The Role of Digital Media in Empowering Individuals: Public Diplomacy, the Blogosphere, and the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

With the powerful presence of mass media sources reaching large-scale audiences and the rapid growth of multimedia sources available online, mass media industries have certainly had a prevailing effect on culture and communication, as well as public political views, both domestically and internationally. Today the consumers and receivers of media have power in terms of influencing the media as well as other members of society. The most dominant example of empowering the general public can be seen with the blogosphere. However, on the flip side of the idea that new communications technologies are empowering individuals, it is important to consider the digital divide. With a world increasingly dependent on electronic technologies, it is obvious that anyone without access to these technologies is being left behind. Not introducing computers to various parts of the world worsens inequality while access to cyberspace gives users freedom from certain social constraints.

Keywords: digital media, public diplomacy, digital divide, new media, international relations

INTRODUCTION

The mass media has the potential to reach large audiences through online sources. Today, more than ever society is dependent on various forms of communication media. This dependence clearly illustrates the extensive power of the professional media as well as the impact that media has on the knowledge of diverse audiences. However, digital media can also be used to empower individuals and to foster public diplomacy.

THE MEDIA’S POWER

The media has the ability to influence people’s behavior, in the form of thoughts, speech, or action. Obviously, the media has no coercive might or political mandate, but this is not a source of weakness, since the power of the pen has increasingly out-maneuvered the ability of the sword, especially in the post-Cold War era. This is not to say that military might does not count anymore, but to suggest that military might is not necessarily the solution to all world problems. This situation is in contrast to that of ancient times, when disputes were often resolved by military or physical campaigns, it was assumed that winner enjoyed the divine blessing, and ordinary people accepted the result as the will of god or nature without question. The power of media can also be depicted in what is called the Control Revolution. The Control Revolution is the ability of the media to influence the consumption of mass audiences with communication technologies.

Nevertheless, our contemporary world is very different, since people around the globe increasingly question authority (even in the most religious societies), do not always follow blindly, and prefer justice over peace. The evidence for this is the increasing number of mass
revolutions against the militarily strong dictators (e.g. in China, Cuba, Iran, Mexico, and Russia), since the start of the twentieth century. If the military might was the answer to all conflicts nowadays (as in the past), then there would not have been a Palestinian-Israeli conflict, considering that the military balance is overwhelmingly in favor of Israel. Today’s underdogs do not accept forced solutions. They value and pursue justice more than peace. People around the world want a better life, similar to the one in the West, mainly as the result of what they have seen, read, or heard, information produced and broadcast by the mass media.

The media has the ability to aim its message to whomever it wishes globally, and it has the ability to produce whatever information supports its interest. The first aspect of media influence is the ability of “selective process.” The media has the capability to select whatever information it desires to produce. In addition, individuals use “selective perception.” When individuals face discordant content, they will choose what they find acceptable. For example, as history points out, it was very unlikely that pro-Vietnam interventionists would have chosen to watch content discussing the senselessness of the Vietnam War.

Priming is another influential power of the media. The media cannot control what the people think, but it can project what they should think about. The priming theory suggests that media images stimulate related thoughts in the minds of the audience. This is similar to and associated with another power of media: agenda setting. Agenda setting is described as a process through which public figures and important events help to shape the content of the media. The audience’s ranking of what they consider to be the most important issues tends to match the amount of coverage that the media gives to those particular issues.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The media also has power associated with public diplomacy, which has traditionally been a power in the hands of governments. However, with the advances in communication technology and lessening of legal restrictions, the news media can set their own agenda, and form international opinion through public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is the idea of “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking, and ultimately, that of their governments.” It most often takes the form of cultural or academic exchange programs, public relations campaigns in foreign mass media, dissemination of print or video materials, or governmental or non-governmental sponsored radio or television broadcasting to foreign markets. Public diplomacy is now empowered with the Internet, so it is difficult, if not impossible to censor its delivery system—media. This power, however, may have negative consequences, such as perception gap, or a perceptual screen.

Among all powers of the media, public diplomacy has a special place. As stated earlier, public diplomacy is the idea of “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking, and ultimately, that of their governments.” The notion of public diplomacy is similar to that of public relations, which is defined as an art and science of establishing and promoting a favorable relationship with the public, just as public diplomacy is public relations among nation-states.

Amid forms of media, television news that combines picture and sound, in traditionally culture dominated societies, typically comprises immense amounts of propaganda. In the study of anti-Americanism, factors such as cultural, religious, and value divisions are viewed as the primary source of negative perceptions of the United States. In fact, some claim that traditionally culture dominated nations typically comprise aggressive national news agencies, such as the Saudi Press Agency. Oftentimes, the media uses public diplomacy as a power tool. A “perception gap,” occurs when an inaccurate belief is partially created by the foreign news media. The media creates an inaccurate belief, many times intentional, for its own benefit and to lead to the success of its particular agenda.

