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Social Media Engagement & Listening:

Core Components for Strategic Public Diplomacy

Nestor Tyrovouzis

PhD candidate for the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Since its conception, public diplomacy has been about communicating with foreign publics in order to achieve foreign policy goals. Until the end of the Cold War, this meant governments using the traditional media to push down information to foreign publics to influence them and subsequently their governments. Near the turn of the 21st century, geopolitical shifts, the spread of democracy, the rise of global NGOs and especially the emergence of new communication technologies, such as the internet and the social media, have forced a new public diplomacy model based on relationship building, engagement and active listening. To cope with the new challenging international environment, governments need to adopt new strategies for planning, implementing and evaluating their public diplomacy campaigns to optimize their effectiveness. With social media becoming a dominant public interaction platform, providing a wide range of monitoring and analytical tools, we identify Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening as two central components of a strategic approach to public diplomacy which can enhance its scope and effectiveness.

Keywords: *Strategic communication, Public Diplomacy, Engagement, Listening, social media.*

Introduction

For the last three decades, due to changes in communication technologies and the trend of democratization following the outcome of the Cold War, public diplomacy has been suspended between the concepts of short-term political information, with the purpose of exerting influence on attitudes of foreign audiences, and long-term relationship building, based on dialogue and mutual understanding. The first concept favors a strategic approach to public diplomacy with persuasion, targeted audiences, opinion research, media relations

and policy advocacy as key components, while the latter, more contemporary model, has been focusing on dialogue, mutual understanding and convergence.

As public diplomacy becomes an integral and substantive part of the policymaking process and a significant factor in the foreign policies of many states (Melissen, 2005; Gregory, 2005; Mor, 2006; Pamment, 2013), and with governments investing considerably in it- in some cases exceeding $2.4 billion (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2023), PD officials come under increasing pressure to improve their policies' effectiveness, which calls for adding more strategic ingredients to their public diplomacy policy mix, such as goal setting, measurable outcomes and action plans. Social media, with their capacity for user interaction and their analytical and data processing capabilities allow the convergence between the strategic and the dialogic models of public diplomacy, shaping a strategic public diplomacy paradigm that combines effectiveness with participation.

This article focuses on the role of two elements of social media interaction, *Social Media Engagement* and *Social Media Listening,* as the two main components of such a strategic-communicative approach to public diplomacy. To support this concept, we will first draw on public diplomacy theory and follow its' development as an instrument of political communication in the geopolitical context. In the next step, we will identify the role of the communication medium, and in particular the social media, in communication and the implementation of public diplomacy policies. Then we will identify the similarities, the differences and the connection between public diplomacy and strategic communication, especially in the contemporary era of media convergence. Based on that, we will show how Engagement and Listening, especially through the social media, supports an effective and participatory public diplomacy communication model.

Analysis

Public diplomacy is the communication of an international actor's policies to citizens of foreign countries (Pamment, 2013). It differs from traditional diplomacy in terms of who it addresses and who it wants to influence and persuade. Whereas traditional diplomacy involves personal communication between diplomats, public diplomacy is addressed to *the citizens* of a foreign country (Ingenhoff, Klein, 2018). These foreign citizens might include civil society representatives, non-governmental organizations, multinationals, journalists and media institutions, and members of the general public.

Public diplomacy involves fostering understanding of a state's cultures, attitudes and behavior abroad; building and managing relationships; influencing foreign citizens

and mobilizing actions in order to advance its own interests and values (Gregory, 2011). At its core lies the objective of influencing foreign citizens and groups whose opinions, values, activities and interests may help sway favorably another government's position. Foreign publics are typically engaged through communication methods such as conferences and expert lectures, collaborative projects and exchanges of culture, education, sports, students or personnel, and media outreach through books and literature, films, radio and TV programs and, more recently, the internet and social media (Nakamura & Weed, 2009).

Communication is at the center of public diplomacy since the early days of its conception. One of the earlier brochures of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University states that public diplomacy "encompasses […] communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications" (Parliament of Australia, n.d.). Not surprisingly, major developments in communications and international relations have shaped public diplomacy theory over the years.

The term 'public diplomacy' originally indicated "open" against secretive diplomacy (Cull, 2006) and had been sporadically used during and after the First World War. It re-emerged in 1965, referring to government communication activities targeting foreign publics, as the U.S. sought an alternative benign term for its propaganda activities during the Cold War.

