

Scope, mechanism, and outcome: arguing soft power in the context of public diplomacy

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Public diplomacy connotes a range of international programmes tasked with cultivating influence for nation-states. It is typically justified within the arguments that comprise the concept of 'soft power'. Soft power, however, is a vague concept, arguably, which has been difficult to implicate as pivotal to foreign policy outcomes. Yet, despite its apparent shortcomings, the concept informs a variety of nation-state and international actors in their strategic formulations. States acting on soft power tenets via a diversity of policies suggest further attention is warranted to examine how soft power is adapted to the practice of public diplomacy among different nation-states. This article draws on Stefano Guzzini's 'performative conceptual analysis' to explore how a comparative analysis of public diplomacy can account for differing articulations of soft power, and the kinds of tools that leverage communicative and cultural resources toward expected gains. The goal is to render soft power as grounded in localised, practical understandings of strategic necessity through public diplomacy tools of statecraft. Soft power is presented as an assemblage of practical reasoning that informs linkages between strategic arguments about communication power and the practice of public diplomacy.

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Introduction

Public diplomacy connotes a range of international programmes tasked with cultivating influence for nation-states. It is typically framed and justified within arguments that comprise the concept of 'soft power'. Soft power, however, is a vague concept, arguably, which has been difficult to implicate as pivotal to foreign policy outcomes (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). Yet, despite its apparent shortcomings, the soft power concept has spread out from its origins as defence of the US post-Cold War dominance to inform other nation-states and international actors in their strategic formulations (Melissen *et al.* 2007; Gallarotti 2011; Nye 2011; Pamment 2012b; Sun 2012).

Nye (2011) describes soft power as 'the ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction' (16). States acting



on these tenets via a diversity of policies and strategic arguments warrant further attention to how soft power is indigenised or adapted to the practice of public diplomacy. This article presents an argument for how a comparative analysis of public diplomacy practices articulates the growing significance of communication-based imperatives to the practice of statecraft, and informs a more grounded, practice-oriented approach to understanding soft power. The limits of soft power as a kind of causal mechanism suggest an opportunity to consider how IR scholarship can address and is implicated in soft power as a range of *practices*.

The soft power concept reflects a somewhat thin ontology of power relations among international actors, where the processes by which ‘resources’ are translated into influence are minimally articulated (see Lock 2010). Soft power is largely an empty signifier; by itself, it *asserts* — more than it elaborates — how it can be a force in world politics. Rather than pursue an agenda to somehow prove whether or not soft power reflects some persistent dimension of relations of international actors the path suggested here proposes an analytical framework to understand how soft power is manifest as a theory of practice.

Soft power is presented here as composed of three primary aspects, *scope*, *mechanism*, and *outcome*, all of which are rendered apparent in some form by the practice of public diplomacy. These aspects reflect the means by which international actors demonstrate the tacit knowledge about influence, communication, and their relation to the imperatives of statecraft. This kind of knowledge is sometimes explicit (as in the case of official discourse about public diplomacy), or it is visible in the programmes that make up an actor’s range of public diplomacy practices. The focus on scope, mechanism, and outcome is an initial move to reconstruct soft power to account for the dimensions of its *doxa* — the sense-making and the shared assumptions that underwrite how and why states choose to engage in communicative action with foreign publics (Hopf 2010: 543).

A move to consider soft power as a *practice* draws upon a growing body of work in IR and diplomacy studies, to provide a grounded understanding of how communication, communication technologies, and the growth of polyilateral relations have constitutive impacts on the roles, structures and forms of governance embodied in relations among international actors (Sending *et al.* 2011). Soft power is, arguably, a contested *concept*, yet it also enjoys an increasingly global application as a justification for public diplomacy. A focused attention to its translation into practice is therefore justified.

This approach also sidesteps concerns among governments and academics about public diplomacy that hinge upon demonstrating impact. Much of the ferment in the study of public diplomacy is driven by questions about the measurement of *effect*. Is there some correlation between a specific practice of persuasion or engagement that yields attitude or behaviour change (Pamment 2012b; Hayden 2013b)? Or, how does public diplomacy contribute to obtaining foreign policy objectives? These questions are important, but they also elide how the practice of public diplomacy



contains constitutive beliefs, encoded into practices like exchange programmes and explicit in policy recommendations and strategic discourse, about relations among states and publics, and how communication media are rendered *available* to states as levers of influence. Following sociologist Merton's (1957) distinction between 'manifest' and 'latent' functions, limiting the study of soft power to the questions of policy actors would circumscribe what soft power *signifies* as a component of state-reasoning about the world, potentially ignoring fundamental questions about the intersection of communication and IR.

This approach draws on the insights in other comparative approaches to public diplomacy studies. Rawnsley (2012), a leading public diplomacy scholar, makes the case clear in his examination of Taiwan and China: '[P]recisely because governments perceive the need to both exercise soft power and pronounce at every opportunity their soft power credentials, it is important to analyse the concept's cognitive use and the discourse about it within particular social and cultural contexts' (125). Before reaching generalised claims about soft power, understanding soft power as a field of actions, assumptions and approaches to integrating communication, technology and statecraft would work to refine its conceptual utility, especially as practices of soft power proliferate among an increasing range of international actors.

This article proposes a conceptual framework for soft power in the context of public diplomacy, drawing on the 'performative conceptual analysis' deployed in Guzzini's studies of power, as well as other critical perspectives on soft power, to better understand how the soft power concept has been adapted to fit particular strategic requirements and contexts (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Bially Mattern 2005; Zahran and Ramos 2010; Mor 2012). The aim is not to demonstrate soft power effects under specific circumstances, nor to rehabilitate soft power as a kind of normative theory. Rather, the concept is presented as suited to a more pragmatic analysis, which illustrates the manner in which soft power is incorporated into strategic positions that actors take on to manage international environments through non-coercive practices. Soft power is considered as an assemblage of practical reasoning that informs linkages between strategic arguments about communication power and the subsequent practice of public diplomacy.

