

# Debating Feminist Foreign Policy: The Formation of (Unintended) Publics in Sweden's Public Diplomacy

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## Abstract

Investigating how publics form, this study aims to develop an understanding of how publics of Sweden's feminist foreign policy are constructed in public diplomacy discourse. To this end, the study conceptualizes publics as forming around perceptions of foreign policy that are mediated through public diplomacy events. Based on a debate on Sweden's feminist foreign policy on the digital platform Reddit, the research suggests three features of publics that become visible in the formation process. These are 1) relationality, 2) performance of meaning, and 3) temporariness in the form of shifting views. The study thus argues that the formation of publics in public diplomacy is highly context-dependent, and that also "unintended" publics are important for the enactment of public diplomacy. The study contributes to a practice focused and more inclusive approach to publics in public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** public diplomacy, publics, feminist foreign policy, Reddit, discourse, narrative

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## Introduction

[T]hey [the members of a Swedish delegation] simply prioritized their political mission they were sent for over activism. (User comment from Reddit, 2017)

I think human rights are a good reason to be confrontational. (...) And I think they've shown themselves to be a joke. They can't recover from this. All their future policies will sound like hypocrisy. (User comment from Reddit, 2017)

These are two quotes from a thread on the digital platform Reddit, in which a Swedish state visit to Iran in 2017 is debated. Studying the expressions of the participants in this debate towards Sweden's feminist foreign policy (henceforth FFP)—or, more specifically, towards what they *perceive* the FFP to be—this study contributes to rethinking the formation of publics in public diplomacy. The FFP and the issues it promotes can be seen as an example of a more activist approach to foreign policy. This brings challenges and arguably also resistance with it, which shows not least when it is mediated in communicative settings.

Public diplomacy is in this study understood as the communication of foreign policy (Pamment, 2012), which, mainly abroad, aims at creating a receptive environment towards the nation's policy (Wang, 2006). The research field of public diplomacy has always addressed the notion of publics. This is of course not surprising, given the fundamental notion of being “public” that distinguishes the concept from other forms of diplomacy, even though the boundaries are blurred. What is striking is the variety in the terminology, which refers to similar yet not identical concepts. Commonly used terms include but are not limited to “publics”, “the public”, “targets”, “audiences”, or “citizens”. Dolea (2018) argues that in public diplomacy research, normative and functional paradigms dominate. These paradigms tend to presuppose the a priori existence of publics, leading to a general assumption of publics being “out there” to be dealt with, to be addressed, and especially to be *targeted*. Such approaches adopt an understanding of publics as passive, which is problematic as they tend to disregard the various dynamics in contemporary communication spaces. This includes unintended consequences of public diplomacy (see Zaharna, 2004). It is also problematic that by discursively re-producing the understanding of publics as passive, those in whose interest successful conduct of public diplomacy is—mostly states—are ascribed power. In turn, those are disregarded whose realities are impacted by public diplomacy, that is, the people involved with it in various ways.

Communicating a country's foreign policy is about legitimizing the policy mainly abroad, but also in the own country. Firstly, the notion of legitimizing implies that publics with different opinions must be acknowledged. Secondly, the possibilities posed by today's communication landscape imply that domestic publics can no longer be segmented from foreign publics (Zaharna, 2004). Furthermore, the view of publics as targets clashes with the notions of the “new” and digital public diplomacy that emphasizes dialogue and engagement of different actors (e.g., Bjola *et al.*, 2020; Duncombe, 2019; Ingenhoff *et al.*, 2021; Manor &

Pamment, 2019; Melissen, 2005, 2013; Pamment, 2012, 2013). However, it remains a mystery how publics are constituted in the first place, as their existence oftentimes seems to be taken for granted.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to rethink how publics of Sweden's FFP are constructed in public diplomacy discourse, assuming that publics do not exist beforehand but are made in practice. Thus, it provides valuable new avenues for scholars, but also for practitioners to rethink how that discourse can become more inclusive to the "other" publics who also play a central role in the functioning of public diplomacy as a communicative practice.

In this study, public diplomacy is regarded as discourse(s) that constitutes publics. In other words, publics and their coming-into-being are understood as discursive process. Such a discourse view on public diplomacy (e.g., Dolea, 2018; see also Kaneva, 2014) allows to acknowledge that publics in public diplomacy *form*, thus challenging traditional views on publics and the taken-for-granted assumptions of these approaches. Throughout the study, the terminology of "publics" is employed, assuming that there is more than one homogenous or broad public and that these can spontaneously emerge and disappear again. Publics are in this study conceptualized as collectives performing narratives on Sweden's FFP, based on a perception they have of the policy, during a limited period, thus paying attention to, and engaging with the policy.

