

Transcending Boundaries: The Public Relations Practitioner as Cultural Mediator

by

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Abstract

This paper takes the circuit of culture model as the basis for a discussion of the public relations practitioner as cultural intermediary, transcending national and geographic boundaries by drawing on the cultural values of diverse audiences. It discusses the public relations strategies used by NATO in its successful campaign in Kosovo in 1999, with particular attention on the role of the NATO spokesman in the execution of public relations strategies, in terms of the “moments” of production and representation during the campaign. In analysing NATO’s communication strategies during the Kosovo Campaign, the paper examines the organization negotiated culture, identity and power in relation to diverse cultural and national audiences. It contends that the NATO spokesman’s public relations strategy attempted to create a transnational and European cultural framework. It argues that NATO achieved this through discursive positioning of the organization as a humanitarian military powerhouse, and so, at the same time, legitimized its own continuation as a viable supranational organization for the 21st century.

Introduction

NATO’s successful intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was hugely influenced by public relations in strategy and execution. For NATO, organizational identity and legitimacy were prime considerations whilst, at the same time, maintaining public opinion in favor of the military campaign. The public relations strategy was to construct the bombing campaign as a natural international reaction to the political, social and demonic forces of the Balkans in the 1990s. The alignment of the public relations strategies with the societal and corporate culture of NATO as part of a European cultural environment is evident throughout the NATO discourses. But, it is in talking about conflict in the Balkans that the clear cultural divisions between “us” and “them” are defined.

The first frame of humanitarian militarism was established in the very early days of the campaign, placing NATO at the very centre of a humanitarian intervention rather than in its traditional role as a defensive military organization. This frame became embedded in the messages of the organization throughout the 78 days of the campaign and successfully provided the framework for publics across national boundaries to accept these messages as being above and beyond “politics as usual”.

As spokesman and prime communicator for NATO, Dr Jamie Shea was the cultural intermediary for this large international organization and he set the stage for the public relations environment. By applying the circuit of culture model to this strategic communication environment, this paper will illustrate the importance of culture and cultural values within the wider socio-political environment and how discourses are constructed for consumption across borders.

In effect, during the Kosovo Campaign, the media celebrity was an Englishman, representing a supranational military organization, based in Brussels and dominated by its North Atlantic partner, the United States. The cultural frame was extended to include the “us” of 19 nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, including two former Eastern European countries. This paper looks at the communication strategies of NATO during the Kosovo Campaign and how culture, identity and power were negotiated for diverse audiences. It contends that the public relations strategy employed by the NATO spokesman created a new transnational European cultural framework. This occurred through discursive positioning of the organization as a humanitarian

military powerhouse, thus reinforcing its legitimacy as a viable supranational organization for the 21st century.

Circuit of Culture Model

The circuit of culture model, developed by a group of cultural studies scholars (du Gay *et al.*, 1997), identifies “five moments” in the process of communication – regulation, production, consumption, representation and identity “that work in concert to provide a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified and recreated” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). Within the circuit, each of the components works with others to create articulations which, in turn, contribute to the social construction of meanings. Regulation looks at the particular controls, laws, regulations and institutions involved in the production of meaning and as such determine whether it is acceptable. For public relations practitioners, this means that maintaining legitimacy and reputation of the organization remains a priority in the regulatory environment.

Production is the process of constructing the messages with intended meanings, drawing on particular power structures and socio-cultural practices. NATO draws its power from its membership, the majority of whom are amongst the most powerful nations in the world. Furthermore, the values of NATO are aligned with the expressed moral values of the West. This was reiterated many times throughout the conflict.

Representation is the means by which the producer endows language with particular meanings which are socially constructed with specific target audiences in mind (which may be in terms of language used, or the availability of appropriate cultural resources) in order to manage the consumption of the message. However, meanings are always sites of struggle and may be challenged and amended according to different interpretations of the message. It is identity which then endows the particular cultural artefact with meaning according to past experience (Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

So, when this model is applied to an organization whose publics are diverse, both culturally and geographically, it is the role of the public relations practitioner to not only span the geographical and language boundaries, but to mediate the meanings and consumption of messages for the benefit of the organization. In this context, the focus is on production and representation and establishing clear meanings which are unlikely to be challenged because they encompass the purported values of diverse publics.

Supranational organizations and international public relations

Little attention has been paid to the role of public relations in supranational organizations. These organizations operate above the level of the nation state and, as a consequence, are less dependent on citizen consent taking the form of mass loyalty in which the citizen needs to be “discursively convinced” (Habermas, 1975, p. 43) of the rationality of the particular case. Such supranational organizations, by their very nature, are required to maintain legitimacy and

credibility across national boundaries and across diverse internal and external publics.

