18   Hybrid communication

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Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 will be remembered as a singular global crisis moment. While the pandemic does not alter the fundamental dynamics already underway, it is accelerating the change concerning our thinking and practice in public diplomacy (PD). One aspect of the change is a hybrid future, where the various tools and platforms of PD are to be re-evaluated and re-adjusted to develop a spectrum of experiences through integrating both in-person and digital elements. This chapter seeks to explore the conceptual foundations for hybrid communication in PD and to identify research areas that will help us better understand the evolving practice.

The impact and implications of the pandemic have been examined as a striking communication phenomenon. Indeed, it provides a critical discourse moment that reveals societal tensions and dynamics. As expected, much research attention is directed at public health and crisis communication. For instance, the journal *Health Communication* convened a special research forum "Public Health Communication in an Age of COVID-19" in 2020 to explore the role of communication in shaping perceptions and behaviours in the context of the pandemic. Topics ranged from norms formation, identity and political ideology, and communicating uncertainty, to messaging in an evolving social media environment, visual communication, and community-level health promotion. The pandemic has sharpened research focus on the rapidly unfolding conduct and consequences of misinformation and disinformation (Brennen et al., 2020; Enders et al., 2020). In the consumer marketplace, for example, retailing is undergoing dramatic transformation as a result of advances in digital technology and changing purchasing behaviour resulting from the pandemic (Grewal et al., 2021). The pandemic has also changed the tone and tenor of corporate communication, against the backdrop of growing brand activism and a greater public awareness of safety and lifestyle balance (Ward, 2021).

Closer to the field of PD, the National Intelligence Council's Global Trends 2040 report noted, "the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic marks the most sig-

nificant, singular global disruption since World War II, with health, economic, political and security implications that will ripple for years to come." Kissinger (2020) declared that the pandemic "will forever alter the world order". Others are more sceptical of the pandemic's transformative effects on global affairs, as Drezner (2020) argued in the article he published in *International Organization*'s special issue on Covid-19 and international relations. Nonetheless it does seem clear that the pandemic has further exposed the fault lines between national and cultural communities and exacerbated the existing tensions in globalization as manifested in the mobility of goods, information and people.

As Brooks (2020) observed in his *New York Times* column, if history is any guide, unlike natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, pandemics generally drive people apart rather than bring them together. The pandemic is a key element in diplomacy as it shapes a nation's reputation and soft power as well as international relationships. It also serves as a catalyst for technological adoption to expand the reach and impact of diplomacy. The pandemic has renewed attention to health diplomacy in bilateral, regional and global contexts (Fazal, 2020; Kolker, 2020). Zaharna (2021) argued that the pandemic heightens the need for a humanity-centred PD rather than a state-centric approach to realize collaborative problem solving for the global good. The experiences of virtual diplomacy during the height of the pandemic have laid the groundwork for hybrid diplomacy in the years to come. As noted in a report by *The Economist* (1 May 2021, p. 55), "Covid-19 has hastened the arrival of hybrid diplomacy, a blend of the physical and digital."

In this chapter, we address the concept of hybridity in PD. There is a vast interdisciplinary literature on hybridity. Our goal is to provide some conceptual grounding for analysing hybridity in PD practices through a review of relevant research. The scope of the review is modest, as we focus on how hybridity, as a technological arrangement, has been conceptualized and discussed in studying communicative practices. For the purpose of this chapter, we view PD as a nation's engagement with foreign publics, through the toolkit of informational, educational and cultural programmes, to advance policies and actions. Our illustrative focus will be on educational and cultural programming rather than information advocacy, the other mainstay of PD, which requires a different set of analytical paradigms and frames of references.

We start with a discussion of the fundamental shifts in PD in the context of the pandemic. The next section examines the concept of hybridity in a range of disciplines and discusses their relevance and implications for the study and design of hybrid communication through combining in-person and virtual

communication in PD. We then put forth key issues and opportunities in understanding hybridity for future PD research.

