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RETHINKING MEDIA DIPLOMACY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT: DIGITAL MEDIA DIPLOMACY

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Abstract: *Modern digital media have enabled the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, to talk to foreign parliaments while his country is at war. Zelensky's virtual communications are not aimed at enhancing Ukraine's international image, as in traditional forms of public diplomacy; rather, they seek to obtain military assistance and reach a mutually beneficial outcome for his country. These, however, are activities of media diplomacy, a concept that scholars have abandoned over the last two decades in favour of public diplomacy. Through a critical review, this study examines the division between these concepts and other related concepts and analyses the role of the media in international communications, including those in times of war. The widespread use of technology and social media, as well as the specific diplomatic communications that have allowed Zelensky to talk to the world, have led to the conclusion that the current concepts of media diplomacy, public diplomacy, and digital diplomacy are not appropriate in the current circumstances. Therefore, a new concept is proposed: digital media diplomacy.*

Keywords: Media diplomacy, Public diplomacy, Digital diplomacy, Mediatization, Zelensky, Ukraine.

Introduction

Describing the media landscape more than five decades ago, Marshall McLuhan (1962) emphasized that the world has become a “global village”. At that time, this seemed like a prediction, but today this concept is already part of everyday life. This has been achieved because of the rapid development of information technology and worldwide media, where globalization has developed into the “global village” (Dalgish, 2006). Today, technology shapes our world (Fu, 2019): digital technologies are used for political and social mobilization, and social media have influenced young people to consume more information (Newman, 2021). With these

modern technologies and media, McLuhan's "global village" has become a "global theater" (Ralón, 2017).

In this global "village" or "theatre", state and non-state actors communicate political messages transmitted via the media, including between countries that do not have diplomatic relations with each other (Saliu, 2018; Saliu & Llunji, 2022) or communicate publicly with state actors of other countries even in times of war. Heads of state usually focus on addressing their own citizens, but they also often mention international issues and such statements have an impact both at home and abroad (Zaragoza, 2020), especially as these are often related to populist foreign policy approaches (Bustinduy, 2022). Political actors, meanwhile, communicate on two dimensions. The first dimension is the level of universality, where the head of state or government communicates on issues of universal value; the second dimension is where the political leader of a country can be perceived as a prominent and visible national icon (Peres et al., 2020). In addition, nowadays political actors use technology to communicate with foreign publics (Manor, 2019).

Volodymyr Zelensky's communications with the parliaments of Western democracies during the ongoing conflict can be considered as being of this nature. Of course, in addition to military assistance, these communications seek to protect Ukraine from Russian aggression. The transformative power of modern communications has meant that, despite not moving physically from Ukraine, Zelensky has been able to address the parliaments of several Western countries, such as the United Kingdom's House of Commons (BBC, 2022), the United States Congress (Wolf et al., 2022), and France's National Assembly (France24, 2022), etc. Through the media, Internet, and social media platforms, Zelensky has been able to communicate in real-time with the leaders of Western countries, conducting virtual diplomacy by communicating directly with global audiences and foreign parliaments. At the same time, these initiatives emphasize his commitment to his country by remaining there in person rather than travelling abroad during wartime.

For this reason, Zelensky's communications are a new phenomenon in international communications and diplomacy. According to studies conducted in this field over the last 20 years, these activities would generally have been viewed as *public diplomacy*, a concept

frequently used by researchers in international communications. However, as will be argued in this paper, Zelensky's communication methods should not be considered public diplomacy, but rather as *media diplomacy*, a concept which has been abandoned by researchers over the last two decades. For this reason, the aim of the paper is to analyse Zelensky's communication activities during the war and to put them into a paradigm (Kuhn, 2012). The main research question arises from this objective, which is: What are the specifics of international political communications that have appeared and reappeared in the case of Zelensky's public communications during the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war?

