Although there exist a fairly broad consensus on the notion of public diplomacy as a “direct relation with people” pursued by a foreign country’s diplomacy, it is still highly contested whether this practice is in fact new. The question is even more intriguing when referred to an “atypical” actor as the European Union – which, by the way, has long been engaged in this kind of diplomatic action. This paper addresses the matter of a new public diplomacy with particular reference to the European External Action Service, coming to mixed conclusions on the EU’s ability to successfully manage this practice. While the Treaty of Lisbon promises higher coherence and efficiency, EU’s communications still prove to be inadequate on a number of major issues. Moreover, the EEAS is still inclined to use old and new media in a one-way manner, and has not yet embraced a more normative model of diplomacy – which would maximise the effectiveness of its soft power instruments. Nevertheless, there is still considerable room for improvement – for instance paying greater attention to non-governmental actors and a pursuing a higher coordination at the national and EU levels through – and the next few years are going to be crucial for the EEAS to fulfil its potentials in terms of public diplomacy.

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This study will be organised around three brief sections. The first
discusses the notion of new public diplomacy and asks what exactly is new
about it? The second considers the challenges for the EU generally and the
European External Action Service (EEAS) more specifically in public
diplomacy. The final section offer a number of modest policy
recommendations drawing upon the previous sections and with the aim of
stimulating public diplomacy as the EEAS looks beyond its first major
review towards what will hopefully be some form of maturity.

What’s new in public diplomacy?

Public diplomacy is by no means new and there is, by now, fairly broad
consensus on what public diplomacy is (and is not). One of the foremost
contemporary experts defines it as ‘the process by which direct relations
with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend
the values of those being represented’ (Sharp 2005: 106). There have been
quibbles about the extent to which closely related terms, such as
information, propaganda and national brand-building are synonymous
with public diplomacy. Although these admittedly constitute areas of
grey, the salient point about public diplomacy is that it is aimed primarily
towards non-government actors with the purpose of building longer-term
and sustainable relationships (see Gregory 2011). It is also a two-way
process, emphasizing the role of listening and reciprocation (as opposed to
one-way megaphone diplomacy). It should be considered as something
other than just an instrument of foreign policy, which often concentrates
on the short-term, as opposed to the medium to long-term goals of public

The issue of what ‘new’ public diplomacy is has proven far more vexatious.
In part it is associated with post-cold war international relations, which
relies far less on traditional forms of diplomacy of the type encountered
during the cold war. In particular, ‘soft power’ is far more important in
shaping statecraft, and public diplomacy is a potent expression of this
(Nye 2011). Whether it is new in historical terms is debateable since it has
been practiced by both the Federal Republic of Germany and, to an extent,
France, since World War II. Melissen argues that new public diplomacy is
an increasingly standard aspect of ‘overall diplomatic practice and is more
than a form of propaganda conducted by diplomats’ (2005: 11). Various
national interpretations of the concept have added further layers of
meaning. In the case of the United States new public diplomacy was
fostered by the ability to adapt the instruments of statecraft to ‘fully
leverage the networks, technologies and demographics of our
interconnected world’ (Department of State).
Behind all of the notions there are the related themes of decentralized forms of power, the (relative) decline of traditional notions of diplomacy, the emergence of soft power and the empowerment of non-governmental actors and individuals through new technologies, which collectively constitute what might be termed ‘new diplomacy’.

**The EU and (new) public diplomacy**

The EU and, before that, the European Community (EC), have long been engaged in public diplomacy. The essentials of public diplomacy differ little in the European and national contexts. In the EU context the aim is to ‘promote EU interests by understanding, informing and influencing. It means clearly explaining the EU’s goals, policies and activities and fostering understanding of these goals through dialogue with individual citizens, groups, institutions and the media’ (European Commission 2007: 12).

The internal aspects of European public diplomacy are not wholly irrelevant to the external dimension for two reasons. First, it is increasingly difficult and arbitrary to impose distinctions between the internal and external dimensions of EU policies. Second, the internal aspects of public diplomacy are part and parcel of the construction of identity and narratives that are then employed externally. Or, put slightly differently, they form part of a mutually supportive ‘self-reaffirming process’ (Duke 2013: 3). A contemporary example of the complex interlinkage of the internal and external aspects of EU public diplomacy is to be found in the so-called ‘eurozone crisis’ and the extent to which the internal efforts to address the crisis are often perceived externally as a wider comment on the state of European integration. In a more legalistic vein, the Lisbon Treaty presents the EU as an area extolling the importance of ‘human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights’ (Treaty on European Union: Article 2).

It is therefore important that the EU must be itself respectful of these notions if it is to have external credibility. The merging of the international and domestic aspects of a policy or issue has been termed ‘intermestic’ by Putnam (1999: 429) and this is a suitable, even if rather inelegant, way of thinking about the EU’s public diplomacy.