Public diplomacy goes hybrid

The upheaval wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic is unmistakable. The pandemic has changed the way we work, shop and play; and that has taken place across geographies and nations as we are all at risk. Digital adoption has experienced exponential growth in the aftermath, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. As the pandemic simmers down, digital growth has begun to plateau (Hajro et al., 2021). Given the erratic nature of the virus and the uncertainty it continues to engender, the post-pandemic focus is increasingly on the "Phygital" – the intertwining of the physical and digital worlds, a phenomenon that began before this pandemic but is now taking on new significance and prominence.

The pandemic is likewise poised to change some of the fundamental practices and processes of PD. Wang and Yang (2019, p. 294) outlined the overarching disruptive, interwoven trends on the global scene along every key aspect of communication, including context, audience, platform, player, and issue concern. The pandemic has only accelerated these changes and adjustments already underway in global affairs and communication. The context and environment for PD is becoming more volatile and competitive.

For instance, the field of cultural and educational exchanges sees a steady increase of programmes and offerings by major and middle power nations (see Chapters 13 and 16 in this volume). Furthermore, our age of information abundance creates an "attention economy" – the poverty of attention necessitates the competition for attention. As a result, the rapidly evolving information eco-system is exacerbating distrust and division (e.g. Settle, 2018). Compounding this communication challenge are the rising geopolitical tensions, which include political realignments currently unfolding in various parts of the world. Although it is still premature to ascertain what the contours of the practice might look like beyond the pandemic, as in other sectors, some pandemic-induced behaviours will stay, while others will be replaced by new ways of doing things.

Much of PD is grounded in the value of direct face-to-face interaction in enabling real and genuine human engagement. This is especially the case in the long-standing practices of cultural programmes and exchanges, with the general aim of nurturing mutual understanding as a bedrock of international

relationships. Such engagement through physical co-presence is believed to be essential to illuminating commonalities between peoples and societies across national boundaries. Moreover, intergroup contact theory suggests that interactions and contacts may help reduce prejudice and conflict between groups (e.g. Pettigrew et al., 2011). Cultural and educational programmes are a modest avenue for developing capacity for international and cross-cultural understanding and cooperative behaviour. These programmes rely on the "last three feet" effect, which represents an elemental form of human communication.

Even before the pandemic, our digital life started to interact ever more with the physical realm. On the one hand, digital access through connected devices is having a growing influence on one's perceptions and behaviours surrounding their world. On the other hand, in a growingly tech-infused world, there seems to be a craving for a sense of conviviality that in-person engagement provides. Physical presence remains fundamental as a transcultural human condition. This has been made particularly poignant, as national and individual isolation and confinement during the pandemic have accentuated the need to recover our senses of space and place.

As pointed out in the *Socially Distanced Diplomacy* report,

> While much of the world remains frozen in a socially distanced stasis and international travel remains nearly impossible, the need for meaningful global engagement, higher levels of trust between allies and international partners, and effective cross-border collaboration has only intensified. The role of soft power and PD in delivering on these fronts remains paramount" (McClory, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic makes it apparent to us that, despite the ease of communication through digital tools, something fundamental is missing when we are removed from our physical environment.

From a practical standpoint, there is general agreement that in-person engagement is most effective for building relationships and creating trust, especially when dealing with complex and challenging issues. Meanwhile, our pandemic experience has shown that "digital platforms have opened up opportunities for new conversations, new participants, and new ideas" (McClory, 2021). For instance, virtual exchange programmes during the pandemic have demonstrated the benefit of being more inclusive by being able to engage a much broader array of participants. The absence of regular international travel has reduced carbon footprint, making exchange programmes more climate friendly. Moreover, online engagement makes exchange programmes more open-ended by expanding interaction opportunities both before and after the exchange experience.