The “Al Jazeera Effect,” as some call it, can serve as an example for the media’s depiction of negative beliefs. The “Al Jazeera Effect” is a notion similar to the so-called “CNN Effect” that was the focus of much speculation during the 1990s. The “Al Jazeera Effect” refers to the networks comprehensive and graphic on-the-ground coverage of the US war in Afghanistan. Some argue that Al Jazeera raised the level of negative sentiment against the US in the Muslim world and created pressure on many Muslim governments to act against US policy in the region.

The news media also characteristically differ from region to region. In some areas, the media displays more power than others. The Middle East has a very complex social structure, and it as culturally differs from Western society, so does its media. One example of the difference is in the media objectivity, in terms of the typical Western balanced reporting of conflicting perspectives. Media objectivity is viewed in another way in the Middle East, where certain sensitive topics are not subjected to such balanced scrutiny, such as Pan-Arabism and Islam.

Thus, from a Western perspective in the Middle East, one may not find “objectivity” when it comes to pan-Arab consensus. Moreover, it may also seem as though Middle Eastern news sources tend to have a “hyperpolitical nature.” Pan-Arab news coverage places the focus on
security and political news, rather than its social or human interest topics, which are relatively more covered by Western news agencies. With the constant subjectivity of news agencies, a “perceptual screen” is likely to develop, as individuals are expected to use their underlying predispositions as a screen, accepting only those considerations featured in the news that are congenial to their own preconceived attitudes, rejecting aspects of the news that are not. It is also imperative to consider that most predispositions are developed as a result of previous experience with media products and preexisting beliefs that form in an individual’s social universe.

**DIGITAL DELIVERY**

A fairly new power of the media is “digital delivery.” With digital revolution, the modern media may send information to people quickly, efficiently, and with any degree of accuracy. Advances in communication technology have made the online press a very powerful entity. These advances now allow the media to instantly deliver a message to millions of individuals via the Internet. Additionally, many individuals use the Internet has their main news source.

Furthermore, digital delivery provides the media with an “interactive” environment. The senders and receivers can exchange information back and forth simultaneously. With this method, opinion data can be collected much faster, making polls more accurate than ever before. This interactive environment or a two-way communication differs from traditional one-way communication and provides the media with even greater power and legitimacy.

**POLITICAL MOBILIZATION**

Last but certainly not least, another influential power of the media is the ability of political mobilization. The media has the capability to mobilize the public on a specific issue, whether it is to go to war, address economic problems, or influence an individual’s opinion. The media also has an educational role, which is an important factor in political mobilization.

With the multimedia revolution and the growth of interactive media, the consumers and receivers of media now have power in terms of influencing the media as well as other members of society. Anyone with access to the Internet can use the online world to create breaking news stories of their own. The most dominant example of empowering the general public can be seen with the blogosphere. The blogosphere can be thought of as an interconnected social network on the Internet in which various “bloggers,” or members of the online community, post their own articles, commentaries, and suggestions. With this, individuals throughout diverse societies can post their thoughts, feelings, and criticisms freely online for the whole world to see. This online interaction has many implications in terms of the media and those who are considered to be the professional media or “controllers.” Not only can the professional media read firsthand what their mass audiences worldwide think of their news coverage and programs, marketing businesses can receive feedback about their products. Audiences can communicate feedback or reinforce the demand for specific products, and the professional media can receive their audience’s preferences to better accommodate their viewers.

Political mobilization is essential to the health of any society, including the democratic ones. In larger democracies, however, political mobilization may be difficult to achieve. In order for individuals to mobilize politically, they must become emotionally involved. Symbolic politics have implications for human emotional involvement. Symbols such as the “9/11” attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, are clear motivational factors. Through film, television, books, and magazines these symbols are displayed by visuals. Visual information (e.g. pictures, images) presented in magazines, films or other aspects of the entertainment industry constitute an important underused and underestimated information resource.

Since the human brain processes information by the use of shortcuts, the media and entertainment industry utilize audiovisuals that have proved to be exceptional impact tools. The human brain extracts valuable information from audiovisuals more quickly and easily than from verbal sources. Visuals provide a less complicated and error-free grasp of information and better emotional involvement. The use of audiovisuals in some forms of media falls short of the medium’s potential to serve as a vicarious political experience and to offer benefit from the intimacy of the involvement.