The empirical material, which the study builds on, are expressions in a debate on Reddit. It has been debated whether social media—to which Reddit in the wider sense counts—is (still) appropriate for public diplomacy as trust in these is decreasing (Di Martino *et al.*, 2022). Yet, it can be argued that publics in public diplomacy also form beyond their strategic relevance, and that people all around the world *do* use social media and online fora for debate. Moreover, social media holds a participatory and transnational promise (Bossetta *et al.*, 2017), thus making it a relevant site for public diplomacy research—especially when looking for less elitist participants in today's communication landscape. Furthermore, though the concept of publics is hard to grasp, their verbal expressions in the form of text becomes and remains visible on digital platforms, which makes online debates an interesting and relevant site of study.

This research contributes to the fields of public diplomacy, diplomacy studies and studies on FFPs by approaching the concept of publics from a discourse perspective and by addressing the notions of FFP and gender issues in the field of public diplomacy, which is increasingly advocated for (e.g., Erlandsen, 2021; Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022).

The article is structured as follows. First, conceptualizations of publics in public diplomacy are reviewed. Then, publics are theorized as emergent in communicative processes, followed by a description of methodology. Consecutively, findings are presented and discussed, followed by the study's conclusions.

## Conceptualizations of Publics in Public Diplomacy

### *The Formation of Publics*

In public relations research, the notion of creating publics in communication has been discussed for example by Grunig and Kim (2017), who argue that publics *arise* around situational problems. They further suggest that “publics mostly create themselves as a *result* of their perceptions of problems,” however, governments “often need to communicate and invest resources to *create* publics related to problems or issues” (Grunig & Kim, 2017, p. 25) (emphases added). While the authors acknowledge the emergence of publics, they also point out that strategic communication—to which public diplomacy is oftentimes argued to belong—is asymmetrical and that it “treats publics as *targets*” (Grunig & Kim, 2017, p. 11) (emphasis added).

The distinguishing characteristic of public diplomacy, as Lee and Inghoff (2020, p. 4343) argue, is “that it highlights the role of *ordinary citizens* as both *targets and agents* in the process of communicating about national policies, culture, and political beliefs” (emphases added). Fitzpatrick (2012) and Pacher (2018) highlight the notion of *strategic* publics in and of public diplomacy. Tam and Kim (2019, p. 29) propose a taxonomy of foreign publics based on segmentation, arguing, “publics are *formed and arise* because individuals are affected by a problem caused by an entity” (emphasis added). Perez *et al.* build on this taxonomy and suggest including the aspect of segmentation for a better understanding of *key* foreign publics, which they understand as “groups of foreign publics who are positioned to *impact* the public diplomacy goals of a nation” (2021, p. 1308) (emphasis added). In this vein, a target can be read as a military-inspired metaphor: something that is there and does not move, which can be hit and perforated by certain messages. What these views implicitly build on, yet do not express explicitly, is the notion that publics come into being in a process—either by a problem issued by an organization, by segmentation, or by being defined as strategically valuable. Yet, by adhering to a view of publics as targets of communication, these are ascribed a rather passive role.

Assuming the crucial role of publics for the success of public diplomacy efforts, di Martino (2020) and Cortés and Jamieson (2020) highlight the concept of *listening* to foreign publics. However, Youmans and Powers (2012, p. 2151) argue that the public is probably not listened “to the degree promised by the term *dialogue*” (emphasis in original), and Kampf *et al.* (2015) claim that foreign ministries do not engage too much in dialogue either. These views propose that it is still public diplomacy practitioners who decide on the processes and practices of public diplomacy, thus paradoxically leaving publics rather passive.

However, by suggesting that publics form because of an issue arising, it remains unclear what that can look like in practice. Therefore, this study zooms in on the context of Sweden to answer the following research question: *How are publics of the Swedish feminist foreign policy constituted?*

## *The Emergence of In Publics in Discourse*

In public relations research, the notion of publics being arenas of discourse is addressed. Jones (2002), for example, discusses emergent publics by suggesting that communities of publics form in special arenas and “are built and sustained through discourses” (p. 50). Also in public diplomacy, publics form in dynamic and unexpected ways.

