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DIPLOCAT AGORA 5

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# Public diplomacy in times of pandemics

How to practise at a distance a direct contact based discipline

GLOBAL DEBATE - 2 July 2020



# DIPLOCAE



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# 1. Background

The world has been going through an unprecedented health crisis since March 2020, one which has restricted international travel and shifted activities online, from teleworking to international summits. Diplomacy, by contrast, is anchored in contact, trust and sharing information with each other. Although the digital option makes many of these features more difficult, political and diplomatic elites still meet and conversations still take place.

Public diplomacy is rooted in the use of soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to influence the preferences of others. As such, it relies on the promotion of a country's brand, its good practices and its culture. Accordingly, it employs tools including cultural and educational exchanges, international visit programmes and other face-to-face activities based on learning at first-hand and experiencing what others do and how they live. However, none of this is possible at present.

Another facet public diplomacy deals with is promoting a country's image abroad to build positive views and make it more attractive for investment, knowledge, institutions and tourism as well as to forge bonds with other countries. Knowing the impact of your governance actions internationally is nowadays an extremely significant part of many states' foreign action. Some of the issues which may most shape a country's reputation abroad include how it addresses climate crises, refugees and the pandemic itself together with its respect for human rights and democracy.

So tailoring public diplomacy to the new situation has been more complex than in other areas of international relations, yet at the same time using it well may be even more important than in other periods.

Until now, DIPLOCAT had run face-to-face activities ranging from seminars and conferences with participants from all over the world to international visit programmes designed to showcase Catalonia at first-hand. However, this is not so easy in the current pandemic while at the same time it is more important than ever to share ideas and practices which will help to tackle the crisis in the best way possible.

## 2. Why this global discussion?

This discussion seeks to understand how a country's image has been impacted by how it has treated its citizens during the pandemic while also looking at the approach to non-nationals, especially refugees. Tools are being sought to keep public diplomacy going and to find new ways of doing things in order to break down the barriers put up by social distancing. Public diplomacy used to be an increasingly common tool, yet in the current climate it has been curtailed and so this is the ideal moment to innovate and rethink the field.

DIPLOCAT seeks to discuss and share ideas on the present and future of public diplomacy. In today's uncertain times, many actors (NGOs, cities, regions and states) are unsure how to assist and support their populations, both nationals and foreigners.

One of the great current examples of the role of public diplomacy emerged in South Korea where they identified a change in international perceptions of the country. Because South Korea did a lot of coronavirus testing early on, they had a very large number of cases at the beginning of the pandemic. It seemed to the world that they did not have it under control, yet over time it became clear that they

were actually doing incredibly well and this has brought them an outstanding opportunity to share their good practices and enhance their prestige (The Korea Times, 2020).

This discussion is designed to provide answers to some of the major questions which public diplomacy is currently facing. This means learning how it can help at this time and identifying the most useful tools for doing so, along with getting ready for tomorrow and thinking about how cultural, scientific and academic exchanges might be conducted in the near future. It additionally seeks to find out whether virtual public diplomacy is losing spontaneity and creativity due to the constraints posed by technology. Ultimately, this discussion aims to find the best way for public diplomacy to do what it does best: bring people together, even when they are far apart.

Laura Foraster, secretary general of DIPLOCAT, introduced and moderated the debate, emphasising the need to find new ways of doing things in the new context and the importance of sharing existing good practices in public diplomacy. The discussion was divided into two parts: the first in which each speaker talked about their area of expertise and the second looking at good and bad practices. The Q&A session provided an opportunity to round off and drill down into some of the topics covered in the conversation.

