

# The importance of public diplomacy to preserve the liberal international order

## Interview with Kyoko Kuwahara



Kyoko Kuwahara specializes in public diplomacy, disinformation and soft power strategies. She is a research fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), and a visiting fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI). She served as an officer at the Office for Strategic Communication Hub at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2018-2019 before joining the JIIA. Her recently published books are about public diplomacy and disinformation.

**Question 1: Public diplomacy is an important element of communication, is there a difference with propaganda?**

There are various views on the difference between public diplomacy and propaganda. Many scholars confuse public diplomacy with propaganda. For example, Ben D. Mor defines public diplomacy as a strategic and tactical method while equating it with propaganda. On the other hand, Mark J. Davidson argues that public diplomacy is not propaganda because it is carried out with transparency and in good faith.

Japan has promoted public diplomacy aggressively since the second Abe Administration. It is essential to note that there are several forms of public diplomacy: (1) listening, (2) advocacy, (3) cultural diplomacy, (4) exchange diplomacy, and (5) international broadcasting. (2) Advocacy and (5) international broadcasting in particular may be perceived as “propaganda” depending on the contents and how they are received by the audience. In this context, (1)

listening is an important form for public diplomacy. If we fail to listen to the audience and make efforts to understand their interests and needs while believing we are developing public diplomacy, it will be seen as propaganda from an objective point of view and eventually the public diplomacy will be rather counterproductive.

### **Question 2: What is the importance of public diplomacy for democracies?**

Public diplomacy is an important diplomatic tool for all states, not only for democracies but also for “nondemocracies”. Japan, France, and even China for instance, along with other countries, have developed soft power, which is designed to make their country perceived as “attractive” to the public of other countries and, as a result, helps to enhance positive views, or eventually trust, towards the country. Soft power, which is also an important form of power when it comes to public diplomacy, could help countries, both democracies and nondemocracies, further promote mutual understanding or strengthen cohesion. Even when bilateral relations are cold on the diplomatic front, or even in the midst of ongoing conflicts over territory, sovereignty, and historical recognition for instance, continued cultural and personal exchanges using soft power are essential for future relations between the two countries and even for regional peace and stability.

In this sense, public diplomacy is not limited to democracies, and could be an attractive diplomatic tool that can serve as a cornerstone for the resolution of issues and the deepening of mutual understanding, regardless of the nature of the political system of the countries involved. At a time when the world is sometimes described as a clash between democratic and authoritarian countries, public diplomacy deserves renewed attention.

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### **Question 3: How can public diplomacy help in the fight against fake news and influence operations, and is it effective?**

Public diplomacy, even if the user has no intention of doing so, can sometimes be assimilated to propaganda if it becomes self-indulgent and self-serving, and could be seen as an exercise of influence operations by others. If this happens, public diplomacy will quickly become counterproductive.

During the Cold War, an American diplomat proposed the concept of public diplomacy in the belief that the coming era would require a more transparent and positive diplomatic approach over propaganda. However, with globalization and the rapid development of communication technologies, disinformation and misinformation have become more prevalent in the information space, such that people are finding it difficult to discern what is true and what is false. Public diplomacy can itself become a weapon to blame or deny others

if it is done in the wrong way, and yet on the other hand, it can be a means to prevent misunderstanding by those affected by such disinformation.

If we exercise this without losing sight of the true significance of the method of public diplomacy, and if we do it well, it may eventually become a force that enables audiences to discern the authenticity of the information based on their own understanding and experience developed through public diplomacy. In this sense, public diplomacy cannot directly stop or prevent the threat of disinformation, and if it goes wrong, it can become a means of influence operations, but on the other hand, public diplomacy could be a way to provide audiences with materials that indirectly reduce the impact of disinformation in the age of social media.

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