

Nov 04, 2016 by **Shawn Powers**

Public Diplomacy and Legitimacy in the Age of Transparency ^[1]

At a recent conference, David Weinberger argued that the future of the news industry is in transparency. Five simple words described how the ailing news industry should move forward: "Transparency is the new objectivity." Reflecting on the rise of alternative media and the increasing loss of legitimacy that the prestige media are facing, Weinberger argued: "What we used to believe because we thought the author was objective we now believe because we can see through the author's writings to the sources and values that brought her to that position. Transparency gives the reader information by which she can undo some of the unintended effects of the ever-present biases. Transparency brings us to reliability the way objectivity used to. This change is, well, epochal."

Epochal, indeed. Weinberger's explanation of why alternative media—blogs, tweets and other online venues—have been able to challenge the mainstream media is spot on. Were it not for transparency, audiences would not trust authors with little repute. Whereas, in the past, audiences depended on the concept of objectivity in order to gauge trust in a journalist or newspaper—is this person/organization well informed and objective?—now, they rely on the ability to fact check and think critically about a story's sources and author. Weinberger concludes: "In fact, transparency subsumes objectivity. Anyone who claims objectivity should be willing to back that assertion up by letting us look at sources, disagreements, and the personal assumptions and values supposedly bracketed out of the report. Objectivity without transparency increasingly will look like arrogance."

What is happening in the news industry is not isolated from the rest of society. The full-on crisis of confidence in news is not because American newspapers were doing a poor job. It is because we have entered the era of the hyperlink, and the ecology of knowledge is in the midst of a revolution. The process by which information becomes legitimated, accepted knowledge has changed, and established institutions need to adjust. Fast.

Taken as fact, "transparency is the new objectivity" presents a once in a lifetime opportunity for public diplomacy practitioners. Public diplomacy advocates have, historically, faced challenges abroad when conveying a message. Audiences of international broadcasting or other communiqué from foreign governments have rightly asked: "but you are speaking on behalf of your government, which has different interests than I. Why should I trust you?" Previously, the answer to this question was conveyed, in essence, by expressing a commitment to objectivity. "I am presenting this news to you as verified facts, with all sides represented," a public diplomat would say. Certainly, the BBC's commitment to objectively broadcasting the news has been crucial to its credibility and widespread success abroad.

Yet, as audiences are exposed more and more to different news narratives from different mediums—ranging from Qatar's Al-Jazeera to China's CCTV—the concept of objectivity is becoming increasingly discredited. The idea that anyone is able to report the news without

inflicting some bias is simply no longer tenable in the eyes of a generation of media consumers with access to any number of competing news narratives, the subtle differences between which expose some level of bias throughout. News media scholars often describe this bias in terms of "framing," and a number of studies have demonstrated framing bias throughout the news media, oftentimes in favor of government policies and opinions.

As transparency becomes the norm for establishing knowledge—and it is—governments that previously had trouble establishing credibility with foreign audiences now have a means of conveying information that does not require a leap of faith by the audience to be trusted. Rather, by embracing the hyperlink, providing in-depth information to back up one's arguments and stories and openly expressing one's personal attachment to an issue—i.e. bias—public diplomacy practitioners have a newly established and ubiquitous means of engaging foreign audiences.

Put another way, the ascendance of transparency as a marker of knowledge, rather than objectivity, levels the playing field. That is why a blog post from Tehran can be considered more credible than CNN's broadcast from Atlanta. Governments, traditionally, have been at a disadvantage to the news media, which often have been seen as more neutral and thus credible in the eyes of foreign audiences. That dynamic has changed. Governments now have a blueprint for establishing trust with foreign audiences, and the news media, at least for now, are struggling to catch up. It is a brave new world, indeed.