## 3. How has public diplomacy adapted to the new situation?

### > NEIL SIMON

**“We should not give up human contact, and we need to lose the fear of being innovative in public diplomacy”**

### The effects of travel restrictions and the future of digital diplomacy

The Vice President of Bighorn Communication (Portland, Oregon, USA) thinks that we will have to live with the virus in the coming months or years, and that is why the current conditions should not be seen as temporary but rather will remain in place for the medium term. Many public diplomacy practitioners have shied away from the digital environment out of fear, but at the moment you have to venture into it because if you want to hold public diplomacy engagements or activities, right now they have to be online. We need to see public diplomacy as just another family relationship. You do not call your mother and tell her that because we are in a pandemic it is going to be tough to connect, so you wish her a happy birthday, a great Mother’s Day and a Merry Christmas, and next year we will get together again and talk. You have to demonstrate the resolve and the need to contact your interlocutors on a regular basis, and you have to look for new ways to do it.

### Good and bad practices

The main role of public diplomacy is to share successes with other countries so that we can learn from each other. The goal is not just to connect but instead to connect to learn from those who do it best, to share knowledge and help us to be better at governing our countries, to have healthier communities and to live our lives better.

When a country sees that it has got something wrong, it also has an obligation to share it with others and to tell the international community that they have tried to do something, and it did not work out so that others do not make the same mistake. Sharing failures is just as essential as sharing good practices in public diplomacy.

More specific examples of public diplomacy practices which have been conducted during the pandemic:

- The celebration of Europe Day by the European Union Delegation to the United States. They hosted an event showcasing the ties between Europe and the United States involving a 90-minute broadcast special and a number of talks by American personalities from the business, cultural and political realms who discussed these ties with Europe and the needs of the moment as part of the importance of mutual aid and a reminder that we are stronger together.
- European and American bilateral chambers of commerce. They decided to run an activity based on short meetings between businesspeople from different countries who were interested in the same topics in a “speed dating” type experience. It allowed many contacts to be made in a very innovative way. This approach was highly rated by the participants.

## > LIZ GALVEZ

**“It is important to make the public a partner in emerging from the pandemic”**

### The impact of the pandemic on the reputation of states

The former British diplomat argued that reputation is very important for all countries, which is why so much is now invested in public diplomacy and nation branding. Soft power is a key ingredient in promoting the health of the domestic economy and in demonstrating capabilities and influence in the international arena. In order to inspire trust and confidence abroad, you need to have trust and confidence at home first. The number of countries that have emerged with glowing reputations from the pandemic can be counted on the fingers of one hand. New Zealand has had decisive leadership, took immediate action and treated the population with empathy while being very honest about the economic and social consequences of the crisis. They made the population a partner in what they were doing and that is why they top the approval ratings, closely followed by South Korea which has also inspired confidence at home and abroad. The other leader is Taiwan, which although not recognised by many as a sovereign state has earned respect and plaudits for the way it has handled COVID-19.

Other countries have taken decisions without involving their population or giving them a say in the impact of the measures imposed. In some countries, dissenting voices have even been punished. In general, empathy has not been a pervasive trait. Instead, doubts about the veracity of the scientific data, mistreatment of the more vulnerable members of the community, racism and conspiracy theories have been common which governments have in many cases been unable to quell or disprove. Others have directly exploited them to pursue policies which abuse human rights and advance the nationalist agenda. Obviously, all of these factors are not part of the formula for building international confidence.

Countries which have failed to act, dismissing the virus as insignificant, have shown little respect for their citizens. So what we end up with is chaos, political division marked by populism and rejection of multilateral approaches.

Europe has the capacity to deal with the pandemic and it has been transparent as a rule. That is why data has been given to the populace and scientists have been involved in handling the crisis, but the

problem has been that the responses have been very different from one EU member state to another. Given the fact that there are also states with varying measures depending on the region, the outcome has not been good. The lack of European consensus has not been a good advertisement for the EU project, and nor is it a way to show Europe is ready to take on the global leadership in responding to and managing the pandemic that the US appears to have renounced.

Some countries are not particularly bothered by a bad reputation, but Western countries have for years been selling the image of economic leaders, advocates of the rule of law and good governance. They need to show that they are in control, with more consistent measures and practising what they have been preaching for years in terms of democratic values.

Nowadays, people are not that interested in what other governments are doing; they are interested in what is happening at home, in what affects them directly. Obviously they will notice whether another country is managing the crisis better or worse, but their main concern is their government's domestic performance. States will now work more on domestic reputation in the short term, but all democracies also need to be able to address the international effects over the medium and long term.

