



FROM PROPAGANDA TO NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: EXPERIENCED AND NEW STAKEHOLDERS IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

The “New Public Diplomacy” represents the latest evolution of soft power theories. In order to positively influence foreign perceptions within the framework of global public opinion, international communication deals with international stakeholders’ interactions, with the aim of determining media flows of information. Whether they are states, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, private companies, otherwise, press, publicity and/or public relations services are sought to shape international information. Facing such public diplomacy and/or propaganda practices, international communicators should avoid becoming mere instruments and instead play the analytical and critical role demanded by international society. Today, such a task involves increased complexity due to: 1) actors’ multiplicity, and 2) and the new balance of forces on the field of play.

Palabras Clave: International Communication, Propaganda, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), Public Relations, Soft Power.

Título en Castellano: *De la Propaganda a la nueva Diplomacia Pública: Nuevas y experimentadas Partes Interesadas en la Comunicación Internacional*

Resumen:

La “nueva diplomacia pública” representa la última evolución de las teorías del poder blando. Con el fin de influir positivamente en las percepciones en el exterior, en el marco de la opinión pública mundial, la comunicación internacional se ocupa de las interacciones de las partes interesadas internacionales, con el objetivo de determinar los flujos de información de los medios. Ya sean Estados, organizaciones internacionales, organizaciones no gubernamentales, empresas privadas, los servicios de prensa, publicidad y/o relaciones públicas se utilizan para dar forma a la información internacional. Frente a tales prácticas de diplomacia pública y/o propaganda, los comunicadores internacionales deben evitar convertirse en meros instrumentos y, en su lugar, desempeñar el papel analítico y crítico exigido por la sociedad internacional. Hoy en día, tal tarea implica una mayor complejidad debido a: 1) la multiplicidad de actores, y 2) y el nuevo equilibrio de fuerzas en el campo de juego.

Key words: *Comunicación internacional, Propaganda, TIC (tecnologías de la información y la comunicación), Relaciones públicas, Poder blando.*

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1. Introduction²

Global connections between the stakeholders of international society provide an ideal framework to design and develop a whole series of propaganda and/or public relations strategies, with the aim of manipulating information flows to their own interests. Such a strategy should be considered, counteracted and potentially rejected by international communicators, who seek to avoid becoming mere tools transmitting informative manipulation by the different actors that constitute the international society.³

This is not new: traditionally, different stakeholders (especially states) enjoyed considerable capacity to develop strategies, exert pressure and even coerce the international communication framework. One does not need to go far back in history to identify regular practices of the manipulation of facts in order to justify international positions or war-like actions. Although these practices have been developed by many powers, only fifteen years ago, the American media (which is followed by that of most of the rest of the world) unabashedly propounded the conspiracy theory fabricated by the Bush Administration regarding the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. In this way, communication flows justified the military invasion of that country, without any warrant or United Nations (UN) resolution. As is well-known, no such weapons were ever found to “justify” the invasion. Indeed, communications media such as CNN later apologised for following the United States (US) government without ever doubting or verifying its claims.⁴ Similar efforts (from the Trump administration) to use and manipulate the media are currently being heeded, in a period of boom and cross-accusations of “fake news”.

Aside from such verified and crystalline examples, a common practice of governments of states involved in recent conflicts (and regardless of whether they are democratic systems or authoritarian regimes) has been to resort to more or less systematic strategies of control over the management of the media. This is especially evident in the diffusion of partial information, including “fabricated” figures and “made-up” photographs,⁵ all with the objective of unidirectionally influencing the information of international communicators. This can be seen in a failure to ask uncomfortable questions about the origin or interest of a source or press service for disclosing particular information.

Therefore, the proposed state of the art deals with the phenomenon of international communication and the whole range of international society stakeholders seeking to affect the global media flows of information as far as possible. Whether they are states, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private companies or otherwise, press, publicity and/or public relations services are sought to shape international information. Therefore, international communicators should stand at a cautious distance and make timely and critical reflections to avoid becoming mere instruments manipulating international public opinion.

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³ Tuñón, Jorge (2017): *Comunicación Internacional: Información y Desinformación global en el siglo XXI*, Madrid, Fragua.

⁴ See Hargreaves, Ian (2005): *Journalism: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press; Williams, Kevin (2011): *International Journalism*, London, Sage; Obijiofor, Levi, Hanusch, Folker (2011): *Journalism across Cultures: An Introduction*, London, Palgrave MacMillan.

⁵ Marthoz, Jean P. (2012), *Journalisme International*, Bruselas, De Boeck (2ª edición), pp.176.



The latest attenuation of the phenomenon of propaganda and the professionalisation of the press and public relations services is represented by “New Public Diplomacy”, in which stakeholders of today’s international society use new information and communications technologies (ICT) to positively shape (at the international level) their own perceptions within the global public opinion framework. Traditionally, the governments of nation states and international organisations constituted the essential and decisive stakeholders in both international relations and international communication. However, today multinational or transnational corporations, NGOs, trade unions as well as religious groups, terrorists and think tanks have become key international communication stakeholders, too, seeking to disseminate their own biased information. Therefore, the broad management of stakeholders and sources represents a challenge for international communicators to independently discern and elaborate international information, to the detriment of institutional propaganda.