The early models of public diplomacy viewed communication as shaper of public opinion. Malone (1985) describes public diplomacy as "direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments", suggesting a two-step influence process (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Tuch (1990) views it as "a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies". Public diplomacy here is seen as a one-way flow of information in which the state actor controls the message by making instrumental use of media channels, with specific short-term objectives (Pamment, 2013). Feedback is only useful to help governments optimize their messages, and interaction with the public is neither pursued nor required.

These early public diplomacy concepts are deterministic in their interpretations of the effects of political communication on audiences. They tend to rely on the so-called transmission communication model which considers communication's primary role as

being the strategic promotion of an agenda through strategically selected mass media efforts (Manheim, 1994; Wang & Chang, 2004), and is usually associated with formulations of persuasion (Hayden, 2010), or with modernist models of strategic communication which view the transmission of information and the creation of networks as means to achieve compliance or ensure the predominance of the organization in its relations with the public (Hallahan et al., 2007).

A transition to public diplomacy theoretical development occurred between the end of the Cold War and the turn of the 21st century, when the internet and global connectedness started becoming the norm. Public diplomacy expanded to include more actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals who were now seeking global support for their causes through the use of global news networks and media events (Gilboa, 2008), with considerable skill and success (Ross, 2002). Public diplomacy scholarship gradually shifted emphasis from transmission to constitutive models of communication and to the creation of *Meaning*. Meaning is central in communication (Berlo, 1960). Communication involves generating meaning through messages (Hartley, 2003) and does not happen without meaning (Littlejohn, 1983). In the early transmission communication models, such as Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), communication is one-way, from the active transmitter to the passive receiver (Nicotera, 2009). Meaning in this case is supposedly embedded in the message and is perceived by the receiver after the message has been decoded. By contrast, in subsequent two-way communication models, meanings are thought to be created *within* or *between* the communicators, with communication being a participatory process of perpetual new meanings production (van Ruler, 2018).

For some scholars, the creation of meaning defines the distance between public diplomacy and propaganda. Whereas propaganda communicates with a predetermined, non-negotiable message that offers no room for different interpretation, and encompasses a range of instrumental and strategic actions oriented toward achieving solely the propagandist's predetermined goal (Zaharna, Arsenault & Fisher, 2013), public diplomacy accepts pluralism in the message's decoding; meaning is assumed to be attributed, not received (Nicotera, 2009). Taylor and Kent (2014) identify public diplomacy with dialogue, and propaganda with monologue, arguing that the continuum between them defines the spectrum of communication in public diplomacy. Almost a century ago, Mikhail Bakhtin (1963) had placed the ideal dialogue, as total engagement

(Littlejohn, Foss, 2011, 240) at one end of the continuum of human communication, with monologue at the other, as the absence of interaction.

As public diplomacy theory expanded, scholars began studying its' relation with other communication disciplines. Signitzer and Coombs (1992) pointed to similarities between public relations and public diplomacy arguing that they pursue similar objectives and employ similar tools. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1992) reflected on the boundaries between public diplomacy and international public relations, defining the latter as "the planned and organized effort of a company, institution or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the policies of other nations". Gilboa (2008) makes a further point in the relation between public diplomacy and public relations noting that governments would hire PR firms or foreign lobbyists to achieve their objectives, as direct government-sponsored public diplomacy may be viewed by foreign audiences with suspicion.

The research headed by James E. Grunig on best practice in public relations, provided also valuable input to the development of communication and public diplomacy theory. Grunig (2001) examined communication models through the concept of communicative symmetry and the balance between the interests of an organization and the public. Symmetry here is defined by the extent to which each side is willing to satisfy the interests of the other. The more symmetrical the communication, the more each party is equally capable of influencing the other. According to Grunig, one-way communication models are always asymmetric because the sender is only interested in the transmission of its own message and does not take into account the receiver. As a result, two-way symmetric communication produces better long-term relationships with publics than other models and is more ethical (Grunig, Dozier, & Grunig, 2002) because it produces outcomes that balance the interests of organizations and publics.

Another discipline that contributed to the development of public diplomacy theory is nation branding. Country image, nation branding and public diplomacy share common elements in the promotion of a positive national image, national identity, culture and values (Szondi, 2008). Anholt (2006) originally classified public diplomacy as a component of national branding. He later revised, arguing that they are both "master disciplines" for differently developed countries, and eventually suggested (Anholt, 2008) that public diplomacy adopts a more strategic approach as a policy instrument rather than a communication method, focusing on enhancing national reputation. He proposed the term "competitive identity" (Anholt, 2007), which integrates public diplomacy with nation branding and trade, investment, tourism and export promotion in order to

improve national competitiveness in a global environment. Manor & Segev (2015) have referred to the use of digital diplomacy in nation branding activities as "selfie diplomacy", arguing that the two disciplines are distinct yet overlapping, sharing elements of positive image creation, promotion of a national identity, culture and national values through the strategic use of digital channels such as a nation's social media accounts.

