

Russian Intervention: Paranoia or Weapon for National Security? From the Perspective on Public Diplomacy

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The 2016 U.S. presidential election changed the concept of public diplomacy as reflected in three aspects: media coverage, rhetorical accusations by governmental officials, and national security. The Russian intervention has become the battleground in U.S. domestic policy. The U.S. president Donald Trump regards the mainstream media as the enemy, referring to them as “fake news organizations”, and using social media, such as Twitter as his information weapon. In addition, Trump’s national security strategy has emphasized bolstering American influence through “strength”, which has changed the characteristics of international mass communication and fluidly defined public diplomacy.

Keywords: Russian intervention, national security, international mass communication, public diplomacy

Definition of Public Diplomacy

Alan K. Henrikson (2006), professor of Diplomatic History Emeritus and founding director of Diplomatic Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, suggested that public diplomacy plays a role in major policies with high-level political, economic, and military components. Through public diplomacy, it is possible to achieve several political strategies, as executed by governmental officials and diplomats in the diplomatic community, to influence other countries via mass communication, including the Internet.

Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2008), University Distinguished Service professor, emeritus and former dean of the Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, defined public diplomacy as an important tool in the arsenal of smart power, but noted that smart public diplomacy requires an understanding of the roles of credibility, self-criticism, and civil society in generating soft power. Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.

The University of Southern California (USC) Center on Public Diplomacy defines public diplomacy as

ithas been widely seen as the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals.¹

Nick Cull (2017), professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, Annenberg, thought that

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¹ Defining Public Diplomacy, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, available at <https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pdf>.

the future of public diplomacy lies in collaboration. No single player is rich enough or credible enough to “go it alone” as the U.S. or the USSR could do in the Cold War. Today, actors need to arrange coalitions and partnerships around issues.

Jan Melissen (2005) categorized public diplomacy into the studies on international relations. As Melissen stated:

Public diplomacy can at least partly be seen as a symptom of change in the conduct of international relations. In a broader historical perspective, it may even be ventured that—for better or for worse—the practice of foreign ministries and embassies in engaging with civil society groups and individuals abroad demonstrates that the evolution of diplomatic representation has reached a new stage (p. xix).

Some scholars would agree with Professor Cull that nations need to collaborate with one another in an interactive and interdependent world; one nation should not go alone and harm the world’s overall stability. This idea reflects the impact of U.S. unilateralism. Nevertheless, as U.S. President Trump emphasized, it is his responsibility to prioritize the American people and America’s national interests. However, the unpredictable and unprecedented nature of the international system would worsen under this new U.S. foreign policy, leading to a fracture in humans as a whole entity in global society. This has created new challenges in the public diplomacy mission of better communication in terms of maintaining national security and national interests for each state.

Many scholars and practitioners regard public diplomacy as new forms of propaganda enacted by governments, which through diplomatic and social networking channels, is clearly aimed at influencing foreign audiences to benefit the sender’s specific national interests. Therefore, we can at least understand that public diplomacy is adopted by governmental officials via media to influence other countries for states’ strategic political purposes, with the intent to win hearts rather than coerce. Studies on public diplomacy are interdisciplinary research connected with mass communication and international relations to reflect the effectiveness of state policy.

U.S. Mainstream Media Coverage of the Russian Meddling and Trump’s Comments

The New York Times reported that American intelligence agencies and both parties on Capitol Hill are in consensus that, as Dan Coats, the Director of National Intelligence, said, “Russia conducted an unprecedented influence campaign to interfere in the U.S. electoral and political process” (Yourish & Griggs, 2018).

Cable News Network (CNN) reviewed the hacking incidents during the 2016 presidential campaign and Russian meddling in the election. Details about the investigations into hacking and efforts to interfere with the election are as the following statements.

Table 1

CNN on 2016 Presidential Campaign Hacking Fast Facts

| Timeline | 2016 presidential election investigation fast facts |
|----------------|--|
| September 2015 | The FBI contacts the Democratic National Committee’s help desk, cautioning the IT department that at least one computer has been compromised by Russian hackers. |
| November 2015 | The FBI reaches out to the DNC again, warning them that one of their computers is transmitting information back to Russia. |
| March 19, 2016 | Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta receives a phishing email masked as an alert from Google that another user had tried to access his account. |
| June 12, 2016 | During an interview on British television, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange says that the website has obtained and will publish a batch of Clinton emails. |
| June 14, 2016 | The Washington Post reports hackers working for the Russian government accessed the DNC’s computer system, stealing oppositional research on Donald Trump and viewing staffers’ emails and chat exchanges. |

(table 1 continued)

| Timeline | 2016 presidential election investigation fast facts |
|------------------|--|
| June 15, 2016 | A cybersecurity firm hired by the DNC posts a public notice on its website describing an attack on the political committee's computer network by two groups associated with Russian intelligence. |
| July 22, 2016 | Days before the Democratic National Convention, WikiLeaks publishes nearly 20,000 emails hacked from the DNC server. |
| July 25, 2016 | The FBI announces it has launched an investigation into the DNC hack. |
| August 12, 2016 | Hackers publish cell phone numbers and personal email addresses for Nancy Pelosi and other members of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. |
| October 7, 2016 | The Department of Homeland Security and the Office of National Intelligence on Election Security issues a statement declaring that the intelligence community is "confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of emails from U.S. persons and institutions". |
| December 9, 2016 | The Washington Post reports the CIA has determined that Russian hacking was conducted to boost Trump and hurt Clinton during the presidential campaign. The Trump transition team dismisses the CIA's findings. |

Note. CNN Library (2016).

