

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND INTELLIGENCE – A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO A SENSITIVE INTERCROSSING

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Abstract

The approach assumed by this research study concerns namely the praxeological side of public diplomacy, found at the confluence with elements of state power, more specifically with those features characteristic to the Intelligence activity. The conceptual precariousness characterizing the field, both as an academic discipline and an effective instrument of power, is highly emphasized. Thus, the operational contextualization of public diplomacy, an approach enabled by emphasizing the role of information and by synthesizing a perspective specific to the Intelligence area, is an objective to be looked for. As a result, a comparative analysis is done between these two dimensions, with a focus on the fact that they are not completely separated, and there can be many common aspects, some of them transiting from one side to another.

Keywords: public diplomacy, intelligence, contextualization, comparative analysis, ethics

The precariousness of the conceptual umbrella

First steps. Public diplomacy is in its early development period, both as a study field and an academic research, as well as an effective power instrument (Hayden, 2013). However, it is worth mentioning that unlike those who acquire a structured knowledge of this domain, for practitioners, such an aspect does not represent a major drawback, for they are not concerned with theory, or for those interested in a brief perspective only about this new star in the field of diplomacy studies (Melissen, October 2011, p. 2). If we are to consider both dimensions, however, some states, among which the United States of America, are significantly more advanced in this respect than Romania, where it is only within the last few years that for of public diplomacy began to be organized (e.g. FEDP), scholars started writing on the subject (Dima, 2013), or initiatives to develop such field research within university

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departments were launched. All these examples are early steps, yet very necessary and well-timed for our country. Until recently, and this is not something happening in Romania only, public diplomacy was characterized by precise and episodic mutual commitments, various institutional “shortcuts” and “caprices”, and, especially, the excessive dependency on the rather unintentional affinities and skills of some decision makers.

The need for an authentic vision. The fragile status of public diplomacy, both as a study discipline and an institutional practice, is highly contrasting with the major expectations regarding its use in managing nowadays challenges. This happens in a context where it has become obvious that neither geography, nor military capabilities can fully justify or cover the security needs. However though, for public diplomacy to be considered a true action tool in the hands of the state, and not just a simple label used for promotion and image reasons, a set of various conditions should be simultaneously accomplished:

- 1) mapping and encouraging connections among various types of diplomacy, such as public, military, intelligence *diplomacies*;
- 2) ensuring not only the superficial coordination at top levels of power hierarchies, but an integrated strategic orientation;
- 3) encouraging the implication and creativity of the private sector;
- 4) enabling a minimum institutionalization for the entire range of activities;

The fact that among different state structures, as well as at various decision making levels discussions on public diplomacy have become a clear trend is something obvious, however though these “institutional actors” are not very successful in reaching a common or, at least, convergent understanding on this subject. For instance, some actors use public diplomacy strategies to support their policies (CIR, 2001, concerning the war against terror; Gilboa & Muntean, 2014, the relation with the diaspora, etc.); others advocate that a reform of public diplomacy is a necessary thing (Miculescu, 2005), or express their belief that performances of different structures and specialized policies should be measured (CPD, 2010). Moreover, another category is lobbying for sets of priorities – as they call their initiatives – to be implemented through means of public diplomacy. Finally, a few of them argue in favour of a comprehensive communication strategy that would support the values and interests specific to national security.

Elementary questions. This whole mosaic and the relatively disordered variety of approaches indicate that any state intending to use public diplomacy must first answer in a coherent way to some basic questions:

- 1) Which are the actors and institutions of public diplomacy?
- 2) How should their efforts be integrated and focused?
- 3) What means, in operational terms, to be open to the world without compromising security?
- 4) How should we deal with annoying propaganda campaigns?
- 5) How should we move from awareness to appropriate action means?
- 6) What priorities are most relevant in the context of current threats and opportunities?

As we can clearly see, the term “public diplomacy” is now part of a global conversation, become relatively polyphonic after a period of use and dispute among experts. Moreover, it seems to be an umbrella concept for strategic communications, public affairs, international broadcasting, open operations etc. And often, it is difficult to separate them from an analytical point of view: if, for example, a military commander made a press statement circulated by global media, what should this be considered as? Public diplomacy, military diplomacy, international business or the communication of domestic military intelligence operation? Branding, propaganda and perception management? Obviously, in such circumstances, the “name” is part of the struggle to “make sense”, that sense that each side is looking for. Naming and labeling do more than simply describing something: they judge and propose valuable insights, establish semantic fields, propose bridges or demarcation lines.

