero-sum logics associated with media fields outside of the context of diplomacy. Mediatization has constitutive effects when strategic thinking about public diplomacy tends toward competition over narratives and attention, despite recognition that the technological context for public diplomacy affords new opportunities for relation-building and mutual understanding. The following section explores the mediatization of public diplomacy by examining how the US deployed a social media counter-narrative strategy in the Ukraine in 2014. In this case, the affordances of the medium present opportunities that function as strategic goals in themselves.

Public diplomacy as policy tool: the Ukraine Communications Task Force

On February 22, 2014, the embattled president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown after an extended period of protests in Majdan Square of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv/Kiev. The protests, which had gained considerable momentum through online organization via social media platforms, had also drawn sharp criticism from the Russian government. Shortly after the overthrow, Russia refused to recognize the interim government, citing the work of fascist elements in the ouster of Yanukovych and responding to concerns of ethnic Russians in the eastern regions of Ukraine where the former president drew most of his support.

In late February of 2014, Russian military forces arrived in the Crimean peninsula of Ukraine, seizing the territory and surrounding the Ukrainian military garrison (Walker et al. 2014). After securing the Crimean parliament, the Russian-influenced legislators dismissed the previous legislative body and called for a referendum to succeed from Ukraine. On March 13, 2014, the newly declared Republic of Crimea declared its independence and was subsequently incorporated into the Russian Federation.

The Russian annexation of Crimea was roundly criticized in the international community for violations of Ukrainian sovereignty, despite Russia’s own narrative of the annexation as justified by popular referendum in the disputed territory. The UN General Assembly approved a resolution on March 27, 2014 declaring the referendum invalid. The US response to the Crimean crisis was swift. Shortly before the referendum, the Ukraine Communications Task Force (UCTF) was set up up to directly counter Russian efforts to control the narrative.
of the referendum and the eventual annexation. This became increasingly important, as the Russian Federation became involved in a growing proxy conflict between the Ukrainian government and separatist ethnic Russian territories in Eastern Ukraine, threatening to widen the scope of the conflict.

The UCTF represents an important example of the operative logics underscoring the contemporary practice of public diplomacy, particularly in crisis and conflict scenarios. It also reflects an episode during which public diplomacy was given a leading role in coordinating the foreign policy response of the US government. And unlike much of the growing literature on relational approaches to public diplomacy, the strategy and practice embodied in the UCTF represents something different than the more inclusive and participatory models of public diplomacy found in prescriptive scholarship. Instead, it reflects a fixated effort at managing the narratives surrounding Russian involvement in Ukraine.

The mission of the UCTF was to erode support for Russian media outlets’ depiction of events on the ground in the Ukraine, both within Ukraine and other international actors. It was designed to portray Russian actions as violating international law and the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine, while legitimating support for the newly established post-revolution government in Kiev/Kyiv. The UCTF represents a whole-of-government approach to the advocacy function of public diplomacy, and involved support from the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and other federal departments.

The UCTF’s efforts involved a number of activities aimed at countering the Russian narrative. It produced a YouTube video, “Sanctions on Russia – How did We Get Here,” that explained the US rationale for imposing sanctions. It also set up the UKRProgress social media presence across a number of social media properties, including Twitter, LiveJournal, YouTube, and Facebook (via its “Straight Talk” page). These platforms were established as broadcasting outlets, as well as opportunities to track and recalibrate messaging strategies, which were subject to measurement and impact metrics (e.g. retweets, new follower tracking, aggregate demographic data, and usage of URL shorteners). The UCTF also set up a coordinated summary of US official communication called the “Diplomatic Playbook” to provide embassies, journalists, and analysts with policy-maker statements, news articles, and US social media content multiple times per week.

Yet the US efforts to counter the Russian narrative faced considerable resistance from the Russian international broadcasting and strategic communication apparatus. While the US has claimed some success in shaping the “conversation” on Twitter and other social media platforms regarding Russian involvement in Ukraine, it is unclear whether this effort has impacted the gains made by Russia’s coordinated information operations capability.

William Stevens, the director the UCTF, stated that Russia has spent “twenty years building up” its strategic communications organizations, which constitutes a vertically integrated communication system strongly centralized with the Russian government (Powell 2014). The Russian infrastructure for its communications operations included media dominance within the Russian-speaking media in Eastern Ukraine, as well as near total control over the press within Russia itself. Outside of Russia, the international broadcaster Russia Today (or RT) leveraged its considerable online audience to amplify Russia’s foreign policy legitimacy (Richter 2014).

Russia’s communication strategy was both multi-platform and targeted to multiple audiences. Within Russian speaking audiences, the media framing strategies emphasized the rights of ethnic minorities within Ukraine, and aggressively took advantage of photo-manipulation techniques to portray acts of the Ukrainian government in a negative light. Social media platforms such as Twitter were flooded with both in-person and automated
accounts set up to defend Russian actions and react to posts that portrayed Russia in a negative light (Seddon 2014).

