

# Propaganda and Public Diplomacy: the Problem of Differentiation

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*Abstract – The objective of this research is to identify the place of propaganda in state’s foreign policy. For this differences between propaganda and public diplomacy are distinguished, and approaches to public diplomacy analyzed. The issues of public diplomacy transformation and the role of propaganda in the information age are of special interest in this context.*

Key words – public diplomacy, propaganda, soft power, foreign policy, information influence.

## I. Introduction

Since the first practices of public diplomacy it has often been compared and identified with propaganda. Even now the differences between the concepts of “public diplomacy” and “propaganda” are not apparent to some researchers. So, our task is to clear up the place of propaganda activity in the complex set of activities constituting the public diplomacy in today’s international relations.

## II. Defining propaganda

As a result of hostile information campaigns in the past, a completely neutral term as propaganda was, gained a lot of negative connotations in the public consciousness and political discourse. Aggressive propaganda was widely used in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in all forms of public expression and was one of the fundamentals of totalitarian regimes.

Common practice of defining ‘our’ activity as public diplomacy and information campaigns and the activity of the opposite side as hostile propaganda is not based on reasonable arguments and has itself features of propaganda. For example, Rhonda Zaharna says that “Americans appear to label political messages as ‘propaganda’ or ‘public diplomacy’ not based on the actual content or its technical features, but rather the source of political messages”. This practice has the roots in the past when the differences between propaganda and public diplomacy were not so clear. But today this “tendency to define propaganda in terms of its source rather than its content or technical features is perhaps why the debate over public diplomacy and propaganda continues” [1].

Different common definitions of propaganda as well as definitions in political science allow us to distinguish the main characteristics of this phenomenon. First of all, it deals with manipulation of information, can encompass disinformation mixed with truth. Secondly, propaganda is aimed at presenting arguments selectively. Besides, it has one-sided influence on the target audience and very often

is related to manipulations, puts on display some of the facts and hides the others. Also propaganda tries to divert attention from other sources and to form one-sided position.

There are different types of propaganda. Black propaganda does not come from the source it claims to come from. Its aims, identity, significance, and sources are hidden. The source of grey propaganda is not identified, and in white propaganda the real source is declared.

## III. Approaches to public diplomacy

Public diplomacy is a government’s effort to reach out to the public in foreign countries [2]. Criticism of public diplomacy concept includes positions according to which public diplomacy is “the modernized version of white propaganda which is aimed at influencing public opinion”. It is “just a euphemism for propaganda, because governments who carry out propaganda cannot call it propaganda, because of its associations with something negative, evil and lies” [3].

We cannot agree with this point of view. First of all, the goals of public diplomacy include increasing understanding of country’s values, policy, and culture, creating positive image of the country, building stable relations of trust and confidence among nations. Although it can encompass short term goals, the long-term activity prevails in effective public diplomacy strategy. In contemporary world, we can not expect that our information will be the only one or the most influential for the audience. Therefore, eventually information policy based on manipulations and propaganda will show its weaknesses and can even have the opposite of the desired effect.

TABLE 1

SUB-TRAITS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY MATRIX [4]

	Advocacy Model		Advisory Model
	Information	Influence	Engagement
Communication Style	Transparent	Propagandistic	Transparent
Time-frame	Long-term/ Short-term	Long-term/ Short-term	Long-term
Posture Orientation	Reactive/ Proactive	Proactive	Reactive/ Proactive

John Robert Kelly distinguishes three models of public diplomacy (Table 1) that are concerned with the three main approaches - information, influence, or engagement of the audience. The propagandistic communication style is characteristic of the second one – called influence. According to Kelly, influence is “distinguished by its aggressive nature in steering target audiences toward a certain opinion” and “ranges from gentler forms of persuasion to the manipulation of facts or other intentions to mislead”[4]. It functions optimally within short- or long-term timeframes and often such propaganda is used as a part of psychological dimensions of wars. However,

in peaceful times it puts the country at the great risk of losing credibility and worsening its image.

Thus, propaganda is used by many countries as a part of their foreign information policy. However, some important public diplomacy instruments, such as cultural exchanges, educational programs, are weakly consistent with propaganda. These examples show to us the truth of Jan Melissen statement that “public diplomacy is a two-way street, it is similar to propaganda in the sense of trying to persuade people what to think, however the main difference is that public diplomacy also listens to what people have to say, which is not the case with propaganda” [5].

#### IV. Propaganda and public diplomacy in the information age

In the current global information age a category such as propaganda is too narrow for foreign information policy and according to Melissen it “cannot capture the contemporary diversity in relations between diplomatic practitioners and increasingly assertive foreign publics”. In addition, propaganda neither points to the concept of diplomacy, nor does generally view communication with foreign publics in the context of changes in contemporary diplomacy [5]. These changes include the formation of the so-called new public diplomacy, for which an engagement of audiences and creating social networks between societies are the main priorities. Joseph S. Nye says that “in this approach to public diplomacy, government policy is aimed at promoting and participating in, rather than controlling, such cross-border networks”. Moreover, “too much government control, or even the appearance of it, can undercut the credibility that such networks are designed to engender” [6].

For the last decades the use of the Internet for political purposes has grown dramatically. The social media revolution reduces the effectiveness of traditional means of influence such as propaganda. According to Nabil Ayad, today we have to do with “‘virality’ of information”. It is released through social media as it is occurring and “therefore, institutions and politicians do not have time to gather data and ponder what public ‘spin’ to release” [7]. So, using the Internet and social media for public diplomacy purposes becomes new challenge for the governments. In this line Jennifer Charlton from the Consulate General of Switzerland in New York says that “determining the appropriate digital channels for your foreign ministry requires understanding the current environment and the needs of your citizens and the host country. It also requires a clear vision to set goals and guidelines” [8].

There is also a dark side of this story. With the advent of the Internet the governments received unprecedented tools for black propaganda and information warfare. Using of these tools accompanies most of the international conflicts in the 21st century.

#### Conclusion

In today's world propaganda is not the most effective tool of foreign policy, especially in democracies. To some extent it can be justified in the case of serious threats, warfares, as a part of soft power, combined with the hard one. However, the effectiveness of propaganda strategy is more likely short-term and can cause unexpected results. Public diplomacy is more adequate evolving concept which responds to the current challenges and offers new ways to international understanding and cooperation.

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