Cross-contextualization

The role of information. Information remains the strategic resource of greatest value in the field of international relations (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2006), an environment shaped by the actors’ understanding and action capacity. However though, the technological evolution and emergency of social networks has deeply changed the speed and the way in which information moves and is consumed. A century ago, a diplomat was allowed to prepare an answer to an action or request within days or weeks. The “closed doors” diplomacy was considered the normal practice, and information leaks

were rare. There were no video cameras to constantly monitor and allow the assessment of the diplomat's acting.

Nowadays, diplomacy is operating in a radically different environment: although interaction between states is still marked by a minimum code of confidentiality, it is not secret in itself anymore. Modern diplomacy also includes the public dimension (Barston, 2014, p. 1), and what happens in various parts of the world can rapidly become a matter of public/national interest, knowing that most of these situations should be managed through specific means of public diplomacy.

The operational perspective. A quick example regarding the "consumption" of information if terrorist attacks were to happen is that "democratic countries should cut the terrorists' oxygen consisting in the publicity they rely on" (Thatcher, 1985). This means two things: 1) the media is highly important in each terrorist attack; 2) the role that public diplomacy has in preventing and countering the terrorist phenomenon in the short and long run. Basically, beyond the deaths and material losses determined by such an attack, the only long run/significant impact that terrorism would have would be in relation to the society's response; in other words, risk aversion connected to alarming reactions leading to public fear can feed terrorism or, in some cases, even generate it.

If we choose an approach consisting in the praxeology specific to the Intelligence field, it becomes obvious that public diplomacy represents a working tool, something difficult to imagine some time ago. Of course, there are convincing reasons to support the need for "backstage" or "behind the scene" diplomatic negotiations, just as Kissinger (1998, p. 484) was showing in his example of the peace negotiations between the USA and North Vietnam, 1970-1972, when channels for secret dialogue played a key role.

Generally speaking, the actors of this process cannot conduct their activity in complete secrecy, fully separated by the close look of many categories of interested public (partners, beneficiaries, speakers etc.). Moreover, "homeland" audience is much more connected to various precise aspects of both domestic and external affairs, pushing therefore towards a bigger transparency and accountability of its representatives, irrespective of diplomatic or security assignments formally invested. This also involves an ethical dimension in order to avoid that the interaction of the two domains lead to a form of manipulating intrusions in any way – both being equally possible (Pinkus, 2014).

Public diplomacy allows a more normal evolution in an environment marked by the omnipresence of media, yet, at the same time, it also claims the exercise of interaction skills, the achievement of new professional skills, the learning of new communication techniques and the ability to give a quick answer to a working environment continuously changing.

A comparison between intelligence and public diplomacy

In this context, the natural question about the role of secret services within the field of public diplomacy takes shape. To answer such a dilemma, a comparison between intelligence and public diplomacy, first as study disciplines and then as aspects of power, can be of great help.

The missing dimension. *The missing dimension* (Andrew & Dilks, 1984, a publication already considered part of the history of intelligence studies) presents a series of reasons about why historians were not able to observe the way and significant measure in which the secret dimension, meaning the intelligence activity, shaped the 20th century policies. Similarly, it is my belief that there are enough arguments to consider public diplomacy and its related activities as another “missing dimension”.

On the one hand, this observation seems normal: it is simply difficult to understand the level and the role played by these activities in the last century, every time the comprehensive ambition is not satisfied with considering only established, formal benchmarks of classical diplomacy. On the other hand, this debate can continue: unlike historians specialized in the Intelligence activity, who can draw a map of the process, and make the necessary connections with the strategic decisions and actions, if we want to assess the impact that public diplomacy has, we will find the approach much more difficult. Often, direct causal relations are missing, leaving room to a large margin of subjective judgement. Nevertheless, the effort should not be considered useless or irrelevant.

The mechanism metaphor. The state apparatus, namely after the Second World War, meant more people and institutions/organizations in more and more places. In the intelligence field, the focus was not on working with some high class agents, but on the “industrialization” process of collecting the information, followed by the organization and knowledge management (Herman, 1996), with the development of procedures for the so-called INTs (SIGINT IMINT, HUMINT etc.), the monitoring of branches of scientific literature, or the management of complex operations etc. Diplomacy knew has known a similar evolution, towards a mechanism of different “complexes” of foreign policy (Hook, 2014), characterised by an increasing

number of international connections. In this sense, we can say that the ministers of foreign affairs will keep competing more and more with other actors, among which the armed forces, the intelligence services, the direct relationships and personal skills of senior civil servants or even anonymous players from outside “the mechanism”, but who are provided with of a smartphone and find themselves in the right place and at the right moment. All these aspects are clear indicators of the exponential increase in complexity that characterises the diplomatic environment nowadays.