To answer this question, the following parts of this paper will explain the concepts of media diplomacy and public diplomacy, as well as the differences between them and the connection with digital diplomacy. This will be done through the critical review and framing method, with these critical explanations made by analysing the most representative literature from the most cited authors of these concepts. In fact, the essential studies for media diplomacy are those written before the year 2000. From January 2000 to April 2022, journals published by Sage Publishingⁱ had only three articles with *media diplomacy* in the title and 95 with *public diplomacy*, while journals published by Taylor & Francisⁱⁱ during the same period have only two articles with *media diplomacy* in the title and 180 with *public diplomacy*. However, the scope of work is not limited to just these two publishing houses; the most representative studies for the field and the problem have been analysed.

In addition, to deepen the argumentation of this abandoned concept that has reappeared with the war in Ukraine, some historical cases of media diplomacy will be given. These examples are selected according to the framing method, which involves selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text. This is done in such a way as to promote a particular definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52): frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions (Entman, 1993, 2004; Redden, 2011). As a research paradigm, framing helps to illuminate normative and empirical contradictions especially in mass communication, political communication, and media analysis (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).

1. The meaning of media diplomacy and related concepts

1.1. The meaning of media diplomacy

Diplomacy used to be highly secretive, especially with regard to diplomats' personal abilities to communicate and negotiate. However, when Britain's Foreign Minister, Lord Palmerston, learnt how the telegraph worked in 1860, his reaction was: "this is the end of diplomacy" (Washburn, 1978). In this case, the telegraph was presented as a medium which carries the message from one interlocutor to another over a long distance. However, media and diplomacy are usually deemed to be "two different types of communication which run along different paths" (Cohen, 1986, p. 6). Meanwhile, mass media provides public information related to foreign developments, while diplomacy operates through confidential conversations between governments via formal channels, statements, and attitudes. Information plays a primary role in international relations, either as a tool of communication between individuals or as a tool of understanding and familiarization between peoples and nations (Masmoudi, 1981).

However, diplomacy has long been public, in other words, the message addressed to a foreign country or government can be released publicly. In this sense, media participation in diplomacy sometimes keeps sensitive information secret, as couriers of diplomatic messages, but sometimes also creates diplomatic incidents or deliberate manipulations to achieve an intended goal (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 73). Media diplomacy reached prominence in the 19th century when the French, British and American press of the time began to pay attention to foreign information (Cohen, 1986); however, "concepts and visualization of media diplomacy have been scantily studied from an international communication perspective" (Lim, 2017, p. 11).

Indeed, in the current era of widespread access to information and global media coverage, political leaders can communicate a country's foreign policy interests to domestic audiences through promoting their own country's interests; at the same time, they are trying to design, manage, and control their own public image (Peres et al., 2020). Such communication increasingly empowers the global society while simultaneously affirming ethnocentrism

(Baraldi, 2006). These forms of communication are sometimes used to counter propaganda, but also even to spread it (Modjtahedi & Szpunar, 2022).

Media diplomacy implies the role of the media in international communications and international relations (Lim, 2017; Shinar, 2000; Cohen, 1986). It includes the media as a conduit for conveying the diplomatic message from state actors to foreign state actors and audiences to achieve specific results: “media diplomacy concerns how the media link policymakers to foreign governments and the public” (Cohen, 1986, p. 8). Among the most accepted definitions is that of Eytan Gilboa (2001), which is also the most cited in international communications.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Gilboa, media diplomacy means using the media for political purposes to transmit messages and attitudes to global state and non-state actors to reach international consensus. “Media diplomacy refers to officials' uses of the media to communicate with state and non-state actors, to build confidence and advance negotiations, and to mobilize public support for agreements” (Gilboa, 2001, p. 10).

Nevertheless, media diplomacy is often confused with – and also interacts with – similar concepts, primarily public diplomacy and digital diplomacy.

