Peace, Public Diplomacy and Media Diplomacy - Examining the Ongoing Armed Conflict in Ukraine

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Abstract

In this article, research into relations among public diplomacy, media diplomacy and peace leads communication to be an aspect addressed with particular emphasis. What the Ukrainian Government and President Zelensky have carried out in the aforementioned spheres, within the context of the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine (2022-2024), is also examined in this piece. On top of bibliographical research, this work comprises an exclusive interview with Tara Sonenshine, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and currently Professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy / Tufts University (United States).

Keywords: armed conflict in Ukraine; communication; media diplomacy; peace; public diplomacy

Introduction

This article is the result of bibliographical research and of an exclusive interview with Tara Sonenshine*. In the United States (U.S.), this interviewee served in the following capacities (Tara Sonenshine):

 -Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs / U.S. State Department (2012-2013)

-Assistant to the President & Director for Foreign Policy Planning / The White House (1996-1997)

-Assistant to the President & Deputy Director for Communications / The White House (1994-1995)

From 2008 to 2012, the interviewee was United States Institute of Peace Executive Vice President (Tara Sonenshine). This expert garnered ten News Emmy Awards and is currently Edward R. Murrow Professor of Practice at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy / Tufts University (U.S.) (Tara Sonenshine).

This piece addresses relations among public diplomacy (PD), media diplomacy and peace. The latter is envisioned not only in general terms, but also, specifically, as concerns the following aspects:

-peacebuilding – reducing the risk of a conflict happening. To this effect, and at all levels, national conflict management capabilities are strengthened, while laying the groundwork for peace and development (Terminology). All this entails a lengthy and complex process (Terminology);

-peacemaking – the process of resolving ongoing conflicts which, generally speaking, includes certain diplomatic measures and activities intended to get the conflicting parties to sign an agreement (Terminology).

The differences between peacebuilding and peacemaking tend to become blurred (Terminology).

Mamchii (March 30, 2023) feels that anyone seeking to embark on a career in international relations needs to get to know PD. This term is far from being consensually defined (Golan, et alii 2019, p. 2). In this article, PD is understood to mean the practice of engaging with international audiences, for the purpose of strengthening trusting relations as well as fostering cooperation (What is PD).

In the late 20th century, PD is considered to correspond to the transparent means whereby a State communicates with foreign audiences (What is PD). This is a narrow, traditional perspective in relation to PD, where the State serves as the basis for its conception (What is PD).

Currently, with a broader conception, scholars develop studies surrounding that which is called the new PD, characterized, among several aspects, by the possibility of non-state actors, with some clout in international politics, communicating with foreign audiences (What is PD). The development of the new PD is linked to progress in the domain of information and communication technologies (ICTs), namely social media (What is PD). In principle, for both state entities and private organizations or even for individuals, social media is more readily accessible than traditional media for sending and receiving messages.

This piece particularly focuses on media diplomacy, which consists of officials' use of media to communicate with state and non-state actors, thereby seeking to create confidence, enter into negotiations and elicit public backing of agreements (Gilboa 2001, p. 10). It should be pointed out that media diplomacy looks to foster conflict resolution (Gilboa 2001, p. 4). This type of diplomacy encompasses interviews, press conferences, spectacular media events and visits from

Heads of State and mediators to rival countries (Gilboa 2001, p. 10). In this regard, we need to stress that media diplomacy includes summit diplomacy (Mamchii May 25, 2023).

In comparative terms, Gilboa (2001, p. 22) highlights the following aspects:

-in general, PD and media diplomacy activities are designed to, respectively, achieve long- and short-term results

-PD can be regarded as being of a generic character, to the extent that it seeks to create, in a foreign society, a favorable environment regarding vital social and political matters; within the context of a given conflict, media diplomacy is specifically intended to generate suitable conditions for a diplomatic process

-on top of the media, PD uses several resources; media diplomacy instruments comprise solely the media.

Hongxiu (July 2018, p. 224) considers that media diplomacy is part of PD. The labels that scholars tautologically attribute to diverse relations between the media and diplomacy cause some conceptual confusion (Gilboa 2001, p. 13). For instance, quoting Saliu (September 2022, p. 8), there is interaction and confusion among public diplomacy, media diplomacy and digital diplomacy. The latter of the three, according to Bjola (2016, p. 2), consists of using digital technologies, such as mobile devices, social media and multimedia for diplomatic purposes.

