

# Ethics in Public Diplomacy: Insights from Practitioners

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Received: December 28, 2023 | Accepted: July 09, 2024

## Abstract

A rare opportunity to shadow, observe and interview Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) working at a U.S. Embassy in a European capital provided insights on how public diplomacy practitioners view ethics in the practice of public diplomacy. Findings show that public diplomats believe that ethics and values are important to their work and that they are ethical in their efforts to engage foreign publics. U.S. public diplomats see themselves as playing an important role in advancing truth and supporting the free flow of credible information about the United States and its interests and values. Participants said that although ethical guidelines are available, they do not routinely consult ethical resources in their work. They cited ethical challenges related to 1) dealing with unethical adversaries who spread disinformation and propaganda, 2) the use of new technologies, 3) gaining timely approvals for field activities, 4) conducting public diplomacy in diverse cultural contexts, and 5) relying on partners who may not share the same values or aims. The study contemplates the need for formal ethical standards in the practice of public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** public diplomacy, ethics, values, practitioners, credibility

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## Introduction

At its core, public diplomacy (PD) is a values-based enterprise widely viewed as an instrument for advancing national and, increasingly, global interests and values in the world through ethical engagement with foreign publics. Yet, ethics-centered analyses of public diplomacy are rare, with the principles and values that motivate and guide public diplomacy practitioners receiving scant attention in the public diplomacy literature. This gap is surprising given historical links between public diplomacy and propaganda (Hamilton, 2021) and increased emphasis on relational perspectives in public diplomacy scholarship and practice (Zaharna, Fisher & Arsenault, 2013). As Fitzpatrick (2010) observed, relational approaches “recognize the centrality of ethics in how nations manage their relations with the people of other nations” (p. 123).

Ethical conduct is central to establishing both public diplomats and the organizations they represent as legitimate and credible actors with foreign publics. According to Zaharna (2010), “To cross an invisible ethical boundary is to deplete source credibility and diminish the overall effectiveness of a nation’s public diplomacy” (p. 183). In ensuring that diplomatic goals and actions are congruent with public interests, the public diplomat must “be genuinely at ease with discussion of values (rather than mere interests), understanding that without clearly stated principles – and constant adherence to them – it will be impossible to animate coalitions of state and nonstate actors, and even harder for members of that coalition to work together to deliver a common good” (Evans & Steven, 2010, p. 25; see also Zhang & Swartz, 2009).

While the analytical and operational boundaries of public diplomacy have received considerable attention by scholars and practitioners (Ayhan, 2019; Gregory, 2016), ethical boundaries have been neglected. Practitioners, therefore, have little guidance on exactly what constitutes ethical public diplomacy. There is no common framework or consensus on responsible advocacy in public diplomacy contexts. As a result, ethical considerations may be missed, ignored, or diminished in public diplomacy strategy, planning, and implementation, leading to negative consequences. As Kim et al. (2018) observed, “when publics’ expectations for a government’s ethical behavior are unmet, their negative sentiment about the government grows” (p. 3). On the other hand, adding ethics to the mix of considerations involved in designing, approving, and implementing global communication and engagement initiatives could lead to more ethical and effective outcomes.

This exploratory research examined the ethical dimensions of public diplomacy through the eyes of practitioners in the field. The aims of the study were to probe the perceived importance of ethics in practice, to identify principles and values that guide public diplomacy efforts, and to explore ethical challenges faced by practitioners on the front lines of public diplomacy. In revealing the ethical underpinnings of PD practices, the study illustrates links between ethics and effectiveness in engaging people abroad and illuminates the importance of

ethics and values in establishing public diplomats and the nations they represent as trusted interlocutors and credible sources of information for foreign publics. As such, the research contributes to the conceptual development of public diplomacy, responding to L'Etang's (1996) call for efforts aimed at advancing the discipline to "go beyond practical ['how to do it'] guidance and consider the motivations, values, beliefs and conventions of the practice" (p. 24). The focus of this study was on discerning practitioner perspectives on ethical public diplomacy.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Public Diplomacy and Ethics***