For example, Pamment and Cassinger (2018) show that the “primary” publics of public diplomacy might not be the *actual main public* of public diplomacy efforts, suggesting that those in whose interest it is (i.e., nations) may not anticipate all engagement in the communication process. Manor et al. (2021) point out that the public can also be a *problem* that needs to be managed. The increasing focus on foreign policy and public diplomacy narratives and the contestation hereof is by Zaharna (2016) referred to with the metaphor of an “information battlefield” in which narratives and contestation gain momentum, and Kaiser (2017) draws on the metaphor of a “public battleground for contestation” for describing the meeting space of publics and counter publics. Also here, one can see the military-inspired metaphors, indicating a problematic relation of different actors in public diplomacy. Indeed, publics that with their opinion lead to unintended consequences of public diplomacy, as discussed by Zaharna (2004), can become a problem for the implementation of public diplomacy and foreign policy. Furthermore, Pamment (2021) introduced the notion of disruption to the field, which shows that public diplomacy is not always a smooth bilateral communication process between a country or other actor and target groups. These views may be linked to the concept of counterpublics (e.g., Asen, 2000; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Warner, 2002). It furthermore implies a view on publics that sees these as more interactive, considering that they play a more active role in building relationships even if these are considered problematic.

Zaharna (2018) argues that communication needs the “other” to function—may it be actual or imagined—as it is inherently relational. It can be argued that publics as the constituting element of the relationship become the “other” *through* public diplomacy and thus, public diplomacy cannot be without publics, but publics would not exist either if it were not for public diplomacy discursively constituting publics. By acknowledging the notion of engagement as active participation (e.g., Zaharna *et al.*, 2013), the *constitution* of publics can be viewed as a process. It can thus be argued that by engaging in the process, various entities *become* actors in public diplomacy, co-constructing discourses and with these certain worldviews. Co-construction can be understood as “the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, (...) ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality” (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995, p. 171) (emphasis from original removed).

It is, however, important to discuss what a discursive approach to publics means. Again, zooming in on the context of Sweden, this study therefore asks a second research question: *What are the implications of a discursive understanding of publics for public diplomacy?*

## Theorizing the Formation of Publics

This study argues that publics are part of and constituted by discourses to which they belong. This argument is inspired by Warner (2002, p. 72), who argued that publics “do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.” In this research, discourse is seen as a way to study “the shaping of social reality through language” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1126), hence, the focus lies on language use and expression. Discourse is thus seen as a form of discussion or debate, performed during a short while in a relational way, building on the notion that the position one takes is always in relation to the positions that others take. Thus, there can be several publics emerging out of different positions. On a more concrete level, discourse in this study also refers to the way that we researchers conceive of and talk about publics in public diplomacy, thus constructing their meaning.

Arvidsson and Caliandro’s (2016) theory of “brand public” inspires this study. The authors describe brand publics as a discursive phenomenon: It conceptualizes publics as social formations that are based on a continuous and common discursive focus of interest and mediation. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016, p. 730) argue, “[P]ublics are artifacts of mediation, they are born and kept together by media devices, in some form, and they last as long as these media devices operate”. In this study, publics in public diplomacy are theorized in the context and with the help of the FFP as mediated in certain public diplomacy events, and publics of the FFP persist in Sweden’s public diplomacy as long as the FFP is being addressed in public diplomacy efforts.

Acknowledging and embracing the role of various actors as well as different aspects characterizing publics, the concept of counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002) is also relevant for this study. Counterpublics can be understood as unknown citizens who challenge dominant narratives (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). The study of counterpublics wants, as Loehwing and Motter (2009, p. 226) argue, “[T]o correct an exclusivist vision that cannot account for all the variety of public discourse and diversity of public identities.” The notion of counterpublics signifies that “some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants” (Asen, 2000, p. 424). Especially for social media, counterpublics may illustrate democratizing potential, legitimize, and maintain marginalized communities, and challenge the “dominant knowledge” in the mainstream public sphere (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). It allows critical investigation into “discursive formations that continue to legitimate the oppressive practices of an exclusionary public under the veil of participatory parity” (Loehwing & Motter, 2009, p. 228). This notion of critical investigation is important for the context of this study, given that interaction and negotiation among different actors and participants are generally assumed to be easier possible in the digital participatory sphere, at least hypothetically.

