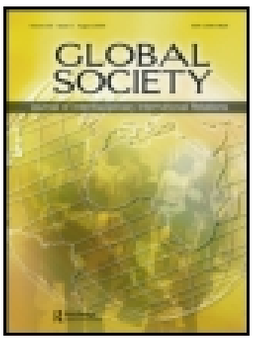

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The Russians are Laughing! The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humour in Online Public Diplomacy

Ilan Manor

Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

In recent years, diplomats have increasingly employed humour online. This study sought to understand why diplomats use humour on Twitter and to investigate whether humour can serve as a public diplomacy resource. The study adopted the prism of "the digitalisation of public diplomacy", which asserts that the norms and logics of the digital society have altered diplomats' working routines. Employing advertising humour typologies, the study analysed humorous tweets published by the Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom. Results suggest that by adopting a humorous and abrasive tone, and resonating with populist narratives, the Embassy was able to craft a unique iBrand online. This iBrand also depicted Russia as a confident world leader whose diplomacy is blunt and understandable to "common" people. Humour also enabled the Embassy to summon the attention of social media users, set the media agenda and identify the values that underscore Russia's image.

KEYWORDS

The digitalisation of public diplomacy; public diplomacy; social media; Russian public diplomacy

Introduction

Recent years have seen two important transitions in the practice of public diplomacy, defined here as the process by which international actors seek to accomplish their foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics (Cull 2008). The first transition is the mass adoption of digital technologies by diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs). Since 2008, MFAs have established embassies in the virtual world of Second Life (Pamment 2012), launched smartphone applications (Manor 2019), used social media to evacuate citizens from war-torn countries (Melissen and Caesar-Gordon 2016) and created web forums for communicating with diasporas (Bernal 2014; Rana 2013).

Scholars have offered a plethora of terms to conceptualise diplomats' use of digital technologies in public diplomacy activities, including digital diplomacy (Bjola and Holmes 2015), cyber diplomacy (Potter 2002), public diplomacy 2.0 (Hallams 2010) and virtual diplomacy (Wehrenfennig 2012). What all these terms have in common is that they suggest that the use of digital technologies has given rise to a new diplomatic

CONTACT Ilan Manor manor.ilan@gmail.com University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 2JD United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

practice. Just as diplomats practice bi-lateral diplomacy and consular diplomacy, so they now practice digital diplomacy. However, digital technologies have reshaped all MFA activities, ranging from internal correspondence to the provision of consular aid (Manor 2016). The aforementioned terms are thus lacking as they fail to address the all-encompassing impact that digital technologies have had on diplomacy. Additionally, these terms are too narrow, as they focus on which technologies diplomats have adopted (e.g. web 2.0 applications) rather than exploring how such technologies have influenced the workings of diplomatic institutions (Bjola and Manor, 2018).

This article offers a different departure point by adopting the term "the digitalization of public diplomacy", which relates to a long-term process in which the norms, values and logics of the digital society influence the working routines of diplomats. Imbued within this term is the assertion that diplomacy is not an island. Rather, diplomats are social beings and MFAs are social institutions (Hocking and Melissen 2015). Processes that affect society at large invariably influence diplomats and it is through diplomats that such societal processes permeate into MFAs. Understanding diplomats' use of digital technologies should therefore begin by examining digital societies or societies that have been substantially influenced by digital technologies. Societies around the world have undergone a rapid process of digitalisation over the past 20 years as digital technologies have been embedded into most realms of daily life. Nearly all forms of employment now include the use of computers while news is accessed through push notifications; romance is nurtured through instant messages; physical exercise includes the use of wearable devices; while taxes and municipal bills are all paid online. Even family albums have been digitalised as they are stored on clouds (Lupton 2015).

The second shift in the practice of public diplomacy is the growing use of humour online. Few studies to date have examined how and, more importantly, why diplomats use humour online, despite the fact that this has become common practice. This study sought to address this gap by examining how and why diplomats employ humour online. Specifically, the study evaluated whether diplomats' use of humour online may be traced to individuals' desire to attract attention on social media. The study also examined whether online humour may be used strategically to obtain concrete public diplomacy goals. By so doing, the study offers an initial answer to the questions of why and how diplomats employ humour.

One notable example of diplomats' use of humour online, which is shown below, dates back to the height of the Crimean Crisis, when Russia asserted that it had not invaded Crimea and that any Russian soldiers found in Crimea were there "by accident" (BBC News 2014). This tweet, published by the Canadian Mission to NATO, negated Russia's assertions while attracting mass media attention thanks to its satiric tone. Yet the tweet was actually authored by an intern at the Canadian Mission (CIHC 2018) and was not the result of an institutional decision to employ humour in online communications. Nonetheless, the question that remains is why did the Canadian intern feel it was appropriate to use humour when dealing with a sensitive diplomatic crisis? (Image 1).

In another tweet, shown below, the Israeli Embassy to Washington utilised the cult film "*Mean Girls*" to respond to Ayatollah Khamenei's promise to destroy the State of Israel. A review of the Embassy's Twitter account suggests that this too was an isolated incident, as the Embassy rarely publishes humorous tweets. However, this tweet also begs the question of why was humour deemed a suitable response to such a serious threat to Israel's existence? (Image 2).