In writing about the ethical dimensions of international relations, Frost (2009) observed that although "international interactions are always ethically informed . . . this aspect is often hidden and not made apparent." As a result, there is a "rather shallow understanding of the role of ethics in international affairs" (p. 18). Frost (2009) argued that to engage in international relations "is to make ethical claims for oneself and to recognize the ethical standing of others" (p. 19). "Understanding what is deemed ethically appropriate conduct is a prerequisite for participation in social practices, including our international ones" (p. 26). Nevertheless, he said, the relevance of ethics in international affairs has not been examined in a serious way. Belay (1997) similarly noted "relatively little research that directly addresses the ethics of diplomacy and negotiation in contemporary global international processes" (p. 227).

The same is true in public diplomacy. In citing a need for research on ethics and social responsibility in public diplomacy, Fitzpatrick (2022) observed, "While ethical principles and values are recognized as important in the practice of PD, they have not been robustly explored in scholarship" (p.148). Only a few PD scholars have written about topics related to ethics. For example, Dutta-Bergman (2006) evaluated public diplomacy efforts of the United States directed toward the Middle East from an ethical perspective, recommending the adoption of a more culture-centered approach that would require the United States to be open to changing and modifying its policies based on dialogue with other cultures. Comer and Bean (2012) criticized the Obama administration for embracing a "duplicitous" strategy of global engagement based on self-interest rather than an ethical public diplomacy that "embraces genuine dialogue (rather than contrived) dialogue" (p. 203). Izadi and Nelson (2020) contended that as public diplomacy moves toward a more dialogue-centered paradigm, its ethical legitimacy is strengthened (see also Taylor & Kent, 2013). Zhang and Swartz (2009) made a case for public diplomacy to expand its aims to include the promotion of Global Public Good (GPG) to help meet shared global challenges. In considering the ethical grounds for doing so, they contended that "morality based on self-interests is also self-defeating" (p. 384).

In discussing power and influence in public diplomacy, Fisher (2011) distinguished PD approaches based on gaining power over others and empowering others. “Genuine, symmetrical exchange is the point at which the two approaches meet as participants are equally open to the influence of the other while seeking to exert influence” (p. 272). Fisher asked, “Is Public Diplomacy purely a tool to support the extension of an organization’s power or a means to engage and participate in the development of a genuinely shared future?” (p. 295). In rejecting power-based approaches to public diplomacy, Fitzpatrick (2007) cited a need to recognize the moral – as well as strategic – aspects of public diplomacy policies and practices and to consider how practitioners can ethically balance the self-interests of the institutions they represent with the interests of affected publics. She later suggested the development of global professional standards that would help to establish public diplomacy as a distinct profession and ensure that decisions and actions are grounded in ethical principles and values (Fitzpatrick, 2013).

### ***Practitioner Perspectives***

A 2007 survey of United States Information Agency (USIA) alumni who served in the USIA during the Cold War found that front-line practitioners strongly agreed that ethics are important in the practice of public diplomacy, and they strongly disagreed that propaganda is the same thing as public diplomacy. One participant explained that “honesty and openness are the best attributes of a successful public diplomacy effort.” Participants in the USIA alumni study also emphasized the importance of credibility to public diplomacy’s effectiveness, with one commenting that “credibility is hard-won and fragile.” Another put it more bluntly: “Without credibility, PD is a failure” (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 237).

Ethical values considered the most important by USIA alumni were credibility, respect, truthfulness, dialogue, and openness. These values also were reflected in their assessments of the effectiveness of various public diplomacy activities, with relational activities involving direct engagement with people abroad – e.g., exchange programs, face-to-face dialogues with local publics, political elites, and other opinion leaders – deemed most effective (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton & Kendrick 2013).

A number of practitioners have written and spoken about the importance of ethical conduct in public diplomacy. Former USIA Director Edward R. Murrow (1963) is perhaps quoted most often: “American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that.”

