

# **MORE THAN A TOURISTIC VISIT: SCHOLAR EXCHANGES AS A COMMUNICATION METHOD IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the concept of Public Diplomacy and the effectiveness of a specific Public Diplomacy tool: Scholar Exchanges as a tool of Public Diplomacy. The foreign Fulbright Program of the United States Government is introduced as a case study and for further interpreting the perceptions of the program, a survey is ran among 59 current grantees. Scholar exchanges programs are suggested to be implemented in order to overcome the barriers in communication processes in the international arena.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper sets out to discuss the importance and effectiveness of scholar exchanges as a public diplomacy method. The United States has been carrying out considerable amount of international exchange programs. Hence, for a closer view on the effectiveness of scholar exchange programs as a communication method, the Foreign Fulbright Program will be analyzed as a case study. An online survey was run among 59 current Fulbright scholars and they were asked for their perceptions of the program. Lastly, other current government scholarships and the possibility of further countries implementing similar programs as part of their public diplomacy attempts are presented in order to explore the future of the scholar exchanges.

A long discussed term, “public diplomacy” is becoming more and more important in foreign policy agendas (Bryson, 2009). An important visionary, Senator J. William Fulbright is quoted as saying “[T]he shape of the world a generation from now will be influenced far more by how well we communicate the values of our[American] society to others than by our[American] military or diplomatic superiority” back in 1960s. Since then, the concerns over the process of communicating values to the international public opinion have been increasing to such an extent that The Public Diplomacy Council (2005) suggested the US government to increase the public diplomacy efforts overseas by enlarging the task force by 300 percent over five years, training the staff and allocating more financial resources for international broadcasting and exchange programs in order to deliver the American messages more successfully.

Within the scope of this paper, the important concept of public diplomacy is described as the attempts of the governments to address other societies. A more detailed description is discussed in the following section. The main focus of the paper is international scholar exchanges programs where scholars and faculty members are hosted in a foreign country. These programs are considered to be prominent in today's global environment the need "to collaborate on projects across borders...has become increasingly important and desirable" (Teng, 2007) and cultural awareness and international networks are created with the help of the scholar exchanges.

## **2. WHAT IS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY?**

The traditional understanding of diplomacy, as described by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, stands for the relations between the states and the interstate organizations. Public diplomacy, on the other hand, involves the approaches of the states to reach the public and to influence the public opinion. Fortner (1994, p.89) describes public diplomacy as an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the people. The role of public diplomacy, in this sense, is to build up a correct image about a country's social values and systems. Public diplomacy "strives for intensive exchange of information, neutralization of clichés and prejudices about one's nation, popularization of one's foreign policy and social system, strengthening one's country positive image" (Plavsak, 2002, p.113). In practice, public diplomacy embraces the core programs which reach international audiences such as broadcasting and information activities, cultural affairs and international exchanges (The Public Diplomacy Council, 2005).

The need for public diplomacy is obvious. In the era of globalization, states must pay attention to the public opinion in other states. Zaharna (2001) cited President Bush as accepting that the US government was not doing a very good job of getting their message out, while speaking about American efforts to reach Arab and Muslim audiences during a national press conference. This quotation demonstrates that this communication process is on the agenda of even the highest level politicians and governors. In this aspect, it is possible to map out similarities between public diplomacy as a communication method, and public relations/public affairs, as both share the aims of "influencing public opinion to advantages of one's organization/government, targeting various groups in other countries, [and] strategically planning for diplomatic (communication) activities" (Plavsak, 2002, p.113).

Unlike the traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy offers a government to people communication method. When Zaharna (2001) was describing the American – British communication after 9/11 as an epitome of effective diplomacy, she highlighted the existence of the reciprocal communication and the

fact that communication was public, unlike the traditional diplomacy which takes place only between leaders of governments. Scholar exchange programs are likely to be an effective method in reaching the public and influencing their opinions on three basis: persuasion, the profile of participants and the cultural aspect.

Traditional diplomacy or public diplomacy based on information broadcasting are one way communication methods, where the participants are subjected to the messages delivered by the officials. In these one way communication methods, there is the possibility of adding a “gate-keeper” to the communication message and of spreading selective messages. Hence these messages might be disregarded by the receivers because of the credibility of the sender (lack of ethos). However, when a scholar is given the opportunity to get involved within the society, he or she can personally arrive at conclusions about the society and its values. As such conclusions are based on personal experiences, credibility will not be an issue. The scholars will be exposed to the same environment as the local residents of the host country and will enjoy the opportunity to build up personal reflections.

There is a reason beyond choosing scholars as the participants of such exchange programs. Scholars and faculty members are the intellectual and influential people in their home countries. Therefore, they are more likely to share their ideas with larger number of people upon finishing their exchange programs. In other words, by inviting the scholars, the host country implicitly entitles them as its honorary messengers. As the host, itself, might be lacking ethos, it will be easier for the influential local figures to further communicate the message. A similar approach was implemented by Britain during World War I. Instead of communicating with the masses directly, British officials decided to reach influential figures in the US, particularly those in influential positions in government, business, education and the media (Taylor, 2002, p.178) and the goal was for such individuals to build up the communication bridges between the British government and the American public.