2. Propaganda and Public Relations

The main players in international relations (supranational organisations, state governments, transnational corporations and NGOs) have progressively improved their communication strategies. Through media or ad-hoc press services, they aim to ensure that the media reflects as broadly as possible and in the manner closest to their interests the international issues that affect them.

In many countries, this has caused communication specialists in these institutional cabinets to become superior in number to journalists. Unsurprisingly, the latter are attracted to communication and/or press offices due to the offer of often higher wages. However, once they cross the border, their role is far from seeking impartiality and objectivity, necessitating reflection regarding their contributions in the field of international communication. This does not mean that those working in such cabinets cannot constitute necessary and valuable interlocutors for international journalists. In any case, they should comply (in the case of serious institutions) with minimum international standards, as represented by diverse professional ethics and public relations codes. In any case, we must not ignore, as Marthoz notes, the fact that “they exist to sell an image, protect interests or a reputation. They act under the logic of partial information, and sometimes in a relationship of disinformation, see intimidation, in the eyes of journalists who renounce to follow their game”.⁶

Part of the work of the professionals working in the press rooms is to prepare press conferences, public events and the appearances of leaders. They develop the speeches, the answers to the potential questions asked, the slogans that must be repeated, the gestures, the photographs and the scenery, trying not to leave any detail to chance. In the most important international states, these services are multiplied by the number of ministries and/or specialised agencies, and may even use public diplomacy offices or press services (as part of public diplomacy) of official ad-hoc information agencies.

Even with globalisation and commercialisation, it is becoming more commonplace for different international affairs stakeholders to outsource press services and sub-contract to private companies, including large public relations transnational agencies. This has become a very common practice in countries such as Kuwait, which on the occasion of the Second Gulf War, institutional communication services were outsourced. Following their consumers’ interests, they drew a scene in which Iraqi soldiers were represented as barbarians who would systematically rape women and murder babies, in order to justify international involvement in the conflict. It was later revealed that these representations were fabricated.⁷

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.177.

⁷ Williams, Kevin. *op.cit.* and Obijiofor, Levi. *op.cit.*



Thus, the result of outsourcing international press services to private companies greatly affects the quality and bias of information. This is not only due to the obvious disruption of information flows, but also complacent acceptance or bitter refusal of international journalists to respond. Even though they have their own offices and public press services, some states may subcontract private companies with specific communication campaigns, just as China did when it hired two companies to improve its international image before the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.

There is no doubt that the proliferation of professionals in communication cabinets or press services who use disinformation and spin doctor techniques⁸ complicates the work of international communicators. Moreover, some international journalists complacently fall into the trap, readily conforming to institutional dossiers, prepared meetings, protocol visits, copious meals of gratitude and sometimes “free gifts”. They are favoured for their docility and “cheerleading” with respect to the framework of action designed by public relations offices, intended to prevent journalists from handling different information from that expected.

Nevertheless (and fortunately), some international journalists are able to develop a “committed journalism”, which in contrast to these press cabinets, is able to take a critical distance and renounce the “facilities offered”. Such journalists continue to insist on the systematic verification and independence of information, even though many of their colleagues have become spreaders of disinformation. Therefore, they must have the courage to be the few defending true information, sometimes in the face of immense state machinery of disinformation.

Within the so-called conflict or war communication, the information-disinformation policy of the parties involved, typically managed by press services, must be highlighted. The influence of these “noise-making machines” has not stopped growing. For instance, the episode of the spokesman to the former US President George Bush became paradigmatic when in preparing the communication strategy to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001), he challenged those journalists who dared to question the “official version” by claiming that “you are with us or against us”. That is why professionals working in these services and/or public relations offices can no longer be considered mere mediators, and rather true actors or stakeholders of international communication.

In order to avoid complete misunderstanding between government agencies and journalists who do not bow to official guidelines,⁹ a series of rules that formally or informally govern relations between them must be arbitrated. Cabinets are not required to disclose all of the information that they know; however, what they disclose must be true. It is thus the task of journalists to decipher and contextualise the communication strategy to present the information as close to reality as possible. In times of disinformation and fake news,¹⁰ journalists should be aware that the convoluted practices or communication strategies of present-day governments do not justify or limit journalists’ responsibilities for their information pertaining to them.

⁸ Hargreaves, Ian. *op.cit.*, pp.98-101.

⁹ Based on those postulates that demand that in a democracy a government inform its citizens about facts, enabling them to know, debate and participate in public life.

