EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State Department public diplomacy leaders and officials at the BBG face several structural constraints in producing consistent, sound research to inform and evaluate campaigns and programs. This includes a lack of time, qualified staff and funds to conduct thoughtful, long-term evaluations; in addition to risk-averse cultures, which can often lead officials to misinterpret setbacks as failures and therefore fail to report them. At the State Department, laws such as the Privacy Act of 1974 and the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 are major impediments to conducting timely and useful evaluation and analytical information on- and offline. As a result, the current research and evaluation systems in place often seem to justify programs, campaigns, and budgets. They could be more effective in providing internal feedback loops that could contribute to course corrections and improvements in public diplomacy strategies and tactics.

How does one determine impact? Too often the difference between outputs and outcomes can be conflated. Given the multitude of factors at play that cause foreign audiences to react to U.S. foreign policy—e.g., psychology, history, politics, culture, religion, and the others that shape a worldview—it is likely that a public diplomacy or broadcasting activity or campaign contributes to an outcome rather than directly causing it. But public diplomacy’s and international broadcasting’s impact can be measured through knowledge, understanding, and trust of the United States, discovered via the compilation of best practices, longitudinal panel studies, comparative studies, and historical case studies. In-depth research also helps to identify and develop culturally appropriate programs and messages, and the proper way to employ them. In addition, it can provide necessary information to eliminate programs and campaigns that are not efficient or impactful.

Improved research and evaluation is dependent largely on structural and organizational change, some of which is already underway at the State Department and at the BBG. In the ECA Bureau, for instance, more robust alumni programs will allow for increased longitudinal panel studies with the same people over time to gauge how perceptions of America, and their relationship with America, change with time. Encouragingly, the recent move by IIP leadership to ensure the re-branded Analytics Office is part of campaign design will help set appropriate goals and metrics at the beginning, therefore creating more informed campaigns at the outset, as well as better post-hoc analysis. The improvements R/PPR is making to the Mission Activity Tracker (MAT) will also allow for better baseline data in
the sense that it will be less burdensome for Public Affairs Officers to self-report information, and its creation of a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan will hopefully support public diplomacy officers with strategic planning.

Last, its deployment of a department-wide content management system for social media accounts at U.S. embassies worldwide will enable better coordination of efforts in digital engagement, and, potentially make for sustainable procedures for pre-and post-communication analytical efforts.

The BBG has focused much time in research and evaluation from its inception with the United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994, which established the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The law mandated a “reliable research capacity” to build programming “based on reliable information about its potential audience.”\(^2\) ACPD fully endorses the reorganization of existing research capabilities to create a new IBB Office of Research and Assessment, which will substantially improve the strategic focus and efficiency of research efforts by overseeing the entire research and digital infrastructure throughout BBG, including the introduction of new information intelligence products and tools. Its movement toward an “Impact Framework” to measure the outcomes of its media activities by creating informed publics, establishing sustainable local media, and improving government accountability in the countries it reaches is also an encouraging move.

Below, we present our key recommendations based on the recurring findings in the four chapters that examine the State Department public diplomacy and BBG offices. First, we review suggested modifications to current structural and organizational impediments, especially at the State Department. Second, we review opportunities to modify research designs so that the reports provide a more actionable data and a more effective feedback loop for policy makers. We recognize that some of these design fixes depend on increased specialists, time and funding, therefore necessitating the structural and organizational change.

**STRUCTURAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

Most of the recommendations below, apply to both agencies except where noted.

**Create a Director of Research and Evaluation Position and Expand the Evaluation Unit in Policy, Planning and Resources (R/PPR):** Research and evaluation for public diplomacy at the State Department needs more strategic leadership. This position, established within the Policy Planning and Resources Office, should regularly design and advise on standardized research questions, methodologies, and procedures that directly link practice to strategy and foreign policy objectives. This office would give more organizational legitimacy and authority to research, advocate for researchers’ needs, and prioritize research activities in ways that reflect strategic short-, middle-, and long-term objectives. We recommend that the Director report directly to the Under Secretary and be able to inform s/he, and other State Department leadership, of knowledge in a tangible and interpretable form. The Director of Research would also support research coordination and consistency within the “R” bureau (IIP, ECA, PA and the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC))\(^3\) in developing systematic and longitudinal methods. S/he would also be able to conceptualize the questions based on the needs of leadership, match the right mix of methodology to the program, determine the level intra- (e.g., Intelligence and Research Bureau (INR); Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau (DRL)) and inter-agency (e.g., BBG, Department of Defense) research coordination, and determine when the work should be outsourced or completed in-house.