The focus on public diplomacy ties the notion directly to action, as opposed to seeking soft power as somehow present within a particular resource, quality or behaviour. The US public diplomacy scholar Gregory (2011) describes public diplomacy as having evolved from 'state-based instruments [...] to engage and persuade foreign publics' to a broader mandate for international actors 'to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values' (353). Gregory's definition suggests that public diplomacy as a *practice* manifests crucial assumptions inherent in the soft power concept. Soft power represents a field of argument positions made visible in public diplomacy actions and policy rhetoric about public diplomacy.



The article explores two bodies of soft power discourse evident in strategic formulations about public diplomacy from the United States and China. The proposed three-part comparative framework offers insight into the translation of soft power within local contexts. The first aspect of the framework, *scope*, directs attention to how the ‘subjects’ of soft power are recognised as viable in terms of strategic objectives. *Mechanism*, the second aspect of the framework, reflects how different power practices and resources (such as communication messages, culture, and communication technologies) are envisioned as effective. Finally, *outcomes* reveal how public diplomacy is justified and articulated as contributing to feasible strategic objectives. The article builds on the work of practice-oriented scholarship in IR and diplomatic studies, to propose a methodological framework based on attention to registers of public argument indicative of institutional comprehension of soft power as a field of practice (Navari 2011; Sending *et al.* 2011; Brown 2012; Adler-Nissen 2013).

The proposed framework is not offered to replace the inferential studies on soft power variables or the studies of ‘impact’, even though previous empirical analyses of soft power resources, messaging tactics or audience dispositions have yet to distil the soft power concept into generalisable claims about cause and effect (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007; Atkinson 2010; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). What remains evident more readily, however, is that soft power is a concept with strategic currency: an increasing number of states continue to act upon its existence and deploy resources to cultivate or leverage its potential (Gallarotti 2011). This article acknowledges the messiness of power as a more localised concept, and proposes a constructivist methodology of understanding soft power via its meaning in use (Guzzini 2005; Lukes 2005; Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). Scope, mechanism and outcome are offered to sort the supportive reasons and arguments behind soft power. They focus attention on how states sustain particular positions on the utility of communicative action, communication media, and their implicit relation to the achievement of policy objectives. Scope, mechanism and outcome are the constitutive elements that comprise soft power as a theory of state practice. Following Rawnsley’s argument for comparative soft power study, these terms refocus the study of soft power to the operative logics (and the context for these logics) that inform how actors actively (re)define what soft power means through public diplomacy.

Approaching soft power in the proposed manner directs attention to the strategic and institutional consequences of states acting upon expectations of power behaviours and their relation to policy objectives. As Lukes (2005) argues, ‘how we conceive of power makes a difference to how we think and act in general, and especially in political contexts’ (478). Soft power matters, in this sense, not as a generalisable theory, but because of its ‘effective performativity’ — illustrating how actors adapt their diplomatic practice in ways that reflect soft power’s claims about the international system and its constituent actors (Healy 2011).



Nye argues that soft power is ‘not a theory’, but an ‘analytical concept’ (Nye 2011: 219; Rothman 2011). Recovering the working assumptions at stake in its implementation may establish grounds to develop contextually relevant measures of soft power outcomes and effects. As Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) claim, the typology of resources for soft power – culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy – tend to be *invariant* structures, which makes it difficult to link soft power to particular outcomes (558). The alternative question posed here is how states render something like ‘culture’ as something available or necessary in relation to other international actors, which would then open up the term soft power to more focused empirical accounts. The contextual translation of soft power assumptions into specific practices may also yield better studies of soft power that account for a diversity of cultural and institutional biases that deflect its implementation through public diplomacy.

How states seek to leverage what Nye (2011) terms their ‘contextual intelligence’ about soft power offers insight about the integration of soft power, implicitly or explicitly, into a broader calculus of strategic orientation and discourse (24). Put another way, Nye’s own arguments hold up soft power as a practical adaptation to conditions that warrant different practices to manage the international environment, rather than a serious challenge to the established tenets of power in realist or liberal visions of international politics. Soft power invites interrogation as a strategic template or framework. Discourses of public diplomacy and strategic communication offer an obvious site for comparative exploration.

The following section lays out the conceptual arguments that make up soft power and public diplomacy, and builds a case for a comparative analysis of soft power *in use* through the study of public diplomacy. Aspects of soft power practice in China and the United States are presented to illustrate the diversity of interpretations that can be drawn from a state acting upon soft power. The article concludes with a discussion of the interdisciplinary contribution of a pragmatic, contingent perspective on soft power through public diplomacy, in order to facilitate case-specific *post hoc* analysis that illuminates the contested utility of soft power as an analytical perspective.

The soft power concept

The term soft power is invoked frequently in arguments for the practice of public diplomacy, yet the two concepts are often conflated in ways that confuse their definition (Hocking 2005: 28; Snow 2009; Fitzpatrick 2010). Public diplomacy implies a set of diplomatic institutions and practices that enable nation-state governments to communicate and establish relations with foreign publics (Cull 2009). These actions involve a diverse range of activities, including exchange programmes, international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, and messaging campaigns. The practice of public diplomacy is effectively warranted by the nature of international politics described in the soft power concept, where influence and the ability to achieve policy objectives can

be found in the capacity to cultivate relationships, convey reasoned arguments to influential publics, and otherwise manage the symbolic context for international relations in ways that yield desired strategic outcomes.

Nye (2011, 2004, 1991) describes soft power as a capacity to influence or attract through non-aggressive or non-coercive means. Soft power is agent-focused in that it is described as held or used by actors (nation-states, NGOs, and so on.), yet it is clear that the term has descriptive implications for world politics that extend beyond actor qualities. Soft power as a *practical* proposition opens up possibilities for leveraging cultural and symbolic resources in international relations, hence its convenience for justifying public diplomacy.

Soft power implies the capacity of states to rely upon structures like cultural norms, social institutions and political values, to secure certain forms of compliance or action as much as to provide a prescriptive value for states to do so (Lock 2010). The core arguments of soft power also suggest that such structures can be leveraged as tools of engagement. The expected utility of norms, institutions and values (that states can act on and through them) means that they can be the focus of state action in order to cultivate an anticipated soft-power capacity (Hayden 2011b; Gallarotti 2011). For example, the Chinese strategic turn towards the promotion of its cultural heritage as a means to amplify its soft power repertoire illustrates a mandate for action implied in China's considerable attention to soft power in official discourse (Wuthnow 2008; Li 2009). For China and others, soft power provides a ready set of justifications for the international outreach and communication of public diplomacy (Nye 2008).