1.2. The meaning of public diplomacy

The concept of public diplomacy, coined by Edmund Gullion in 1965, was traditionally understood as dealing with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies (Cull, 2006). Its purpose is to increase the country's international image by exposing the values of that country and bringing economic, political, cultural, and tourist-related benefits (Leonard et al., 2002; Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004; Gilboa, 2008; Saliu, 2021, 2022). It also involves the communications of state and non-state actors with foreign publics to inform, influence, and engage them in realizing state interests (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005; Gilboa, 2008; Gregory, 2011; Cull, 2008, 2012; Pamment, 2013, 2016a; Saliu, 2020a, 2020b). In other words, the state and non-state actors of a country address foreign audiences rather than the state actors of foreign countries: “public diplomacy is the art of communicating a country's policies, values and culture to the people of another nation” (Lee & Lin, 2017, p. 1). The objective of public

diplomacy is “to influence a foreign government, by influencing its citizens” (Frederick, 1993, p. 229). These practices are focused on the cultivation of positive public opinion in foreign nations (Golan, Manor & Arceneaux, 2019) and is achieved through various activities, including educational and cultural exchange programs, scholarships, cinematography, and the media, as well as through language programs, sports, and the arts, etc. (Nye, 2004, 2008, 2019; Gilboa, 2008; Snow, 2020; Golan, 2015).

Some scholars place public diplomacy in the field of international relations and diplomacy (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005), whereas others believe it belongs in the field of communications and public relations (Ingenhoff, Calamai & Sevin, 2021; Di Martino, 2020; Tam & Kim, 2019; Gilboa, 2008; Saliu, 2022).

According to Eytan Gilboa (2008), Mark Leonard et al., (2002), Joseph Nye (2004, 2019), activities undertaken via public diplomacy to achieve its goals are the following:

- information management, which is a daily and even hourly activity where media is used as a communication channel to convey positive information about the country to foreign audiences;
- strategic communication, which means sending messages to foreign audiences focusing on weekly and monthly activities;
- the establishment of long-term relations, which requires years of activities to achieve understanding and cooperation for common values, including cultural diplomacy, student exchanges and scholarships, the influence of a country's diaspora in the host country, etc.

1.3. The differences between media diplomacy and public diplomacy

Media diplomacy has frequently been confused with public diplomacy (Gilboa, 1998, 2001), but in fact they differ from each other. Gilboa (2001) emphasizes that media diplomacy aims to reach an international agreement where the use of public channels has a rapid effect, while public diplomacy through the media aims to create a friendly climate within a target country and/or enhance the international image of the country over an extended period using the media. As defined by Gilboa, public diplomacy is where “state and non-state actors use the media

and other channels of communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies; while *media diplomacy* is where officials use the media to communicate with actors and to promote conflict resolution” (Gilboa, 2001, p. 1). In other words, this means that the difference has to do with communication actors and communication channels.

In public diplomacy, communicative actors are those state and non-state actors who use the media to influence foreign audiences. In media diplomacy, actors communicating with foreign audiences are only state actors, but not non-state ones.

Regarding the use of communication channels to reach foreign audiences, public diplomacy uses the media as one of many such channels because there are also other ways for direct communications to be realised which are unmediated – for example, exchanges of students and scholars, cultural exchanges, tourism, the diaspora, etc. By contrast, media diplomacy uses only media-based channels and has no other forms of communication: “since public diplomacy treated the media as one of its tools to influence foreign audiences for promoting the foreign policy and affecting their thinking, media diplomacy has received scant likelihood of being regarded as a promising field of study in international communication” (Lim, 2017, p. 13).

Gary Rawnsley (1995) sees the difference between the two concepts in the messages received from the media, i.e. from the audience. According to him, in public diplomacy it is the political actors which send messages through the media and which are addressed to foreign audiences, while in media diplomacy, state actors send messages through the media to the state actors of other countries. Others see this as an intentional move.

