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BRITISH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY & SOFT POWER

Diplomatic Influence & Digital Disruption



James Pamment



Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations

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British Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Diplomatic Influence and the Digital Revolution

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PREFACE

One of the more frustrating realities of writing a modern history of an institution is that it becomes dated by the last big report or inquiry that it discusses. In this case, my study ends in 2015 with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO)'s Diplomatic Excellence programme, something that already risked becoming passé upon William Hague's retirement from politics in mid-2014. Consequently, it is somewhat fortunate that 2016's Next Big Thing was released just as I was putting the final touches to the manuscript. This book will therefore be eventually considered outmoded due to its association with "Naked Diplomat," Tom Fletcher's state-of-the-art *Future FCO* report, and appropriately so. Because as much as this book is about the FCO's recent past, it also speaks to a future for British diplomacy better informed by a knowledge of the complex trends and trajectories that have shaped its modern evolution. Fletcher's final recommendation—number 36—reads: "*Promote a better understanding of the FCO's history and inheritance. Commission a 'History of the FCO' which all staff receive on joining.*"

What such a history can teach us about the Future FCO report is not to be sniffed at. Future FCO is not the first review of the FCO in the digital age, as Fletcher claims. Indeed, coinage of the term "public diplomacy" in 1995's Fundamental Expenditure Review was supposed to help re-orient the organisation in light of greater interconnectivity through the Internet. The internal Foresight report five years later spoke of the potential for cyber diplomacy, and was quickly followed by a department-wide e-diplomacy strategy. Almost all the ideas proposed in Future FCO have a history, a history that this book seeks to catalogue, interpret and place in

its proper context. The ebbs and flows of ministerial vanity projects, three-year postings, new technologies and gliding terminology serve to obscure this trajectory. The risk of ignoring history is not so much that we are doomed to repeat ourselves, but that the larger trends are lost amid what often appears as cyclical and incoherent change. Perhaps, then, this book might be considered a humble contribution to Future FCO recommendation 36, the one recommendation that might truly be considered timeless.

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3 June 2016

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ABBREVIATIONS

BATF	Britain Abroad Task Force
BBCWS	BBC World Service
BC	British Council
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DfID	Department for International Development
DfE	Department for Education
FAC	Foreign Affairs Committee
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FER	Fundamental Expenditure Review (1995)
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NAO	National Audit Office
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Strategy
oda	Official Development Assistance
PDB	Public Diplomacy Board (2006–2009)
PDSB	Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (2002–2006)
PSVI	Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative
PUS	Permanent Under-Secretary (FCO)
UKTI	UK Trade & Investment
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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Introduction: Diplomacy Re-imagined

In December 2010, Foreign Secretary William Hague quietly launched a series of reforms at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) designed to reassert Britain’s “diplomatic excellence.” Observing a “reduction of this country’s influence in the world,” Hague vowed to “transform” the FCO by projecting the message that “Britain is open for business” (cited in Coughlin and Porter 2010). Diplomatic Excellence, which by mid-2011 had become the preferred name for an entire programme of reforms culminating in the creation of a new Diplomatic Academy, signified “a renewed emphasis on policy creativity, on in depth knowledge of other nations, on geographic and linguistic expertise and the enhancement of traditional diplomatic skills in a manner suitable for the modern world” (Hague 2011). He argued,

We will embark on a substantial reinvigoration of the diplomatic network to make it ready for the twenty-first century; to expand our connections with the emerging powers of the world, and to signal that where Britain was retreating it is now advancing. (Hague 2011)

Diplomatic Excellence may be placed in a recent tradition of efforts to reshape Britain’s diplomatic network for the twenty-first century. For example, 1995s Fundamental Expenditure Review (FER) also outlined the reforms necessary for a modern diplomatic network capable of successfully promoting “the influence and prestige of the UK” in the twenty-first

century (FCO 1995: 7). It argued that the FCO needed to think of itself as a service provider with clearly communicated aims and objectives, and that it needed to work more effectively, provide better value for money, respond to changing demands and maintain a world-class foreign service. All of this needed to be done in the context of substantial savings, just as Hague demanded 15 years later.

