

## Postmodern Public Diplomacy: Appraisal of a Paradigm in the Age of Post-Reality

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**Article DOI:**

10.48028/iiprds/ijdshmss.v14.i1.36

**Keywords:**

Public diplomacy,  
Postmodernity,  
Postmodernism,  
Social constructivism,  
Post-truth, Post-  
reality

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### Abstract

This theory-driven contribution seeks to understand the foundational principles of contemporary public diplomacy, which is dominated by the relationship-oriented New Public Diplomacy, and evaluate its suitability under the current conditions of the public sphere. It is contended that postmodernism is the single philosophical stance that generated and informed the relational turn in public diplomacy. Three underlying tendencies are identified as informing the relational turn: (1) a materialist-teleological interpretation of information and communication technologies in determining paradigmatic transformations in public diplomacy; (2) a distribution of agency being shared among public diplomacy actors and publics (rather than being monopolized by the actor); and (3) an ethical predicament motivating the above-mentioned agency distribution. Contemporary public diplomacy can be termed postmodern in three respects: first, as a feature of global politics defined as postmodern international system; second, as a transnational communication paradigm that hinges upon the (postmodernist) premises of social constructivist theory; thirds, as a teleological interpretation of history. The essence of the postmodern paradigm of public diplomacy is encapsulated in the following normative assumption: *the process of shifting the agency distribution toward empowering the public diplomacy audiences cannot be undone (if anything, it can only be pushed forward); that is due to the combination of techno-informational globalization teleology and the ethical-emancipatory predicament of postmodern public diplomacy*. This paper suggests that, in the context of a late-postmodern public sphere characterized by a condition of post-reality where the social construction of reality is hardly possible, the postmodern paradigm of public diplomacy faces fundamental challenges.

## Background to Study

This theory-driven contribution seeks to understand the foundational principles of contemporary public diplomacy and evaluate its suitability under the current conditions of the public sphere. As documented in the editorial of the first issue of this journal, the academic study of public diplomacy has grown dramatically since the early 2000s, with an average of 59.7 English-language articles being published yearly over the period 2005-2014 and the figure rising to 131.7 during the period 2015-2020 (Ayhan, 2021). It is arguably no coincidence that the increase in the number of scholarly publications devoted to public diplomacy has been located around year 2005, which was the publication year of Jan Melissen's manifesto of the New Public Diplomacy (NPD). Now all too familiar to students, researchers, and practitioners in the field, the relationship-oriented reconceptualization of public diplomacy proclaimed by the NPD at that time sparked the relational turn that soon became dominant and set the standard for public diplomacy (Zaharna, 2020). A quantity of concepts and discussions on the goals and features of relational public diplomacy mushroomed ever since.

This article is aimed at tracing the intellectual roots of the web of conceptual entries which appeared within the scope of relational public diplomacy so as to coherently make sense of their apparent multiplicity. I contend that the single philosophical stance that generated and undergirded the relational turn may be located in postmodernism. Not only does twenty-first century public diplomacy take place, as scholars and commentators incessantly remind, in a "postmodern" globalization world wherein major events are significantly affected by a plurality of transnational, sub-national, and supra-national actors and forces which challenge the primacy of the Westphalian model of the "modern" state system. By specifically referring to the social constructivist corollary of postmodernist thought and the discourses of agency and emancipation that emerged in the postmodern climate of critique and deconstruction, it will be also argued that the relational reformulation of public diplomacy owes to postmodernism the idea that agreement and understanding shall be socially constructed through dialogue and the ethical clause of social responsibility attached to NPD articulations such as multistakeholder and collaborative diplomacy.

The transplantation of key postmodernist tenets into the understanding and advocacy of public diplomacy under the postmodern conditions of the contemporary world marked a paradigm shift in scholarly thinking which promised to improve the effectiveness and enhance the relevance of public diplomacy in global politics. Arguably, that promise can only rest on the fundamental premise that the social construction of shared ideas and meaning is an actual condition of the public sphere involved in the public diplomatic intercourse. No matter how subjective they may be, the ideas, judgements, beliefs, and identities of agents acting in the social realm still need to be *socially* agreed upon and constructed through the collaborative participation of multiple agents in order to be *shared*. Recent advancements in the study of the public sphere in the era of post-truth seem to suggest that what I term here the "reality principle" – that is, the idea that reality is still, at least minimally, relevant in civil society – is no longer a truism of the contemporary

world (Bjola & Manor, 2021). If that is the case, it follows that the postmodern premises of public diplomacy shall be questioned under the present conditions of the public sphere known as “post-reality” (Bjola & Manor, 2021).

To develop these considerations, this paper takes three steps. The first section reviews a selection of key writings of what constitutes the overall NPD theory, it reconstructs the normative assertion of the NPD as relational public diplomacy, and identifies three underlying tendencies informing the relational turn: (1) a materialist-teleological interpretation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in determining paradigmatic transformations in public diplomacy; (2) a distribution of agency being shared among public diplomacy actors and publics (rather than being monopolized by the actor); and (3) an ethical predicament motivating the above-mentioned agency distribution. The second section provides qualifications for heuristically subsuming the whole semantic field of the relational turn in terms of “postmodern public diplomacy”. It is argued that contemporary public diplomacy can be termed postmodern in three respects: (1) as a feature of global politics defined as postmodern international system; (2) as a transnational communication paradigm that hinges upon the (postmodernist) premises of social constructivist theory; and (3) as a teleological interpretation of history. This postmodernist characterization of relational public diplomacy prompts a serious consideration of the state of the public sphere in the contemporary era. Finally, the third and final section evaluates the fitness of postmodern public diplomacy in the present context of the public sphere.