From the beginning of the 21st century and on, scholars and practitioners have employed the term "new public diplomacy" to adjust to the changes brought about by the global trend of democratization after the Cold War and the revolution in the means of communication, which broke down previous barriers, globalizing and homogenizing data, perceptions, images, and knowledge (Mor, 2006) and led to the expansion of the municipality of stakeholders (Hudson, 2009). Individuals could now express their views on global matters and influence large numbers of people through social networking, challenging the importance of traditional media and the role of official institutions as sole or dominant actors in communicating foreign policy. This changing environment produced a "new" public diplomacy paradigm, which breaks away from the previous one-way communication model and uses the new media (internet, social media) to establish two-way communication and promote relationship building, dialogue, networks and cooperation with foreign publics (Dale, 2009) with the purpose of bringing out mutual benefits for all stakeholders (Yun, 2006). Public diplomacy here is conceived as a key mechanism through which nations strengthen mutual trust and productive relationships and is vital to building a secure global environment (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.). It is global in nature and involves a multitude of actors and networks. It is diachronic, and continues work even when traditional diplomacy fails and formal diplomatic relations are broken (Metzgar, 2012). As *relational communication*, rooted in the Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) became the new communication paradigm, replacing the former "interpersonal communication" model, focus shifted to the study of the relationship rather than the face-to-face context in communication. Terms like "engagement", "dialogue'" and "reciprocity" replaced "information transmission" or "influence" as key words in public diplomacy (Gonesh & Melissen, 2005). In this new context, two-way communication isn't only the goal for public diplomacy in order to build and maintain relationships (Szondi, 2008), it becomes its' very essence (Pamment, 2013).

The conflict between the "old" and "new" public diplomacy models refers to Habermas' (1985) influential analysis of the public sphere and his twofold analysis of

human action, which identifies between *strategic action,* or action that is based in the realization of specific ends, and *communicative action*, or action oriented toward achieving a rational consensus. Accordingly, Deetz (1992) argues that all communication has always been suspended between the goals or ideals of participation and effectiveness. Paul (2011b) identifies three areas of tensions between the two basic communication models: a) between "broadcast", where the aim is to "say our message louder, and clearer, on more channels", and "engagement", with an emphasis on relationships, two-way understanding and listening to what others have to say, b) between complete and pluralistic control of the message, and c) between informing and influencing.

Cowan and Arsenault (2008) converged influence and participation in public diplomacy in a third "collaborative model", which involves dialogue between participants and stakeholders, "and specific and usually easily identifiable goals and outcomes that provide a useful basis and structure upon which longer-term relationships can be formed". The two scholars don't dismiss dialogue or monologue in public diplomacy communication, but argue that each should be used tactically in order to achieve the best foreign policy outcome. Monologue, for example, can be an essential advocacy tool for informing about a country's policies, identities or values, and dialogue can be useful for promoting public diplomacy objectives, since "sometimes the very act of sharing information or showing a willingness to share information can lay the foundations for deeper ties". The "collaborative" model is best suited for initiatives and outreach campaigns in situations where citizens from different countries try to complete a common project or achieve a common goal. Anne-Marie Slaughter gave her own definition of collaborative power in the foreign policy frontier as a third path beyond the traditional classification of hard and soft power (Slaughter, 2011), identifying it by its' forms as *mobilization*, to exercise power through not a command but a call to action; *connection*, which avoids controlling a specific set of choices, but connects as many people to one another and to a common purpose as possible; and *adaptation*, which reflects willingness to shift one's own views enough to enter into meaningful dialogue with others.

The role of the communication medium

Public diplomacy actors communicate with foreign publics usually through mass communication channels (media, cinema, internet, social media, etc.). Yet, any form of interaction which exceeds embodied mutual presence requires the extension of one or

more communicative faculties (Holmes, 2005). Any medium which enables such extension will necessarily transform the content, form and possibility of what can be communicated. Therefore, the PD actor needs to strategically choose the appropriate means to communicate with foreign publics (Daft, 1987) taking into account the available channels of mass communication, the distribution of access to those channels and the favorability of those channels to certain styles of messaging (Hwang, 2017). For example, the cultural background of the audience is related to media use. In individualistic cultures, people read more than in collectivistic cultures therefore press media could be more effective channels of influence (Mooij, 2008). In collectivistic cultures, where people tend to be more visually oriented, television is a more important medium. This has also implications on new media as well: website design in Asia, Latin America and Africa is less verbal and more visual.

