

Unfair Competition: How States Use Disinformation to Exercise Public Diplomacy

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The research examines Chinese and Russian public diplomacy in the new disinformation order and whether their strategies can be defined as public diplomacy when their dynamics, ethos, and scope break with the established literature. Both countries have gained an advantage over their competitors, mimicking public diplomacy techniques on an unfair basis. Putinism is not consistent and is not interested in Western reputation. Its objective—as confirmed in Ukraine 2022—is the control of the Russian living space and the comeback to the spheres of influence narrative. China self-promotes as an alternative to American hegemony. Its reputation is framed on long-term relationships excluding political values or interference in each domestic political agenda. In conclusion, the new practices represent a change in the ethos of public diplomacy, which abandons its orientation to dialogue and mutual understanding. Reputational security represents the realist turn (legitimacy, territory, security) and suggests the end of an era in public diplomacy studies.

Keywords: public diplomacy, propaganda, China, Russia, ethics, disinformation

Public Diplomacy for a Changing World

Public diplomacy is a discipline of international political communication that was consolidated in the second half of the 20th century (Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2021). Public diplomacy's nature is traceable, and it is associated with a known political subject (Ayhan, 2019). A myriad of public and private actors, not just governments or official actors (Melissen, 2005), establish sincere relationships with the support of civil society.

The theoretical construction of public diplomacy is waning due to the pandemic (Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 2021), the deglobalization phenomenon (Kornprobst & Paul, 2021), and the decline of the liberal order (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021). The new media ecology transforms diplomatic practices and institutions (Manor & Crilley, 2020), including communicative and semiotic codes (Pamment, 2014). Diplomats compete for news attention, framing, and dissemination (Golan, Manor, & Arceneaux, 2019).

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Due the context of mediatized public diplomacy and disinformation order: Do Russia and China take advantage by employing values and techniques attributed to public diplomacy? What if goals (dialogue and cooperation) are settled on an unfair basis (false content, meddling, and institutional erosion)? Can their repertoire of actions be considered public diplomacy? If not, what impact do their actions have on the theoretical construction of the discipline?

The questions are posed in a theoretical sense by questioning the validity of the literature on public diplomacy under the disinformation order and operationally by identifying practical tools and techniques aimed at influencing international society to achieve foreign policy objectives that simulate public diplomacy. This is related to the definition of legitimacy narratives, which aim to "provide moral and consensual foundations for modes of governance" (Price, 2014, p. 8).

Public Diplomacy and the Disinformation Order

Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology distinguishes between three types of activity. Misinformation is about false information, including the lack of empirical research or context. It focuses on the cognitive domain, not political motivation. Malinformation pursues the distribution of private information to damage a third party.

Disinformation is content created with the intent to harm. Techniques include falsifying, fabricating, or manipulating content, context, or data. The aim is to gain money, influence, or both. False content includes fake news and mimicking the look of actual news outlets. Authors may hide or forge their identities, deceive authorship, or use bots and trolls. According to La Cour (2020), disinformation means the distribution of stories (hoaxes, fake news), the organization of systematic campaigns (controversial issues, polarization), and the implementation of strategic operations (on-off actions, real voices and bots, false information, and serious journalistic work).

The rise of disinformation has led to the constitution of a disinformation order (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It is characterized by the decline of trust in institutions, political parties, and elections (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018); the weakening of legacy media and the fragmentation of audiences (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018); the culture of digital participation (Asmolov, 2019); and the "unedited public sphere" (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

Disinformation addresses preexisting social and political breaches. Its cumulative effects are contradictory (Lanoszka, 2019). The main consequence is the naturalization of "epistemic cynicism" and "pervasive inauthenticity" (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Hyperpartisans trust their own judgment over the press and the political class, so they are more likely to create, share, and believe "popular political mythologies" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 128). Moreover, participatory proactivity is recognized as a sign of status (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). Authoritarian countries use the openness and transparency of the democratic system to drive disinformation campaigns and tailor responses to different audiences (anti-vaccine, conspiracy-theory fanatics, alt-Right campaigns, or European Union [EU] detractors) without following a political rationale. Democratic systems find it more difficult to exercise authoritative political communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) as the press and institutions vanish. The disinformation order devalues

conventional propaganda (Cull, 2009). Current currency lies in the analysis of rhetoric, purpose, behavior, or reaction (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