Image 1. Canadian use of humour.

The growing use of humour by diplomats warrants academic attention for several reasons. First, diplomats from numerous nations now employ humour online when dealing with crises, including Israel, Canada, Russia, Ukraine and the UK. It is thus necessary to evaluate if humour can be used to obtain public diplomacy goals, and if so which goals. Next, humour is a fickle mistress. At times, diplomats may use humour to diffuse tensions or draw attention to another actor's overtly aggressive stance. Other times, diplomats may be lambasted for using humour when dealing with sensitive issues such as military crises, which devastate communities. Lastly, humour may negate the expectations of online publics as diplomacy is still a practice shrouded in an aura of gravitas and eloquence (Ish-Shalom 2015); reducing diplomacy to memes and GIFs risks alienating digital publics.

To summarise, this article has three goals: first, to draw scholars' attention to diplomats' growing use of humour online; second, to propose a theoretical framework through which this use of humour can be investigated, that of the digitalisation of public diplomacy; third, to demonstrate how humour can serve as a public diplomacy resource. To meet these goals, the study analysed humorous tweets published by the Russian Embassy to the UK over a two-year period. This analysis demonstrates that the Embassy created a unique iBrand by employing a humorous, yet abrasive, tone and by tailoring its tweets to the cultural and political landscape of the UK (i.e. Brexit). Furthermore, the analysis argues that this humorous and disparaging

Image 2. Israel's mimetic response to Iran.

tone may have helped the Embassy obtain three public diplomacy goals: setting the media's agenda, attracting online followers and managing the values associated with Russia.

The rest of the article consists of three sections. The literature review introduces the norms, values and logics of the digital society. The next section details this article's research questions, its humour typology and sample, while the results section offers an in-depth analysis of four case studies.

Literature review

Scholars have yet to examine how the digital society shapes public diplomacy activities. This is a substantial gap given that processes that affect society at large influence diplomats who soon adopt new norms, values and logics. For instance, when social media platforms were viewed by societies as democratic tools and the harbingers of an Arab Spring, diplomats sought to use such platforms to create online relationships with foreign publics (Hocking and Melissen 2015; Khatib, Dutton, and Thelwall 2012; Seib 2012, 2016). Yet, once societies came to view social media as a negative force that facilitates the spread of disinformation, MFAs created units tasked with tracking fake social media accounts (Bjola and Pamment 2018). Similarly, once diplomats employed WhatsApp groups to coordinate family holidays, they also used such groups to coordinate votes at UN forums (Borger, Rankin, and Lyons 2016).

Diplomats now practise public diplomacy among digital societies, or societies that have been reshaped by digital technologies. While not all digital societies are similar, they do share certain values (Castells 2006, 2013); this is because digital technologies elicit specific behaviours, which are explored next.

A society of iBrands

Storr (2018) has argued that the neo-liberal ethos shaped the digital society from its very beginning. Early developers of the personal computer envisioned a world in which individuals would be free to unleash their potential without surrendering to government authorities. Companies such as IBM and AT&T promoted a rhetoric of unlimited individuality in which individuals would become hubs of ingenuity and profit-making. In turn, every individual would become a commodity that could be traded on a marketplace. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn have merely provided the market in which individuals are traded (ibid., 252).

On the social media marketplace, individuals are transformed into brands that must compete over the attention of other users. Subsequently, the age of the iPhone and the iPad is also the age of the iBrand (Manor 2019). Within the scope of this study, the term iBrand denotes a societal process in which individuals adopt branding practices in their online, daily life. Imbued within the term iBrand is the assertion that social media users no longer fear attention or intrusiveness. Rather, they conduct acrobatic fetes to attract the gaze of their peers. Guided by the logic of corporate branding, individuals now craft individual brands, or iBrands, that stand out among a sea of billions of social media users. Facebook users, for instance, can attract attention by sharing their chiselled abs or lip-synching pop divas. In today's political landscape, users may also attract attention by spinning conspiracy theories or denouncing political correctness. Populist iBrands are also popular iBrands.

Yet iBrands may be far removed from the harsh realities of daily life. Few selfies are taken on the unemployment line, unless unemployment itself becomes a popular topic for online discussion, as is the case during the Covid19 crisis (Manor and Soone 2018). Importantly, this study argues that the online activities of individuals shape the practice of public diplomacy as diplomats also strive to be stand out among a sea of users. Understanding the concept of the iBrand may best achieved by examining the norms, values and logics of the digital society.

Storr (2018, 255) asserted that, on the social media marketplace, the currency "is the self while the gold standard is openness and authenticity". In other words, to become an attractive iBrand, and attract online attention, social media users must adopt the norms of openness and authenticity. Openness refers to a personal commitment to lead a transparent life, to share one's failures and successes, marriages and divorces, promotions and family drama (Bauman and Lyon 2016). Authenticity, this study's subject of enquiry, relates to creating a distinct iBrand; one with its own appearance, tone and areas of interest, ranging from naval history to the adventures of Batman. While Storr used the term authenticity, he did not suggest that iBrands are "real" or "genuine". As noted above, iBrands are well-crafted online images meant to maximise "shares" on social media. Storr viewed authenticity as synonymous with originality and uniqueness. For the sake of clarity, this study thus employs the term "uniqueness" throughout.

