

**Don't Say I Didn't Warn You: An Intermedia Agenda-Setting Experiment
of Public Diplomacy**

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The conclusions and opinions expressed in this study represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Using intermedia agenda setting as a theoretical foundation, this posttest-only experiment manipulated source attribution within a western media outlet news article among three experimental groups ($N = 676$). Working within a scenario where a respected western news outlet cites reporting from a state-controlled nation without a free press, data show how audiences transfer the credibility of their western media sources to unknown state-run media sources cited in news coverage. Conclusions discuss the impact of media literacy, the responsibility of journalists to accurately depict state-run sources, and the need for public relations practitioners to understand the concepts studied here in order to better their media relations activities.

Keywords: intermedia agenda setting, credibility, state-run, propaganda, public relations

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Public relations practitioners should care about how their competitors are framed and presented in the media as much as they care about their own organizations. Thankfully, credibility is not a zero-sum game. Western media act as a watchdog and journalists generally attempt to tell both sides of the story. But what happens when the other side of the story involves another nation, abroad?

Public diplomacy offers practitioners a framework for a government to communicate to a foreign public. An often-repeated definition of public diplomacy comes from Tuch (1990, p. 3) in describing it as “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies.” Simply put, the goal of public diplomacy is to persuade a foreign public and gain acceptance.

Public Diplomacy

Looking at public diplomacy, this study begins to explore the domestic impact of media framing of foreign agents. China’s public diplomacy is well studied, and their fondness for using media to achieve their goals is also well noted (Zhang, 2008). To this point, Zhang (2010, p. 684) suggests “aside from Soviet-style propaganda, the Chinese government has learned to use certain forms of modern public relations,” including what is referred to as soft power. Nye (1990, p. 167) described soft power by explaining, “soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes.” Media, then, represents the most expansive battlefield to deploy the soft power arsenal. While Nye’s work showcases a notable murkiness between “soft power” and “propaganda” (1991, 2004, 2008), Bakir et al. (2018) describes that grey area between the two in terms of selectivity, deception, and coercion. It is challenging to pinpoint the transition from persuasive soft power messaging to coercive propaganda. If scholars continue to debate this wide spectrum of public diplomacy, what level of media literacy must then the public have in identifying and understanding the nuances of messages from a foreign government?

It is critical for public communicators to understand the implications of how foreign governments are described in the domestic media. Can the public see past journalistic euphemisms used to describe foreign sources? A common practice among western journalists is to label soft power assets as “state-run news agencies,” but it remains unknown if the public understands that “state-run” could be code for government-controlled media and equivalent to propaganda.

Media Literacy

In the past five years, the discussion of media literacy vigorously reemerged when alternate facts from a government podium have become intermixed with the greater idea of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. As the need for media literacy increased, so too has discussion about how to assess quality information, sources, and media outlets. Even so, most of this media literacy discussion centers on distorted information masquerading as legitimate news, rather than reminding audiences of the dangers of government propaganda.

Rationale

While the public should question seemingly false information written by an individual or news organization, audiences should also recognize the dissemination of government propaganda. At times, the media itself does the policing. This was the case when the COVID-19 White House press briefings came too close to the line of propaganda and CNN cut away from a presser (Concha, 2020). Yet, when it comes to foreign propaganda, western media may rely on it because they are limited by available foreign sources. With foreign news bureaus shuttering over the past decade, editors are challenged by a lack of funding for foreign correspondents who used to provide background reporting and file from directly from the scene (Otto & Meyer, 2012). Western media will often quote state-run news media outlets (Cheng et al., 2016), some of whom originate from countries that do not allow freedom of the press. Rawnsley (2015) notes U.S. adversaries like China and Russia amass soft power through media engagement. Therefore, any media published from these countries is equivalent to a statement from that nation's government. Given that western media has been known to use media reports from nations with state-controlled media as sources in their own reporting (Cheng et al., 2016), there is a concern if U.S. audiences do not understand not all press is a free press.

Purpose

This study examines the impact of the journalist's choice in framing propaganda from a public relations perspective. Drawing from intermedia agenda-setting theory (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998), this experiment investigates audience-assigned message credibility when presented with a western media outlet news story in which a state-run news outlet is quoted. Specifically, this study seeks to understand if the public perceives propaganda messages from a state-run news outlet as credible. From these results, public affairs practitioners will have better informed media relations practices when up against reports from state-run media as opposition to their narrative.

Literature Review

This study employs intermedia agenda setting in looking closer at how media quote other media. This provides a basis for public relations practitioners to operate media relations and pursue agenda-building with journalists.

