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## Social Media: An Instrument of Public Diplomacy and a Weapon of Psychological Operations

Social media provides opportunity for citizen participation in democratic deliberation because it allows an exchange of opinions and information without the intervention of editors and opinion leaders. Nevertheless, it can also be used as a weapon in psychological operations because it can hide the source of misleading information and merge into the online discourse without the target audience realising it. This chapter examines two major areas of impact of the social media. On the one hand, it can be an instrument of including citizens in a new form of public diplomacy called peer-to-peer diplomacy. The first part of the chapter summarises the role of modern media in shaping political opinion in a transparent way. In addition, it highlights the theoretical background to its impact, then introduces a case of the successful application of social media for promoting a country. In contrast to this, the second part of the chapter explains why and how social media becomes a weapon in psychological operations. It draws attention to the total surveillance and isolation which the social media technologically allows. It takes its examples from recent events: among others, from the Russia–Ukraine war.

### **Introduction: The development of the modern media**

Since the evolution of mass media, that is, the appearance of the news industry with the institutionalisation of news production and mass news consumption from printed newspapers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars have been researching its impact on societies. Technological advancement has resulted in other forms of media, such as radio, television, satellite broadcast, and, in our time, the Internet and social media platforms. Contemporary researchers distinguish conventional

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media (print newspapers, radio, television) from digital media (the Internet and social media platforms). The major distinguishing features are the production of content and the degree of interaction between the content providers and the content consumers. From these aspects, conventional media is often described as comprising top-down processes in which small privileged groups of journalists and media workers create content for the public in close cooperation with, and, in fact, under the control of the elite.<sup>2</sup> In this context the gatekeepers (for instance, the editors) filter information and decide on publication dependent on the dominant ideology and values of the given society. Apart from gatekeepers,<sup>3</sup> institutions (boards) may be functioning in order to control the flow of information to the public and the legal and ethical standards of news reporting. Contrary to this vertical model, the digital media is usually seen as a horizontal, more decentralised model, in which many provide content for many, mostly free of the strict control of institutions, gatekeepers, boards and regulations. The digital media could lead to new forms of citizen participation; however, it poses some dangers that will be discussed later. As mentioned above, the methodology of analysing the content and assessing the impact of mass media communication started to evolve since its appearance.<sup>4</sup> In the early phase of research, the Direct Flow Theory was formulated and it was believed that mass media content had a direct effect on every individual who was exposed to it. In the 1950s, the Theory of Two-Step Flow was developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld.<sup>5</sup> The novelty of this theory was the inclusion of interpersonal relationships in its model of political communication because it attributed relevance to personal contacts in spreading and recycling information broadcast as well as the creation of individual engagement. Thus, the definition and the role of opinion leaders was regarded slightly different: they were viewed as members of the small, interconnected networks which constitute society. The Two-Step Flow Theory was later further developed into the Multistep Flow Theory.<sup>6</sup> In the Internet Age, due to technological disruptions, network studies have come under spotlight again, which underpins the significance of the Two-Step, and of the Multistep Flow Theories.

<sup>2</sup> VAN DIJK 1988.

<sup>3</sup> SHOEMAKER 2016.

<sup>4</sup> LAZARSFELD et al. 1944; BERELSON 1952; VAN DIJK 1988; KRIPPENDORFF 2004; FAIRCLOUGH–FAIRCLOUGH 2012; NEUENDORF 2017.

<sup>5</sup> SOUTHWELL 2016.

<sup>6</sup> KATZ 1987; BROSIUS–WEIMANN 1996.

## **Modern media and public diplomacy**

The media assumed powerful roles from the beginning, two of which are especially important from the perspective of politics and international relations. First, it was soon recognised by political elites as an essential tool for establishing a link between themselves and their constituents. Thus, media campaigns and agenda setting were exploited as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Second, it was understood that the information disseminated by the media shaped the perception of the facts and events of the world by the audience.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, media became an effective means of foreign policy for agenda-setting, constructing shared knowledge, shaping beliefs and public attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Constructivism in international relations research actually holds that global political discourse, mostly disseminated by the media, plays a decisive part in forging, strengthening or weakening international ties.<sup>10</sup> Models of communication for the media are mostly founded on interpersonal oral communication,<sup>11</sup> which reflects the evolution of human language, writing and society. This also explains why human networks play a crucial role in conveying information. The efficiency of combining technological and human networks has been the basis of the development of an innovative form of public diplomacy: peer-to-peer diplomacy. The term “public diplomacy” is relatively new: it was created in 1965 and became widely used after the end of the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> However, taking into consideration that it involves the dissemination of state-sponsored news favourable to the objectives of the stakeholder, the practice is as old as history. The five major areas of public diplomacy are listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting.<sup>13</sup> The latter underscores the importance of news production, even though much of it seems to be out of state control in the era of social media. Before the discussion of new forms of public diplomacy, its possible connections with persuasion and propaganda need to be clarified. Due to the fact that the term ‘propaganda’ was discredited in two world wars, during the Cold War ideological struggle and in

<sup>7</sup> HAMPTON 2010.