In his Integrated Public Diplomacy Model, Golan (2013) notes the use of global news media in mediating government-to-citizen engagement (p. 1251). Cull (2008) underscores the importance of media use in public diplomacy by connecting it to two out of his five core components of public diplomacy, namely advocacy and international broadcasting. Advocacy, as an international communication activity to promote policies, ideas, or national interests in the minds of a foreign public has been traditionally the work of embassies and press officers through press relations and informational work. International Broadcasting refers to an institution's attempt to manage the international environment using radio, television and internet technologies to interact with foreign audiences (Cull, 2008). This role was eagerly pursued by states during the Second World War and the Cold War that followed, with the continued development of states' overseas services such as the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Moscow, Deutsche Welle, etc.

Based on media use in the conduct of foreign policy and international negotiations, Gilboa (2001) identifies three conceptual models: a) public diplomacy, where state and non-state actors use the media and other communication channels to influence foreign public opinion; b) media diplomacy, where officials use the media to communicate with counterparts abroad and promote conflict resolution; and c) media-broker diplomacy, where journalists and media take on the role of mediator in cases of international terrorism or crises. Further, he distinguishes between three time dimensions of government communication with foreign publics (Gilboa, 2008): immediate, where the purpose is to react within hours or a few days to developing events, and where advocacy, international broadcasting, and cyber public diplomacy are more suitable; intermediate, which is conducted during periods lasting between a few weeks and a few

months and is based on techniques of strategic communication, and favors IPR, corporate diplomacy and Diaspora public diplomacy; and long-term, which is the closest to traditional public diplomacy and is designed to produce long-term results of attitude change among foreign publics, relying on cultural diplomacy, international exchanges and branding. Deibel and Roberts (1976) divided public diplomacy into two schools based partially on the type of media they use. The tough-minded school, which considers that the purpose of public diplomacy is to influence the attitudes of foreign audiences through persuasion, and uses for its purposes the "fast" media (television, radio, press and news magazines); the tender-minded school, which sees public diplomacy mainly as a cultural function, aims to create a climate of mutual understanding, and uses the "slow" media, such as films, exhibitions, language teaching, academic and artistic exchanges.

Research has shown that media influence the perceptions of foreign audiences about a country and help build and maintain its image (Gilboa, 2008), which is why public diplomacy actors have traditionally pursued good media relations. Before and during World War II, mass media were thought to have the ability to regulate public behavior at will, like a 'hypodermic needle' or 'magic bullet' (Berlo, 1960). The post-war research of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) challenged this notion, but showed that the media were indeed involved, at least indirectly, in shaping people's views, in two or more stages. Other studies have linked the influence of the media to the time of media consumption (Gerbner, 1973), highlighted their decisive role in agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, (1972), framing and priming, or shown that countries that enjoy greater media coverage are perceived by foreign audiences as more important for their country's interests, while negative reports generate negative opinions about a country (Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). In the 1990s, the so-called "CNN effect", which claims that global television networks are a decisive factor in determining foreign policies (Gilboa, 2005), revived attention to the media as an influence tool.

By the end of the 20th century, the emergence of the internet and the social media as a new form of communication reshaped communication, confronting governments with the need to include foreign audiences as more active partners in their communication activities (Hocking, 2005). Some saw the "new" media as the ultimate "modern soft power tool", and drew parallels with the "Rock 'n Roll" of the 1960s and 1970s (Kounalakis & Simonyi, 2011), which had a significant influence on young people behind the "iron curtain". Internet's role in the Middle East political upheavals in 2011 contributed decisively to this perception, prompting many scholars to focus their research on the untapped potential of social media in mobilizing social and political activism.

However, the events in the Middle East also inspired a collaborative approach in communication (Slaughter, 2011), which views the internet as a tool for decentralized cooperation and for collective action. This approach capitalizes on internet typology which lacks a clear center and relies on horizontal interconnection, shifting the notion of influence from the one (actor) to many (audience) models of traditional public diplomacy to the many-to-many model of collective influence.

Today, social media use continues to expand allowing diplomats to connect with a potential public of 5.24 billion individuals worldwide (Petrosyan, 2025). With their ability to promote dialogue, direct engagement, two-way symmetrical communication with online foreign audiences (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Adesina, 2017), and forms of interaction that the "old" media could not offer (Littlejohn, Foss, 2011), they are seen as an expression of the "new public diplomacy" model (Kampf, Manor Segev, 2015). Zhang (2013) links social media with the strategic management of public diplomacy issues, including, among others, issue identification, issue analysis, audience segmentation and targeting and evaluation of results, and asserts that they are essential in achieving long-term policy goals and organizational missions.

Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is defined by the deliberate communication practice of an actor (government, organization, business, cause, social movement etc.) with the purpose of advancing its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007). Although models vary, typically strategic communication may include prior research to identify a problem or issue, audience analysis, message strategy, channel choice, program assessment and measurable goals and objectives. Hallahan (2004) points to six professional disciplines that are involved in strategic communication: Management Communication, Marketing Communication, Public Relations, Technical Communication, Information/Social Marketing Campaigns and Political Communication. The latter, Political Communication on the international level, includes communications in support of public diplomacy.

The connection between public diplomacy and strategic communication has been variably interpreted over the years, which might be attributed partly to the fact that both disciplines lack an agreed definition, and their meanings, boundaries and priorities often vary (Löffelholz et al., 2014).

Some authors consider strategic communication as the overarching concept (e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2007; Glassman, 2010) and view public diplomacy as a subordinate

tool that can help a state to achieve its foreign diplomacy strategic goals. Others, subordinate strategic communication to public diplomacy. Leonard et al. (2002), for example, describe strategic communication as one of the three dimensions of public diplomacy beside news management and relationship building.

Other authors regard public diplomacy and strategic communication as distinct concepts, that can be even conflicting at times. Powers (2017) claims that strategic communication is associated with management and revenue generation which is incompatible or may not be well-suited when applied to the context of relational public diplomacy. Dulek and Campbell (2015) argue that strategy in communication "focuses on achieving the sender's predetermined aim" and "shifts the focus from context and the recipient to purpose and the sender". According to Leonard et al. (2002) strategic communication is different from relationship-building as it involves activities that resemble those of a political campaign, such as strategic messaging and planning (p. 15).

Still others (e.g., Gregory, 2005) view public diplomacy and strategic communication as analogous concepts which commonly refer to government, organization, group or individual activities to a) identify and understand public attitudes and cultures, b) broadcast information to or engage in relationships with publics and institutions, and c) influence public attitudes and behavior through strategies and means intended to persuade. Löffelholz (2014) identifies three broader areas of agreement between public diplomacy and strategic communication as both may employ a) direct or mass-mediated communication activities to reach foreign governments and/or foreign publics, b) aim at reducing negative clichés, misconceptions and prejudices, and generating sympathy and understanding for an organization or a nation, and c) aim at building positive images and relationships, facilitating closer political ties and promoting tourism and foreign direct investments. Noting that "all public diplomacy is instrumental at its core" as it can't be separated from foreign policy purposes, Gregory (2005) bridges the two disciplines acknowledging *dialogue* as applicable to elements of public diplomacy that emphasize engagement and the exchange of people and ideas, and *instrumental communication* as applicable to those elements of public diplomacy that emphasize persuasion, targeted audiences, opinion research, media relations, and policy advocacy. Similarly, Hallahan et al. (2007) refer to integrated communication which involves strategic activities that focus on the audience's needs, concerns, and interests—not merely those of organizational communicators or managers. Pamment (2013) also relates the two disciplines pointing to strategic concepts in the field of public diplomacy such as

"relationship management", "data-steered decision-making", the "management of discourse" and use of social media, particularly in an interactive way.

Strategic Public Diplomacy

Manheim (1994) defines strategic public diplomacy as "refined" (Hocking, 2005) propaganda, "informed by empirical research into human motivation and behavior". In the years that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks and into the Iraq War (2003-11), U.S. public diplomacy concluded that it needed a new strategic approach to public diplomacy (Peterson, 2005). It proposed strategic public diplomacy that was connected to national security issues and embraced management, marketing, branding and communications techniques to formulate and communicate policy "in a more effective and better understood and accepted way" (Peterson, 2005). Glassman (2010) connects strategic public diplomacy even closer to national security and away from "public relations", with focus on specific foreign policy objectives instead of "vague, feel-good improvements in the far-off future".

On the other side of the spectrum, Zaharna (2005) offers a participatory perspective on strategic public diplomacy, with networking as a key concept, and argues that the U.S. should switch its strategic focus to building bridges and forging a network with international publics. She argues that strategic public diplomacy should evaluate the quality of relationships and take advantage of the interactive features of modern technology.

For the purpose of this paper, we describe strategic public diplomacy as a PD actor's communication with foreign publics, defined by elements of both communicative and strategic functions, for the accomplishment of foreign policy goals. Two core elements of this strategic public diplomacy approach are Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening.

Discussion

Holtzhausen (2008) argues that new media platforms, such as the Internet and social media, provide space for both persuasive and collaborative communication with the public, with the use of a wide variety of communication techniques. This paper identifies Social Media Engagement and Social Media Listening as the two elements that can support such argument.