The most detailed disclosures about Russia's intervention in 2016 were a product of Mueller's investigation. His office has so far brought criminal charges against 12 Russian intelligence officers and 13 other Russian nationals (plus three private businesses) over what he alleged were illegal attempts to involve themselves in the presidential election (Heath, 2018).

On July 16, 2018, *The Washington Post* reported from the Helsinki U.S.-Russian Leaders summit that

Trump would not challenge Putin's claim that the Russian government played no role in trying to sabotage the U.S. election, despite the Justice Department's indictments Friday of 12 Russian intelligence officers accused of hacking Democratic emails as part of a broad subterfuge operation to help Trump win the election. Trump went on to condemn the expansive federal investigation of Russian interference as "a disaster for our country" and "a total witch hunt", arguing that the probe, along with "foolish" American policies, had severely impaired relations between the two countries. (Rucker, Troianovski, & Kim, 2018)

Table 2

CNN on Putin's Involvement in the Meddling

| US intelligence report | Trump's comments |
|---|--|
| Putin ordered an influence campaign. | He believes Putin's denials that he was involved in any election interference. Trump said this after his first face-to-face meeting with Putin in July 2017. |
| Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump. | Putin would never support him because of his desire to increase military spending and increase U.S. energy production, which would hurt Russia. |
| We did not assess the impact that Russian activities had on the outcome of the 2016 election. | There was absolutely no effect on the outcome of the election. |
| Russia's intelligence services conducted cyber operations against targets associated with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, including targets associated with both major U.S. political parties. | Russia hacked Democrats but not Republicans. He said Russian hackers never compromised Republican National Committee servers because they had strong hacking defenses. |
| Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order. | Trump once said foreign meddling in U.S. elections has been happening for many, many years. He has also downplayed the unprecedented and unique nature of Russia's actions by stating this on several occasions. |
| Moscow's influence—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or "trolls". | The Russia hoax continues, now it is ads on Facebook. |
| The nature of cyberspace makes attribution of cyber operations difficult but not impossible | Trump has said repeatedly that it is impossible to determine who is responsible for cyberattacks. |

Note. Cohen, M. (2018).

The U.S. mainstream media quoted U.S. intelligent agencies and sources to prove that Russian had been meddling in U.S. elections and political processes via media and social media to change the voters' decisions in its favor for Trump. This makes it appear as if both Trump and Putin collaborated to undermine the U.S. democracy system and national security, including the international liberal order over which the U.S. has governed for many decades. However, based on Trump's comments, it appears though he has attempted to destroy the mainstream media's credibility in order to reduce the Russia gate scandal's impact on the U.S. midterm elections.

Therefore, it appears to me that political fighting in domestic politics is a crucial element; in other words, whoever is president will determine the U.S. national direction. Trump has created a sense of uncertainty among U.S. institutional elites and allies, which is a core problem in the context of ever-present foreign influence, especially if it is revealed that Russia has successfully influenced U.S. audiences towards their preferred outcomes.

Russia's Feedback on Interference into U.S. Elections

The Russian president Vladimir Putin stated that "In response to our alleged interference in their election, [the Americans] want to create problems with the presidential election in Russia". If that is the case, it is very bad; it undermines the entire purpose of the Olympic movement. "International sports organizations—including the IOC (International Olympic Committee)—are very dependent on Washington", Putin stressed. He added that the major companies that pay for and extend broadcasting rights, as well as main sponsors and advertisers, are based in the U.S.²

Russian media RT reported that the American media diluted the facts and fanned conspiracy theories by spreading allegations of Russian meddling in the U.S. presidential election, a senior state election official has said, adding the voting system is near-impossible to manipulate externally. Brian Kemp, Georgia's Secretary of State, argued in an opinion piece for USA Today, that "misinformation from the media or disgruntled partisans not only fuels conspiracy theorists but also erodes the first safeguard we have in our elections—the public's trust".³

A U.S. federal grand jury indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities accused of interfering with U.S. elections and political processes. However, there are "no allegations" that they influenced the 2016 election. The indictment was not left unanswered though. Maria Zakharov, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, called the latest affront by the U.S. "absurd". She noted that 13 people would have hardly reached the desired outcome even if they planned to meddle with the polls.⁴

The idea that Moscow swayed elections and brought down U.S. democracy by "meme-sharing" is preposterous, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said. The accusations hurled at Russia by the U.S. lawmakers left him baffled. "It's just hilarious when I hear that funny pictures can undermine American democracy", Lavrov told reporters on Thursday, answering RT correspondent's question about the latest U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on alleged Russian interference in U.S. domestic affairs. "I think that's

² Putin: U.S. Wants to Disrupt Upcoming Russian Presidential Election, RT, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/409346-putin-us-wants-interfere-election-russia/> (9 November, 2017).