### **Understanding the Relational Turn**

At the origin, the NPD, which sparked the relational turn in public diplomacy approaches, was formulated as in contrast to the assumedly more traditional forms of public diplomacy. These forms, characterized as non-relational, were associated with notions such as propaganda, strategic communications, and (with some qualifications) nation branding. With a view to understanding the relational turn, we explore in this section the conceptual web surrounding the NPD, which comprises notions such as networked, participatory and collaborative public diplomacy. As we reconstruct the discourse of the NPD, we will trace the essential underlying tendencies informing the relational turn.

### ***The Relational Turn as Public Diplomacy Norm***

The NPD was presented as a paradigmatic shift from its “traditional” predecessor. As the scholarly canon agrees, the distinction between traditional public diplomacy and NPD is clear-cut: the former involves the one-way communication of information from a government to foreign civil societal targets, with the aim of influencing their perceptions, opinions, and behaviors. The latter prioritizes two-way dialogue, fostering relationships with foreign societies, and striving to build mutual understanding and long-term trust between nations, rather than focusing solely on short-term advocacy and explanations of specific national policies. The goal of the NPD is therefore the creation of common understanding between nations through sustained relationships and dialogue, in the

framework of which the explanation of policies and their contexts is only one part of the wider inter-societal engagement (Melissen, 2005).

As Rhonda Zaharna explains, the relational turn discloses the existence of “two parallel views of public diplomacy”: one assumes “a focus on providing information, the other on building relationships” (Zaharna, 2020, p. 96). Accordingly, the NPD discourse that has risen to prominence in contemporary public diplomacy advocacy prescribes that the paramount concern of public diplomacy shall be no more the production and effective delivery of information to the foreign publics as fits the national interests (i.e., strategic communication), but rather the long-term management of transboundary relations between societies aimed at mutual understanding and appreciation (Fitzpatrick, 2013). That must be done through dialogical activity, wherein the wide-ranging practices of listening play a constitutive role in public diplomacy (Cull, 2009; Di Martino, 2020).

Besides this prescriptive provision, the formulation of the NPD openly aspires to distinguish public diplomacy from such seemingly related concept as propaganda, nation branding, and cultural relations. Melissen argues that

[t]he distinction between propaganda and public diplomacy lies in the pattern of communication. Modern public diplomacy is a 'two-way street', [...] it is fundamentally different from it [propaganda] in the sense that public diplomacy also listens to what people have to say (Melissen, 2005, p. 18)

Public diplomacy is thereby rendered conceptually autonomous by signifying the phenomenon of one-way (monological) communication as propaganda. Given that the NPD is defined in contrast to the traditional public diplomacy as relationship and dialogue versus one-way information dissemination and delivery, propaganda and traditional public diplomacy are collapsed into the same concept, and (new) public diplomacy is granted conceptual sovereignty as a result. It can be added that this conceptual move also collapses NPD and public diplomacy into the same category, so that the NPD as a concept now corresponds to all public diplomacy. In other words, dialogue and relationality achieve normative status in qualifying the phenomenon of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is also said to be different from nation branding. While it is undoubtedly true that the management of the nation's brand or competitive identity (Anholt, 2007) and public diplomacy are indeed strongly interrelated activities (Kaefer, 2020), public diplomacy is also distinct from nation branding in as much as it is “first of all about promoting and maintaining smooth international relationships” (Melissen, 2005, p. 21) rather than simply cultivating and projecting the national image or brand. From this perspective, national branding consists of the monological practice of broadcasting a skillfully crafted message being the nation's brand. The activities of surveying the foreign perceptions of our national brand through opinion polls or the various existing international brand rankings and soft power measurements may appear as an act of

listening, but as a matter of fact they are subordinated to the end of improving and maximizing the ability of our messaging to influence the foreign perceptions towards desired outcomes. From the viewpoint of NPD, nation branding falls short of fulfilling the relational ideal. It is inherently asymmetrical in as much as its listening practices are subordinated to the goal of speaking more effectively and more powerfully. Thus, it is revealed to be just a sophisticated form of strategic communication, updated to fit the globalized condition of the contemporary world.

In summation, the formulation of the NPD makes the case for public diplomacy's autonomy from apparently similar fields such as propaganda, strategic communication, and nation branding. The most essential difference is made by the dialogic nature of public diplomacy and its orientation toward relationship-building and -management. As Shaun Riordan asserts, "successful public diplomacy must be based not on the assertions of values, but on engaging in a genuine dialogue" (Riordan 2005, 189). The normative implication of this relational formulation of public diplomacy is manifest in that it prescribes public diplomacy to fulfil the dialogic-relational clause of the NPD definition. Forms and instances of public diplomacy cannot be properly termed public diplomacy if they are not oriented toward the NPD ideal, no matter how composite and sophisticated the instruments they employ – be those the most skillfully crafted marketing methods or advanced digital tools. It is not the complexity and sophistication of the instruments but the underlying *logic of communication* that matters most and defines the nature of public diplomacy (Cull, 2013; Manor, 2019; Zaharna, 2020).