The norm of uniqueness is hammered into the minds of digital society members through the designation of Twitter celebrities. Those social media users that attract the most followers are adopted by corporate sponsors and propelled into a life of luxury. They attend champagne-infused fashion shows while promoting wristwatches (Manor and Soone 2018). The logic of the iBrand is also hammered into the minds of social media users through the "like" or "re-tweet" buttons. As Locke (2018) argues, Facebook's ingenuity lies not in its ability to connect distant friends or acquaintances – these features were already available in previous social networks such as Myspace (Boyd and Ellison 2007) – Facebook's success is tied to the "like" button, as "likes" offer users a sense of social validation and a feeling of worth (Locke 2018). In the digital society, one's worth is determined by the reach of his last post. So it is through the "like" button that a digital society is transformed into a society of iBrands, or a society that celebrates openness and uniqueness. Recently, diplomats have also adopted the norm of creating iBrands, as is explored next.

The individualised nation state

Like other digital society members, diplomats have also migrated to social media and it is now estimated that 90% of UN member states have established some social media presence (Bjola 2017). Moreover, diplomats have adopted the logic of the digital society. When reflecting on diplomacy in the twenty-first century, Alec Ross, who oversaw the digitalisation of the US State Department, told diplomats that open is good, closed is bad and authenticity is key (Manor 2019, 70). Similarly, the Director of the UK Diplomatic Academy recently stated that British diplomats fail to attract online followers, as "they are boring" (Manor 2019, 53). The goal of diplomats using social media is thus similar to that of individuals: to attract a sizable number of followers. To this end, diplomats have established iBrands for their nations; a process that some have dubbed the corporatisation of public diplomacy (Surowiec and Kania-Lundholm 2017).

The Japanese Embassy to the UK, for instance, uses Facebook to promote Japanese culture. This includes organising Manga drawing competitions and advertising Japanese art exhibits. Conversely, the @Israel Twitter channel is used to showcase local technological innovations, while the Polish MFA operates a Twitter channel dedicated to distancing Poland from the atrocities of WWII and arguing that Poland did not partake in the Holocaust. In all these cases, diplomats use social media to create a unique iBrand that deals with a specific topic and adopts a specific tone. Such is the case with the @Israel channel, which employs a hopeful tone, suggesting that technology is key to peace in the region.

However, diplomats' use of social media to create a unique national iBrand has an important consequence, as it leads to the individualisation of the nation state. Indeed, on Twitter the State of Israel has a profile page, it has "likes" and dislikes, it deals with specific topics, it can respond to comments posted by other users and can even interact with other users in real time. This leads to the individualisation of the nation state as it assumes the traits of a digital individual. The digital activities of diplomats therefore differ from those of individuals as diplomats can use their nation's iBrand to shape the traits associated with the individualised nation state. Such is the case with the individualised Polish nation, which distances itself from the horrors of WWII as well as the values of hate, bigotry and anti-Semitism. Given that online impressions shape offline perceptions (Natarajan 2014), the individualised nation state projects onto the offline world and potentially

influences how publics perceive a nation's policies. Put differently, by managing their iBrands on Twitter, Israeli diplomats may shape public perceptions of Israel's policies in the Middle East while Polish diplomats may influence the norms that publics associate with the Polish nation state. The question underscoring this study is whether humour can be used to create a unique iBrand?

How can humour help craft a national iBrand?

To understand humour's potential influence on national iBrands, it is useful to review studies from the fields of advertising and marketing. Notably, this study's methodology and analysis rests on studies examining offline marketing and advertising. This study borrows from the offline world for three reasons. First, few studies to date have examined diplomats' use of humour online. It was thus decided to build on humour typologies that have been consistently employed by advertising scholars for more than three decades. Second, over the past four decades, advertising scholars have conducted a series of meta-analyses to better understand how humour impacts perceptions of ads and brands. These studies all identify the affective and cognitive models referred to in this section. Meta-analyses of online advertising are more limited in scale. Finally, this study sought to introduce diplomacy scholars to canonical texts in the field of marketing and humour, which may be used in the study of online public diplomacy.

Over the past four decades, marketing scholars have rigorously investigated the influence of humour on consumers. The reason for this is threefold. First, more than 20% of US television advertisements employ a humorous appeal (Beard 2005; Eisend 2009; Weinberger and Gulas 1992). Second, the majority of advertising executives believe that humour is an effective instrument for gaining consumers' attention (Madden and Weinberger 1984). Third, humour is a multifaceted construct and its efficacy is influenced by myriad factors ranging from target-audience characteristics (e.g. age or gender) to communicative goals (e.g. promoting a product or a brand) (Eisend 2009; Gulas and Weinberger 2006).

According to Eisend (2011), there are two models which account for humour's potential impact on consumers. The cognitive model asserts that humour has a high attention-attracting ability, leading consumers to dwell on an advertisement's message (Speck 1991) while at the same time reducing consumers' tendencies to formulate counter-arguments to an ad's message. Reductions in counterarguments positively influence perceptions of the product and the brand (ibid.; Krishnan and Chakravarti 2003). The second model is an affective one, whereby humour elicits an immediate affective response which includes happiness and pleasure (Gulas and Weinberger 2006). Studies have identified an "affect transfer" whereby positive affect is carried over from the ad and the brand (De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001; Eisend 2009).