Public diplomacy in its various forms amounts to communicative and social acts to inform, persuade, and build relations between governments and strategic publics that forward the foreign policy ambitions of the state engaging in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy, as an institution of diplomatic practice, relies on a set of arguments that establish its legitimacy as a field of practice relevant to the larger burdens of statecraft (Hayden 2011b). Soft power, in particular, has served this purpose — making the discourses of public diplomacy an ideal site to investigate the pragmatic reasoning derived from the soft power concept.

Arguing soft power: towards a performative conceptual analysis

Arguments conflating the tenets of soft power with an increased necessity to engage in public diplomacy suggest a conceptual use for soft power as something other than an alternative route to persuasion among international actors. Rather, the salience of soft power may say something more about a constitutive re-orientation for diplomatic institutions grappling with an expanding sphere of stakeholders and a diminished capacity for sovereignty (Sending *et al.* 2011; Hocking *et al.* 2012; Proedrou and Frangonikolopoulos 2012). It implicates a *sociological* shift in the requirements of



diplomatic actors and institutions: the salience of soft power among ministries of foreign affairs should cue analysts to consider what happens when international actors do things under expectations defined by the arguments about soft power.

Like other dominant strategic discourses of international relations, soft power is an assemblage of claims about the nature of international politics that is played out in fields of practice. So, how might practices like public diplomacy reveal characteristics of the field? This form of insight is well-established in international studies scholarship, but has yet to be applied to the notion of soft power and public diplomacy (Neumann 2002; Adler-Nissen 2009; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Navari 2011). The methodological position that follows requires attention to strategic and public argumentation about public diplomacy from policymakers and public figures as well as the programmes derived from such discourse. The study of a broadly construed sense of ‘argument’ has been readily acknowledged as pivotal in constructivist depictions of inter-state socialisation and normative change (Crawford 2002; Bjola and Kornprobst 2011). The methodological stance suggested here is to situate argument as a *performative* component of strategic discourse that deploys and defines concepts, where policy claims are not simply indexical to rational calculations, but part of a broader repertoire of discursive practice that warrants institutional orientation (Hanrieder 2011). Discourses about soft power are *constitutive* in the sense that they inform the field of strategic necessity for public diplomacy, and how resources, programmes and actions are available as tools for soft power.

This form of analysis, however, does not suggest that the strategic language about soft power is ultimately *determinative*, and that any ‘serious deliberative argument’ is foreclosed (Checkel 2005: 819). Instead, analysis of policy discourse can locate the *generative* capacity of policy argumentation to constitute the art of possibility surrounding soft power, through how states load assumptions about communication, media effects and linkages with other kinds of power into a rhetoric of necessity or exigency (Hayden 2011b).

Guzzini’s (2005) ‘performative conceptual analysis’ of power illustrates the value of focusing on the discursive acts that sustain the significance of soft power. Guzzini observes that when a kind of ‘power’ is invoked in policy or embodied in practice, the articulation carries the assumption that power is available to the actors involved – that actors could have done otherwise. ‘Power implies an idea of counterfactuals – the act of attributing power redefines the borders of what can be done’ (Guzzini 2005: 511). Guzzini’s (2009) analysis of power is situated squarely within a constructivist study of IR, and it largely rejects the search for a predictive ‘measure’ of power. Rather, he proposes a more pragmatic analytical perspective to ascertain how certain measures of power are agreed to as a social fact. For example, ‘diplomats must first agree on what counts before they can start counting’ (Guzzini 2009: 10). In this case, how is soft power transformed conceptually by how it is *recognised* by practitioners and policymakers?

Examining the discourses of soft power, with its concomitant reliance on culture, values and political legitimacy, illustrates how these aspects are politicised. To understand this, Guzzini looks to the terministic consequences of linking concepts:

Naming or addressing something in terms of power does something to it. It establishes the borders of the political realm (*res publica*), where what falls inside becomes an issue of public action and justification. By doing so, it appeals to discourses of responsibility for acts taken and shunned. (Guzzini 2006: 3)

For example, when Chinese foreign policy discourse places a clear emphasis on soft power, to improve national image through the promotion of particular cultural resources, it renders these fields and resources normatively and practically part of statecraft. A *performative* analysis of soft power would, therefore, attest to how its discourses reveal ‘the respective value of different power resources’ (Guzzini 2006: 12). When discourse correlates with institutional realignments, such as China’s growing research and investment in public diplomacy, the constitutive effects become apparent.

Following Bourdieu’s approach to discourses that comprise a *field*, Guzzini (2006) suggests attention to those discourses ‘where categories and schemes to apprehend the social world interact with that world’ (11). As sociologist Alexander (2005) argues in his approach to performance and power: ‘By identifying something as power [...] we wish to indicate a dimension of social life in which coercion can be evoked. Resources and capacities matter.’ (3) Neither Alexander nor Guzzini are discounting the material dimension of power, but they are directing attention to how actors draw conceptual lines around the resources and practices that supposedly grant or reflect power — that is to say, how resources are constructed discursively as pivotal to the broader signifier of power. In this sense, power is evident in how it is argued for, elaborated, and ultimately acted upon in policy and practice formations.

In his performative analysis of power, Guzzini draws parallels with securitisation studies, where securitisation manifests itself as the *process* by which actions and practices are rendered a shared-belief, or ‘securitised’ among international actors. Securitisation scholarship attends to the consequences of discourses that construct distinctions between self and other, but also to the range of actions, statements and reactions that impact the ‘action-complexes’ of actors (Guzzini 2011: 336). The routine ‘action-complexes’ of public diplomacy are not simply path-dependent bureaucratic practices or programmes, but reflect an ongoing articulation of intersubjective understanding among nation-states about communicating with foreign publics. A performative understanding of soft power would look to those key texts and practices to understand how the structures of soft power, embodied in public diplomacy programmes, are reproduced. The goal of performative conceptual analysis then is not a generalisable account of soft power, but attention to the claims and conditions that warrant these arguments and render them authentic or credible.