### ***The Conceptual Web***

While the conceptualization of the NPD applies an exclusionary logic which alienates concepts such as strategic communication and nation branding from the semantics of public diplomacy, a multitude of other concepts have grown out of public diplomacy's relational turn. These concepts should not be understood as in contrast to the NPD; on the contrary, they are characterizations of public diplomacy in the twenty-first century. They underpin and provide foundation for the NPD discourse. Below, the following two concepts will be considered: networked public diplomacy and participatory-collaborative public diplomacy. Together with other related concepts, they form a conceptual web surrounding public diplomacy's relational turn. A quick overview of their subjacent discursual logics and assumptions is helpful for grasping the fundamental underlying trajectory of the evolution of contemporary public diplomacy set out by the relational turn.

### ***Networked PD***

The nature of the NPD is relational; hence, it places emphasis on the value of connections. As connections proliferate, networks are created and expand. The notion of "networked public diplomacy" results from the application of Manuel Castell's network theory to public diplomacy (Zaharna et al., 2013). It refers to the idea that we now live in a world whose architecture is complex and made up of multi-hub, multi-directional networks connecting communities across all regions of the world. The interconnected and



interdependent character of the contemporary world renders collaboration among communities imperative to solve global issues of shared concern. Power is no longer unidimensional; instead, it lies in the ability to manage and mobilize networks to tackle complex problems. Consequently, power is distributed amongst a multitude of actors.

Public diplomacy in the era of networks acknowledges the complexity of the contemporary world and, accordingly, places its primary focus on the expansion and deepening of connections with multiple global actors. Soft power may originate as a byproduct, but relationship-based networks are the ultimate objective (van Ham, 2013). It is important to clarify that the notion of “networks” in this discourse of the networked public diplomacy does not necessarily coincide with “social networks”. Although social media as a cutting-edge innovation of Web 2.0 can be reasonably expected to be powerfully facilitating the expansion and proliferation of networks and the corresponding NPD practices (Cull, 2013), the term “networks” here encompasses various forms of interactions that link a diverse array of actors.

The emphasis on networks logically presupposes the existence of multiple actors which form the hubs and nodes of such networks. According to the much-popular globalization discourse which promises the relative decline in the power of nation-states in the contemporary international system, a host of non-state players are now said to be playing a larger role in influencing global events compared to the past. Because the state- and non-state actors which inhabit the international arena not only have the ability to shape future developments but are also affected by them, they hold stakes in the management and governance of the global commons and the issues of common interest. A public diplomacy that acknowledges and fosters relations with these global stakeholders to pursue shared goals is also called “multistakeholder diplomacy” (Hocking, 2006).

Importantly, this characterization of contemporary public diplomacy implies the joint efforts of international as well as domestic civil societal players acting as the publics of public diplomacy (Vibber & Kim, 2016). As Ellen Huijgh popularly stated, public diplomacy begins at home (Huijgh, 2019). It follows that “the promotion of ideas and values, or national images, cannot be the responsibility of one body alone, state or non-state. It must be a collaborative effort by all aspects of civil society, state and non-state actors alike, and all levels of governance” (Riordan, 2002, p.133).

### ***Participatory-Collaborative Diplomacy***

It is understood that the point of the new PD is to build and cultivate relationships with a plurality of networked civil society actors at home and abroad. But what is the underlying assumption of all that? The assumption is that all these actors are no longer supposed to play the passive role of mere listeners of one-way communication. Instead, they are now called to play an active role. That applies in at least two respects. First, the participation of the private actors in the public diplomatic dialogic interaction results in the collaborative construction of the national image of the country engaging in NPD. Assumedly, the public diplomacy publics are expected to dialogically respond to our image-projecting

messaging, thereby playing an active part in reshaping our initial message (Zaharna et al., 2013). As Riordan puts it,

If tackling the major security issues requires collaboration at the global level with both governmental and non-governmental agencies, and if stable and effective collaboration can be secured only through engagement with broader foreign societies, public diplomacy becomes an integral and substantive, not just presentational, part of the policy-making process. (Riordan, 2005, p. 187)

Secondly, by virtue of their participation in the dialogue on the global problems of shared concern, both the actors and publics of PD de facto co-participate in framing the given issues and thereby co-determine the ways in which such issues will be addressed. The NPD recognizes these facts of today's world and, correspondingly, it invites a host of civil societal players to participate and collaborate in the public diplomatic effort. This activity of engagement through public diplomacy demands action through social practices, thus it goes beyond simple act of communication (two-way or otherwise) and forms part of policy (Zaharna et al., 2013; Manor, 2019).

### ***Trajectories of Public Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century***

The NPD, which was promoted by its early theorists and advocates as a true paradigm shift in thinking and conducting public diplomacy, is characterized as relational, networked, multistakeholder, collaborative and participatory diplomacy. Here, we explore the three fundamental tendencies of public diplomacy's relational turn: (1) a materialist teleological view of public diplomacy evolution; (2) the changing distribution of agency in the public diplomatic process; and (3) public diplomacy's ethical predicament.

### ***Techno-informational teleology***

The key premise unanimously recognized by all researchers and advocates of relational public diplomacy is the discourse of a complex globalization world populated by a crowd of ever-more-closely interconnected and interdependent state- and non-state actors (Zaharna et al., 2013). It is said that, owing to the emergence, expansion, and consolidation of the new ICTs, especially the internet and Web 2.0, a considerable number of non-state actors have gained the ability to withhold or share information. Such non-state actors are categorized as subnational, transnational, and supra-national, and they include the usual suspects reiterated by the globalization discourse: private businesses, international institutions, civil societal groups (transnational or otherwise), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and certain particularly influential individuals. The empowerment of this kind of actors, so the discourse goes, owes much to the recent advances in the ICTs, including the Internet, instant messaging, social media, and so on. These awe-inspiring technologies are said to have allowed everyone to virtually generate, shape, and disseminate information worldwide with no constraints. As goes the old adage, nation-states are no longer the supreme actors in the global arena.