Disinformation order impacts public diplomacy strategy, actors, messages, and audiences. The strategy is defined in an environment of increasing conflict and communication management for "weaponized narratives, strategic deception, epistemic attacks" (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2020, p. iii) and the creation of a "modern political warfare" (Robinson et al., 2018, p. 5). Airlines, foundations, technology companies, broadcasting networks, and museums operate in tune with the interests of the sponsoring states without a clear dividing line to analyze conflict of interest, accountability, or dependency. Public diplomacy is not perceived as a space for collaboration.

In relation to messages and audience, clickbait and partisan press flood the public sphere. State-sponsored networks inject alternative approaches that defy the Western agenda and unattended audiences (Mattelart & Koch, 2016). The press has become a securitized activity (Flonk, 2021). Finally, the participatory culture arises, and so audiences produce and consume their own news (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Amateurism is a value as well as the emotional contagion of feelings, traumas, or memories (Ecker et al., 2022).

Thus, the disinformation order has contributed to the salience of new issues in public diplomacy. Following Fallis (2015), disinformation mimicking public diplomacy affects the construction of knowledge, creates opinion, impacts beliefs, and may have a factual basis. History and geography are confused with memory and nostalgia. Chaos confuses and pursues the rupture of collaborative spaces needed: Public diplomacy initiatives become acts under suspicion. The disinformation order feeds emotions. Emotions have the appearance of truth (rage, hope, respect) and generate the basis for the identification of real political objectives (borders, linguistic communities, migrations). Emotion configures the epistemology of truth and lies, a new semantic or representational force (Floridi, 2011).

In synthesis, disinformation order reveals new priorities including security, legitimacy, and sovereignty. This realistic shift assures the end of an era in public diplomacy studies (Seib, 2021). Cull (2022) coined "reputational security," which advocates a defensive interpretation of international communication. The notion represents a shift in the ethos of public diplomacy away from its orientation toward dialogue and mutual understanding.

Table 1. Featuring Propaganda, Disinformation, and Public Diplomacy.

	Definition	Features
Propaganda	"Deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 7).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content creation and distribution • Passive audience • Political goals • Easier to counteract

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethos: Information that can be true
Disinformation	Producing and distributing inaccurate, erroneous, or false information and content using an emotional basis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust and misperception • Self-participatory audience
	Harming societies and institutions using preexisting controversies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clear political goals • Difficult to counteract
Public diplomacy	Managing international communication in accordance with foreign policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethos: Epistemic harm • Communication and culture, economy, and influence • Receptive audience • Competitive market of ideas and values • Ethos: Open societies and cosmopolitan outlook

Research Design

The case study is an appropriate technique for public diplomacy when the salience and events are evolving (Yin, 2014). The examination is a qualitative study (Collier & Elman, 2008).

The research method follows Cull's (2019) typology: (a) active listening; (b) promotion of interests; (c) culture; (d) educational exchanges; and (e) international broadcast. Active listening is the ability to identify trends, understand the demands of the global audience, and build trust in institutions. Polarized content does not require discursive coherence (hoaxes) or reliable sources (fake experts). The promotion of interests is defined as the identification of a collection of foreign policy ideas. Think tanks and leaders' discourses dominate the conversation. Dissenting opinions have no place, except to exemplify punishment. Cultural diplomacy comprises intangible assets, heritage, and values. Museums, the arts, science, gastronomy, and other instruments promote a world vision. Nostalgia (Manor & Pamment, 2022) and politics of memory (Ociepka, 2018) are key themes.