¹⁰ “Comunicación de la Comisión al Parlamento Europeo, al Consejo, al Comité Económico y Social Europeo y al Comité de las Regiones, La lucha contra la desinformación en línea: un enfoque europeo”, at <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2018/ES/COM-2018-236-F1-ES-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>



3. Soft Power and New Public Diplomacy

The diverse political communication strategies described as “territory branding” or “country branding” constitute a recent instrument, but one of major importance in the design of the international policies of nation states¹¹ due to the importance that the mass media and world public opinion have acquired in recent times. The use of a territorial dissemination communication strategy termed “territory branding” implies the projection of the typical characteristics of the national/territorial identity. This projection becomes a tool to modify and improve the perception of the image of a given country within the framework of third states’ mass media and public opinion. It is, therefore, a formula that seeks within a globalised world to increase the foreign reliability and prestige of a particular territory and/or state, with the aim of securing an international position that provides significant economic revenue.

In short, and as a consequence of advances in ICT, “know-how” and the transmission of knowledge represent tools that in a production model such as the present is not only used by international organisations, nation states or sub-state entities (regions), but also by a plethora of public and private actors that make up the international system. We are referring here to the concept of soft power,¹² which supports the transcendence of the symbolic, relational or intangible over the mere economic and military resources used by territories to stimulate third parties to modify their initial positions via assumption and conviction and without resistance. Insofar as the benefits of soft power over hard power lie in attraction being more effective and economical than coercion, the development of soft power strategies in the “information society”, as Castells¹³ argues, affects the competitiveness of a given territory. Indeed, it grants “access to information and communication flows, greater influence in the process of elaboration of knowledge and credibility in the conduct of domestic and international affairs”¹⁴.

It should be added that this type of so-called “soft power” is not only capable of being exercised by the actors of international society that are intimately linked to a territory, but also by other agents of international relations and civil societies, such as social movements, NGOs, transnational corporations, political, religious and terrorist groups, among others. All may elaborate communication strategies based on their own brand that, following Nye’s claims, advocates persuasion, seduction and attraction rather than the coercion of hard power. Thus, they facilitate access to communication flows and thereby affect the framework of international affairs management.

At this point, concepts like “New Public Diplomacy” should be introduced. Indeed, means of overcoming traditional diplomacy are addressed not only to governments (whether state, supra-state or sub-state), but also to civil societies in all such territories. This “New Public Diplomacy” is the amalgam of all those political strategies of communication directed to the outside with the aim of promoting an image of international public opinion around a determined territory. To be effective, territories use all the communication tools they can find, precisely to design a public diplomacy that enhances the capabilities of persuasive speech, using appropriate

¹¹ See Gratius, Susanne: “Cómo renovar la Marca Europa en América Latina”, in Grevi Giovanni and Keohane Daniel (ed.) (2013): *Desafíos para la política exterior europea en 2013. Renovar el papel de la UE en el mundo*, FRIDE, Madrid; Tuñón, Jorge, Marzá, María J. (2012): “La Marca Canarias en Europa. La Ultraperiferia como distintivo de una exitosa estrategia política de comunicación”, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 2012; and Tuñón, Jorge. *op.cit.*

¹² Nye (Jr), Joseph (2004): *Soft Power: The Means to I in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs Press.

¹³ Castells, Manuel (1997): *La era de la información. Vol I: la sociedad red*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial.

¹⁴ Iglesias, Marcela, Molina, David (2008): “La estrategia Marca País en la sociedad informacional: los casos de España y Ecuador”, *Historia Actual Online*, nº 16 (June 2008), pp. 109-126.



technological resources in this task. We therefore agree with Iglesias and Molina¹⁵ that the strategy of “country branding constitutes an instrument in the service of public diplomacy and national development, within the framework of international economic and political relations”.

Both the media evolution and globalisation have necessitated that territory be aware of the importance of its image, its reputation and ultimately its brand, presupposing a reformulation of the political paradigm.¹⁶ In this new context, the “country label” or “territory branding” implies the use of the unique characteristics of the national identity of a given territory in order to model the projection of its image. This consequently involves its perception by foreign civil societies, media and public opinions, thereby increasing international attention, improving both its competitiveness in economic terms and its positioning on a political scale.

Strategies of “territory branding” may be understood as the use of typical characteristics of the life of a given territory as a formula to influence and improve perceptions within the media and foreign public opinion, with the objective of increasing its international prestige and political and economic position within the framework of international society. For this reason, success is derived from the degree to which the following (among other) benefits are achieved: increased customer reliability, exhibiting successful experiences, raising expectations about product quality and improved starting position in negotiation processes.

In terms of communicative strategies and information flows, the “territory branding” strategy has two substantial advantages. On the one hand, it has a positive impact on the image of the territory and its external perceptions, as a kind of “filter or sieve that conditions the information flows and the analysis tasks that are done about it”, thus compensating for “deficiencies in the matter of informative visibility, presence in the circuits of interpretation and global studies and media diffusion, improving their position (...) in the international system”.¹⁷ On the other hand, it represents a solution to mitigate or redirect the effects of media overexposure, insofar as repeated presence in the mass media on a global scale can exhaust foreign public opinion and have counterproductive consequences for the territory.

