A Political Communication Theoretical Perspective of Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy

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There is a natural fit of political communication theory and public diplomacy practice due to the fact that political communication research and practice has always dealt with influence and persuasion about political subjects. Any visceral reaction against using campaign communication in strategic communication (SC) or public diplomacy (PD) is a confusion of one type of political communication with all other types. There are many others forms, all of which constitute some type of political persuasion. Political communication ranges from studies that help practitioners become more effective persuader to critical studies that expose ethics problems, power issues, and propagandistic aspects of influence. Political communication theories are constructed from decades of research concerning the connections of messages, cognitive and affective responses to those messages, networks of interpretation and influence, and consequent actions. In general, political communication research has four general concerns (Denton & Woodward, 1998).

These are how resources are allocated by government for various social needs; providing means for consent to be given by the governed; control of actions deemed threats; and helping citizens understand political culture, values, and issues. A huge part of political communication is what some in strategic communication call perception management. In other words, communicators learn how to manage the impression they make on others in ways that maximize their chances for acceptance or election.

Despite all of this, studies have shown that the United States government (USG) has very little connection to communication theories in the practice of public diplomacy. Many trees have been felled to accommodate report and report noting recurring failure with public diplomacy such as a) say-do gaps, b) not recognizing the symbolic force of actions and policies; c) not knowing or working with the fact that actions that contradict claims are believed more than the claims; d) low levels of sociocultural knowledge and intelligence to support discourse; e) over-reliance on one-dimensional views of political identity such as narratives or branding; and a paucity of systems thinking in relating various processes of message design, targeting, and assessment of effects.

It is necessary to address the reasons for these disconnects, argue for an application of political communication, and present some methodological directions for better public diplomacy effects measurement. At the risk of making one more critical argument that gets thrown into the pile of articles, reports and books on this subject that are interesting but not quite all that useful, some thoughts are offered here for some paradigm shifts in strategic communication and public diplomacy.

Reasons for the Lack of Theory

If one believes that PD is simply new propaganda, the claims about there being a lack
of theory may not make sense. If however, one looks at PD as something possibly post-propaganda or communication that may be done in conjunction with propaganda, the lack of theory claim is important. This does not mean that theories are not employed from sources like public relations, marketing, and communication, but rather that there are not specific PD theories are this time that are widely accepted or employed. New developments in communication technologies such as social media usages suffer from the same paucity of theory. In such cases, the solution appears to be more basic empirical study followed by hypothesis testing and theory construction.

As noted in the title of this panel, public diplomacy is a field involving disciplines that range from communication studies, international relations, rhetoric, political, and various governmental areas like military, State Department, and intelligence agencies. To create a new field like this, it is necessary to not privilege one discipline over the others but to see how each one contributes knowledge and theory to the overall PD field.

While ostensibly unexplainable, there are historical reasons why political communication theories have not been utilized in public diplomacy. One reason is that the latter is seldom taught in political communication programs and political communication scholars are seldom involve in public diplomacy research. Instead, international relations, political science, and military theorists appear to be more involved.

The consequences of a SC or PD lacking theoretical ground are found in dozens of reports which indicate that much USG attempted persuasion falls far short of anticipated goals.

Recently on a LinkedIn debate, numerous arguments were made about public diplomacy or strategic communication improving with new language. Many of the proponents of new language work for military services. Controversy abounds and the new proposed terminology was little more than putting old wine in new bottles. Have we not been through this before?

On the other hand, more critical thinking about public diplomacy appears necessary. Even concepts, so long a part of our parlance, such as soft power, should be interrogated.

In the LinkedIn debating, experts in strategic communication, mainly in the U. S. military, have search for a term to replace “strategic communication” in hope of finding more effect message strategies in doing so. The arguments pose the necessity of something more focused such as “synchronous communication.” I believe that waiting for the perfect terms for strategic political influence is akin to waiting for Godot. Those terms are chimerical. The real issues are about cultural analysis, messages that are persuasive and resonant, and methods for tracking and adjusting message effects. In other words, the best search is not for new labels, but rather for new wine.

A Political Communication Perspective

While there are many uninformed views of political images in both the studies of campaigns and in studies of public diplomacy, there are many empirical and logical reasons to believe that the construct of political image has been very useful in both domains. On the other hand, the concept of candidate images in political communication, like the concept of national image in strategic communication, have had to be supplemented by other theoretical concepts and processes of political messaging and cognition in order to link audience perceptions to source messages. It is absurd to say that one concept in political communication like candidate image does not explain campaigns. It is not intended to. Concepts need to be used at specific levels of analysis and evaluated at those levels of analysis.

