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Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: A Critical and Reflexive Assessment

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Abstract

This essay presents a critical and reflexive assessment of contemporary efforts to innovate the measurement and evaluation of public diplomacy. Analyzing a recent and pivotal report called “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” it explains how the institutional and ideological residue of the Cold War underwrites these initiatives in the context of American activities in its contemporary “War on Terror.” Inspired by Marx’s concept of the fetish—an under-represented conceptual approach to public diplomacy research—the authors critique the thinking of public diplomacy scholars and officials, arguing that both an omnipresent past and a powerful form of technological fetishism are discernible in the “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy” report. An outcome of the type of thinking represented in the report, they conclude, has been the pervasiveness of contradictions and, in this area of foreign policy, disempowering implications.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, Cold War, technological fetishism, measurement and evaluation

1. Introduction

Succinctly defined, public diplomacy (PD) has been a means of advancing a country’s assumed interests through the efforts of various agencies and actors to shape the thinking and ideals of foreign publics. PD has historically involved an array of activities: from propaganda broadcasts to educational exchange programs to embassy-sponsored cultural events. With technological developments (e.g., television, satellites, and the internet), innovations in PD have followed. The rapid development of digital, social, and mobile media has compelled PD officials in many countries to make use of new technologies in ways that go well beyond message dissemination.¹ Increasingly, it is expected that the precise results of communication efforts should be *measurable*. While empirical outputs (e.g., the number of messages a particular PD program distributed) have long been reported, capabilities associated with digital

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¹ Ronit Kampf, Ilan Manor, and Elad Segev, “Digital Diplomacy 2.0? A Cross-National Comparison of Public Engagement in Facebook and Twitter,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 10, no. 4 (2015): 331-62, doi:10.1163/1871191X-12341318; Rauf Arif, Guy J. Golan, and Brian Moritz, “Mediated Public Diplomacy: US and Taliban Relations with Pakistani Media,” *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 2 (2014): 201-17, doi:10.1177/1750635214538619; James Pamment, “Digital Diplomacy as Transmedia Engagement: Aligning Theories of Participatory Culture with International Advocacy Campaigns,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9 (2016): 2046-62, doi:10.1177/1461444815577792.

technologies have opened the door to what some call “the holy grail” of PD: measureable *impacts*—uniquely detailed assessments of what a particular policy or program *achieved* in terms of its influence on public thinking at a level heretofore unavailable to policy analysts.²

Rather than debating broad methodological, epistemological, or even philosophical questions related to this quest (debates, for example, regarding the possibility or impossibility of controlling the thoughts of others), in this essay, we closely examine a recent and much lauded US policy report on this topic—titled “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: Progress Towards Measuring the Impact of Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Activities”—to critically reconsider the technologically-framed goals of this foreign policy sub-field.³ Herein, we argue that the renewed and intensified desire to measure and evaluate PD (now through capabilities associated with digital technology) stems from at least two under assessed and interrelated sources. One, we propose, is the ideological residue of the Cold War and a way of thinking about communication that contributes to a profound institutional inertia. Information technology scholar Paul Edwards refers to this Cold War-era thinking as “closed-world” discourse.⁴ We argue that this discourse contextualizes “data-driven” PD measurement and evaluation, not just in practice but also in how PD measurement and evaluation are being conceptualized. The other source of this compulsion involves a general lack of clarity as to what PD officials are meant to achieve, specifically PD’s measurable impacts. We argue that this unanswered “what” question—what ends are PD analysts and officials pursuing (and, at least indirectly, what has caused the problems that they are responding to)—is not so much a matter of ignorance as it is driven by influences that, curiously, may well be recognized but are treated as if they are not. Most PD efforts, we argue, do little to address (let alone redress) root causes of antipathy; yet, while many or most officials and analysts surely recognize this, the increasingly ambitious march towards the granular measurement and management of PD continues.

We seek to explain this strange state of conscious self-denial using a critical and materialist approach (and one not yet applied to the study of PD) drawn from Marx’s concept of the fetish.⁵ Through this concept’s iteration as *technological* fetishism, we try to better understand PD’s technology-mediated disjunction between thought and action. In bringing both Edwards’ concept of a closed-world discourse and Marx’s understanding of the fetish to bear on contemporary PD, in what follows, we seek to challenge and refresh what has been a somewhat unreflexive area of foreign policy—paradoxically unreflexive, given that digital technologies are said to be “revolutionizing” PD practices.

The pairing of the theoretical orientations of Edwards and Marx might seem incongruous in that Edwards’ discourse-oriented approach draws influences from social construction of technology and poststructuralism, both of which, in part, arose from perceived shortcomings in Marx’s focus on political economy. Both Edwards and Marx, however, draw attention to relations of power and, in our view, language and culture are not reducible to narrowly-defined material conditions, but nor are they autonomous. We agree with Cultural Studies

² James Rider, “Proving Public Diplomacy Programs Work,” *The Foreign Service Journal* 92, no. 10 (2015): 19-22, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.afsa.org/sites/default/files/december2015fsj.pdf>.