**Support Evaluation Staff with More Expertise:** The staffs tasked with conducting research and evaluations at both agencies are by and large well trained, dedicated to their tasks, and
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eager to implement reforms. Yet they are too few of them to expand the range and scope of evaluation techniques. While some contracting is necessary to maintain impartiality, not all of this work should be outsourced. More in-house specialists who can proactively conceptualize research and employ the right methodologies are essential for improving the work.

Increase Funding for Research and Evaluation: While evaluation and measurement officials recognize the need to employ a broad range of methods and participants, and to expand research products, they do not have adequate funding to pursue it. According to the Evaluation Roundtable, an association of evaluation professionals, the standard for research and evaluation in philanthropies and foundations should be 5 percent. In fiscal year 2014, $8.8 million of its $726.5 million budget, or 1.2 percent, went toward research and evaluation. This percentage is decreasing in fiscal year 2015 to .7 percent ($4.7 million of $721.26 million). The State Department’s Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau, had less than .25 percent of the $568.5 million fiscal year 2013 budget allocated toward evaluation. Increasing funding at both agencies so that these units get closer to at least the 4 percent industry norm would allow for more robust and constructive research and evaluation processes to drive decisions on what activity would best support U.S. foreign policy goals.

Review Further The Privacy Act of 1974: The ACPD will conduct a follow-up review of the Privacy Act of 1974 with legal experts and provide separate recommendations based on their analysis. The law currently roadblocks audience research and analytics in the sense that, according to State Department lawyers’ interpretation of it, influential figures cannot be identified with online analytics tools, despite the fact that those figures opt to broadcast information publicly using commercial platforms like Twitter. Anonymized information can still contribute to the creation and appraisal of programs and campaigns, yet its value is limited.

Provide State Department Research Waiver for the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980: Public diplomacy is a vital dimension of national security and research is critical to its success. This law limits the State Department’s ability to conduct measurement research in a timely fashion, as research officials must receive a waiver for each study that seeks to enlist more than 10 people. This bottleneck is particularly relevant with respect to the need for benchmark and time-series studies that would reveal public diplomacy’s impact over time. The INR Bureau, a member of the U.S. intelligence community, has a blanket waiver. While not a part of the intelligence community, we feel that public diplomacy research offices should also receive one.

Improve Inter- and Intra-Agency Cooperation and Data Sharing: Evaluation units within the Department of State share data and collaborate on an ad hoc or informal basis. There appears to be no systematic way that evaluations are distributed, stored, or solicited. The need for timely sharing of information was recognized in the June 2013 State Department Office of Inspector General Report on the IIP Bureau (see Informal Recommendation #2, page 15). Department-wide, the 2007 GAO report also recommended a more holistic look at audiences based on polls, studies, focus groups and in-depth media analysis. Clear lines of authority to access data that is being gathered by other government units (e.g. Open Source Center), as well audience data collected by third parties, should be established.

Support a Risk-Taking Culture That Allows for Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Setbacks: As is the case with almost all bureaucracies, suggestions of limited or negative outcomes may inhibit future funding and administrative support. This creates a climate that inhibits realistic evaluations, and evaluations in general. In the current environment, it is hard to imagine how critical, forward looking research designs could be implemented given existing cultures of fear and risk-aversion. State Department and BBG leadership should reward and
encourage honest and balanced evaluations and encourage the admission of setbacks for stronger programming.

Establish Guidance and Training on Research and Evaluation: BBG and State Department managers need written guidance and training on how to read and interpret evaluation findings and should be encouraged to seek out evaluations of previous or complementary research to use actionable information to change programs, and not just validate their work. A program at the Foreign Service Institute on how to identify and integrate basic research and evaluation into A-100 classes for new foreign services officers, not just public diplomacy officers, would help significantly. These skills should also be reinforced through advanced training.