One of the consistent challenges for EU has been its ability to move beyond infopolitik to public diplomacy (Fiske de Gouveia and Plumridge 2005: 8-9). The idea of transferring information, either passively (leaflets or web-sites) or actively (by visits of EU officials to third parties) is certainly an aspect of public diplomacy. But, critically, public diplomacy at the European level demands *reciprocation and listening* capacities. If the EU is to fully embrace ‘new public diplomacy’ these two facets must be fully deployed in order to exploit the full potential of its soft power.
A further longer-term challenge to EU public diplomacy has been the Member States themselves who have, to varying extents, ‘claimed credit for EU decisions that prove popular and to blame ‘Brussels’ for the unpopular ones’, with the result that many are ‘ill-informed about European issues and many have a negative image of the EU’ (Wallström 2007). National sensitivities can also be provoked by the inclusion of cultural aspects in European level public diplomacy (France, Germany and Spain all have close ties between foreign policy and cultural and linguistic promotion).

The EEAS and (new) public diplomacy

The emergence of the EEAS held the promise of linking strategic communication, public diplomacy and stakeholder engagement in ways that had not been possible before. This was certainly the potential that the first post-Lisbon High Representative, Lady Ashton, saw when she noted the need for a ‘professional communications structure in order to engage all stakeholders and public opinion. This is important within the EU as well as to the outside world’ (Ashton undated). Just as importantly, it held the promise of linking the external dimensions of internal policies to the outside world.

A second major structural change with profound implications for EU public diplomacy was the advent of 139 EU delegations, following the attribution of legal personality to the Union. This implied that the delegations could now speak on behalf of the EU on all aspects of external relations. It also meant that the delegations could now coordinate more easily with the local diplomatic representations of the EU Member States on a wide variety of issues. The virtual disappearance of the rotating Council Presidency from EU external relations also promised to enhance coherence in the EU’s external public diplomacy. In this context, the EU’s delegations now assumed this representative role. The addition of this substantial burden has not, however, been matched by additional resources or specialised training in public diplomacy or media relations for many of those assuming public diplomacy duties in the delegations.

Any judgement on the ability of the EU to move towards new public diplomacy must, of necessity, be tentative given the relative recentness of many of the major structural innovations of the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, a few factors are worth noting. The merging of the former roles of the High Representative, the Commissioner for External Relations and President of the General Affairs and External Relations Council under one triple-hatted High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), has proven to be a mixed blessing. The tendency of the ‘big three’
(including the Presidents of the European Council and the Commission, in addition to the HR/VP) to coordinate inadequately on a number of major issues (Egypt provides a striking example) results in redundancies and damages to the Union’s wider reputation. The tendency on the part of the HR/VP to produce huge numbers of statement and declarations (593 in 2011 alone) also poses a considerable challenge for the EU’s public diplomacy in terms of focus and priorities. In the absence of a clearer core message, the possibility of a Gresham’s law type effect taking hold cannot be ignored (i.e. bad messages drive out good).

The nominal ‘de-pillarisation’ of the EU introduced by the Lisbon Treaty might, on paper, suggest an improvement in the coordination of EU-wide public diplomacy. There has been some improvement with, in particular, closer coordination between the EEAS and the Commission’s DG Development. This cooperation, among other things, resulted in an important and helpful Information and Communication Handbook for EU Delegations which provides encouraging evidence of the need to produce more coherent messages for an external audience and, for the internal audience, demonstrate value for money (EEAS/DEVCO 2012). There is, however, still need to expand this model of cooperation more widely within the Commission, most notably DG Trade, and to other EU institutions and to take into account the intermestic aspects.

Considerable efforts have been made to enhance coordination of EU-level public diplomacy and that of the Member States. This is most notable in the delegations where regular consultation between the EU delegations and the local EU Member States diplomatic representation has increased information flows and coordination. While it is inevitable that Member States will follow independent courses from time to time, as Germany did over Libya, the costs of pursuing independent (public) diplomacy have become higher since the EU members all have temporarily assigned national diplomats working in the EEAS headquarters or delegations.

The emergence of the EEAS as the core coordination body and centre of geographical expertise in the Union obviously suggested that the Service would assume the primary role when it comes to coordinating and disseminating the key messages of EU external actions. The practice, thus far, has proven that expectations do not yet reflect reality. The first issue for the new Service was that the envisaged department for information and public diplomacy did not come into being. Instead the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI) was created which falls under the responsibility of the HR/VP but is administratively part of the Commission. Part of the FPI’s mandate relates to ‘public diplomacy and election observation’ which includes the budgetary aspects (most notably the EU delegations Information and Communication Budget). Thus, rather strangely, significant parts of the EEAS’s public diplomacy remain under the
Commission’s budgetary purview (and not within the CFSP budget) and are also divorced from key parts of the Service like Strategic Communications. Hopefully this situation will be addressed in the near future, as the EEAS Review (2013) already proposed to transfer some budgetary responsibilities in this domain to the HR/VP.