A review of 30 articles published between 1993 and 2009 found that humour is most persuasive when it is witty, for when a source is believed to rely on humour as s/he cannot persuade through arguments, the source is no longer viewed as persuasive (Eisend 2009). Studies have also found that people in a positive affective state (e.g. pleasure) avoid dwelling on negative thoughts (Andrade 2005). They are also less likely to process information. A positive affect can thus suppress negative thinking, constituting a form of persuasion as an advertiser determines what consumers will and will not think about (Andrade 2005; Eisend 2011).

Studies suggest that two types of humour may contribute to source credibility: Arousal–Safety and Incongruity–Resolution (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). The former employs a threat that does not materialise (e.g. man falls on a banana peel but is uninjured) while the latter rests on a cognitive incongruence that breeds mirth (e.g. toddler wearing a suit). Markedly, humour has been found to increase liking of an ad, a product, a brand and the source (Belch and Belch 1984; Duncan and Nelson 1985; Eisend 2009; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986; Woltman, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004).

The aforementioned review suggests that, by employing a humorous tone to create a unique or original iBrand, diplomats may obtain several public diplomacy goals. First, diplomats may capture the attention of digital publics who are always scrolling on to the next tweet. This is crucial as without attracting digital publics, diplomats cannot practice public diplomacy. Second, a humorous tone can increase the persuasiveness of diplomats' messages by eliciting pleasure. Third, humour can lead to a positive affect towards the source and the brand (i.e. the Embassy and the individualised nation state).

To investigate diplomats' use of humour, this study focused on times of crises. While public diplomacy is always a priority for nation states, it is during crises that public diplomacy becomes an essential tool as states attempt to rally public support for their policies, while preventing an adversary from doing the same (Mor 2012; Olsson 2013). Humoristic tweets, published during bilateral crises, could therefore offer the most insight into why and how diplomats utilise humour online.

Research question, sample and methodology

Research question

Given the fact that no study to date has evaluated diplomats' use of humour online, this study adopted an exploratory approach. Its goal was *not* to analyse a large sample of tweets but rather to use a limited number of case studies to evaluate diplomats' possible use of humour to craft a unique iBrand. As such, this article is but a stepping stone towards additional research on this topic. The article's guiding research question was: *How can diplomats use humour to create a unique iBrand that projects onto the digitalised nation state?*

To answer this question, the study analysed tweets published by the Russian Embassy to the UK. Russia was deemed a relevant case study as Russian diplomats have eagerly adopted social media and the Russian MFA manages hundreds of social media accounts (Manor 2019). Additionally, between 2014 and 2018, Russia found itself in the midst of several bilateral crises including: the stealth invasion of Crimea and the mutual expulsion of Russian and US diplomats; the alleged poisoning of Sergey Skripal in Salisbury (UK); and the alleged digital interference in the 2016 US elections and Brexit referendum. All these events negatively impacted Russia's standing as British and US newspapers labelled Russia a threat to national security (McTague 2019; The Guardian 2018). It was therefore assumed that Russian diplomats would be engrossed in the task of reshaping Russia's iBrand. Lastly, it was also assumed that Russian diplomats would use Twitter to comment on the aforementioned crises as diplomats employ Twitter to comment on events in near-real time (Seib 2016). This study also focused on Twitter, given that MFAs are most active on Twitter (Kampf, Manor, and Segev 2015).

Sample

The study's sample included 39 tweets published by the Russian Embassy. Using the advanced Twitter search engine, the author reviewed Embassy tweets published between January 2016 and December 2018 mentioning the words "Skripal", "Salisbury", "Poisoning", "Ukraine", "British", "US" and "Obama". This search yielded 794 tweets. Of these, more than 50 employed humour, be it in the form of cartoons, images mocking the British Foreign Minister, fake newspaper headlines orreferences to pop culture icons such as Darth Vader. Eleven tweets were excluded from the sample as they did not relate directly to bilateral crises (e.g. a tweet from 2016 mentioning the word "poisoning" before the Skripal affair). Each tweet was analysed based on a typology developed by marketing scholars, which is explained next.

Methodology

In his seminal article from 1991, Speck offered a typology of three humour processes each of which "engages the subject at a different level, requires a unique pattern of processing and produces a distinct effect" (Speck 1991, 3). The first humour process of Arousal–Safety rests on the notion that laughter is the result of heightened arousal and subsequent relief (Rothbart 1973). Such is the case when a stimulus, such as another person, is first regarded as menacing and later as inconsequential. This humour process is affective in nature and is based on relief from anxiety. The best example for this humour process may be a man slipping on the supermarket floor, only to stand back up and continue shopping.

The second humour process, Incongruity–Resolution, occurs when one's expectations regarding an event are not met. It is through the resolution of discrepancies that one discovers the joke's meaning (Shultz 1976). This cognitive process underlines laughter from puns, punchlines, comic reversals, irony, understatements and exaggeration. Speck exemplifies this process through a Saab advertisement that proclaimed "the good news is you can buy a Saab for about $17,000. There is no bad news". The incongruity stems from the expectations of a "bad news … good news" dichotomy. The resolution occurs when one reinterprets the ad without the expectation for "bad news".