In view of what was previously mentioned, we can talk of a domain that includes sub-domains and sub-sub-domains, presented as follows, for example:

1. PD

1.1 media diplomacy

1.1.1 summit diplomacy

1.1.2 digital diplomacy

PD and security

From the standpoint of Lin (March 14, 2022), with regard to international relations, security is what determines States' actions and interactions. Presently, it is wise to have an overview regarding the topic of security (Swistek Spring 2012, p. 79). This way, in the field of security, various civil and military resources are interconnected, as military force is regarded as a last resort (Swistek Spring 2012, p. 79). In said field, PD takes on particular importance (Swistek Spring 2012, p. 79).

For instance, specifically, with the goal of contributing toward disseminating security-related matters, NATO has PD programs geared to certain target audiences, such as scholars, parliamentary groups and opinion leaders, inter alia (Communications and Public Diplomacy October 3, 2022). According to Wallin (August 2012, p. 1), PD is vital for U.S. security. From Grattan's (2005, p. 13) standpoint, the U.S. Armed Forces need to devise a military strategy which, at every level of warfare, integrates PD objectives in military operations.

Tools for peace - PD and media diplomacy

PD's relation to peace is present in several studies on security (Pamment, et alii April 13, 2023). Within a context of crisis among nations, PD can contribute toward reducing tension and heightening mutual understanding among the various parties (The Role of Public Diplomacy in International Crisis Management October 20, 2023).

Sapir Handelman (2021, p. 5) believes that PD is able to engage people in peacemaking efforts while prompting leaders to sign agreements. With the aim of strengthening peacebuilding capacity, various countries in Asia, Western Europe and North America have developed PD (Langmore October 11, 2022). For instance, the Kosovo International Summer Academy, comprising an aspect of PD, abides by the following guiding principle: "Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Areas" (Hajdari, et alii January 15, 2024). The purpose of PD activities can include achieving security and stability in a given part of the world (Zajecki, et alii July 2020). In this regard, and also to exemplify, we should underscore a regional conference held in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, on April 14, 2023, which addressed the importance of PD for peace and good neighborliness in Central Asia (Nakispekova April 18, 2023).

Cvetkovic-Kurelec (2000, p. 14) thinks it is advisable for diplomats to be trained in the field of communication, so that they can, among other aspects, understand the work of the media. Currently, traditional and social media are considered to be PD instruments (Mamchii March 30, 2023). In an article published in the "China Daily" newspaper, Ma (January 11, 2014) emphasizes that the global media are used by governments to carry out their PD programs. Positive results depend, inter alia, both on a specific long-term strategy that is developed in relation to target audiences and on the credibility that audiences attribute to said media (Ma January 11, 2014).

In countries where inhabitants either do not have access to global media or see it in a negative light, their alternative is to turn to local media (Ma January 11, 2014). From the standpoint of Davis (November 3, 2008), PD needs to value both international and local audiences. When it becomes necessary to involve local audiences, local media can be very important (Davis November 3, 2008). Engaging the local audience is a precondition for a successful peacebuilding process with intervention of an outside force (Davis November 3, 2008).

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University of Lisbon logo1.Olive Branch: A Symbol of Peace

As underscored by Nirupama Rao (July 19, 2017), social media are intimately related to PD and can even be regarded as its official instruments (Tago July 27, 2017). For instance, at U.S. embassies, PD professionals use social media to communicate with foreign audiences (Rugh January 10, 2017). By way of dialogue, there is a direct exchange of messages between the sender and the receiver (Verrekia Spring 2017, p. 28). This interaction favors the receiver's engagement.

Use of the Internet in the field of diplomacy, that is, digital diplomacy, most notably social media, has sped up diplomatic activities relative to a prior time. This means that, from a technological standpoint, conditions are in place for rulers in the sphere of foreign policy to rapidly react to certain events. Prudently speaking, this swift reaction should be preceded by an equally swift reflection (though not always easy), to avoid a few hazards, such as hastiness and lack of confirmation of certain elements. Within this context, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be useful, with due care, bearing in mind the risk of AI bias, among other issues.

