

Tracing the Price of the Discourse Power in Media Diplomacy

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Abstract

Media is one among many tools used in diplomatic practice. Apart from being mechanical, the media cannot be isolated from the social and cultural situations from which the message produced and understood, the political economic interests for which the message created, and the networks of actors by which the contours of the discourse took relevance. Discourse power of the media is warrant by the providence of the media as public space. The nature of discourse power can be seen through its mobility, interactivity and fluidity. The power of the discourse may promote peace as much as conflict, and be utilized for preserving mass compliance as much as steering movements of global resistance.

Keywords: media diplomacy, discourse power, peace, conflict

Introduction

Based on the title above, two conceptual phrases are to be examined in this article, namely: media diplomacy and discourse power. Each concept is explained within its initial expression and idiom in the first part of the writing so that the readers can have a picture on the point of view being used by the writer.

Media diplomacy is a term given to the critical function of the media in complicated situations. Media confers the idea of print, visual, electronic as well as digital technology that brings information and engages public, locally or globally, to discuss and organize pressing social issues. In the realm of diplomacy, media is seen to be the communication catalyst over the issue of peace and conflict. The primacy of the media in diplomacy emanates from the basic assumption that people make choices based on information and that the media offers a wide array of

information through public engagement. Media has assembled this information into a discourse, by which we see the world and created beliefs of what happens and how it happens.

The notion of diplomacy, as cited from the G. R. Berridge & Alan James' *A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2001), refers to the communication system of international society. While diplomacy inferred to the nation state as the main actor of international relations, diplomacy itself is not bound to the practice of modern state system, originating in fifteenth-century Italy. Rather, diplomacy is a perennial international institution that expresses a human condition that “precedes and transcends the experience of living in the sovereign, territorial states of the past few hundred years” (Jonsson & Hall, 2005). Referring to the latter, diplomacy can not be defined sufficiently as mere

intergovernmental conduct in international relations, but more as every meaningful social practice conducted by various actors—locally or globally—with their values and interests to be contested altogether.

Discourse is the term given to the systems of textual representations through which power sustains itself. Media is one of the instruments through which discourses are shaped within society. Whereas power mostly conceived by sociologists as the key factor in sustaining, as much as disturbing, social system, power in this article is seen as the key factor in promoting, as much as weakening, harmony. Admitting what Foucault (1980) regarded that power dispersed globally throughout the social and political arena but only manifests as a ‘local’ phenomenon, this article negates the micro/macro contextualization of media diplomacy, adding what the term diplomacy in this writing conferred above. Under the inquiry of media diplomacy, discourse and power are perceived to be inseparable. The term discourse power coins the way that media structures our sense on the reality through the categorical knowledge of who we are and what the social and political world is like.

CNN effect studies have tested the hypothesis that global news coverage has demonstrable effect on audiences and policy makers. Albeit undecided, the possible CNN effect and researches alike have stimulated wider discussion on the power of the media in inducing the policy making through its newscast. The way that media beholds the function to informing, to interpreting, and to steering the interest of the policy makers according to the public it mirrors, suggest the media’s expediency or, even more, the media’s underlying responsibilities, through the discourse it disseminates, within political arena.

The interaction between media and politics has been analysed by numerous

researches and findings in a wide array of issues and perspectives. At the risk of simplification, these researches and findings can be differentiated between two strands of thoughts, those of the optimists and the pessimists. The optimists see the media as the stakeholder of democracy, together with inter-governmental organizations, global civil organizations, and transnational financial and industrial corporations, which will rally with the nation-states to feed the development for the benefit of all mankind. The pessimists, however, see the media infiltrated with political bias and commercial interests.

While it is quite common to suggest that media provide their audiences with a ‘map’ of the social and political world beyond their own immediate experience, the way the media present the map is, indeed, infused by dense feature. The thing is, media can be either the fourth estate upholding the democratic scheme of governance or the myth-whisperer that keep on the discrimination among society on the basis of racism, religion, sexism, or class. The notion that media is part of the elements that constitute civil society is undoubtedly agreed upon. However, it is not decided yet how much its role does actually perform in international political arena. In view of the proliferation of technologically-mediated means of public communication nowadays, it is critical to consider the successful role of the media in encouraging amity, instead of enmity; especially by reckoning that along with the proliferation of the media actors are the excess of communication process and, eventually, the information it generates.