## Good and bad practices

What you want to achieve with public diplomacy are stable, long-term relationships which have a lasting effect over time. Maintaining these relationships at a distance can be done in a number of ways such as networking with elites, scientific exchanges and cultural diplomacy.

### Networking with elites can produce many activities:

- Webinars, discussions, conferences with academics, members of think tanks, etc. These events, which used to take place in person, can be transferred online without too much difficulty. Moreover, in this approach they can reach wider audiences and bring more people into contact with each other.
- International visit programmes. A British foreign minister recently paid a virtual visit to Bangladesh, where he was able to meet digitally with a number of people as though he were there in person. Likewise, the United Arab Emirates ambassador hosted a virtual dinner party with British MPs.

### Scientific exchanges:

Although science is generally fairly competitive and there is quite a lot of rivalry among scientists, in the search for the vaccine for COVID-19 they have shown that they can work together, and they have been able to do this as a result of technology. Chile has an inter-university and private enterprise scientific cooperation programme with other countries to study the vaccine. This new collaboration has shown that it is possible to forge bonds in times of pandemic.

### Cultural diplomacy can also be conducted in many ways:

- Online language classes.
- Virtual tours of museums.
- Online concerts.
- Online master chef cooking classes such as the one conducted by the Philippine tourism office in London with professional chefs.



- Academic exchanges and educational programmes. For obvious reasons, this is one of the areas of cultural public diplomacy that has been most severely disrupted. Apart from education, what students are looking for is a well-rounded experience and not being stuck in a room sitting in front of a computer. This situation will lead to a fall in the number of foreign students at universities and will have a significant financial effect while reducing the impact of many countries' public diplomacy.

## > MONTSERRAT FEIXAS

**“By not discriminating between nationals and refugees, the pandemic has helped to make societies more empathetic and build networks”**

### The importance of public diplomacy in humanitarian crises

Today, 1% of humanity has been forcibly displaced. That is more than 70 million people. The UNHCR's mission is to ensure that the right to seek asylum is respected for all and that refugees are treated properly. She said that public diplomacy is often used to make this possible. Society must be made aware that behind the numbers there are people.

The UNHCR has three main action strands:

1. Narrative: speaking up at the right time with a clear message and following what the experts say.
2. Empathy: generating empathy and compassion for refugees and asylum seekers and addressing people's fears and misperceptions about these groups.
3. Action: getting people to act and governments to adopt the right policies.

In terms of audience, they distinguish between four profiles:

1. The sympathisers, people who believe that supporting refugees is the right thing to do.
2. The conflicted middle, people who may have compassion for refugees but are also concerned about the impact of refugees on their society, culture, the economy and safety. This is the majority of people in Europe right now.
3. The media, which has the power to reach a vast audience.
4. Governments, to try to make sure they abide by international law and do not infringe the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in their policies and legislation.

States closed their borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and although the UNHCR acknowledges that it was legitimate to do so because these states' first concern was to protect the people in their country, efforts went into making sure that anyone in need had the option of knocking on their door and asking for asylum. Another important aspect was to ensure that whatever programmes were put in place to support the population took refugees and asylum seekers into consideration and the UNHCR worked with governments to make certain that public health messages were also delivered to refugees.

A further key component of public diplomacy in times of pandemic has been the way that refugees with a healthcare background have played a role in the fight against COVID-19 which has helped to convey a positive image.

## Good and bad practices

In the countries where she works (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), there has been no discrimination in access to the health system although the right to seek asylum has not been fully respected.

Virtual engagements and meetings have made it easier to attend more meetings and events than would otherwise have been possible. Refugee networks have been set up which has allowed building bridges between refugees and communities in host countries and cities, such as a forum for refugee women in which women from the host countries also take part, and this has made it possible to construct a very large community because it is virtual.

Nevertheless, there is no substitute for direct human contact, no matter how good digital practices may be.