Education helps to accelerate the process of acculturation, the use of language, and cultural management. Science is a preferred field as it engenders authority and respectability in the eyes of a global audience. International broadcasting centralizes infrastructure and platforms through the networking of companies, services, and digitized content that cater to the demands of an audience that is usually underserved by Western companies (Rawnsley, 2015; Xu & Wang, 2022).

Analysis and Results

Telling China's Story Well

In 2016, the international campaign to "Tell China's Story Well" was launched by boosting the visibility of President Xi Jinping (Bandurski, 2017) and investing in media infrastructure and technology (Keane, 2016; Thussu, de Burgh, & Shi, 2018). The presidential mandate entailed a "fighting spirit" (Bloomberg, 2019). Diplomats and the military must engage in communicative action and prepare to disseminate the ideology and push for a "United Front" in which the state, the Party, and other actors work toward political goals (Charon & Jeangène Vilmer, 2021, p. 33). All three elements constitute the "magic weapons" (Brady, 2017).

Active listening started in 2008, increasing its global presence (Zhang, Wasserman, & Mano, 2016). These funds were used to acquire television networks and news outlets and recruit journalists with local credibility, especially in Africa (Lim & Bergin, 2018). This plan is consistent with investment in infrastructure, satellites, fiber optics, and other technology that controls data, messages, and locations. The capitalization of data is managed through the Party (Hoffman, 2019). Chinese investment and funding of access imply control over information flows (Shen, 2018). Twitter is a key tool in spreading the message (Huang & Wang, 2019).

President Xi Jinping structures the promotion of interests. Making the narrative presidentially oriented has been heightened by the adoption of the resolution, "Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Century of Struggle" at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Central Party Committee. The document sets out the "correct" narrative regarding the history of the Party and the country as well as an outline of the president's thinking. Xi's rhetoric emphasizes his personal contribution to a new international system where China aims to "work to build a community with a shared future for mankind" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 7). The discourse includes respect for cultural identities and human rights. International audiences decode the wording according to local perception (Nathan & Zhang, 2022).

Global think tanks are preferred tools to defend the "Chinese characteristics" of any issue (Li, Chen, & Hanson, 2019). In Australia, the think tank known as the Australia-China Relations Institute (Australia-China Youth Dialogue, 2015) has received a US\$1.8-million initial donation to promote "a positive and optimistic image of China" (para. 3). It is based in the Sydney University of Technology. This think tank organizes interviews and pays for trips. The China Public Diplomacy Association has trained more than 500 journalists from Latin America and 1,000 from the continent of Africa. Training is extended to elites with a presence in 160 countries and 400 political institutions (Hackenesch & Bader, 2020). The Belt Road think tanks provide specialized knowledge (Menegazzi, 2021).

In culture, the thesis highlights China's need to cultivate its perspective and transmit the image of a global actor. The state-owned company China Film Group Corporation finances global entertainment while attracting private investments. In the realm of fiction, the government has promoted local productions with a nationalistic tone. The Golden Week festival is the popular time to premiere patriotic films, generating record audiences year by year according to official sources. The industry is "not about patriotism only, but

an integration of business elements, action film and creative storytelling" (China Global Television Network, 2023, para. 7). *My People, My Country* (Chen, 2019), *The Battle of Lake Changjin* (Chen, 2021), *1921* (Huang & Zheng, 2021), and *Founding of an Army* (Lau, 2017) leverage nationalistic memories of the first half of the 20th century. All these films are blockbusters despite complaints about inaccurate factuality. *Wolf Warriors 2* (Wu, 2017) is a slogan taken from texts of the Han dynasty: "Anyone who offends China will be killed no matter how far away the target". The film closes with a direct political appeal—"Citizens of the PRC: When you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland" (*Wolf Warriors 2*; Wu, 2017, 01:56:35). *Wolf Warriors* are now franchised war films. *Home Coming* (Rao & Gwo, 2022) explores China's diplomatic capacity. *The Wandering Earth* (Gwo, 2020) offers a story about planetarian infrastructures (Weihua, 2020).