Intermedia Agenda-Setting Theory

Since its introduction in 1963 with Bernard Cohen's famous question "does the news tell us what to think in society, or what to think about?", agenda setting has become an overarching communication theory with nested levels of study. McCombs and Shaw's original Chapel Hill study (1972) surrounding the 1968 presidential election investigated the seminal agenda-setting hypothesis showing that the media indeed influences the public agenda. Agenda-setting theory explores the effect of the media agenda on issue saliency in the public agenda (Golan, 2006). Decades of research expanded and expounded on the Chapel Hill study, while adding theoretical derivatives relevant to public relations including second-level agenda-setting research (Sweetser & Brown, 2008; Sweetser & Brown, 2010) and agenda building (Curtin, 1999).

In public relations, agenda building emerged as a way for practitioners to actively participate in the agenda-setting process and have a hand in setting the agenda for the public. Kim and Kioussis (2012, p. 658) suggest that the "agenda-building perspective focuses on who sets the media in the first place." In doing so, public relations practitioners may promote specific frames or talking points when talking to journalists. While agenda building is an opportunity for

public relations practitioners, there is a strong history of journalists resisting public relations materials as an attempt to influence the media coverage and the agenda-setting process (Cameron et al., 1997; Curtin, 1999). How then, if at all, can the agenda-building goals be achieved when some reporters may be on guard against it? One option may be the cousin to agenda building: intermedia agenda setting.

Intermedia agenda-setting theory, grown from the original agenda-setting hypothesis, provides another explanation of where the media themselves get their agenda. The theory refers to the influence of mass media agendas on each other (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998). Like the original hypothesis investigating who or what sets the public agenda, numerous research projects delved into who or what sets the *media's* agenda. Intermedia agenda setting has effects both within media channels and between media channels (Sweetser et al., 2008).

Breed (1955) found that large, nationwide newspapers and wire services had a significant effect in shaping the agenda of smaller newspapers. Reese and Danielian's (1989) study of drug coverage found the New York Times to set not only the agenda for other newspapers, but also television newscasts. Similarly, Protess and McCombs (1991) found elite newspapers shape the news agendas of local newspapers and local television news programs, while Golan (2006) identified the significant influence of the New York Times on the agendas of the three top evening newscasts. Intermedia agenda setting, they demonstrated, does not only apply within media channels, but between them as well (newspapers influencing the agenda of television broadcasts). In a sense, when media cite another outlet as a source it is the ultimate public display of intermedia agenda setting.

Looking closely at this concept during the second Gulf War, Williams (2004) found that news coverage cited other media as sources in 46% of the televised coverage and the average broadcast contained 2.38 other media as sources. There were fewer media-as-source instances in online news, which only employed media-citing-media in 37% of the online news coverage. Lim (2006) explored the tendencies of three South Korean online news sources and found that two online newspapers influenced the agenda of wire services. Golan (2006) also concluded international news coverage is influenced by the agendas of other news agencies when he studied the effect of the New York Times' international news coverage and the subsequent material highlighted on three broadcast evening news programs. Golan's (2006) work supported the connection between New York Times' media products and similar network coverage.

Examining the public diplomacy aspect of soft power, Cheng et al. (2016) studied whether Xinhua influenced coverage by the New York Times. They concluded that Xinhua had a significant impact on the issue agenda of the New York Times regarding its coverage of the then-new Chinese president Xi Jinping. Digging deeper into the second-level agenda setting, the scholars noted the Xinhua agenda portraying Xi as determined for reform transferred directly into New York Times coverage. Much like public relations media relations predicts, when a source paints a picture a certain way that picture then gets shared with the masses. The current study attempts to expand current understanding of intermedia agenda-setting effects by studying how it can affect perceived message credibility. Building on research in this area, this study will use the state-run media agency Xinhua as the source cited within media coverage.

Source Credibility

Perceived credibility can be assigned to a message, media source, medium, or channel (Kiousis, 2001). The focus in source credibility research is often the impact that a message has on the credibility of the organization, entity, or person associated with the message (Kiousis,

2001). As such, a source may be a nation, a media outlet, or a specific person. Within the types of credibility, there are several constructs at play such as trust and believability, among others.

Source credibility plays an important role in public relations as the attribution of believability to a particular source by an audience (Callison, 2001). Park and Cameron (2014, p. 490) define source credibility as “the characteristics of the message sender that have an impact on the receiver’s processing of the message.” Explicated in Hovland and Weiss’ (1951) seminal study on persuasion, trustworthiness, and expertise were the most highly matched traits associated with the credibility of a source. Source credibility is increasingly difficult for news consumers to parse with the vast amount of crosstalk and chatter loudly crowding global information markets.