This form of analysis requires attention to the contingent nature of soft power as a meaningful concept for policymakers, and a focus on the rhetorical and the argumentative aspects of claims that link policy and practice (Goodnight 1998; Epstein 2008: 9; Asen 2010). How policymakers make claims about power in ways that establish necessity or highlight exigency forms the basis for the proposed framework. When actors articulate, by virtue of confirmation or critique, the requirements of public diplomacy, they contribute to the pragmatics of justification that sustain the prevailing logics about what is necessary or required about soft power.

The proposed framework differs from the study of *practice* conceived narrowly as common-sensical positions held by state actors engaged in international relations. Unreflective and iterative procedures often hold *a priori* significance for practice theorists (Pouliot 2008). Yet, it is reasonable to suggest a continued analytical utility of what Pouliot terms ‘the logic of representation’ within a pragmatic consideration of policy rhetoric (ibid.: 260). Policy argumentation can reveal pivotal articulations of institutional purpose (Goodnight 1998, 2010). Meaning, we can look to certain forms of representational evidence that questions the stability of the existing discourses and practice in times of strategic uncertainty, such as the examples discussed below that argue for the inclusion of soft power capacities to address perceived institutional inadequacies. What Adler and Pouliot (2011) describe as the ‘fixation of meaning’ is as much a reflection of practice sedimentation into foreign policy institutions over time as it is a product of sense-making during episodes of institutional uncertainty (3).

Scope, mechanism, and outcome

Articulated justification, or, the rhetoric behind soft power, is important because neither public diplomacy nor soft power are wholly uncontroversial aspects of statecraft. How these concepts are argued for and evaluated through what social theorist Boltanski (2011) has termed ‘meta-pragmatic’ registers of institutional discourse suggests their contingent significance: they are seen as necessary to what institutions of statecraft require to mitigate uncertainty and interpret strategic imperatives (72). Reflexive argumentation within institutional contexts also provides an instructive resource for comparative investigation of soft power as it has been translated into an operative theory of practice. Scope, mechanism, and outcome provide insight on the translation of discourse into practice.

Scope

Scope is drawn from Nye’s (2011) own description of soft power – and signifies who or what is actually involved in any case of soft power action (6). Scope refers to the *subjects* of soft power: which actors are seeking power, who is the intended



'audience' for soft power action, and what types of actors are implicated otherwise in an emblematic case of soft power. Actors who seek to employ soft power do so under assumptions of their own capacity to use power. When a nation-state decides to engage a foreign public, it does so under assumptions about what a nation-state can or should do in terms of its identity as a sovereign state.

Scope refers to the way in which programmes of public diplomacy reflect a *rationalisation* of the audience — the way in which public diplomacy organisations 'imagine' publics as available to persuasion, comprehend audiences as pertinent to foreign policy objectives, and credit the subjects of soft power as important enough to merit a public, rather than a traditional form of diplomacy (Napoli 2010). Scope is also a critical point of analysis, because how states see publics as publics has consequences for the asymmetry of power between the sender and the receiver. For example, when states conduct public diplomacy that emphasises collaboration or dialogue, audiences gain some benefits of information transparency when they are rendered stakeholders in a diplomatic scenario. However, if publics are conceived as informational 'dupes', public diplomacy programmes will reflect minimal expectations of an audiences' interpretive agency.

These differing conceptions of audience are evident in the public diplomacy strategies of China and the United States. For example, Chinese soft power strategy seeks to break a perceived Western monopoly over China's image in global media through predominance in international broadcasting. Zhao (2004), a veteran of Chinese international communication efforts and public diplomacy scholar, explains the imperatives that drive China's focus on global media and representation: '[M]ore than 80 per cent of international news is now supplied by news agencies of advanced countries. It is indispensable for China to explain itself to counter the image shaped by these media of advanced countries' (3). In this regard, public diplomacy is predicated on a media-dependent audience susceptible to media effects.

Scope describes both the qualities of the auditors for public diplomacy as much as the range of ideal stakeholders. Chinese public diplomacy discourse, in particular, implicates *domestic* audiences in strategic arguments as necessary to the success of any soft power cultivation (Wang 2012). For example, foreign minister Yang's arguments suggest that foreign engagement is predicated on the domestic public's role:

[P]ublic diplomacy should look both inward and outward. Overall planning is crucial so that our public diplomacy always serves [...] domestic reform, development and stability and international peace, development and cooperation. We need to show the world a true picture of China and at the same time, offer the domestic public more comprehensive information on the international situation and China's diplomacy. (Yang 2011)

Analyses of China's orientation to scope suggest both a fixation on the promotion of image to a range of foreign publics dominated by Western media hegemony, as well



as a more inclusive approach to how the state should respond (Tan 2012). Public diplomacy is not a fringe element of a broader diplomatic apparatus, but necessarily involves the cooperation and contribution of domestic publics as part of a ‘huge systematic project’ across state institutions and citizens (Yang 2011).

In contrast, the United States has engaged more recently in multiple efforts to facilitate audiences’ communication, rather than to control the field of communication. These audiences are rendered in policy discourse as politically viable and technologically enabled networks. Ross (2011), former Senior Advisor for Innovation to the US Secretary of State, declares that ‘networks are the defining feature of the new global power structure. The very clear evidence of recent years demonstrates that network technologies devolve power away from the nation-state and large institutions’ (452). As a result, the US strategic engagement programmes are designed increasingly around the technological contexts through which these relations are sustained and which maintain their legitimacy.