Questions related to truth and credibility in U.S. public diplomacy date back to its earliest days. In *Cool Words, Cold War*, which reported on a 1953 study of the USIA’s operating assumptions, Leo Bogart (1995) pointed to the agency’s “Statement of Strategic Principles”

which stated that the USIA “is deprived of the devices of convenient falsification, concealed omission, manufactured evidence, and spurious consistency which have been powerful weapons of expediency in totalitarian propaganda” (p. 128-129). According to Bogart (1995), honesty in reporting is defended on the grounds that it is both morally right and pragmatic in countering disinformation and achieving credibility. “To convince anyone, output must first be believed,” he said (p. 134).

Hans Tuch (1990), a former USIA officer, wrote in *Communicating with the World* about the importance of ethics and values to the success of a public diplomat: “The credibility of the communication process embodied in the practice of U.S. public diplomacy overseas depends equally on truthfulness and on comprehensiveness. If we meddle with the truth or if we present only one aspect of American life while hiding another, we will inevitably be found out and suffer a corresponding loss of credibility, and thus effectiveness, as public diplomats” (p. 121). In a call for the U.S. government to revitalize public diplomacy in the wake of 9/11, the Public Diplomacy Council explained, “Understanding what is credible in the context of other societies – with their own history and politics – is the foundation upon which effective public diplomacy is constructed” (Kiehl, 2005, p. 191).

Discussions regarding ethical standards in public diplomacy often cite the unique culture of diplomacy as having “implicit rules of action, not always possible to be verbalized or taught” (Guiora, Cotton & Sebastiao, 2021, p. 119). As noted by a former president of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), although the Foreign Affairs Manual provides general standards for ethical conduct, there is no “developed code such as many professional associations apply to ensure that their members understand their mission and the importance of conducting themselves ethically” (Johnson, 2010).

During the Cold War, U.S. public diplomacy principles and practices were learned on the job rather than through ethics training programs or manuals. In *Career Diplomacy*, Kopp and Naland (2021) observed, “Most governments recognize that diplomatic skills are most surely gained through education, training and experience in the field” (p.7). Although members of the U.S. Foreign Service see themselves as professionals, Kopp and Naland said, “diplomacy is different from other professions” in that “amateurs are allowed to participate. . . There is no diplomats’ guild to establish standards or regulate access, and there are no sanctions for being diplomatic without a license” (p. 93).

At the same time, there is some movement toward the idea of developing formal ethical standards in U.S. diplomacy. For example, former U.S. Ambassador Charles A. Ray (2015) observed in the *Foreign Service Journal* that in order for the American Foreign Service to move from “a collection of highly intelligent, intensely dedicated and loyal experts in the art and craft of diplomacy” toward becoming a body of diplomatic professionals, formal ethical standards are needed. “There is no shortage of ethical regulations and prohibitions in our line of work, and no one can say that Foreign Service personnel are unethical in general,” he

wrote. “The current regulations, however, are proscriptive, couched in dense legal jargon and spread through the Foreign Affairs Manual, making them relatively hard to access.” According to Ray, the AFSA needs “a clear, formal code of ethics that is prescriptive and aspirational, easy to understand and apply evenly and fairly, and understood by people who are not part of the Foreign Service” (p. 4).

Former U.S. Foreign Service Officer Joe B. Johnson (2022) made a similar case for the development of ethical standards in public diplomacy. He explained that values and norms that in years past were imparted to new public diplomacy officers by mentoring are not included in formal training programs today. “American public diplomacy has been admired around the world for reflecting the traditional values of its society. Our openness, transparency and commitment to values that transcend private interests is the key to America’s soft power.” According to Johnson, we should all do our best to make sure those values remain strong. “It’s time for public diplomacy leaders to call out the most important ethical principles in our work.”

## **Research Questions**

In an effort to better understand practitioner perspectives on the ethical dimensions of public diplomacy, the following research questions were posed to a group of working public diplomats:

RQ1: Do practitioners view ethics as important to their success?

RQ2: What ethical guides do practitioners follow in their work?

RQ3: What ethical principles and values are considered most important in communicating with foreign publics?

RQ4: What ethical challenges do practitioners face in their work?