Listening

Listening is the subject of a wide range of communication-related research. Nye (2008) describes effective public diplomacy as a two-way street that involves both speaking and listening. Leading American psychologist, Carl Rogers considered listening central to any relationship (Broome, 2009). Listening, with respect for differences, increases the likelihood that communication will improve and that relationships will become more creative, fruitful and satisfying, contributing to the promotion of mutual respect and understanding (Broome, ibid.). It also enhances a country's reputation (Stewart, 2006), is at the basis of participatory communication and is central to the practice of effective cultural diplomacy (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2005). Macnamara (2015) considers it the basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity and business responsibility and suggests that organizations should create a competent listening architecture.

Cull (2008) places listening in a privileged position compared to his other four components of public diplomacy (Advocacy, Culture, Exchanges, International Broadcasting), because "it precedes all successful public diplomacy". He defines it as an agency's attempt to manage the international environment by gathering and contrasting evidence about foreign publics and their views, and using that evidence to redirect the agency's policy or broader approach to its public diplomacy. He warns though that effective listening must be linked to policy making and should ensure that foreign opinion is weighed in the foreign policy process (Cull, 2008b), otherwise it can quickly be interpreted as an attempt to patronize or manipulate and become counterproductive.

Strategic listening places communication at the heart of the policy process, and engages with people "to get their views about how to make policy work best" (Bird, 2008), while endorsing more interactive, collaborative and experiential communication styles. Macnamara and Gregory (2018) suggest that open listening is crucial for the *evaluation* and setting of communication objectives, as well as for measuring outcomes and impact of strategic communication. Strategic listening involves prior research, surveys, pre-testing, consultation, social media monitoring and analysis, and supports the continuous evaluation of the ongoing communication campaign for the prompt adjustment of strategy, if required.

Listening is an important element in the evaluation organizational process. Indeed, evaluation of public diplomacy communication activities has so far been

notoriously problematic for at least a dozen reasons, ranging from the long-term effects of public diplomacy to its intangible nature to its time, labour, and cost intensive methods (Banks, 2011). Governments have been monitoring foreign publics to evaluate their own efforts since the beginning of the twentieth century (Arsenault, 2015). On one hand, they monitored the impact of their own communication efforts aboard and on the other, they collected information regarding their image abroad and what foreign media were saying about their country. Monitoring, at this point, was directed mostly towards the foreign elites and opinion leaders or vocal groups and its main objective was to provide headquarters with information. But listening in contemporary public diplomacy goes beyond traditional monitoring. The "new" public diplomacy views listening as a core component for building and managing relationships by creating an invitational environment where communication can thrive (Lipari, 2010). In this ideal listening environment, it is presupposed that all communication partners are equally prepared to change problematic points that are brought to light by listening to the others. And, although states would never let their foreign policy be driven by the whims of their foreign audience (Cull, 2008), they should nevertheless do well to identify where foreign opinion and their own policy diverge and try to fill this gap or explain the reasons behind the divergence.

In social media

Social media provide digital analytical tools that allow qualitative and quantitative listening that was impossible with the "old" media. The spectrum of listening in social media stresses between "social media listening" and "social media monitoring" (Williams, 2024). "Social media listening" or "social listening" refers to the collection and analysis of discussions on various social media platforms, in order to draw useful conclusions for long-term trends and current debates abroad, and to identify communication opportunities and patterns of interdependence with foreign audiences (Grundel, Stenberg, 2019, March). "Social media monitoring" involves tracking social media messages, comments and conversations directly related to a government and responding to those engagements. In other words, monitoring lets an organization know "what" is being said about it, and listening "why" it is being said.

Macnamara (2015) also identified two types of social media listening, one communicative and one instrumental. In an interview with a senior social media manager, she described them as *engagement,* which is to hear what people are saying and

what they are concerned about so as to respond to and interact with them, which often leads to multiple exchanges and conversation; and *intelligence,* which uses what people are saying to inform strategy and tactics, often not acknowledging or responding to them.

Di Martino (2020) defines his own spectrum of social media listening in public diplomacy. It ranges from the ideal type of Apophatic listening to Surreptitious listening, which is linked to surveillance and spying. In the continuum created by these two extremes, he places Active Listening, which promotes trust and understanding and aims to implement long-term strategies; Tactical Listening with short-term objectives, such as addressing misunderstandings and misconceptions, and instrumental monitoring of issues or factors that can create problems for the state's image; Listening In, which focuses on measuring the reach of the actor's message using social media measurement tools; and Background or Casual Listening, in which public diplomacy actors scroll through social media content to find sources of information for diplomatic briefing.