The final humour process is that of Disparagement, which is always based on a three-way relationship between joke teller, joke hearer and the victim. If the joke teller means to teach the victim a lesson, the humour is satiric. If the joke teller means to embarrass the victim publically, it is put down humour. If the joke teller does not care about the audience, the humour is sarcasm. Speck (1991) gives the example of an advertisement that reads "For years IBM and Apple have told they're user friendly. With friends like these, who needs enemies?".

Raskin (1985, 66) offers a different, linguistic typology of humour, while arguing that jokes contrast two scripts in some "definite ways", such as good–bad or real–unreal. The punchline of a joke switches the audience from one script to the other. Raskin identifies three contrasts that underpin humour. The joke below includes a contrast between actual and non-actual (Raskin 1985, 106).

> An English Bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese: 'My lord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death. Can you possibly send me a substitute by the weekend?'

The first "actual" script is that of a Vicar in need of a substitute following his wife's death while the "non-actual" script revolves around the Vicar's need for a substitute wife. Alden, Hoyer, and Lee (1993) add that the joke's incongruity is resolved upon the realisation that the Vicar meant one thing, but implied another. The joke below is representative of the expected/unexpected contrast (ibid., 66).

> A doctor tells a man, 'Your wife must have absolute rest. Here is a sleeping tablet'. 'When do I give it to her?' asks the man. 'You don't', explains the Doctor, 'you take it yourself'.

Here the incongruity stems from the unexpected prescription of medicine to the healthy yet talkative spouse. The final contrast of possible/plausible and impossible/less plausible is evident in the following joke (Raskin 1985, 47):

> Samson was so strong; he could lift himself by his hair three feet off the ground.

Although it is possible that Samson could lift others off the ground, it seems implausible that he could lift himself (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993, 67). In all these cases, the role of the punchline is to help the audience resolve the incongruity between the two scripts.

Markedly, Speck's (1991) typology was adopted given its widespread use in marketing and advertising studies. Raskin's (1985) typology was used as it has been employed in cross-cultural humour studies. This was important as this study examined Russian humour which was meant to appeal to British Twitter users. Importantly, these typologies enable one to approach an objective analysis of humour even though humour is inherently subjective. Each tweet in the study's sample was categorised based on the humour process it relies on (e.g. Arousal–Safety) and the contrast between scripts it elicits (e.g. Actual/Non-Actual). Next, a case study from each category was analysed in depth to demonstrate how the Russian Embassy employed humour on Twitter.

Results

As seen in Table 1, of the 39 Russian tweets, 35 were image-dominant or relied on an accompanying image to elicit a humorous response (Speck 1991). Disparagement humour was the most frequently used, including putdowns, satire and sarcasm. This is an important finding, as Disparagement is the least likely to contribute to source credibility. Moreover, Disparagement often includes a negative tone which may not elicit a positive affective state. That said, 17 tweets employed the Incongruity–Resolution resolution process and four rested on Arousal–Safety, both of which contribute to source credibility. The expected/unexpected dichotomy of scripts (Raskin 1985) was the least employed. The four case studies below demonstrate how each humour process was employed by the Embassy.

Table 1. Russian tweet by humour process and scripts.

		Speck (1991) typology			Raskin (1985) typology		
	Image dominant	Arousal–Safety	Incongruity–Resolution	Disparagement	Actual/Non-Actual	Expected/Unexpected	Possible/Impossible
Number of Tweets (total of 39)	35	4	17	18	15	8	16

Case study number 1: the lame duck tweet

The tweet below was published in December 2016 following the Obama administration's decision to expel 35 Russian diplomats in retaliation for possible Russian interventions in the US Elections. The tweet was published at a time when US–Russian relations were already strained, following the 2014 invasion of Crimea (Allison 2014; Burke-White 2014).

Speck (1991) suggests that when analysing a humorous ad, one must first interpret the ad's written message, then it's accompanying image and finally the relationship between the two. The tweet's text implies that Obama's actions are reminiscent of the Cold War, an era marked by open aggression between the United States and Russia. However, the tweet also suggests that, unlike the Cold War era, there is now something that unites Russians and Americans: the desire to see Obama leave office (Image 3).

Importantly, the image accompanying this tweet transforms it into a sophisticated rhetorical device thanks to the use of a double entendre. At first glance, the viewer is drawn to the word "lame", written in bold letters, signifying that President Obama is "lame". This message would be discernible to all Twitter users who could also recognise the abrasive tone employed by the Russian Embassy. Next, one is drawn to the image of a duck. It is at this moment the tweet's double entendre is made apparent: Obama is not only lame, but he is a lame duck, a President destined to shortly leave office and thus lose all relevance. The image therefore denotes that Obama belongs to the irrelevant past. Here, the relationship between the image and the text becomes apparent as Obama is supposedly as irrelevant as his outdated policies. The "lame duck" double entendre would only be discernible to more sophisticated Twitter users who are familiar with this political analogy. Due to the relationship between the image and the text, the tweet is image dominant.

Image 3. Russia's lame duck tweet.

