

Public Diplomacy and the Information Space Today

A Strategic Approach

Elizabeth M. Allen

As Secretary Antony Blinken laid out in his recent speech at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, we are at an inflection point in history.¹ Aligned to our vision of a free, open, secure, and prosperous world, the United States is weaving together our alliances and partnerships in new and innovative ways and across geographies. This includes, critically, relationships between people, which are increasingly shaping the geopolitical environment and making modern public diplomacy (PD)—that is, audience-driven, data-informed, and policy-centric PD—more critical than ever.

Every day, the State Department’s almost 5,000 public diplomacy professionals advance these relationships and position the United States as a trusted interlocutor. They do this in a severely resource-constrained environment—one in which the People’s Republic of China spends \$10 billion annually on what they call PD and Russia uses technology to undermine global public opinion of the United States—to outmaneuver our adversaries to show up as a partner of choice.

Our Current Information Space

The information space today has dramatically transformed since even five years ago, the last time the State Department had a confirmed Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Both state and non-state actors are effectively sowing false narratives with malign intention, finding it easier than ever to reach audiences in other countries—and harder than ever for the public to detect. We have a structural issue where media platforms’ business models incentivize profit, allowing malign actors to blend in, pay for influence, or even earn real influence by concealing their identity or intention. The popularity of closed networks such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal makes it challenging for us to monitor, counter, or provide factual information. Moreover, artificial intelligence raises credibility and authenticity questions, the policy implications of which we are only beginning to explore via the White House’s coordination of interagency engagement and the voluntary commitments made by tech companies. Disinformation is here to stay, and artificial intelligence and the rapid pace of change only exacerbates the complexity of our task ahead. While we can and will continue to go after disinformation, there is also a great need to nurture a healthy information environment and build media literacy and audience resilience. In this landscape, our credibility is our greatest asset.

We have taken a holistic approach, navigating and leveraging traditional media, social media, and closed personal communications networks to weed, garden tend, and cultivate the information space by:

- Exposing Foreign Malign Influence
- Building Open, Resilient Environments
- Directly Engaging through Strategic Messaging
- Advancing People-to-People Relationships

We must be weeding, tending, and cultivating simultaneously, and in parallel.

Weeding

First, we are exposing and weeding out foreign malign influence when state-sponsored disinformation campaigns target foreign audiences overseas. The State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) coordinates interagency and multilateral efforts to identify, analyze, and expose false narratives. Since its establishment by Congress in 2017, the GEC’s 750 comprehensive reports—such as the reports exposing Russia’s disinformation narratives around the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and Russia’s mass abduction of Ukrainian children—have assisted nations in holding the Kremlin accountable. In late September, the GEC

released a landmark report on how the People’s Republic of China has invested billions of dollars to construct a global information ecosystem that promotes its propaganda and facilitates censorship and the spread of disinformation, in a bid to reshape the global information environment to Beijing’s advantage. On the international engagement front, the GEC is working to build consensus, strengthen alignment, and promote a common approach through a framework of shared principles for addressing foreign information manipulation. And we are putting the framework to use through recent Memorandums of Understanding coordinating disinformation efforts with North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and others on deck for Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Our whole-of-government approach also includes closer coordination with the Department of Defense and U.S. government interagency, expanding the number of PD officers embedded at combatant commands, allowing the broader PD community to benefit from shared and sophisticated analysis. Together, we are creating and sharing best practices across the federal government, while galvanizing other governments to disincentivize and expose disinformation in their own domains.

Garden Tending

However, exposure is not enough. A healthy information ecosystem is much more than only directly calling out disinformation. Our second approach is bolstering information integrity by tending to the open and democratic media environment, supporting internet freedom, and building audience resilience. We are creating momentum with partners and allies through the Media Freedom Coalition to strengthen protections for journalists and independent media. When the Iranian government cut off internet access to most of its 80 million citizens following the death of Mahsa Amini, we changed sanctions rules on VPN sales so the people of Iran could access outside information for the first time in years; we are surging resources to content-sharing agreements to provide citizens of Southeast Asia with access to free, high-quality, non-biased news wire reporting; and we are investing in programs like the Women in the Digital Economy Initiative in Africa, skill-building TechCamps, and journalist exchange programs to develop audience knowledge and digital literacy so that investigative journalism can thrive and viewers can assess and understand the source and integrity of an image, video, or article. In October, the Digital Communication Network—an exchange program alumni network of journalists, gamers, and digital creators that turned into its own organization—will be launching a new Asian branch to join its networks in Latin America, Africa, and Europe.