Warner (2002) argues that at least minimal participation is required for belonging to a public, and that can be as “little” as paying attention. In turn, this means that the publics need at least something that catches their attention, such as a problem, to discuss and gather

around. Participation is structured by private affects, such as “an urge to share a point of view or an experience,” or by “collective affects that drive waves of imitation” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 728). Publics resonate meanings related to the FFP that are articulated either by a governments’ own communication or from diverse meanings associated with the FFP in everyday life. A medium—in this case, public diplomacy events constructing FFP discourses—“can offer publicity to a multitude of diverse situations of identity” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 727). Although the focus of this study is not on identity per se, it can be seen as a lever through which one expresses oneself and one's attitudes toward the FFP, thereby constructing certain discourses.

Publics can thus also be understood in simpler terms as collectives performing narratives during a limited period. Miskimmon *et al.* (2013, p. 9) argue that what distinguishes narratives from discourse is a causal transformation, taking actors from one status quo to another—a “temporal dimension and sense of movement”. They argue that narratives are crafted out of discourses. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) argue that publics’ participation is widespread and sporadic, and that they “result from an aggregation of a large number of isolated expressions that have a common focus” (p. 727). Narratives can thus be seen as sporadic, temporal, and dynamic constructs, which are expressed by participants in the Reddit debate. Publics’ participation in the form of paying attention and expressing themselves verbally is understood as triggered by public diplomacy events, resulting in publics coming into being by constructing various narratives around a given event.

## **Methodology and Empirical Material**

The empirical material used in this study helps to facilitate and encourage critical reflections. This, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2011, p. 4) argue, can “enhance our ability to challenge, rethink and illustrate theory” about publics in public diplomacy.

### ***Empirical Material from Reddit***

The digital participatory space including social media has gained momentum in the study of the “new” public diplomacy and thus, Reddit is a promising space to collect empirical material for understanding how publics in public diplomacy form. Material was collected in a first step by searching for the term “feminist foreign policy” on Reddit. The search was conducted in August 2021 and resulted in a list of entries, from which one thread stood out with over 2000 comments. This thread begins with a link to a briefing from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) UN Watch. The briefing is titled “Walk of shame: Sweden’s “first feminist government” don hijabs in Iran” and is dated from February 12, 2017 (see UN Watch, 2017). As they represent a debate about Sweden’s FFP in participatory digital space, the written words in the over 2000 comments of this thread provide the empirical material for the analysis. Screenshots of the comments were taken to ensure that the empirical material would remain available even in case the thread was deleted.

### *Analysis of the Empirical Material*

The material was analyzed by text analysis, following a qualitative abductive approach. The focus of the analysis lies on the narratives that the participants in the debate construct as a response to the mediated “image” of the FFP.

First, the material was coded by one coder. Inspired by the method of in vivo coding (Given, 2008), the codes were constructed from the material based on the verbal expressions of participants who specifically and explicitly address the FFP in their comments. The coded material was organized into patterns ranging from expressions of support and defense of the policy, to expressions of confusion about its meaning, to expressions of disapproval and dislike of the policy. From the patterns, and in consultation with the theoretical framework, themes were formulated. These are presented in the section on findings and exemplify characteristics that the publics of Sweden’s FFP display throughout the discursive dynamics of the debate.

Thus, this study draws on a meso-discourse approach, “being relatively sensitive to language use in context but interested in finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of the text and generalizing to similar contexts” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1133).

### *Reflections on the Methodology*

Most accounts on Reddit do not contain information about who the users are, meaning that Swedes can also take part in the discussion—being recognized as such or not. However, it is acknowledged that domestic publics in public diplomacy can today—generally—not be strictly separated from foreign ones anymore. Furthermore, the focus of this study lies not on *who* publics are, but on the characteristics that they display in enacting FFP narratives.

A limitation is that the analysis can only capture the written. It is impossible to reconstruct from the thread how the debate scatters beyond the Reddit debate, for instance in further interpersonal communication, in social media circulation, or in politics.

Reddit users are anonymous; hence, they cannot be traced back and it would be nearly impossible to ask for their permission to use their statements as material. Yet, to adhere to ethical research standards, the users were pseudonymized when directly quoted.

Lastly, the briefing which was posted on Reddit and sparked the debate is not published by a big news outlet or blog, instead it was available on the website of the NGO who edited it, which some of the Reddit users noted as problematic. UN Watch is, furthermore, a small and probably not widely known NGO. However, this may be viewed as an example of rather unknown actors reproducing a perception of the FFP which was mediated through a public diplomacy event, thus providing an interesting empirical setting for this study.