³ US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: Progress Towards Measuring the Impact of Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Activities,” September 16, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/231945.pdf>.

⁴ Paul Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol.1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

scholar Chris Barker that “the material-cultural binary is a hindrance to investigation and should be put to one side.”⁶ PD practices involve an assemblage of material technologies, institutional subcultures, and ways of talking about PD that permit, encourage, or forbid alternative ways of thinking. Our approach applies political economy and textual analysis and articulates them together to produce a novel interpretation of an influential PD policy guidance document. In doing so, we hope to spur consideration of alternative possibilities for PD’s future.

We begin with an overview of the institutionalization of particular ways of thinking during the Cold War, demonstrating that despite this conflict’s conclusion more than twenty-five years ago, its residue has resurfaced to taint the assumptions of PD officials fighting the post-9/11 “War on Terror.” Relating the key PD report mentioned above (“Data-Driven Public Diplomacy”) to this closed-world discourse, we proceed to address two main questions: (1) How does the report characterize the history of PD measurement and evaluation? And (2) How does the report reflect and reinforce questionable assumptions about the political and cultural potentialities commonly associated with communications generally and digital technologies more specifically? After demonstrating that PD officials are turning to technological solutions, our paper examines this concentration of resources through the lens of technological fetishism. Through its conceptual application, further contradictions are revealed—contradictions that we suggest need to be openly examined for both academic and strategic reasons. We conclude that PD’s embrace of increasingly sophisticated analytical technologies—as they reflect and further fetishize policy relations and preferred narratives—is entrenching something very different from a foreign policy truly focused on peace, security, and development.

2. The Cold War Residue in a US “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy”

In 1963, at the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States Advisory Commission on Information (established by Congress) issued its eighteenth report. In the wake of that year’s confrontations concerning Cuba, its authors pointed out that other events—such as developments in Berlin, the Chinese Communist invasion of India, and Communist insurrections in South Vietnam and Laos—demonstrated the very real threat of international Communism.⁷ An array of American state resources would need to be mobilized in response. The role of the US Information Agency (USIA), for example, was clear: “Our most urgent job is not merely to interpret US policy and the US way of life, but to more pertinently establish in men’s minds the basic distinction between western and Communist concepts of society.”⁸

More than at any other time, America’s containment of the Communist (and especially the Soviet) threat involved both physical and psychological defenses. However, citizens were often frustrated that communication promoting America abroad lacked efficacy. “Many Americans—including Presidents and Congressmen—could not comprehend how information programs seemed incapable of blunting anti-Americanism abroad and building

⁶ Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2002), 17.

⁷ US Department of State, *Eighteenth Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Information*, 88th Cong. 1st sess. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963), accessed March 20, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/175429.htm>.

⁸ *Eighteenth Report of the United States Advisory Commission*, 21.

sympathy for U.S. policies.”⁹ The Advisory Commission therefore noted that critics of USIA were correct in their assertion that “enhanced research and training programs are needed in order ... to develop firmer foundations for our foreign information programs in relation to the opinions, attitudes, hopes, aspirations, and misconceptions of the foreign audiences... .”¹⁰ Topping its list of what to do about it were recommendations for “improving internal coordination and communication, inspection and evaluation, ... interagency relations and coordination, ... forward planning, and the role of the office of policy.”¹¹

More than fifty years later, despite dramatic changes in geopolitical conditions, as a report completed by the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) in 2014 (“Data-Driven Public Diplomacy”) conveys, this need for ever-improving measurement and evaluation of PD has reemerged. Commissioned by the successor to the Advisory Commission on Information, the ACPD was operating in a much different world: “Non-state actors” had replaced the Soviet Union as the world’s most significant threat.¹² Nevertheless, enhancing the capacity to measure and evaluate strategic information and communication activities—a significant element of PD’s Cold War past—has again become a priority. The “War on Terror” (or, to use official jargon, “Combatting Violent Extremism”) has filled a vacuum created by the Soviet Union’s collapse. In some ways, of course, it has. But in other ways, as we argue, something more complex and worrisome is at work. Specifically, Cold War-era institutional assumptions and practices have found renewed relevance in the form of “data-driven” PD, thereby constraining the ability of policymakers and officials to think about security and PD in new ways. As one U.S. intelligence community insider noted, “Many of today’s principal analytic problems arise from continued reliance on analytic tools, methodologies, and processes that were appropriate to the static and hierarchical nature of the Soviet threat during the Cold War.”¹³ We similarly see in passages of ACPD’s “Data-Driven” report a renewed attempt to make sense of a highly complex world using aspects of a Cold War-era mindset.

