*Cathie Burton*

# OSCE Public Diplomacy – From Communiqués to Cyberspace

When the new Albanian government started its work this summer, it began with an important realization. New to power, and interested in how to communicate with important partners, it called the OSCE Mission to propose the idea of training in public diplomacy. The government's main concerns: getting its messages out in a clear and coherent manner, understanding the tools of the communications trade, and most of all, learning the tips and tricks that would make them fully able to share in a world where social media has become the preferred means of receiving information for most of the population.

Even before General Kitchener called soldiers to the First World War through posters on each British street corner proclaiming that "your country needs you", governments have been in the business of not only informing their different communities on plans and policies, but using persuasion to change opinions and behaviour. Now, in an era when messages can fly across the globe at the touch of a button, the art of communication has become more sophisticated and complex than ever. For an organization like the OSCE, with its many different mandates, geographical locations, and areas of interest, the art of public diplomacy can seem like a daunting task. Yet by using key elements of communications practice, and building on the experience of the past, the OSCE can succeed in growing its reputation and brand with a variety of audiences.

Many people outside the world of communications tend to misunderstand the complexity of building public engagement in their organization's work. The old model of a press conference, with a press release and perhaps a photo snapped in passing might be the immediate default idea for most; sadly, this is not, and hasn't been for many years, the best way to organize communicating to a general public. Engagement in real public diplomacy demands a manifold approach, which includes efforts to understand the audience's needs, to figure out exactly who that audience is and the way in which they consume information, and to tailor the messages so that the audience will "hear" them in the intended way. Communication – in the end – is not about what you say, but what people understand you to have said.

Let's take a few minutes to look at how modern-day communications evolved. The starting point is in Vienna, with the insights of Sigmund Freud. When Freud started to explore the complexities of the human mind, he inadvertently initiated the science of communication: a process wonderfully re-

counted in the 2009 documentary "The Century of the Self".[1] In it, award-winning documentary maker Adam Curtis sets out the extent that governments and private industry have used Freud's theories to "control the crowd", asking the question of how much free will we really exercise in our day-to-day choices. Freud became not only the father of psychoanalysis, but also the founder of the science of persuasion and propaganda that is at the root of all current models of public communication. He was also a progenitor in the proper sense of the word: Edward Bernays, the acknowledged pioneer of public relations, was Freud's nephew, and Matthew Freud, his great-grandson, was part of the communications team that spearheaded what pejoratively became known as the UK Labour Party's "spin machine", engineering the communications messages that put Tony Blair into Downing Street.

The tactics that Bernays used in his campaigns for private companies and politicians are not so far removed from methods in use today. Working on his first big campaign for Lucky Strike, his aim was to make it acceptable for women to smoke in public – a way to effectively double the potential buyers of the product. He planted women with cigarettes in the famous New York Easter Parade, carrying banners "Torches for Freedom"; a slogan that resonated with the American psyche and brought to mind for many the statue of liberty not far away. Later, working on various political campaigns, he conceived of public relations as being essential to a fully functional democracy, stating in his 1928 book *Propaganda: "*The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. […] We are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. […] In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons […] who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind."[2]

To a modern audience, this declaration can sound sinister in the extreme. The very term "propaganda", once a totally acceptable name for a benign area of work, became tainted during the years that followed, as the Soviet and Nazi regimes used the power of mass communication to warp and mutilate the idea of free choice. Bernays himself would be tarred with this brush, with critics inferring that his work was pivotal in the development of totalitarianism. Yet he was invited by Woodrow Wilson to the Paris conference following the First World War to bring "democracy to the whole of

---

1    Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self*, 2002.
2    Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, New York 1928, pp. 9-10.

Europe", and was a founder member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Was Bernays right? Does democracy depend on the way in which we receive communication? Even at a more mundane level, the answer is difficult to pin down. The Apples and Coca Colas of this world – those companies with a product and a stock market share – can answer easily. Did I persuade people to buy my product? Yes, sales are rising/no, we've slumped. But for any organization involved in the business of selling values – such as the OSCE, the UN, and indeed national governments – there is no valid means of measuring whether what we do has impact or not.

So how do we decide on public diplomacy actions if we have no means of testing the water? As I began my first year at the OSCE in January, tasked with launching a new communication strategy, this difficulty was very much on my mind. It was apparent that an attempt to bring in a "one-size-fits-all" strategy would get us nowhere. What would work in Serbia would not work in Tashkent; the way in which the High Commissioner on National Minorities communicates is very different to the way in which the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights needs to go about selling its story. Most of all, there was no "snapshot", no baseline measurement that could easily be taken. Yet it was clear that to fulfil our mission of finding the widest and most engaged audience for the OSCE's mission and tasks, we needed to re-shape the manner in which information was being delivered to the public.