International communication processes always suffer from cultural barriers. Although cross-cultural awareness is on the rise and communication specialists are trying to be more sensitive about culture, these issues still stand as problems in the communication processes. By creating personal experiences instead of fabricating messages and creating strategies from a central headquarters, scholar exchanges help public diplomacy to avoid cultural obstructions in the communication processes.

In short, this paper defines public diplomacy as the attempt of governments to challenge the prejudices and stereotypes about their own values and attitudes in other countries, and in doing so to provide more accurate images of their own societies to the rest of the world. Scholar exchange is an important, but not the only method which can be used in public diplomacy. Such exchange programs involve hosting scholars and faculty members in the country for academic purposes.

### 3. A CASE STUDY: FOREIGN FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

The mere existence of The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs under the US Secretary of the State (ECA) shows how valuable the scholar exchanges are in American foreign policy. According to the Bureau statistics, over 250 current and former heads of states and governments are alumni of ECA programs. When we take Ross' (2002) claim that the US government will benefit from having exposed that person to U.S. society, values, and the company of U.S. peers, it is possible to argue that ECA has been carrying an important public diplomacy mission successfully. Among these ECA programs, the Fulbright Program remains the flagship government-sponsored exchange (Ross, 2002).

As of 2008, the Fulbright Program reported 285,000 alumni from 155 countries since the program started in 1946. Among these alumni, there are 39 Nobel Prize Winners, 1 Secretary General of the United Nations and 1 Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. After the World War II, the Fulbright program was started to improve mutual cultural exchange between the US and the rest of the world. The Foreign Fulbright Program invites nearly 3000 scholars every year to continue their studies in various institutions throughout the US.

In return, -as explained by the ECA (n.d.)-, the Fulbrighters are expected to continue to the ideals of the program:

*Throughout the history of the Fulbright Program, Fulbrighters have exposed their host communities to new cultures and ideas. In turn they have taken their experiences back to their home communities and shared them with family, friends, and peers. This cultural exchange is an important part of the Fulbright Program's mission to promote mutual understanding. In addition to academic endeavors, Fulbrighters have a unique opportunity to make a valuable contribution to their host and home communities through participating in community activities abroad and sharing their experience upon returning home.*

What makes the Fulbright program different than any other scholarship program is the fact that the identity of being a Fulbright alumnus stays with the scholars after they return back to their home countries. This identity is the main aspect which makes the Fulbright program a public diplomacy effort rather than being a solely academic exchange. The Foreign Fulbright Program is supervised by a board of 12 people, appointed by the President of the United States. Also, current chairwoman is a former communication specialist. Shortly speaking, US government is trying to protect the program's public diplomacy features by supervising it closely.

The Fulbright Association was founded by Fulbright alumni in 1977, and has served as a global alumni organization since then. Currently the association has more than 9000 members (Fulbright Association, n.d.). The Fulbright Association also works closely with more than 70 national Fulbright alumni

organizations abroad members (Fulbright Association, n.d.). In other words, the alumni protect their ties with the Fulbright program.

During an impressionistic study, 59 current foreign Fulbright scholars were contacted and were asked their opinions about the program in an online survey. There were 6 compulsory multiple choice and ranking questions and 2 open ended optional questions. The response rate in the open ended questions was 83% (49 responses). The survey was looking for global responses, so no questions regarding the age, gender, area of studies or country of origins were asked.

The first two questions asked about participants' prior visits to the US, and whether the Fulbright program helped them to decide on coming to the US. 69.5% (41) of the scholar are enjoying their first time in the US with the help of the Fulbright program, 83%(49) of the participants said that Fulbright program was effective<sup>1</sup> in their decision to study in the US. This number clearly shows that the existence of the Fulbright program makes the US institutions more attractive to study for foreign scholars.

The following question focused on the main source of information about the USA (government, people, lifestyle etc.) before the scholar's visit. There were nine multiple choice answers and an open ended "Other option", which was used by 0.5% (3) and all three participants wrote down their prior visits to the country (Academic works, Curriculum, Literature, Computer Games , Websites / Blog, Official Documents, Movies, Friends, Family members, Other). The top three answers were Friends 81.3% (48), Movies 71.1% (42) and Academic Works 64.4% (38). Official documents were pointed out only by 0.3% (2) of the participants. The data suggests that when gathering information about a foreign country, social networks and narratives of personal experiences are more effective than official documents. This suggestion supports the importance of Public Diplomacy.

Next two questions were open ended and asked the scholar's image they had in their minds of the US prior and after their Fulbright experience. Although there was no majority negative nor positive prior images, some of the phrases used to describe the American society included "lonely people, obesity, over-commercialization, consumption-driven society, competitive capitalism, terrible public education" and "positive perception not regarding the US international policy abroad but about the academics and lifestyle, very civilized and advanced nation". After the personal experience, the perceptions of the images included "ethnically diverse, small-town culture, large cities and small town differences, systematic and hardworking people". There were in fact two important qualitative outcomes. Firstly, the after images were explained more in detail with real life cases. And secondly, as all the scholars were in the US during the 2008 Presidential Elections, the phrases of "change" and "hope" were often used in describing the after image. In other words, the exposure to the culture helps the scholars to use

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<sup>1</sup> This survey question provided guidelines for responses. The original text was "Was Fulbright Program effective in your decision to study in the States? (YES: I have decided to study in the US because they offer the Fulbright Program. NO: I have decided to study in the US because of other reasons, i.e. Good universities, research opportunities etc.)"

their own ideas in describing the American society in the real life experience. The fact rich expressions suggest that the scholars are being integrated to the society and trying to understand the dynamics.