While China seeks to compete in the broader context of news flows to audiences awaiting information, the United States is oriented towards being ‘present’ in communication spaces where audiences already act and consume information (McHall 2013). As McHale, former US Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, argues:

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 [...]. 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. (McHale 2011)

The imagined public telegraphed in the US public diplomacy reflects a politically engaged public sphere defined by deliberative action as much as a site of strategic exigency (Comor and Bean 2012). It is not so much that the US public diplomacy seeks to *persuade* in all cases of engagement, as it is that it wishes to demonstrate that the United States adheres to an ethic of communication between the stakeholders involved. A US public diplomacy characterised by enabling or facilitating communication serves the symbolic purpose of establishing credibility. Facilitation engenders a long-term route to the cultivation of influence among foreign publics that veers close to the conceptual domain of *development* practice. Former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Sonenshine makes the strategic argument for the value of this vision of public diplomacy:

Public diplomacy does bring benefits to the American people. It does that by building positive environments with people everywhere – face-to-face, through educational and cultural exchanges, and through social media. *When we help more people become healthy, productive, democratic, empowered, and prosperous,*



they become our economic, trade, social, political, and strategic partners. That spells security and prosperity for America (Sonenshine 2012; emphasis added)

The scope dimension of American public diplomacy hinges on the provision of services and the modes of outreach — not necessarily the content of messages or image management.

Chinese public diplomacy programmes — including an incredibly extensive investment in international broadcasting — also see foreign audiences as strategically necessary to China's global politics (Yu 2010). Yet, it is not entirely obvious whether or not Chinese public diplomacy programmes convey that its audiences are *publics* in the sense implied by other nation-state public diplomacy strategies. And this has consequences for how China pursues a soft power-based strategy of public diplomacy and global image management. Consider the language of China's 2006 Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development, which involves a 'go global' strategy of cultural promotion. The plan's soft power approach is based on attraction sustained by a capacity to reach audiences through 'strong propaganda methods and strong propaganda capabilities [...] to form public opinion powers commensurate with China's international status' (Glaser and Murphy 2009: 15). Foreign audiences are thus construed as vulnerable to the 'prejudiced' views of non-Chinese media (Qingguo 2010). The scope of soft power in this logic operates on a rendering of the mass audience as the likely subjects to public diplomacy initiatives.

The 'translation' of soft power into a particular discourse of public diplomacy is thus conditioned by how it constitutes the subject of soft power. How are the targets interpellated or 'made into subjects' by virtue of the act of engagement tactics like public diplomacy (Althusser 1971)? What policymakers mean by 'publics' can have significant implications for what soft power can accomplish, let alone what it actually signifies as a kind of power. Recent critiques of state-based practices of public diplomacy, for example, argue for a networked public diplomacy (Lock 2010). Publics are 'networks' in that they are structures of relations around issues, cultural practices, ethnicity, interests, and so on. — structures that can be leveraged, persuaded, or otherwise engaged by virtue of their structural properties.

The fact that networks, as a social form, are increasingly significant to public diplomacy is not new (Kelley 2010; Melissen 2011). What is new, however, is the manner in which soft power can be derived from networks based on how a public diplomacy programme's design anticipates network effects (Fisher 2010). Analysts of soft power might reconsider soft power resources and behaviours as properties of networks and the ability to encode such networks. Analysts can also gauge the prospects of soft power by how scope reflects the way networks (as publics, audiences, and so on.) are perceived by states as available to be leveraged in their attempts to use public diplomacy for strategic purposes. As public diplomacy researcher Yepsen (2012) argues, how networks are seen as constellations of viable



political actors that sustain a particular kind of political discourse can have crucial implications for the success of public diplomacy interventions.

Mechanism

The concept of *mechanism* accounts for the ways in which governments connect resources to behaviours in acts of public diplomacy. The use of the term is not to be confused with ‘causal mechanisms’ as understood within process-tracing methodology, but as a signifier of how states mobilise or arrange specific resources to achieve expected effects (Curtis and Koivisto 2010; Collier 2011). Most likely, any soft power case study of public diplomacy makes a *de facto* claim about a ratio of resources to behaviours. Mechanism reflects how nation-states anticipate ‘what works’, which can be ascertained both in strategic discourse, programme evaluation, and in retrospective reconstruction of public diplomacy episodes. And the manner in which a mechanism is perceived as attributable to a strategic outcome can have significant impact on how public diplomacy is ultimately rationalised as a tool of statecraft. As public diplomacy scholar Pamment (2012b) argues, the way public diplomacy is saddled with measurement and evaluation imperatives can delimit the available repertoire of public diplomacy programming around culture, information, and relation-building.

‘Mechanism’ is useful as an analytical category because of the variety of methods employed in public diplomacy. States rely on different programmes, media, messages, and forms of reputational ‘capital’ in order to pursue the cultivation of soft power through public diplomacy. For example, China anticipates the persuasive draw of its considerable cultural heritage — which is viewed as linked to achieving particular objectives. A 2006 editorial for the *People’s Daily* frames the strategic significance in plain terms: ‘culture is a key integral part of a country’s overall national strength, what people have called “soft power”, and it has become a point of competition between national powers’ (Bandurski 2007). China’s Confucius Institute partnerships with education institutions around of the world are a clear indication of this position, though the ‘power’ of culture is also evident in a significant amount of policy discourse on soft power within the Chinese academy and in speeches by policymakers (Ding 2008; Li 2008).

Former Chinese president Hu Jintao’s position on soft power in relation to culture elaborates an implicit mechanism in a speech to the 17th CPC Congress in October, 2007, in which he argued that China should ‘enhance the country’s cultural soft power [*wenhua ruanshili*]’ (Glaser and Murphy 2009: 16). For Hu, ‘culture has increasingly become an important source of national cohesion and creativity and an important factor in the competition of overall national strength’ (Glaser and Murphy 2009: 16). This position translates into a concerted effort to promote cultural products and perspective into the perceived competitive field of cultural circulation.

Chinese information minister Li Changchun, speaking in 2008 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the creation of China Central Television (CCTV), articulates

a strategic argument for the mechanisms by which soft power tools translate into foreign policy outcomes:

In the modern age, whichever nation's communication methods are most advanced, whichever nation's communication capacity is strongest, it is that nation whose culture and core values are able to spread far and wide, and that nation that has the most power to influence the world. Enhancing our communication capacity domestically and internationally is of direct consequence to our nation's international influence and international position, of direct consequence to the raising of our nation's cultural soft power [...]. (Quoted in Bandurski 2009)

In other words, how states perceive culture or communication instrumentally *as persuasive* implicates the kind of power anticipated, because it ultimately impacts the programmes that derive from these assumptions. Analysis of soft power mechanisms is not simply one of description, but also of inferring constitutive effects on policy and programmatic choices.