Assumed that, as we may reasonably agree, the survival and success – or, in a word, the power – of one actor depends on the actor's access to accurate data on the surrounding environment, it follows by logic that power is socially distributed amongst a plurality of interdependent actors of various kinds (van Ham, 2013). It is in the interest of each actor (state- and non-state alike) to engage in positive relationships with all relevant actors and share information based on common interests. Those who fail to recognize this necessity are to be expected to fail or perish in this complex and interdependent world. This kind of survival-of-the-fittest logic thusly prescribes the norm and necessity of relational public diplomacy or NPD.

The logical structure of this globalization discourse undergirding public diplomacy's relational turn is indeed solid. What needs to be pointed out here is that all this discourse stems from and hinges upon the acknowledgement of the material appearance of the new ICTs and the material effects on the global system of state- and non-state actors they are said to have engendered. This is a materialist and historical pattern of thinking. Implied by this reasoning is the idea that innovations in public diplomacy thinking are not the product of developments in pure thought independent of the empirical reality but are rather necessitated by changes in the material world. Because the material appearance of the new ICTs is, as the globalization discourse wants us to believe, an epoch-making evolution that distinguishes our era from all previous history, the reasoning behind the necessity of relational public diplomacy rests upon a materialist-historical conception of the world.

Finally, this materialist-historical reasoning culminates in the teleological view that, based on the survival-of-the-fittest logic mentioned above, the overall course of history will eventually show a convergence toward a relational understanding of public diplomacy. That is a teleological worldview which interprets the relational-oriented transformation of public diplomacy as being necessitated by material changes in the information technologies. This claim is most apparent in such studies addressing the cases of digitalized public diplomacy (or Public Diplomacy 2.0) that fail to employ the most advanced digital tools in our era, including social media and the like, for the purposes of genuine dialogue and relationship-building and -cultivation (NPD) but only for the (one-way, monological) goals of information broadcasting and dissemination (Zaharna, 2010; Cull, 2013; Manor, 2019). The understanding of such cases as public diplomacy's failures to unleash the full potential of the digital tools for enlightened goals exposes the embedded (techno-informational) teleologism of such claims.

### *Distributions of agency*

The move away from soft power is relevant to the notion of “social power”, which Peter van Ham (2013) regards as the foundation of public diplomacy. No matter how softer and praiseworthy compared to its harder counterpart, soft power is an actor-centered concept that is concerned with the power of one single actor to elicit the attraction of others (Nye, 2004). Nation A's soft-power initiatives boost and project the (supposedly) attractive



features of Nation A with the expectation that the foreign publics in Nation B will be drawn to them. The foreign (Nation B) audiences of Nation A's soft-power initiatives are thus seen as passive receivers who possess no agency in the process of deciding what constitutes a soft-power feature of Nation A. Unlike the soft power theory, the NPD understands agency as socially distributed, so that all relevant actors and audiences in both Nations A and B to some extent wield the power to (co-)construct Nation A's image and attractive features. They also converge in the collaborative framing of international issues and the image of Nation A.

### *The ethical predicament*

Not only is the endowment of agency to the public diplomacy audiences expected to deliver more satisfactory outcomes in terms of national interests (Zaharna, 2010), but this empowerment of the once-disempowered, the giving the voice (and agency) to the once voiceless (and agency-less), is also an ethically connoted development that puts (new) public diplomacy on a moral high ground. Conceived as such, public diplomacy is no longer about increasing and wielding soft-power resources (defined as attractive national features including culture, political values, and policies) to elicit positive attraction and achieve "desired outcomes" (i.e., national interests) (Nye, 2004), but a matter of win-win engagement for the shared interests of all players involved. Public diplomacy thus goes well beyond mere soft power in as much as it tendentially assumes the socially responsible role of taking into account the interests of the publics and invites their participation in the collaborative NPD framework (Fitzpatrick, 2013). This ethical role of public diplomacy is what distinguishes it from other forms of transnational communication.

In sum, the one important element that characterizes the NPD and differentiates it from other forms of transnational communication is its ethical orientation. The newly gained ability of non-state actors, as public diplomacy audiences, to speak out their own voices in the context of public diplomatic dialogue and to collaboratively frame and address issues of shared concern in the interconnected and interdependent arena of the globalized world is indeed a significant form of empowerment of those who were once disempowered in earlier times, prior to the (presumed) advent of globalization.

### **Public Diplomacy Enters Postmodernity**

We established from the previous discussion that the NPD, which was publicized by its early proponents as a true paradigm shift in thinking and conducting public diplomacy, is characterized as relational, networked, multistakeholder, collaborative diplomacy. It is indeed a state-of-the-art innovation in the study of public diplomacy and, as a matter of fact, no fundamental innovations have been advanced so far beyond the NPD thusly characterized. With a view to a unitary grasp of the apparently multifold existing characterizations of relational public diplomacy, it is necessary now to understand the deeper intellectual processes that inform the NPD and its relational turn. I argue that such intellectual processes are all derivations of an overarching philosophical worldview that falls under the category of postmodernity or postmodernism. Because no scholar has thus

far systematically discussed the NPD in terms of postmodernism, I shall provide a concise elucidation of the proposed heuristic understanding of contemporary public diplomacy as inherently postmodern.