The distortions through visuals may certainly impact foreign policy making process by the elite in addition to ordinary citizens’ opinions about international issues. In this regard, the notion of “audiovisual stimuli” plays a significant role when it comes to media distortions. The human brain is far more adept at extracting information from audiovisual stimuli than from verbal stimuli. Verbal stimuli are processed serially, one verbal unit at a time, whereas visual stimuli are processed simultaneously. This provides the reader or viewer with a more sufficient approach to information processing. Unlike the ability to process verbal messages, the ability to process visual information develops early in life. Therefore, youth and illiterate adults can learn from visual information with ease.
This gives the leaders in less developed countries, where there is higher illiteracy percentage, more power and the ability to take advantage of the segment of the population that cannot read but is easily influenced by visuals. However, visuals are often used effectively by both authoritarian leaders in the developing world or elected officials in the developed countries attempting to sway public opinion. With greater emotional involvement, comes greater political mobilization.

The film industries everywhere, especially in Hollywood, have expertise in dramatizing events, as practice makes perfect. Recently, visual imagery and advances in special effects have brought the entertainment industry to the same level of projecting reality as the news media clips of current events, especially in terms of the power of persuasion. An emphasis on the power of visuals, however, does not mean to discredit audio information, such as radio. Poorer nations with little access to television and cinema still use radio as the dominant tool to spread their message. Moreover, it is not fair to give credit only to the entertainment industry for their ability for political mobilization, since popular culture also has such a capability.

Among many types of media, the producers, distributors, and exporters of music generally have the most freedom in spreading their messages via songs. Music is considered an art, and is not restricted by most governments, even the authoritarian ones. Music can comprise strong political messages, such as "Rage Against the Machine", or strong cultural messages such as country music. With the internet and MP3 files, music can be downloaded and listened to across the globe within seconds.

Nevertheless, there are differences in this regard around the world. Downloading music is a larger phenomenon in Europe than in the United States. There are about 8 million users of the popular music file sharing Kazaa, compared to about 9 million in Europe. In Africa, radio (which is often considered to be the poor man tool) is the main information source for both entertainment and news. In many parts of the globe, the radio is also the most commonly used form of communication to spread propaganda and public diplomacy.

For example during the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the local radio station was the main tool used in order to spread propaganda throughout the country, which promoted violence and the killing of the Tutsi population. The Hutu government used the popular local radio station (which usually played "pop" music) to broadcast a message of hate and violence against the Tutsi population. The Hutu government went so far as to direct the Hutu population to kill their Tutsi relatives and neighbors on the local radio station. The radio can also access global listeners in addition to the national audience. Furthermore, radio programs are able to impact children as well as the illiterate population, since the radio can easily reach them and reading is not required in order to understand the message.

**THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

However, on the flip side of the idea that new communications technologies are empowering individuals, it is important to consider what is called the digital divide. For the purposes of this discussion, the digital divide is defined as those who have access to technology, such as the Internet, versus those who do not have access. Government officials and academic researchers now consent that there is a digital divide; the National Telecommunications and Information Administration’s 2000 figures display that White and Asian American households with 46 and 57 percent access are double the access of African American and Hispanic households. With a world increasingly dependent on electronic technologies, such as the personal computer, or communication technologies, such as the Internet, it is obvious that anyone without access to these technologies is being left behind in the dust. To elaborate, because computers and the Internet are used today by society as if it were second nature, people rely on computer software, such as Microsoft Word, to complete school papers or reports for a professional job; the digital divide has more serious implications besides not being in the “in-group.” With our dependence on using technology, not only for personal reasons, but in academic and professional life, having technological skills and knowledge of basic computer software is key in acquiring professional, decent paying jobs.

Overall, the research studies describing and measuring the digital divide report two assumptions: that not introducing computers to various parts of the world worsens inequality and that access to cyberspace gives freedom from certain social constraints to its users.

**CONCLUSION**

The mass media uses its powers of priming, agenda setting, selective processing, digital delivery, public diplomacy, and political mobilization in order to influence culture and communication, as well as political perceptions and opinions. The mass media also has the ability to influence the formation of the public’s political perception and opinions. Since the mass media determines who is communicated to and what is communicated, it has the ability to effectively change and influence the outcome of group conflicts. The media can play a positive role in influencing public opinion and highlighting the benefits of intercultural communication in order to emphasize the need for peace and overall understanding. Given the power of digital media, we
must seriously consider the implications of the digital divide in parts of the world where access to the Internet and other media is limited or nonexistent.

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5 Ibid.


12 Ibid


14 Ibid


18 Ibid


22 Ibid


25 Ibid

27 Ibid