## 4. Q&A Session

### Is the pandemic scenario more propitious for public diplomacy than for traditional diplomacy? What lessons can we learn to enhance global democracy through public diplomacy and to tackle future challenges such as fake news?

**Neil Simon:** Yes, the context is more conducive to public diplomacy. Traditional diplomacy is very much based on personal contact and relationships, and the digital environment does not furnish the climate of trust and privacy in conversations and negotiations which they are used to. Yet it is precisely this opportunity to reach more people, in a simpler way, which enhances the potential of public diplomacy.

Fake news can be neutralised by communication teams by sharing good practices and investing in increasing the impact of your message on the networks. However, you need to be aware that this constant and aggressive activity is unstoppable. It is important to find partners to get your message across. Famous athletes have been enlisted to promote the use of face masks in the USA.

**Liz Galvez:** What we have learned from the pandemic is that more multilateral cooperation is needed in all possible areas to be able to cope with potential new challenges and future waves. These options for cooperation need to be defined and spelled out in concrete proposals. As far as fake news is concerned, although it is difficult to control because it is easy to spread, it can be curbed by specialised staff. We need to differentiate between deliberately fake news, designed misinformation and rumours. To deal with disinformation, you have to bring out the right people with the appropriate messages. Sometimes it might be celebrities or influencers who are keen to convey the right messages, or you can use foreign communities as a means of internationalisation.

**Montserrat Feixas:** Fake news is a never-ending battle. There is a very toxic discourse against migrants, and refugees and we have to use diplomacy to counter it. We have learned from the pandemic that access to public healthcare is a human right and that until now it was not guaranteed; we have to change this.

## What is the role of cities in public diplomacy and global agendas?

**Neil Simon:** The role of cities is extremely important and they have demonstrated this by leading the response to the current crisis. The failure of states to engage city and regional leaders is a mistake as most of today's challenges have implications for urban areas, such as carbon emissions or mobility. This is why local authorities need to join the global debate and share their learning and the actions they are taking.

**Liz Galvez:** The role of cities and non-state actors is very important. Not just now in tackling the pandemic, because there is a lot where cities can lead the way, such as transport or sustainability for green cities, especially when these policies are maybe a step too far for the whole country. City-to-city diplomacy is a very strong driver. City twinning represents a personal contact that is not government-to-government or official-to-official, but rather a different and very important kind of contact.

**Montserrat Feixas:** The role of cities in public diplomacy is especially important when it comes to embracing refugees and working for their integration into the community and their wellbeing.

## What is the role of culture in public diplomacy?

**Neil Simon:** There is now an opportunity to do more tactile things, even though we are in a digital environment. For example, you can send a country in a box. You post a digital experience to stakeholders, such as a chef master class, and everyone opens their box at the same time, and you give the participants the opportunity to engage with each other. This goes way beyond a simple digital discussion. Having something physical to touch or smell leads to a new way of conveying culture. Virtual museum tours, online concerts and celebrity events are successful in promoting culture. We just need to find different and innovative ways to promote cultural diplomacy.

**Montserrat Feixas:** Cultural diplomacy is a great way to present refugees not just as the recipients of aid but also as people who can chip in and share knowledge and talent. This shifts the conventional narrative to a more constructive one, creating a better understanding about who refugees are and what they can contribute to the host society.

## 5. Conclusions

Many answers, ideas and good practices for how to keep public diplomacy going against a background of social distancing emerged from the global discussion. The importance of not bringing it to a halt but rather staying in touch with counterparts, contacts and potential audiences to further enhance ties was pointed out. The opportunity and the need to do it in an original way, to try to go beyond the strictly digital environment and bring different sensations to the activities that are organised and promote contact between the participants, was also addressed.

There was additionally talk about the chance to extend public diplomacy in areas of knowledge which are often more competitive than cooperative, such as science which is currently teaming up in the search for a vaccine and a cure for COVID-19. These ties which have emerged as a result of the pandemic may be here to stay.