4. Experienced and New Stakeholders of International Communication

4.1 States

Nation states are the primary stakeholders in both international relations and international affairs. As inheritors of the Westphalian nation-state model, we legally understand the state as that entity endowed with a territory, a population and a government, which is sovereign and independent, in the sense that it is not subordinate to any other state or entity, within the framework of international society. Therefore, it is consubstantial to the existence of the state, comprising territory, population and organisation of power. First, the territory is configured as a geographical area in whose limits the state authority, that is, the physical frame in which the legal system of a state, operates. Then, the population is equivalent to the national community, that is, the group of people united to the state by the legal and political bond of nationality, that is to say the differentiated human group that is grouped in each state society. Finally, the organisation of power, common to all states, refers to the existence of an organised form of political power. Therefore, there is no state entity formed exclusively by a population that inhabits a territory, but rather it is necessarily an apparatus of government and institutionalisation of powers, representing the organised community and exercising power over it.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.110-111

¹⁶ Van Ham, Peter: “The Rise of the Brand State. The Post Modern Politics of Image and reputation”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. LXXX-5 (September-October 2001), pp. 2-6.

¹⁷ Iglesias, Marcela, Molina, David. *op.cit.*, pp. 111.



From the communicative perspective, declarations and actions of states within the framework of international politics are the object of some international information. This is always conditioned by the system of political organisation prevailing in a state, which largely determines the degree of development of communication systems, transparency and even freedom of the press.¹⁸ This is why it is possible to distinguish models derived from countries with stable democracies from others with authoritarian systems. Nevertheless, it is impossible to obviate, to a greater or lesser extent, that information from all states, regardless of their model of organisation, will be biased depending on the preferences or concerns of their governments.

In most states with a strong democratic tradition, the dissemination of information is undertaken by press services or official agencies linked to the ministries of the presidency or foreign affairs. This does not mean that different departments, or at least the main departments, lack their own communications and information services, operating as gatekeepers for international communicators.¹⁹ Accordingly, the press services of the presidency or foreign affairs departments often organise meetings with international informants, in which they present or discuss international reports. Such events are often very useful for international informants, although depending on the source attribution traditions of a country, the information received may be characterised as “off-the-record” or “on the background”, supposedly so that it will not be attributed to sources, generally with the aim of avoiding diplomatic conflicts. In any case, the rules surrounding the question of transparency also vary according to the traditions of a state. In some cases, citizens and informants alike are able to access public documents describing governmental deliberations. This situation is unviable in many other countries, but it is of great utility for international communicators where it exists.²⁰

Non-democratic governments also envisage information and communications systems. However, those may be closer to propaganda and often lack a minimum degree of impartiality. To this end, they have departments or public relations offices in charge of channelling the government’s public communications both within and beyond the borders of the country. On the basis of lack of freedoms, they exert a strong influence both over the media (whether state or private, if permitted to exist) and information professionals themselves. They even have the task of managing the visits of special envoys or the work of correspondents from foreign media. They aim to organise and supervise their agendas, trips and meetings or interviews with local sources, so that the final output (the information reported) will be sufficiently deferential to the government in question. It is thus the task of international communicators to try to bypass press chiefs or official mentors in order to disseminate truthful information rather than become mere instruments of government propaganda dissemination. A paradigmatic example of this model is North Korea, which also has a “cultural attaché”/censor of Spanish origin, Alejandro Cao de Benós, who frequently appears in the international press.

¹⁸ Canel, María J., Sanders, Karen: “Government Communication: An Emerging Field in Political Communication Research”, in Semetko, H. and Scammell (2012): *The SAGE Handbook of Political Communication*, SAGE, London, pp. 85-96.

¹⁹ Marthoz, Jean P. *op.cit.*, pp.158-159.

²⁰ In this sense it is possible to review the annual classifications made by Transparency International (<http://www.transparency.org/>) in relation to citizens’ access to official public information, especially regarding access to public documents in Southern Europe. Also see Patterson, Margaret, Fullerton, Romaine, and Tuñón, Jorge (2016): “At a crossroads or Caught in the Crossfire? Crime Coverage concerns for democracy in Portugal, Spain and Italy”, *Journalism Practice*, Taylor and Francis Group, Routledge.



4.2 International Organisations

International organisations, also known as supranational organisations or intergovernmental organisations, are purely voluntary associations of states established by international agreements, which are endowed with permanent and independent bodies that are responsible for managing collective interests capable of expressing a will legally different from their members. It is possible to emphasise quadruple characteristics: interstate essential composition; legal basis; permanent and independent organic structure; and legal autonomy. In fact, international organisations are primarily composed of sovereign states, so that they may be distinguished from other international entities such as state federations; there are still international organisations whose members accept other international organisations, such as the European Union (EU) member the World Trade Organization. Moreover, they have an institutional structure comprising several permanent organs, distinct and independent from those of the member states. In addition, they are responsible for managing collective interests, for which they will be provided with necessary means (which appear in the constitutive treaty itself), and have a legal personality distinct from their member states, necessary for the fulfilment of the purposes for which they were created.

As international stakeholders, international organisations represent an enormous source of information for international communicators. In particular, those with greater thematic and geographic scope constitute a mechanism producing information of international relevance, whether through different press services in general or their own officials in particular. International organisations such as the EU, the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regularly appear at news reporting. They are often reported for its main institutions decisions, but also on the occasion of the reports, which emanate from the variegated conglomeration of units and agencies, either endogenous or exogenous, that adhere to them.

