

FRS – Japan Program

COMMUNICATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: JAPAN FACING THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Yasushi Watanabe



Professor Watanabe Yasushi is Professor of Public Diplomacy at the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University. Before joining Keio University, he was awarded a PhD in Social Anthropology from Harvard University and undertook post-doctoral research at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. He was previously a Fellow at Downing College, University of Cambridge in 2007, a Visiting Professor at Sciences Po in 2013, a Japan Scholar at the Wilson Center, and a Visiting Scholar at Peking University and the College of Europe in 2018. Yasushi serves on the Advisory Panel at the Japan Foundation, as a program director of the International House of Japan, and a co-chair of the Japan Advisory Council of the Salzburg Global Seminar. His books include the co-edited volume *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States* (2008) and the edited volume *Handbook of Cultural Security* (2018). In 2005, he was awarded the prestigious Japan Academy Medal, which is the highest national prize awarded to mid-career academics.

Question 1: There are a lot of debates about the role of public diplomacy in liberal democracies and the differences between public diplomacy, propaganda and “communication”. In that context, how would you define public diplomacy for a democratic country like Japan?

Public diplomacy is an art of “winning hearts and minds” of foreign audiences. It aims at “shaping realities” (defining the *status quo*, setting agendas and making rules), thus bringing other actors and countries on your side. It requires two types of communication. One is for culti-

vating a sense of intimacy and trust in your country among a wider, general public in foreign countries. Culture can be an important gateway to your country. The other is more focused on achieving specific policy goals (e.g. climate change, human rights, territory and trade). This one is often called “strategic communication”.

Propaganda is based on false information and one-way communication. Public diplomacy is quite an opposite to it. It works best when free and open dialogue is ensured. In this respect, exchange programs and intellectual policy dialogues are

usually less susceptible to propaganda than international broadcasting is. Also, non-democratic (authoritarian or autocratic) countries are more prone to propaganda because they lack transparency.

Although non-democratic countries are getting more vocal in international relations, democratic countries like Japan and France must maintain the integrity of “public diplomacy”. Degrading our efforts into “propaganda” is not only self-defeating: it is also exactly what non-democratic countries wish for.

Question 2: When did Japan start being more proactive in terms of public diplomacy and what were the main incentives?

Right after World War II, Japan has been rather inactive in public diplomacy. We were under U.S. occupation and lacked resources. As our economy took off in the 1960s, we experienced trade frictions with the U.S. and in Southeast Asia. So, we had to actively defend our positions by embracing “Japanese uniqueness” discourses. We became more active, but it was essentially reactive.

Since around 1990, when Japan got criticized as doing “checkbook diplomacy” at the time of the Gulf War, we started to make more commitments to international society (i.e. multinational peacekeeping operations and overseas development aid). So, instead of emphasizing “Japanese uniqueness”, we began exploring more “common ground” with other countries, thus contributing to global commons. I would say it was half reactive and half proactive.

Then, since around 2000, Japan became more proactive. September 11th was a

shocking challenge to Japan as well. Also, Japan’s creative industries began popular, especially among the youth abroad, starting with manga and anime, and then cuisine, fashion, film, sports, etc. In 2004, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially started using the term “public diplomacy” for their offices and activities.

Question 3: What are the main instruments of Japan’s public diplomacy? How are cooperation and coordination between different agencies organized? Should each ministry, such as the Ministry of Health, the Interior Ministry or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have its own public diplomacy agenda with a large degree of autonomy and reactivity or should there be global coordination?

For example, the Japan Foundation and NHK World are key instruments for widening and deepening communication with foreign audiences. When it comes to more policy-specific issues, the Cabinet’s Office and ministries are natural players.

However, we should not forget that public diplomacy is getting more public today. I mean, private actors such as media, think tanks, universities, NGOs, corporations, religious organizations, YouTubers and celebrities have more influence than ever before. And they value autonomy and abhor the government’s interference. It is getting almost impossible (nor it is desirable) for a government to control information and images. The role of state actors today is to coordinate the platform for those diverse actors and serve as a facilitator rather than as a dominator. This is particularly so in reaching out to wider, general audiences abroad.

Also, public diplomacy is getting more public in the sense that what you do could have global implications. If you make a

racist remark, for instance, it instantly crosses borders and invites backlash against you, your organization and your country. Even within a Ministry, public diplomacy is not something that only the office of public affairs/public relations should/could do. The domestic/global demarcation is getting less clear.

Question 4: What could hinder Japan's public diplomacy initiatives?

I think that Japan is lucky, as we are not so much affected by the populist backlash against global engagements or internationalists. Politically, it is still very stable. The great majority of politicians and of the public opinion recognize the importance of international understanding of the position of the Japanese Government and commitment for the sake of both Japan and the world. It sounds obvious, but it is not necessarily so in reality.

Having said that, I am sometimes annoyed by hawkish voices calling for a more muscular approach, which seems to me short-sighted, backfiring and self-defeating. At the same time, I am concerned with dovish voices refusing to face the grim realities of international relations, thus rejecting public diplomacy as profane. Both voices are neither realistic nor idealistic.

Question 5: Is public diplomacy, for a country like Japan, the same as "soft power"?

I think so. If "soft power" is the ability to win the hearts and minds of foreign audiences, public diplomacy is an art for wielding that power.

Having said that, I am perplexed by the fact that people often mix up soft power and attractive resources. They are not the

same. Japan, like many other countries, has many attractive resources, but whether a resource can translate into soft power depends on policy goals, contexts and methods. That is why I am a little awkward about making soft power ranking by countries. Maybe they rank the general perceptions of a country's attractive resources. But in my view, soft power is not a beauty contest.

Question 6: What are Japan's main assets in terms of public diplomacy?

Like that of France, the general perception of Japan is quite positive. It is a valuable asset for Japan to exploit in terms of public diplomacy.

"G7 countries, of which France and Japan are a part, can work together in the field of public diplomacy as well, for example in dealing with "fake news" and "sharp powers" or leading a global public health campaign against pandemics. Democratic countries have natural advantage in credibility and legitimacy.

But for what? Public diplomacy is a tool, not an end in itself. There are a number of policy goals but the bottom line is to preserve, protect and defend the rule-based, democratic and free world order. We should be careful not to be arrogant nor self-congratulatory when we talk about these values. Yet, any effort to undermine these values need being countered. G7 countries, among which France and Japan, can work together in the field of public diplomacy, but also, for example, in dealing with "fake news" and "sharp powers" or in leading a global public health campaign against pandemics. Democratic countries have a natural advantage in credibility and legitimacy.

This is the time for such a more “collaborative” public diplomacy, instead of Japan or France going alone.

March 2020