Third, we are building trust and credibility by doing what we have always done, but better: delivering direct, truthful, and credible messaging—and being more strategic in our communications. The United States’ voice from the podium and visual branding continue to be effective carriers of information. Investing in audience analytics, focusing on human-centered storytelling, and unifying our branding has carried our messages even further. Our insightful, creative PD practitioners in the field add local cultural acumen to make our voice even more relevant to our audiences. And we are not alone. Our smart realignment of resources around strategic communication positioned the U.S. government as a key strategic communications partner, creating an expertise that government counterparts are eager to learn from and collaborate with. We have built coalitions around trust, coordinating joint statements and strategic messaging with likeminded partners worldwide—from the G7, to the Indo-Pacific Quad, and beyond. However, the U.S. flag and voice have limits in their reach, especially within closed communication platforms, which is why we are also investing in reaching people through credible third-parties, stakeholders, and influential voices.

Cultivating and Growing

Lastly, we are nurturing our long-term investments to build trust and credibility planted through the seeds of people-to-people ties. For decades, our Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs’ exchanges, English classes, American Spaces, speakers, and trainings have showcased America as a tangible partner of choice to foreign citizens—and increasingly, to their governments. Over 600 current and former world leaders at the Head of State level are alumni of U.S. government programs and trainings, and over 2,000 U.S. government program alumni have served in foreign Cabinets and above. Throughout my travels, I have been struck by how partners and alumni have described their U.S. government-funded public diplomacy engagements as pivot points in their lives, citing them as providing “hope,” opportunity, and a path forward, in contrast to the

economic and political crises in which they are living. English is often a gateway to improving economic conditions for a participant, with concentric impact on their families and communities. Our incredible global alumni networks are force multipliers for participants to share resources, collaborate on projects, innovate together, and create their own partnerships—and we continue to convene these networks and offer resources to alumni years after their program. Their impact is inspiring, and it's a result of our deep investment in public diplomacy work.

The Future of Public Diplomacy

As Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, I am also committed to improving our domestic engagement—telling the story of American diplomacy and communicating the value of foreign policy to the American people. In the near term, I have invested in our team at the State Department—dedicated colleagues carrying out and innovating critical public diplomacy work across the world. I have prioritized training PD practitioners, including locally employed staff at our embassies abroad, on practical skills required for modern diplomacy such as social media and audience analysis, but also on leadership, supervision, and strategic planning. We are in the final stages of a multi-year project to strategically realign our human and physical public diplomacy resources and will soon be opening the National Museum of American Diplomacy to the public to share our story with Americans and the millions of global visitors to Washington, D.C. each year. And in the longer term, we will continue to position the United States as a partner of choice by building partnerships and alliances to address disinformation and foreign malign influence, exploring responsible use of artificial intelligence, delivering credible information, and investing in long-term relationships. These public diplomacy efforts are key to reimagining the power and purpose of American diplomacy toward achieving President Biden's vision of freedom, peace, stability, and an international community capable of rising to the challenges of its time.

Elizabeth M. Allen is Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy (PD) and Public Affairs, where she leads the \$1.5 billion, almost 5000-person strong PD enterprise. In this role, she oversees the Department's foreign policy public affairs, counter-disinformation and counter-foreign malign influence efforts, and cultural programming and international exchange. This is her sixth role at the Department, where she also has served as Senior Official for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Global Public Affairs (GPA). A long-time communications and public affairs strategist, Under Secretary Allen was previously a partner at the strategic advisory firm FGS Global, where she specialized in message and advocacy strategy, reputation and crisis management, and executive leadership communications on a range of international public policy issues. Under Secretary Allen served in the Obama-Biden Administration for eight years, including as White House Deputy Communications Director and Deputy Assistant to President Barack Obama, White House Director of Message Planning, and Deputy Director of Communications to then-Vice President Joe Biden. Under Secretary Allen is a proud Buffalo, New York, native and graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in Political Science and minor in Sociology from the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Geneseo.

¹ Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS): The Power and Purpose of American Diplomacy in a New Era," Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, September 13, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-johns-hopkins-school-of-advanced-international-studies-sais-the-power-and-purpose-of-american-diplomacy-in-a-new-era/>.