In fact, the 20-year period between the FER of 1995 and the completion of Diplomatic Excellence in 2015 signifies a remarkable series of efforts to transform the FCO. These include Robin Cook's (1997) "Mission Statement," the internal "Foresight Report" drafted by the FCO's disillusioned younger generation (FCO 2000), Jack Straw's "International Priorities" (FCO 2003) and "Active Diplomacy for a Changing World" (FCO 2006), David Miliband's "Strategic Framework for the FCO" (FCO 2008), and Hague's "Structural Reform Plan" (FCO 2011), which lay the grounds for Diplomatic Excellence. Some of these reforms sought to make the FCO more diverse in terms of its employees' ethnicity, gender and education; others looked to remould the geographical make-up of the network; while others fit within the more general context of the "new institutionalism" or "new public management" techniques that sought to rationalise management practices across the civil service (Hall 2013) (Table 1.1).

In this book, I propose an alternative interpretation of the FCO's transformation between 1995 and 2015. The argument pursued here is that these reforms most fundamentally reflect *the re-imagining of British diplomacy in light of the digital communication revolution*. This is not to say that other interpretations are incorrect, but rather that they may be seen as symptoms of a more central preoccupation with the evolving communicative basis for diplomacy. A more diverse make-up of staff creates more varied perspectives, broader stakeholder communities and, subse-

Table 1.1 Selected FCO reform initiatives

<i>Reform initiative</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Foreign secretary</i>
Fundamental Expenditure Review	1995	Malcolm Rifkind
Mission Statement	1997	Robin Cook
Foresight	2000	Robin Cook
International Priorities	2003	Jack Straw
Active Diplomacy for a Changing World	2006	Jack Straw
Strategic Framework	2008	David Miliband
Structural Reform Plan/Diplomatic Excellence	2010–11	William Hague
Future FCO	2016	Philip Hammond

quently, better policy formation and presentation; a rationalised network focuses the ability to collect and distribute knowledge, galvanises inter-connectivity, and improves the quality, speed and distribution of policy decisions; new management practices improve communication within the organisation so that it can better identify, follow and communicate its priorities. Reform of the FCO has at its most profound level been about adapting to the potential of twenty-first-century communication techniques and technologies in order to conduct its work more effectively.

The FCO has remained a relatively obscure and misunderstood institution throughout this period. With the decline of diplomatic correspondents, much of the day-to-day insight behind the scenes of foreign ministries and diplomatic posts has disappeared from foreign policy news coverage. Former *Daily Mail* foreign correspondent John Dickie's book *The New Mandarins* (2004) remains the most recent in-depth analysis of the cultural changes at the FCO at the turn of the millennium, and there are many "insider" memoirs and the like that offer a window into how foreign policy works from the perspective of a single diplomat. However, there has not yet been a detailed, systematic academic study of reforms in the contemporary period and how they have collectively reinvigorated British diplomacy. This book will therefore be of interest to anybody who wishes to better understand how and why the FCO and the broader conduct of British diplomacy is changing in the early twenty-first century, whether as policymakers and advisors, students and researchers, foreign policy or communication specialists, current or future employees, taxpayers, collaborators or rivals. The particular innovation of this study is to link institutional reform to the ability of the organisation to communicate, by integrating debates about the future direction of the FCO into discussions of diplomatic influence, public and digital diplomacy and, more recently, soft power. I argue here that it is the confluence of digitisation and broadened public participation in foreign affairs that has forced the FCO to rethink its role and *modus operandi*, and thus that this case forces us to rethink our most basic assumptions about how diplomacy, public diplomacy, digital diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power interact.

DIPLOMACY FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

The 20-year period under consideration provides two bookends in contemporary diplomatic communication history. The FCO created its first website in 1995. In these early days, the belief was that the FCO Daily

Bulletin, a full-text compilation of press releases, briefings and ministerial engagements released at 12 pm every day, would revolutionise the relationship between the FCO, opinion leaders and the general public by cutting out the middleman: the print media. That same year, the FER made use of the term *public diplomacy* for the first time in the FCO policy context, on the understanding that the website represented the future of its information, news and culture activities in the digital era. FER recommended public diplomacy's inclusion in the FCO's corporate objectives and went on to define the public part of diplomacy as a "core business" (FCO 1995: 44). Public diplomacy discourse was therefore a signpost pointing to the future mandate and sites of diplomatic practice in the twenty-first century, in distinction to earlier uses of the term associated with the US context.

Two years later, Cook (1997) argued for a "people's diplomacy to increase respect, understanding and goodwill for Britain," while Foresight saw public diplomacy as a "core activity" through which the FCO could engage in "two-way flows of information and ideas" with the outside world (FCO 2000: 80, 83). Between these two reports, a series of workshops, publications and committees on Britain's overseas image (collectively summarised in the tabloids as *Cool Britannia*) wielded tremendous influence upon how the FCO and its partners in overseas promotion, the British Council (BC) and BBC World Service (BBCWS), saw their roles. Major communication and influence campaigns were commissioned by the FCO and its posts, drawing together the latest thinking on nation brands, marketing and strategic communication to project a more modern image of Britain. Maintaining and projecting a coordinated public profile was increasingly seen as the key to sustained national influence.