³ U.S. Media Dilute Facts with False "Russian Hacking" stories—Top State Election, RT, available at official <https://www.rt.com/usa/395141-russia-us-election-media-false/> (3 July, 2017).

⁴ U.S. Indicts 13 Russians for 2016 Election Meddling, but "No Allegations" They Influenced Outcome, RT, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/419044-us-election-meddling-indicts/> (16 February, 2018).

just paranoia that goes off the scale”, Lavrov chuckled, saying that talk of weaponizing memes only makes the Senators themselves look bad. “It’s not respectable for American lawmakers to make a sensation out of nothing”.⁵

As the Russian Valdai Club Research Program director Andrey Sushentsov (2018) wrote:

Information has become a key theater of the international confrontation given that kinetic means are not available. The fight for the hearts and minds of the skeptical international public requires a special skill set, including finely honed communication skills. This is quite possibly the most difficult challenge facing Russia today.

Based on above listed Russian feedback, we can see that public diplomacy has become rhetorical accusations from the government officials among different actors. Russia views these accusations as unfounded paranoia established as a barrier to understanding U.S. rhetoric attacks. Nevertheless, the U.S. media control the mainstream opinion and will reduce the prevailing trust of the Russian government, thus this adversarial information warfare will be the challenge for Russian public diplomacy.

Conclusion for Further Discussion on Public Diplomacy

In the age of the Internet, neither the United States nor Russia can neglect new cybersecurity threats. Both are afraid of being affected by hacks and fake news. If public diplomacy is conducted by the governmental officials through media and NGOs to change foreign opinions in order to acquire benefits in favor of their states, the presidential elections and prominent international activities are the areas in which to insert their influence.

From this perspective, based on the definition of public diplomacy, is it enough to prove that Russia has meddled in the U.S. political process? Or can we suggest that the new direction for protecting national security will be a collaboration among states against the real transcontinental criminals rather than useless, non-stop accusations?

The United States possess the biggest arsenals of information resources and that makes the U.S. insert influence than any other state can do. Therefore, the U.S. both the elites and social groups are afraid of losing their past privilege in international system. Trump needs to change his approach towards the foreign states and this has changed the content of public diplomacy.

As the above mentioned point has shown, on December 18, 2017, the Trump administration issued its National Security Strategy (NSS), which centered on four main principles: protect the homeland, promote American prosperity, preserve peace through strength, and advance American influence. Referring to itself as “America First National Security Strategy”, the document is also the first attempt to translate President Donald Trump’s campaign promise of “America First” into national strategic goals. First, it explicitly singles out China and Russia as competitors that have emerged to “challenge American power, influence, and interests”. It also recognizes the strategic significance of space and cyberspace as new domains and discusses efforts by adversaries to lower confidence in democratic institutions. For U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, the NSS suggests the strategic importance this region has for the United States (Tatsumi, 2017).

Trump has made his decision to reduce the reliance on the Chinese economy and transfer the U.S. national directions towards the Indo-pacific region. It is unsurprising that Trump rejected the ideology of globalization in his UN speech in which he said, “We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected,

⁵ Hilarious & Paranoid: Lavrov Laughs at Idea that Russia Uses Memes to Destroy U.S. Democracy, RT, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/434933-sergey-lavrov-russia-memes/> (2 August, 2018).

unaccountable, global bureaucracy. America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.”⁶ This statement is indicative of his attitudes toward building walls and retreating from international institutions. At the same time, Trump supports the principle of realism which reflects an anarchic international society from which America will protect their own country and people from the outside world. However, Trump still hopes to do business with other states through bilateral negotiations, which will change the global production chain from multilateral dimensions into a simplified U.S. versus non-U.S. single-line link in international trade relations.

The new threats from terrorism and hacker attacks will rage on in the endless political fighting. Therefore, it is clear that U.S. national security strategies view Russia and China as adversaries. Whether hostile international relationships could help rebuild international order remains uncertain in the globalization process. However, Trump emphasized bolstering U.S. influence through “strength”(military dominance), a goal that will require significant money to implement. The trade war with China and other states can be attributed to this strategy. From this perspective, “public diplomacy” will legitimize U.S. military dominance and strengthen the trade war as the justice action. We still face the changing content and context of “public diplomacy”, which has been viewed as the smart and soft power fading in the age of created phobia and paranoia of the so-called Russian intervention.

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⁶ Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, The White House, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/> (25, September, 2018).