In the case of China, the expected returns of communication and diplomatic framing language are illustrative of the role assigned to language as a key mechanism of its soft power. As Callahan (2007) argues, there is ample evidence of Chinese efforts at the iterative and repetitive use of foreign-policy 'language games' to cultivate influence and assuage concerns over China's rise (786–87). Put simply, the practice of terminological adjustment says much about the expected returns of rhetorical fine-tuning in diplomatic messaging over other forms of inducement.

Another implication of mechanism involves the expected capacity of media forms to elicit effects. In this sense, public diplomacy derives inevitably from an institutional construction of meaning around media and communication technology: what kind of impact media can have, what sort of social significance the platforms exhibit, and what sorts of scale of reach is possible. Again, the contrast between the United States and China is instructive.

The Chinese emphasis on international broadcasting tools reflects a pre-occupation with 'monological', transmission-oriented communication (Cowan and Arsenault 2008). The Chinese case also suggests that attitudes towards the efficacy of political communication platforms are refracted through their historical domestic context, which conditions how they are deployed in anticipation of an effect. As a result, the Chinese have invested a considerable amount of resources into their international broadcasting portfolio and have moved to manage internet infrastructure aggressively at the domestic and the international levels (Kalathil 2011; Price 2011; MacKinnon 2012). While this attitude is changing to acknowledge the limitations of broadcast models that target undifferentiated audiences, the emphasis on crafting a better message delivery strategy prevails (Tan 2012).

Similar critiques of strategic communication attitudes were levied at the United States after the launch of *Al-Hurra* satellite news channel for Arab publics in 2004 — where transmission-oriented technologies failed to achieve public diplomacy



objectives in the context of changing social roles for such technologies among Arab audiences for the US public diplomacy (Cull 2008; Kraidy 2009). The wash of criticism within the US government and among academic commentators pointed to the misuse of communication tools and the social relations they sustain. A 2009 US Government Accountability Office report highlighted that ‘a failure to adapt in this dynamic communications environment could significantly raise the risk that U.S. public diplomacy efforts could become increasingly irrelevant’ (GAO 2009). In the wake of such critiques, the United States has sought to leverage the capacity of social media platforms in order to establish credibility (if not necessarily legitimacy) among sceptical publics (Comor and Bean 2012; Hayden, 2013a).

What these kinds of practices reveal are institutional accommodations. The so-called ‘21st Century Statecraft’ policies launched during the Clinton tenure as the US Secretary of State underscore the facilitative turn in the US public diplomacy, and rest on the assumption that power is distributed, non-hierarchical, and increasingly outside the realm of the state. Ross (2011) claims that the ‘proliferation of communication and information technologies creates significant changes for statecraft’ (452). Ross argues that the nature of diplomacy itself must change to adapt to the disruptive potential of social media technologies and the networked politics that they enable.

Outcome

Outcome reflects the range of objectives anticipated from the effective use or cultivation of soft power. This is not a novel concept: it is clearly present in scholarly treatments of power (Berenskoetter 2007). The outcome in this case, however, focuses attention on the goals that are argued to follow from scope and mechanism when a state engages in acts of public diplomacy. This is particularly important, because public diplomacy is often criticised for being disconnected from strategic imperatives (Wallin 2012).

The outcome is a relatively straightforward category, but it also addresses some of the unwieldiness in Nye’s use of the term ‘behaviour’. Behaviour, for example, seems relatively limited in its range of application and in the kind of explanatory narratives that could arise from the post-hoc process-tracing that Nye (2011) encourages (95). What *form* of ‘getting what you want’ is accomplished through agenda-setting or attraction in ways that account for the concatenation of resources, programmes, and actors that culminate in the management of the international environment? The analytical focus on arguments about soft power outcomes offers insight into how ‘behaviours’ become invested with strategic efficacy.

Other scholars have suggested similar broad categories. Wolfers (1962), for example, identified milieu *vs* possession goals for international politics. Wolfers argued that possession goals reflect direct impacts that relate to the needs or requirements of the actor in question (e.g., acquiring access to a resource, preserving



territory, and so on.). Milieu goals, in contrast, are about preserving or transforming the context in which the state must act.

Similar attention to the systemic affordances of power is present in Riker's (1986) concept of 'heresthetics', which describes how a state actor would strive to set the 'rules of the game' in its favour. Viewed in this way, the anticipated outcomes of public diplomacy can be seen as a process of framing or socialisation, where acts of soft power cultivate appreciation of values and institutions (Ikenberry 2006). Likewise, the crux of Van Ham's (2010) 'social power' thesis is control over the intersubjective perception of norms, values, and rules that support relations among nation-states. Social power, considered as a kind of outcome, revolves around the capacity to control what it means to be a state, and the kind of political agency that derives from that identity. However, unlike some of the previous scholars mentioned, the articulated 'outcomes' are not offered as a measure of rationality, but as an indicator of a contingent rational calculus. As Pouliot (2008) argues, 'a practice can be oriented toward a goal without being consciously informed by it' (261).

There is evidence that China seeks a form of social power, not only in its public diplomacy, but across other forms of international engagement through bilateral agreements and developmental investment (Brautigam, 2009). China's foreign policy — including the promotion of its development model, its defence of resource flows, and its own internal politics of domestic political control — reflects a larger agenda of shaping international norms of sovereignty and 'harmony' (Li 2009: 30). As Chinese scholar Xan Yutong argues about the necessity of Chinese soft power, '[d]uring a period of globalization, the sphere of competition is no longer about land, resources, or markets but rule-making, setting regulations, norms, or customs' (quoted in D'Hooze 2010: 4). The over-arching burden of public diplomacy as a strategic orientation towards outcomes is to help shape the context for China's message — to frame its actions and its rising power as acceptable, legitimate, and unthreatening.