Meanwhile, media diplomacy is about using the media only as a communication channel to convey the message to heads of state, governments, and foreign audiences. When a political actor speaks during times of conflict, it should be considered that the actor speaks for a highly heterogeneous public. This requires a message to resonate with certain audiences. As stated by former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was the commander of the US forces during Operation Desert Storm (Iraq, 1990), there are multiple audiences. During the operation, he instructed his team staff to be careful when speaking on television because “when we are out there on television, communicating instantaneously around the world, we're talking to five audiences” (Leonard et al., 2002, p. 12). The first group of these listeners, according to Powell, was the reporters who asked questions; the second group was the American television-watching

public; the third group comprised at least 170 foreign governments which were interested in what was being said; the fourth was the enemy, while the fifth group was the American military troops at risk (Leonard et al., 2002).

According to Gilboa (2005, 2001), the use of the media as an instrument of foreign policy and international negotiations encompasses three dimensions: public diplomacy, media diplomacy and media-broker diplomacy. The latter can be defined as “where journalists temporarily assume the role of diplomats and serve as mediators in international negotiations” (Gilboa, 2001, p. 1), while media diplomacy means that a politician seeks to mobilize the support of the world to reach a useful solution for his country in troubled times. Public diplomacy, however, has to do with promoting the country in peacetime.

1.4. The meaning of digital diplomacy

In this age of hypermedia (Deibert, 1997), the widespread use of digital technology has changed the way of doing business, interpersonal social communications, and government communications with the public. Interaction modes have changed and have become more frequent and empowering. In this networked society (Castells, 2009, 2015) and infosphere (Floridi, 2014), narratives and storytelling are at the heart of a nation's identity and image (Lepore, 2019), especially on social media. Politicians and diplomats increasingly use digital technology and social media to spread their messages.

In the age of the Internet and social media, the practice of engaging diplomats in information management has been transformed. Now, political actors, foreign ministries, and diplomats can directly manage this information, whereas in the age of traditional media and in the pre-Internet era, messages which were to be shared publicly had to pass through mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television. Although media have been used in diplomacy for many years, digital diplomacy has received intermittent attention from the field of media studies (Hayden, 2012; Pamment, 2016b). Social media has begun to attract significant and serious interest in the academic world, especially after the political revolutions in the Middle East in 2011 (Bjola & Jiang, 2015).

Digital diplomacy is broadly defined as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes (Bjola, 2015, p. 4). In the first place, it is about the use and management of digital technology in diplomacy, especially social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). Digital media is even used in international communications and diplomacy to spread stories and to engage political actors, diplomats, and the public with issues of common interest (Pamment, 2016b). In other words, “digital diplomacy is defined as a strategy of managing change through digital tools and virtual collaboration” (Holmes, 2015. p. 15). This has to do with changing previous practices of diplomatic communication, such as engaging diplomats by managing public information themselves, addressing foreign opinions publicly, managing information in international negotiations or crisis management, etc. (Bjola, 2015). Even this aspect can be considered more as a part of public diplomacy, especially when it comes to managing public social media communications in peacetime which also means trying to increase a country’s international image or strengthen the brand of the politician who is using them. In other words, “digital diplomacy is now a salient part of public diplomacy” (Wright & Guerrina, 2020, p. 525).

In the first twenty years of the current century, mediatization has become an essential concept not only in the media (Hepp, Breiter & Hasebrink, 2018) but also in modern life, including international communications (Saliu, 2022). This is because everything is mediatized nowadays, including health, war, medicine, science, music, identity, consumption, memory, death, etc. (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). In general, mediatization is a concept used for the critical analysis of changes in media and communications on the one hand and changes in culture and society on the other (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). People today are always online; in January-February 2021, about 93 per cent of Americans were online and/or used the Internet to either communicate with relatives, to purchase goods and services, or to request information (Perrin & Atske, 2021). Conflict and terror are also mediatized and their impact can be experienced on a massive scale when the attacks or skirmishes receive media coverage (Cottle, 2006; Hjarvard, 2001, 2008; Lewis, 2005). Indeed, in essence, terrorism contains a form of communication as spreading fear, panic, and insecurity, especially by using online communications, are the goal of terrorists (Seib & Janbek, 2011).