Admittedly, much of PD engagement is hybrid to start with. The current endeavour is about reconfiguring engagement and experience through an optimized mix of virtual and face-to-face interactions. As digital technology provides a key capacity for PD to grow and expand, it is crucial to figure out what is worth doing in-person vis-à-vis remotely by leveraging the efficiency and convenience afforded by digital capability. The question then becomes how we integrate the need for creating a distinct digital presence in PD programmes and that for maintaining human touch through direct person-to-person contact. This is no different from the wider discussion surrounding the notion of "Phygital" in consumer marketing – "the combination of physical and digital for enhanced experience" (Prior, 2021). And for PD, hybrid engagement is the question of how the online and offline worlds complement each other in creating and maintaining relationships. We next review various frameworks and approaches to hybridity in a range of literature to make sense of the general conceptual grounding and to explore implications for PD research and practice.

Hybridity: a conceptual overview

Hybridity refers to the process whereby separate social structures or practices mix to produce new elements. Derived from biology, the concept and discourse of hybridity quickly expands to literary theories, cultural research and social sciences (García-Canclini, 2001). The theoretical connotations of hybridity usually vary across disciplines. For example, hybridity is used by post-colonial scholars to allow cross-boundary experiences when discussing the politics of difference and diaspora. The previous social and conceptual demarcation is drawn between us and them or between one race and another, which is obfuscated by globalization (Ang, 2003; Drichel, 2008). Hybridity confronts and problematizes boundaries and always implies an unsettling of identities. In a broader sense, as Paz (1999, pp. 80–81) wrote, "the great creations, be they collective or individual, are the result of the fusion of different, event opposing elements. Culture is hybridity." By extension, Kraidy (2002) called for addressing hybridity in international communication scholarship.

The concept of hybridity has been applied in the analysis of various forms of organizations, including regimes, government bureaucracies, corporations and civil society groups (Rantanen, 2021). In media studies, hybridity refers to the ambivalence of genres of media products and suggests a new form of audience engagement of such media works (Bore, 2009). Or as Chadwick (2013, p. xi) has noted, this mixed genre represents "systemic hybridity in flow – in

information consumption and production patterns". Economic hybridity of media content, on the other hand, refers to a media franchise that represents both public interest and private profit-driving goals (Patterson, 2016).

Communication scholars describe the current media landscape as a hybrid media system such that different audiences are targeted through a variety of media channels (Chadwick, 2013). Political campaigns with hybrid competence would be more influential than a singular form of media engagement (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). In these contexts, the fluidity of hybridity allows scholars to describe the state of mixing and fusing boundaries across various social and cultural conditions and offers new opportunities to think about the consequences of such a mixture.

Hybrid communication

The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) transforms the human communication process. In this chapter, we are particularly interested in the sociotechnical construction of hybrid communication, a mode of communication that breaks the boundary between the online and offline, mixes experiences of the in-person and the virtual, and generates unprecedented communication practices and consequences.

Researchers from the fields of interpersonal communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have devoted much effort to understanding how online communication supplements, suppresses or mixes with face-to-face communication. For instance, compared with face-to-face communicators, people who are making conversations through computer-mediated channels express more affection and relaxation (Walther, 1995). People already integrate CMCs into their daily lives, which has proven to be a valuable tool for many to initiate, develop and maintain relationships (Rabby & Walther, 2003). Vergeer and Pelzer (2009) found that online network capital augments offline network capital. The network capital was measured in terms of network size and time spent on the network.

While communication is just one aspect of socializing activities, the results of studies like this one imply that online communication could strengthen offline communication in both communication network size and the time people spend in that communication network. A longitudinal study conducted in Germany (Dienlin et al., 2017) found that social network site (SNS) commu-

nication increased both face-to-face communication and instant message (IM) communication six months later.

Likewise, offline interaction can affect the characteristics of online interaction. Matzat (2010) found that a mixture of virtual and real-life interaction, in contrast to purely virtual interaction, among members of knowledge-sharing online communities reduces the problems of sociability, namely, lack of trust and free-riding behaviours. By reducing the problems of sociability, offline networks facilitate online knowledge sharing, while in other settings, the internet is mainly used as a tool to obtain information, and it is the social ties formed in the computer club that facilitate social interactions among a group of older Americans (Xie, 2007). Zuo et al. (2012) revealed that more than half of the online interactions are included in the offline interaction network in a conference. The results show that physical contact in a social proximity-based system can lead to more online interaction.