Candidate images are related to agenda setting at macro, meso, and micro levels of social interaction and to framing processes at
both cognitive and sociological levels. Thus, the constructs must relevant to political communication, such as political images and frames, are sociocognitive in nature and cannot be explained by either purely macro-level (rhetoric, narratives, etc.) or micro-level (images, schemata, attitudes, cognitive representations, cognitive frames, etc.)

Political science reveals that cognitive representations of political candidates, known as candidate images, are closely related to how voters evaluate people running for office and how they differentiate them (Flanigan & Zingale, 2010; Hacker, 2004, 2008). Identity creation, image shaping, branding, and political marketing did not start in recent times but have ancient origins (Melissen, 2007). The so-called “winning hearts and minds” goal can be found to stem back to Plato drawing distinctions between (felling) heard and thinking (mind) in 54 battle for heart and minds in the 4th century B.C. More importantly, in 1818 John Adams wrote about the war of independence being the “hearts and minds of the people.” (Dickinson, 2009).

Foreign perceptions are very important, but recent scholarship for more. There are calls for better relationship building, stronger networking, and more collaboration. One might wonder what they have to do with political communication. The simple answer is that they have always been part political communication. This fact can be dwarfed by the emphasis placed on election campaigns.

Framing Theory and Public Diplomacy

One of the most useful theories in the field of political communication if framing theory. Framing theory explains how speakers or writers use language and/or imagery to shape interpretations of issues or entities (people, nations, policies, leaders). Political persuaders use framing to select priorities as realities are explained (Azpiroz, 2012).

Framing theory is also known as second-order Agenda-Setting Theory. Agenda setting involves public issues being set by media-narrated issues. Today, we know that agenda involves both old and new media. Framing goes beyond knowing what stories are important to what attributes characterize the people or events being discussed.

Framing Theory and candidate image theory can be used to summarize the fact that national images are perceptual. However, as with politics, image or mental models are not
enough. People also judge leadership, partnership, and actions.

A sociocognitive model of PD might describe the interactions of actions, partnerships, and images. The key goal is not national images alone but more importantly, the development of cultural relationships.

Relational models of PD are strong challenge to the information models of the past and of the present status quo.

I argue that the best goal on the horizon is a paradigm shift for public diplomacy away from propaganda and one-dimensional models and toward policy networking and architectures of bi-national and multinational cooperation My argument is grounded in a belief that present and past public diplomacy has been more zero-

sum based than win-win based in relation to the strategic part of strategic communication.

Toward Some New Metrics

Political communication metrics can be applied to SC and PD with some reservations that take into the account the difference between campaign communication, governmental communication with domestic audiences only, and the external audience targeting of SC and PD.

The basic starting points for political communication campaign are awareness, cognitions, learning, and attitude change. Next come image building and social identity building. Third, networks of influence are used for message diffusion and interpersonal persuasion. Finally, analytics tools are employ for two purposes: first, for overall campaign message effectiveness tracking, and second, for direction behavioral change linked to changing message tactics.

New tools of message tracking can be employed to measure how well SC and PD message are moving perceptions as evidence in discourse. Automated discourse analysis techniques can be used to track narratives, stories, and patterns of language use.

Some Ending Critical Questions

1. What is the difference between framing and branding and do this actually help American public diplomacy?
2. Why is the most workable balance of strategic communication and public diplomacy some mix of cultural relations, information operations, and foreign exchanges?
3. How can a nation like the U.S. balance its bilateral relations interests with its efforts to fit into the new directions of international relations?
4. How is public diplomacy integrated into foreign policy and international relations strategies today?
5. What substantive progress has been made with public diplomacy over the past few years?
6. Why is communication so lacking the development of public diplomacy?
7. Are politicians increasing their recognition of the importance of public diplomacy?
8. Are we still trying to market poor policies with elaborate communication strategies?
9. Why does cultural diplomacy still take a backseat to broadcasting?

While there are many cases to compare or contrast PD of any nation to, China and the United States and China presently engaged in a competition for soft power.

In trying to communicate with or about China, it is first necessary to understand China, it history, its culture and its national interests. While this may been like common sense, it may not be commonly done because China is so culturally complex and opaque in terms of its political aspirations.

David Lynch (2013) implies that from a discourse analysis point of view, one hypothesis about China might be:

H1: If China discusses its culture in terms of international values, norms, and symbols structures, it is likely to be more interested in zones of cooperation than zones of competition.

H2: If China commonly talks about international events in adversarial terms, is may be more interested in zones of competition.

One continuous research question is whether culture leads to security policies or whether there are more complex relationships between culture and policies. An alternative view is that political policies produce cultural changes. This brings about the interesting concept of cultural securitization.

