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Transdisciplinary advantages – the case of international communication

From the perspective of international communication, as a sub-discipline of international relations, the separation of social communication as a field of study is a minor issue. This is due to the fact that international communication is transdisciplinary, which is not an independent discipline in Poland and, hence, one cannot obtain a bachelor or master degree title in it. It can be studied as part of journalism, political science or international relations. Additionally, inter-culture communication can be studied as a specialization in culture studies.

Let's first define the terms. International communication is a type of inter-cultural communication. Its evolution and phenomenon can be illustrated by two definitions, first of which mentioned here was used in 2002 and the second – in 2008. In a work published in 2002, international communication was defined as transfer of meaning between subjects of different nations and ethnic groups. It can occur on an interpersonal, group, institutional or mass level¹. In 2008, it was defined as all forms of transborder transfers and relations created as a result of the transfers². In the first case, the emphasis is on the cultural and social factors while in the second – on institutional. Presently, “internationality” is substituted by “globality” in research on communication terminology, which is reflected in the term “global communication”. According to Ingrid Volkmer's definition, “in the theory of communication globality can be understood as communication around and through the globe”³. Communication understood this way focuses on the trans-boarder dimension and the ease of crossing borders, including cultural.

The introduction of international communication as an academic discipline and a field of research in the area of political science is not coincidental. International communication has got a strong institutional (due to the role of the state as an actor in communication acts) and legal connotation. Studying this field also requires a more in-depth study of international law, including European media law, and shows the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline.

¹ B. Ociepa, *Komunikowanie międzynarodowe*, Wrocław 2002, p. 13–14.

² Also, *Komunikowanie międzynarodowe – rewizja pojęcia*, [in:] *Studia z nauk społecznych i humanistycznych*, ed. by J. Juchnowski, M. Waloński, Wrocław 2008, p. 570.

³ I. Volkmer, *News in the Global Sphere. A Study of CNN and its Impact on Global Communication*, Luton 1999, p. 26.

Thanks to international communication tied to political sciences, an interesting stimulus is given as a result of the dispute between the (neo-) realists and constructivists on international relations. The disagreement can lead to some people believing that the term international communication should be replaced by the term global communication. It should also be noted that presently international communication is a lot less state oriented than it was in the 1950s when this discipline was first established.

Transdisciplinary nature of international communication has both advantages and disadvantages. From an academic perspective, it can be said that it is advantageous, it is like an endless adventure in which fascinating research projects can be undertaken. Doctoral students, however, may not agree. To them transdisciplinarity can potentially mean confusion in applied methods and theories and, thus, difficulties in defending their papers. In most cases, though, these fears are unfounded and students' work is methodologically sound.

The transdisciplinary nature of international communication is its inherent trait. This discipline takes from linguistics, social psychology and technical sciences. International communication can also be studied in relation to achieving of military goals and analysing information war. All the same, international communication can be part of military sciences (information security).

International communication can point out cultural differences. In Europe, there is a tendency to focus on international communication from a Western point of view. However, the phenomenon of Bollywood represents directions different from cultural imperialism approach. In this discipline existent is centre-periphery terminology which indicates which are the information centres, information neighbours and information peripheries. These terms can help explain asymmetry of transmission between countries, influenced by both their "hard" and "soft" power⁴. The introduction of international communication into Polish academic centres may be interpreted as an example of influence of unwelcome "soft power". The establishment of the International Communication Department at Wroclaw University's International Studies Institute, which I am head of since 2002, was delayed as a result of long discussions on whether it should be created. It was suggested during the discussion to change the name considering it too similar to English terminology and not in accordance with Polish social sciences.

⁴ The term "soft power" first appeared in J.S. Ney's publication. It means "delusion" in foreign policy, the use of attraction instead of coercion. See J.S. Ney, *Soft Power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej*, Warszawa 2007.

Recently, international communication devotes a lot of attention to country image, reputation and branding. This terminology is also used in international public relations. This is an area which could also be an independent discipline, similar to social communication. Public relations can be studied as part of management or social science, in accordance with the term *Öffentlichkeit* by Jürgen Habermas. This is another discipline characterized by transdisciplinarity. Moreover, it is not an independent discipline either but a specialization or a subject of post graduate studies as part of philology, marketing, management or economic studies. As a result, we are dealing with situations in which students defending doctoral papers in public relations do it at journalist or social communication faculties, at Polish philology institutes (such is the case at Wrocław University). In such cases, examiners can be representatives of either discipline, including economics professors. It may be somewhat problematic regarding diplomas of doctors specializing in public relations at philological institutes. This is another discipline which really should be independent. In international communication we often use the term “international public relations” with thesis papers and defenses in this area taking place at social sciences institutes. There are also other sub-disciplines becoming autonomous in research and having difficulties with independence in the area of didactics and awarding academic titles.