Decision versus effects. Both intelligence and diplomacy offer a graduated perspective of the state. If the traditional discourse about diplomacy is focused on decisions of foreign affairs policy taken by national leaders, the study of intelligence is rooted in the fact that those decisions are based on informational products shaped by complex networks of collecting, processing and disseminating information. There are many intelligence studies approaching problems such as failure, internal vulnerabilities or action motivation. In contrast, public diplomacy is less interested in the process of decision making, being mostly concerned by the *output*, the effects, however, it also deals with complex networks that try to shape the environments in which the state evolves and acts.

The emphasis given to products/effects of foreign policy reduces the attention traditionally offered to decision as a key element of diplomacy and of the state as a unitary actor. This is one of the reasons why a greater attention should be given to actor-network theories and to the way in which they are relevant for modern diplomacy (Gstohl, 2012). From such a perspective, even the strongest traditional instruments of diplomacy seem to be structurally inadequate to answer the increasingly large set of actors, requests and challenges.

Limits of open sources. Most frequently, when the relation with groups or societies relatively closed or opaque (such as Iran or North Korea) has to be dealt with, the intelligence products are an essential element: event for the simplest act of communication, it is extremely necessary to know to who you are talking, to have common subjects of interests although perspectives can diverge. Then, when also considering the relation with open states/societies, should that be on diverging matters or competitive interests, the level of public knowledge (TV, internet) about them can be quite poor and lacking structure, which means that intelligence can become an important reference to understand and choose various approaches. As a decision maker, you cannot always have a timely and accurate information by simply watching the news on TV.

How perceptions are influenced. The more delicate issue regarding the question of how to influence the perceptions of a wider audience or of personalities through key actions that are more or less discrete, cannot be avoided. It has been extensively approached by the literature dedicated to the large public, often included in articles addressing Aristotles' persuasive rhetoric in the 4th century BC, or the persuasion dynamics in the 21st century described by Perloff (2003). By focusing, however, on the perspective given by analytical pragmatism, it would be very useful if we stopped thinking in terms of the overt-covert dichotomy, and rather accept a continuum between 100% open ("message X was transmitted by government Y means") and the full range of variations from "sensitive" to "discrete but unclassified" and up to "top secret."

It is well known that even some news, in democratic societies, come from sources that are only partially open. The sentence "a close source of Minister X" is often used to avoid saying that there was an information leakage, sometimes deliberate, sometimes not, thereafter turned into news. Standard typology of propaganda – white-gray-black – can also be applied to identify sources, and common sense and wisdom of the classics (Plato's argument related to the myth of Gyges) shows that the degree of disclosure of sources is often proportional to their veracity. However, although it is reasonable to believe that a "black" source is more likely to misinform than a "white" source, it does not necessarily mean that the data provided by the former is false.

The main idea is that just like Intelligence officers, actors of public diplomacy must to assess their action environment from a variety of perspectives, sometimes by using methods borrowed from the Intelligence field.

Conclusions

The two dimensions are not brutally separated and there can be many similar aspects, some of them even transiting from one side to the other. For example, there are cases where the path of classical diplomacy is open to discrete channels of intelligence diplomacy, while others required that certain segments of public negotiation be moved backstage to avoid the pressure of the "open stage game" that can reduce the actors' flexibility to engage in a dialogue. At this point, practitioners of authentic intelligence diplomacy converge in considering that one of the important rules linking public negotiations and discrete initiatives consists in making sure that what is said behind the scenes is similar to what is assumed in public – meaning that the assessments and secret commitments must be consistent with and backed by

signals transmitted in public. Otherwise, beyond the obvious moral issue and the risk of depreciation, it can also produce confusion about the real intentions and options.

Least but not last, it is necessary to show an ethical conduct designed to prevent and counter the risk (such as that of manipulation, distortion or politicization of the intelligence activity conducted for purposes of public diplomacy). The lack of ethical dimensions can damage the consistency and coherency of the decision making process, and, in addition, might lead to the reduction or even the loss of public confidence – a central element both for the intelligence activity and public diplomacy. Furthermore, a close reflection is needed, consisting of how intelligence diplomacy will evolve in the future, the changes that are still needed in both areas, as well as the strategies by which one can serve the purposes of the other without breaching ethical boundaries and damage the trust they are given by both the state and especially the citizen.

In this moment, comparative studies are still insufficiently treasured. However, given that research of public diplomacy is still developing, such questioning at the intersection of knowledge and action can be useful, providing the driving force of further developments.

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