Another scale question asked the scholars to rate the change between the images they had of the US prior to, and after their visits, on a scale of 0 to 10. 0 described no change, and 10 100% change. The rating average turned out to be 4.87. However, 25.4% (15) of the responses were 2 and below and 33.8% (20) of the responses were 8 and over. The rest of the responses did not show any statistical pattern. However, when asked to rate the effectiveness of their US experience in cultural and social terms on the same scale, 66% (39) of the responses were 8 and over. Evidence suggest that the US experience will affect the way the scholars live even after they return back to their home countries.

The last question was: "Following your return to your home country, what aspect(s) of the American experience will you value the most?" There were seven choices and an open ended other option (Academic methods, Arts, Daily life habits, Human Rights concepts, Music, Social life, Theater, Other). The "other" option was used twice. One respondent discussed the professionalism and the work ethic, while the other pointed out the diversity and tolerance. 59.3% (35) of the responses identified "Academic methods", which was followed by "Daily life habits" by 35.6% (21). The scholars are willing to take back what they have been practicing in the US.

To summarize the findings of the survey:

- The Fulbright program gives the US institutions a comparative advantage in recruiting qualified foreign scholars.
- Regardless of their prior views of the US, the scholars become integrated into the society and try to understand the values and dynamics.
- Scholars' views of the US do not necessarily change during their stay in the US, however, their experience in US changes their lives in social and cultural terms.
- The scholars are willing to take what they have been practicing in the US back to their home countries.

#### **4. OTHER CASES**

American government is not the only government using the scholar exchanges to communicate its messages across. The Japanese government continues the Monbukagakusho scholarship program since 1954, the British government provides the Chevening scholarship and the European Union allocates considerable financial resources for Jean Monnet program. All of these scholar exchange cases have one aim in common, to attract the scholars to the countries and to provide more accurate images of their societies. Yet, the fields of studies and the nationalities of the participants change with regard to the host country. The Jean Monnet program looks for scholars in the field of European Integration, the

Chevening program explicitly announces its focus countries as “China and India, countries which are going to be most important to foreign policy over coming years” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, n.d.), the Monbukagakusho scholarships are focused on technology related researches. The European Union, Japanese and British governments defined their policy objectives and key audiences and implemented the scholar exchanges programs in order to spread out their messages.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE OF SCHOLAR EXCHANGES**

We live in the era of globalization. Foreign policy, especially the employment of “soft power” (Nye, 2004, p.11) diplomacy is becoming a top priority in governmental agendas. In this context, every government has to consider the images of their countries in other parts of the world. An accurate image and positive public opinion towards a country will facilitate the diplomatic relations between the countries. Democratic states and “the non-democratic states must take public opinion into account” (The Public Diplomacy Council, 2005). And “[e]ven in those remaining nondemocratic and authoritarian societies with state-controlled media, public diplomacy programs have proven to be effective in affecting public perceptions” (The Public Diplomacy Council, 2005).

In this context, scholar exchanges are important because these programs, besides creating international academic networks, help to build up accurate images of the host countries. Moreover, exchanges increase the understanding of cultural awareness, both in the host countries and the home countries as scholars are expected to share their experiences upon their return. Scholars are influential people in their home societies, who have the ethos in the eyes of the local people and who have the possibility to reach large groups of people. In the case of Fulbright, these scholars are expected to be “the representative of their countries as well as persons with some sense of social responsibility” (Johnson&Colligan, 1965 p.40). Thus, they are better messengers than the traditional diplomacy corps, who might be lacking the credibility and the connections.

As discussed in the case of the Fulbright program and the other cases, several countries are using scholar exchanges as a method to influence several public opinions in various countries. What is suggested in this paper is that this method is effective, and if used by more countries, it will be beneficial not only for the creation of a more accurate image of the respective country but, also effective for raising cultural awareness universally.

Therefore, all governments that are interested in fostering their foreign policies, and that are capable of sustaining such exchange programs should build up their own exchange programs by taking their target audiences and key fields of study into consideration. These programs can increase the mutual and global cultural awareness and eventually contribute to the world peace, just like any other successful diplomacy attempts. J. William Fulbright espoused this principle in his speech on June, 26<sup>th</sup> 1986 by saying that “I’m sure that President Johnson would never have pursued the war in Vietnam if he’d ever

had a Fulbright to Japan, or say Bangkok, or had any feeling for what these people are like and why they acted the way they did. He was completely ignorant.” Fortunately, the necessary tool to solve this problem of ignorance is readily available: scholar exchanges as a communication method in public diplomacy.

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