Theoretical discussion on the subject of international communication has gained some headway as a result of many countries efforts to change their image or brand. These activities were also the result of popularization of the marketing approach, successfully used in home (political marketing during election campaigns) and international policy. A new international environment requires from the countries new ways of attracting attention and reaching viewers with broadcasts. Changes in the technology of communication on the one hand have introduced new actors into international policy and, on the other hand, have created new ways and opportunities of information exchange.

This trend results in the proliferation of the terms “soft power” (see above) and “public diplomacy”. The latter is particularly popular in Anglo-Saxon countries. Public diplomacy, although part of international communication, is more common in political science studies. It was defined in the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* as dialogical communication between governments and other actors on the stage of international relations, via mass media or non-mediated channels. The goal of such communication is to create or reinforce a positive image of the country and its society in order to facilitate the achievement

of the sender's foreign policy goals⁵. A definition formulated this way indicates indisciplinary. Public diplomacy is dependent on a given country's political system and the openness of its media system as well as the culture of foreign policy. This shows that there are numerous factors influencing whether a given discipline will be considered part of social studies or as an independent discipline in a given country. Public diplomacy is derived from international relations' theory, diplomatic theory and practice, intercultural and international communication, and international public relations. In the US, one can obtain a master's degree in the subject, while in Great Britain there are MA studies in place branding⁶. In Poland, on the other hand, only post graduate studies in public diplomacy as specialization are available.

Terminology within the discipline of international communication is changing. As I indicated in earlier publications, "As J. Watson points out in the introduction to his work, *Media Communication. An Introduction to Theory and Process*⁷, language of communication as a field of study reflects its history and the same can be said about international communication, especially with regard to terms such as "propaganda", "public diplomacy", "international public relations". The first relates to World War II and the Cold War, the second originates from the US and becomes popular in Europe after 1989 in the period after velvet revolutions and the third symbolizes "economization" of international communication and branding of countries"⁸.

International communication is somewhere in between international relations and media studies. International relations is also not an independent discipline and despite the functioning of this field of study, diplomas are obtained in political science. In many countries (i.e. in France) a separate field for international relations is deemed redundant and artificial. This is also the situation we are dealing with in Poland as it is difficult to decide what should be included in international relations and what in domestic ones, which is rather impossible taking into consideration the present social, political, economic and cultural reality. Despite this situation, efforts are being made to separate the two. During the 1st Political Science Congress, the the Polish Communication Association debated this issue. Similarly, the Polish International Relations Association has a goal to establish international relations as a separate humanistic discipline. From an international communication perspective, the problem is -

⁵ B. Ociepka, *Public Diplomacy*, [in:] *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. by W. Donsbach, Singapore 2008, Vol. 9, p. 3956–3960.

⁶ "Place branding" is the creation of shaping of recognizable and positive images to cities, regions and states.

⁷ J. Watson, *Media Communication. An Introduction to Theory and Process*, New York 2003, p. 7.

⁸ B. Ociepka, *Dyplomacja publiczna jako forma komunikowania międzynarodowego*, [in:] *Dyplomacja publiczna*, ed. by B. Ociepka, Wrocław 2008, p. 21.

which discipline should we identify with? Or maybe yet another option should be considered – to choose a third alternative, that is establish a Polish International Communication Association with a goal to accredit this field of study as an independent one? This is the dilemma international communication, public relations and other disciplines are facing.

Why is it so imperative that these disciplines become independent? It is due to the legal system which regulates awarding of academic diplomas and titles as well as general education on all three levels. There are two alternatives – to create new associations lobbying for autonomy within existing legal bounds or to change the law. The advantage of the first option is activation of civil society and professional groups interested in better conditions for development. Disadvantage – the closing in of these circles within their narrow specializations, lack of research information flow and in teaching and last but not least – cliques. Specialized disciplines have a tendency to create mechanisms excluding outsiders, especially when such closed circles decide about their academic independence. Should the law be changed then? This option is definitely longer and more difficult to achieve, also with recent experiences of changing the law regarding the education system not being all that successful.

Finally, there is also the utopian solution. It would mean consistent application of existing standards and adherence to transparency and uniform decision making on all levels of education and teaching management. Why is this option considered utopian? Because the Polish higher education system is in havoc. The system is incoherent and not in tune with modern education requirements. The number of overtime hours and additional responsibilities in contrast to low pay creates such pressure on those in management positions that we should all wonder how is it that the system is still functioning. It makes a rational activity impossible.

The creation of a new discipline does not solve this academic problem, including the issue of international communication. The fact is that there are more and more doctoral papers on this subject but it should be noted that this field is closest to political science and international relations. Establishing international communication as a new discipline will not make a big difference. Each new humanistic field of study will lead to the creation of new areas of research also wishing to become independent. It is a natural state of academic development. What is imperative is the creation of clear standards of academic and research work. It will facilitate the evaluation system of dissertation papers and awarding of academic titles. It will aid the defense of dissertation papers of transdisciplinary character. It will also transfer some competences from government agencies to universities, making them more autonomous in the establishment of new disciplines and fields of study.