In the field of education, the Confucius Institutes have been singled out as political spaces. The Trump administration accuses the network as "an entity advancing Beijing's global propaganda and malign influence campaign on US campuses" (U.S. Department of State, 2020, para. 2). France, Sweden, Canada, Japan, Germany, and Australia closed a number of institutes based on arguments regarding poor academic quality, transparency and accountability, or funding (Horsley, 2021). The network continues to expand in Africa, where the institutes have become training hubs for professional development or technology (Li, 2021). The COVID-19 vaccine has expanded public diplomacy into global science (Lee, 2023). However, the effectiveness of the vaccine, the lack of transparency in the scientific process, and its linkage with other commercial decisions have multiplied doubts about the honesty of the contribution (Wang, 2021). The same dynamic can be seen in traditional medicine, which is considered a strategic set of values to export (Cyranski, 2018).

The international broadcasting tools are diverse and adapted to different markets and techniques. Xinhua and the China News Service have 230 international delegations and have grown by 40% since 2017 (Falletti, 2021). The service subsidizes international news and it is nearly free. The agency distributes content of interest to the diaspora, which the latter consume without local intermediaries. On the other hand, documentary films are broadcast with the aims of making an impact on the media agenda and being consistent with global audiovisual culture (Hartig, 2020).

The *Global Times* and *China Daily* are official state newspapers produced in English. The supplement "China Watch" is a monthly insert that has been distributed in media such as *El País*, *Le Figaro*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *New York Times*, and *Rossiskaya Gazeta*. It has a circulation of 13 million copies in 30 countries. This technique is called "travelling on borrowed boats" (Brady, 2017, p. 10), which is complemented by hiring local journalists to produce and translate content tailored to the audience. China Global Television Network is a broadcasting network present in 140 countries with more than 70 correspondents. It is professionally produced. The opening of the Washington newsroom enabled the incorporation of five former BBC correspondents who were working in Latin America. Global CAMG operates 11 broadcasting stations in Australia and another 22 in the Indo-Pacific region (Qing & Shiffman, 2015). Chinese-language content is distributed to the international diaspora with a notable presence in the United States and the United Kingdom. On the domestic front, the *South China Morning Post*, a Hong Kong newspaper with 118 years of history, changed ownership and passed into the hands of Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba. In terms of technology, broadcasters of the African Union based in Addis Ababa receive broadcast

productions courtesy of the Startimes, which is a private operator. It is present in approximately 10 million households of a total of 24 million homes with access to pay TV.

The impetus of the official state press undermines independent journalistic initiatives at home and hinders professional practice (Luqiu, 2017). Three techniques stand out: The recognition of government officials as local journalists (Lim & Bergin, 2018), the unacknowledged purchase of local newspapers to distribute propaganda (Qing & Shiffman, 2015), and the overestimation of experts who support Chinese views (Leavenworth, 2016) or even direct fabrication of such personalities, like Wilson Edwards and Laurène Beaumont (Guibert, 2021).

Correspondents cannot choose their sources, nor can they move freely around the country or gain access to certain geographical areas (Denyer, 2018), which would result in having their visas revoked (Davidson, 2020; *The Washington Post*, 2020). Tibet, Hong Kong, and Sinkiang are areas in which mobility is limited. If one wants to visit these places in situ, paid trips are organized with official representatives. In Hong Kong, the China-U.S. Exchange Foundation has invited more than 130 journalists and political representatives to visit the region. It also pays for the publication of current affairs articles. Bad practice in public diplomacy increases when spokespersons spread an aggressive discourse on international issues (Huang, 2022). Diplomats have been dubbed "Wolf Warriors" (Martin, 2021), like the aforementioned film production, for their combative spirit on social media. Press restrictions are combined with the promotion of foreign influencers living in China (*The New York Times*, 2021).