<sup>8</sup> GERBNER 1985; PHILO 2010.

<sup>9</sup> SEIB 2010.

<sup>10</sup> WENDT 1999; HURD 2008.

<sup>11</sup> MCQUAIL–WINDAHL 1993.

<sup>12</sup> CULL 2008.

<sup>13</sup> CULL 2008.

deceptive political campaigns, for instance, to justify wars,<sup>14</sup> it has been avoided in order to delineate persuasive activity that is intended to be transparent and democratically controlled. Nevertheless, today's definitions of propaganda are quite similar to the classic ones. For example, Lasswell and Leites, among the first propaganda scholars, defined propaganda as “the manipulation of symbols as a means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters”.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary researchers Jowett and O'Donnell say: “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”<sup>16</sup> Public diplomacy is sometimes placed in the triangle of hard power, soft power and smart power.<sup>17</sup> It may offer a clue to the classification of various types of influence, whose diverse names are confusing to the public, such as public relations, information and influence operations, marketing and advertising, strategic communication – just to mention a few. Terminology seems to be a means of influencing on its own, because any activity perceived as adverse can be labelled “propaganda”, “manipulation” or “fake news” by an opponent. The report entitled *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* (2020) recommends that allies build shared terminology for hybrid threats, which would obviously lead to shared situational awareness and more united action against adverse activities, one of which is deceptive foreign propaganda. Bakir et al. propose a comprehensive theoretical framework founded on a continuum ranging from consensual forms of persuasion, which are transparent, to non-consensual forms, which are not transparent and comprise deception, incentivisation, coercion and deceptive coercion.<sup>18</sup> If the use of persuasive techniques is recognised in modern democracies as well as in international relations, the systematic description and analysis of various types of persuasion will be possible, including widely accepted methods of peer-to-peer public diplomacy. A comprehensive framework will also make it possible to distinguish between the state organised participation of volunteer citizens in promoting their country, conducting transparent activities, and troll armies hired for clandestine activities.

<sup>14</sup> MARLIN 2003; JOWETT–O'DONNELL 2015.

<sup>15</sup> LASSWELL–LEITES 1965: 177.

<sup>16</sup> JOWETT–O'DONNELL 2015: 7.

<sup>17</sup> NYE 2008.

<sup>18</sup> BAKIR et al. 2019.

### **Peer-to-peer public diplomacy and social media**

Joseph Nye explains that soft power is the ability of a country to attract others, especially with one's culture and values, which may result in an ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices available to others.<sup>19</sup> The recognition that civil society generates much soft power has led to the development of peer-to-peer public diplomacy. The process was facilitated by various factors: the loss of the prestige of state designed information and influence operations, the results of research into social networks and social media platforms and the re-evaluation of personal contacts and face-to-face encounters. As it was mentioned earlier, in international relations states have always tried to target the citizens of other states and this has become possible in the internet era. For instance, Israel launched a 'peoplehood diplomacy' project in 2010 and 2011 involving their public and the Jewish diaspora as advocates so as to improve the image of the country.<sup>20</sup> Following the identification of tools, messages and campaigns, Israeli citizens who volunteered were prepared for conveying positive messages globally. Thus, networks in foreign societies were created or activated faster and more effectively than in conventional, state-run public diplomacy activities. Messages were personalised making use of the enthusiasm and creativity of the participants, while they were still financed and controlled by the state. A remarkable idea of the project was dealing with misinformation, prejudice and stereotypes about Israel: a website was constructed as a resource for both foreign and home audience, where advocates could find evidence to counter hostile attitude. In case of the diaspora, careful selection and training preceded the activities of the advocacy delegations. The collection of contact information allowed the multiplication and extension of the social relationships of the networks. On the whole, the innovation of peer-to-peer diplomacy lies in its adaptation to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has included in its inventory the interaction between the digital world and the physical world; the merging of home audience and foreign audience; the blurring boundaries between state and non-state actors; the transformation of genres and social events; the global reach of individuals and, most of all, active and passive network building. The sections below, however, will highlight that the very same inventory of the Internet, namely, of the social media can be used as a weapon in psychological operations. In the ninth chapter of *Hybrid Warfare*

<sup>19</sup> NYE 2004.

<sup>20</sup> ATTIAS 2012.