Cities such as New York, Geneva and Brussels, where some of the headquarters of the most important international organisations are located, bring together hundreds of correspondents and/or accredited special envoys, who live hectic days in times of crises or summits. They must usually deal with information from these institutions, reducing its institutional character and adapting them to the diverse information trends of countries that form part of the international organisations. The coverage of summits or crisis meetings is especially interesting, as international communicators enjoy the opportunity to undertake more research and detail and report on diplomatic games, thus substantiating many of the decisions taken and reflecting the global geopolitical position of the states involved. For the informers (and beyond the official statements of the organisations), the testimonies of the representatives or officials of the organisations (who can send information, often “off-the-record”) become crucial.

For instance, the EU is presently involved with the Brexit issue and the European elections. Indeed, it has been much argued about the EU communication deficits, as a consequence of its inter-state composition and other key factors: complex decision-making process, heterogeneous but without a customised message, lack of updated narratives, among others.²¹ Nevertheless, in addition to its information and communication channels with its states and relevant stakeholders, the EU’s global communicative relevance is undeniable.

²¹ Tuñón, Jorge, Bouza, Luis, Carral, Uxía (2019): *Comunicación Europea. ¿A quién doy like para hablar con Europa?* Madrid, Dykinson, pp.132-138.



4.3 Other Stakeholders: NGOs, Unions and Transnational Corporations

Although classical theories of international relations advocate the existence of two fundamental stakeholders in the international society (i.e., states and international organisations), today the importance of another series of actors is increasingly recognised, too. In addition to states and international organisations, they play an important role in the field of international communication and represent key sources of information for international communicators. They include NGOs, transnational or multinational corporations, religious groups, terrorist groups, trade unions and even academic centres such as universities, think tanks and research centres.

- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)** are progressively gaining ground in the international context. They practically intervene in most areas and are of vital importance as privileged and/or exclusive sources in certain remote and resource-poor geographical contexts, which other international society stakeholders find harder to reach. Some of the most relevant at a global scale (with capacity to intervene in the most diverse fields) include those focused on development cooperation (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Acumen Foundation, Care); humanitarian crises (Doctors Without Borders, Danish Refugee Council, Partners in Health, Mercy Corps); human rights watch (Amnesty International); the environment (Greenpeace, World Wide Fund for Nature); and education (Wikimedia Foundation).

They differ from other international society stakeholders in that they are associations of private and non-profit origin that develop transnational activities based on the domestic law of the place in which they establish their headquarters. Their international importance derives from their influence in shaping global public opinion and their capacity as international lobbies. Some additionally have consultative status in international organisations such as the UN under Article 71 of the UN Charter.

Some have managed to achieve undeniable credibility as sources of international communication, organising themselves as real media, thus employing journalists and demonstrating high reactivity towards international affairs. They are indispensable in some disciplines of communication such as regarding humanitarian crises and war. Moreover, akin to the case of state governments and international organisations, the information they produce responds (to some extent) to particular interests, hence must always be taken with caution. It is noteworthy that the prominence of certain issues such as human rights helps facilitate NGOs' media presence.²²

In fact, the media visibility of such topics favours the omnipresence of NGOs in the international sphere, as reflected in analyses of the Arab Spring, the current situation in Venezuela, and the granting of sporting events to countries that severely restrict human rights, notably Russia, Qatar and China. Therefore, in order to remain relevant actors within the framework of international society, NGOs are very interested in overexposure, which is not always justifiable according to the communication perspective.

In any case, relationships between international reporters and NGOs are highly complex. On the one hand, it is undeniable that workers can be valuable sources of information. Being present in regions of long-term crisis helps develop contact between the various parties involved (e.g., local authorities, governments and guerrillas). NGOs also manage numerous forms of transport, communication and even security, rendering them preferred sources for informants. Yet, on the other hand organisations such as Doctors Without Borders and Cáritas tend to

²² Marthoz, Jean P. *op.cit.*, pp.167-169.



protect their partiality, affording them access to victims in conflict zones, which is why they do not commit merely based on informative objectives.²³

It should therefore be noted that there are divergences of logic and interest between NGOs and international informants. The former also think in terms of communication, and risk being reduced to information filtering, interested in promoting or concealing the effects of some of their actions, especially in cases where interpretations may be ambiguous or contradictory. For instance, an NGO in Southeast Asia or Africa will not agree to publicise agreements with authoritarian governments beyond the knowledge of Western governments and populations. Here, once again, they become interested actors in international communication, developing thoughtful and measured communication strategies, as well as trying to impose agendas and frameworks on the international media in a clear example of spin doctoring.²⁴

- **Unions** have also historically played an important role in different international contexts, reflected in the political ascent of union leaders such as Lech Wałęsa in Poland and Lula da Silva in Brazil. Today, international news often offers a voice to trade union organisations. Their members and leaders become key sources of information because they participate in political action and generally provide the opposite perspective to governments and businessmen. Indeed, they can provide important information about the repercussions of social crises or the international strategies of companies.

