



The new PR of states: How nation branding practices affect the security function of public diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how the role of public relations practice in public diplomacy is undergoing a transformation as a consequence of the influence from nation branding. A case study of the Danish government's response to the so-called Cartoon Crisis illustrates how the threat from international terrorism to national security initially served as a catalyst for new public diplomacy initiatives. But as the initiatives were implemented within a framework of nation branding the focus on risk reduction became subjected to a marketing logic and a new focus on economic objectives took over. The paper points to a possible future status of public diplomacy under the influence of nation branding: Public diplomacy may maintain a function pertinent to national security but as this function is incapable of managing real risks it will only serve as auto-communication that legitimizes security policy towards a domestic audience. In the public diplomacy efforts towards transnational publics the link to national security will completely disappear whereby the public relations of states is transformed to the marketing of states.

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1. Introduction

The efforts of states to promote national interests abroad at citizen level have traditionally been conducted within the disciplinary framework of public diplomacy, a discipline closely affiliated with public relations (van Ham, 2002; Wang, 2006). Public diplomacy as a scholarly field is built on the theoretical traditions of international relations and international communication (Gilboa, 2008; Szondi, 2008) and for communication scholars the natural host discipline is international public relations (Kunczik, 1997; Yang, Klyueva, & Taylor, *this issue*). From this perspective, studies of governments' increased citizen-level diplomacy have been conducted through the lens of image-building and more recently relationship management (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 2007; Taylor, 2008). Thus, public diplomacy can be seen as a part of the successful expansion of core public relations practices such as relation building (cf. Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and image making (cf. Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001) into many societal institutions as a specific mode of governance (Crouch, 2004).

The expansion of public relations has for the past two decades been accompanied by a convergence. In this the traditional boundaries between public relations and marketing are dissolving as new organizational practices and theoretical frameworks such as corporate communication and corporate branding have emerged (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Cornelissen, 2011). These developments have, together with the past decades of changes in the more general field of strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007), undoubtedly contributed to the identity crisis of public relations (Hutton, 1999) but it has at the same time kept the field vibrant (Gregory, 2012).

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However, public relations practice may be facing some limits to its allegedly successful colonization of other societal modes of governance as foreign policy security issues are increasingly handled through reputation management practices (Fan, 2008; Hopf, 1998; Rasmussen, 2010). By theorizing the current influence of nation branding on public diplomacy and further the way governments are increasingly relying on risk management in their policy making, this paper argues that the traditional link between public diplomacy and efforts to enhance national security may be undergoing a transformation where it is gradually being replaced by a new link between nation branding and efforts to increase national prosperity. By examining the events that followed Denmark's so-called cartoon crisis the paper points to how this shift may have severe consequences; firstly for the way governments respond to national security risks, and secondly for the role of public relations practice in what has become known as 'new public diplomacy' (Melissen, 2005; Seib, 2009; Szondi, 2008).

The overall argument of this paper is twofold: (1) When security risks are redefined as reputational risks public diplomacy practitioners will be directed into governing those risks through market economy metrics. (2) In the process of that redefinition the relationship building function of public relations loses terrain to a brand management function to an extent where new public diplomacy becomes the *marketing* of states rather than the *public relations* of states.¹

The argument of the paper falls in six sections. The *first section* outlines the scope and structure of the paper. The *second section* explains the role of public diplomacy, including its historical heritage in propaganda; its modern link to public relations; and the contemporary influence from the marketing logics of nation branding where reputation metrics play an increasingly important role. By referring to some of the current discussions in the risk management literature, the *third section* examines how the adoption of risk management practices by governments is likely to result in a focus on reputational risk rather than societal risks. This section further argues that the increased focus on reputation, which resembles the shift from public diplomacy to nation branding, jeopardizes the rational foundation for risk management. The *fourth section* presents findings from a case study of the Danish cartoon crisis that show how the impetus for implementing a new public diplomacy strategy based on nation branding was founded in a security policy need. But the influence from nation branding on public diplomacy was accompanied by increased attention on marketability at the expense of the traditional security function. The *fifth section* discusses the practical implications of basing public diplomacy efforts on nation branding methods. The section discusses the limitations of handling the security dimension of public diplomacy with nation brand metrics and points to how metrics for measuring the national reputation transform the nation brand into an independent risk. A *final section* concludes the paper by pointing to a possible future status of public diplomacy within the nation branding framework: The security aspects of public diplomacy will only serve as a way of legitimizing policy making towards a domestic audience whereby public diplomacy as the international public relations of states is transformed to the marketing of states.

2. From public diplomacy and the PR of states to new public diplomacy and the branding of nations

The discipline of public diplomacy (PD) has sometimes been regarded as the public relations of states (van Ham, 2002; Wang, 2006). Therefore PD has by some PR theorists simply been considered a continuation of public relations with other goals. Thus, Grunig argues that to a public relations scholar "the field of public diplomacy consists essentially in the application of PR to strategic relationships of organizations with international publics" (Grunig, 1993, p. 143). Signitzer and Coombs state that due to the expansion of communication technology PD and PR are within foreign policy "in a natural process of convergence" (Signitzer and Coombs, 1992, p. 146). In sum the similarities are due to the fact that both are tactical and operational communication practices employed with relatively clear cut goals in the form of managing international relations and reputations (Wang, 2006).

2.1. Public diplomacy and national security

As a concept PD dates back to the end of the nineteenth century (Cull, 2006) but its modern conception is linked to the Cold War's ideological struggle between capitalism and communism (Mor, 2009; Szondi, 2008). Here it was widely adopted by U.S. diplomats as a powerful policy tool and an alternative to propaganda in the superpower's battle for hearts and minds. It was popularized in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, the then dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, to designate America's communication activities in cultural exchange and diplomacy (Cull, 2006; Wang, 2007). Former U.S. diplomat Hans N. Tuch defines the purpose of public diplomacy as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). The conceptual core of public diplomacy in this definition as a strategic communication instrument aimed at foreign publics is broadly accepted by contemporary scholars in the field (see Cull, 2009; Gilboa, 2001, 2008; Gregory, 2008, 2005; Melissen, 2005; Mor, 2006; Seib, 2009; van Ham, 2008).

However, it remains contested what the goal of PD practices is. For scholars within the realist tradition of international relations the ultimate goals of PD are founded on power politics and national security (Viotti & Kauppi, 1999). Leonard and

¹ The terms "state" and "country" are used interchangeably in this paper. In their basic definitions the terms are synonymous insofar that they refer to a self-governing, autonomous and sovereign entity. The theoretical tradition of international relations referred to in this paper prefer the term "state" while the marketing tradition of nation branding prefer the term "country" or "nation". The latter terms differs from the two other in the sense that a nation need not be a sovereign entity but rather a group of people sharing a common culture.

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