*Reference Curriculum. Volume II*,<sup>21</sup> the authors have already pointed out that they will write in more detail about the psychological operations in the context of the Ukrainian–Russian war. First, the concept of psychological operations will be defined. Psychological operations aim to impact the cognitive dimension to influence the selected target group.<sup>22</sup> The target group may not only be the enemy but also the allies or even a country’s own population. For example, political campaigns aim to influence their own voters to mobilise them, their opponents’ voters to stay at home, and the hesitants to vote according to the goals of the campaign designers. Even if in a different way, it is an activity that is as old as mankind. When the prehistoric tribes put bones on themselves and painted their bodies red to look more terrifying, thereby scaring away enemies, it came under this field of activity. With the evolution of technology, more and more new tools were used to influence the chosen target groups, and the spread of mass media led to a paradigm shift. Totalitarian regimes preferred to spread propaganda through mass media. This is one of the reasons why NATO avoids using the term propaganda in its information operations, as it has a negative connotation due to its Nazi and Soviet ideological and political implications. Consequently, NATO uses the terminology of ‘targeted communication’.

### **The negative impacts of social media**

The emergence and spread of social media have been another important milestone in psychological operations. Social media has transformed many aspects of our lives, but the early positives of its use have quickly reversed. A series of studies have shown that it causes severe depression among young people,<sup>23</sup> significantly increasing anxiety.<sup>24</sup> Today, social media has become a serious weapon to influence individuals and societies. This can be attributed to several factors:

- Social networking sites gather data on tens of thousands of aspects of their users. To give just one example, they capture the messages that have been sent and those that have been typed but deleted before being

<sup>21</sup> KRASZNAY et al. 2024: 187–205.

<sup>22</sup> NARULA 2004.

<sup>23</sup> MERRILL et al. 2022.

<sup>24</sup> WOLNIEWICZ et al. 2018.

sent.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the algorithms of social networking sites, combined with artificial intelligence and machine learning, can predict what users will do, when they will do it, and what they will do weeks in advance. In addition to information about individuals, open source information gathering is also relevant for trend analysis, where reactions to specific processes can be examined in real-time. More importantly, given sufficient data, future events can be predicted with high accuracy. For example, János Kertész, a Hungarian network researcher, and his co-authors have shown in a study that the trend analysis of a film's Wikipedia page can predict with 85% accuracy what the box office revenue will be on the first weekend of the film's release.<sup>26</sup>

- The Snowden case in 2013 demonstrated that social networking sites had become a tool of almost total surveillance by national security services.<sup>27</sup> In case of anti-democratic states, this is a fundamental way of controlling and oppressing the state's citizens. Consider, for example, the social credit system in China.<sup>28</sup>
- Social networking site algorithms create so-called opinion bubbles, which are amplified by the post-truth phenomenon.

In the absence of pluralistic consumption habits, this automated selection process adjusted to the user's behaviour may result in the development of a so-called filter bubble; that is, the user will only find those contents at media sites that they regularly consume, whereas they will encounter few or no contradicting contents; however widespread they may be otherwise.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, such a filter bubble potentially leaves the impression on the user that their narrowed perspective on reality is objective, encompassing reality as it is. A closely related concept is the recently expanding post-truth phenomenon, which essentially contributes to the impact of fake news on political decision-making.<sup>30</sup> The term post-truth refers to a state of affairs when public opinion is driven by emotions and beliefs rooted in personal convictions rather than being based on facts. In this

<sup>25</sup> SLEEPER et al. 2013.

<sup>26</sup> MESTYÁN et al. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> BÁNYÁSZ 2014.

<sup>28</sup> CHEN-GROSSKLAGS 2022.

<sup>29</sup> SPOHR 2017.

<sup>30</sup> LEWANDOWSKY et al. 2017.

situation, objectivity gradually loses its importance in reality perception while being replaced by many parallel subjective realities. This process contributes not only to the absorption of fake news but also to the confusion deliberately generated by disseminating alternative information questioning the validity of mainstream news releases. This latter activity is referred to as noise-making, which is aimed at undermining public trust in the institutions of democracy, thus impairing the perceived legitimacy of the current government. Noise making is commonly used by the national security agencies of authoritarian states, particularly against the Member States of the European Union, since fragmenting the EU hinders the Member States from standing up in unity as a global political actor, which leaves more scope to the political ambitions of the noise-making states. Researchers found that fake news, particularly fake political news, spread more rapidly, reached a wider audience, and underwent deeper absorption in all observed information categories, in some cases significantly exceeding the dissemination of valid news. It is also worth noting that people spread fake news faster than botnets.<sup>31</sup>