In contrast to the Russian efforts, the US public diplomacy strategy was more dispersed across embassies and federal agencies – a flexible if less coordinated approach to cultivating support for the US position on Ukraine. The State Department’s efforts were not without controversy. The hashtag “#UnitedforUkraine” drew criticism from domestic political commentators, after the office of the spokesperson argued that Russia would have to recognize the “power of the hashtag” in legitimating its foreign policy. The Russian foreign ministry began to use the State Department hashtag in its own Twitter posts, potentially diluting the ambition to build wider coalitions of support for action against Russia (Al Jazeera: The Stream 2014). When confronted with questions over whether US public diplomacy was working against such extensive Russian efforts, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Richard Stengel demurred, claiming that despite Russia’s efforts to promote its message, the US still retained the advantage of “credibility” in the face of propaganda (Amanpour 2014).

How does the UCTF represent the impact of mediatization on public diplomacy? The answer is not derived from the tools used to conduct its counter-propaganda efforts, so much as in the connection between such tools and the strategic intent of public diplomacy in this instance. The measurement and evaluation efforts, in particular, offer insight into this relationship. The UCTF was supported by extensive monitoring from analytical units within the State Department, such as the Audience Research and Measurement team (ARM) within IIP. The State Department’s measurement focused on the “engagements” observed – the extent to which US sponsored communication was shared or “favorited” as well as grew in followers.

Yet it is less clear whether such engagements represent the countering or de-legitimation of the Russian narrative about its actions in Ukraine. More importantly, it is not obvious whether counter-narrative efforts function as strategic ends in themselves, or serve as a means to service other goals, such as to consolidate support among nation-states for stricter international sanctions against Russia, or to encourage opposition within Russian-speaking publics. In the absence of a clear policy agenda to facilitate or promote via public diplomacy, the purpose of public diplomacy defaults to a strategy derived from the material affordances of the technology itself – in this case, the measurable outcomes of retweets, likes, and followers.

UCTF, considered as a kind of public diplomacy strategy within a conflict scenario, appears driven less by an overarching strategy of influence, and more so by perceptions of how social media behavior among crucial demographics stands in for political credibility and leverage. Which is to say, by examining the practices of counter-narrative engagement, the implicit strategic logic rests on the expected (and unarticulated) returns of being “present” in a turbulent social media space, without a significant elaboration of how its various audiences could serve as crucial publics with the political agency to help facilitate US policy objectives in the region. Mediatization becomes apparent in narrowing the scope of the conflict to the contest of narrative framing in social media, which both amplifies an inherent competitive logic of communicative engagement while diminishing or downplaying both the “understanding” imperative of public diplomacy and how such a campaign could translate counter-narratives into tangible policy outcomes.
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Conclusion

The US efforts to intervene in the competition of media frames over Russian involvement in the Ukraine is presented here to illustrate the persistence of advocacy-oriented logics to define the way public diplomacy is rationalized as a tool of statecraft. It is also offered to suggest that emergent strategic approaches to public diplomacy are in part derived by perceptions of what the technology offers in the service of influence, rather than a more elaborate vision of public diplomacy operating within a complex, networked politics. Put another way, the perceived affordances of the technology to enable users to share information in support of a particular media frame or narrative becomes the de facto strategy of public diplomacy in their own right. The mediatization embodied in the UCTF public diplomacy tactics, in other words, obscures a more robust logic of engagement that could elaborate how communicative action works to link the US foreign policy objectives in the Ukraine to the capacity of media audiences to consume or act upon social media counter-narrative efforts. Importantly, the UCTF’s activity does not suggest that advocacy is the predominant aspect of public diplomacy either in the US or elsewhere – other “relational” approaches to public diplomacy are supported by the US and other countries with active cultural and exchange-oriented public diplomacy programs around the world. However, in the wake of the events unfolding after the Ukrainian revolution, the US did not turn to its well-established cultural and exchange-based programs in the region. Indeed, these kinds of programs were curtailed as the potential for conflict grew.

The US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, one of the most extensive recent US public diplomacy efforts with Russia, was suspended after the crisis began. Pressure among US legislatures also grew to force US international broadcasting outlets such as the Voice of America (VOA) to more directly promote US policy perspectives and directly combat Russian propaganda efforts, threatening the VOA’s enduring institutional commitment to journalistic integrity (Hattem 2014). Despite overtures toward facilitative and relational approaches to public diplomacy, the default strategic position veers toward the enduring imperative of control and the management of policy legitimacy. More entrepreneurial diplomacy advocates such as former technology advisor Alec Ross argue that the need to “control” information environments, such as through official press statements and advocacy through international broadcasting, is both difficult to achieve and unrealistic given the diffusion of political agency among the potential stakeholders for a country’s foreign policy (Ross 2012). Despite such claims, international actors continue to see public diplomacy and its attendant terms such as engagement in terms that both anticipate the ability of states to effectively shape the political impact of conversations across mediated networks, and, importantly, that the affordances of such networks offer readily available evidence that competitive struggles over such conversations can be managed. While there are indeed exceptions, instead of promoting more inclusive and collaborative politics, the mediatization of public diplomacy has worked to sustain the enduring characteristics of political warfare through communication as much as to promote new venues for mutual understanding and relation-building, while at the same time deferring strategic logic to the affordances of the technology itself.

References


Public diplomacy