As concerns the present discussion, the transformation of contemporary public diplomacy in a relational sense is postmodern in three respects. First, it occurs in the context of an international system which International Relations (IR) scholars term “postmodern”. Second, it is built on the (implicit) foundational assumption that what truly matters in international affairs are shared ideas, meanings, and values which are constructed socially through discourse (framing) and interactions. Third, postmodernity captures the historical outlook embedded in the discourse surrounding the relational turn.

### *Postmodernity in IR: The Evolution of the International System*

The notion of a globalized world wherein state actors are challenged and called upon to cooperate with non-state entities is a familiar construct in the IR discipline, which refers to it as the “postmodern” international system. This notion emerged as a response to the perceived mutation of world politics toward the close of the twentieth century, a period that witnessed the increased salience of a range of transnational issues. Among these issues, we encounter the following canonical list: the global environmental and resource crisis, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, financial instability, mass migration, transnational organized crime, global health and pandemic preparedness, and so on and so forth. As many reiterate, these transnational issues demand cooperation between state- and non-state actors to be effectively addressed. State capabilities are no longer sufficient to tackle the global problems of the contemporary world. That being the case, the primacy of the sovereign state in shaping global politics is now being challenged by a multitude of non-state entities. These entities are not only those who most overtly challenge the authority of the state (such as in the case of transnational terrorist and criminal networks) but also include actors (including NGOs, multinational corporations, and international institutions inter alia) whose capabilities, expertise, and cooperation are pivotal to adequately addressing global problems.

In IR jargon, the system of sovereign states is referred to as the Westphalian state system, which assumes the undisputed primacy of the state as the most powerful and influential actor in international politics. Consequently, an international political environment that witnesses the relative decline in the power and capabilities of the sovereign state vis-à-vis challenges and players of transnational scope is called post-Westphalian. By transitive property, because the Westphalian state system is also called the “modern” state system (in contrast to the pre-modern, feudal system of Medieval Europe), it follows that the post-Westphalian state system is also “post-modern”. This terminological pattern is particularly evident in a number of foundational texts on the relational public diplomacy, which frequently allude to the concept of a postmodern international system. Given our previous exploration of the postmodern premise of the NPD in terms of the globalization discourse, we do not need to reiterate it here.

### *Postmodernism as Social Constructivism*

From the vantage point of IR, we are familiar with the term “postmodernism” as it comes to such non-mainstream, post-positivist strands of IR theory (Burke, 2008). These include postcolonialism, feminism, and critical theory. What these have in common is the understanding of the reality of international political hierarchies as socially constructed through language and social practice. Their approach owes intellectual origin to philosophical postmodernism, that defines postmodernity as the appraisal of the “end of metanarratives” (such as the Enlightenment faith in scientific reason and the idea of Western modernity) (Lyotard, 1979). Postmodernism denies the possibility of an overarching, unified, and objective narrative of reality and truth, and instead embraces a fragmented, diverse, and pluralistic view of reality. In other words, it signifies an epoch of skepticism toward universal explanations of historical progress and acknowledges the coexistence and juxtaposition of a plurality of realities and worldviews socially constructed by like-minded groups of people.

Quintessential to the postmodernist sensibility is the emancipatory vision stemming from the social constructivist revelation. As social structures are viewed as resulting from and enabled by linguistic constructs (Derrida, 1967), the linguistic deconstruction thereof is viewed to wield the potential to emancipate the subaltern and marginalized subjects – in terms of race, gender, class, etc. – from existing power structures. Postmodernism is therefore charged with an ethical, emancipatory mandate and carries the vision of a more democratic and inclusive society (Vattimo, 1985).

As regards public diplomacy, I contend that the connection between philosophical/IR postmodernism is manifest in two aspects. On the one hand, the idea that meanings and worldviews are socially constructed through language in the context of social interaction is the philosophical premise of all the existing formulations of the relational approaches in public diplomacy. What else is the building of mutual understanding, being the normative goal of all public diplomacy, if not the construction of shared meanings (regarding the Self, the Other, the community, and the world)? Furthermore, what else is the co-framing of international issues (that informs the participatory-collaborative articulation of the NPD) if not the social construction of a shared meaning to be attached to the given issue?

It is assumed that in the condition of the contemporary world, “the assertion of values, when such values are no longer universally accepted without question, risks provoking automatic rejection and the assertion of alternative value systems” (Riordan, 2005, p. 189). Therefore, values must be constructed socially and shared in the cooperative framework including actors and publics of public diplomacy.

On the other hand, the ethical tone which colors the empowering of sub-state actors, along with the decentering of agency in favor the audiences of public diplomacy, is a manifestation of the broader postmodern normative climate of emancipation and empowerment of oppressed groups within the traditional hierarchies of (state) power. In

light of these considerations, it can be argued that the relational turn in public diplomacy is but a manifestation of a more general intellectual and normative mood whose origin must be traced in the fundamental insights and ethical code of postmodernist philosophy.

### ***Postmodernity as (Post-)Historical Consciousness***

The denial of modernity's metanarratives posited by postmodernism leads to a flattened understanding of history. Because the conception of historical progress in a linear and teleological fashion oriented toward an ultimate and singular ideal is no longer tenable, multiple historical perspectives (such as feminism and postcolonialism, among others) coexist and provide their own different – and possibly conflicting – visions of history. On the whole, as these plural narratives are juxtaposed non-hierarchically, a rhizomatic, non-linear interpretation of history emerges. In his well-known critique of postmodernism, Frederic Jameson adopts a historical-materialist perspective whereby the erosion and fragmentation of collective narratives is attributed to the principles of individualism and consumerism that are the driving force of the capitalist mode of production (Jameson, 1991).