### **Online deception in the Russia–Ukraine war**

The Ukrainian–Russian war has given the experts many surprises. Everyone was counting on the dominance of previously assumed Russian capabilities in psychological operations, which have been used in an increasingly sophisticated way since 2014. After the beginning of the war, Russian psychological capabilities did not even approach the success of Ukrainian operations. The Russian national security services recognised the importance of filter bubbles and post-truth and successfully campaigned to reinforce mistrust. Covid-19 has strengthened this trend, significantly increasing the spread of pseudo-scientific content and reducing citizens' trust in science and democratic institutions. The various absurd fake news did not eliminate each other but fused into a new paradigm. An example from the first days of the war in Hungary: “Well, do you see Chemtrail stripes in the sky lately??? You haven’t!!!!!!!!!! Now, do you understand what Putin bombed?? The Ukrainian bio labs where these toxins were produced for us and [...] their airports where the planes carrying the toxins took off!!! No more flu and Covid!!!!!!!!!! Putin’s bombs exploded for us! Ukraine was the dep

<sup>31</sup> VOSOUGHI et al. 2017.



stat's (meaning Deep State – author's note) war base!!! All the chemical sprays came from there, and all the poisons in our food came from there!!! So who is thanking Putin???? Bless his every step!!!”<sup>32</sup> We have corrected the spelling mistakes in the quote, which were otherwise numerous. In this Facebook post, several conspiracy theories appear, such as the hidden state, Covid as a biological weapon, chemtrail and genetically modified foods. As the algorithm creates a bubble for users, this content is spread mainly among those who already believe in this narrative. The bubble undermines these ambitions. In our opinion, the Russian lack of success can be explained by previous Russian achievements. However, in wartime, convincing others to support our narrative is crucial, and this requires convincing new audiences. Before the war, the independent press in Russia was not particularly strong, but after the beginning of the war it was almost eliminated by the Russian Government. For this reason, the Ukrainians had to be incredibly creative to inform the Russian population about the war by following the facts and not just with the narrative created by Russian propaganda and censorship. From the beginning of the war, it was vital for Ukraine to strengthen the morale of the population, while at the same time weakening the morale of the Russian soldiers, which was done with great creativity. As we have already pointed out in the mentioned study, cyberattacks and psychological operations influence each other. The fact that cyber volunteers have hacked into the records of the Russian armed forces and published the personal data of the soldiers who were fighting in Ukraine is a perfect illustration of this. Based on this, they started to call family members of soldiers who had been killed or taken prisoner of war in Ukraine to inform them about the soldiers' condition. On the one hand, this informed Russian citizens that there was a war going on – the Russian narrative still says there are only special military operations today. By reporting on the condition of the troops, the morale in the Russian hinterland was reduced, and the appropriate questions were used to extract information about troop movements. Finally, a campaign was started whereby Russian soldiers who had been captured could inform their mothers by filling in Google Forms that they had been taken prisoners of war and that if their mothers came to collect them, they would be freed. In one stroke, this boosted

<sup>32</sup> To this day (July 2023), the user is very active on Facebook in spreading the Russian narrative similarly. Of course, the user may be a fake profile, but this does not diminish its importance. People who have accepted this narrative will encounter this sharing in the same way as if a real person had posted it. We cannot cite the original post to protect the individual's rights.

the morale of Ukrainian soldiers, reinforcing their feeling of superiority while at the same time significantly lowering morale among Russian soldiers. Both countries have a strong interest in influencing international public opinion. As the war continues, Russia is attempting to reduce the unity of European Union members and strengthen the narrative among European citizens that sanctions do not harm Russia, only the EU. The purpose of this is to change the government's support for Ukraine by eroding the public's support. To neutralise this, Ukraine is also working hard since continued support is a matter of survival. Artificial intelligence will be the next game changer for fake news campaigns. Today, we already have numerous videos in which public figures say things they would not otherwise say.<sup>33</sup> This is known as Deepfake, whereby artificial intelligence montages the faces of public actors – even in real time – onto the actors' faces, and add their voice. As machine learning evolves, this technique will become more sophisticated in the future. This will further erode trust in a supposed truth.

## Conclusion

The technological potential of the social media may be exploited for either good or bad purposes. On the one hand, it can become a tool of transparent and democratically organised persuasion and shape public opinion and international relations in a beneficial way. This was illustrated by the case of peer-to-peer diplomacy introduced in Israel. On the other hand, social media may be a source of disinformation, of spreading fake news and deepfakes. In such a case it can be transformed into a malevolent force, like in political fake news campaigns, or in disseminating pseudo-scientific information like in the Covid-19 pandemic. Our examples were taken from psychological operations during the Russia–Ukraine war. In summary, it can be concluded that social media has a positive effect if it is used for connecting users and reality, and it has a negative effect if it is used for isolating users from one another and from reality.

<sup>33</sup> In this context, it is worth searching YouTube for the video from 2018 entitled *You Won't Believe What Obama Says in This Video!*

## Questions

1. What was the effect of the development of the media on political communication?
2. Why is peer-to-peer diplomacy also called “people’s diplomacy”?
3. Does social media connect users or isolate them? Please give your opinion.
4. Which technological opportunities of the social media can be exploited in psychological operations?
5. Please discuss: how can resilience to online deception be improved?

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