Decision-making, in the spheres of foreign affairs and diplomacy, can be influenced by AI (Choi April 5, 2024). Currently, regarding digital diplomacy, there are experts, such as Elad Ratson, who now speak of algorithmic diplomacy (Cocking September 19, 2016). The growing influence of technological factors in diplomacy should be combined with human capabilities, such as creativity, asserting diplomacy as an art.

Social media can supplement the action of the global media or can be used as alternatives in order to seek to overcome censorship / applicable legal prohibitions in given countries vis-à-vis international media. Social media also allows precisely sending messages to certain target audiences.

Currently, the way content is disseminated over the Internet, including social media, is not the same worldwide, to the extent that some States put up various kinds of obstacles. This happens, for example, in China (Suciu March 15, 2024). Also to exemplify, in the U.S., TikTok could be banned if this Chinese social media is not sold to a U.S.-government-approved buyer (Maheshwari, Holpuch June 20, 2024). Obviously, with greater or lesser difficulty, in reality messages can be received while bypassing government-imposed prohibitions. In order to effectively achieve certain objectives, we need to bear in mind that PD activities take place under domestic and foreign conditions that are hard to predict and which can undergo changes (Hlihor January-March 2023, p. 24). This is why it's necessary to be able to adapt to new circumstances (Hlihor January-March 2023, p. 24).

On February 3, 2009, several PD experts and independent film and media producers met in order to come up with innovative ways of improving relations between the U.S. and other countries (Media As Global Diplomat (1)). The media are granted the ability to transform PD and to contribute toward peaceful international relations (Media As Global Diplomat (2)). PD has effective means of influencing the thinking and behavior of both political leaders and ordinary people abroad (Hlihor January-March 2023, p. 22). Knowing how to use the media could contribute toward a successful peacemaking process (Gilboa 2001, p. 23) and this should not be overlooked by policymakers (Puddephatt April 2006, p. 5). This contribution toward peace can be provided by both international and local media (Khalif August 2023, p. 40). In the viewpoint of Ghasemi and Karimi (January 2020), the new media have become a major factor for fostering peace.

Khalif (August 2023, p. 40) states that the weight of the media in conflict management and resolution has grown since World War II. For instance, regarding decades of conflict in Somalia, the media play a leading role in fostering peacebuilding efforts (Khalif August 2023, p. 40).

Ukraine / Zelensky

In an exclusive interview for this piece, and touching on the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine (2022-2024), Tara Sonenshine feels that, since February 2022, Ukrainian president Zelensky has made very good use of the media to communicate that his country wishes to be independent and free. The interviewee adds that, considering that things are very bipartisan in the U.S., Zelensky's greatest impact can be seen among Democrats. In this regard, Sonenshine refers to a Gallup poll conducted from March 1-17, 2024, showing bipartisan differences, with Democrats spearheading the backing of Ukraine (Brenan April 12, 2024).

Tara Sonenshine points out that Zelensky has defended his cause on social media, while traveling the world to hold talks and give interviews. Based on an analysis of posts by the Ukrainian government and by the city of Kyiv, according to official figures provided by Twitter (present-day X), immediately following Russian troops' setting foot on Ukrainian soil, Boatwright

(August 18, 2023) concludes that these governments have used said digital platform as a form of strategic communication and PD. In Boatwright's (August 18, 2023) opinion, the way the Ukrainian government has made use of social media throughout the armed conflict with Russia can be shown as a model or should at least warrant the attention of other countries seeking to improve their public image, chiefly in wartime or during other hard times.

In the field of media diplomacy, for the sender, it's important to determine specific audiences and precisely send them messages via adequate communication channels. As concerns the ongoing armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, Sonenshine states that targeted messaging is key for Ukraine. Current ICTs enable targeting the smallest segment of audiences – individuals (Zhang, Swartz March 2009).

