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Public Diplomacy in the Era of Post-Reality

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The Financial Times recently published an AI-generated image of President Biden kissing former President Trump, with the subhead: “Fakes, forgeries and the meaning of meaning in our post-truth era.” The term ‘post-truth,’ popularized in 2016 by The Economist Magazine, originally referred to the impact of social media on politics in general and American politics in particular. *The Economist* argued that a new breed of politicians, who owed their popularity to social media, had taken the art of lying to new heights. These politicians no longer feared being caught telling a lie. In fact, they were proud of their lies and defiantly argued that all politicians lie, but only great leaders admit to lying. Politicians’ defiant lies won them the adoration of many social media users who finally found honest politicians, honest about lying at every turn.

Since then, the term post-truth has taken on added meaning and has been used to reference the fact that social media platforms generate an endless number of truths, given that content is tailored to each user’s preferences. Locked within their algorithmic filter bubbles, different

users would encounter different truths. In the social media feed of one user, the truth might be that Russia *had not* invaded Crimea in 2014. In the social media feed of another user, the truth might be that *unmarked mercenaries* had invaded Crimea; while according to the feed of another user, the truth might be that Russia had mounted a *stealth invasion* of Crimea.

In the post-truth era, public diplomacy activities centered on negating the online truth spread by some actors, while creating appealing digital narratives to support one's own truth. Combating disinformation rested on debunking the assertions of some states and discrediting some spokespersons while enhancing the credibility of others. Concepts such as de-bunking and pre-bunking became popular as diplomats sought to contend with the growing number of different truths spread by state and non-state actors.

In many instances visuals were used to “prove” the truth. NATO satellite images were used to “prove” that Russian troops had crossed over into Ukraine. Images of a bombed Aleppo were used to “prove” that the Assad regime was murdering its citizens. Images were even used to “prove” that once Deash lies are exposed, its fighters become disillusioned.

The question is how can public diplomacy contend with the phenomenon of post-reality, given that the existing strategies of debunking and using visuals to prove truths will no longer be effective?

The rise of Generative AI, and visual AI in particular, ushers in another era marked not by multiple truths but by multiple realities, as Generative AI can be used to create highly believable alternate realities. The difference between post-truth and post-reality is that the tools once used to “prove” facts are now used to “prove” falsities. Such is the case with images, videos and official documents that can all be easily doctored. Post-reality is far more encompassing than post-truth. Truth is derived from reality while reality exists independently. Put differently, the reality in 2014 was that armed individuals had invaded Crimea. Several truths were derived from this reality. In one truth, the armed individuals were Russian. In another truth, the armed individuals were not Russian. Yet in both truths, the reality was one and the same.

In post-reality we enter an age of endless realities. In one reality, armed individuals have invaded Crimea; In another reality, Crimea is free while daily life goes on normally. This reality is well documented. Images of Crimeans going about daily life are shared across multiple media; videos of Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, ensuring the world that no one invaded Ukraine can easily be found; while CIA satellite images, shared online, “prove” that no Russian forces have entered Ukraine. Each of these realities can then serve as the basis of many truths. Post-reality is thus a force multiplier. If there are a hundred realities, then there can be a thousand truths, as truths are derived from reality. If there are a million realities, there can be 10,000,000 truths. Post-reality scales up the phenomenon of post-truth and creates a world where nothing can be agreed upon and where there are no facts.

Some maintain that post-reality will be driven by deepfakes — highly believable yet false images and videos. Such is the case with a video of President Joseph Biden resigning from

office or admitting to being a Russian agent. This video can be easily created and shared globally with visual AI. Yet textual AI will also play a key role in this era. ChatGPT can be used to create false memos, false emails and even false battle plans “documenting” Ukrainian plans to attack Russia with chemical weapons. In this era no image, video or document may be trusted.

The question is how can public diplomacy contend with the phenomenon of post-reality, given that the existing strategies of debunking and using visuals to prove truths will no longer be effective? One answer may lie in creating long-term coalitions with trusted spokespeople. These may vary and include journalists, academics, policy makers or celebrities. Ukraine has pioneered this approach in its War with Russia using several digital Ambassadors to negate Russian propaganda and help raise support for Ukraine. These Ambassadors include Star Wars actor Mark Hamill, singer Barbra Streisand and Yale Professor and former NASA astronaut Timothy Snyder. While these Ambassadors attract very different followers online, they are all trusted spokespeople. That is, they enjoy a high level of credibility among their followers and are believed when they tweet or post about current events.

By creating long-term coalitions between foreign ministries and digital Ambassadors, diplomats may be able to extend their digital reach and promote a single reality among diverse groups of social media users. Such coalitions may prove especially useful in times of crises when diplomats hope to quickly promote a single reality online and reach large groups of social media users. Such strategies may help diplomats contend with the impact of Generative AI and the era of post-reality that will soon be upon us.