Although Di Martino views listening mainly from the actor's perspective- while listening, as a bidirectional process involves all communication participants- he offers a useful framework for understanding the function of social media listening in public diplomacy. Still, his model could be expanded to include other forms of social media listening, such as a "Moderator" type of listening, where a PD actor moderates a social media community discussions to upkeep the community standards; or a "Peer" type of listening, where an actor monitors the social media activity of other competing or non-competing PD actors in order to keep abreast of interesting developments, identify opportunities for cooperation or intervene to counter misinformation, protect its image, etc.

Engagement

Engagement in contemporary public diplomacy is a commonly used term that is rarely defined but carries always positive value. Scholarship literature suggests that *engaged* public diplomacy is sensitive to values-based behavior (Murphy, 2008). It is based on ideas and knowledge, on dialogue with other stakeholders and on the development of solutions to common problems (Murphy, ibid.). It involves building partnerships and networks, and working together with citizens, groups, and organizations (U.S. Department of State, 2010). Through engagement, organizations and communities can make decisions that build social capital (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Engagement is an important element in strategic communication as well. Gregory (2011) mentions that strategic communication uses tools of "deliberate communication" and "engagement", including those implemented "by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals" to achieve specific objectives. Paul (2011a) defines strategic communication as "coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or *engagement* intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives".

Taylor and Kent (2014) focus on the dialogic engagement between organizations and their audiences, which ensures an ethical communication environment. In dialogic engagement, the other person must be treated as a valuable human being rather than a strategic resource. The aim of this type of engagement is to drive organizations and audiences to action, to help them make better decisions, to keep citizens informed and to empower all parties involved. To achieve this form of engagement, dialogue should be based on reciprocity, proximity, empathy, risk and commitment. The latter in particular, commitment, i.e. the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote (Huang, 2001), is a key component for measuring successful long-term relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Gregory (2011) singles out engagement and advocacy as excellent components of public diplomacy. For him, engagement is based on networks and participation in cross-border relationships, and it prioritizes dialogue, reasoned argument, openness to the views and opinions of others, learning through questioning and finding common meanings. While it seeks to serve foreign policy objectives, it doesn't negate dissent. On the contrary, dissent is welcome, because it is only through the dialectic interaction of concerned parties that the framework for managing contradictions and achieving unity in diversity may be formed (Littlejohn, Foss, 2011).

Taylor and Kent (1998) identify five measurable components of social media engagement between an organization and stakeholders: a) contact a secondary research before beginning the interaction, in order to understand the key publics, underlying social conditions, cultural variables, etc. associated with the topic of interest, b) show respect for the other and demonstrate clearly a positive regard for the stakeholders input, experiences and needs, c) extend the interaction for relational purposes outside the immediate problem or issue, d) be ready to accept stakeholders advice and counsel on issues of organizational/ public/ community concern, e) interact with stakeholders for the good of the community. Engagement here is not an instant result of the dialectic organization-public relationship but a process that expands in a continuum between two

approaches. The first favors long-term relationships, where the actor values reciprocity, considers political outcomes as of secondary importance and is prepared to relinquish control. In the second approach, actors focus more on political objectives and place greater emphasis on the control of communication, using engagement to encourage certain public attitudes or to mobilize action to their short-term advantage.

In social media

From all the media, the Internet is unique in its ability to offer an interactive engagement environment that combines the potential for synchronous or asynchronous, unilateral or reciprocal, bilateral or multilateral/cyclical communication, where relationships with foreign publics can be created and maintained. Social media provide PD actors with the necessary interaction and engagement environment for fostering dialogic communication with key publics on topics of mutual interest (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). Taylor & Kent (1998) identify the core principles underlying online relationships as (a) facilitating a dialogic loop, which creates space for feedback and allows the public to query organizations to its questions and concerns; (b) providing relevant, well-structured and hierarchical information to the general public; (c) fostering repeated visits to a website by creating interesting and regularly updated content; (d) creating a concise and easy to use interface that provides ease of access to online content; and (e) encouraging visitor retention, by posting links that keep visitors within the website, and avoiding distractions or the use of external links that take visitors to other websites.