Image. Berlo et al. (1969) found that the receiver’s image, or preconception of a source, also influences credibility. They found that image, much like images projected by media agencies online, is a dynamic dimension of credibility. This credibility image is both projected by the source and refracted by the receiver as they choose (Berlo et al., 1969). The increased number of news sources and anonymity of the internet gives a platform to government-run news agencies like Xinhua. Presented alongside media products from western media outlets as equal images, state-run media agencies create further difficulty for news consumers in differentiating source credibility (Reporters without Borders, 2016). In thinking of the audience impact which may occur due to the media-cite-media type of intermedia agenda setting, publics may place a higher-than-deserved level of perceived credibility on the cited source because media is seen as serving the interests of everyone equally and fairly to a greater degree than businesses (Edelman, 2020).

Third-party Endorsement. Consider the concept of third-party endorsement and its role in setting the stage for perceived credibility. O’Neil et al. (2020) explained that third-party endorsement is argued to create additional value and higher ratings from people because they would more positively view content written by journalists since, unlike advertisers, they are not paid by the company they are writing about. Looking into the value of third-party endorsement, Cameron (1994) examined whether advertisements compared to publicity would result in different outcomes and any potential lasting nature of such impact. This early work supported the assertion that a mere label did impact memory. That is, content labeled as an advertisement was less memorable to participants than when the same content was labeled as an editorial. Cameron (1994, p. 202) contends “this modestly supports the claim made by public relations practitioners that publicity is more valuable than comparable ad placement due to the third-party endorsement of editorial staff.” Putting these seminal findings in the context of this study, that question of how state-run propaganda is labeled becomes the issue.

Park and Cameron (2014) examined whether perceived source credibility would differ when comparing a PR blogger (speaking on behalf of an organization) against a personal blogger (providing third-party endorsement). Their results indicate the two sources were rated differently in terms of credibility. When it comes to assessing credibility of journalists, O’Neil et al. (2020, p. 19) found that “people believe that a journalist’s independence, research and writing skills, objectivity, and association with a reputable news organization all bolster” credibility. Applying insight from the Media Insights Project, it is possible that the audience may transfer the credibility of the publishing news source over to the cited media source (Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2016). That is, if a New York Times article cites state-run media by saying “reports from Xinhua indicate”, then readers of that article are

likely to give Xinhua the same credibility as the New York Times. Regardless, if that cited media source is actually an arm of the government (e.g., state-run news agency), public relations and government public affairs practitioners might engage in the agenda-building process with journalists differently and respond as if it were disinformation (Morgan et al., 2020).

Trust. Pornpitakpan's (2004) critical review of five decades of research found that source credibility varied with many factors including: media modality, length and intensity of message, and geographic region. Pornpitakpan found the most common and most-cited measures of credibility were expertise and trustworthiness. Though credibility and trust are intertwined, they do represent separate constructs.

Each of these elements are critical in the practice of public relations and successful organizational communication programs. Supporting the interconnectedness of source credibility and trust, Kim (2005) found the two correlated and subsequently suggested public relations practitioners focus on placing information in key traditional media in order to nurture trust relationships with stakeholders.

Johnson Avery (2010) compared the perceived credibility of different sources for health information, and found government agencies to be the less credible than public relations practitioners but more credibility than journalists. The study further looked at moderators of source credibility and found that expertise, transparency, and knowledge were the top criteria used in evaluating credibility. This illustrates the complex nature of determining source credibility.

Relational Aspects

A key argument in the foundation of this study is that absent of opinion about a media source, the audience will transfer credibility from original outlet citing the other media (Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2016). Scholarly literature suggests that transfer is enabled by credibility, but potentially based in much deeper construct.

Flanagin and Metzger (2007) assert that credibility as a construct contains aspects of competence and trustworthiness. Kang (2010) defined source credibility in terms of trustworthiness, whereas Huang (2008) defined trust in terms of credibility. Trust and credibility, it seems, are incredibility interwoven concepts, and the words therefore sometimes used interchangeably.

In public relations, trust/credibility exists as a key construct organization-public relationship scholarship (Ferguson, 2018). As a whole, organization-public relationship includes openness, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment (Hon & Grunig, 1999). In line with other empirical public relations research, this study will continue to examine the interplay between credibility and relationship.

In a study focused on use of government websites, Hong (2013) operationalized relationship as public trust. Teasing out credibility in looking at relationship, Jo (2003) observed a relationship between media credibility and trust, then suggested that credibility influences trust relationships. Sweetser et al. (2016) found that credibility predicted Communicated Relational Commitment, as well as Conversational Voice. Another study found credibility predicted that perceived relationship with an organization, expressing a sense of the public feeling Communicated Commitment from the organization (Sweetser et al., 2015). Applying this body of relevant work to the current study, the research here will examine the relationship as an outcome (Browning et al., 2020).

Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy, and Propaganda

Government public affairs is an established industry for practicing public relations (Broom & Sha, 2012). Though the body of scholarship examining of public affairs and its practitioners is not as vast as that of corporate communication, it has been increasing since the 1990s (Sweetser & Kruezberger, 2020).

In the United States, military public affairs officers operate under a standardized code called Doctrine (JP 3-61, 2016). This guidance places public affairs officers as strategic advisors to the operational commanders, dictates that a strategic process employing research and evaluation be applied to communication programs, and discusses ethics. The main ethical guidance for U.S. military public affairs officers is derived from the Department of Defense's principles of information (Department of Defense, 2017). The ethical code calls for timely and accurate information. In talking to domestic audiences, military public affairs officers are taught to avoid crossing the line of distributing propaganda to American audiences at home (JP 3-61, 2016, Department of Defense, 2017).

Public relations research on public affairs has focused more on the practice than the practitioner, with much attention focused in media relations. For example, Plowman (2017) assessed the strategic communication plans for the U.S. military in Iraq. Becketl et al. (2021) studied how journalistic frames of a public affairs message could help in gaining support for a major military policy change. Hecht et al. (2017) examined journalists' preference of military spokespeople over corporate spokespeople. Sweetser and Brown (2008) looked at the impact of providing journalists access to military operations on subsequent coverage. Veil et al. (2018) studied the effectiveness of a media relations program that made journalists a "Sailor for Day." Haggard et al. (2021) looked for media effects resulting from entertainment PR efforts supporting the military-entertainment complex.

These are all examples of public affairs to a domestic audience. What happens when a government wants to communicate to people outside of its borders? Public diplomacy is known to look at "communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives" (Sevin, 2015, p. 563). Zaharna and Uysal (2015) suggest that a nation maintains the control over the relationship dynamic in public diplomacy, and that the nation uses it as a means to manage their foreign public. Building a taxonomy for public diplomacy, Fitzpatrick (2010) explicated six relevant functions: advocacy/influence, communication/informational, relational, promotional, political, and warfare/propaganda. Notably, half of these categories involve the media.

Governments can control messages released within and outside of their country in many ways. One such way is for the government to control large news agencies and media distribution systems that may be "owned and run by the state, or nominally private but in fact under government control," often referred to as state-run news agencies (Walker & Orttung, 2014, p. 71). State-run outlets are soft-power tools in public diplomacy, employed to shape the political and cultural narrative, "prais[ing] the powers that be" while also discrediting the enemy or opposition to the status quo (Walker & Orttung, 2014, p. 72). Many state-run media outlets employ propaganda to spread their narrative, and even use state-run news agencies to directly target western audiences (Sweetser & Brown, 2010).

Communication has always had an element of persuasion, but during the early part of the last century the concept of *propaganda* emerged introducing a more sinister approach trying to

prey on the masses (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Bernays (1923) explicated propaganda as “a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of a public to an enterprise, idea, or group” (p. 25). Scholars note that strong persuasion-based techniques created the need for increased media literacy in society (Hobbs & McGee, 2014).

Lasswell defined propaganda as “the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 9). Lasswell also identified four major objectives of propaganda: mobilizing hatred toward the enemy, preservation of allies’ friendship, preservation of neutral party’s friendship, and demoralization of the enemy (Lasswell, 1927). Most often, state-run media’s propaganda style is characterized by one-way, asymmetrical communication from the government to the public via the intermediary news organization.

Propaganda becomes a concern for U.S. public relations professionals when the state-run news agencies are legitimized or their reports presented in news coverage without being labeled as state-controlled messaging. News consumers with low media literacy may not understand these messages are propaganda. Those unfamiliar with the state-run source may apply their own free press model, and assess the information as balanced and fair factual reporting. This makes it more difficult for western public relations practitioners, whose profession is held to standards of truth and transparency, to counter the opposing narrative (Broom & Sha, 2012).

Media in China

When it comes to media control, China leads other nations (Committee to Protect Journalism, 2015). The Xinhua News Agency in China is the Communist “party’s throat and tongue,” as dubbed by Mao Zedong, the first president of China (Kuan & Brosseau, 1991). As the propaganda tool for the Communist Party in China, Xinhua reports national and international news, taking orders from the State Council regarding what to report and how to report it (Walker & Orttung, 2014).