Without rendering to the newly digitized media, this paper offers the discussion on the way the media becomes element of diplomacy through the discourse it sets forth. The discussion is divided into three sections. The first part discusses the vague situation of the media due to the intangible objective put on them diverge with its

tangible gravity to yield. The second part presents how the discourse power of the media takes its cues. The last part sets the heart of the argument, plainly to bid the problem of discourse power, which pays little or no attention in recent literatures discussing media diplomacy in somewhat instrumental account.

The Power of the Media and Its Shortcomings

Accepting the way market and globalization have shaped a freely information of ideas and frames have highlighted the assumption that government policies are made by the competing influences of political, economic and ideological interests. These match eventually qualify the power of the media to settle on various issues in regards to its responsibilities as *agenda setting* (media capacity to focus public attention on some events and issues, and away from others), *the spiral of silence* (media capability to withering or ignoring issues and perspectives), *priming* (media ability to influence citizen's criteria of political evaluation), *framing* (media ability to frame issues and perspectives), and *ideological effect* (the production of meaning in the service of those of the dominants).

Concerning the ambiance, it is hardly possible to take notice of the worldwide transformation in computer technology and communication policies in 1980s. Some believed that, the policies of market liberalization in the context of media was and remains to be tied to deregulatory policies inspired by neo-liberal foreign policy. Instead advancing a participatory communication, these alterations have generated media imperialism in which media concentrated around a few and status quo players out of privatization, enhanced commercialization and conglomeration. As noted by Boyd-Barrett and Xie (2008), until 2007, almost all major players in transnational communication markets were

based in Western countries or Japan, most of them in the U.S. or significantly dependent on the U.S. market. While there are other significant export centres, these are generally limited to specific genres or markets, such as telenovelas, Bollywood movies, or Japanese anime. In this sense, Boyd-Barrett argues that the spreading of deregulation to other nations not only facilitates media imperialism, but itself a form of media imperialism.

Inherent within media imperialism is informatics imperialism which, according to Majid Tehranian (1999), becomes the latest stage of global system development, patching up the epoch of industrial imperialism. While industrial imperialism was supported by mining and manufacturing services, informatics imperialism is backed up by knowledge industries as its mode of economic production. Whereas the mode of communication during the industrial imperialism was assisted by print technology, secular-based identity, national community, and ideological legitimacy; it is assisted by electronic technology, cosmopolitan identity, global community, and ecological legitimacy during the pan capitalism.

In an informatics imperialism, media becomes the leading apparatus of power, subject to political control or economic ascendancy. The power of the media lays on its ability to frame the object it represents so that it stands for as something as it were to be. Corresponding to this capacity is the ability of the media to persuade the masses to think the way it wanted them to think and to act in reference to the thinking. Within this logic is the segmentation of media readers along the lines of people's interests, preferences, and other similarities, ranging from those of the trifling with less consequence to the most corollary with grave impact. In this light, however, media becomes easily accustomed to a war waged manipulation maintained by a group against the other.

Media, undoubtedly, faces intricate realities, hardly perceived in simple contradictories of, say, the elites and the masses. This is because the pancapitalistic arena gives way to the rise of new actors, other than state and multinational corporations, subject to political representations, ranging from the transnational media corporations, alternative governmental organizations, transnational military organizations, and unrepresented nations and peoples organizations, to name a few. All of these actors subsume into a grid of global power and incline to take up their contention within the discourse of global politics. Their different accesses and leverages to diverse media systems and political process define their choice of media use.

Dov Shinar (2007) identified four kinds of media systems commonly employed by actors in international relations. First, transnational media oligopolies in the more developed countries, dominate the commercial media system around the globe. Second, government media monopolies, saturated by foreign economic interests, shape the flow of information and news in less developed countries. Whilst the former systems move towards an ethics of freedom, the latter is in the direction to the establishment of public media systems adhere to the notion of public service. Third, community media systems, operate in a rather homogenous population, based on ethnicity, religion, profession, or fad similarities, and serve their own constituents. Fourth, independent media, such as those activated by zine-publishers and bloggers activists. While each of the actors exercises different technique to arrive at their interests, the first three media systems are oblique to state bargaining political power in the form of regulations, but with different intensity.