In Speck's (1991) typology, this tweet is representative of the Disparagement humour process. Specifically, the tweet rests on "put-down" humour as the Russian Embassy sought to publicly insult President Obama. Indeed, the Embassy "tagged" several British newspapers, and the US Embassy to London, thereby ensuring that the "put-down" was public. In terms of Raskin's (1985) scripts, this tweet contrasts the actual with the non/actual. While Obama is not actually or physically a lame duck, he actually is a "lame duck", or a President who no longer carries influence.

This tweet begins to demonstrate how the logic and values of the digital society can help account for diplomats' use of humour. First, by employing Disparagement humour to comment on a bilateral crisis, the Russian Embassy adopted a unique, albeit abrasive tone. Second, by employing humour, the Embassy successfully competed on the Twitter marketplace. This tweet was shared and liked by more than 30,000 Twitter users; an impressive figure given that, during the sampling period, the average Embassy tweet garnered only 80 retweets and 544 favourites.

Third, the "lame duck" tweet was one heard around the world. A Google News search for term "lame duck tweet" found that the tweet was featured in news articles in Australia, India, Israel, the UK and the United States, suggesting that humour may help diplomats reach offline publics such as newspaper readers. Although some of these articles criticised the Russian Embassy for "trolling" the Obama administration, they nonetheless featured the tweet prominently. While previous public diplomacy studies have suggested that setting the media's agenda is an important goal, many have examined diplomats' attempts to court and foster relationships with journalists. Here, however, diplomats may have sought to set the media's agenda by becoming a viral sensation; a sensation based on insult and disparagement (Pamment 2012; Powers and Gilboa 2007).

Importantly, the tone of this tweet also attests to the traits of the individualised Russian nation state. Specifically, the Embassy's iBrand implies that the Russian state is blunt and clear spoken. It does not hide behind vague diplomatic language. It speaks its mind frankly and directly. Russian foreign policy is thus understandable to the "common" man or woman. Markedly, the blunt tone of the Russian iBrand is a powerful one, as it resonates with a contemporary populist narrative that rejects political correctness; a narrative prevalent during the Brexit debate (see discussion).

Case study number 2: sanctioning the pool

The second case study, shown below, was published on September 2016, a year which saw additional US sanctions imposed on Russia due to its cyber interventions in the US election. The tweet's text is simple as it ponders why the United States would impose sanctions on a swimming pool in Moscow? The text alone demonstrates that this tweet rests on the Incongruity–Resolution humour process. There is a stark incongruity between the first part of the text, which refers to sanctions, and the second, which refers to a public swimming pool. Twitter users would expect financial sanctions to target Russian banks, oil companies and Vladimir Putin's cronies, but certainly not pools. The resolution of this incongruity occurs when one realises that the tweet employs irony to mock the United States and its response to Russia's actions, as the United States has mistakenly targeted a public pool. While the tweet is not entirely image-dominant, the image does

magnify the incongruity, as the mighty US eagle, cloaked in the US flag, is pitted against elderly Russian swimmers (Image 4).

The tweet's image is not "professional", it is an amateur's montage, as one can barely make out the letters "VS" or identify the Russian swimmers. Yet this amateurism may also be deliberate, as it increases the incongruity between the awesome strength of the United States and the object of its wrath: a dainty, harmless pool. There may even be a claim to piety here, as Russia is the object of indiscriminant US attacks, which target citizens as opposed to state institutions. So while the "lame duck" tweet may have elicited a cognitive process through the use of a double entendre, this tweet could have elicited an affective response. If successful, such an affective response would prevent Twitter users from dwelling on the events that precipitated the sanctions as positive emotions suppress cognitive processes (Andrade 2005; Eisend 2011).

In terms of scripts, this tweet contrasts the expected with the unexpected. While one might expect the United States to sanction Russia following its invasion of Crimea, s/he would not expect the sanctioning of a pool. From an iBrand perspective, this tweet demonstrates a certain consistency in Russia's use of humour to comment on diplomatic crises leading to a unique tone that sets it apart from other Embassies. However, this specific tweet failed to attract attention from Twitter users in terms of retweets and favourites, possibly due to Russia's deteriorating image in the UK. This assertion, which warrants further attention, is important as it identifies a possible limitation of humour's contribution to public diplomacy activities.

Lastly, this tweet also shapes the character of the individualised Russian nation state, as Russia responds to US sanctions with levity. Taken to the extreme, this tweet could imply that Russia is not the weak nation state that it was during the 1990s. It is now a

Image 4. The eagle versus the pool.

confident world power that is not afraid of confronting, and mocking, other powerful actors. The Russian nation state does not scare easily; it stands firm behind its policies and disregards the threats of bullies who wage war on pools.

Case study number 3: in the line of fire

The "line of fire" tweet was published in September 2018 following a visit by the UK's Defense Minister to the Crimean border. This tweet is entirely image-dependent, as the tweet's text makes little sense unless one reads the headline of the accompanying newspaper clip, according to which a British Minister deliberately put himself in harm's way when visiting Ukraine (Image 5).

This tweet rests on the Arousal–Safety humour process. British Twitter users would be concerned to learn that a Minister was sending Russia a message by putting himself in the line of fire. Any injury to a UK Minister visiting Ukraine could dramatically impact Russian–UK relations. Yet the tweet's text offers a comic relief, insinuating that the Minister was in no danger as the tense border with Ukraine is miles away. The tweet further alleviates anxiety through the image depicting the Minister in the line of a band's horn section. The image and the text of this tweet are inseparable and the humour arises from the interaction between the two. In Raskin's (1985) typology, this tweet contrasts the plausible with the implausible. While it is plausible that a British Minister was in the line of fire, it is implausible that the line of fire consisted of tubas and trumpets.