According to the US Department of State, ACPD is charged with appraising US Government activities intended to understand, inform and influence foreign publics and to increase the understanding of, and support for, these same activities. Comprised of seven bi-partisan members drawn from government and industry, ACPD had been grappling with new mandates for better PD measurement and evaluation since the early 2000s, when the State Department’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) required units to scrutinize the use of taxpayers’ money as part of a broader Government Accountability Office (GAO) push for increased effectiveness and de-duplication of effort. In a public meeting of ACPD in 2010, Cherreka Montgomery, Director of the Evaluation and Measurement Unit (EMU) in the US Under Secretary of State’s Office of Policy Planning and Resources (R/PPR), described State’s newfound level of commitment to evaluation as unprecedented. When Montgomery was hired in 2005, PD had “more than 898 different performance measures, most of which were merely outputs,” and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had assessed State’s PD

⁹ Seth Center, “The Evolution of American Public Diplomacy: Four Historical Insights,” December 2, 2013, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/219025.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Eighteenth Report of the United States Advisory Commission*, 22.

¹¹ *Eighteenth Report of the United States Advisory Commission*, 3.

¹² US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, “2014 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy,” December 11, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/235008.htm>, 10.

¹³ Jeffrey R. Cooper, *Curing Analytic Pathologies: Pathways to Improved Intelligence Analysis* (Pittsburgh, PA: Government Printing Office, 2005), 23, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA500058>.

strategy and performance measurement as “not performing.” Montgomery described how she and others had worked to standardize, consolidate, and improve PD performance measures.¹⁴

Nevertheless, ACPD was temporarily shuttered in 2011 after failing to win congressional reauthorization. In announcing its reauthorization in 2013, ACPD’s new Executive Director, Katherine Brown, emphasized that ACPD was “operating under a clear mandate to itemize and assess the efficiency of public diplomacy programs across government for an annual comprehensive report.”¹⁵ At the ACPD’s first public meeting following its reauthorization, Brown described the organization’s role as a “watchdog” that needed to “break down the activities and review how their impact is being measured.”¹⁶ ACPD today claims that measurement and evaluation of PD and broadcasting are priorities: “Knowing when public diplomacy is working can often be elusive, yet measurement and evaluation of public diplomacy and international broadcasting activities is essential for strategic planning.”¹⁷

The 2014 “Data-Driven” report was produced by communication and PD scholars who also made recommendations based on their findings, which focused on five key areas:

(1) increased recognition on the part of State Department officials of the importance of research in public diplomacy; (2) movement away from State Department and BBG’s [Broadcasting Board of Governors] risk-averse cultures, which can negatively impact how research data and evaluations are conceived, conducted, reported and used; (3) more consistent strategic approaches in developing and evaluating public diplomacy and international broadcasting activities; (4) increased training in strategic planning, including research and evaluation; and (5) more funding and personnel to conduct more meaningful evaluations ... that can correct the course of programs and activities.¹⁸

Numerous institutions and commentators praised the report for its innovative approach, and it has figured prominently in ACPD’s subsequent Comprehensive Annual Reports. Indicators of the report’s significance include the Public Diplomacy Council’s (a nonprofit organization with close ties with the US Information Agency Alumni Association) declaration, “Anyone who follows US public diplomacy should read the report, starting with Nicholas Cull’s excellent introduction tracing the history of evaluating US efforts to change opinions and attitudes of publics overseas.”¹⁹ According to another commentator, the true audience for the report was not the general public, but rather, “the specialists and especially the policy makers who can effect change....”²⁰ Intertextual markers of the 2014 report’s influence continue to emerge while its themes reflect trends in public diplomacy research writ large.²¹

¹⁴ Tijana Milosevic, “Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy Examines Evaluation Tools,” Alliance for International Exchange, July 21, 2010, <http://www.alliance-exchange.org/policy-monitor/07/21/2010/advisory-commission-public-diplomacy-examines-evaluation-tools>.

¹⁵ Lisa Heyn, “Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy is Reinstated After 19-Months Hiatus,” Alliance for International Exchange, July 31, 2013, <http://www.alliance-exchange.org/policy-monitor/07/31/2013/advisory-commission-public-diplomacy-reinstated-after-19-months-hiatus>.

¹⁶ See “Minutes and Transcript for December 2013 Meeting of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy,” December 2, 2013, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/219024.pdf>.

¹⁷ “US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy,” U.S. Department of State, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/index.htm>. Assessing additional contextual factors would be useful in further understanding the production of the 2014 “Data-Driven” report, but doing so would not change our fundamental critique of its discourse.

¹⁸ For minutes and transcript from the quarterly meeting, see US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: Progress towards Measuring the Impact of Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting Activities,” September 16, 2014, <https://www.state.gov/pdcommission/meetings/232682.htm>.

¹⁹ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” par. 2.

²⁰ Patricia Kushlis, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy: An Evaluation of an Evaluation of and Evaluation,” WhirledView, October 3, 2014, <http://whirledview.typepad.com/whirledview/2014/10/data-driven-public-diplomacy-an-evaluation-of-an-evaluation-of-an-evaluation.html>, para. 2.

²¹ James Pamment, “Articulating Influence: Toward a Research Agenda for Interpreting the Evaluation of Soft Power, Public

However laudable and forward looking the report has been in the eyes of policy analysts and PD officials, our reading reveals signs of something more obscure, entrenched, and seemingly unchangeable: lingering Cold War-era assumptions about the capabilities of communication technology to sustain and advance (self-evidently benevolent) American power. Of course, the “Data-Driven” report is just one of many examples of PD discourse, not all of which reflect such Cold War assumptions. However, we argue that the “Data-Driven” report uniquely reveals evidence of what Edwards calls a closed-world discourse—a set of material and symbolic conditions that underlay US Cold War policies promoting global surveillance and control through technology.²² Both then and now, analytical technologies have enabled various American national security offices and officials to work together in the context of a complex of techniques, political goals, and ideological perspectives.