The inevitable focus on much of the post-Lisbon public diplomacy has been upon the structures and processes, but a potentially more troublesome hangover from the pre-Lisbon era is the overall lack of strategic direction of the EU in its global role and, therefore, certain ambivalence about the nature of its actorness on the international stage. This issue is not only an academic preoccupation but is also an increasingly urgent policy issue at the European and national levels as the EU considers how to secure its influence in a changing world (see European Global Strategy 2013). The challenge for the EU is that it is drowning in strategies (country, regional, continental and thematic) but it lacks a compelling sense of its global role which, in turn, would form the core message of the Union’s public diplomacy and engagement.

Finally, the growth of e-diplomacy also needs to be further investigated. This is still very much in its embryonic stages within the EEAS but it has rapidly become one of the features of ‘new’ public diplomacy. The EEAS, as well as DEVCO and TRADE, have all recognised the rising importance of social media and have accordingly established accounts (Facebook, Twitter and Flickr, for example), as has the HR/VP, the EEAS and most of the delegations. The potential for the intelligent use of e-diplomacy was made clear by the events that became known as the Arab Spring, where hundreds of thousands of young people were able to utilise social media to organise themselves and exchange real-time information across borders.

There are, however, two challenges to the continued emergence of e-diplomacy as a force in global affairs. The first relates to the need to ensure that social media is a two way process. The inevitable temptation in the early days of the EEAS was to use social media sites as primarily a one-way street, sometimes even duplicating existing websites. One-way media risks being ineffective or, worse still, perceived as propaganda. Social media also has its limitations in terms of the ability to present long or complex ideas. The second challenge lies in the simple fact that in many parts of the world, like sub-Saharan Africa, more people learn about the world around them by radio, notably through the rapid spread of community radio (see Duke 2013: 26).

The EEAS has certainly embraced elements of new diplomacy, at least in spirit if not deed. The EU employs primarily soft power instruments (although the harder aspects need careful coordination in terms of the Union’s overall public diplomacy) and is conscious of the need to address non-governmental actors.
The overall emphasis of the EEAS’s diplomacy is still geared towards government-to-government relations, in part because of the lack of resources and expertise. In this regard the influx of national diplomats into the Service could be a significant plus for public diplomacy.

The EEAS is also still in the throes of sloughing off its *infopolitik* legacy and moving towards a more normative model of diplomacy. The idea of the EU promoting normative values and principles is of course central to the Union’s (fuzzy) self-identity. Nevertheless, there is the danger that this will create a bifurcated form of diplomacy in Europe with the Member States promoting their first order interests (specifically prosperity and security) while the EU pursues an ethical agenda, or second-order interests (human rights, democracy promotion, the rule of law, tackling poverty etc) (Hyde Price 2008: 31-32). The EEAS should be at the core of helping ‘ethical Europe’ grow, whilst also providing a keen sense of strategic direction and interests. It is far from obvious that the EU has actually developed a convincing explanation of its role in the world, how this differs from the Member States and, thus, the nature of its actorness. These are the essential attributes of public diplomacy, quite aside from the new variant.

**Conclusions and policy recommendations**

It is key to remember that any conclusions are necessarily tentative, given the fluid situation of global politics as well as the relative immaturity of the EEAS (see Duke 2013: 35-37). Nevertheless, the following might be considered as suggestions for improving public diplomacy in EU external relations:

i) **Strategic elaboration**: Attempts to strive towards a coherent message, around which to build and refine public diplomacy, will be frustrated if the EU and the Member States lack a clear sense of the Union’s broad global role and the nature of its actorness:

ii) **Related dimensions**: Divisions between the internal and external aspects of EU policies are often arbitrary. In particular, the Union must be mindful of the presence of a self-reaffirming process between what is portrayed and practices internally and what is then exported externally as the Union’s power or attraction:

iii) **The end of infopolitik**: Public diplomacy is about engaging with primarily non-governmental groups and the construction of long-term and sustainable relationships. The EU should therefore continue to move away from public-diplomacy-as-information models towards more sustained dialogues that involve, among other things, active listening and engagement of non-governmental actors:
iv) **Coordination at the national and EU levels** The Member States bring a wealth of public diplomacy experience to the Union, especially to the EEAS. Existing efforts to promote joint public diplomacy strategies (like those with Brazil and Mexico) should be expanded, as should ways of benefitting from national experience.

v) **Adequate resources** Public diplomacy, as with any diplomacy, is difficult to do on the cheap. This means that a satisfactory balance has to be found between the exigencies of budgetary downsizing and the ambitions of public diplomacy. This includes not only budgets, but the provision of properly trained personnel to fill the posts.

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