Xinhua News Agency, China’s Communist party-controlled news agency, entered an era of expansion over the last decade as part of a shift in the country’s engagement strategy with the world, assisting the country in projecting a new international image as a responsible and peaceful global player (Li & Sligo, 2012). During this time, Xinhua moved beyond solely serving as the propaganda arm of the Communist Party into a multidimensional and multi-purposed media platform that provides content globally (Cheng et al., 2016). To this end, Xinhua is among the tools that “represent China’s attempts at augmenting its soft power via strategic communication campaigns” (Cheng et al., 2016, p. 2). Therefore, China is employing media as a public diplomacy soft power tool.

Presenting itself as a key information subsidy for journalists around the world, Xinhua may serve an important intermedia agenda-setting function competing with other western and state-sponsored global news agencies. Although the credibility of Xinhua is often undermined by its perceived role as a propaganda platform, it does provide insights into China not available through western media sources (Cheng et al., 2016). Chinese media offers western audiences a different view on current events (Xin, 2006). Alternately, western audiences exposed to state-run media sources from China sometime question the credibility and links to functioning propaganda producers (Li & Sligo, 2012).

U.S. Media Perspective on China

The few studies that examine the overall framing of China in the American news media point to a largely negative tone of coverage that is generally consistent with the U.S.

government's stance toward the Chinese government (Golan & Lukito, 2015). In examining editorial content of two major U.S. newspapers, Golan and Lukito (2015) described four ways that American media was framing its country's relationship with China either as an economic partner, an economic threat, geopolitical threat, or as a country with internal strife. The analysis breaks down into two predominant viewpoints: framing China as either a global partner or rival to U.S. interests. The positive global leadership frame was confirmed by Cheng et al. (2016), who found that narrative among Xinhua's top three issue attributes.

Elite media outlets in the U.S. often set the agenda for other domestic media (He et al., 2012), exhibiting intermedia agenda setting. In reporting on the succession of Xi Jinping to the Chinese presidency, the attributes being reported by Xinhua were incorporated into the reporting of the New York Times (Cheng et al., 2016). Some of those attributes trickled into other U.S. media, but ultimately Xinhua's attempts to set the agenda for elite national media had limited success. One explanation for this is that Xinhua's style, characterized as one-way communication, did not resonate with the international news media (Cheng et al., 2016). Despite the limited influence, media framing remains important when nations lack political and cultural proximity, such as the U.S. and China (Cheng et al., 2016). Missing from these analyses, though, are audience effects in understanding how they perceive the news source or China itself.

Research Questions

Based on this established research of intermedia agenda setting, source credibility, current overall media environment, and the desire to understand how the public perceives message credibility from state-run news outlets, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: How do audiences perceive credibility of state-run sources and propaganda messages when quoted in western media?

H1: Media who cite other media in their coverage, engaging in intermedia agenda setting, lend their credibility the cited news organization.

RQ2: How does credibility relate to the relational variable of communicated commitment with the media?

Method

This posttest-only experiment with one control group ($N = 676$) altered source attribution within two manipulation cells to better understand perceived source credibility. Researchers manipulated an article published by the western media wire service Reuters which cited Xinhua speaking about China's reaction to U.S. Navy activities in the South China Sea.

A wire service was selected as stimulus media source because recent data suggests that 60% of Americans prefer to get their news from objective (non-biased) sources (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020). Elite media outlets in the United States do have brand name appeal, however they are often seen as edging toward an ideological corner. Using a western wire service as a source then offers an objective source without an ideological brand. The researchers chose Reuters as a stimulus media brand due to its universal media trust rankings (Ye & Skiena, 2019). Notably, around the time of the data collection the wire service saw an increase in reputation and media rank while at the same time decreasing in terms of bias (MediaRank, n.d.). On the academic media ranking site, Reuters is the first appearing wire service and in the overall top 5 of U.S.-based media outlets (MediaRank, n.d.).

Design

A short news wire article about U.S. Navy operating in the South China Sea served as the stimulus in this experiment. The only information manipulated across all three experimental cells was the attribution of the Chinese source: depicting Xinhua as a state-run news agency, simply as a news agency, or an absence of attribution (merely saying “China”). The rest of the news article remained the same across each cell. The experimental cells were manipulated as follows:

- *State-run* ($n = 225$): The Reuters article cited messages from Xinhua, “a state-run news agency run by the Chinese government.”
- *News agency* ($n = 226$): The Reuters article cited messages from Xinhua, “a news agency based in China.”
- *Control* ($n = 225$): Messages about the Chinese reaction were written as statements without attribution.

A manipulation check determined whether participants could accurately decipher the cell to which they were assigned. A chi-square showed participants were able to recall if they saw Xinhua quoted in their article or not and how Xinhua was defined, $\chi^2(6) = 29.69, p < .01$.