Previous literature has also documented the benefits of hybrid communication in practice. For example, blended care, a combination of online and face-to-face therapy, is being applied in mental health care to obtain optimal health outcomes (Wentzel et al., 2016); blended learning, the convergence of online and face-to-face education, could support academic success and engage students more effectively (Watson, 2008).

The application of hybrid communication reshapes the experiences of events visitors. Digital arts communities can utilize both cyberspace and physical gatherings to allow social interaction and knowledge creation. Online discussion and offline participation in major arts festivals can formulate the hybrid community (Marletta, 2010). Another study examining hybrid event communities identifies three virtual practices: connection, recruitment and creation. The everlasting online social interaction supplements the events with limited time and space (Simons, 2019). Yet, it is worth noting that most of the event organizers agree that the success of the event is based on the offline experience, especially the offline interaction quality (Lu, 2019).

The integration of digital technologies in public engagement

ICTs have reshaped the human communication process and, as the last section demonstrated, hybrid communication has emerged as a new communication modality that combines the advantages of both online and offline interaction.

Specifically, a wide range of cutting-edge technologies has been integrated into the communication process especially in the setting where the public is engaged, such as exhibitions, museums and urban communities. The introduction of these interactive technologies into public engagement has completely transformed the relationship among the environment, the media and the people.

Since the 2000s, hybrid spaces and networked communities of place have emerged. Offline communities are being suffused with digital layers and social networks that were also taking place online which further facilitates community participation in educational, cultural, health care, and other venues (Fernback, 2005). The urban community can benefit from hybrid forms of community engagement that are enacted through a constant back and forth between online and face-to-face interactions (Mosconi et al., 2017). To cite an example, the hybrid forms of community engagement combine online interactions in a closed Facebook group with face-to-face meetings and engage the public in accomplishing certain immediate or ongoing needs (Mosconi et al., 2017). By presenting the exciting new possibilities for engagement and communication across boundaries, the hybrid cyber- and physical-space nurture inclusion and diversity that are core values in the democratic process of community building (Fernback, 2005).

The introduction of virtual technology to exhibitions and museums quickly draws scholarly attention to understand the best practices of the arrangement and the effects of such technological reform. In the museum setting, technological affordances (such as live chat, 3D navigation, customization) can enhance perceived reciprocity, social presence, reality and usability (Sundar et al., 2015), which later translate into an overall more positive visiting experience. The presence of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) objects are found to be correlated with the enjoyment of visitors in a virtual museum (Sylaiou et al., 2010). Compared with an immersive 360-degree VR video and physical visit, the 2D video tour significantly lowers participants' spatial presence and emotional engagement with the tour. The 360-degree video tourism can be a good analogue to a real-world experience (Wagler & Hanus, 2018). Immersion and interaction are the two most important dimensions to understand how AR and VR technologies become potential means of communication for cultural experiences (Carrozzino & Bergamasco, 2010).

In addition to enhancing the visitors' experience and engagement with the cultural artefacts, the technologies (e.g. AR, VR) can protect the cultural artefacts, and multimedia information can be easily stored and retrieved. However, images produced by the advanced graphic system can be too realistic. Also,

computer reconstructions are often based on partial evidence, which might be biased towards historical objects (Styliani et al., 2009).

The power of digital technologies can be maximized when the optimal environment design (e.g. physical layout and accessibility) is present (Kim, 2018). This study argued that compared with dynamic visual cues, dynamic verbal cues lead to visitors' higher levels of willingness to pay more, and the effects are strengthened when environmental augmentation provides a high level of virtual presence. Appropriate installation of technologies with the aid of environment design seems to generate the most desirable outcomes.