Managing this process across cultures is more than simple translations from one language to another, but rather draws on specific values which cross many national boundaries and are the basis for the establishment of supranational organizations like the United Nations, NATO, the European Union, World Trade Organization, and others.

The challenge, then, is to construct a collective identity for the supranational organization. The construction of the collective “we” draws the line between who is included and who is excluded. This line serves to identify who the organization is claiming to speak for, and who it speaks against (Fairclough, 2000). In the case of NATO during the Kosovo Campaign, the organization was indeed beyond the nation state in that it claimed to be speaking for the “international community” which included the “us” of the Alliance, as well as all those who were aligned with the Western hemisphere of influence.

This strategy was apparent in the early press releases of 1999, as NATO discursively aligned itself with the international community by taking over the role of spokesperson for this “imagined” community:

NATO and the international community have a legitimate interest in developments in Kosovo, inter alia because of their impact on the stability of the whole region which is of concern to the Alliance. (NATO Press Release 98-29, March 5, 1999)

These interests are semantically conflated with those of a constructed “international community”. Indeed, the use of “international community” calls into being a group of nations,

which supports certain actions, has no formal institutional infrastructure and no democratic decision-making processes. Rather, it is a loose configuration of Western-oriented nation states, which either exert international political pressure or have it exerted upon them. The use of the word “community” implies fellowship and shared interests and, by adding “international”, it maps “political desire onto geopolitics” (Poole, 2006, p. 28). NATO statements and press releases consistently used the legitimacy of a constructed international community to legitimize its own actions. This approach won the tacit assent of mainstream media organizations since there was no discussion or debate about the legal implications for NATO acting without the authority of the actual international community, the United Nations. Cheney and Christensen (2001) observe that an organization’s public relations activities work towards the establishment of the organization’s “unique self” (p. 234) while, at the same time, taking into account the concerns of target audiences. In this particular case, Jamie Shea became the “unique self” of NATO with the identity of the organization being concentrated within the persona of the spokesman. Shea’s total self-identification with the campaign and his determination to maintain public opinion with NATO is illustrated extensively throughout the press conferences. He was certainly instrumental in articulating the NATO military organization with humanitarian aims to produce a new discourse of humanitarian intervention (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2008). As he later wrote: “NATO had to be able not only to take care of Milošević but also to show the other side of NATO as a humanitarian organization building refugee camps able to take care of these victims” (Shea, 2000).

Shea attempted to present NATO as indeed a unique organization – one that marries military intervention with humanitarian aims. The ambiguity in the use of the verb “to take care of Milošević” and later, “to take care of these victims” illustrates this “unique self” that differentiated NATO from all the other European organizations – humanitarian, military, political or economic – and allowed the organization to reach its original objectives in this campaign. NATO has two arms – one to take care in the military sense and one to take care in the humanitarian sense. Shea helped to maintain this as a dominant public relations strategy that played out over the 78 days of the campaign (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2008). The humanitarian arm of the organization clearly drew on the cultural values of audiences in the member states of NATO and, as such contributed to the unity of the organization.

The practitioner as cultural intermediary (1): Production

In reference to the circuit of culture model, the practitioner is no longer a boundary spanner within the management function of the organization but is rather repositioned as a cultural agent who is not only producing information but is continually generating messages which aim to help publics to understand, how to think about a certain situation and how they should feel about it (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, 2007). In order for this to be successful across national and cultural boundaries, the practitioner must be highly versed in the cultural attributes of his/her publics and construct messages which resonate with all publics, even to the point of developing a new “cultural meaning” specifically for the situation at hand. This, too, can be constructed with using the binary opposition of “us and them” as well as by drawing on shared values across

diverse publics. One way of doing this was by positioning Yugoslavia as the outsider of Europe, the country that could not conform to the mainstream:

We want to have a situation of stability in the Balkans so that we can bring Yugoslavia into the same democratic mainstream as virtually all of the other countries of Europe. ... we can't start even thinking of this [partnership for prosperity] until we end to the current process of moving backwards into the 19th Century... (Shea, NATO Press Conference, April 3, 1999)

In this excerpt, Shea was reinforcing the perception of the Balkans as a backward region and was using the text ideologically (Fairclough, 2003) as a means of embedding the assumption that Yugoslavia needs to become part of the democratic mainstream as laid down by NATO and there is no place for deviation.