Russia, Greatness Nostalgia, and the Russian Living Space

The etymology of the word disinformation leads us to *Russian dezinformatsiia*, the set of active measures promoted by the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Shultz & Godson, 1984). Putinism's doctrine bets on the intensive use of information in pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Information Security Doctrine, 2016). This approach modernizes techniques and abandons the conventional propaganda paradigm (Abrams, 2016; Giles, 2016; Van Herpen, 2016).

Sputnik and RT are the main state-directed media outlets devoted to active listening abroad. Putin's third presidential reelection emphasizes its agitainment nature (Tolz & Teper, 2018). Despite the lack of transparency in their financial statements, both companies report receiving about US\$430 million in an estimated business of about US\$1.5 billion per year. The fund allocation increased in the last 15 years (Michałowska-Kubś & Kubś, 2022). The investments help to fuel digital narratives, online engagement, and transnational coverages (Miazhevich, 2018). The media outlets define international problems with an anti-Western perspective (Carter & Carter, 2021) and the chain of plans and plots to diminish Russia's role in the international sphere (Borenstein, 2019). Targeting military forces and elites, the systematic review shows "a general conspiratorial worldview, [. . .] an image of Russia as under threat" (Kragh, Andermo, & Makashova, 2022, p. 360). Hence, the content analysis offers a cocktail of conspiracy, anti-European resentment, disorder, and a sense of chaos (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Completing the framing analysis, the moral evaluation puts Russia at the heart of solutions as a global actor (Bacon, 2018).

Journalistic activity has also been eroded, reducing accountability. Oates (2007) had previously predicted the problem of a "neo-Soviet" model based on propaganda, a lack of impartiality, self-censorship, and poor legislative quality. Pomerantsev (2019) argues that the disintegration of the media system is complete. As an example, it has been argued that on the downing of flight MH17, RT invented an authoritative source to discredit international investigations (Schreck, 2018). Abroad, the merger between intelligence services and journalistic companies ends up diluting independent journalism (Mackey, 2017).

The promotion of interest is based on Putin's rhetoric. The president anticipates a worldview and Russia's ontological mission. In 2005, Putin said, "The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century" (Kremlin, 2005, para. 6) during the State of the Nation address. Later, he stated, "NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] expansion [. . .] we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" at the Munich Security Conference (Kremlin, 2007, para. 51). At the Valdai Club, he remarked that "the so-called 'victors' in the Cold War had decided to pressure events and reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests" (Kremlin, 2014, para. 15). At the Russian Geographical Society, he underlined how "geography helps to form the foundations for patriotic values and cultural and national awareness and identity" (Kremlin, 2017, para. 5). This historical and geographical conception structures the text "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (Kremlin, 2021). His manipulation of facts, philosophers, and concepts is recurrent (Moss, 2015; Radvanyi, 2017; Vázquez Liñán, 2010). His political addresses and frequent appearances in the media disclose a reliable international plan (Drozdova & Robinson, 2019).

Russia has multiplied its think tanks and government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (Naim, 2007). Expert knowledge and public conversation are vitiated as these institutions produce information, documents, and events oriented to the defense of government interests. Ideological documents without support or evidence prevail although they have a high impact in journalistic, military, and diplomatic circles. Alexander Dugin, Igor Panarin, and Fyodor Lukyanov stand out as public intellectuals. The provision of experts and the promotion of counter-hegemonic voices is captured in the "Foreign Policy Concept" (Russian Federation, 2016). In practice, the institutions simulate a dialogue with civil society that does not exist. The funding and management structure maintains close ties with the government (Vendil Pallin & Oxenstierna, 2017). The dominant metanarrative depicts Russia as a "resurgent great power told by the Putin regime since the turn of this century" (Bacon, 2018, p. 9).