Sample

Study participants were from a convenience sample collected from currently enrolled students in a large southwestern university ($N = 676$). The average age of participants was 20.34 years old ($SD = 4.27$), and in those that reported a gender preference, the majority were female ($n = 539, 80\%$) with smaller numbers of male ($n = 127, 18\%$) and transgender ($n = 2, 3\%$) participants. Four participants declined to identify a gender. Due to the gender disparity with an over representation of female participants, the main variables in this study were examined to ensure there was not a statistically significant difference based on gender. Once confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences, the analysis continued.

Given that young people consume their news online more than any other population subset (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017), and that the bulk of media messages propagate online (Pew Research Center, 2017), the sample of young, internet-using adults in this experiment is appropriate to evaluate perceived source credibility in an online news story.

The ethnic background of participants varied with more than half representing diverse populations within the U.S. (56%; $n = 379$). Participants were permitted to choose all of the ethnic options that described them, and were White American (58%; $n = 394$), Latinx (19.5%; $n = 132$), Asian American (17%; $n = 117$), Black (5%; $n = 34$), American of Middle Eastern heritage (3%; $n = 26$), American Pacific Islander (4%; $n = 27$), Native American (1%; $n = 11$). A small group were international students (4%; $n = 32$).

The majority of participants reported no prior knowledge of Xinhua News Agency ($n = 620, 92\%$), even though it is the world’s largest state-run news media outlet (Fish, 2010).

Instrument

Each participant completed the same posttest questionnaire, regardless of cell assignment.

Relational Outcome. Though organization-public relationship scales can measure for trust specifically, given the overlap with the concept a credibility a more relational approach was sought. Following the lead of Browning et al. (2020), Sweetser and Kelleher’s (2016) five-item organization-public relationship Communicated Commitment scale measured relational outcome. Participants rated their perception of the media (in general) on the CC scale items. The CC items were summed into a single index and represented a relationship with the media ($\alpha = .79$). Overall, participants rated CC with the media as being low ($M = 2.73; SD = .63$).

Perceived Source Credibility. Researchers assessed perceived source credibility of four different entities using the Appleman and Sundar (2015) credibility scale: (1) China itself, (2) Xinhua itself, (3) the overall article, and (4) the reporter. The scale measured perceived source credibility for 9 items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), and was deployed separately for each entity. Items included accurate, believable, reputable, fair, objective, true, and authentic, among others. Based on the complex aspect of source credibility (Park & Cameron, 2014; Johnson Avery, 2010), the Appleman and Sundar scale afforded the researchers a multi-characteristic measure for credibility. Separate credibility indexes were created for the assessment of each entity (China $\alpha = .88$, Xinhua $\alpha = .87$, article $\alpha = .88$, reporter $\alpha = .88$). Credibility was neutral to low overall. Participants rated the reporter as being the most credible ($M = 3.29$; $SD = .56$), then the overall article ($M = 3.28$; $SD = .57$), Xinhua ($M = 3.01$; $SD = .47$), and China ($M = 2.94$; $SD = .59$).

The control group represented the baseline opinion of the credibility of China ($M = 2.95$; $SD = .64$), indicating that participants were squarely neutral on their opinion of China in the absence of exposure to Chinese's soft power public diplomacy. Given that the study is manipulating the labeling of a soft power media source, credibility for the Reuters article itself was confirmed to have remained constant across all cells prior to the start of analysis.

Media Literacy Knowledge. Participants were presented with four knowledge items, aimed at understanding the subject's media literacy and ability to identify state-run media as propaganda. For example, one statement read "state-run media means the government has editorial control of the content." For each knowledge item, participants were asked to mark it true, false, or don't know. The items were scored based on accuracy, where correctly answered items would equal one point. The "don't know" option was scored as an incorrect response.

Results

This posttest-only experiment with one control group ($N = 676$) manipulated source attribution to better understand reader-assigned perceived source credibility. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess assigned credibility of the reporter, the article, Xinhua, and China. Researchers questioned how the public would perceive credibility of state-run sources as propaganda when quoted in western media, as well as credibility of western media when quoting state-run news outlets and propaganda.

Only 7.7% of participants were familiar with Xinhua before this study ($n = 52$). When determining a general level of knowledge of state-run media, 30.8% of participants demonstrated complete understanding of propaganda as evidenced by correct responses on all four knowledge items ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 1.45$).

Credibility

Credibility items were used to determine how a reader responded to the article read in the experiment. Given this study is focused on possible attitude changes toward a foreign government based on the labeling of information from that country, the researchers first confirmed that there was no difference in credibility of the western media in any of the cells concerning readers' credibility regarding the reporter or the Reuters article itself. The analysis proceeded.

