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May 07, 2020 by **Bradley McConachie**

In the Age of the COVID-19 Crisis, Have Journalists Become the New Diplomats? ^[1]

A country's image in 2020 will be shaped by how their government is perceived to have responded to the challenges of the escalating pandemic.

The public diplomacy stage is becoming increasingly crowded in these times of 24-hour news cycles, social media and the spreading of “fake news,” making the control of this narrative nearly impossible. Global health diplomacy was once a term contained to public health or humanitarian literature; however, with the media spotlight now scrutinizing all governments' decisions to contain outbreaks of COVID-19, journalists play an increasingly important public diplomacy role as “opinion leaders.”

As we retreat to our homes to obey regulations on social distancing, people rely on messaging delivered through the media to shape their perceptions of how each country is faring and to dissect the impact of policy decisions in real-time. In a world where even

diplomats are forced to work from home, other forms of traditional public diplomacy have almost entirely been replaced with mass-media messaging. Governments are scrambling to manage their public image as domestic and foreign populations consume daily press briefings, global health statistics and debates on the different public health policies adopted across the globe.

Public diplomacy is often promoted as benign and well-intentioned, however, with close links to the preservation of power it has every chance of crossing the divide into ill-intended propaganda. With governments increasingly relying on the media to spread their message, both domestically and internationally, it is essential for the global public to find ways to differentiate between public diplomacy and propaganda.

The ability of messaging to be influential relies on “the two-step hypothesis,” which refers to the diffusion of information from mass media to the public, often filtered through opinion leaders who influence how the masses receive this messaging. Opinion leaders will influence many others, multiplying the influence across society. Imbalance occurs when a person (opinion leader or follower) receives a message that is inconsistent with their current beliefs. The first cycle is the opinion leader seeking advice from an intermediary and being influenced to change their behavior. When followers receive information that is inconsistent with their views, they will seek out an opinion leader. For example, if a health professional in a media interview suggests that governments introduce restrictions to “flatten the curve,” the report would contradict a neoliberalist’s view of limited state influence on the economy. This would then initiate the second cycle of communication (to seek out individuals, or alternative media outlets, which they trust to decide if this new information will impact their final belief, and therefore, behaviors).

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Advocates of opinion leadership would argue that the media is just as capable of exerting influence as is a person in power, so long as they are exposed to the right people and have the viewership to take on that role. Trump as the President of the United States has proven to be a master of this approach, throughout his election campaign, gaining unprecedented coverage during his rise to power in 2016. His messaging may have worked domestically, but public diplomacy is outward-facing, and these same communication strategies have not translated to a foreign audience. To many, Trump’s ability to manipulate messaging is the grey area where public diplomacy meets propaganda.

President Trump's press conference at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis is an example of this distinction. As the pandemic was unfolding, and with countries implementing differing policies, the American public became confused. Trump ignored early warnings from public health professionals and instead relied heavily on supporters in the conservative media to push the message that COVID-19 will not impact the U.S. *The Guardian* at the time wrote:

"Donald Trump has used a press briefing on coronavirus to play a propaganda-like video praising his record on the pandemic. Prior to playing the video, which comprised clips from his preferred network, Fox News, the president said: 'Most importantly, we're going to get back on to the reason we're here, which is the success we're having.'"

These early missteps highlight a fundamental weakness of the Trump administration—their inability to listen. Madeline Albright famously stated that public diplomacy is the “listening part as well as the telling part of the message.” It is often reported that President Trump does not respect the media, but his relentless attacks on journalists who do not support his message, while relying on those who do, highlights the opposite. Trump's treatment of the media displays his understanding of opinion leadership, and that as a journalist, you are either a patriot or a traitor.

When we think of soft power, we often assume it is a game to be played between great powers. However, being out of the spotlight can give smaller countries such as Vietnam the ability to listen before telling. While the Trump administration was battling a breakdown in communication, the Vietnamese government was closely monitoring the COVID-19 outbreak and has received international praise for its early actions. The Vietnamese government understood the immediate threat to their under-resourced health system and acted swiftly with a clear and decisive message that included extensive testing, vigorous quarantines and social unity that has never wavered. Kidong Park, the World Health Organization's representative to Vietnam, believes the country's early response was critical, saying that “Vietnam responded to this outbreak early and proactively. Its first risk assessment exercise was conducted in early January - soon after cases in China started being reported.”

This comparison is not about establishing causation between these early decisions and the COVID-19 cases experienced in each country, as this would be downplaying a range of complicated epidemiological factors. Rather, as public diplomacy practitioners, what we can learn from this comparison, is how a reactive and impulsive reliance on opinion leaders—whether they be powerful leaders or the media pushing messages that support a particular political agenda—is not public diplomacy, but rather in contrast, is nothing more than modern-day propaganda.