The first step was the relaunch of the OSCE magazine. Now entitled *Security Community,* it has had a complete face-lift both graphically and in the way stories are presented, and now appears as an online and an iPad version. More importantly, efforts to build the distribution network have led to a much bigger take-up, with each print edition running out quickly and increased visits to the site. During next year, we hope to build on this public engagement to build partnerships with outside organizations and individuals interested in the OSCE's work and to fold them deeper into our day-to-day work, creating a virtual "brain's trust" to match the efforts being carried out to capture a wider debate through the Secretary General's Security Days events.

The second step – one that lasted most of the year – was the overhaul of the existing website. Our assumption at the onset was that it needed a fresher look and feel and more searchability. Not willing to rest on our assumptions, we tested our hypothesis by entering a "discovery" phase. Over a number of months, we carried out interviews with "key stakeholders" in our internal audience from the Secretary General down, talked to external audiences such as top-level journalists and academics, and – most interesting of all – sat 15 random members of the public at a computer to "test drive" the old site. When the results were in, our thoughts were confirmed. Across the board, everyone wanted a fresh new look to the website, more video and podcasts, and photos. Better searchability was top of the list overall. But what we

279

hadn't reckoned with was that we were losing the vast majority of the audience because we were failing to add context to the stories we were posting. A conference on arms control? All well and good … but isn't that NATO, and what does this OSCE do anyway? Put to the test, it was obvious that the OSCE's efforts at public diplomacy where simply failing to reach the public.

The redesign of the website had to remedy that situation. It also had to be designed in a way that every visitor – from the internal audience of delegates to specialized journalists, academics, and the general public – was able to access the information they wanted in the way they wanted. This meant an approach that would allow people to enter through different "doors", enabling them to find information in the way that was intuitively best for them. It meant that the website needed to be rewritten from the perspective of the intelligent general audience we wished to reach and maintain. There would need to be more emphasis on film, photography, and other interactive elements. And, perhaps most innovative of all, every publication by the OSCE, on whatever topic, would be easily found, either on pages dedicated to a theme, or on a standalone page. The website could then act as a real library and resource for all those who visited, be it a schoolchild researching a project, an activist looking for information on one of the mission pages, a researcher deep in the details of a PhD thesis, or a member of one of the delegations in Vienna attempting to find a Permanent Council decision.

A website – especially one designed to benefit all audiences – is a public-diplomacy staple. But the question still remains: how to draw in the audiences, get their attention, and keep it. That is where the communication revolution comes to our aid. Over the past decade, the general public has gradually switched from consuming written texts to harvesting information online. At the same time, communications work has changed from a process of controlling the message into something new. Once, a spokesperson communicated solely through the means of press releases, news items, and briefings to the media. In a digital world, this is no longer possible. The model has moved from control to conversation, with public diplomacy increasingly becoming an online phenomenon. Our world has changed, and we are now living in the age of digital diplomacy.

The change was documented this year by Twiplomacy, the online branch of media gurus Burson-Marsteller. In a major study of world leaders,[3] they showed that more than three quarters of the 193 UN member countries now have a presence on Twitter. Almost half of the 505 accounts are personal accounts of heads of state or government and foreign ministers. A third of them tweet themselves – Carl Bildt being the best connected – but very few are regular users. Those tweets are not simple missives of states though; leaders frequently use them to interact with their supporters. Argentina's President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Latin America's most followed

---

3    See Twiplomacy Study 2013, at: http://twiplomacy.com/twiplomacy-study-2013/#.

leader with 2.1 million followers, uses the medium to communicate with her peers; Ugandan Prime Minister Amama Mbabazi replies to almost all the questions he gets on Twitter. This places Twitter in the forefront of the most powerful modern public diplomacy tools.

Many international organizations are still unsure about exposing themselves to this form of communication. Some have decided not to enter the experiment, where others, such as NATO, are forging ahead and entering conversations with their audiences. The OSCE is rapidly expanding in the field of social media: At the time of writing, we have 22,000 followers on Twitter and 26,649 on Facebook, and the numbers are growing. Field offices and institutions have also started to use social media – although there needs to be careful thought about whether it is indeed the appropriate course to take in some circumstances. In Central Asia, for example, the use of "Western" models would not work; in Moldova, Facebook is not the most popular social network. The key factor is to look carefully at the best tactic in a given country, for a given story, in a given situation. Social media is, after all, only one tool in a vast toolbox of possibilities, ranging from public lectures and pamphlets to Google Hangouts and Facebook likes.

In the coming years, people will abandon their PCs for tablet computers. Journalists are already much more likely to track stories through Twitter or comparative social media, and have themselves become curators of online information rather than generators of the material itself. The OSCE will be ahead of this trend, with a new website configured for tablets and ready for shares on social media. But most importantly of all, alterations to our means of communication and our day-to-day practices will help us to spot the best projects and programmes in advance, work out which audience needs that information, and find ways to tell the story to that audience so that they understand the OSCE's values and engage in our mission.