However, as is the case of other international stakeholders, the information obtained from trade unions must be treated with caution, as it may also be biased. Some trade unions suffer from a high level of corruption, while others are closely linked to governments, which is why they act as their transmission tools yet benefit from their legitimacy as trade union organisations.

Undoubtedly, trade unions have developed a kind of “trade union diplomacy”, as ideological extensions of the ideological sectors they represent. During the Cold War, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (CISL) from Brussels (where NATO is also located) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) based in Prague, maintained a bitter confrontation between the East and West fracture lines. Following the fall of communism, the WFTU lost its international influence, being restricted to communist countries or some authoritarian Arab states.

Trade union internationalisation is linked to the period of the Cold War and Trade Union Diplomacy. Today, it usually defends more pragmatic positions related to protest actions that gain greater visibility within the framework of the summits of neoliberal economic groups. At present, national trade unions are hierarchically and internationally integrated in the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which brings together more than 170 million workers and publishes an annual report on violations of trade union rights, and so represents a good source of information regarding the political realities of different countries. Similarly, unions are not only hierarchically organised, but are also cross-cut by branches of activity within the framework of international professional secretariats. These are thus also important sources of information.

Unions today are important actors within so-called alter-globalism, a movement that shelters positions most opposed to the current neoliberal status quo. Therefore, they have played an important transnational role during the negotiation of trade agreements, such as the Agreement for Free Trade in North America (NAFTA), the Free Trade Agreement of the

²³ Tuñón, Jorge. *op.cit.*, p.109.

²⁴ Hargreaves, Ian, *op.cit.*, pp. 98-101.



European Union with Canada (CETA), and the ongoing and unsigned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Treaty (TTIP) between the EU and the USA.

However, unions are progressively losing their monopoly of “syndical diplomacy” due to the relationship between globalisation and the emergence of social networks. As noted by Bouza and Oleart, “the negotiations of the TTIP saw the development of a transnational campaign that gained momentum as the negotiations reached a critical status, including in Spain. The Spanish anti-TTIP campaign is interesting in that it has gained some salience among media, civil society, trade unions and some political parties in a country where trade and EU affairs are rarely controversial”²⁵.

- **Transnational companies** are the owners of production or service facilities that operate in states other than those in which their headquarters are based, and are thus subject to their jurisdiction. Beyond the juridical precision that their transnational nature provides, mimicry can be identified between the interests of the largest multinational corporations and the foreign policy of a given country. Indeed, the global interests of large multinationals converge with those of their countries of origin, not only in terms of strict foreign policy, but also in fields such as development, trade and banking services. Therefore, the issue of territory branding is not only beneficial to the public sector, but to the private sector as well.

Aside from obvious examples of companies that are closely linked to the national interests of different states, relationships can be seen between countries and international organisations, such as the world aviation rivalry between the US Boeing and the European Airbus (an issue that returned to the news following a Boeing accident in Ethiopia in March 2019). For instance, it is necessary to resort to the evident commercial interests of the large Spanish companies in Latin America, which are very relevant to justify the priority devoted to that continent, beyond its cultural and historical links. Undoubtedly, Latin American interests in Telefónica or Santander converge and are sometimes confused with those of Spain, as seen with the well-known diplomatic conflict between Spain and Argentina regarding the nationalisation of the oil company Repsol-YPF by the Argentine government in 2012.

In short, the interests of large multinationals such as Gazprom, Siemens, Volkswagen, Walmart, Google, Apple, Facebook, Sony, Toyota, Inditex, Boeing, Airbus, Chevron, Amazon, Alibaba, Microsoft, General Electric, Samsung, Nestle and PwC, to name but a few, tend to overlap rather than diverge with those of the countries they represent. They exist in a reciprocal relationship of mutual synergies between commercial results and branding strategies. This is why multinationals become decisive actors in the projection of the “territory brand” to foreign audiences. In a bidirectional relationship (which is theoretically win-win), multinationals benefit from their country’s reputation in order to market their products abroad, while governments benefit from the strength of their economies and companies to obtain better international agreements.²⁶

For instance, in the Spanish case and in terms of territorial branding, the business sector has become closely linked (at least during the two legislatures of the former President, Mariano Rajoy) through the *Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas* (FMRE). The FMRE is presented as private interest group, interlocutor and preferred partner of the “Spain brand” project in order to facilitate public-private collaboration. It seeks to form a strategic alliance comprising more

²⁵ Bouza, Luis., Oleart, Álvaro. (2018): “From the 2005 Constitution’s ‘Permissive Consensus’ to TTIP’s ‘Empowering Dissensus’: The EU as a Playing Field for Spanish Civil Society”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, vol. 14 nº 2, pp. 87-104.