## **Method**

Formal and informal interviews with U.S. public diplomacy practitioners based at a U.S. Embassy in a large European capital were conducted over a four-day period in November 2022. Two researchers, who were there by invitation, gathered insights about ethics and values in public diplomacy from approximately 20 practitioners in a variety of positions and functions, including FSOs and locally employed staff. Eight FSOs participated in formal interviews, each lasting about one hour, during which they were asked about the role of ethics in their professional roles. The interviews used a semi-structured approach with broad research questions. According to Tredwell and Davis (2020), using a semi-structured approach allows both the interviewer and the interviewee the chance to elaborate on topics and may

create a natural conversational flow. This structure also allows for follow-up to key questions. The in-depth interview sessions provided an opportunity to understand how the public diplomacy officials frame their own experiences.

The researchers also collected unstructured responses on the topic of ethics via group discussion and observational data. The researchers were invited to speak with a team of public affairs practitioners who were participating in a meeting and brainstorming session. In this case, the researchers participated in a question-and-answer with a group of 12 public affairs officers, social media managers, and advisors. Although there was no predetermined set of questions, the session allowed for a discussion related to the key aims of the study. Other information was gathered through participant observation, i.e., listening and informal interaction with public diplomats in their workplace setting and at social functions. As participant observers, the researchers were able to observe the daily work life of participants and their exchanges with each other.

The researchers recorded and interpreted individual and group behaviors of the public diplomacy officers in their work environment at the U.S. Embassy. The researchers were provided supervised access to parts of the embassy and other facilities to participate in the interviews, team meetings, and observational settings. Per IRB guidelines, the researchers disclosed their objective of collecting information about ethics in public diplomacy for the purposes of academic research to all participants and received explicit consent from the eight formal interviewees to include their verbatim responses in published research. To ensure confidentiality, participants in this study are not identified by name, title, or location.

Formal approvals, provided through a key informant, helped to legitimize the researchers' presence, and established the study discussions as nonthreatening and acceptable. The researchers were asked to not electronically record the interviews. However, the researchers were permitted to take handwritten notes during the interviews. Immediately afterward, the researchers discussed the responses with each other to ensure accuracy and clarity and to create a single transcript. The transcript was later analyzed for general themes related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In reviewing the findings, the researchers considered the setting, participants, end goals of the communication, language and behavior used to convey meaning, tone of speech, and norms governing the discussions (Tredwell & Davis, 2020). Given the rare opportunity to speak with public diplomacy officials, these methods were appropriate for gathering exploratory data.

## **Results**

### ***RQ1: Do practitioners view ethics as important to their success?***

Overall, the ethical conduct of U.S. public diplomacy officials was perceived by participants as a moral imperative that is tied to national interests. Study participants

emphasized that following ethical best practices is important in creating effective and credible communication that serves the national interest. Conversely, the practitioners stressed that unethical practice undermines trust and damages relationships. One respondent noted that ethics is very important and that is why the government requires annual ethics training.

Several interviewees stressed the importance one's professional moral compass plays in doing what is best in communicating U.S. values and the principle of democracy. As one respondent noted, "Ethics, communication, and public diplomacy are not separate. They are woven into the same tapestry."

To some extent, what was *not* said by the public diplomats was as insightful as what they did say. While they never actually expressed the notion that "of course we are ethical, we work for the United States of America, and we are bound by U.S. and international law" that message came through loud and clear. The researchers' general observation was that the FSOs believe their work is inherently ethical because they are representing the interests of the United States and are fighting to defend the values of democracy around the world. However, some of the participants seemed reluctant to discuss ethics directly. When asked about ethics, their responses veered into conversations about how disinformation and fake news were being disseminated by foreign adversaries, or they brought up issues surrounding the difficulty of engaging foreign publics on matters of real importance to the United States.

### ***RQ2: What ethical guides do practitioners follow in their work?***

The researchers observed slight confusion among some of the respondents when asked directly about a "code of ethics." Overall, practitioners struggled to identify specific sources of guidance. When asked what ethical guidelines or codes they follow, they pointed to various sources with several commenting that the U.S. State Department has regulations for openness and transparency. One stressed, "Public diplomacy is very *public*." She referred to the Smith-Mundt Act which established the legal basis for overseas public diplomacy, while also guarding against domestic propaganda. Several mentioned the ethical values of the Global Engagement Center (GEC) as outlined in the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM). Another respondent indicated that sharing values and combatting disinformation was an essential part of the job. She called attention to the GEC mission as outlined in the FAM (Foreign Affairs Manual), "The Global Engagement Center (GEC) leads, synchronizes, and coordinates efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining U.S. national security interests" (Introduction to Global Engagement Center). According to this respondent, the State Department conducted research and polling regarding disinformation, and the findings indicated that it does not work to call out the disinformation cases. "Instead, the approach is to call out U.S. strengths."

Some respondents said they also follow professional standards of public diplomacy



associations. For example, the Public Diplomacy Council of America's values code stresses truthfulness, cultural respect, safeguarding confidences, and avoiding manipulation (Public Diplomacy Council of America, 2024). The Diplomatic Council also provides a code based on 10 ethical principles (Diplomatic Council of Ethics, n.d.). While acknowledging that guidelines for ethical practice exist; however, the respondents said they do not focus on them in their day-to-day activities. Rather, one participant explained, the focus is on specific rules of engagement set out in U.S. and international law and diplomatic culture.

***RQ3: What ethical principles and values are considered most important in communicating with foreign publics?***

Practitioners cited honesty, integrity, respect, dialogue, and transparency as important in the practice of public diplomacy. One respondent said, "PD officials must provide truthful, accurate information that represents U.S. values and policies." It is also important that respect be shown for foreign countries' culture and values. One participant expressed that it is important to understand the needs and interests of other countries and strive to create an open dialogue and mutually beneficial relationships. To best communicate, participants agreed that transparency is crucial to U.S. public diplomacy. One respondent with 16 years in the Foreign Service said, "U.S. public affairs is very public with regulations for openness and transparency."

Relationship building and dialogue are seen as key components of effective public diplomacy. Participants stressed that building genuine, positive relationships fosters mutual understanding, good will, and social capital between nations. One respondent cited the importance of two-way dialogue rather than just information sharing. "Public affairs is 90 percent press relations versus country relations," the respondent said. "The two don't always play well together."

Overwhelmingly, practitioners were passionate about their mission to share the American values of freedom and democracy. When asked about how American values are branded, several participants referenced the "Brand America" branding guide (Brand America: Branding guide), which was developed in order to promote consistency in U.S. promotional messaging. According to the guide, "The U.S. Department of State is one brand within the United States family of brands. It is the only agency that focuses on promoting American values to global audiences through diplomatic efforts" (Brand America: Branding guide).

One respondent said, "America is a global brand, but how do you sell the brand in different countries? Education is one thing, but America is different. Democracy is a personal risk for many people." This respondent also referenced Edward R. Murrow's "Last Three Feet" statement which expresses the sentiment that moving information over long distances is easier than the close, person-to-person connection, which is vital to effective communication. This respondent stressed that the crucial link in international exchange is connecting personally to the message recipient and mentioned that one way the embassy works to share

American values and create open, participatory dialogue is through the American Spaces program. According to the Foreign Affairs Manual, the “American Spaces programming showcases the breadth and depth of American values, culture, ideals, and perspectives on a variety of themes” (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Several participants referenced the six pillars of American Spaces: (1) English language learning, (2) educational advising, (3) alumni networking, (4) cultural and outreach activities, (5) information about the United States, and (6) skills building (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

***RQ4: What ethical challenges do practitioners face in their work?***

Numerous participants stressed that although U.S. communications are transparent, honest, and open, this is not always the case with other nations. One said, “With other actors, anything goes.” Another participant noted, “Honest people are constrained by the borders of the truth, but those who lie are not.” As a result, practitioners face considerable challenges in combatting disinformation and building relationships based on truth.

Participants also noted challenges related to modern technologies and stressed that ethical standards and professional values are imperative when new technology is utilized to create and disseminate messages to foreign publics. They cited hacking, surveillance, AI, and the use of big data as concerns related to ethics and observed that new technology has blurred lines between public diplomacy and propaganda. With the ability to reach large foreign audiences directly and quickly, risk is greater for message manipulation by other countries. One participant said, “The Russian Ambassador here tweets constantly. Sometimes the U.S. Embassy finds out information quicker from him than from [the embassy] here.” Another concern raised was about how disinformation could spread with X’s move to charge for verified content making it possible for anyone to become verified. Respondents stressed that because disinformation and misinformation spread rapidly, truthfulness is essential.

In adapting to technological changes, participants said they must balance effectiveness with ethical considerations. They noted that digital tools enable greater adaptation of messages for different countries but also can lead to misunderstanding. One respondent explained that the United States communicates via social media (X, YouTube) and measures social media metrics. However, the information shared is not always direct. Moreover, it is not always interpreted correctly. For example, to teach disinformation, the Department of State created video games called Harmony Square and Cat Park. However, the media literacy tool did not translate well between countries. One participant explained that the tool uses an inoculation theory approach to help players understand how democracy works. She described the game’s mission of teaching media literacy: “A fake news controversy is created about a park for cats, and gamers learn about how misinformation is spread via coding.” She cautioned that the tool potentially missed the mark and could have a boomerang effect teaching users how to code and spread disinformation. Thus, U.S. efforts to combat

disinformation are only effective to the extent that the “truth” is both received and understood.

The interviewees also mentioned the constraints of internal guidelines on communication efficiency, noting that all U.S. messages must go through multiple channels of approval. One respondent said, “The greatest challenge is the clearance process. With social media, there is the need to respond quickly, but everything needs clearance.” The interviewee explained that in a crisis situation, a quick response is often imperative. However, because in many cases clearance is needed from officials at headquarters in Washington, D.C., “the advantage of quick engagement is lost when every message is looked at word by word before responding.” Another practitioner said that U.S. training on ethical boundaries is good, but sometimes, especially when people’s lives are at risk, practitioners must act quickly to make situational ethical decisions.

Challenges related to operating in diverse cultural contexts also were cited. As one respondent said, “ethics in the Foreign Service is inherently complex because we are working in multicultural environments.” Another said that because public diplomacy practitioners must communicate globally to 190 countries, dialogue can be difficult. “We put out a lot of content, but we don’t have a lot of engagement. We want a conversation.”

Another challenge is related to collaborating with local partners to implement programs. For example, although American Spaces materials are carefully crafted to be “on brand” in the promotion of democracy and those who craft those stories are trained by American Spaces, one public affairs officer mentioned there is a risk of losing control of the message while relying on local partners who may have different interests or goals. In many countries around the world, the American Spaces are operated out of host institutions and run by operating partners who might have other priorities than what the embassy needs to prioritize. One said, “We are relying on the kindness of strangers to tell the American story. Sometimes there is not a lot of control over the message that is shared.” Another respondent stressed that strategic planning is key in communicating American values. “For example,” they said, “we [may] want the public to talk about SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], misinformation, etc., but they [local partners] are excited [to share] about Halloween.”

## **Discussion**

This paper reports the findings from interviews and conversations conducted with U.S. public diplomacy practitioners about ethics and values in the practice of public diplomacy. After spending nearly a week in the field, shadowing, observing, and engaging with FSOs and other public diplomacy professionals, the researchers garnered several key take-aways. To the extent that the public diplomacy practitioners interviewed for this study are representative of the larger diplomatic corps, the findings reveal that PD specialists working in the U.S. Foreign Service are committed to the values they are fighting for, are passionate about their jobs, and

believe that they are practicing public diplomacy with the utmost ethical standards at the forefront.

Frost's (2009) observation that the ethics of international relations is "often hidden" seems to encapsulate what the public diplomats in this study conveyed (p. 18). Although ethics and values are viewed as important to public diplomacy practitioners, there seems to be no explicit consideration of ethics in PD planning, decision making, implementation, or approval processes. The most pronounced finding was that the officers do not focus on the ethical dos and don'ts of their job, but rather implicitly understand the importance of their work and the necessity to practice it using ethical standards and the laws to which they are bound. They echoed the results of a USIA alumni survey in 2007 that reported strong agreement that ethics were important to the practice of public diplomacy and that without credibility and truthfulness, PD will fail (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Participant views on the most important values in PD are in line with those cited by USIA alumni and other practitioners, indicating agreement that credibility, truthfulness, integrity, respect, dialogue, transparency, and openness are important to effective practices (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