Put another way, the long-term agenda of Chinese soft power may very well be to diminish the predominance of Western cultural and social norms that inform world politics, and to engineer the 'field' of policy practice to its favour, such as with the 'democratisation of international relations' position introduced by Zhang Zemin, which provided a Chinese interpretation of multilateralism to address critiques of its own actions. To accomplish this kind of systemic goal, Chinese public diplomacy has been constructed as an intervention into China's 'international publicity' and national image, to combat the perceived media and communication hegemony of the West (Yu 2010; Charhar Symposium 2013). This position rests on the possibility that the normative structure of international relations is available to enterprising actors to be actively contested with a comprehensive public diplomacy.

The United States, in contrast, struggles with an apparent loss of soft power in the form of legitimacy and credibility. The problem, as former CIA analyst Pillar (2011) notes, is that the US soft power objectives are assumed to stem from resources that do not require significant maintenance or amplification. Soft power is presumed to be in



abundance: the US democratic ideals and values do not need to be explained because they are by nature universal. Under this logic, the US soft power resources only need to be conveyed, not elaborated, argued, or even reconsidered. The undercurrent of American exceptionalism that pervades the US thinking (or lack thereof) on soft power has been a persistent factor in policy deliberations on public diplomacy in the United States for decades (Parry-Giles 1994; Hayden 2011a). Lack of attention to the necessity of engagement has resulted in a relatively poor integration of public diplomacy into the larger calculus of foreign and security policy (Wallin 2012).

More contemporary developments in the US public diplomacy practice, however, suggest a gradual shift in strategic thinking on soft power outcomes. As mentioned previously, the US public diplomacy engagement has moved towards a facilitative stance — the provision of communication capacity and the empowerment of foreign publics for development (Gregory 2011). This is evident in programmes such as the ‘TechCamp’ development events designed to bring together technologists with civil society actors to solve problems in developing countries, as well as in the attempts to leverage Twitter, YouTube and Facebook in order to convene ‘real-time’ engagement with crucial publics (Seib 2012). Similarly, the US international broadcasting actors are leveraging online platforms to provide means to communicate within countries and regions beset by authoritarian communication policies (Powers and Youmans 2012).

The anticipated outcome of the US soft power can be understood as a kind of milieu goal, to cultivate both a communication governance regime that benefits free information flows as well as a particular ethic of communication represented by the United States (McCarthy 2011). For example, the US ‘Freedom to Connect’ policy agenda reflects a strategic priority to support a global communication infrastructure that remains free of authoritarian information controls. While some have argued that, ultimately, this reinforces the US economic interests in international communication governance, the Freedom to Connect policy, along with targeted investments in technological development projects functions as a symbolic public diplomacy.

A senior technological advisor at the US State Department claimed: ‘Our basic assumption is that we’ve lost control of the information environment – the only option is to embrace the change and work to shape it.’ (Hanson 2012) Rather than engage in a Cold War-style ‘information battle’, policy emphasis has shifted to shaping the bias of global communication flows in ways that benefit other US strategic priorities (Zaharna 2009).

This has led critical scholars to question the intent of ‘engagement’ as a strategy for public diplomacy, because it represents an intervention into the way foreign publics communicate among themselves. The audiences to public diplomacy, regardless of their strategic importance, already use social media platforms to sustain communal ties, identity and cultural sovereignty. What does it signify when the United States seeks to leverage these affordances in ways that simply reflect state interest (Comor and Bean 2012)? In this case, the outcome for policies and



programmes that facilitate the means to communicate is conveyed symbolically in the intent to manage the ways in which ideas circulate among publics.

How the United States demonstrates its credibility and intent through such programmes anticipates the increasingly multistakeholder, multilateral governance that dominates global policy concerns. The soft power of the United States manifests itself in the ability to provide collaborative solutions to governance problems that cut across levels of actorhood: individuals, transnational advocacy networks and, of course, states. It is a public diplomacy of demonstration, rather than persuasion. The US public diplomacy appears moving towards an invitational stance on international rhetoric (Foss and Griffin 1995).

Understanding the strategic conceptualisation of soft power outcomes in the context of the US public diplomacy is perhaps best understood as a fusion of the aforementioned '21st Century Statecraft' programmes of facilitation with the available affordances of social media technologies for communication goals. In other words, the realm of conceivable ends linked to soft power for public diplomacy has changed. Former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Glassman's (2008) speech on 'public diplomacy 2.0' signalled this shift in the strategic culture of the US public diplomacy. Its key message was to reframe the locus of expected power within communication, from 'diction' to 'conversation' (Glassman 2008). Glassman argues that rather than burnish the image of the United States, the United States should seek to use communication tools actively to transform contexts of strategic importance to its foreign policy.

This argument effectively expands the domain of public diplomacy into the more traditional sphere of responsibility dominated by diplomacy and the national security apparatus. It suggests that securing the communication 'contexts' (such as publics at risk of religious radicalisation), yields a kind of soft power. Glassman argues to revise the core *justifications* for public diplomacy rather than articulate a need for different tools — by implicating communication resources as pivotal to fields of diplomatic practice traditionally outside public diplomacy. These kinds of arguments continue to animate the digital diplomacy increasingly apparent across the US State Department activities, and evident in doctrinal statements that fuse the purpose of diplomacy with public diplomacy (Hanson 2012).

Conclusion: Looking ahead

As Melissen argued in 2005, there are real limits to our understanding of soft power if we narrow our focus to the experience of the US public diplomacy. Melissen provided a clear invitation for a more robust agenda for comparative diplomatic research. This article offers one potential contribution that moves beyond much of the extant normative and prescriptive literature, and offers a comparative, cross-national framework for analysis.



This article proposes a framework for a pragmatic analysis of soft power in the context of public diplomacy that builds on a growing body of scholarly attention to public diplomacy and strategic communication in international studies, and encourages attention to the institutional dimensions of public diplomacy as a tool of statecraft. The way states act upon assumptions that inhere in public diplomacy practice can provide insight into larger debates about soft power within the interdisciplinary field of public diplomacy studies. Comparative research, in particular, can offer insights that demonstrate the utility of soft power as a theory of practice as much as a theory of influence in international affairs (Pamment 2012a; Sun 2012). This study uses public diplomacy to inform a grounded understanding of soft power, although, clearly, public diplomacy can also demonstrate competing normative frameworks for statecraft, such as tensions between ‘mutual understanding’ and ‘persuasion’ that inhere within institutional debates about public diplomacy reform (Zaharna *et al.* 2013).