The Valdai Discussion Club is the paradigm of a simulated think tank and open debates. President Putin participates in the annual meeting, a sort of counter-hegemonic Davos that has generated its own narratives. The "National Identity and the Future of Russia Report" (Valdai Discussion Club Report, 2014) exposes some recurring ideas: A new Russia, the cult of heroes, and the cultivation of national spirit, a.k.a., patriotism. Russkiy Mir Foundation is a heuristic device that compiles culture and heritage. The foundation provides coherence to the "Orthodox civilizational community" (Wawrzonek, 2014, p. 760). Language, the politics of memory about its Soviet past, and the identity of the Orthodox Church build strategic narratives of identity (the geographical and political space based on values and traditions and not on post-1989 frontiers), its position in the world (defense of tradition, legacy family and Orthodox values, and autocratic political regime), and the responses to a changing world order (Russian civilization, Russian order, and cultural cohesion against minorities). Common language unifies while the Great Russia heritage fuels a

nostalgia for global power. Putin's rhetoric repeats the mantra of the Russian world as a living space not delimited to frontiers but to the aspirational desire to become and speak Russian. Reactionary narrative engages worldwide due to internal coherence and as an alternative to liberal societies. According to Gerrits (2018), "Putin has successfully brand-named Russia as a conservative bastion against the excessive political, economic and cultural liberalism of the West" (p. 11). Another analysis shows that the provision of experts and the construction of narratives has impacted other European think tanks. A review of texts produced during the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows a dynamic beneficial to Russian interests (Koval, Kulyk, Riabchuk, Zarembo, & Fakhurdinova, 2022). In sum, under Putinism, the public sphere has been degraded. Without quality public conversation, rhetoric builds legitimacy on seclusion.

The Russian language is a vehicle in cultural relations. The population bordering Russia is a community of ex-Soviet countries with 100 million Russian speakers, 25 million of whom see themselves as ethnic Russians. Self-classification takes on a political tone with the term "compatriots," who are "transmitters of Russian culture, values, and language, as well as intermediaries to the foreigners" (Kallas, 2016, p. 7). The "compatriot" activates the frame that contests nationality and state sovereignty (Pieper, 2020). The issue is relevant in the Baltic states, where the Russian diaspora is as much as 24.7%; in Estonia, it is 24.9%; and in Latvia and Lithuania, the figure is 4.5% each. This issue is sensitive because of the strong attraction of the Russian aspect and the continuous references to the diaspora as taking precedence over the nation-state, or in other words, the question of territorial sovereignty and the legitimacy of the post-Soviet democratic states (Coolican, 2021). The political notion of language sustains the Russian living space rhetoric. Combining the ideas of greater civilization, security, and internal stability "compatriots" becomes a formal and legal category. The epistemology of truth in this post-1989 Russian identity has become a foreign policy doctrine that extends "the need to protect compatriots abroad, including with the use of force" (Zevelev, 2014, para 40).

A second relevant aspect is the construction of memory through cinema and audiovisual fiction (Wijermars, 2019). Other cultural initiatives (museums, anniversaries, exhibitions) have been excluded from the analysis. Soviet nostalgia is controversial (see the case of Katyn, as cited in Drzewiecka & Hasian, 2018) because it reinterprets history according to the construction of a new Russian identity (Boele, Noordenbos, & Robbe, 2019). Again, the "living space" leverages self-identification as one who self-considers as a member of the Russian heritage. The conservative turn contains cultural and civilizational attributes in the Eurasian space (Khapaeva, 2016). The audiovisual industry evolves in parallel with the conservative turn of Putinism. The frame *chernukha*—criticizing the Soviet past—disappears from the scene. During Putin's regime, films showing a golden age of order and stability as well as a strong state with a civilizing mission multiplied. Nikita Mikhalkov—elected new president of the Russian Film-Makers' Union—encourages the film production of new Russian heroes for new Russians that will take away the trauma of collapse (Hashamova, 2004). Beumers (2005) describes his filmography as a "shift from a nostalgia for a past that is openly constructed as a myth to a nostalgia for a past that pretends to be authentic" (p. 2). Later, Mikhalkov (2010) promulgates a political manifesto where he defends law and order, loyalty to the state, the centrality of the Orthodox Church, and the geopolitical relevance of Eurasia, ideas in the conservative turn of Putinism. In sum, there is no pluralistic view of Russian society or criticism of past events.