Create ACPD Subcommittee on Research and Evaluation: Dependent on a Memorandum of Understanding with State Department public diplomacy and BBG leadership, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy should create a sub-committee on research and evaluation to review State Department and BBG research agendas, methodologies and interpretations once a quarter. It would be comprised of selected academics, market researchers, and research professionals from private organizations. The sub-committee’s objective would be to provide objective feedback early into the research to ensure the methodology is rigorous and the findings are rich. They would also help establish a set of achievable goals for this research, emphasize the employment of research in strategic planning, and serve as an additional validity check on the suggestions that emerge in the reports.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The six key recommendations below are based on the recurring research design issues in the State Department and BBG offices examined and are not wholly dependent on increased funding and personnel. We suggest that the research and evaluation directors aim to include these suggestions in their work whenever possible.

Acknowledge Research Limitations in Products: The inherent challenges associated with measuring the long-term impact of public diplomacy are well-known. For example, how do you measure something that didn’t happen—e.g., someone doesn’t become a terrorist or a reporter doesn’t promote anti-American sentiments through national media—even if such non-actions are partially the result of public diplomacy initiatives? The inability to show that public diplomacy efforts are the direct and proximate causes of such effects hinders the ability of public diplomacy officials to provide convincing data to policymakers and others on the value of public diplomacy to U.S. national interests. Thus, this reality should be acknowledged where appropriate.

Increase Integration of Data into Strategy and Program Development: Evaluations are only useful if the goals and objectives are clearly defined; clearly defined goals and outcomes are critical at every level of authority. The International Information Programs (IIP) leadership is already doing this: the Office of Analytics will be located with the campaigns and policy offices of the bureau, a change that promises to better link research and evaluation to campaign design and implementation. We applaud this, and encourage further movement toward establishing data-driven goals as the first and most critical phase of public diplomacy planning rather than the final phase. This would help efforts be more information-driven and strategic, and help to ensure that defined objectives are measurable.

Create More Disaggregated Data for Better Feedback Loops: Aggregated data without context or nuance has very limited value for State Department leadership and may be misleading. Disaggregated data by demographics (e.g., gender, age, economic status) or other targeted criteria, in addition to participants’/respondents’ specific experience with U.S. public diplomacy, will provide better feedback for the types
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of programs and experiences that resonate in different countries and regions. This is especially pertinent to the State Department’s Advancing Public Diplomacy Impact Report (APDI), which is an aggregated benchmarking study and is used on a limited basis by stakeholders in the State Department and externally.

Use More Comparative Data and/or Analysis to Determine Impact: At the State Department and BBG, comparative data is either not used enough to show impact (or lack thereof) or it can be used incorrectly. In some cases, comparisons made to illustrate certain trends were based on incongruous variables and could be used in a more effective and precise manner. More comparative data at all of the State Department’s public diplomacy evaluation offices and at the BBG would be clarifying for where U.S. programs rank, helping to benchmark outputs and outcomes vis-a-vis the United States’ closest allies and competitors.

Provide More Contextual Data to Determine Impact: Rarely in the State Department’s or the BBG’s reports is contextual data provided to understand why changes in foreign public sentiment or behavior do or do not occur. Public diplomacy activities are often but one factor of many that may determine policy success. It is more likely that a public diplomacy activity or campaign contributed to an outcome in a secondary manner rather than as a primary cause and thus a lack of the “big picture” may provide misleading conclusions about public diplomacy’s impact.

Highlight Negative Findings for Course Correction: Evaluations should be written in a balanced manner that highlights the successes and failures of particular campaigns and activities. Research units need the authority to make such guidance, and leadership must encourage analytical products to be seen as constructive rather than punitive.

REFERENCES

3. At the time of this study, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications was in the early stages of creating an analytics and/or evaluation capacity and was therefore not appraised.
4. Evaluation Round Table.
6. Specifically, it stated that “interagency protocols regarding the sharing of audience research information, including establishing a forum that would bring audience research staff together on a regular basis to discuss plans and concerns across all topics of interest” while also developing “an electronic clearinghouse of U.S. government audience research that could be accessed by staff throughout State, USAID, DOD, and BBG, including BBG grantees.”
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