As critics have noted, ultimately, the soft power concept may be too underspecified to be of use for analysts seeking to understand the instruments, vulnerabilities and strategies that define the contemporary practice of power, especially those that seek prediction-oriented, deductive-nomothetic theories (Layne 2010; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). However, if soft power is most visible in the ‘conversion’ process, as Nye argues, then it may be best understood as a way to assign meaning *post hoc* to an exercise of power — to guide the assemblage of factors that concatenate into particular objectives or effects. Soft power, as a concept in practice, may also reflect a wider array of symbolic action that can threaten or coerce as much as attract or cultivate identification (Bially Mattern 2005). The study of soft power, as suggested here, invites analysis of how the tools of soft power are situated within larger strategic discourses that describe their efficacy, their subjects and their purpose in a calculus of interest.

From a diagnostic perspective, the soft power concept can help analysts ascertain where certain resources and behaviours factor into particular situations or episodes, such as in Atkinson’s (2010) analysis of military exchange programmes and their correlational effects on domestic human rights policies. This is clearly Nye’s suggestion for how the concept can be put to use. Yet, as argued here and elsewhere, soft power’s abstract terms are often too underspecified and too context dependent to generate prescriptive insights, other than to highlight increased attention to the ways in which states can intervene into the domestic formation of foreign policies (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012).

Soft power’s conceptual ambiguity is an invitation for the concept to be appropriated and resituated in localised discourses of international strategy. The ‘performative conceptual analysis’ offered by Guzzini and promoted here provides an opening to study the reflexive argumentation within a comparative investigation of soft power. The framework of scope, mechanism, and outcome as



aspects of soft power discourse conveys the underspecified elements that comprise the soft power concept's assumptions, and works to unpack its component dimensions of publics, communication modalities, and the logics of how states can acquire influence.

Future performative analysis can (and should) involve more comprehensive and ethnographic investigations that explore the cultural, historical and organisational factors in the strategic currency of soft power in a given context. One comparative strategy following this lead could explore the manner in which identity, nationalism and cultural politics influence inevitably the way 'culture' is rendered in public diplomacy programmes and supportive statements based on soft power. The politics of culture at stake among emergent nation-branding strategies could be a productive site of enquiry to demonstrate the key differences in how the abstract terms of soft power are recontextualised (Kaneva 2011).

Another strategy could be to assess the array of strategic objectives that stem from the broad warrant of soft power, and how these 'outcomes' are linked to particular geostrategic circumstances and perceived exigency. For example, the 'art of the possible' to be achieved in the soft power of 'middle powers' is something quite different from the systemic ambitions of China or the United States (Bátora 2006; Gilboa 2009). Providing more granular attention to the kind of effects policymakers attribute to soft power could enrich its potential as an explanatory narrative for international relations, or make room for cognate concepts that reflect more readily the capacities of non-super power states to effect change, such as in Slaughter's (2011) notion of 'collaborative power'.

Further study is necessary because, despite its limited impact as a theoretical concept, soft power appears to animate implicitly and explicitly the growth of public diplomacy and strategic communication programmes around the world. Soft power reflects an emergent set of assumptions about international influence enacted in the resources and modalities of communication. Soft power as a general proposition may also beg for conceptual revision, to clarify what kinds of resources and behaviours reflect the translation of power capacities into outcomes, as well as help constitute a rhetoric of international engagement. As Leander (2011) argues, theorising about concepts in IR should not strive to produce 'cookbooks', but rather reflect the burden of writing 'unfinished dictionaries' comprised of terms and concepts that must inevitably be revised. Following Guzzini's (2013) suggestion for a more robust interrogation of the concepts that underwrite theorising about IR, scholarship must engage the 'historical anchorage' of concepts like soft power continuously, to acknowledge how such terms are informed and constructed from the practices they otherwise justify (536).

What remains amidst the analytical problems, however, is that nation-states still act on some kind of soft power assumption, while the institutions of public



diplomacy continue to expand as a kind of diplomatic practice. For example, in 2010, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying explained the necessity of public diplomacy for China:

Having public diplomacy is like playing a football match. Playing a game is good even when you don't care about winning or losing. One gets the chance to present his side and allow others to feel his existence. But one will definitely lose if he doesn't play at all. (*Global Times* 2010)

Fu Ming was commenting at the opening of China's first centre for public diplomacy research at the Beijing Foreign Studies University (*People's Daily Online* 2010).

Future research can also investigate the less obvious, but more far-reaching implications of soft power perspectives that manifest themselves in institutional transformation and the practices that develop from these adaptations. The US Secretary of State Clinton (2010) signalled this in a public defence of the first US State Department Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review in 2010: '[T]he department is *broadening the way it conceives of diplomacy* as well as the roles and responsibilities of its practitioners [...]; increasing global interconnect- edness now necessitates reaching beyond governments to citizens directly' (emphasis added). Soft power matters, not as a constant of international politics, but as a set of constitutive claims that manifest themselves in institutional transformation.

Likewise, less dynamic resources like culture, values and foreign policy legitimacy may be crucial to the conceptual schema of soft power, but *how they become resources* available to states is increasingly important to the practice of public diplomacy and strategic communication. As Zhao Qizheng justifies public diplomacy, 'China cannot always be the gentleman who works more but talks less in the present world flooded with information. China must, instead, strive for "national rhetorical competence" in the form of a robust public diplomacy' (*People's Daily Online* 2011). These kinds of arguments warrant attention to how states reorient, confirm and critique their institutional approaches to network relations, international structures and the changing nature of political agency beneath the level of the nation-state that mandate a kind of communication power.

The preponderance of new social media technologies, hyper-transparency and adaptations to these conditions through new public diplomacy programmes compel a revision of soft power thinking. The proposed vehicles for analysis — scope, mechanism and outcome — ground such understanding in a phenomenology of soft power. These constructs are suited for an increasingly necessary critical and pragmatic *diagnosis*, more than prediction and causal generalities, and they offer another way to test the limits and capacities of soft power as a framework for statecraft.



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