According to Edwards, during the Cold War, the closed and tightly policed world of US national security affairs was bound together, ultimately, through the overarching struggle between the United States and Soviet Union. As the Advisory Commission’s 1963 report (mentioned above) illustrates, American PD efforts were principally conducted to thwart real or imagined Soviet aggression. For Edwards, closed-world discourse comprised a number of inter-related elements involving a shared worldview, a tacitly agreed upon set of practices, and a common language. For one thing, it relied on “techniques drawn from engineering and mathematics for modeling aspects of the world as closed systems.”²³ The ACPD’s “Data-Driven” report reiterates this impulse in its emphasis on complex analytical models from which to generate innovations drawn from what it calls “actionable data.”²⁴ The report’s authors urge the BBG, for example, to “employ more advanced statistical methods for analyzing cross-national survey data, such as hierarchal linear modeling (multi-level analysis) of aggregated cross-national survey data to identify and measure global and regional predictors of BBG impact.”²⁵ As one commentator noted in response to the report, “The greatest opportunity for influence comes from the visualization and synthesis of big data insights with the nuance, experience, and understanding developed by generations of diplomats.”²⁶ This commentator, a consultant who stands to benefit from “data-driven” developments, described the need for data scientists and diplomats to work shoulder-to-shoulder: “An understanding of the nature of data science and the roles diplomats and data scientists would play at each stage of research and analysis is critical to success.”²⁷

Closed-world discourse also relied on technologies, especially the computer, that made “systems analysis and central control practical on a very large scale.”²⁸ Similarly, the ACPD’s emphasis on “data-driven planning and measurement” demonstrates that the impulse toward centralized analysis and control persists.²⁹ Current efforts include the Mission Activity Tracker

Diplomacy and Nation Brands,” *Public Relations Review* 40, no. 1 (2014): 50-9, doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.11.019; Christopher Paul, Jessica M. Yeats, Colin P. Clarke, Miriam Matthews, and Lauren Skrabala, *Assessing and Evaluating Department of Defense Efforts to Inform, Influence, and Persuade: Handbook for Practitioners* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015); Efe Sevin, “Pathways of Connection: An Analytical Approach to the Impacts of Public Diplomacy,” *Public Relations Review* 41, no. 4 (2015): 561-68, doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.07.003.

²² Edwards, *Closed World*.

²³ Edwards, *Closed World*, 15.

²⁴ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 19.

²⁵ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 46.

²⁶ Ali Fischer, “Data-Driven Diplomacy: A Practical Guide,” *CDP* (blog) *USC Center for Public Diplomacy*, February 23, 2015, <http://usepublicdiplomacy.org/blog/data-driven-diplomacy-practical-guide>, para. 4.

²⁷ Fischer, “Data-Driven Diplomacy,” par. 5.

²⁸ Edwards, *Closed World*, 15.

²⁹ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 17.

(an online performance measurement reporting tool that documents the scope, frequency and achievements of specific PD activities) and the Advancing Public Diplomacy's Impact report (a global comparison study to measure the influence of US PD activities worldwide on key foreign audiences). Despite these and other initiatives, the "Data-Driven" report's authors noted the need to go further, bemoaning that "there is currently no centralized methodology or office responsible for measuring and evaluating US public diplomacy and public affairs activities conducted via social media."³⁰

Edwards, furthermore, argues that closed-world discourse involved "fictions, fantasies, and ideologies, including such visions as global mastery through air power and nuclear weapons [and] global danger from an expansionist 'evil empire'...."³¹ While the Soviet threat has vanished, enemies have multiplied. As the "Data-Driven" report declares, "Given the fast proliferation of non-state actors who are shaping the international system this century, it [PD] has never been more pertinent to our national security strategy."³² Here it should be noted that the complete absence of discussion within the report of what threat, exactly, is being countered through PD is consistent with what scholars describe as a post-9/11 homeland security "ontology," by which they mean the "translation of virtual, potential threat[s] into specific, possible outcomes and concrete, material actions."³³ Vague-yet-omnipresent threats haunt the "Data-Driven" report, bolstering its urgency and recommendations.

A final element of closed-world discourse during the Cold War was its "language of systems, gaming, and abstract communication and information that relied on formalisms to the detriment of experimental and situated knowledge."³⁴ Such a language of games and control endures in the ACPD report as its authors assert that "public diplomacy, like traditional diplomacy, is a long game."³⁵ The report "makes suggestions on structures and methodologies needed to make foreign audience research more robust, impact assessment more institutionalized, and feedback loops for strategy and tactics more systematic."³⁶ For example, a "department-wide content management system for social media accounts at US embassies worldwide" would "enable better coordination of efforts in digital engagement, and potentially make for sustainable procedures for pre-and post-communication analytical efforts."³⁷ Systemization of PD, however, appears more aspirational than actual in that evaluation "should strive to be more specific and systematic in describing the research processes it undertakes" and, in some cases, there appears to be "no systematic way that evaluations" presently can be "distributed, stored, or solicited."³⁸

The "Data-Driven" report contains residues of closed-world discourse that, at first glance, seem coincidental and are easy to overlook. Of course, there are also many notable differences between the report and Cold War-era PD efforts. For one thing, the authors demonstrate malleability in arguing for the need to "identify and develop culturally appropriate programs and messages, and the proper way to employ them."³⁹ The report's repeated calls for field

³⁰ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 34.

³¹ Edwards, *Closed World*, 15.

³² Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 16.

³³ Lauren Martin and Stephanie Simon, "A Formula for Disaster: The Department of Homeland Security's Virtual Ontology," *Space and Polity* 12 (2008): 286.

³⁴ Edwards, *Closed World*, 15.

³⁵ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 16.

³⁶ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 2.

³⁷ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 18.

³⁸ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 32 and 20.

³⁹ Advisory Commission, "Data-Driven Public Diplomacy," 18.

research, avoiding self-reported data, and deepening and expanding research efforts evidence more openness than the Cold War rhetoric that Edwards analyzed. Our concern, however, is that several of the “Data-Driven” report’s premises and recommendations eerily resemble Cold War-era thinking, implying little or no reflection on the underlying assumptions of PD itself at a time when that reflection is urgently needed.

The “Data-Driven” report’s flickers of closed-world discourse risk further entrenching the status quo. As arguably the most vaunted example of a more general and pervasive embrace of technological empowerment and scientific precision in PD, paradoxically the report undermines the pursuit of a precise understanding of why people in other countries support or (sometimes violently) oppose US policies in the first place. As Eric Nisbet and colleagues put it in the context of PD in Muslim countries:

Public diplomacy initiatives and media lobbying efforts do not address the root causes of anti-Americanism endemic to Muslim countries and instead are likely to only lead to small gains in ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the Muslim public. Short of substantial changes in US political, economic, and foreign policy, widespread hatred and loathing of the United States in the Muslim world is likely to continue.⁴⁰

3. The Implications of “Closed-World Discourse”

Data-driven PD’s promise of sophisticated measurement, abstract representation, and statistical certitude in support of the status quo risks further marginalizing the voices of PD officials and analysts who may be critical of US national security policies, and thus an historically-grounded and substantive re-consideration of them. It is vital to recognize that, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s infamous Cold War-era Pentagon computers, the output of data-driven PD is not simply statistical, it is also rhetorical in that it bolsters conformity to existing policies. What is puzzling is that the “Data-Driven” report’s authors simultaneously acknowledge *and* ignore this situation. Echoing critiques of misleading and self-serving 1960s Defense Department “research,” they note that “current [PD] research and evaluation systems in place often seem to justify programs, campaigns, and budgets” *yet* the authors recommend changes that surely will be used to legitimize subsequent elaborations of many of these programs, campaigns, and budgets.⁴¹

Rather than an unacknowledged error or the intellectual inability to identify such contradictions, we propose that the authors of the “Data-Driven” report generally see this problem but, nevertheless, choose to ignore it. If this is correct, the question that needs to be answered is *why?* To respond directly, below we draw upon concepts from Marx to supplement Edwards’ discourse-centered approach. To productively connect Edwards’ and Marx’s approaches, however, we first need to explain how the institutional context of ACPD’s report influences its characterization of PD’s Cold War past—a preferred narrative that shapes PD’s present and future.

Whether during the Cold War or post-9/11-era, by the very nature of the institutional framework of their analysis, when writing a report for a country’s foreign policy officials, scholars are compelled (whether consciously or not) to frame what they produce in accordance with the “realities” at hand (as James Joyce famously quipped, “My consumers are they

⁴⁰ Eric C. Nisbet, Matthew C. Nisbet, Dietram A. Scheufele, and James E. Shanahan, “Public Diplomacy, Television News, and Muslim Opinion,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9, no. 2 (2004): 33, doi:10.1177/1081180x04263459.

⁴¹ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 18.

not my producers?”). Indeed, all scholarly work is influenced by the vested interests that directly or institutionally shape intellectual capacities. While, ideally, academics—protected by tenure and the university—are relatively free to think openly and reflexively, their “real world” circumstances (from the research cultures of their institutions, to the need to gain or maintain access to institutional arenas, to the commercial interests of their publishers) all shape what can or cannot be said and, in the context of policy questions, what can or cannot be conveyed as being reasonable and actionable. The “Data-Driven” report reflects these general limitations, but not without some remarkable moments of hesitation and even self-contradiction.