RQ1 asked how audiences perceived credibility of state-run sources as propaganda when quoted in western media. Comparing credibility scores, researchers found higher credibility given to China by readers of the state-run article compared to those in the news agency cell.

An initial ANOVA showed statistically significant main effects among the three cells in regard to the measures of China’s credibility when quoted in western media outlets, $F(2, 651) = 4.15, \eta^2 = .01, p = .016$. Those in the state-run article cell rated China’s credibility as neutral ($M = 3.01; SD = .54$), and .161 higher than those exposed to the news agency article ($M = 2.85; SD = .57; p = .012$). The news agency article readers reported a lower China credibility score than participants in either the control or state-run cells. As such, R1 is answered in that journalist’s framing of Xinhua as a state-run news agency actually increased participant’s assessment of China as being credible.

H1 predicted that in the case of intermedia agenda setting, the media that cites another media outlet will lend their credibility to that secondary (cited) outlet. In this case the original (source) media credibility is represented in a computed variable of article’s credibility plus reporter credibility. This new combined source credibility variable is then an independent variable in a regression analysis, predicting Xinhua credibility. The resulting equation ($R^2 \text{ adj} = .08, p = .001$) revealed Xinhua credibility was predicted by the source media’s credibility ($\beta = .12, p = .001$) and a low propaganda knowledge score ($\beta = -.02, p = .02$). See Table 1. H1 is confirmed.

Table 1. Regression Predicting Credibility and Relational Outcome

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		<i>p</i>
			LL	UL	
Xinhua Credibility					
Media Source Credibility	.124	.017	.092	.157	.000
Media Literacy Knowledge	-.029	.012	-.053	-.005	.02
Credibility of China					
Xinhua Credibility	.610	.044	.524	.696	.000
Media Source Credibility	.059	.019	.021	.096	.002
Media Literacy Knowledge	-.031	.014	-.058	-.004	.023
Communicated Commitment					
Media Source Credibility	.129	.024	.082	.176	.000
Xinhua Credibility	.112	.055	.004	.219	.042

Based on these findings to the research questions, a posthoc analysis further examined how credibility of China was constructed. A regression equation resulting in China’s credibility ($R^2 \text{ adj} = .22, p = .001$) was predicted by Xinhua’s credibility ($\beta = .61, p = .001$), the computed media credibility score used in H1 ($\beta = .05, p = .002$), and a low propaganda knowledge score ($\beta = -.031, p = .023$). See Table 1.

Relational Outcome

With CC serving as a relational outcome, a regression sought to understand how credibility and knowledge of state-run media as propaganda might predict it. The resulting equation for CC (R^2 adj = .06, $p = .001$) was predicted by the computed media (source) credibility score ($\beta = .12$, $p = .008$) and China's credibility ($\beta = .13$, $p = .008$). The media literacy knowledge score for propaganda did not significantly contribute to CC. See Table 1.

Discussion

Rooted in intermedia agenda-setting theory and the concept that media outlets shape each other's agendas, this study attempted to understand how credible the public perceives the soft power tool of state-run media when quoted within a western media news story. By understanding perceived credibility, public relations practitioners can effectively identify, explain, and counter propaganda (Morgan et al., 2020). This study provided insight beyond the traditional salience tracking in content analysis methods used for exploring intermedia agenda setting, and enabled a media effects perspective. Results shed a new light on how the public responds to and perceives public diplomacy efforts.

Media Literacy Begets Credibility

This study illustrates the impact of a public diplomacy soft power tool like a state-run news agency. Xinhua drew credibility from the media in which it was cited, as the literature suggested it would (Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2016). This transfer was facilitated by low media literacy (an inability to identify propaganda). On its own, such a finding is troubling as it suggests low media literacy and the practice of media-citing-media can exploit citizens who are not able to properly recognize propaganda. Taken with the next finding, the results are even more troublesome. The data revealed that China was able to capitalize on soft power tool and increase their own perceived credibility.

These findings provide a tangible cost of poor media literacy. The participants in this study were, as previous research suggested and confirmed by H1, willing to transfer credibility of Reuters to Xinhua and that then fed into an inflated credibility of China. When the stimulus source story quoted Xinhua as "a state-run news agency run by the Chinese government," participants assigned the message significantly more credibility than when attributed to a news agency in China or not attributed at all. This RQ1 finding is confounding, as the label "state-run" does indicate government control. Taken more broadly and in context with the overall low propaganda knowledge, specifically that only half of participants correctly identified that "state-run media can be used as propaganda" ($n = 346$, 51.2%), suggests that participants' low media literacy was at work. Researchers believe participants associated the fact that Xinhua was said to be "run by the government," was interpreted under a western lens of expected transparency of government and a watchdog press (Broom & Sha, 2012; Department of Defense, 2017; Lee, 2012; JP 3-61, 2016). Researchers suspect that participants understood Xinhua to be similar to objective information subsidies released by the U.S. military (Hecht et al., 2017), versus propaganda released by the Chinese government to sway opinion.