This tweet also suggests that Russia is far more familiar with Ukraine's geography than the British press. Notably, eight out of the 39 tweets comprising this study's sample included newspaper clippings. These were used to attack British press institutions (e.g. BBC), lament the British media's "warmongering", emphasise inconsistencies in news coverage and suggest that British allegations against Russia were ludicrous. Such is the case with the tweet that mocks allegations that Russia swayed the 2016 US elections with a few thousand dollars (Image 6).

The attacks on the British press may have resonated with another populist narrative which gained mass appeal during the Brexit debate: that of "fake news". Like British and US politicians, the Russian Embassy repeatedly sought to attack the credibility of the British press. Rather than rely on vitriol or twitter tirades, however, the Russian Embassy assaulted the press through irony, puns and comic reversals, as is the case in Image 7.

The humorous Russian approach may have been more effective than violent tirades, as humour stifles cognitive processes and the formulation of counter-arguments. Humorous tweets may have thus reduced Twitter users' willingness to defend the British press. Most noteworthy is the fact that, through humour, the Embassy was able to employ populist narratives without appearing angered or violent.

The common use of newspaper clippings and amateur montages (e.g. lame duck; swimming pool) suggests that the Embassy's iBrand was unique or distinct both in terms of tone and appearance. This tweet infers that the individualised Russian nation state does not threaten or berate but, rather, mocks. There is therefore an element of level-headedness to Russia's new character; one far removed from Khrushchev's pounding shoe at the United Nations.

Image 5. A minister in the line of fire.

Case study number 4: the Poirot tweet

The final tweet presented in the study was published on 18 March 2018. At the time, the British government alleged that Russian operatives had used a nerve agent to attack former double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury. This tweet's text urges the British authorities to enlist the assistance of the fictitious detective Hercule Poirot given the lack of evidence tying Russia to Skripal's poisoning. The humour process employed in this tweet is that of Disparagement or, more specifically, sarcasm. By stating that Poirot could aid the British investigation, the Embassy sought to depict the British authorities as incompetent. This disparaging appraisal of the British government is communicated through the text alone. Thus, unlike previous case studies, the "Poirot" tweet is not image dominant. The image of television's Poirot may have been used to remind certain Twitter users of who Poirot is. Most importantly, the "Poirot" tweet was unique, as it was tailored to British publics by referencing a staple of British culture: the works of Agatha Christie. Tailored messages, which take into account a public's history and culture, have been shown to be more effective in shaping public perceptions and beliefs (Enwald and Huotari 2010; Noar, Benac, and Harris 2007) (Image 8).

Image 6. Swaying an election.

In Raskin's (1985) typology, the "Poirot" tweet contrasts the possible with the impossible. While it is possible that the UK authorities are incompetent, it would be impossible to summon the aid of the fictitious Poirot. This contrast also extends to Russia. While it is possible that Russia poisoned Sergey Skripal, it is impossible that it did so without leaving any trace of evidence. As such, this tweet includes a Russian claim of innocence that rests on the invocation of Poirot, whose novels are known for their intricacy and "twists and turns". In Poirot stories, the culprit is usually the least likely character. The Russian Embassy may have invoked Poirot to suggest that, in the end, Russia will be vindicated while another, less likely actor will be found to be the culprit. Russian digital channels suggested that whether Ukraine, the CIA or Britain itself where behind the poisoning, all of them tried to frame Russia (Ma and Corcoran 2018; Warrick and Troianovski 2018).

By summoning Poirot, the Embassy was also able to make a sterner argument: that the UK government was manufacturing evidence; that its allegations against Russia were as fictitious as Poriot himself. Here, the Embassy resonated with a third populist narrative – that of conspiracy theories – yet it did so through art and culture. This tweet attests to a

Image 7. Russian comic reversal.

different aspect of the individualised Russian state: Russia is cultured and when called to defend itself it does it through art and literature. Poirot's image may have helped substantiate this argument, as Russia is as elegant as TV's Poirot.

This Poirot tweet, which obtained online virality, also demonstrates one of the pitfalls of using humour. By making light of a serious matter, diplomats may be accused of being

Image 8. Russia's Poirot tweet.

callous and insensitive. Twitter users criticised the tweet, writing "You're supposed to be promoting all the good parts of Russia, food culture etc. But instead you're spreading conspiracy theories and mocking dead people. Shame on you" (Charity 2018).

Discussion

This study sought to examine how and why diplomats use humour on social media. These questions are pertinent given diplomats' growing use of humour online. The study proposed to answer these questions through the prism of the digital society. As this study has shown, the Russian Embassy's iBrand was unique or distinct in three ways. First, the Embassy adopted an abrasive, confrontational and disparaging tone. Second, the Embassy created a distinct digital appearance, relying on montages and newspaper clippings. Third, the Embassy's humour was tailored to the cultural and political landscape of British Twitter users as the Embassy summoned fictional literary characters and resonated with three populist narratives that were part of the Brexit debate. All these together may have set the Embassy apart from other London-based Embassies, if these also used humour online.