The impact of new communication techniques upon the core business of diplomacy quickly moved out of the realm of branding and image, and became part and parcel of policy formation as well as presentation. In the aftermath of 9/11, Jack Straw demanded that "all our Posts see public diplomacy as a central task" (FCO 2003: 51), and convened the Wilton (2002) and Carter Reviews (2005) to investigate how the FCO, BC and other public diplomacy organisations sought to influence foreign citizens in support of the Government's foreign policy goals. The FCO created a Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (PDSB) to oversee how public diplomacy was deployed across the diplomatic network, but it was incapable of resolving institutional differences. By 2006, the role of the FCO's staff was defined as supporting "the UK's strategic priorities through com-

munication, advocacy and engagement with targeted audiences, including key individuals, civil society and community groups and the media” (FCO 2006: 47). The development of techniques for persuasive engagement with these key public groups was considered essential to resolving global challenges. This was supported by a new Public Diplomacy Board (PDB) with greater “clout” and a clearer mandate that ran a series of pilot programmes aimed at changing the way the FCO ran its diplomatic campaigns.

The next wave of reforms instigated by Miliband involved restructuring the Communication Directorate to ensure “genuine engagement. More and more, we need to bring thinking and ideas from outside the FCO into our policy-making processes to create joint solutions, and to work with others to deliver these solutions” (FCO 2008: 96). Miliband saw diplomats as campaigners in the public sphere, capable of drawing upon all tools at their disposal to achieve results. By the end of the Labour mandate in 2010, the communications revolution had effectively been institutionalised into the diplomatic apparatus, as was demonstrated by the major internal change programme “Making Communication Mainstream.” This demanded that diplomats use public and digital communication in their everyday strategic campaigning, and hence that the core activities of diplomacy were now formally integrated with public diplomacy (FCO 2008).

The Coalition Government changed terminology from *public diplomacy* to *soft power* upon coming to power in 2010, but the focus upon re-envisioning diplomatic communication remained. Seeking to leverage diplomatic influence as a means of generating the departmental priorities of Security and Prosperity, Hague’s reforms involved using soft power “as a tool of UK foreign policy” (FCO 2011: 2). Nearly a third of FCO communications positions were reconfigured with the aim of embedding a stronger communication capacity directly within each policy area. The FCO was expected to be recognised as “the best Diplomatic Service in the world” by the end of 2015, according to a series of National Audit Office (NAO) approved measures (FCO 2013). Achieving this would involve “working together collaboratively to achieve common goals and share knowledge and best practice,” as “one team ... extending across Whitehall and other external partners and opinion formers” (FCO 2013). The GREAT brand identity was launched to support promotional efforts at overseas posts before and during the 2012 Olympics, but developed into arguably the de facto governance structure for British public diplomacy. These new structures for communicating with and influencing the

wider world have fundamentally changed how diplomacy works in the twenty-first century, to the extent that the term *public diplomacy* is no longer relevant to discussions of the FCO's work. It has become ubiquitous (Table 1.2).

The common thread across these efforts is the principle that the FCO can no longer conduct diplomacy from the ivory towers of King Charles Street and its overseas posts. In many respects, this may be summed up as a response to broader demands upon the institution of diplomacy in the early twenty-first century: from pressure groups, multilateral organisations and “coalitions of the willing,” whose expertise and resources have become increasingly necessary to the pursuit of diplomatic objectives; from digital communications, the increased pace of knowledge transfers, and the impact of “spin” and branding on politics; and from major “game-changing” crises precipitated by globalisation, borderlessness and hyper-connectivity, such as global terrorism, climate change, public health scares and the international banking crisis. These and other factors have motivated an array of efforts to revolutionise the approach, aims, techniques and players relevant to the pursuit of diplomatic objectives, trends that have contributed to the thorough re-imagining of how diplomats manage their policy areas in the digital age.