²⁶ For instance, it has been argued that a large part of US foreign policy has been a consequence of the commercial interests of the powerful Jewish lobby in the United States.



than 100 Spanish companies, together with the General State Administration to promote the projection of the international reputation of Spain. However, analysts such as Javier Noya²⁷ are sceptical of the convergence of communications strategies in the case of the FMRE, arguing that it “has barely developed initiatives that have improved the image of Spain abroad. In this way, the “ambassadors” appointed periodically would serve more to give notoriety to this business lobby, than to improve the international image of Spain. And the associates themselves, the great Spanish brands, have seldom exhibited a true national pride or “made in Spain” abroad, but on the contrary, they have hidden it”²⁸.

Indeed, large multinationals are developing their own public relations akin to state diplomacy, the most important of which are even more influential than many state governments. This explains why within their different units there exist precious sources for international communicators. As long as they become actors or subjects of international affairs and newsworthiness, multinational corporations (through stock variations, purchases, investments, relocations and so forth) represent a key source of information and explanation for the analysis of global geopolitical dynamics.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that they also have their own private interests, reflected in those that exploit child labour or the most permissive labour or environmental legislation on the planet, those that bribe the local authorities of the states in which they are located, those that adopt corrupt practices to operate in states where state action is less effective, and those that are involved in criminal activities or in the financing of criminal groups.

- **Religious groups** can be understood as stakeholders in international affairs, although in truth they do not represent more than groups of particular associates based on beliefs, albeit in a transnational way, as many religions transcend national borders. On the one hand, for some decades international religious news has been relegated to the background. Yet on the other hand the so-called return of religious phenomena has brought the religious question back to the forefront of the world. This return has been coupled with two substantial issues, namely: the replacement of Pope Benedict XVI by the more “media-friendly” Latin American Pope Francis, as well as the importance of the religious question being linked to international issues such as the situation in the Middle East and the Islamic State.²⁹

Religion is widely said to be a decisive factor in many international conflicts, such as Palestine-Israel, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, Sudan and the Philippines. However, it also constitutes the specific policy of some countries with regard to the international dimension. This is evident in the case of the State of Israel, where religious, cultural and national questions are intermingled to the extent that their dissociation is virtually impossible. This is also clear in the case of the USA, where religious lobbies (whether evangelical or Jewish) traditionally determine the country’s foreign policy, especially with regard to the situation in the Middle East.

This phenomenon should also be noted in the Catholic context, as Pope Francis is often “claimed” by various actors as a mediator in diverse conflicts throughout the world. Accordingly, as regards the Spanish framework, the Catholic Church has played an important diplomatic role in Spain’s territorial tensions in both the Basque Country and Catalonia. The

²⁷ Noya, Javier (2012): *La imagen de España en el Mundo. Visiones del Exterior*, Madrid, Tecnos, Colección: Estado y Sociedad, vol. 1, p. 431.

²⁸ Tuñón, Jorge. *op.cit.*, pp. 203-204.

²⁹ The practical emergence of Islam as an actor in international affairs since the events and aftermath of 11 September 2001 (e.g., conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Arab Spring, Syrian civil war, Arab-Israeli conflict and the actions of al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State) has placed the religious phenomenon at the forefront of international diplomacy.



Catholic Church has also recently become a key communicative actor concerning the possible exhumation of the remains of the dictator Francisco Franco.

In fact, religious groups have certain preeminent social positions, granting them access to personalities and information that are not usually attainable by other information sources. Within the framework of different dictatorships, religious groups have gained valuable information about political repression data, or have sometimes acted as intermediaries between terrorist groups and national leaders. This has been seen on several occasions in the case of the Basque Catholic Church during negotiations between the terrorist organisation ETA and Spain. Furthermore, some states in the Middle East and Northern Africa are currently closely linked to Islam, a religion that has become an important actor in international diplomacy.

Therefore, it is now essential for international informants to understand the specificities of religious phenomena and to identify the actors and discourses surrounding them, as well as the fundamentals of practices, especially their consequences in the social sphere while influencing relations between peoples. In this sense, international communication should be attentive and sufficiently prepared to warn of other types of issues (usually related to the control of territories and resources) being discussed under religious pretexts. The complex conflict between Palestine and Israel is the paradigmatic example.

- **Terrorist groups**, at least as agents involved in international information, must also be mentioned. Needless to say, some have an explicit relationship with religion, or at least use it to justify their actions. Although different groups have ceased their activities, laying down their weapons (e.g. Irish Republican Army activities in the United Kingdom or ETA in Spain), terrorism is a recurring constant in the international world. While in some cases its impact is geographically limited, on other occasions, such as following 11 September 2001 and in reference to the actions of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, it has deep and global repercussions.

For communication purposes, it is not easy to deal with these agents of international information. Due to the risk of attack, access is usually complex and dangerous, and this is why interaction tends to be through videos, social networks and/or statements. This also constitutes an area of international information that is subject to considerable pressure and manipulation in order to influence the content of the international message. In particular, over the years international communication has been compelled to move away from sources and to instead deal rather more cautiously with such information. In contrast, in the past international communicators were treated, almost exquisitely, by terrorist groups for decades. Indeed, the same communicators who were strategically suitable for the international dissemination of their actions and messages in the past, are today the direct targets of terrorist groups, especially where they are perceived as disseminators of supposedly western values.