## **The Feminist Foreign Policy Engages People: A Prerequisite to the Formation of Publics**

### ***Sweden's State Visit as a Public Diplomacy Event***

In February 2017, the Swedish Prime Minister at the time, Stefan Löfven, led a Swedish delegation to Iran, primarily to strengthen prerequisites for trade (SVT, 2017). The delegation included the Swedish Minister for Foreign Trade at the time, Ann Linde. A state visit can be an act of public diplomacy, and thus as a strategic public diplomacy event (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2021; Pacher, 2018; Tago, 2017; Wang & Chang, 2004). In general, international travel and how much attention a visit receives can impact furthering foreign policy goals (Cohen, 2016).

From 2014 to 2022, Sweden pursued a proclaimed FFP, which means following an agenda that promotes gender equality (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019). The country also proclaimed to have a “feminist government.” Further, it has been argued that “Sweden’s active conduct of feminist digital diplomacy has both strengthened its feminist self-narration and offered new opportunities to communicate typically Swedish pro-gender values to large audiences” (Aggestam *et al.*, 2021). However, it has also been argued that the issues the FFP searched to promote can be seen as examples of a less consensus-driven foreign policy that might spark negative perception (Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2019) and can cause tensions. In the discourses enacted of public diplomacy practitioners, this tension is however smoothed (Karlsson, 2021), which can be interpreted as an example of how public diplomacy actors try to avoid causing contestation or “risking” the creation of contesting publics.

The Swedish delegation’s state visit itself was said to be good, however following the visit, a critical conversation broke out in various media, focusing mostly on the fact that the female Swedish officials “chose to wear Islamic headscarves while in Iran” (Taylor, 2017). The Washington Post further explained in this context that “[b]y law, women are required to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothes when they appear in public in Iran ... These rules require international visitors to dress modestly even if they are only in the country for a short time” (Taylor, 2017). The critique, as Sveriges Radio (2017) wrote, is that “The Swedish government, which claims to have a ‘feminist foreign policy,’ was accused of hypocrisy and double standards.” After the critique, Linde told Swedish tabloid newspaper *Expressen*: “It is nothing that I like. But it is law in Iran that women must wear the veil. One can hardly come here and break the laws” (Asplid & Jakobson, 2017) (own translation). She further defended herself saying that the only other option would have been to send an all-male delegation. This incident and the debate hereof, as Rosén Sundström *et al.* (2021) argue, is a personified event around Ann Linde. According to Ann Linde herself (see Skoglund, 2020) the photograph of her wearing a headscarf in Iran is still being posted daily, which shows that this incident continues to hold provocative potential.

### ***Reddit as an Arena for Debate***

In the digital participatory sphere, the critical narrative about the public diplomacy event discussed above was not least prominent on the discussion forum Reddit. There, the debate

spiked upon a briefing by the NGO UN Watch (2017) that criticized Sweden for “sacrifi[cing] its principles and betray[ing] the rights of Iranian women” despite having a proclaimed FFP. Reddit is one of the most used participatory platforms (Clement, 2022), ranking closely after Twitter with 430 million users by October 2021 (Dixon, 2022)<sup>1</sup>). Although Reddit is so popular among users, it is an uncommon platform for public diplomacy scholars to study. Reddit can be described as a news platform, news aggregation, and social media forum, and hosts controversial discussions and groups (Jasser *et al.*, 2021) —which is interesting for this study, given the potentially antagonistic perception of the FFP. The FFP reflects Sweden’s self-image of being a “humanitarian superpower” (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016), with humanitarianism being an issue of societal importance—and on Reddit, such issues are being discussed (Guimaraes *et al.*, 2019).

Misogyny, the “hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) is also a prominent topic on Reddit, which makes it interesting to see how feminist idea(l)s and ideology in international relations and public diplomacy are taken up and debated. The platform is considered less elitist, as people usually do not use their real names and thus do not worry as much about what they express. This makes it an example of an open space in which anything could happen and where discussions take on a life of their own. A reason why Reddit has not yet been more in focus in public diplomacy research might be that public diplomacy practitioners do not commonly use it as an official communication site. On Reddit, one can instead expect to find nonprofessionals, who may as unknown citizens challenge dominant narratives, thus being examples of counterpublics (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). Reddit is structured in so-called subreddits, which are communities dedicated to different topics of interest. Another distinct feature of the platform is the ranking function, which allows users to up- or down-vote entries and comments (for an overview of Reddit functions, see Proferes *et al.*, 2021). While the ranking function may influence the debate as it encourages or discourages users to express their opinions freely, this study looked at the comments in their chronological order of appearance, thus focusing on the overall debate.