It is interesting to observe how all this non-linear, -hierarchical, -teleological historical understanding originating from postmodernism's end of modernity's metanarratives ironically produces its own “metanarrative” – i.e., the narrative that accounts for the rhizomatic pluralization of narratives. This is evident Francis Fukuyama's supposition of historical progress culminating and terminating in the universal and full-fledged realization of capitalist liberal-democracy as the “end of History” (Fukuyama, 1992). Fukuyama's post-historical thesis is still historical; likewise, postmodernism's anti-teleologism betrays latent teleology. By extension, postmodernity is in a way a historicization of the post-historical.

Albeit devoid of Jameson's critical (Marxist) undertone, the same historical-materialist way of reasoning is displayed in the NPD's narrative of the contemporary international political environment in terms of the globalization discourse. The acknowledgement and pluralization of multiple voices (identified in the audiences of public diplomacy) that need to be listened by the actors of public diplomacy, coupled with the changing distribution of agency informing the relational public diplomatic dynamics of social construction, are assumed to be necessitated by the historical transformations in the material dimension of information technologies. Furthermore, the presupposition that such a progressive transformation is marking a new “era” – the proverbial “globalization era” – as distinct from previous history adumbrates deep historicism and teleologism.

Mirroring the postmodernist interpretation of the end of History, the globalization discourse of relational public diplomacy conveys a historicized perspective on the end of the Westphalian metanarrative. For instance, the idea of grassroot, civil societal groups speaking out their voices and being listened by the (state-)actors in the process of public diplomacy (and the shifting distribution of agency underlying this process) indeed reflects the rejection of the hierarchical structuring of international politics implied by the

modern-Westphalian state system. If that is the case, the postmodern formula captures the historical dimension of the NPD discourse. This reveals the (latent) historical consciousness of the public diplomacy discourse in the early twenty-first century.

### **Postmodern Public Diplomacy in the Age of Post-Reality**

The relational turn of public diplomacy shows the three tendencies of: (1) social constructivism as the underlying logic of public diplomacy's relational norm; (2) ethical-emancipatory orientation informing the shifting distribution of agency inherent in the public diplomatic process; and (3) a materialist-teleological view of history. While understanding of these three fundamental tendencies requires extensive exposition (as we have seen in the first section of this paper), the formula of postmodernity conveniently captures the nature of the relational approach to public diplomacy.

In this final section, I will try to extend the existing tendencies of relational public diplomacy and push them to more extreme consequences in order to evaluate the applicability and suitability of postmodern public diplomacy in face of the current state of the international public sphere. That will unfold in three steps: first, from a logico-theoretical viewpoint I will acknowledge the inherent tension between public diplomacy's supposed commitment to truth and the dialogical dynamics of relational public diplomacy; second, I will present three perspectives that address the question of post-truth within the contemporary public sphere; third, I will contemplate whether some of the most recent findings in public diplomacy research are moving beyond the normativity of truth. This analytical procedure will be executed by maintaining the following bedrock assumption of postmodern public diplomacy: *the process of shifting the agency distribution toward empowering the public diplomacy audiences cannot be undone (if anything, it can only be pushed forward); that is due to the combination of techno-informational globalization teleology and the ethical-emancipatory predicament of postmodern public diplomacy.*

### ***The Tension of Truth, Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata***

It is common sense to assume that public diplomacy, which claims to be endowed with an ethical and socially responsible mandate, must carry a commitment to truth. That would be, as common sense goes, necessary for distinguishing public diplomacy from other untruthful – or not-necessarily-truthful – information communication practices such as propaganda, disinformation, or other securitized forms such as information operations, information warfare, and the like. This appears to be the argument advanced by Izadi and Nelson (2020), who seem to prescribe that public diplomacy must maintain a commitment to truth if it is to be different from propaganda. Following the logic of this common-sense prescription, public diplomacy must always share only truthful information through its communication practices. As posits the famous and universally accredited taxonomy of propaganda in terms of black, gray, and white propaganda, not only deliberate lies but also half-truths and selective truths can be acknowledged as propaganda. It follows that public diplomacy, by reason of its commitment to truth, must eschew these forms attributed to propaganda; that means, public diplomacy shall communicate – always – the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.



From the perspective of postmodern public diplomacy, however, this requirement is untenable. We established from the previous discussion that postmodern public diplomacy is essentially characterized by some degree of agency endowed to the audiences in the dialogic process of constitution of meaning and truth. Dialogic public diplomacy requires indeed “a more open, and perhaps humble, approach, which recognizes that no one has a monopoly of truth or virtue, that other ideas may be valid and that the outcome may be different from the initial message being promoted” (Riordan, 2005, p. 189). That being the case, from the heterogenesis of the public diplomatic message a fundamental contradiction arises as concerns the normativity of truth. If the initial message of public diplomacy Actor A is fully and thoroughly truthful (as common sense prescribes), then the dialogical modification thereof on the part of Audience B would produce a final half- or partial truth, for the initial full truth has been altered to some extent by addition or subtraction through the process of dialogue. Conversely, if we want the final message co-constructed through dialogue to be the full truth, then we must admit that the inputs of both Actor and Audience shall be partial truths, for nothing can be dialogically added to a truth which was already full in the first place.

It follows from this tension inherent in the normativity of truth that the unnuanced commitment of public diplomacy to truth is not only inconvenient in practice but has no logical and ethical grounds. When it comes to assessing the ethical and pragmatic value of public diplomacy, the question, therefore, is not whether the messages sent out by public diplomacy actors are truthful or not, but whether they (tend to) fulfil the postmodern ideals of agency being endowed to the audiences.