The emphasis practitioners placed on dialogue and relationship building is in line with PD scholars' calls for relational approaches to PD and the view that relational approaches are more ethical than one-way communication or strategic dialogue focused on self-interest (Zaharna, Fisher & Arsenault, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2013; Fitzpatrick 2010). Participants emphasized the importance of genuine dialogue in relationship building, which recognizes the importance of respectful engagement in mutually beneficial exchanges. Although it would be a leap to suggest that these findings suggest a rejection of power-based models of PD, the embrace of relational perspectives shows an appreciation for the benefits of dialogical approaches to PD in practice (Zaharna, 2009; Cowan & Arsenault, 2008).

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers agree with scholars and practitioners who have encouraged the development of formal ethical guidelines for public diplomacy practitioners (Fitzpatrick, 2013; Johnson, 2022). The seeming confusion of participants when asked about a "code of ethics" indicates the need for a written set of ethical guidelines that are easily accessible by practitioners and meaningful to their work. Notably, the establishment of ethical standards for government professionals involved in strategic communication and engagement in other agencies is also being considered. For example, the Rand Corporation recently suggested a new ethical decision-making framework for Department of Defense information professionals involved in planning influence operations (Marcellino et al., 2023).

A formal code of ethics in public diplomacy would contribute to more consistent ethical practices and advance the professional standing of practitioners. A code that captures the operating principles and values that in years past were handed down to succeeding generations of practitioners would help to ensure that traditional public diplomacy values remain strong (Johnson, 2022) by providing both explicit guidelines and guardrails that

promote ethical decision making on the part of practitioners. A formal code of ethics also would show the world that public diplomacy is an ethical enterprise (Ray, 2015).

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this research provided a rare opportunity to gain insights from practitioners in the field on the ethical dimensions of public diplomacy, the findings are limited in scope and depth. Given the exploratory nature of the qualitative study, findings cannot be generalized beyond the respondents interviewed in this study. The study included participants working in one U.S. embassy. An embassy contact provided clearances into the building and made the introductions among the researchers and participants. Thus, the selection of participants included those available and willing to be interviewed that day.

As participant observers embedded in activities being studied, researchers also risked losing their objectivity in interpreting data collected. Although the researchers are trained in qualitative methodology and are established scholars in public diplomacy, it is possible that some of the information may have been misinterpreted. Although research questions guided the process, the semi-structured research design allowed for wide-ranging discussions.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a framework for better understanding ethical considerations and challenges in the practice of public diplomacy and can help to inform future research on the ethical dimensions of public diplomacy in the United States and other regions of the world. Future research should delve further into the motivations and values of public diplomacy (L'Etang, 1996), as well as the sources of ethical guidance that practitioners may consult. Studies also should consider the potential professional ethical standards have to advance public diplomacy as a profession. Future studies also should address the specific ethical challenges identified by practitioners, including the ethical complexities of operating in diverse cultural contexts (Belay, 1997). The guarded nature of and lack of access to government employees make access to the practice of PD difficult for researchers. Nonetheless, efforts to interview, survey and observe public diplomacy practitioners in the field are necessary to provide the empirical evidence required to move the field forward.

## **Conclusion**

In today's technologically driven, interdependent world, with global conflicts on the rise, the need for the highest ethical standards in U.S. public diplomacy becomes increasingly important. Not only are public diplomacy officers fighting to win hearts and minds, they also are fighting to win likes and shares. As noted by the participants in this study, the same technologies that allow for greater reach, efficiency, and engaging content also create opportunities

to manipulate information, deceive publics, and spread disinformation and malicious propaganda.

Yet, ethical decision-making frameworks that explicitly recognize the ethical dimensions of PD operations and provide guidance and processes for making ethical decisions are not available to practitioners. As a result, ethical considerations in the planning and implementation of PD activities do not receive the same careful consideration that strategic elements receive. The findings of this study – showing that ethics are not top of mind for PD practitioners – suggest the time has come for the development of formal standards of ethical practice in public diplomacy.

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