It is questionable whether all the Reddit users engaging in the debate read the NGO’s briefing or were aware of all the circumstances around the event. Therefore, it is important to consider the headline of the briefing, which is also the title of the post itself. It featured the slang term “walk of shame”, which refers to “The walk from another person(s) house, apartment, (...) or other; to your place of residence wearing the same clothes you had on the night before” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). More specifically, it is “the return trip home the morning after an unplanned sexual encounter (...) wearing clothing from the previous evening” (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Perhaps applying a provocative and potentially antagonist phrase in the context of diplomacy caught people’s attention. Such a framing may trigger emotion and evoke judgment and polemic; thus, setting the scene for a heated debate. It becomes clear that this “official” briefing and the notion it conveyed, also in its headline, created various opinions, and thus different publics.

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1) Note: User figures had not been updated by the platform for 12 months or more when the statistic was developed.

## **Characteristics of Publics**

In the debate on Reddit, different narratives emerge that illustrate how publics in public diplomacy are constituted through relationality, performing meaning of the FFP, and shifting views. In the following, these three themes will be illustrated, concluded by a discussion of the findings.

### ***Relationality of Publics***

One characteristic in the formation of publics is that of relationality. Participants in the debate relate their arguments to the happening at hand, to their own understanding of “right” and “wrong”, as well as to other commentators. It shows in how participants in the discussion ascribe appropriate diplomatic behavior to the Swedish delegation. User Y, for instance, stated:

In this case, it seems like a practical solution to help the ministers keep discussion at their meetings on topic (...). They also don't have to worry that their arguments are being undermined by the lack of respect by their counterparts. (...) Feminists have many priorities.

It was also stated, “[T]hey simply prioritized their political mission they were sent for over activism”. It was pointed out that the character of diplomatic missions and trade is not nor should it be activism. Another argument was that the Swedish delegation was without a doubt right to follow local rules when visiting another country, may they be tradition, cultural habits, laws, or norms. User W asked, “When you visit a foreign country is it not courtesy to obey their customs?” The Swedish delegation was defended by arguing that there would not be any clash with the country’s ideological stance and that their decision was not shameful, in contrast to what the headline of the briefing proposed. However, drawing on Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond (2016, p. 328) who state that the FFP “provides a platform from which to promote highly controversial political issues to national and global audiences”, it could be argued that the FFP can be seen as a more activist foreign policy. Furthermore, the FFP is a norm-based foreign policy (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). Consequently, one could argue that by *not* being deemed activist, the public diplomacy situation created by the Swedish delegation was not in line with the government’s foreign policy approach.

It is in consequence important to question how the mediation of the FFP in public diplomacy events introduces a norm-regulating discourse. Asen (2000, p. 425) has argued that “the often-implicit norms regulating discourse in any one sphere at one time are likely to advantage some participants and to disadvantage others,”. In consequence, the process of mediating the FFP might be doing exactly what it “ideally” should not be doing: establishing power relations. This highlights the necessity of talking about publics in plural, as “there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms”

(Benhabib, 1992, p. 110). Thus, it becomes important to acknowledge the relationality of publics. Indeed, as Asen (2000, p. 426) argues: “by emphasizing manifold relations among multiple publics, some of which may articulate an explicitly counter status”, one can overcome the risk of a binary distinction of a public and its counter. Thus, it allows publics to be perceived as more fluid and to become aware of the power relations emerging through the norm-regulating discourse initiated in public diplomacy events.

### *Performance of Meaning*

Another characteristic is that of performing meaning, as participants in the debate construct their “own” meaning of the FFP and its legitimacy, based upon the perception they get of the policy through the mediating public diplomacy event(s). This shows for example in how participants contest the idea they have of feminism or feminist ideas in politics, dismissing them as illusion. User I stated, “[I]t is easy to be feminist in Sweden, with being morally superior to USA”. It was argued that the values Sweden stands for and strives to convey are naïve, but also arrogant.

It was furthermore argued that Sweden would harm and downgrade itself by employing feminist principles in foreign policy, and that feminism as an ideology would be the opposite of gender equality, in that it favors one gender. This is not what feminist ideology is about. However, expressing this belief illustrates how the perceived ideology or idea of feminism itself was rejected in the debate, and how feminism in international relations, and more specifically the FFP, were dismissed as an illusion or delusion.

It was also argued how the FFP would be an example of forcefully imposing (national) values on others. User H stated:

You go to someone else’s home you respect their rules. That’s how the world should work. You don’t go into someone else’s home and try to impose your house rules. (...) I hate this idea that whatever values you have in your country have to be imposed on someone else’s.