#### ***From Post-Truth to Post-Reality: Three Perspectives***

Canonically defined as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”, the term “post-truth” was elected by Oxford Dictionary as the Word of the Year in 2016. Conventional wisdom associates post-truth with such political phenomena as Brexit, the rise (and fall) of Donald Trump, and populism in Europe. From the perspective of international politics, post-truth has ever since been cause of great concern in as much as it was believed to pose a threat to the cohesion of the alliance of Western liberal democracies in the face of the multipolar transition and the perceived rise of autocracies such as Russia and China. For instance, post-truth was (fore)seen to be an enabling condition for malignant foreign interferences, such as Russian disinformation (Cosentino, 2020).

With the benefit of hindsight, such alarms raised by the Western mainstream may be judged as overstated. Mr. Trump has been defeated by no one but himself. Once out of the European Union, Global Britain now pursues its ambition of leadership within the Western liberal-democratic alliance in the face of the menace of Russia and China; with all European governments – populist or otherwise – bandwagoning all that. Russia, at least from the Western perspective, has been reduced to a pariah state engulfed in a supposedly bound-to-fail war operation in Ukraine. The choking of China in all security domains orchestrated by a web of emboldened military and intelligence alliances, which

was started under the Trump administration, coupled with the ongoing project of technological embargo, is now real and manifest. Overall, the alliance of Western states, now extending across all oceans of the planet, has all but weakened; on the contrary, it has grown stronger.

In light of these facts, it is true that it would be not very interesting and meaningful to discuss post-truth as concerns IR. However, the legacy of the research on post-truth that has been burgeoning in recent years still provides us with valuable insights into the condition at the deeper level of the public sphere in contemporary societies. Since the public sphere, understood as the domain of civil society where public opinion is formed, is the ground where public diplomacy operates, an overview of the main perspectives available on the post-truth phenomenon may well benefit the research of public diplomacy in the contemporary era.

### *The realist perspective*

We can call the first perspective through which scholars approached post-truth the “realist perspective”. This is the perspective adopted by early post-truth theorist Lee MacIntyre (2018), who considers post-truth to be originating out of cognitive biases. These impair people's perception and assessment of facts and reality, as long as the harmful consequences of ignoring reality are not perceived. However, the deniers of reality will retract their post-truth convictions as soon as reality takes its toll on those who ignored it.<sup>1</sup> Following this diagnosis, facts will ultimately prevail over those who used to disregard them. Accordingly, the solution to post-truth would be, quite simply, to consistently and efficiently informing the audiences of reality and its facts. That is to say, “[e]ven before the water rises, we should try to figure out some way to 'hit people between the eyes' with facts” (MacIntyre, 2018, p. 161). Scholars in this “realist” camp advocate the “important role that governments and public organisations could play in helping to raise public awareness about the harm that post-truth is doing to our society, in order to promote more self-reflection on the situation” (Sim, 2019, p. 166), for example, by means of media literacy programs alongside media regulations and fact-checking.<sup>2</sup>

### *The constructivist perspective*

A more intellectually sophisticated perspective is offered by such “constructivist” scholars who understand knowledge as a social practice. Accordingly, they downplay the importance of communication and demonstration of truth in favor of a relational understanding of the post-truth phenomenon and the possible solutions to it. Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou express their reservations concerning the commissioning of “experts who 'know better,'” punishment for difference, censorship packed in algorithmic decision-making and the fortification of that which is claimed to be under siege [i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup>MacIntyre gives the example of the Republican mayor of a city in Florida, who had been denying the existence of global warming but then realized gravity of the problem, and acted accordingly, once the rising seawater level started threatening the survival of his city.

<sup>2</sup>The applications of information technologies in such “positivist” government interventions are explored in the work edited by Visvizi and Lytras (2019).

truth]" (Farkas and Schou, 2020, p. 149). In its stead, they invoke the issue of "equality, universality, recognition and care" and call for "deeper, more inclusive and open democratic institutions" as spaces for the clash and reconciliation of alternative voices to take place (Farkas and Schou 2020, p. 150). Authors of this constructivist position value relationality, respect for the self-esteem of the audiences, and their need for social recognition. What is needed is the (re)foundation of a common language and norms upon which to construct a shared discourse (truth) within a communal space (Lee, 2022).

As a more suitable alternative to the realist perspective, Giovanni Maddalena and Guido Gili propose "rich, relational realism" that relies on "indirect knowledge, necessarily based on faith—namely, on trust in another person or people who we judge to be reliable"; in the framework of such relational realities as "[a] family, an association, a nation", trust and human relationships are allowed to grow (Maddalena and Gili, 2020, pp. 100-1). They advocate for the prioritization of the "intermediary layer of groups, communities, associations, and local media, where people can meet and recognize one another, and which serve as a filter for the influences of large institutions" (Maddalena and Gili, 2020, p. 99). Ultimately, it is envisioned that "Truth will always be a correspondence to reality, but since reality is more complex than purely sense-related data, truth would come 'in the long run', if inquiry were sustained long enough" (Maddalena and Gili, 2020, p. 102).