In his introduction to the report, Nicholas Cull, for example, asserts that US PD, carried out primarily through the now disbanded USIA (United States Information Agency), effectively exposed Eastern Europe and the USSR to “Western ideas:”

The leaders of revolutions spoke powerfully of the influence of US international broadcasting and analysts noted the role that exposure to western ideas through exchanges had in laying the foundations for change. Ironically the agency’s success in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union contained the seeds of its decline. USIA had always justified itself as a necessity of the Cold War. Once the Cold War was ‘won’ its political pay-masters saw it as an ideal source of a ‘peace dividend’ budget saving.⁴²

There are, of course, many interpretations as to the reasons for the collapse of Soviet and East European communism.⁴³ As Cull intimates, among PD scholars, the theory that the information and ideas disseminated through American state agencies, especially the USIA, played an important role conveys an implicit bias that legitimizes PD generally and the saliency of the “Data-Driven” report more specifically. It should be pointed out that we do not raise this issue as a means of simply dismissing Cull’s assertion. Instead, we wonder if this “truth,” coupled with its widespread use in associating the contemporary problem of Islamic extremism with the Cold War, is at least as much self-serving as it is insightful. The taken-for-grantedness of PD’s assumed past utility reveals, we argue, that the “Data-Driven” report itself is imbued with “baked in” institutional interests that otherwise might go unnoticed, especially in a policy paper crafted by seemingly objective academics.

This generalized and partial explanation for the report’s orientations is not novel; once any scholar is tasked to conduct research and submit recommendations—particularly on an assumed problem requiring actionable guidance—the intellectual straightjacket that is an obvious component of all nation-state policymaking (and one traditionally resisted *within* the university) is almost certainly strapped on. We suggest, however, that there is more to it than this: The reified object of the “Data-Driven” report—digital technologies—also plays a significant (but largely unseen) role in shaping or, to be more precise, *mediating* the thinking behind the report itself. Indeed, the report’s very title—“Data-Driven Public Diplomacy”—implies that data *itself* has become a form of agency in this policy arena.

In his introduction, Cull recognizes (and seemingly regrets) the actualization of what we might observe to be a form of technological determinism (i.e., technology itself constituting a decisive and, indeed, independent social agent). Cull traces this determinism to the

⁴² Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 11.

⁴³ Michael Cox, *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Soveitology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia* (New York: Continuum Intl. Pub. Group, 1998); David M. Kotz and Fred Weir, *Revolution from Above: The Demise of the Soviet System* (London: Routledge, 1997); Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch, “Preface,” *Socialist Register* 27 (1991); Robin Okey, *The Demise of Communist East Europe: 1989 in Context* (London: Arnold, 2004).

Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, which, he says, “imposed a considerable administrative burden on the entire agency [the USIA] by introducing a requirement to generate a hierarchy of goals and deliver annual assessments of the extent to which these had been met.”⁴⁴ Cull continues, “While logical on paper, it proved a poor fit for the agency’s work,” and he goes on to discuss post-9/11 efforts to better measure PD’s results as, “*The quest to measure the un-measurable*.”⁴⁵ Yet, on the same page, Cull writes that “the new tools of social media make new kinds of evaluation possible even as the communication environment requires an ever more nuanced approach for an ever more savvy audience, evaluation has an unprecedented significance. *It must be part of the DNA of public diplomacy’s future*.”⁴⁶

Measurement and evaluation of what a PD program has achieved or can achieve are therefore positioned to be *both* dubious and inevitable. Cull recognizes measurement and evaluation’s DNA-like entrenchment in contemporary PD alongside its inadequacies and contradictions. Thus, introducing the ACPD report is a leading PD academic and policy analyst who appears to know that the mechanization of knowledge that a data-driven PD furthers is neither doable or desirable, yet he accepts it as inevitable. Collectively, the scholars writing the “Data-Driven” report propose the renovation of PD on foundations that are far from stable yet, they assert, *build it we must*. As the short history of PD presented by Cull concludes, data-driven policies now are in place and, going forward, “actionable research” and “measured forms of impact evaluation” are crucial for PD’s “maximal utility.”⁴⁷ We next identify what might be a principal contributor to this contradiction.

4. “Data-Driven” Technological Fetishism

In its introduction and subsequent pages, the “Data-Driven” report reflects the pervasiveness of something more complex and powerful than just technological determinism: technological fetishism. According to David Harvey, this kind of fetish reflects:

the habit humans have of endowing real or imagined objects or entities with self-contained, mysterious and even magical powers to move and shape the world in distinctive ways. The technological changes that we see all around us are, of course, very real. *They are a constitutive feature of how we live our daily lives*.⁴⁸

This focus on fetishized relations in daily life as *constitutive* is important in that it underlines that fetishistic thinking is not based in the mind. It is instead rooted in concrete human relations. A policy official, for example, almost certainly knows that digital technologies do not have the intrinsic power to prescribe or impel specific outcomes but, because others work and act as if they do, they in fact generate an experienced social reality; they entail a tangible form of agency. As a technology or technique is institutionalized and utilized (e.g., the internet), people really do organize their social relations, investments, and public policies around its existence as an unquestionably central agent of history. In this sense, the magic of the fetish is real. As the thing fetishized is treated as if it is powerful, it *in effect* exercises power.

⁴⁴ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 11.

⁴⁵ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 11-12, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 12, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 16.