This argument ties in with User G’s comment, who stated, “Just because we recognize some things as human rights doesn’t mean others do too.” The argumentation here is that of Western norms and values dominating over other norms and values; thus, being employed as a tool of power. In addition, it was pointed out that imposing values would be a sign of considering one norm superior to the other. This ties in with the notion of Sweden as a norm entrepreneur (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Davies & True, 2017), and thus role model, which implies an intention to make others follow suit. Yet, due to the way that this meaning is perceived and mirrored back in the performance of the participants, the “new” meaning of the FFP is turned into something negative.

## *Shifting Views*

A third characteristic is that of shifting views as participants in the debate express their disappointment in Sweden and their judgement of hypocrisy. User U for example stated, “Diplomacy (...) isn’t just doing whatever someone else demands you do without question, especially if it violates your personal principles. Having a spine is part of diplomacy if you’d rather not be a doormat.” The metaphor of having a spine (or not) employed in reference to Sweden exemplifies integrity, or the lack thereof. The contestation of the Swedish delegation’s actions in the debate circulates the notions of weakness and cowardice, and the argument that the country shies away from what it could or should dare to do. It was also argued that Sweden is cherry picking when it comes to following through with its feminist values. User T stated:

They [the members of the Swedish delegation] proudly advocate “global” feminism (...). Thus [*sic*] declaring themselves a “feminist government.” But then the moment things get a little pushy, they completely abandon any semblance of beliefs (...). Just how much of a political coward do you have to be to do that?

In general, Sweden’s actions were deemed controversial in the Reddit debate, which one commentator expressed through a metaphor: “I didn’t know feminism had an on/off switch. Interesting.” (User Q). This was attributed to the country as a result of their proclaimed FFP and feminist government on the one hand, yet adhering to what was perceived, labelled, or explained as non-feminist or misogynist rules on the other hand. It was argued that the state visit and its implications were perceived to not align with Sweden’s values as promoted by its government and foreign policy.

It was furthermore argued that Sweden does not “walk the talk” of what it means to have a FFP and a feminist government. User O commented:

Who knew that western feminists would submit to a real patriarchy instead of doing anything to fight it, bring it down or even make a small stand for womens [*sic*] rights? Just goes to show how the current Swedish government and electorate are more concerned with virtue signaling than womens [*sic*] rights.

It was criticized that the Swedish delegation did not take the risk of not following the local law, which was considered to collide with Sweden’s feminist values. It was pointed out that Sweden was thus countering its own values. The participants also debated whether Sweden was doing wrong by prioritizing the trade deal over taking an ideological stance. User L argued, “They didn’t have to visit. They visited for monetary reasons. They agreed to be humiliated for profit.” User K commented, “Money. (...) [T]hey went there to sign trade deals. (...) [T]hey had a choice, ideals or money, and they made it.” This argument ties in with money, or more specifically economic growth, being a paradigm in communicating the

FFP in public diplomacy (Karlsson, 2021). However, in the debate, the participants express their disapproval.

Labelling Sweden hypocritical was a common pattern throughout the debate. User N, for example, stated: “I think human rights are a good reason to be confrontational. (...) And I think they’ve shown themselves to be a joke. They can’t recover from this. All their future policies will sound like hypocrisy.”

This comment exemplifies the perceived gap between Sweden’s FFP and its actions, that is, between what is said and what is done (Brunsson, 1993). Asen (2000, p. 439) explains the shifting of expressed views in that the “associates with whom participants form counterpublics in regard to one episode or controversy may confront them as antagonists on other issues at other moments.” Thus, it can be argued that publics of the FFP—or more precisely: publics of the perception of the FFP that is mediated in public diplomacy events—are temporary and in flux.

## Discussion

In the Reddit debate, expressions of opinion as well as the narratives constructed around these are highly context-dependent; in another context, participants might express different views and carve out different narratives. This illustrates how publics are temporary constructs in flux that gather around debate-worthy mediated and *mediating* public diplomacy events.

Conceptualized as collectives performing narratives about Sweden’s FFP during a limited time, the publics forming on Reddit around the mediated public diplomacy event of Sweden’s state visit to Iran in 2017 enact various narratives while showing certain characteristics. The narratives differ content wise, for example, some frame the behavior displayed by Sweden’s state representatives more critically than others. However, the publics forming along the lines of the different narratives have in common that they are situational, and that their formation is informed by the social, cultural, political, and technological context of a debate, as well as the experiences of the participants at a given point in time.