Indeed, since 2014 this has been one of the main communication strategies of the Islamic State. The release of videos depicting brutal executions of western citizens and threats towards western countries in western languages has made this terrorist group a prominent stakeholder within international relations. It has intentionally launched a combination of hard and soft power diplomatic strategies that appear threatening in the West. Even today, at a time when its military defeat seems close, its propagandistic legacy continues to inhabit the Internet. “The propaganda of ISIS is the greatest thing that has ever been done in the world of propaganda”, said former USA diplomat Alberto Fernández to Francisco Carrión, a Spanish journalist based in Cairo, and recognised analyst of the diplomatic machinery of the Islamic State.³⁰

³⁰ Carrión, Francisco (2019): “La propaganda sin fin, el peligroso arsenal que rearma al Estado Islámico”, *El Mundo*, 24 March 2019.



In fact, even in February 2019 a movement linked to ISIS distributed two videos with subtitles in Spanish that extolled the “brotherhood” among jihadist fighters and praised “those who persecute martyrdom”. Its Arabic weekly *Al Naba* and news agency Al Amaq continue to report on the group’s actions alongside the constant re-broadcasting of familiar productions via Twitter, YouTube and Telegram. As beneficiaries of ICT, this propaganda remains accessible in cyberspace, ensuring that ISIS retains its long-term relevance in international communication.³¹

- **Universities, research centres and *think tanks*** have also demonstrated their involvement in international affairs. Universities have recently become concerned with containing specialised centers for the analysis and study of international relations. Their academics have become important sources of international affairs in a dual sense: for the media, which uses them to obtain analyses of current news on an international scale; and for government officials, who may turn to them as experts or consultants to gain a better understanding before making political decisions.

It is known that national governments (and political parties in the opposition too) as well as supranational organisations (such as in the case of the EU with ESPAS)³² rely on ad-hoc think tanks as intellectual laboratories for the formulation or justification of their policies. Even in some cases they have become essential actors of models of new public diplomacy and brand territory. That is the case of the Elcano Royal Institute, which hosts an “Observatory of the Spain Brand” with the aim of establishing a series of indicators that can publicise an image of Spain based on disaggregated variables.

Of course, research centres and think tanks may be of a public or private nature, which is why we must also consider the information they provide with caution, because as actors of international information, they also have their own interests. On a global scale, the New York-based Council for Foreign Relations (CFR) is well known, while in Europe the European Policy Studies (CEPS), the European Policy Center (EPC) and the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) bringing together more than three dozen research centres should all be highlighted. Meanwhile, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) is significant.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the emergence and convergence of new ICT has transformed not only the production of information at the international level, but its consumption as well. Information is only one keystroke away, potentially an inexorable step in the democratisation process. The development of ICT has made a wealth of information available to private consumers, unthinkable only a few years ago. However, citizens today are unable to manage such abundance. How can they discriminate between accurate and reliable information on the one hand and disinformation on the other?

Specifically, online news production differs from the “traditional” in terms of variables such as speed and immediacy; null constraint space; the policentrality and multiplicity of sources for disseminating the message; interactivity between issuers and audiences; and increased audience participation. As a result of the evolution of the mass media, especially on the Internet, different global networks have become able to coalesce, mobilise and act with unprecedented efficiency. Some have also proven capable of avoiding so-called “spin doctor”

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Tuñón, *et al. op.cit*



techniques to spread the so-called *CNN effect*, and have reported sensitive topics to global audiences. These audiences often blame their governments or other international stakeholders for inaction on certain topics. Consequently, stakeholders such as governments have had little choice other than to copy their counterparts, discussing issues that would otherwise remain unattended. Sometimes the media are even successful in setting the agenda of national governments or international organisations.

Indeed, international communication must deal with the attitudes of diverse international society stakeholders, who seek to determine as far as possible media flows of information. Whether they are states, international organisations, NGOs or private companies, press, publicity and/or public relations services are sought to model and shape international information. Facing such public diplomacy and/or propaganda practices, international communicators should avoid becoming mere instruments and instead play the analytical and critical role demanded by international society. The attenuation of the phenomenon of propaganda and the professionalisation of the press and public relations services have led to the consensus between public relations offices and international journalists. The latest evolution of the phenomenon is represented by the “New Public Diplomacy”, by which the stakeholders of international society use new ICT to positively shape perceptions within the global public opinion framework.

Undoubtedly, the governments of nation states and international organisations (such as the EU) are the decisive stakeholders in both international relations and international communication. They generate or hide most of the global information. However, they are not the only actors involved in the process. Multinational or transnational corporations, NGOs, trade unions and even religious groups, terrorists and think tanks also represent recognised and adaptable stakeholders in the context of international information. It is precisely within this framework that each stakeholder looks to disseminate information that is not always innocent and transparent. Therefore, the broad management of international stakeholders and sources offers the international communicator the ability to face the challenge, independently discerning and elaborating international information to the detriment of diverse forms of institutional propaganda.



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