In terms of the reputation of countries, it has become patent that it is now more important how the government of the country in which you live performs. While there may be apparent winners such as New Zealand and South Korea, all countries can emerge stronger if they are not afraid to publicly acknowledge their mismanagement and demonstrate a commitment to improvement.

Handling the refugee crisis has been put on the back burner and currently does not seem to have much bearing on the reputation of states. With closed borders, the prospects for refugee and asylum claims have been very slim. However, it has been shown that with determination it is possible to ensure that there are no undue distinctions between nationals and non-nationals in access to basic services such as healthcare.

The virtual realm has proven to be a great means of reaching out to more people and building wider networks, although direct contact is irreplaceable. Certain areas of digital public diplomacy are likely to stay put in the post-COVID scenario.

## 6. References

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## Annex. Speakers



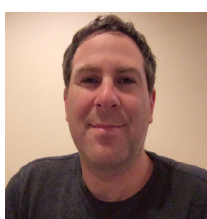
### > **MONTSERRAT FEIXAS** UNHCR REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Montserrat Feixas Vihé has been UNHCR's Regional Representative based in Budapest since July 2013. She is responsible for the coordination and management of UNHCR's operations in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. She is a member of DIPLOCAT's Advisory Council.



### > **LIZ GALVEZ** SENIOR FELLOW AT THE DIPLO FOUNDATION. FORMER SENIOR DIPLOMAT WITH THE UK FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Liz Galvez worked in the diplomatic service of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office for 33 years, both in London and in places such as Helsinki in the 1960s, in Central America during the 1980s, the most troubled time in the region, at the OSCE in Vienna before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in Romania in the early post-communist transition and at the United Nations in both Geneva and New York. After retiring, she was appointed the first Executive Director of the Aspen Institute Romania which she set up and managed for three years. Since 2009 she has been a lecturer at the Diplo Foundation, specialising in public diplomacy and negotiation skills. She has recently been appointed senior fellow of the faculty.



### > **NEIL SIMON** VICE PRESIDENT OF BIGHORN COMMUNICATION (PORTLAND, OREGON, USA)

Neil Simon is Head of EU Policy and Outreach Partnership at Bighorn Communication, a role he has held since the project's inception in 2016 and for which he has produced over 200 activities in more than 35 countries. He is an award-winning journalist and the former communications' director of the US Helsinki Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly. He has led USAID training programmes in Vietnam on diplomacy for parliamentarians and has published numerous articles on public diplomacy in Europe and Central Asia.

# The member entities of the consortium

## » Public institutions and municipal entities

- Government of Catalonia
- Barcelona City Council
- Tarragona City Council
- Girona City Council
- Lleida City Council
- Vielha e Mijaran City Council
- Barcelona Provincial Council
- Tarragona Provincial Council
- Girona Provincial Council
- Lleida Provincial Council
- Conselh Generau d'Aran
- Catalan Association of Municipalities and Counties
- Federation of Municipalities of Catalonia

## » Entities of the business sector

- General Council of the Official Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Catalonia
- Entrepreneurs association Foment del Treball Nacional
- Association of Micro-, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises of Catalonia (PIMEC)
- Confederation of Cooperatives of Catalonia
- Multi-Sector Business Association (AMEC)
- Private Foundation of Entrepreneurs (FemCAT)

## » Entities of the social, trade union and sports sector

- The Group of Entities of the Voluntary Sector of Catalonia
- Trade union Unió General de Treballadors de Catalunya (UGT)
- Trade union Comissions Obreres de Catalunya (CCOO)
- Football Club Barcelona

## » Universities, business schools and academic institutions

- University of Barcelona (UB)
- Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)
- Technical University of Catalonia (UPC)
- Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)
- University of Lleida (UdL)
- University of Girona (UdG)
- Rovira i Virgili University (URV)
- Ramon Llull University (URL)
- Open University of Catalonia (UOC)
- University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC)
- International University of Catalonia (UIC)
- Abat Oliba CEU University (UAO CEU)
- Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI)
- EADA Business School
- Barcelona Graduate School of Economics (Barcelona GSE)