This book tells the story of how new forms of diplomatic communication have been created by the gradual adaptation of techniques associated with *public diplomacy* into the very core of diplomatic practice. It uses the term *public diplomacy* to cover these techniques, but seeks to develop it as something that is continually renegotiated and redefined as part of politi-

Table 1.2 Major public diplomacy reform initiatives and governance

<i>Inquiry</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Governance</i>	<i>Period</i>
FER	1995	FCO Public Diplomacy Division	1996–99
Panel 2000	1998	Britain Abroad Task Force	2000–02
Wilton Review	2002	Public Diplomacy Strategy Board	2002–06
Carter Review	2005	Public Diplomacy Board	2006–09
Making Communication Mainstream	2008		
Austerity/Structural Reform	2010	Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy Forum GREAT Programme Board (& other major Funds)	Did not convene 2011–

cal processes tied to FCO-wide organisational reforms, communication reforms and communication governance reforms. Therefore, it is fundamentally about diplomacy, and “diplomacy’s public dimensions,” rather than about public diplomacy per se (Gregory 2016). In a break from universalist and predominately North American definitions of the term, this analysis identifies seven dominant “concepts” or “articulations” of public diplomacy established through these periods, each the product of its time and unique to its organisational and political contexts. Thus, this study uses public diplomacy as a *field of inquiry* for exploring efforts to reform British diplomacy over a 20-year period (Table 1.3).

Hence, the term *public diplomacy* supports the interpretation of reforms that began in 1995 with a single FCO website and that now witnesses a proliferation of public communication to the extent that public diplomacy may no longer be considered a thing-in-itself distinct from diplomacy. This book uses institutional reforms and reforms in communications techniques to cut to the core of the FCO’s purpose and mission in a changing world. In support of this, the book traces salient trends at the FCO and the partners it funds through grant-in-aid, the BC and BBCWS.¹ It analyses these reforms through the terms that were used at any given time, and in relation to the intellectual and political climates of the moment. Dozens of internal documents have been made available for the first time, including minutes from meetings, communication strategies, evaluations, budgets, internal telegrams and briefings of various kinds. Interviews with nearly 100 people involved in these developments support the analysis.² The result is a groundbreaking study of the step-by-step policy decisions, theories and activities that drove innovation in twenty-first-century British diplomatic practice.

Table 1.3 Articulations of public diplomacy

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Period (approx.)</i>	<i>Foreign secretary</i>
Image and Identity	1995–2000	Robin Cook
Influence	2000–04	Jack Straw
Engagement	2005–07	Straw/Beckett/Miliband
Strategic Campaigns	2008–10	David Miliband
Targeted National Promotion	2010–12	William Hague
Soft Power	2010–15	Hague/Hammond
Cultural Relations	1995–2015	n/a (used by British Council)

CONCEPTUALISING DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Diplomacy's methods have undoubtedly changed with the times (Nicolson 1954; Sofer 1988; Kelley 2010; Hocking and Melissen 2015). The need to communicate and represent through diplomacy has remained consistent regardless of the capacities of the communicative forms available. Historical studies have observed the importance of changes in communication technologies and channels upon message transference processes, and hence upon some of the structures and practices of diplomacy (Jönsson and Hall 2005; Black 2010; Hamilton and Langhorne 2011; Knutsen 1997; Dittmer 2016). The rollout of telegraph systems and undersea cables during the latter half of the nineteenth century, for example, provided a partial reconfiguration of the geospatial landscape, with consequences for the ability of diplomats to “collect information, convey messages, and secure a knowledge base” (Der Derian 2003; Winseck and Pike 2007). It also strengthened the power of foreign ministries at the expense of ambassadors, and removed the “plausible deniability” of distant diplomats exceeding their instructions (Nickles 2003: 41). Unsurprisingly, the potential impact of globalisation, digitisation and the Internet on twenty-first-century society has awakened a great deal of interest in what these changes might mean for the future of diplomacy. For example, the introduction of emails to ministers and diplomats at the FCO hastened the end of hierarchical telegram distribution; junior diplomats may now present their ideas directly to more senior staff, shaping the potential for new practices of information circulation (Dickie 2004: 232).

Such questions run the continual risk of lapsing into technological determinism. Vincent Mosco (2005: 21) has convincingly argued that the “utopian discourses” accompanying digital technologies undermine “the reality of struggles for control of communication devices and hegemony over norms and systems.” On the contrary, debates into the potentially revolutionary impact of digital technologies may be placed in a long tradition of redemptive mythologies about the transformational capacity of other historically “new” media, such as the telegraph, electricity, telephones, radio and television. Tracing these discourses, Mosco observes common expectations placed upon communication technologies when they are new, such as the ability to collapse geographical and temporal distance, and to establish the common norms and values for a post-polit-