The numerous actors playing active in a widely dispersed message productions out of the discourse they set out gives way to the composite

reality that media must absorb. An informatics imperialism gives no leverage to media player for they have got to toil their energy to win the minds of the populace, through their asymmetrical and exhaustive assertions on the affairs at stake. At one side, interactivity offered by the technologically new-media provides a wide and full access for each player to encounter between one another, as informant and addressee at once. At the other side, the crisscross of information becomes so staggering and open to failing, purposely or accidentally. Being opaque by the image of reality, media may unwittingly give pretext to where the wind blows. In this sense, the value of the truth out of the reality as exposed by the media are highly amenable to operational power of the discourse themselves.

Discourse Power and the Practice of Media Diplomacy

Media, as a public space, is one among many sites where discourse power takes place. By public space, media is regarded as an arena set up for public use, into which everybody supposed to have accessed, not only by utilizing it for acquiring information but also for employing it to confer information. Surely, the information being told by the media is a reproduction of people's story. Even more, it is not the media alone, but the people themselves recount their story through media, too. The knowledge-based information in the media is, thus, produced and re-produced through the media interactivity. The meaning-producing and meaning-making surrounded within this process, count up for the tally of the knowledge as discourse, which may lead either to a positive or a negative upshot.

Discourse has a janus-faced characteristic, since it represents the duality of control and freedom, captivity and release, or suppression and emancipation. Discourse power of the media is fastened with this nature, for it

amplifies the message of cooperation as much as of conflict. Additionally, discourse power of the media can either augment mass consent on the service of the powerful status quo or, equally, break the spectre of power against the hegemony.

On the message of conflict, the case of Kenya's post-election conflict may well illustrate it. Following the inauguration of Mwai Kibaki as Kenyan president in 2008, ethnic conflict erupted and more than one thousand people across the country had been killed less than a few months. International reports claimed that the media, particularly local language radio stations in Kenya, mushroomed as the government issued the media liberalization policy in 1996, were responsible for fanning ethnic hatred and fuelling violence. The winning of Kibaki (the incumbent candidate from Kikuyus ethnic) against Raila Odinga (the oppositional candidate from Luos ethnic) was perceived as flaw. Rather than systematic, the media's involvement through their proto nationalist discourse in fanning tension and violence went on. After the political process broke down, the violence started to erupt and media was open to political manipulation.

Media in a given country is structurally, institutionally and politically biased toward nationalism. Benedict Anderson (1983) reckoned the constructive role of the media in promoting nationalism as such. Yet, in a society with fractured demography, nationalism is hardly diffuse among the populace for it is likely to concentrate on the powerfully dominant ethnic group. Nationalism in this type of country becomes the pretext of xenophobia. The media, as partisan, may join in this power theatre by becoming the cultural apparatus supplementing intolerant and racist culture.

The way that media shaped the-other into an evil figure that must be exterminated are cases applied in cracked societies of Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, and Serbia. In the Rwandan

case, the Radio Télévision Libre de Mille Collines (RTLM) played an inciting and aggravating role in the massacre of the Tutsis by repeatedly broadcasting messages in which the Tutsis were slandered and ridiculed, and depicted as despicable (Terzis, 2005). In former Yugoslavia, it is noting that mainstream media have played a significant role in arousing the myth of Greater Serbia, creating an environment of ethnic hate and xenophobia that contributed towards the pre-conditions for savage ethnic wars (Collins, 2001). With the collapse of Yugoslavia and the impetus of international discourse of war on terror, the national discourse of Serbian mythic continuously reproduced against the Kosovo province (until it gained its independence in 2008), inhabited by Muslim majority (Erjavec & Volc̆ic, 2007).

On the message of cooperation, media plays a pivotal role in peace making and peace building at the post-conflict areas through its institutionalization and the discourses it offers. Learning from the wrong past, the use of radio and television as weapons of war in Yugoslavia have led to the development of new media structures in the Bosnian process of reconciliation. The Free Exchange Radio Network (FERN) was established by the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE), to provide coverage of the first post-war Bosnian election. Along with FERN was Support Programming for Emergency Assistance by Radio (SPEAR) project. This project, handed by Media Action International (MAI), provided assistance to journalists in order to produce peace and development oriented programs. FERN is comparable to other radio stations established in post-conflict zones, such as Radio UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority) in Cambodia, studio Moris Hamutuk in East Timor, Radio Ndeke Luka (Bird of Luck) in Sierra Leone, UN Radio MINURCA in Central African

Republic, and STAR Radio in Liberia (Shinar, 2007).

The establishment of new peace-oriented media structures has been sponsored mostly by humanitarian NGOs, such as the international Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and Fondation Hironnelle, some in cooperation with UN missions. SFCG operated in the post conflict areas in Rwanda, Burundi, Angola and Sierra Leone, while Fondation Hironnelle worked in the Central African Republic, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These projects focused on the establishment of radio stations, which is public oriented and, most importantly, focus on the production of peace oriented contents (news, soap operas, programs for women and children, and musical shows featuring peace songs). In addition to this, they give assistances to local journalists, such as the Hironnelle News Agency, which set up to cover the Rwanda genocide trials at the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania. It was Studio Ijambo, established in Burundi by SFCG in 1995, in direct response to the production and broadcasting of hate incitement and genocidal propaganda by neighboring Rwandan RTLM, which actually became a model for the entire continent. Under the slogan "Dialogue is the future", most programs of Studio Ijambo directly address the roots of the regional conflict. Emulating Studio Ijambo, in 2002 Congolese Radio Okapi, a joint venture of Fondation Hironnelle and the UN mission, was broadcasted from Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo in local languages to almost one million refugees (Shinar, 2007).

Respecting the aim to foster cooperation, environmental issues and stories exposed incessantly in the media impart legitimacy to green values and politics around the globe. A contest between the valuing of life, environment and cosmological time, and the market, capital and

instrumental time takes place within the news media where large audiences are exposed to battles over the right to determine the public uses of geographical public space and natural environments (Castell, 1997). The image and idea of environmentalism, produced in 1970s and continuing to exist up until recently, ceded on the rootedness of environmentalists action in love of place, and the marginality of environmental concerns to mainstream social and economic power (Brockington, 2008). Owing to the media, the environmentalism image and idea have proven to find its efficacy nowadays. Environment issue has become public awareness at all level of society, from any part of the world. While environmentalism gives the impression of seeking contest and undermines the instrumental logic that dominates the network of society, it has little choice but to engage with major news media outlets in so far as they can lend legitimacy and effect on both environmental action and values (Hutchins & Lester, 2006).

On the service of the powerful status quo, government uses media to persuade public opinion in order to earn national support on the implementation of a policy. Media, and the discourse it derives, becomes one of the key methods in public diplomacy activities projected to international public. The message proposed in this kind of diplomacy is evolving around the universal discourse of human rights, tolerance, gender equality, economic and personal freedom, and secularism. Meanwhile, public diplomacy in principle is meant to open the room for dialogue between cultures (process-preference), and its action draws a parallel with propaganda (end-preference). United States public diplomacy, intended to spread US commitments, objectives and aspirations to the world, and is defined around the notion of democracy, provides a clear example of it.

US public diplomacy after 9/11 is worked out as a parcel of military war, instead a peace settlement. In this manner, public diplomacy becomes a process whereby the US government tries to win popular support from other countries by any measure, and if the goal fails to attain, then it ostensibly fits for the so-called failure of diplomacy (Van Ham, 2003). Public diplomacy was seen as the viable approach to fight the battlefield of anti-Americanism which rose up in many Muslim societies after the US invasion to Afghanistan (Blinken, 2002). Effective programming to foreign populations via the media was needed to battle media hate due to its powerful and insidious effect it created. The term 'media war' becomes a definition that situates the problem of US image in the world as much as the solution to repair it (Kaufman, 2002).

On the message of resistance, media finds its decisive function as public spaces where private individuals or interests groups publicly deliberate forms of opinions, and begin strategic plans to influence changes in society. In this light, discourse power of the media inspires individuals as well as groups to get into collective actions in order to demystify a centralized, overpowering, top-down regime whose scales are ranging from the local to that of the global. In the instance of local context, *Malaysiakini*, conceived as independent journalism, offers a balanced discourse in review of democratic process in Malaysia, where the government is controlled by the pro status quo party and which policy favors certain ethnic group, in contrast to other existing ethnicities. *Malaysiakini* functions as a traditional news provider, and it is the norms and values of journalistic professionalism rather than the medium of the Internet that make the discourse become so powerful that threatening to government authorities (Steele, 2009).

Also, in favour of resistance, media befits the magnitude for copious social movements nowadays. The significance of the media in the manner of resistance has been exemplified by Mexican Zapatista movement. Starting from the release of first commune to the national press through fax machine up to the service of the internet for the positioning of this organization, Zapatista has changed from the local movement into a global cultural political clout. The employment of national symbols of Mexican flag does not restrict the movement to gain popular attention, beyond the national or even regional boundaries. Within media's hand, the issue of movement, dwelt in the cultural political verve of non-violence calling for alternative society in all honesty, becomes the counter-discursive framing against all of the despots in the world. Later, the print reproduction of Subcomandante Marcos as the icon of Zapatista movement can be seen to a large extent in artifacts of popular culture, catches the attention of not only the picketers in dissent, but also of people in common (Gilbert & Otero, 2001).

Discourse Power and the Errand of the Media on Ground of Diplomacy

Given the illustration above, media serves as the primary and hotly contested communicative interface between players of diplomacy. Media becomes the site, structuring intermediary, of diplomatic conduct. Yet, the role of the media expanded as it shapes debate and influences outcomes through which representation determined, images softened or distorted, and power granted or denied (Brockington, 2006). Based on the version given above, there is one thing left to be questioned: how should the discourse power of the media be valued in the company of diplomacy?

Discourse power lays on its mobility and interactivity. It traverses national boundaries and forms of media, running through different foci

of apprehension so that it grows to be the traffic in meaning. Discourse is always in motion; always circulate through an ever-expanding networks and set of associations. Discourse is free-floating, without anchors; drift easily across the globe, allowing an increasing people to participate in the proliferation of meaning. Discourse is fluid, absorbed in distinctive contexts which will probably yield in diverse discernments and atypical responses.

Pertaining to discourse power, Arjun Appadurai's notion of 'mediascape' is worth considering. Mediascape passes on the idea about the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and spread information and the images of the world created by these media. Mediascape is the vision given to us by media of distant places and people. It creates our vision, in a rather image-based, of the distant places and people.

The mediascape provides their audiences with a complex set of information, images, narratives and ethnoscape, which defines social effects, in which events and commodities around the world are profoundly mixed. According to Appadurai the audience regards media as a complex mix of print, celluloid, etc. so that in the images these create, the border between reality and fiction, becomes blurred. Those who experience them transform these often image-centered narratives into strips of reality or scripts of imagined lives (own and those of others). These scripts can be disaggregated to complex sets of metaphors that people live by as they create narratives of the distant Others (Appadurai, 1996).

Together with mediascape is ideoscape, both closely related to the landscape of images. Ideoscape refers to political images, concerns with the ideologies of states and counter-ideological movements opposed to them. This ideoscapes is composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, ideas of *freedom*, *welfare*, *rights*, *sovereignty*, *representation*, and *democracy*. But the distribution of these ideas across the world during the 19th century has loosened the internal coherence that has made it possible for different nation states to organize

themselves around different keywords (Appadurai, 1996).

It is impossible to see the work of ideoscape without being affected by mediascape, and the other way around. The media creates people's image of the world, but this image is not clean from the mediator's ideoscape or not the least the readers/viewers. Just as any human that observes and studies the world around him, media interprets what it sees out of the social constructs it has been brought up with and lived by. This explains why there is a typical narrative of the distant Other by the media, as can be seen in the discourse of people at the margin by National Geographic channel. While the program is intended to deliver cross-cultural reports, the content of information often utilizes fetishized codes of primitiveness where people of colors are equated with 'culture', in static terms and worth safeguarding — and whiteness become synonymous with modern 'civilization' (Roy, 2007).

Similar to National Geographic, international media outlets like CNN or BBCworld, even though specialized to a specific language in their news reporting, their contents are not specialized to a specific region. Nonetheless, they still reflect a discourse of the culture within which they have their origin. At length, the western media describes the world based on western perspective. And even if they try to be culturally unbiased, in the end it is the reader or viewer who interprets what is aid by the journalists and fits the narratives into their worldview.

The work of mediascape and ideoscape to carry discourse, however, cannot be separated from the field which nurtures them. Technological advancement in communication, which blurs the mass-mediated and personal-mediated communication, along with the expansion of complex global system of production and exchange, reduces the hold of local environment over people's lives, nourishes the framework for the discourse power to meet its pinnacle. With the discourse on the move, it is much more difficult to assure that there will be shared

understanding, especially when primordial mythic and standing conviction conceals the process of communication, among people at odds, as what happens in Palestine-Israel conflict. However, with the discourse on the move there is a growing and widespread awareness on common problems to deal with, such as the problem of environmental depletion, albeit it founded on para-social relations, which is insufficient and unintentional, through the vogue of celebrities (Brockington, 2008).

Despite this double-edge sword of the discourse power out of the media, in grave international crises or when all diplomatic channels are cut off, the media may be the only channel available for communication and negotiation between the rival actors. For the least part, re-institutionalization of media system in post-conflict areas in split states of former Yugoslavia, in scattered countries of Africa, and in fragmented community of Cambodia, are clear examples of how communication are still seen to be the valuable assets to grow and, more importantly, can be grown. Yet, knowing that the challenge may likely come from the discourse itself, not the media structure per se, the field that must be addressed is perhaps how to make these efforts effective.

Take the lesson from the enduring Palestinian-Israel conflict. In the Middle East, most Israeli, Arab, and Palestinian mainstream media have not been investing serious efforts in peace-oriented communication. Some non-governmental organizations have tried to open the channel of communication in a rather bottom-up approach. Based on European sponsorship, Keshev, the Israeli Association for the Protection of Democracy, and its Palestinian counterpart Miftah, have been monitoring media coverage of the conflict, and publishing reports that have had considerable impact. In addition, Israeli-Palestinian jointly operated All for Peace Radio, anchored in the model of peace journalism. Common Ground News Service (a SFCG project) was established as a news agency to provide information to both sides in the conflict. The service presents coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, employs local and

international experts and provides syndicated articles, analysis and op-ed pieces. Supported by the European Community and UNESCO, the service operates on a non-profit basis. Despite its potentiality, there is not much to be seen from this effort for the conduct of peace process between the two governments. The real menace may come from the impervious mythic interpretation that transcends among generations through mainstream media channel or other social institutions, such as educational or religious institution. Thus, investing a constructive discourse cannot be fulfilled only through the re-creation of media structure. Transformation of media system by modelling on peace journalism will only reap when education system and religious institutions are willing in accord to revolutionize.

Conclusion

The uses of media to communicate among actors on diplomatic ground cannot automatically build confidence and advanced negotiations, as well as mobilize public support for agreements. While the task of media diplomacy can be identified through various routine and special media activities, such as press conference, interviews, leaks, head of state visits, exchanges of mediators in rival countries, and spectacular media events organized to usher in a new era, the discourse power out of the media is hardly considered.

This article tries to forward the issue of discourse power out of media. Without rendering to particular kind of media outlets, the exploration goes through depicting the various situations affected by the use of media to spread information, which leads to the installment the clout of the discourse. What is proposed by this article is that the process of production and re-production of information through media channels cannot be capped in somewhat vacuum situation as projected by a dialogue model. Instead, the article goes with the recognition of the complex situations that blurs the sheer message intended by the producers so that it snowballing into an effect unforeseeable, as the dual-nature of discourse as power, liberating and oppressive,

all at once. Common understanding cannot mechanically yielded, especially in situation where there remains discrepancies among resources in parts of the world and mythical apparition standing through generations. In this situation, communication investment is probably timeless in attempt and extensive in resources, yet worth doing.

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