All the above-discussed narratives are examples of contesting the perceived idea of the FFP in one way or another. However, this does not necessarily have to be a problem. It could rather be argued that the FFP is dependent on what one could call contestation, because it would otherwise be hard for Sweden to take on the self-proclaimed role of leader and norm entrepreneur with a “progressive” political stance striving to disrupt the status quo. Asen (2000, p. 441) argues, “The movement toward multiplicity...recognizes simultaneity, permeability, overlap, diverse affiliation, partiality, and contestation among publics and between publics and counterpublics.” Hence, the diverse narratives that are enacted in the debate may indicate a shift towards a more inclusive public diplomacy discourse, as they illustrate how diverse publics emerge in and become part of this communicative situation. In turn, they give (more or less) legitimacy to the FFP, which rests on the notion that the status quo in the world needs to change. The FFP may get more attention than other foreign policy

approaches, and while its very existence is not contested so much in the Reddit debate, the perception of the mediated FFP that emerging publics get through Sweden's public diplomacy was heavily debated in terms of credibility and hypocrisy. This illustrates once more how public diplomacy is an arena of meaning making and negotiation of foreign policy. It also shows that the way in which foreign policy is mediated informs what narratives are constructed around it.

This study illustrates how publics emerge out of the possibility to discuss issues of interest and how they are constituted as temporary constructs in this process. The discussed examples of contesting publics, but also the construction and perhaps systematic overlooking of unintended, unexpected, or unwanted publics on a more general level raise "important questions about who has access and power to decide how stories are told in the public sphere" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, p. 949). The stories that the publics on Reddit tell may be unintended by Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs. However, the narratives they construct around a mediated image of the FFP may impact the implementation of the policy. Therefore, this study argues for acknowledging that all publics matter, thus moving away from a narrower view that focuses on publics' strategic relevance and outcome of public diplomacy efforts.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to rethink how publics of Sweden's FFP are constructed in public diplomacy discourse. It showed how publics of the FFP are constituted in a digital participatory space as relational, temporary constructs that perform meaning. This study thus argues that publics are constituted through processes of communication, which make participants gather around public diplomacy events mediating the FFP and creating attention to certain polarizing issues. The perception of the FFP may be discussed continuously, yet certain events seem to spark discussions, through which publics *come into being*. This study illustrated that there is not only one actor such as "the state" that communicates and thus makes public diplomacy, but that also other actors are part in this communicative process, namely publics, who themselves emerge out of this process. In other words, not only strategic communication by for example Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs can frame the FFP in a certain way. Also the communicative situations created by public diplomacy events—such as a debate on Reddit—function as sites of meaning negotiation where various narratives are crafted by emerging publics. These may have consequences for the perception of foreign policy issues, and thus for the development of opinion environments abroad.

For public diplomacy, a discursive understanding of publics implies that even though unexpected or unanticipated by practitioners, various publics form, both as a result and as part of communicating foreign policy. Thus, while this study may provide just a glimpse into one debate on one digital platform, it hopes to provoke some thought about how we conceive of and talk about publics in public diplomacy. It also challenges the approaches to publics that take for granted a priori, passive publics. Instead, it suggests that we should remember the

(ideal) view of inclusive as well as more humanity-centered public diplomacy (see Zaharna, 2021) when we think and talk about publics. Dolea (2018, p. 343) argued:

The new public diplomacy is no longer the formal power of the state actors that is legitimized by international treaties. It is a form of social power that has to consider marginalized and alternative discourses within societies that ultimately challenge, influence and co-construct the formal power of the state.

Indeed, including those who actively engage and counter dominant narratives and discourses in communicative processes that play out on platforms like Reddit are part in enacting and bringing to life public diplomacy and should therefore not be marginalized.

Asen (2000, p. 442) argued, “Emergent publics cannot articulate all possible perspectives in public debates (...)”, which is why exclusion “appears as a recurrent feature of public discourse, in that new formations of publics engender new exclusions.” This notion highlights a practical issue of public debates, that is, that complete inclusion may not be possible. However, besides this general problem, a more specific issue in public diplomacy discourse is the tendency to exclude some publics, such as those emerging on Reddit. Thus, public diplomacy discourse may be more elitist than the actual practice of negotiating the meaning of foreign policy. By illustrating how publics of Sweden’s FFP are constituted, and by discussing implications of a discursive understanding of publics, this study contributes to public diplomacy research with a practice-focused view. It also hopes to pave the way towards a more inclusive understanding of publics in public diplomacy.

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