Notably, the Embassy's humour resonated with three populist narratives, prevalent during the Brexit debate. First, the "lame duck" tweet included a rebuke of political correctness while appealing to "common people". When investigating populist politicians in the UK and the United States, Greven (2016, 6) found that political correctness is both the "declared enemy" and closest friend of Right-wing populists. By attacking political correctness, the populist uncovers the corrupt rule of elites while also opposing these elites. In the populist mindset, political correctness is but a mechanism through which elites impose their world view on the "common people" (Betz and Johnson 2004).

The repeated use of newspaper clippings to attack the British press resonated with the populist narrative of "fake news". Notably, populism appeals to emotions rather than logic and stands in contrast to objectivity, including the objective media (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Populists rebel against the mainstream media, which is viewed as yet another mechanism through which the elites subjugate the silent majority. Donald Trump, for one, consistently portrays himself as being attacked by the elite-ruled media (Betz and Johnson 2004; Gerbaudo 2018; Higgins 2017).

Finally, the Poirot tweet resonated with the narrative of conspiracy theories, a potent populist tool that uncovers the masses' domination by brutal elites (Castanho, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017). It is also through conspiracy theories that the "we", or people, become a cohesive unit that is under attack from "them", or the elite (Oliver and Rahn 2016). By resonating with these narratives, which were prevalent during the Brexit debacle, the Russian Embassy may have sought to court British populists, thus creating a receptive base. Yet Russia did so without abandoning diplomatic decorum, or negating digital publics' expectations for diplomatic gravitas.

Like individual iBrands, the Embassy's iBrand summoned the gaze of digital publics, thus obtaining an important public diplomacy goal, as one cannot practice public diplomacy without first attracting the public (Cull 2008). Moreover, a humorous tone may have increased the Embassy's ability to compete online opposite other London-based Embassies. Much like individuals, diplomatic institutions also aggressively vie over digital publics, given a desire to influence their worldviews, perceptions and beliefs (Manor and Soone 2018).

Results indicate that the Russian Embassy relied mostly on Disparagement humour, which can actually reduce source credibility. However, the Embassy did use humour as a witty and sophisticated rhetorical device by employing double entendres (lame duck), literary figures (Poirot) and irony (sanctions on a pool). Such wittiness may have elicited a cognitive process, reducing Twitter users' desire to formulate counter-arguments (Eisend 2009; Gelb and Zinkhan 1986; Woltman, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004). Mor (2012) suggests that credibility is crucial to public diplomacy activities in times of crisis. Nations that lack credibility may be unable to rally public support for their foreign policies.

Unlike individual iBrands, diplomats' iBrands lead to the individualisation of the nation state, which has the same characteristics as a digital individual (Manor 2019). The traits of the digital nation state project onto the offline world as online impressions shape offline beliefs. Through humour, the Embassy depicted Russia as a confident world power that speaks truth to power and is not afraid of confronting other powerful nations. Above all, Russia responds to threats and sanctions with levelheadedness and mirth. Subsequently, by relying on humour, the Russian Embassy may have obtained another public diplomacy goal: managing a nation's image while associating the nation with distinct values (Kaneva 2011; Szondi 2008).

To summarise, this study argues that the Russian Embassy used humour due to the digital society's logic (competing on the social media marketplace), norms (create distinct iBrand) and values (attracting attention). This *is* the very process of "digitalization of public diplomacy".

Conclusion

The study's limited sample precludes it from reaching any definitive conclusions, yet its findings serve to demonstrate that diplomats do not employ humour for the sake of being funny. Humour can be used strategically to obtain concrete public diplomacy goals. It can also be used to shape online and offline perceptions about the world. To paraphrase Speck (1991), humour is serious, as it is a gateway to influence. As such, online humour warrants the attention of diplomacy scholars. One of the limitations of this study is its failure to adopt a systematic approach to the analysis of populist narratives. Future studies should examine the extent to which diplomats use populist narratives and rhetoric when crafting an attractive iBrand and whether populist narratives elicit humour or mirth.

The methodology employed in this study, which rests on the typology of advertising scholars, may help guide future studies. Through this typology, diplomacy scholars may be able to unearth the meaning imbued into humorous tweets, GIFs and memes. The same is true of this study's theoretical prism. By beginning their investigation with the digitalisation of society, scholars may better understand *why* diplomats use the digital technologies in certain ways.

Future studies should examine whether diplomats from other nations employ humour as part of a well-crafted and strategic communications approach. Additionally, studies may examine whether different MFAs use humour in different ways. While the Russian Embassy used humour to make claims of innocence, Israeli Embassies have used humour to attract attention to threats made against it by other nations. Studies

should also build on research examining online branding and marketing. Finally, scholars may evaluate whether humour does, in fact, alter public perception of a nation's policies, its character and its standing in the world.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Ilan Manor is a digital diplomacy scholar at the University of Oxford, and a visiting fellow at the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. Manor's 2019 book, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan. Manor's 2020 edited volume, *Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty* (with Surowiec), will also be published by Palgrave. Manor has contributed to several journals, including *Review of International Studies* and the *Journal of Media, War and Conflict*.

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