Through discourse analysis, you can find uses of particular language and frames, but also ways of thinking about conflicts and national security. Lynch (2013) found the following in his analysis of Chinese leadership discourse:

1. China is locked into a competition with the U.S. in military, economic, and cultural terms.
2. China must work to shape perceptions of its culture both at home and in other nations.
3. Its PD must address the nature of its rising power. Removing suspicions will allow its expansion of power to be greater.
4. It must increase its soft power in a competition of soft power. We might ask if this approach sees soft power as an end or a means toward more totalizing power.
5. Within international culture, there are conflicting value systems.
6. China had about ⅓ of the soft power of the U.S. in 2008 but that number is continuously increasing.
7. Three components can be used to calculate soft power: international attractiveness, international mobilization capacity, and domestic mobilization capacity.
8. Since 2005, China has been promoting the harmonious world concept.
10. China refers to America as a hegemon that wants to choke it.
11. They equate cultural security with national security.
12. The Chinese seek to promote what they call the national spirit. Through music, art, literature, etc. the national spirit strengthens the nation-states.
13. An internal/psychological rise in Chinese citizens will be related to the rise of the nation-state. Is this a new Hegelianism? National spirit is talked about as a centripetal psychological force that unifies people into the national will.

14. A nation willing to contend with others can stand in the ranks of other nations.

15. The Chinese worry about cultural penetration by other societies with bad ideas like Valentine’s Day.

16. There are four key strategies for Chinese soft power development:
   a. Use communication to help citizens that more than economic development is needed. Cultural power can consolidate military and economic power.
   b. China can be a Golden Mean nation that is flexible in relations with others to suit its national security interests.
   c. China should increase its networking with beneficial nations.
   d. China should move to frame itself as higher in domestic fairness and justice than the United States.

One possible lessons to learn from the study of China is that the “neibu” side of a nation’s political culture and strategic culture should inform what types of engagement are entered and what types of communication are attempted.

Some Elephants on the Couch
Playing language games or rhetoric of rhetoric games or endless questioning the nature of values or persuasion will not solve the problems how nations should conduct public diplomacy. Some sticky-wicket questions follow:

1. Is propaganda really gone for simply re-formatted as new forms for PD?
2. When will the red-haired stepchild known as Information operations (IO) be recognized as alive and expanding and related to PD even if indirectly?
3. Is the USG paying lip service to soft power and PD while relying heavily on old power tactics?
4. Are old style power political and exploitation of other nations and cultures possible with new enlightened forms of PD?
5. Is there an element of Orientalism in American PD today or have moved into an age of cultural knowledge, respect and goals of cultural cooperation?
6. Are there some ideological components of American political culture that will continue to work against new public diplomacy such as American Exceptionalism?

Izadi (2009) presents a strongly critical view of PD which can frame the endeavor as new propaganda rather than new public diplomacy. In his analysis, PD continues to serve the interests of American imperialism although the appearance of PD is made more enticing with concepts like soft power. We need to address these kinds of concerns and our levels of critical thinking as high as possible.

Ideals of a New PD Field
A new field of public diplomacy can make substantial contributions to ne thinking about political persuasion, foreign policy, world relations, and the role of nations in a changing world. This is not overly idealistic or Utopian but rather very realistic and ethical. Nations can use PD to generate more cultural networking and more collaborative forms of policy making or what one scholars calls policy networks.

It is probably time now to include practitioners with academics in future
discussions like this. It is also time to have an international presence on panels like this. Finally, future efforts should include having members of stove piped organizations discuss these matters together in order to identify common concerns and goals.

In terms of framing, I would like to advocate an interactive framing process in which political actors work together to produce meanings rather than meeting together to argue the meanings already formed on both sides. With interactive framing, nations can learn more about their legitimate national interests and national security concerns. They might also be able to communicate in a discovery process rather than communication competition process.

A Unified Model of Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy

Source:

There are three at least models for change now in play: the military recommendations, the White House doctrine, and the Clinton DOS arguments. Some of the military practitioner arguments say that we need to jettison the word “strategic communication and replaced with a term like “coordinated communication.”

The White House doctrine presents a rational and systematic view of PD that is consistent with what many communication researchers have been arguing over the years. The specific balances among components are never specified, however. This allows a sustained propaganda-based SC and PD.

The Clinton DOS arguments depart from the other two in substantial ways. It appears to seek a diminishing role for the DOD in defining SC and other communication terminology related to PD. It also moves toward a more active role for the USAID in public diplomacy.
Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage described diplomacy as “saying ‘Nice doggy, nice doggy’ until you can find a stick.” We are fortunate to have moved far beyond such absurd thinking. Now we need to chart a course that links the disparate disciplines that can make a PD field. Cross-disciplinary research along these lines could be very useful. Eventually, some theories will emerge in this exciting field.

References:


