

Strategic Reporting in Maintaining Public Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

As much as public diplomacy is constantly discussed and used in terms of warfare and practical concerns of international relations, nevertheless, in journalism, other parts of news reporting such as crimes and crisis concerning foreign nationals also needs to be focused on especially in this borderless world and where migration of nationals are fast becoming a sociocultural trend. The use of a 'soft power approach' in terms of using general semantics sometimes pacifies a volatile situation from erupting. This paper explores the use of general semantics as a mechanism in strategic communication in evaluating a high profile crime case which involved a Mongolian national and a high ranking Malaysian politician which in parallel helps readers and researchers understand a subtle approach in reaching public diplomacy.

Keywords: *Crime News, Strategic Communication, Public Diplomacy, Conflict, Conflict Resolution, Semantics, Soft Approach*

Introduction

Strategic communications, as defined by Hallahan et al. (2004: 4) is a “purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission”. In other words, strategic communication is a way of persuading other people to accept one’s ideas, policies or course of action. In many

ways it is persuading the ‘rakyat’ (or nations citizens) to support the policies of their leaders so that a national will is forged to accomplish national policies (Halloran, 2007: 5). Strategic communications has its roots in the meaning of propaganda which in turn was a neutral term that meant using information which should be factual and accurate to advance whatever cause one was promoting. However, this changed during World War 1 when the Germans distorted the meaning to include lying to advance whatever cause it was promoting. At the same time, the term “public diplomacy” was first coined in the 1960’s essentially as an alternative to the word “propaganda”. It was replaced for the simple reason that the latter was tarnished by the popular reputation of telling lies especially in any form of international communications (Taylor, 2010: 28). In fact public diplomacy is really ‘propaganda for peace’ because the intent is to promote international understanding and to remove negative stereotypes that can lead to international tension and even war (Rajib and Taylor, 2006).

In strategic communication, it is believed that the first step is identifying the audience followed by crafting the message. Today it is not just the two which is at play but with the growing number of foreign nationals in the country it is also important to include the need for public diplomacy which is the engagement of carefully targeted sectors of foreign publics in order to develop support for those same strategic goals. This is the epitome of this paper and crucial in strategic communications of journalism. The three factors are intertwined because the sender has to be sure about what message is being sent out and how the message is going to be received by the target audience. Good strategies would entail everybody remembering it and ensuring everybody is amiable and pacified.

According to Taylor (2010: 27), “the essential self-defining feature of public diplomacy makes it different from other forms of propaganda is its mutuality and its reciprocity. Source and recipient both benefit, although perhaps not always in equal measure.” The essentiality of public diplomacy is as a tool for projecting their national identity to foreign policy by preparing public acceptance in foreign countries of another nation’s activities. This is done primarily in two ways which includes projecting culture and national values and secondly disseminating news and information which this paper address.

This paper tends to explore and identify the strategies used in writing crime stories to ensure the use of the factual information which

advances believability while informing, engaging and influencing foreign publics.

Public Diplomacy

Most research on public diplomacy revolves around politics (Snow and Taylor, 2006; Rawnsley, 2000), foreign policy (Manheim, 1994) and or terrorism (Pettersen, 2002). Some media and diplomacy research includes Nisbet, Nisbet and Scheufele (2004), Seib (2009) and Wetzstein (2010). According to Wetzstein (2010:507) since diplomacy has shifted from secret chambers to the public sphere, the press has turned into a major actor in diplomatic processes. According to Tong (2007), Chinese journalists are required to always place political compliance above professional values and goals if they are to keep themselves and their organizations safe. However, it is said that to do so they must constantly conduct problem solving to overcome constraints and to achieve their goals.

A baseline definition of public diplomacy is to inform, engage, and influence foreign publics (Ross, 2003: 22). Public diplomacy generally deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy (Taylor, 2006). This includes the interaction between private groups and interests between nations, communications and the process of intercultural communication. As much as public diplomacy is constantly discussed and used in terms of warfare and practical concerns of international relations, nevertheless, in journalism, other parts of news reporting such as crimes and crisis concerning foreign nationals also needs to be focused on especially in this borderless world and where migration of nationals are fast becoming a sociocultural trend. Public diplomacy generally deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy (Taylor, 2006). This includes the interaction between private groups and interests between nations, communications and the process of intercultural communication.

Rajib and Taylor (2006) contend that public diplomacy is designed to build long term mutual understanding, benefiting both the source and the receivers. In a sense, public diplomacy differed from other forms of international propaganda because it is tailored according to the principle

– ‘to know us is to love us’. Hence, public diplomacy is used as a soft power approach, which we see in the form of journalism, to influence foreign policies and publics.

Journalism comes in the form of words, visual and sound. According to the general semanticist, words are the most sophisticated symbols of mankind, and derogatory words such as ‘crusade’, ‘dictator’, ‘terrorist’, ‘prostitute’ and the like can exacerbate tension. On the other hand, words associated with glittering generalities which are propagandistic in nature such as ‘honor’, ‘glory’, ‘love of one’s country’, ‘loyal’, ‘patriotic’ are positive and can generate goodwill and understanding among people of various nations.

Through the mass media via media language, journalists can accomplish more than the understanding and influencing of public opinion. With a deeper understanding of objectivity and a healthy regard for the appropriate use of media language, journalists can help to make public opinion and public diplomacy operative as well as intelligent, and hence, perpetuate understanding and world peace (Faridah and Rajib, 2005).

According to Seib (2009), public diplomacy may be physically and culturally different from domestic audiences, they nevertheless deserve to be recipients of information that adheres to a high standard of truthfulness. This is indeed interesting as this paper tends to explore this feature where the victim is a foreign national and the suspect is a local highly dignified and in a top government ranking position. The lines are sometimes blurred when need to be truthful and objective come into play. Seib (2009: 774) mentions that rarely does news coverage present all the information available about the topic being covered, but a basic precept of objective journalism is that the selection of information to deliver should not be guided by a political agenda. Could this be possible in this case? In any case for that matter, when the version of the truth serves the interest of a particular party and not all parties involved, then there is no public diplomacy.

Methodology

Behind the semantics we see a strategic design or a pattern somewhat of how a crime reporter frames his/her information. The researcher applied the textual analysis to a particular case study – Altantuya Shaaribuu in comparison to two Malaysian national dailies, *The Star* and *Utusan*

Malaysia. Altantuya Shaaribuu was a Mongolian national and was a murder victim who was either murdered by C-4 explosives or was somehow killed first and her remains destroyed with C-4 in October 2006 in a deserted area in a forested land near the Subang Dam in Puncak Alam, Shah Alam. The Malaysian police found fragments of bone, later verified as hers. Her story created pandemonium in the Malaysian press as she was alleged to be in a relationship with Razak Baginda, a defense analyst from the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre think-tank. Razak Baginda and three members of the police force were arrested during the murder investigation. As of the writing of this research, Razak Baginda has since been acquitted.

Altantuya's case was chosen for its explicit details, sensationalism and portrayal of the case in the media which garnered public interest. The case was among the few and between which were commented on by higher ranking ministers (i.e.: Prime Minister) to the extent that the crime reporters were questioned by police in the intention of learning about the sources of the story.

Using a textual analysis of the cases the researchers 'dissected' the articles to explore the various ways in which crime reporters gather and report the news and the types of sources they use in ensuring that the facts used are justified to be the truth and objective in view.

Findings

The findings showed much detail and could be dissected into discussion points. The dramatization and sometimes over emphasis of certain details which the researchers find irrelevant sometimes adds to not only the sensationalism of the account but the believability of the crime.

In analyzing these articles, it was found that all individuals involved in these criminal cases irrespective of the nature of their environment are mentioned in the newspaper article by name, occupation and its relationship with the story. The 5W's and 1H (Who, Where, When, What, Why and How) which clearly defines the person who is involved (who), the location of the crime (where), the time frame or date when the crime took place (when), the action itself (what), the reason for this action (why) and the process or explanation of the events leading to it (how). In the case, this basic information makes up the situational-based explanations and is shown as follows:

In Altantuya's case it was explained as:

- Who : Altantuya Shaaribuu
- Where : Puncak Alam, near Shah Alam
- When : Yesterday
- What : reported missing about a month ago, were found scattered in some bushes.
- Why : Not mentioned and this is the reason for police investigations
- How : Police believe the woman, in her 30s, was murdered and her body blown up. The remains were found in some undergrowths.

These details were similar in both newspapers regardless of the language used. The information is constantly repeated in articles (follow-up stories) as backgrounder (normally in the middle or last few paragraphs of an article) except for the first day when it is highlighted in the first two to three paragraphs to give the reader an idea of what had happened. Nevertheless, some basic information was rather confusing as both newspapers had contradicting information. The fact is that, the crime reporters tried to portray the victim as normal as 'part of every day life' or 'someone you could meet in your life'.

The coverage of crime here, as discussed in the literature, presents crime as an unfolding mystery story, beginning with the main players' profiles after which the crime itself (typically murder), and the investigations. These true crime stories are presented as dramatic entertainment. The crime drama fits the profile of being dramatic and lends itself to replays of the gory details of the crime itself. Crime news is inherently dramatic but it is also the case that there are numerous tools used by journalists to create the sense of drama and concern. With a play on words and narrative style of writing, the crime reporters resonate these crime stories in the culture because certain pictures and comments have shared significance and invoke certain emotional responses.

Even though there were quite a number of photographs whether it is family photos of the victims or handcuffed suspects, most crimes can be remembered either by visuals or the texts or contents of the story which narrates the actual crime. It was also found that the crime reporters tend to repeat similar facts every day. This could be because, the newspaper and crime reporters intend to ensure readers are able to remember facts and what has happened.

This is similar to Wardle (2008: 139) who states that news that is memorable is that which arouses reader's emotions. Crime coverage can be emotional; whether it is focusing on the individual emotions that occur when a crime has been committed or the collective emotions connected with irrational fears about crime. Crime stories generally fit into an age old mould which uses a narrative form and has a basic premise. Krajicek (1998: 7) mention that 'too many of these stories begin and end with who did what, to whom embellished with the moans of a murder victim's mother or the sneer of an unrepentant killer in handcuffs'. This was not so in the articles published in both the newspapers. In fact, the articles were straight to the point and rarely embellished with unwarranted information.

Leads used in a news story is the most important aspect of the story itself. Kicking off a story with such impact and leading the reader to continue reading a story is an accomplishment not many have. To ensure this happens one must ensure the lead contains enough information and is framed in such a manner that there is enough to 'reel in' readers while, not enough to put down the article. The two types of common leads used in the articles were narrative leads and summary leads, both of which serve as a story-telling manner to the news story. This can be seen in the following examples:

Summary Lead:

BANGKOK: Seorang penganalisa politik dan pertahanan terkemuka ditahan polis di sini hari ini bagi membantu siasatan kes pembunuhan seorang wanita warga Mongolia yang dipercayai mati ditembak sebelum mayatnya diletupkan dengan bom tangan di Empangan Tasik Subang, Puncak Alam, Shah Alam, Selangor. (UM, 8 Nov 2006)

Narrative Lead:

KUALA LUMPUR: Mongolian freelance model Altantuya Shaaribuu flew to Malaysia on Oct 6 together with her sister and cousin in search of a political analyst whom she claimed was her husband. (TS, 8 Nov, 2006)

Circumstantial description vividly recreated the scenes of violence. At the same time the articles are also full of speculation about what the details from the scene of the murders might mean. In the two cases the gruesomeness of the murder was explained in the following articles:

Police are investigating a gruesome murder after the remains of a Mongolian woman reported missing about a month ago were found scattered in some bushes...

(TS, 7 Nov 2006)

Cebisan tulang dan daging mangsa yang dipercayai dibunuh dua minggu lalu dikatakan berselerak di tepi empangan...

Translated: Flesh and bone fragments of the victim who was believed to have been murdered two weeks ago was said to have been scattered beside the dam.

(UM, 9 Nov 2006)

Although an argument can be made about the appropriateness of including details about how the victim was murdered nevertheless, the fact that the reporters used information which was formally revealed to them in a press conference in some way allowed for a more 'diplomatic' manner in which to word the situation.

It is understood that C4 explosives were used to blow up her body in an effort to destroy evidence...

(TS, 8th Nov, 2006)

It is difficult to argue with the fact that this is how she was murdered.

Cebisan tulang dan daging mangsa yang dipercayai dibunuh... berselerak di tepi empangan akibat diletupkan...

Translated: Flesh and bone fragments of the victim who was believed to have been murdered... was said to have been scattered beside the dam.

(UM, 9 Nov, 2006)

The location of the body also summed up vivid images of the murder scene and the aspect to the value of life for the perpetrator was also questioned. In the articles, the location or position of the bodies were described. It is almost as if the reader has been invited to the crime scene and yet again this fact did not include embellishments to the fact.

...were found scattered in some bushes...

(TS, 7 Nov, 2006)

...dikatakan berselerak di tepi empangan...

(UM, 9 Nov, 2006)

Translated : was said to have been scattered beside the dam.

The use of the language of tragedy and the construction of the victims as innocents provides yet another potential ‘emotional hook’ to lure readers into the spirit of crime reporting. It conveys a sense of immense human potential and so amplified the tragedy’s impact. This ‘emotional hook’ goes deep into this article because they emerge from the ‘loss of a life’ (Websdale and Alvarez, 1998). At the same time, the emotional hook allows readers (mostly locals) to feel some amount of sympathy for a foreigner killed here on a foreign land. This in turn epitomizes a sense of sympathy that has resulted in a tragedy.

Both newspapers personalized the victim. There was more personal information given, for instance information about their background, family and career in a manner in which the victim was described and is assumed that the empathy for the victim was increased. Nevertheless, the media then changed its tune and there was immense victim blame when it started portraying the victim’s social life and possibly allowed the readers to question the morals of these women. What is interesting is the fact that the victim was portrayed in a ‘good girl gone bad’ scenario. What is also interesting is the fact that *The Star* (TS) newspaper had sent their reporter to Mongolia to gather information about the victim and this was published as a feature story with insights from friends and school mates.

absent most of the time... she skipped classes and examinations... she never completed the course because she was pregnant.
(*TS*, 15 Nov 2006)

hubungan sulit yang terjalin antara lelaki itu dan Altantuya... (Translated: the affair between the man and Altantuya)

or

hubungan itu menyebabkan Altantuya mengandung dan dia melahirkan seorang bayi di Negara asalnya tahun ini... (Translated: the relationship caused Altantuya to be pregnant and deliver a child in her own country this year) (*UM*, 8 Okt 2006).

Altantuya Shariibuu was portrayed as an intelligent woman who ‘enrolled in Otgontenger University, a private education center specializing in business and language studies’ (*TS*, 15 Nov 2006) Altantuya Shaariibuu was pictured as ‘a stunning beauty’ (*TS*, 8 Dec 2006) or ‘she had a mole on her right side of her upper lip and it was removed about five years ago to make her look more attractive’ (*TS*, 15 Nov 2006). These contradictions of ‘bad girl’ and ‘good girl’ generally would confuse the reader into trying

to understand the victims as simply victims and not just the fact that they were women as an excuse.

What is most interesting is also the inclusion and highlight of the victims family members in the reporting.

The father of murdered model Altantuya Shaariibu will come with documents to prove that she was married to the prominent political analyst. Altantuya's father would also be bringing his grandson for DNA tests to ascertain the identity of the father. Altantuya's family claimed to have in their possession a valid marriage certificate (*TS, 9 Nov, 2006*).

Motives are assumed and so is speculation about what could have happened or whether there are one or more killers. However, the speculation is not solely the journalists' subjective interpretation of whatever he sees at the scene, but is also based on equally speculative conversation with the police officers present. This is similar to Rossland's study (2007: 141) where he mentions that the police are clearly respected and the information by the police is not critically assessed or questioned. Crime reporters rely on the police rather than criminals for the vast majority of their information. Sources are primary gatekeepers of information and selection of appropriate sources is a central concern of the journalist as this determines the quality of the accounts. In all the stories the police were relevantly referred to as to confirm the details of the case. In terms of sources, reporters used anonymous sources as well as official sources to gather information in both cases. It was found that all stories were confirmed or comments were given by high ranking police officers. Even though sources were named, the amount of information provided about the source varied. Most times official sources confirmed the case or the issue at hand.

Selangor police Chief Deputy Commissioner Datuk Ismail Omar confirmed that police had recovered the remains... (*TS, 7 Nov, 2006*)

Other named sources which were used to ensure validity to the information includes Brickfields deputy OCPD Supt Mohd Kuzi Minai, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Musa Hassan and the (former) Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. In this case source transparency was clearly used where it deals with how much detail is provided about a sources identity (Carpenter et al., 2004). Transparency applies to news sources

that have some information provided about their background. In this case it is the Prime Minister, Chief Minister or Inspector General of Police. As much as named sources were used to ensure reliability and credibility of the stories published, it was also found that there was a large amount of usage of anonymous sources where it prevents the readers from being able to evaluate a sources' qualification. At the same time, the role of the various envoys such as the Mongolian Ambassador and the Mongolian Honorary Consul in Kuala Lumpur in ensuring a speedy and fruitful investigation helps boost confidence between the two nations that every possible action is being taken.

Sementara itu, Kerajaan Mongolia mahukan penjelasan dan maklumat terkini daripada Kementerian Luar Malaysia berhubung pembunuhan ngeri rakyatnya, Altantuya Shaariibuu (Translated: Meanwhile, the Mongolian government wants an explanation and latest information from the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the gruesome murder of their citizen Altantuya Shaariibuu) (UM, 11 Nov, 2011).

This was reciprocated by the Malaysian counterpart:

Konsul Kehormat Mongolia di Malaysia, Datuk Syed Abdul Rahman Alhabshi hadir di Ibu Pejabat Polis Kontinjen (IPK) Kuala Lumpur di sini hari ini untuk memberi keterangan berhubung kes pembunuhan ngeri seorang model warganegara Mongolia dua minggu lepas... Beliau telah memberi kerjasama penuh kepada polis dengan memberi maklumat relevan yang diminta termasuk mengenai mangsa, keluarga mangsa dan ketibaan keluarga mangsa dari Mongolia malam tadi. (Translated: Mongolian Honorary Consul in Malaysia Datuk Syed Abdul Rahman Alhabshi was present at the Police Contingent Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur today to give a statement regarding the gruesome murder of the Mongolian model last week... He has given cooperation to the police by giving relevant information asked including about the victim, the victims family and the arrival of the victims family from Mongolia last night.) (UM, 11 Nov, 2011)

This clearly shows the reciprocative manner in which the tense situation was diffused and the news reports which was presented immediately (reference is made to the date of publication).

Analysis and Conclusion

The researchers believe that public diplomacy is not exclusive to reporting on war and terrorism but in any and or all cases when it refers to a relationship between nations and where various entities are at play. Strategic communications includes the need for public diplomacy to be incorporated in terms of ensuring peace between nations and its citizens. One way for reporters to approach reporting news which deals with foreign nationals and nations is by using the soft approach. In the use of 'soft power' approach, there needs to be the development of mutual trust and understanding. By using suitable choice of words, phrases and photographs, and being sensitive of general semantics – this is a much more appropriate way of pacifying an aggressive or volatile situation. "This study of general semantics emphasizes on the study of how people perceive the world and how they subsequently communicate their perceptions or misperception. In the teaching of general semantics, words do not represent the thing it refers to. Different people may perceive differently the meaning of words based on their biasness" (Mohd Rajib, 2010: 6).

Words, from spoken to written words have certain magical powers. They have the power to create and to destroy; to influence and to change. Words are used by journalists to impart messages and educate the masses every day. In times of crisis and predicament, journalists could create words and report strategically to pacify conflicting parties and order the chaos so that annihilation could be avoided. Hence, the soft power of journalistic language could be a good vehicle for public diplomacy (Faridah and Mohd Rajib, 2005).

In this case, the crime reporters have written the story to give it various angles and to ensure there is no biasness to any one party. It can also be said that based on the reports, the quotes or comments from the Mongolian ambassador and Mongolian Honorary Consul General ensures a neutral and amiable stand in the whole situation.

After analyzing the articles, it was found that the reporters on some days had rarely any new information to impart on the reader. The follow-up stories which have new information were followed with side bar stories of less importance which supported the main story and gave the readers something to read about while awaiting much larger developments. These news stories carry a connoted message. It cannot purely mean that what we read is the reality but not a constructed reality that was purposely created by the newsroom man. Its news stories are

a reflection or a construction. Reality versus constructed reality turned into a key factor to consider on how believable the visual depictions can be. This strategic communication is a guerilla tactic used to ensure the news pages are filled, the story has a following and circulation and readership escalates.

How the story is framed is set by frames of reference that readers use to interpret and discuss public events (Tuchman, 1978: ix). According to Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), “they give the story a spin...” and taking into account people’s information processing and interpretation that are influenced by preexisting meaning, structures or schemas. Framing crime stories in this case have moved from the criminal to highlighting the victims and their private lives. This is one of the many strategies which reporters use in reporting of crime stories. In some ways it creates a conflict resolution process. As Wetzstein (2010) states, the media can provide an important platform for all negotiators participating in an international conflict resolution process is true and the need to deflect readers from the actual focus that the victim was a foreign national and to ensure that the focus is on the crime itself is a means of playing up the crime and not the ‘foreign’ element is a conscious strategic effort.

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