Tara Sonenshine believes that Russian Federation President Putin has repressed the media while restricting the work of journalists. Russia recently banned several European media in response to the European Union's ban of Russian media (Faulconbridge, Osborn June 25, 2024). The New York Times also reported that journalists in Ukraine object to pressures exerted on their work (Kramer, et alii June 18, 2024). In reality, a State isn't always able to use the media to easily send a message to a foreign target audience, especially in a context of war. This is because it could be necessary to overcome censorship or applicable prohibitions in other countries while managing to influence the media's agenda-setting process. The message can only influence the receiver if the latter actually receives it. Sonenshine states that, for any country's PD, communication with foreigners is vital.

Summit diplomacy currently plays a key role in international relations (Mishra July 17, 2023). For the Ukrainian government, the Peace Summit, held in Switzerland on June 15 and 16, 2024, started off by serving to exert international pressure on Russia, in order to lead the latter to negotiate peace with Ukraine (Umarov June 21, 2024). While this summit was not attended by the Russian Federation President, the day before its scheduled start, in an anticipation effort, Putin laid out his conditions for peace with Ukraine (Soldatkin June 14, 2024). Those conditions were quickly rejected by Zelensky via Italian news channel SkyTG24 (Soldatkin June 14, 2024). Said statements by Putin and Zelensky's immediate same-day reply constitute a sort of dialogue. To this end, we should point out the relevance of rhetoric as part of media diplomacy. It is vital for a sender to be able to influence the target audience.

During the aforementioned summit, Zelensky and representatives from several countries were given the chance to globally disseminate messages, from Lucerne, through various world media outlets that sent their journalists there to cover the event. In the presence of reporters, Zelensky underscored joint efforts to put an end to the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, leading to the establishment of a just peace (Bellamy June 15, 2024). The presence of journalists at this kind of events enables participating political leaders to send messages to both audiences of their countries and international audiences, as they seek to influence public opinion. This can be particularly important as support to decision-making by the governments of democratic States.

In actual fact, most people do not become aware of foreign affairs on site, but, rather, via news media (Golan July 19, 2013). The media's approach to a given subject somehow influences public opinion (Golan July 19, 2013).

Conclusion

Academic research into the media's relations with diplomacy, namely PD and media diplomacy, currently reveals that there is some conceptual uncertainty and / or confusion. Even under such circumstances, research is possible while making a few conceptual as well as terminological choices. At least for those studying this topic, the importance of PD becomes evident in the sphere of international relations. (However, in strategic terms, PD is part of a whole where various components need to be conveniently interconnected).

In reality, PD and media diplomacy evolve with a high degree of dynamics, due, inter alia, to their ability to take advantage of progress in the domain of ICTs. The central element of PD, media diplomacy and digital diplomacy is communication. In this field, it is vital for the sender to be able to influence certain target audiences: from vast swaths of the population of one or several countries down to a single individual; via traditional media (international, national or local); over the Internet, most notably social media; or even face-a-face. This is why, among others, the training of diplomats should include studying communication.

The abovementioned digitalization boosts the speed of diplomacy, compared to a prior era, allowing for swift responsiveness to a variety of international situations. This swiftness can be positive if it isn't tantamount to hastiness. Thus, if a rapid response is required, prudence calls for quick reflection beforehand.

Within a context where diplomats ordinarily use ICTs to relay their messages, we should not forget that diplomacy is an art. Certain of the diplomat's human qualities, such as creativity and charisma, continue to be important.

Security-related issues are vital for understanding relations among States. To such end, it should be added that PD currently holds critical relevance for countries' security. PD, in general, and media diplomacy, in particular, under different time horizons, can contribute toward peace. Ideally, policymakers need to know how to use the media to achieve peace. This can also be an objective of summit diplomacy. This was precisely underscored by Ukrainian President Zelensky, via journalists from various parts of the world who were on hand at the Peace Summit, which was held in Switzerland on June 15 and 16, 2024.

As part of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Ukrainian Government and President Zelensky have made effective use of PD, media diplomacy and digital diplomacy, to defend the nation's interests and garner international backing. Among several aspects, and on an international scale, this goes by way of the ability to influence the media's agenda-setting process, seeking to have news on said armed conflict brought to the forefront as much as possible over time, without causing audience saturation.

Considering his prior acting experience, President Zelensky takes thorough advantage of his communication skills, namely as concerns television. Currently, and in actual fact, rhetoric, in the field of the media, is a relevant aspect of international political communication.

 Interview

*This interview was conducted, via email, on July 2, 2024

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