In regard to education activities, Sputnik V is a symbol of technical capability and the authority of knowledge (Krasnyak, 2020). The momentum of the Gamaleya National Research Center has brought Russian science back to the board of global decisions. Russia presents itself as a country that creates solutions to global problems. The vaccine incentivizes diplomatic relations and exports (Center for Advanced Governance, 2021). This narrative of vaccine developer and promoter of cooperation is consistent with its self-perception as a leading country in science, a provider of medical solutions for the post-Soviet space, and a global competitor. The vaccine has served to fuel institutional discredit abroad (Broad, 2020). Epistemological bullying is supported by the rise of anti-scientific and conspiratorial discourse (creationism, plandemics) and Far-Right populism (Kennedy, 2019). The narrative constructs a frame of harassment and severe restriction of freedoms in European and American territories. The quality of European science is attacked. In Ukraine, the Russian vaccine is framed as a geopolitical conversation and government incompetence, while in Serbia it is associated with values of generosity and scientific advancement (Keegan, 2022). Counternarratives that fuel polarization and internal divisions have been documented as the technique "playing both sides," in which content generated is distributed by bots and trolls to politicize medical decisions (Broniatowski et al., 2018, p. 617).

Finally, state-owned companies RT and Sputnik represent the spearhead of the ideological structure of international broadcasting. The parent companies are Rossiya Segodnya (Sputnik, Ria Novosti) and Russia Today (RT, Ruptly). Copying other international radio and television stations, they are directly financed by the state and produce content in more than 30 languages. The structure, financing, and state-government relationships are not transparent (it is not possible to identify financial flows or the criteria for selecting managers). The two networks simulate an independent journalistic organization. RT (founded in 2005) and Sputnik (in 2014) were launched as part of this controversial strategy in the face of growing pro-European sentiment in the ex-Soviet sphere, NATO enlargement, and the Russian economic crisis. With its international expansion since 2008, RT has become a partisan media outlet and a loudspeaker of the official position and the conspiratorial world (Audinet, 2021). In the digital sphere, trolls and bots generate noise with multi-platform strategies (Golovchenko, Buntain, Eady, Brown, & Tucker, 2020). YouTube is a preferred dissemination medium as it allows for the introduction of disinformation into mobile devices and peer-to-peer redistribution (Orttung & Nelson, 2018). Freedom of expression is used to position its own explanation of the world with propaganda tools (Oates, 2016).

In America, due to their structure and governance model, these companies must register both as an agent of a foreign principal and as such under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938. The production or distribution of their content is not prohibited, but the ownership of the companies must be identified. Within the European framework, Russian broadcasters take advantage of its openness and the defense of pluralism to support anti-EU initiatives such as Brexit (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, 2020).

International broadcasting targets Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia, where the Russian language is dominant in international reporting. These countries lack a reliable media system and professional journalistic quality (Lehtisaari & Miazhevich, 2019). The current weakness of the media and news ecosystem allows for the mass influx of foreign content aimed at defending an international position and belittling dissident voices. The common language conveys the interests of Putin's government to the detriment of