Social media quickly attracted professional and academic attention due to their potential for engaging with the public and their ability to offer quantifiable data and the analytical tools to assess them (Mariani et al., 2018; Munoz-Expósito et al., 2017). Studies on measuring social media engagement are categorized into four groups (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). The "Quantitative metrics" group, which constitutes the vast majority of the literature, proposes a straightforward assessment of the impact of social media engagement, based on the number of comments, likes, shares, followers, etc. The second group of "Normalized indexes", provides a quantitative assessment of the engagement generated by a piece of content in relation to the number of people to whom that content has been displayed. The third group of studies focuses on "sets of indexes", which measure users' involvement in the social media content by assessing different weights to different interactive actions, such as liking, sharing, or commenting. A fourth group pursues qualitative approaches, seeking more reliable and in-depth material for critical

analysis while criticizing the quantitative metrics approach of other groups as "vanity metrics" (Rogers, 2018) that only provide a superficial engagement assessment.

Social media services managers use the term Engagement in social media to define for actions that reflect and measure how much social media users interact with a creator's content. Engagement here may include quantifiable data such as likes, comments and shares, but varies by platform (Sproutsocial, 2022). Typically, it takes the form of:

- Interacting with a Page, such as clicking on a call-to-action button, clicking on an account owner or administrator's profile, clicking on any tab.

- Interacting with posts on a Page, such as comments, expressions of like or dislike of Page content, notifications.

- Interacting with direct messages: sending messages to a Page or replying to a message.

- Interacting with other Pages: references from one Page to another, commenting on other Pages' posts.

Keeping track of engagement in social media allows organizations to:

- receive feedback on their image as a company or a brand,

- benchmark against competitors in the same field of activity,

- mitigate the impact of negative events that may cause reputational damage to the organization,

- increase public loyalty,

- enhance visibility, through the social media algorithms that reward greater public engagement in social posts by displaying them to more people, or through the sharing of positive public testimonials in the organization's own networks of contacts,

- improve the user experience, and better tailor the content or services offered to the user.

Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) describe engagement in connection with three types of social media behaviors. Consumption refers to the minimum level of engagement and involves actions like viewing audio, video or images related to a business or organization. Contribution indicates interaction with an organization's online content (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting). Creation is considered the most essential level of

online engagement and is defined as the spontaneous adaptation of an organization's content by the audience (e.g. publishing content related to the organization, uploading videos, images, audio or writing articles related to an organization).

While public relations and business management have embraced the use of social media metrics to measure engagement, public diplomacy is reluctant. Powers (2017) claims that social media metrics were built for the advertising industry, and as a result, may not be well-suited when applied to the context of PD because they are vulnerable to manipulation and don't measure engagement in any meaningful way. Metzgar (2012) notes that engagement assessment should be based on the quality of the dialogue between the embassy and its followers and not on the number of "likes" on an embassy's social media profile. Still, while social media provide a platform for dialogic engagement with the publics, PD actors don't fully use this potential. Manor (2017), for example, examined the State Department's social media content compliance with the components of dialogic engagement and concluded it was, in fact, limited, as MFAs still favour influence and message dissemination among elite audiences over true engagement with foreign publics and relationship building.

Conclusion

As communication has been suspended between participation and effectiveness, public diplomacy and strategic communication have been diachronically defined within a bipolar continuum between a model that favors information transmission, persuasion and tangible short-term results and another which is based on dialogue, mutual understanding and long-term relationship building. Although scholars still debate over which model is overarching or about the exact relation between public diplomacy and strategic communication, very few would disagree that Listening and Engagement are important elements for both disciplines. Social media, with their interactive properties and data processing tools, make these elements even more relevant for contemporary public diplomacy, providing a platform for convergence between the relational and instrumental dimensions of communication.

Using such social media tools as *Comments, Direct messaging,* and *Mentions*, PD actors have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with foreign publics, to respond to inquiries and concerns, to build relationships, clear misunderstandings, create consensus and overall improve their country's image, serving their PD campaigns' relational long-term goals.

Social media provide also instruments for the management and evaluation of these efforts, such as (but not limited to) *Audience size* and *Audience growth metrics*, which show a PD actor's social network reach; *Engagement metrics*, which reveal the levels of involvement with a PD actor's message; *Sentiment Analysis*, which gives an overall idea of public sentiment towards a PD actor's image; *Demographic data*, which provides basic information about the gender, location, age, etc. of a PD actor's audience. All these social media tools, and many more, may provide support to strategic issues in PD campaigns, such as problem identification, audience analysis, message strategy, program assessment, program evaluation and performance assessment.

Unfortunately, while the tools are already here, research shows that organization-public communication is overwhelmingly comprised of organizational speaking and top-down information dissemination rather than active listening or dialogic engagement (Macnamara, 2015; Manor, 2017). It rests upon PD actors to better integrate social media into their own policies and use them more effectively to serve their goals, for the benefit of their countries' foreign policies and their audiences alike.

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