Another means of constructing the message was by using a particular frame drawing on cultural values which are likely to resonate with diverse publics (Hallahan, 1999). The use of the humanitarian frame for a military intervention was extremely prevalent throughout the NATO discourses when the word humanitarian was used as an adjective to describe a large number of different aspects relating to the campaign: from humanitarian catastrophe, crisis, disaster, suffering and tragedy to humanitarian aid, airlifts, assistance, convoys, efforts, missions, operations, relief and support. The repetitive and constant use of this frame served to remove the destructive aspects of the strategic bombing campaign from the immediate consideration of target publics (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2008).

The PR practitioner as cultural intermediary (2): Representation

More than 400 journalists converged on Brussels in the first week of the Kosovo operation (Skoco & Woodger, 2000) providing NATO with a captive audience for its own particular worldview. Foreign journalists had been banned from Belgrade and from Kosovo by the Yugoslav government at the beginning of the campaign. From a critical political public relations perspective (Trujillo & Toth, 1987), this allowed NATO to maintain and enhance its power and credibility as an authoritative and acceptable organization (Chilton, 2004; Chilton & Schäffner, 1997), carrying out the policies of its member governments on behalf of their citizens. The daily press briefings served to inform these publics of the nature of the results of the decision-makers and the ongoing activities of the operations being carried out by NATO.

Although the format of the press conferences always required a uniformed military spokesman as well (and over the period of the 78-day campaign, these uniformed spokesmen were from UK, Italy and Germany), it was Jamie Shea who dominated the conferences and developed close relations with the attendant journalists. His autobiographical details confirm his skill as a spokesperson with an academic background of a doctorate from Oxford University, adjunct professorships at a number of European and American universities, a fluent speaker of five languages, and the author of scholarly works on NATO and European interests. However, it was his manner, rather than his academic qualifications, that proved to be the most effective element during this period of the Kosovo Campaign.

L'Etang (2006) likens public relations practitioners to actors who are concerned with method, technique and practice. They are also engaged with specialist work behind the scenes, keeping

their audiences interested, entertained and compliant to the persuasive techniques within the discourse. This is the less obvious work such as building particular relationships with influential people in the media, consulting with the diverse nations that make up the membership of the organization and taking advice from more experienced spokespeople.

For many of the journalists present at NATO Headquarters in Brussels during the Kosovo Campaign, Jamie Shea was indeed a decisive force in persuading this influential public to support NATO's message. His "daily 'Punch and Judy show' as he called it, was an idiosyncratic blend of press briefing, homily, university lecture and theatrical performance" (Pearlstein, 1999). Shea was indeed the "actor in the drama"(Castells, 1997) since he outshone nearly all the other key personalities in the Kosovo conflict. Neither Javier Solana (from Spain), nor General Wesley Clark (US) could claim the same level of authenticity and credibility for the organization even though their positions held far more power and authority.

So what was it about Jamie Shea that experienced, war-hardened journalists could relate to and, in turn, report almost verbatim on the progress of NATO's campaign? Alistair Campbell, former spokesman for British Prime Minister, Tony Blair remarked that Shea was "a real person talking to real people" (Campbell, 1999, p. 36) and was the acceptable face of NATO, the human face of an impersonal high altitude bombing campaign. He represented a military organization, yet was a civilian. He used military terminology, discussed bombing assessments and military strategy while drawing out the emotions of the audience with his verbal imagery, elegant literary quotations and professional conduct on the podium.

Shea was representative of his British culture and yet was European in his approach to his diverse audience. His international identity, whilst maintaining the “flat vowels” and east London accent, positioned Shea as the ideal public relations professional in this particular cross-cultural context.

Shea’s particular use of public relations strategies and tactics worked extremely well in positioning NATO to achieve maximum positive media coverage and thereby maintain popular public opinion in favour of the campaign. His use of literary quotes and references to celebrities was grounded in his Anglo-Saxon “Britishness” but resonated significantly amongst diverse, multicultural audiences. However, one of Shea’s laments about NATO’s media operations was that, whereas President Milošević controlled the pictures, he had to try to make up for the lack of pictures by grabbing media attention with his own brand of infotainment. Although Shea himself acknowledged he had the words, he grudged Milošević having the images: “I’m going to be honest, I would have given up all my Shakespeare quotations, my quotations from Edmund Burke, from Frank Sinatra and the Beatles for one or two good pictures that illustrated our side of the story” (Shea, 2000).

For the Kosovar Albanians, Shea represented “liberation” and, at the end of the war, received appropriate adulation and was “cheered as the conquering hero” (Taylor, 2000, p. 113). For the Serbs, on the other hand, NATO was seen through a “Jamie Shea lens” – as a “hate figure and a basis for caricature” (Shea, 2004, pp. 109-110). For the Alliance nations, there was relief that the operation had been a success and that NATO had maintained its legitimacy with its publics.

