



Integrating concepts of international governmental communication— A framework for further research

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on interdisciplinary concepts of strategic communication by nation states and governments directed at foreign publics. Although different concepts describing the field have developed independently, closer consideration reveals that they show many convergences. It is assumed that the differentiation of various concepts is rather a question of theoretical viewpoint but this hardly allows for a specification of the social phenomenon. The paper thus offers an *integrated* and *systematic* approach to international communication by integrating the different concepts of strategic governmental communication with international publics.

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1. Introduction

Indisputably, communication directed at foreign audiences has always been part of foreign affairs. But the *strategic* use of international communication by governments for political purpose dates back to the early 20th century when, in World War I, rival parties systematically took on communication for border crossing “professional image cultivation” (Melissen, 2007b, p. 4).³

Nowadays, nearly every act of foreign policy takes elements of strategic communication into account (Kunczik, 2009, p. 848): American President Kennedy’s well-known 1963 speech in Berlin, the widely media-attended underwater cabinet meeting of the Maldivian government held in 2009, bilateral exchange programs and international campaigns directed at foreign investment are merely some examples of the use of strategic communication by governments directed at foreign audiences.

Against this backdrop, the phenomenon has also been the focus of scientific consideration. Different disciplines have thus

developed their own approaches as to which propaganda, public diplomacy, public relations and nation branding are regarded as the four most important. Sound analysis of the concepts, however, reveals that it is the theoretical stance that marks the differences among the approaches, not empirically observable facts. To the contrary, the broad convergences allow for a sort of consolidation of concepts and an integration of approaches may be viewed as beneficial. Thus, the central objectives of this paper are to offer a systematic overview of the current state of the art of strategic international communication with foreign publics, and to develop a system of categories to comprehensively describe the field and offer a starting point for prospective research.

This contribution is an outcome of a larger research project by the author examining backgrounds, forms and effects of international communication by nation states in the course of foreign policy. Accordingly, the focus is put on *governmental* communication with foreign audiences. Nevertheless, the approach might also give a useful impulse for the consideration of other types of international communication (see Fährnich, 2013).

2. Interdisciplinary approaches – evolution and the current state of the field

As outlined above, different disciplines have offered alternate takes on strategic international communication. Whereas the concept of propaganda that evolved in the late 19th century in the field

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³ For the historical development of strategic communication see also Bentele (2012).

of mass psychology shows the longest tradition, political theory raised the concept of public diplomacy in the 1960s. From a communication science standpoint, the concept of public relations has been put forth to explain the phenomenon. Finally, marketing theory joined the field by introducing the concept of nation branding in the 1990s.

2.1. Propaganda

Its integral role in the field of international communication notwithstanding, propaganda is one of the oldest concepts dealing with the phenomenon of strategic communication. Derived from the Latin “propagare” (extend, enlarge), the Catholic Church appropriated the term in the so-called “Congratio de propaganda fide” in the 17th century to mark their proselytization activities. Over the course of the 19th century, the term was also adopted for political and economic contexts (see Bentele, 1999, 2007) and finally, the term “propaganda” was also introduced into science (see Bussemer, 2008).

Over the last century, the meaning and connotation of propaganda in social sciences has been constantly evolving. In the early 20th century, propaganda was regarded as a legitimate instrument of foreign affairs, as shown by various historical sources (for Germany, see Menz & Karo, 1926; Pfeiffer, 1917; for the US, see also Lee, 1935). Today, the term has taken on a rather negative connotation internationally, bringing to mind both national socialist and communist propaganda. Bentele (1999, p. 133) broadly describes propaganda as a type of systematically biased public communication. Propaganda is therefore used, more often than not, in the efficient pursuit of the communicators’ interests rather than the exploitation of true information (cf. Bussemer, 2008, p. 30).

Accordingly, the scientific consideration of *international* propaganda takes a rather critical perspective.