#### *A perspective "beyond the reality principle"*

It seems that no systematic advancement has been offered beyond what I termed here the realist and constructivist perspectives on post-truth. While the realist perspective uncritically presumes the omnipotence of reality, facts, and information thereon effectively communicated, the constructivist position adopts a more critical stance and privileges the construction of shared meanings, understanding, and trust through relationships. What the realist and constructivist perspectives have in common, however, is the assumption that "reality" plays a role in the process of forming opinions in the public sphere. On the one hand, the realist perspective assumes reality as an overwhelming entity whose facts must be discovered by man through knowledge and reason, while failure to do so is attributed to insufficient information or reasoning. On the other hand, the constructivist perspective believes reality to be socially constructed among like-minded people who respect and sympathize with each other in relationships of mutual recognition. Still, in both cases, there is a "reality principle" informing these perspectives. Whether it is about discovering it or constructing it, reality remains the crux of the post-truth problematique and the interventions prescribed for post-truth governance.

A number of arguments have been recently advanced that seem to move toward the recognition of the irrelevance of the reality principle in the public sphere. The dynamics of social media are discovered to engender "the fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of self-referential segments, politically polarized 'bubbles', devoid, at least potentially, of a common communicative sphere" (Palano, 2019, p. 36). Following the

usual techno-informational materialist pattern of reasoning, the development of social media, coupled with the postmodern mutation of the media into mere entertainment ready for audience consumption (Habermas 1991), have thereby determined a structural transformation of the public sphere where the people's willingness or possibility at all to converge toward a shared reality can no longer be taken for granted (Hyvönen, 2022). Not only like-minded communities, but each and every individual Self is now insulated and put at the center stage of their personal, singular, individually (a-socially) constructed worlds of (social) media and representation. This transformation is so extreme that the very idea of society – which is the foundational condition for the possibility of socially constructing reality, truth, meaning, and social action – has been effectively eroded.

There is no such thing as society (also) means the absolute centrality of the self, the sovereign right of all individuals to express themselves and construct inevitably subjective meanings. [...] The world and others therefore become the stage upon which to express and impose the self and a store of tools with which to potentially express and impose oneself. [...] Not only does truth appear threatening, since by definition it places limits on the single person's free will, but more deeply, it is made inaccessible by taking the subjectiveness of building meanings to the extreme. [...] The public sphere cannot be a space of conflict, confrontation and changing opinions due to all people speaking their own language and rejecting all attempts at translation as inauthentic (Alagna, 2019, pp. 124-125)

At the end of the day, this condition of the public sphere leaves no possibility for any social construction of truth, let alone the chance that reality may pose a constraint on post-truth beliefs. That is because any attempt at socially constructing a shared truth in cooperation with others by appealing to some idea of reality is seen by the individual Self as a violation of one's own agency and satisfaction (Kalpokas, 2019). As state of the art, no convincing methods for addressing and overcoming this further condition of postmodernity has been formulated.

### ***Post-Reality and Public Diplomacy***

The hypertrophied agency that enables all singular individuals to construct their own personal worlds in radical isolation from society accords with – and indeed is an outgrowth of – the postmodern logic of empowering the audience in the process of constructing reality and truth. In terms of public diplomacy, the distribution of agency shifts one step further from being shared between public diplomacy Actor A and Audience B to being (more) fully transferred onto the Audience. As the initial shift of agency from the Actor was motivated (mostly) by moral sentiment, the further shift of agency to the Audience is likewise an ethically justified development. By implication, a reversal of this evolution would be ethically disenfranchised and contradict the bedrock assumption of postmodern public diplomacy.

Although this theoretical situation obviously does not apply to all empirical reality, we must keep in mind that this is what we encounter as postmodernity reaches its further, or late, stage. Under such a circumstance – which is assumed to be materially determined, ethically justified, and historically irreversible – public diplomacy must interrogate its conditions of existence and its role in a public sphere which is, potentially or actually, affected by the conditions of post-truth culminating in post-reality. After assessing through listening practices and social research which segments of the international public sphere have effectively reached the post-reality stage, the question remains on the methods and strategies public diplomacy may adopt to achieve its goals in accordance with (postmodern) public diplomacy's normative tenets.

### **Conclusion**

The postmodern formula proposed in this article was an attempt to develop a heuristic understanding of what is, at least in theory and discourse, the dominant paradigm of contemporary public diplomacy. As a paradigm, postmodernity determines the assumptions, methods, and scope of public diplomacy research. It dictates what is deemed relevant to study in the empirical instances of the public diplomacy phenomenon, and how it is appropriate to practice public diplomacy in terms of policy. The essence of the postmodern paradigm is encapsulated in the bedrock assumption of public diplomacy as materially determined, ethically motivated social construction of reality. This theoretical research suggests that, as the postmodern paradigm encounters difficulties in the current situation of post-reality, a new paradigm beyond postmodernity would benefit a richer understanding of public diplomacy and equip public diplomacy practitioners with a more composite portfolio of strategies to be deployed in specific contexts.

Confronting the phenomenon of post-reality and the structural conditions that engendered it (Bjola & Manor, 2021), public diplomacy may either remain fettered to the old postmodern mantra of using the new instruments for the (old) purposes of emphatic relationality, shared community building, and so on, or go beyond that through a different path to embrace and navigate the new, late postmodern condition. Much needed research – theoretical, empirical, and experimental – will tell in which direction public diplomacy will go in the age of late post-modernity and post-reality. In the meantime, we may provisionally affirm that the status of truth (i.e., its normativity) in public diplomacy should not be reasonably expected to be a major problem. As some recent empirical findings seem to suggest, even post-truth claims may, in certain cases, serve the goals of public diplomacy (Miles, 2021). The real question is where the agency of the public diplomacy process lies, and to which extent and through which means can public diplomacy legitimately affect the distribution of agency upon a balancing of its normative premises and policy goals.



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