Public relations: Strategies and tactics for a multicultural audience

In analysing the NATO discourses during the period of the Kosovo Campaign, the central strategy of articulation (Slack, 1996) is clearly evident. This articulation at the point of production and consumption (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, 2007) provides a new European transnational cultural framework which transcends both the ethnocentric and polycentric approaches to international public relations. By framing the Kosovo Campaign as a humanitarian intervention, Shea was presenting the campaign in “mythic terms” (Fursich, 2002, p. 354) and was developing a transcendent discourse which could resonate with diverse publics.

As a cultural intermediary, Shea constructed the discourse to portray NATO in the best possible light and to clearly align it with the current socio-cultural values and worldviews of publics. He was concerned with “shaping the attitudes the audience hold toward the organization” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 239), thus maintaining the legitimacy and credibility of NATO which essentially was changing from a defensive military organization to an offensive powerful military force.

By framing the intervention within a humanitarian discourse, NATO’s discursive strategy legitimised, in terms of public opinion, the use of military force in an offensive operation in ways that promote it with positive perceptions of the organization. Furthermore, NATO’s framing of the war in Kosovo as a humanitarian intervention, or more precisely, as a war to prevent a “humanitarian catastrophe” was unique (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2008).

This framing was further enhanced by the differentiation of “us” and “them” which contributed to the already existing western metanarratives of the Balkans. By drawing on historical accounts, the overriding western image of the Balkans was one of bleakness, political chaos, savagery and discord (Todorova, 1997, 2000). Moreover, at the time, events in many of the Balkan states in the immediate post-Cold War political collapse seemed to confirm that these territories were populated by people perched on the edge, waiting to be tipped into a final fight for survival. Political and media representations of the region and the people have “focused on uncertainty, irrationality and violence” (Kuusisto, 2004, p. 169) which allowed NATO to construct its discourses around the key message that international intervention offered the only hope for the region’s future.

By suggesting that chaos was the natural order of life in the Balkans, the use of metaphor and imagery offered ways of engaging the popular imagination and reaching diverse audiences throughout Europe and the Western world. The strategy presented the idea of a virtuous bombing campaign for humanitarian ideals whereby meaning is reinforced as “the right thing to do”. Binary oppositions such as “us and them” , “good and evil” , peace-loving and violent” , “developed and backward” , “consensus and discord” are used as representations which, individually and cumulatively, lay claim to the fertile ground of imagination with dominant images that can then be exploited for particular ends.

The metaphor of abandonment provided a discursive shift which suggested that Yugoslavia was an orphan requiring good parents in order for it to be stable:

...this is an area where we simply cannot abandon the Balkans to Milosevic. We know what has happened in the past and we know what would be the consequences if we did that (NATO Press Conference, March 31, 1999)

By using the orphan metaphor and the expression of a dysfunctional society, there is a legitimate requirement to intervene. NATO needed to intervene in the Balkans for the “good” of the Balkans. Milošević is portrayed as the “bad parent” and, at the same time, it draws on common historical knowledge that his audience has about the Balkans: “We” know what has happened in the past – there is no need to spell it out – and “we” also know the consequences that would occur if “we” did not intervene.

These strategies of legitimization are positive constructions of the self and delegitimization of the other through negative constructions (Chilton, 2004). By articulating the military with the humanitarian discourse, NATO was able to be seen positively, not only performing its main task as a military organization, but also acting on the moral values of audiences to provide a humanitarian response to the situation. Here, at the moment of production and representation, the messages could be transmitted clearly. When something is stated as being the “right thing to do” or, that it is a “moral duty”, it becomes clear that the strength of this framework provides a robust and persuasive argument for “selling” a policy or action to appropriate publics (Roper, 2001)

The role of the public relations practitioner as a cultural intermediary is a useful one, especially when it is used by supranational organizations in communicating with diverse publics. In order to actively create meanings across national boundaries by bringing about the audiences’

identification with the organization and its actions, the practitioner must align cultural and international values to ensure that meanings are interpreted and accepted by influential publics. Without such a role, the supranational organization is likely to be represented according to an ethnocentric positioning, (and being seen to be doing so) rather than transcending national and geographic boundaries.

Since NATO's first military offensive foray in Kosovo in 1999, the organization has been transformed from a purely defensive military organization to one which, today, is actively involved in offensive operations in Afghanistan and off the coast of Somalia. By framing its goals in terms of the inclusive cultural values of the people of Europe, NATO has not only maintained its identity but ensured its viability as an organization into the 21st century.

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