⁴⁸ David Harvey, “The Fetish of Technology: Causes and Consequences,” *Macalester International* 13, no. 1 (2003): 7, emphasis added.

To reiterate, the technological fetish is not some kind of twisted condition of a defective mind; it is an experiential outcome of “normal” social relations. More generally, in modern society, most relations are mediated by money, contracts, technologies, and other such *things*. What occurs in the fetish is the mind *not* inverting reality but, instead, *its recognition of a real inversion*. In contemporary society, the (dead) products of social relations—including technologies—experientially mediate our relations and realities. Fetishization, therefore, is more than just reification (the taken-for-grantedness of human creations) or technological determinism. With the fetish, a dual reality is recognized. Specifically, most people know or have the capacity to know that a fetish is an arbitrary social construction but, through the conditions of one’s relations, *act* as if it is not. By comparison, technological determinism—in practically all its iterations—is not *consciously* understood and accepted.⁴⁹ Generally, technological determinism more directly reflects the reification of things while the technological fetish cannot, by comparison, be simply eradicated through some form of critical reflection. Instead, it constitutes what Slavoj Žižek calls (when referencing the fetish generally) an “objective illusion”—a “reality” that is inseparable from the “real world” of human relations, including the real world of policymaking.⁵⁰

Illustrating continuity between the Cold War and post-9/11 eras, the “Data-Driven” report demonstrates that the “real world” of PD seems to fundamentally require an unyielding march toward the generation and use of evermore precise and measurable forms of data. The report’s assertion of a “recent movement toward more data-driven planning and measurement” as a “positive shift in public diplomacy” both elides this historical continuity and undermines the more subjective, indeterminate, and human elements of PD.⁵¹ For the “Data-Driven” report’s authors, this problem need not be dwelled upon. Why? A circular and arguably idealistic answer is given: “Those involved in international broadcasting and public diplomacy research and evaluation are impressive both for their deep loyalty to US diplomacy generally and the need for measurement specifically.”⁵²

In much of the report, while technology-mediated and quantitative methods are recognized to have their limitations, they constitute an inevitable and necessary “way forward,” although a “way forward” towards precisely *what* remains unclear.⁵³ By its conclusion, however, the report implicitly answers this unposed question with a call to, among other things, refine and nuance various forms of data using more developed social media assessment capabilities. The fetish, it seems, both obscures the question and structures the answers. Thus, what has become a common sense means of policy empowerment—digital technologies and data—contributes to analytical disempowerment. As with so many other mechanized applications, digital technologies do more things for us and, in the process, intellectual capabilities once exercised are subsumed.

Because technological fetishism stems from structural conditions and material relations, for analysts and officials aspiring to redress its contradictory implications, to repeat, their individual recognition of its presence is not in itself a sufficient response. The technological fetish, we argue, mediates and serves to externalize the problem it appears to be redressing

⁴⁹ Sally Wyatt, “Technological Determinism Is Dead; Long Live Technological Determinism,” In *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Edward J. Hackett et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 165-80.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 340.

⁵¹ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 17.

⁵² Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 17.

⁵³ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 47.

as isolatable and resolvable. Anti-American extremism, for example, is not presented as a problem that the American state, or interests that it represents, have directly contributed to.⁵⁴ This historical dimension of foreign policy, for practical purposes, lies outside the parameters of the analysis. Not only are the foreign policy continuities concerning American power and the problem it is confronting obscured, technological developments are themselves insulated from their socio-economic contexts.

Assessing the “Data-Driven” report and US foreign policies involving data and digital technology through an understanding of technological fetishism clarifies the implications and contradictions at hand. With this in mind, calls for the innovative use of data through PD measurement and evaluation developments should be accompanied by a far more critical recognition of the ways in which such appeals demonstrate continuity with entrenched institutionalized interests and Cold War-era assumptions about the possibilities of controlling human beings. However, this kind of reflexive historical and relational perspective becomes difficult to imagine given the mediating role of technological fetishism in now “common sense” efforts to, in effect (and to repeat Cull’s statement once again), measure the unmeasurable. Following Gramsci, common sense itself is a way of thinking that, despite its logical and empirical shortcomings, serves as a shared and often useful guide in people’s lives. As with the fetish, this usefulness involves the fact that others also act as if it makes sense. Gramsci contrasts common sense to what he calls “good sense” which, instead, entails a conscious understanding of the complexities, dualisms, and even the fetishisms that pervade everyday life.⁵⁵ We assert that PD needs to be guided by less common sense and more good sense.

5. A Different Future for Public Diplomacy

Some analysts who are not obligated to a policymaking *raison d'être* and who are pursuing seemingly idealistic research agendas (ironically) can be useful to policymakers. Corman, Trethewey, and Goodall, for example, do not hesitate to call US strategic communication models “dysfunctional,” arguing that they have “diminished [our] status among world opinion leaders and further[ed] the recruitment goals of violent extremists.”⁵⁶ Instead of asserting the need for tighter message control through the use of ever improving measurement and evaluation techniques, they explore the productivity of acknowledging the fallibility of American policies. “For instance,” the authors state, “rather than always promoting the virtues of democracy, the United States might try messages that discuss its problems and invite comparison of these faults to the problems of other forms of government.”⁵⁷ They also urge officials to “deemphasize control and embrace complexity, replace repetition of messages with experimental variation, consider moves that will disrupt the existing system, and make contingency plans for failure.”⁵⁸ We find Corman, Trethewey, and Goodall’s critical impulse refreshing, innovative, and perhaps even a good place to begin reconsidering the foundational premises of PD.