This mediatization of international communications has further caused physical distances to lose their importance. As mentioned in the introduction, the world has been reduced to a “global village”, as demonstrated by Zelensky’s virtual appearances in several national parliaments. Now, states, non-state actors, international institutions, social movements, and the 4.5 billion people alive in the world today who have access to the Internet are all visual narrators of global politics (Crisley, Manor & Bjola, 2020).

Debates and studies on global media are not new, while “with the arrival of the Internet, especially social media, many global media around the world have adopted these resources in their potential to break geographical boundaries” (Zhang & Ong’ong’a, 2021, p. 4). So, with digital diplomacy, politicians who have social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, etc.) have media that they can manage themselves and send out communications whenever they see fit, without needing to call journalists to give a message or statement.

2. Historical and practical cases of media diplomacy

International information has been growing since the 19th century. *The Times* of London had a war correspondent for the Crimean War in the 1850s, while between 1858-1868, seven London daily newspapers entered into agreements with *Reuters* for news journalism and the *Press Association* began distributing international news to local press (Cohen, 1986). On the eve of World War I, the *Daily Telegraph* had correspondents in Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg, and New York. Television became dominant later, especially after World War II, where greater attention was paid to international information (Cohen, 1986).

During the Cold War, media diplomacy served the nuclear arms race on a global scale. The US and the USSR were involved in a fierce battle to generate negative global perceptions of the other. Thus, in 1957, the Soviet leader Khrushchev promoted a new era of international political communication via an interview with the American television station CBS, in which he argued for a peaceful co-existence (Laurano, 2006). With this instance of media diplomacy, the Soviet secretary in fact sought to clean up – as much as possible – the negative international view of the USSR. This had worsened due to its failure to respect the freedoms of people in Warsaw Pact countries; in 1956, just one year previously, the Soviets had carried out a military

intervention in Hungary. An additional early example in this respect was also given by the American president John F. Kennedy, who, being aware of the importance of media influence and the traditional methods used by the White House, circumvented the journalists and addressed the American public directly, appealing to them to “participate in the presidency”. Consequently, the first live television broadcast from the White House was on 25 January 1961, where a room of 418 journalists could ask the President questions thanks to the first use of wireless microphones. 60 million viewers watched that broadcast (Laurano, 2006).

Global TV stations have also created new worldwide opportunities for diplomatic propaganda, misinformation, and manipulation. For instance, political leaders may release a statement which is broadcast directly on local or global TV stations in the hope that what has been said will acquire the dynamics to damage or disrupt the plans of the opposition party. Thus, during the First Gulf War in 1990, the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein made a statement that he allegedly accepted the conditions of the Western allies. This statement was made shortly before the beginning of the field attacks, once all preparations had been made. The sole purpose of the statement was to influence world opinion by saying that a country which had accepted the conditions was being attacked (Gilboa, 2002). For this reason, media – and most importantly television (Newman, 2021) – create instant global diplomatic communication, which has resulted in new challenges, new dilemmas, and insecurities for participants involved in political processes. For political leaders, this includes how to deal with the need for instant responses to situations, as well as how to manage confusing and challenging developments, while at the same time avoiding exposing oneself as a weak leader. All of this needs to be integrated into a single message which appeals to both domestic and foreign audiences (Gilboa, 2002, p. 25-26).

Recently, it has become apparent that designers and advocates of foreign policy receive wide attention primarily due to a straightforward reason: nowadays, any statement uttered in any corner of the world does not need to be shared through traditional diplomatic channels. Nonetheless, thanks to the media, such statements can take off all around the world in a blink of an eye. In fact, foreign policy is also implemented through the media and is not just based on statements from governments, as was the case in the past. A practical example is of American president George W. Bush during a visit to Tanzania in 2008, who, one day after Kosovo’s independence was proclaimed, stated to the media that the United States of America supported

this act (ABC News, 2008). “Sometimes, during grave international crises, the media provides the only channel for communication and negotiation between rival actors, or officials often use global television rather than traditional diplomatic channels to deliver messages” (Gilboa, 2001, p. 11). There are many other such examples, as Gilboa outlines:

During the first phase of the 1979-81 Iran hostage crisis, the United States communicated with the terrorists holding the hostages exclusively through the press; during the 1990-91 Gulf conflict, US Secretary of State James Baker delivered the last ultimatum to Saddam Hussein through CNN, and not through the US Ambassador to Iraq; in January 1998, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami chose CNN to send a conciliatory message to the United States. (Gilboa, 2001, p. 11).