This highlights a vital task for public relations practitioners working in industries internationally where state-run media or nations with controlled media systems exist. Public relations practitioners must incorporate identifying and explaining propaganda to public responses, and clarify the inclusion of "state-run" media as propaganda in order to avoid

confusion. This type of media literacy campaign should be considered by the practitioners when communicating to their publics, but also in their media relations interactions with reporter's in holding them accountable for reducing ambiguity in media narcissism situations. The danger to practitioners is very real: If the public does not perceive a lower level of credibility when examining a propagandist news source, they run the risk of identifying the presented information as factual.

The Case for Media Literacy Education. To the larger point of media literacy, public relations practitioners should turn attention to adding value and education along the existing efforts. Wyatt (2006) suggests that media literacy enables professionals to build trust. Today trust in information is decaying at an alarming rate (Edelman, 2020; McCorkindale, 2020; Meng et al., 2019). Public relations practitioners notably experience disinformation aimed at their organizations (Meng et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2020). With disinformation attacks impacting organizations, this is a larger issue than perhaps once considered.

Fullerton et al. (2020) contributes to this discussion by providing a wide-angle view of how public relations students fare on media literacy. They support the assertion that the practice must become engaged on media literacy education. On the national level, Public Relations Society of America is championing media literacy, however more must be done to ensure citizens can better assess the quality and authenticity of information.

Intermedia Agenda Setting Domino Effect

Another important factor this study highlights for public relations practitioners is the potential domino effect of intermedia agenda setting. This study used Reuters, a major international news agency, to quote a state-run news agency from China. That was the first domino in intermedia agenda setting. However, as Reese and Danielian (1989) and Protesse and McCombs (1991) found, major news outlets like Reuters and the New York Times can shape the agenda of smaller, local news outlets. This would be the second set of dominos. If these major outlets quote propaganda messages, then smaller outlets may continue to highlight said propaganda messages. Public relations practitioners must be aware of the widespread effects of intermedia agenda setting. This study allows practitioners to understand how the public interprets these messages and highlights the need to counter them through public relations campaigns.

The responsibility of the reporter is illustrated by these findings, and practitioners are well-poised to ensure they understand the impact of low media literacy regarding such state-run media citing. Furthermore, considering that even if only to a small degree that western media credibility transfers to that external outlet cited in a media narcissism scenario, reporters are best served fully disclosing source conflicts of interest. The data here suggest that practitioners working in industries that connect to nations without free press should have an open dialogue with reporters expressing the limitations of merely labeling this type of propaganda as "state-run" or failing to provide context at all.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitation. Though focused on the demographic that is most susceptible to low media literacy, the age demographic of the participants was admittedly narrow. This may prevent the study from being totally representative of the American public, especially an older and perhaps more media literate or international news savvy audience. The recent prominence of "fake news" as a media concept may have also affected the perceived credibility of any presented news source. Further, the gender distribution of participants may have impacted the findings. Though a comparison of means for the main variables in this study

did not reveal meaningful differences based on gender, future studies should ensure more equitable gender representation among the sample. If this study were conducted at a different time, or using a different method to source participants, results may have differed.

Future research should include comparing and contrasting perceived credibility of overall American news sources and state-run news sources to determine if a statistically significant difference is present. This could help identify and define a knowledge gap and aid in developing future communication plans and products. Furthermore, research should focus on the American public's knowledge of propaganda itself and the ability to identify propaganda messages. Until public relations professionals can determine the public's awareness level of propaganda, they won't truly be able to define the areas that require specific attention. Despite the described limitations with sample age and education, the results of this study emphasize the importance of key public relations roles and responsibilities and encourages additional scholarship exploring source credibility and state-run messages. The results of this study are of particular use to practitioners educating the public and communicating within industries where one operates in nations without a free press system.

Conclusion

While the concept of fake news may have been thrust into the spotlight by politics, the importance of understanding perceived credibility of intermedia agenda-setting messages is vital to the public relations field now more than ever. Public relations practitioners must understand the media environment in which they work, including the media's tendency to build one another's agendas. As nations with closed media systems gain global, economic, and military influence, public relations practitioners must understand assigned credibility to state-run propaganda messages. Ironically, this study focused on media literacy and yet the lessons learned here help practitioners better understand the media effects of public diplomacy on their own domestic audiences.

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