⁵⁴ Kamel Daoud, “Saudi Arabia, an ISIS That Has Made It,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/opinion/saudi-arabia-an-isis-that-has-made-it.html?_r=0.

⁵⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 332-35, 419-25.

⁵⁶ Stephen R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and Bud Goodall, “A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas” (Report no: 0701, Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University, April 3, 2007), 2, <http://csc.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/114.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Corman, Trethewey, and Goodall, “A 21st Century Model,” 13.

⁵⁸ Corman, Trethewey, and Goodall, “A 21st Century Model,” 15.

Although the “Data-Driven” report’s principal recommendations have little to do with reconsidering the foundations of PD in this way, an opening for change is revealed in more than just Cull’s two-minded introduction; it also surfaces in one of its recommendations. Specifically, its authors state, “In the current environment, it is hard to imagine how critical, forward looking research designs could be implemented given existing cultures of fear and risk-aversion. State Department and BBG leadership should reward and encourage honest and balanced evaluations and encourage the admission of setbacks for stronger programming.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, “[e]valuations should be written in a balanced manner that highlights the successes and failures of particular campaigns and activities.”⁶⁰ Although we find it difficult to believe that PD policymakers and researchers will use this recommendation to reconsider their fundamental working assumptions, calls for “honest and balanced evaluations” might, going forward, promote more thoughtful accounts of the underlying policies and premises that PD campaigns and activities are designed to support.

Finally, some solace might be taken in light of Cull’s recognition, although largely implicit, of the dubiousness of the “Data-Driven” project itself. It is likely that only the more distant and critical analyst—one *relatively* removed from policymaking and its fetish-mediated realities—has the capacity needed to place PD on a reflexive and productive path, one very different from the cul-de-sac within which it is now travelling.

6. Conclusion

In critiquing the ACPD’s “Data-Driven” report, and the characterizations and biases on which it rests, we conclude that the enrollment of evermore sophisticated analytical technologies, particularly as they reflect and further fetishize policy relations and preferred narratives, is not a useful innovation of PD. These developments ultimately renew and entrench questionable Cold War-era assumptions about technology and the nature of state power. Data-driven approaches have less to do with building mutual understanding and peace than with supporting governments’ strategic interests and ambitions. The danger is that data-driven approaches will lead officials further away from PD’s humanistic capabilities. Just as stakeholders have witnessed US educational institutions recently diminish or eliminate important aspects of instruction in order to boost quantitative assessment outcomes,⁶¹ data-driven PD risks diminishing (or, more likely, not considering) PD’s more useful—yet more difficult to assess—potentials.

A critical perspective maintains, however, that the twenty-first century trajectory of PD is not inevitable, particularly as the technological choices being made are, simultaneously, political choices.⁶² Through critique and a more reflexive effort to understand these policy choices, wider and less contradictory alternatives become at least imaginable. As Edwards notes, objects of knowledge are produced under specific conditions from materials that are themselves historical products, practices, objects, and symbols.⁶³ In this context, for academics advising policymakers on how to manage a specified problem, their elaboration and, indeed, legitimization of the magical powers vested in digital technologies and

⁵⁹ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 20.

⁶⁰ Advisory Commission, “Data-Driven Public Diplomacy,” 22.

⁶¹ Lindsey Layton, “Study Says Standardized Testing is Overwhelming Nation’s Public Schools,” Washington Post, October 24, 2015.

⁶² Barker, Cultural Studies; Edwards, Closed World.

⁶³ Edwards, Closed World.

measurement techniques is profoundly contradictory. The presence of the technological fetish obscures the historical and material relations shaping contemporary policy delusions; yet, when applied reflexively in our analysis, the technological fetish also illuminates and clarifies the (contradictory) realities of why PD officials and commentators are thinking and acting in certain ways. In regard to the authors of the “Data-Driven” report itself, to quote Maurice Godelier, “it is not the subject who deceives himself, but *reality* which deceives him.”⁶⁴

Participating in fetishizing technology and, in turn, facilitating its mediation of policy, promotes an ahistorical and potentially circular analysis. This mediation entails technology’s paradoxical *disempowerment* of the same analysts and officials who turn to technology for empowerment. Once again, empowerment to do precisely what remains unclear, and this confusion may be related to the dualistic reality of the fetish itself. Our conclusion is that the common sense that more institutional monitoring, quantification, and measurable coordination will lead to more effective PD is something far removed from the more difficult task of exercising good sense—a way of conceptualizing PD that, we suggest, might yield a much different approach to peace, security, and development.

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⁶⁴ Sean Sayers, *Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 203.

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