In these times where advanced communication technologies are used, a political statement which affects bilateral or multilateral relations is a direct message from one country to another conveyed in real time, be it to a neighbouring state or to a country on the other side of the world. This bilateral communication can occur even between enemy states, such as Iran and Israel (Shinar, 2000); for example, the media often reports statements from Tehran and the prompt responses from Israel (Pahlavi, 2012). This illustrates that constant communication can occur between countries that have no diplomatic relations, and such communications often occur, albeit conducted at a distance. In February 2009, the prime minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, stated in Pristina that Russia would also recognize Kosovo’s independence (Top Channel, 2009). The Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, reacted immediately. From Moscow, he stated that Russia had not changed its position on that matter. This example demonstrates, as Evan Potter (2002) emphasizes, that increasing the opportunities for access, speed, and abundant dissemination of news and information to a global audience in real-time has made the management of state affairs more complex than ever.

Conclusions

Returning to the example of Volodymyr Zelensky, the communications of the Ukrainian president do not seek to enhance the country’s international image for economic or tourism-related purposes; nor do they aim to enhance Ukraine’s national brand, or to capture the hearts and minds of foreign audiences, as is commonly aspired to through public diplomacy. Rather,

he seeks military support to counter Russian aggression and reach a favourable outcome for his country, which is typical of media diplomacy. However, scholars have abandoned the concept of media diplomacy over the last decade, perhaps because in peacetime, the main goal is not to reach international agreements (media diplomacy) but to promote a country's image for political, economic and cultural benefits (public diplomacy).

Zelensky's case, therefore, takes us back to media diplomacy. By appearing in virtual form in the parliaments and assemblies of Western democracies in real-time while Ukraine is in a state of war, it can be argued that he is an example of self-managed media diplomacy. However, at present only digital diplomacy can be self-managed in the narrow sense of the word; that is, where the individual actor concerned uses digital media and social media. Since international communications are highly dynamic and are realized in real-time, and also because diplomatic communication channels have been transformed and are now both public and mediated, current concepts such as media diplomacy, public diplomacy and digital diplomacy do not adequately describe this new situation. Therefore, we consider that a new concept, *digital media diplomacy*, describes these new circumstances more realistically.

Another specific detail displayed by these new modes of diplomatic communication is that media have enabled political actors from different countries to communicate specific agendas without needing to travel or to meet each other in person. In this way, foreign policy was communicated directly from a country's seat of power without having to visit their foreign counterparts. In addition, it has also ensured communication between countries that do not have traditional diplomatic relations with each other.

Nowadays, the new concept of *digital media diplomacy* outlined in this study represents a specific contribution to international political communication. Indeed, in going beyond traditional communication channels, it makes foreign policy more agile and more dynamic. It has also removed the barriers of traditional diplomatic communications, allowing a two-way exchange of diplomatic messages even between countries that may not have friendly relations. This marks another dimension of this concept: the transformation of the unidirectional method of disseminating a message to foreign audiences has now been replaced by a genuine bidirectional exchange, facilitated by technology and modern communications. Such dynamics

require that a political or diplomatic actor is ready to convey a diplomatic message by reaching out to various internal and external audiences, as well as to the official governmental representatives of both friendly and unfriendly countries, in order to defend the pragmatism of that particular state. As has been shown in this study, *digital media diplomacy* allows a single message to be transformed into a multi-dimensional form of communication which impacts both domestic and foreign audiences, thus demonstrating its power in the world of foreign policy and international affairs.

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?field1=Title&text1=public+diplomacy>.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Google Scholar, the most cited scholar in the field of media and public diplomacy is Eytan Gilboa, with about 4400 citations.