local political systems. There is no clear alternative to this systematic undermining of neighboring countries, and meddling in elections to promote candidates and polarize debates. The counter-hegemonic profile is not based on new institutions or trade agreements but on weakening of European or American proposals. The pervasiveness of Sputnik and RT enables partisan framing of Russian stances on international issues, projecting Putin's image as a protector and model for the region, as well as promoting Soviet nostalgia and the denigration of Western views (NATO, the EU). The promotion of local politicians who support Crimea's annexation, as well as the protectorate over Georgia and Belarus, foments instability and polarization, or a kind of non-electoral interference in domestic affairs (Heerdt, 2020). Paul and Matthews (2016) describe the Russian state media's responsiveness in fabricating news and justifying Russian pressure on Georgia and Ukraine. The speed of publication and distribution of news to construct this frame enables the expansion of the Russophile position in the face of the small number of Western media outlets on the ground. The inability of the BBC World Service, France 5, and CNN to penetrate the Russian-speaking audience increases news authoritarianism (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). The absence of Western competitors allows for the creation of "our truth" (Yablokov, 2015). Verification and fact-checking initiatives may not be able to impact the audience as the conspiratorial world is based on ideas and statements that are not proven wrong.

Ukraine is a unique case, even before the Russian invasion (Audinet, 2018). The Russian framing has the following features: Protection and order (Szostek, 2014); territorial integrity (the use of the Russian toponym Novorossia to the detriment of Ukraine's Crimea); political support to regions (Donbas, Donetsk); military conspiratorial shift (the downing of Malaysia Airlines MH17); and economic plots (the progressive abandonment of Nord Stream 1). Thus, the ideological construction of Ukraine is reduced to a Russian "living space." Interference is common sense in the face of a country without decision-making capacity, part of the Russian heritage, and subject to disorder. The two broadcasters, Sputnik and RT, contribute to the information disorder through the dissemination of simulated journalistic behavior, the construction of logics supporting Putin's theses, the nomination of anti-hegemonic and independent experts who build up the negative narratives, and the provision of free information content to the Russian-speaking communities.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the disinformation order, Russia and China take advantage. The systematic weakness of free media under the guise of security or national interest confirms the unfairness hypothesis. Using such legacy diplomatic tools to advance is a sort of unfair competition designed for rapid expansion in different digital formats and platforms. There is no room for political pluralism in these two regimes that unify party, president, and public administration into one system. Where there is no pluralism, there is no public diplomacy.

The Chinese campaign to "tell China's story well" places itself as an alternative to American hegemony. Its purpose is less accountability in human rights or climate policies and challenging the Western model, which offers other political values (e.g., sovereignty, peace frame). It aims to build a reputation based on positive values and stable, long-term relationships that accompany investments, especially in Africa and Latin America. Here the Chinese approach is based on harmony and dialogue with elites. Media acquisition is aimed at integration into local culture and catering to diasporas, a driving force in the Indo-Pacific region. China's rationale is structured in the positive light of the global order including no interference

in domestic political agenda. The construction of a counter-hegemonic order requires settling the respect of partners and the constitution of a certain degree of international order and law. Reputational security advances in the configuration of this new type of Chinese globalization.

Putinism operates in a different political dimension. A grand strategy cannot be expected. This strategy paves the way for reputational security on the principles of strength and authority in the new multilateral order in the face of Western countries or institutions. The recovery of the rhetoric of zones of influence, the disinterest in multilateral institutions, and the -almost proud- assumption of the idea of being the pariah leverage the security performance. Instead, it tries to reinforce an internal message of pride and a sense of belonging to "Russian living space." Thus, "Russkiy Mir" and "compatriot" are considered an emotional rhetoric technique. The nostalgic narrative seeks to discredit the EU and NATO to set itself up as the only model for the ex-Soviet space, which is a territorial rationale based on geopolitics and security. Putin's presidential system portrays itself as a conservative value-based bedrock of strength versus the chaos of the West. In doing so, domestic interferences are key drivers in the strategy.

The present study has documented new practices in public diplomacy and has paved the way for new lines of research. It will be useful to gain more knowledge regarding the ways in which audiences perceive journalistic channels. In other words, are they perceived as reliable sources or as propaganda? It will also be interesting to explore how emotion and nostalgia drive narratives as well as the way that correspondents carry out their work in countries that *battle for facts and truth* (Ressa, 2021). Finally, there is the issue of securitization of freedom of expression as a zero-sum game between freedom and security.

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