The American social scientist Martin (1971, 1958) was one of the first to look at international propaganda by governments. He defines propaganda as the “persuasive communicative act of a government directed at a foreign audience” (Martin, 1971, 62f.). His early work focuses on a critical discussion of the legal and diplomatic control of propaganda in the international system and comes to a rather skeptical conclusion that for propaganda, there is “little chance of being controlled or adjudicated at the international level” (Martin, 1958, p. 4). In his essay “Effective International Propaganda”, Martin (1971) differentiates between propaganda and “facilitative communication”. For him, a significant function of communication activities is to keep lines open and to maintain contacts for the day when they are needed for propaganda purposes (Martin, 1971, p. 62).

Kunczik (1990, 1997) also deals extensively with the international and manipulative communication by governments that he calls propaganda. For Kunczik, foreign propaganda focuses on the dissemination of positive images and, in this regard, the author also admits to a certain necessity of propaganda for smaller countries in order to influence their media image abroad. On the other hand, however, he sees a danger in powerful governments misusing propaganda to push their interests in the international arena (Kunczik, 1990, 1997).

As such, there is an ethical component inherent in the scope of propaganda research. Accordingly, for Melissen (2007b), propaganda has been rendered practically obsolete in contrast to other concepts of international communication, such as public diplomacy.

“A category such as propaganda simply cannot capture the contemporary diversity in relations between diplomatic prac-

tioners and increasingly assertive foreign publics.” (Melissen, 2007b, p. xx)

It thus is an empirical question whether this differentiation does reflect real developments.

A significant portion of propaganda literature focuses on case studies, of which governmental communication during war times is a central theme (Axelrod, 2009; Cull, 1995). Propaganda activities during the Cold War are also of great interest (for Western propaganda see Cull, 2008; Schumacher, 2000; for Eastern activities see Bussemer, 2003; Miller, 2004). Furthermore, certain propaganda instruments such as broadcasting and cinema (Hoffmann, 1993), as well as international events such as the Olympics which are analyzed in regard of underlying political interests (Morley, 2001), come under empirical consideration in the course of propaganda research efforts.

2.2. Public diplomacy

Developed in American political practice in the 1960s as an alternative to traditional diplomacy, the concept of *public diplomacy* has mainly been used in the fields of political science and international affairs (Melissen, 2007a, 2007b). A popular definition is offered by Tuch (1990), who describes public diplomacy as:

“a government’s process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented.” (Tuch, 1990, p. 3)

Nowadays, public diplomacy is an internationally established concept in both theory and practice. The concept of “soft power” in particular, introduced by American political scientist Joseph Nye, gave even more attention to public diplomacy: For Nye, a state’s reputation and image in the international arena can be viewed as an important source of power, next to military and economic strength; in this regard, communication with foreign audiences becomes vital to political actors.

A large volume of descriptive, practice-oriented and normatively arguing literature on public diplomacy exists, but fundamental theory is rather scant (Melissen, 2007a, p. xvii). In general, literature can be categorized as follows.

Austrian communication scientist Signitzer (see Signitzer, 1995, 1998, 2008; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992) made an important contribution to public diplomacy research and conceptualizing. At the core of his approach is the definition of different types of public diplomacy, namely, “hard” and “soft” types that can be distinguished according to their objectives, instruments, and short- vs. long-term-orientations (Signitzer, 2008). A comparable approach to categorizing public diplomacy is offered by Leonard, Stead, and Smewing (2002), who differentiate between reactive and proactive public diplomacy and relationship building, which, again, are characterized by a certain time orientation and specific instruments. Melissen (2007a, 2007b) proposes a rethinking of public diplomacy that he marks with the term “new public diplomacy,” since objectives, actors and measures are changing against the backdrop of global political and societal developments. Yun and Toth (2009) put forth a comprehensive approach based in the field of international relations theory.

As is the case with the field of propaganda research, a significant portion of public diplomacy literature can be found in the form of empirical case studies. Whereas several works focus on the activities of certain states, especially the USA, but also others (see Cull, 2008; Fisher, 2009; Pratkanis, 2009; Zöllner, 2009), several authors focus on more specific aspects of public diplomacy, such as the actors (Hocking, 2007; Wang, 2005), the role of mass media (see Gilboa, 2001, 2009, 2002) and the instruments (Scott-Smith, 2009; Zaharna, 2009). Finally, ethical aspects are also under consideration (see Nelson & Izadi, 2009; Seib, 2009).

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