In concerts and sports games, the effect of using digital technologies on liveness and satisfaction is more complicated. It is common to see the audience waving their smartphone recording, uploading, and sharing the performance of musicians or the exciting moments of a game. The boundaries of these live events are extended to the online audience who are remotely located. The audience who are physically present collects and preserves the moments but also tries to remain engaged in the events (Bennett, 2016). In addition, the use of smartphones such as texting, taking pictures, and recording a clip can be seen as a distraction by other audiences. Therefore, many stadiums and arenas prohibit the use of smartphones by spectators during events (Hutchins, 2016). Taking photos at exhibitions may also lower the chance of revisiting by visitors as the experience has been remembered by the machine (Lee et al., 2021). These tensions question the use of technologies by acknowledging the sense of being there together and liveness. However, with proper guidance, the use of mobile communication devices can increase the time visitors spend at exhibitions and the levels of mindfulness and perceived learning (Hughes & Moscardo, 2017).

Further research

The general concept of hybridity underscores "complexity, interdependence and transition" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 10). About digital technology and its transformational impact, hybridity needs to be conceptualized as relational, rather than binary as in the simple dichotomy of online versus offline. In this respect, practices of hybridity provide a spectrum of experiences across the physical and virtual worlds. There are tensions and opportunities in this dynamic relationship between online and offline spheres. Our thinking of their interaction and integration began with, if not first rooted in, the physical world. From there and with the adoption of digital technology, we consider

the extent to which technology enhances or inhibits, replaces or supplements physical experience.

As digital technology further expands into our daily lives, our attention turns to the question of how the physical might in fact shape and structure the digital. There is also the possibility of juxtaposing the physical and the digital experiences as parallel, separate spaces all together. The next generation of the internet "the metaverse", a form of "3-D internet" that spans the physical and virtual worlds, is gaining growing momentum. As noted in a McKinsey & Company (Hazan et al., 2022) report, the metaverse is here to stay, given ongoing technological advances, wider applications of the metaverse, and major investments in its infrastructure. As brands start to explore marketing opportunities in the metaverse, venture capitalist Matthew Ball wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* (2022, p. C4) that metaverse-related applications have moved "beyond consumer leisure into infrastructure, healthcare and warfare". A related development is that of "Web3", an internet platform that builds upon blockchain technologies. While still at their early stages, these technologies and platforms, as they evolve, are poised to significantly impact the hybridity of PD.

As the prospects of hybrid PD take shape, a core research question becomes how in-person and virtual interactions influence each other based on their respective qualities. How do they reconcile tensions and structure PD outputs and shape outcomes? Specifically, in the realm of cultural programming and exchanges, we may raise several key questions for research. One set of questions is to develop better understanding of the general practices of online and offline engagement in the aftermath of the pandemic. How do online and offline practices interact with and affect each other in programme design, its implementation and participant experience? How are AR and VR tools deployed in PD, and how do they impact PD audiences? Are there patterns of processes and practices that are germane to hybridity of communication in general, and are there features and characteristics specific to the PD realm? What are the factors and mechanisms underlying the structuring of a hybrid experience?

Another set of issues addresses the expectations of programme participants in the ways of combining different modes of engagement. This arises from the need for appreciation of variations across countries and locations, due to regulations, politics and user behaviours, which all are highly pertinent to PD work. How to arrive at a right balance of in-person and virtual engagement practices first and foremost depends on participant needs, preferences and

constraints. Does PD continue to embody "places-based" approaches? Are there geographic patterns in hybrid PD?

The other potential research path is to look at how the hybrid mode of communication in PD affects community and network building as PD outcomes. While virtual communication might accelerate the tie formation among different sectors such as government organizations and business communities (Wang, 2006), it remains a puzzle how strong such ties are compared with conventional face-to-face communications in building cross-border relationships. Hybrid communication can also create hybrid ties and how such hybrid ties might create cohesion and clustering in the community could be highly useful for practitioners. Lastly, it is essential to understand how hybrid communication influences community building at different levels (i.e. national, regional and global) as various forms and tools of diplomacy are required to meet the multilevel network building process (Goff, 2015).

This chapter has explored the concept and literature of hybridity and discusses the implications for PD research from the perspective of hybridity as a technological arrangement. The paths and patterns of integrating in-person and virtual engagements provide new opportunities to make sense of the benefits and limits of PD in a digitally enabled environment. The applications of theories and concepts of hybridity in the PD realm will add to our general understanding of hybrid communication.

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