CHAPTER 5

Mapping the field (2): Public relations and discourse

This chapter continues the theoretical aspects of chapter four but focuses them around a range of public relations-specific issues: the possible demarcation of public relations and propaganda; the role of public relations in political communication and international relations and the relevance of crisis communication and crisis management. The chapter seeks to contribute to all three areas, especially the crisis concerns that were central in NATO's communication strategies during the 78 days of the conflict.

Public relations, propaganda and discourse

For many scholars, the line between propaganda and public relations is impermeable, and others it is very fine, or even non-existent. In some cases the two are absolutely separate and, in others, the two concepts are labelled interchangeably, depending on the context of the discussion. One major theorist of propaganda, Philip Taylor (2003), defines propaganda as:

> the *deliberate* attempt to persuade people to think and behave *in a desired way*. … the conscious, methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve specific goals that are *intended to benefit those organizing the process*. (p. 6) [italics in original].

Taylor (2003) further concludes that public relations is essentially "a nicer way of labelling it [propaganda]" (p. 6). Other theorists of propaganda similarly claim the key to identifying a particular discourse as propaganda is to determine the intention behind it and what it is trying to achieve. Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) provide a definition of propaganda as being "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p.4), which is close to Taylor's definition.

However, Walton (1997) argues that by simply using the word propaganda, it immediately "suggests that the message referred to is intentionally manipulative and deceptive" (p. 384). As a consequence, he continues, to describing any discourse as propaganda immediately puts the arguments presented in an extremely negative light and suggests that any evidence produced is unreliable. Walton (1997), however, also concedes that: propaganda might be seen in a more positive light; and that there is nothing inherently negative or bad in propaganda, which could be viewed as "an organized and methodical type of discourse that is recognizable as such" and should be evaluated in the way argumentation is used "in

relation to the goals appropriate for such a use of arguments" (p. 386). That concession aligns with both Jowett and O'Donnell and Taylor's (2003) argument that it is the intent that "distinguishes propaganda from all other processes of persuasion" (p. 7).

The debate over the use of the terms propaganda, public relations or public diplomacy to refer to particular types of messages have become a feature of the world in which we all live, in the media as well as in the academy. What is important to understand is why the messages are being formulated the way they are, how they are being used and to what purposes they are put. It is this point that Weaver, Motion and Roper (2006) take up when they discuss the role of public relations communication:

> public relations communication can be understood as the strategic attempt to control the agenda of public discussion and the terms in which discussion takes place. In these terms, public relations practitioners are complicit in the attempt to gain, and maintain, social, political, and/or economic power for the organizations that they represent. They do this by asserting the "common sense" truth value of what they stand for and communicate. (Weaver et al., 2006, p. 17)

This strategy of controlling the agenda of public debate can be connected with the maintenance of power. This can be done by appealing to the public as judge of the organisation according to perceptions of the organisation's trustworthiness and whether it is worthy of support (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). This, in turn, raises questions of legitimacy when an organisation behaves in a way that is aligned with the public's

perceptions of that organisation (Nasi, Nasi, Phillips, & Zyglidopoulos, 1997) and questions of delegitimation when it does not.

True colours? War, propaganda and public relations

Discourses during conflict and war are commonly categorised as propaganda, since the intention (Taylor, 2003) behind any such discourse is to persuade citizens that the government is defending their way of life, their values and their national interest. But, because of the pejorative connotations associated with the word, propaganda, any other term is usually preferable. This thesis provides support for Miller's (2004) contention that many of the communication methods used by contemporary governments and political elites have been learned from the public relations industry and the private sector.

Since the public relations industry is essentially one that operates "behind the scenes", it is often difficult to reveal its internal workings and these difficulties are compounded during war and conflict situations where external and internal censorship is introduced or intensified. This does not vary from propaganda to public relations. Sophisticated and complex discourse constructions often hide attempts to shape public opinion. Nevertheless, without getting behind the scenes, the functions of a public relations campaign can often be deduced from particular cases. At the time, there appear to be clear links between public relations strategies, goal, objectives and key messages and targeted at influential publics.

Such connections often find retrospective confirmation in the memoirs by, or books about, the communicators involved. (see chapter 12, for examples).

Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) colour code propaganda into white, black or grey according to the source and accuracy of the information. White propaganda is credible information from an accredited source whereas black propaganda is creatively deceitful and includes lies and fabrications. Grey propaganda is somewhere in-between, where the source may or may not be identified and the accuracy of the information is uncertain. For Moloney (2006), public relations falls into the category of white propaganda or, in other words, weak propaganda. Intention is still the key and, in liberal and market-oriented societies, it is public relations practitioners who produce messages for their publics in order to manipulate them to comply with "ideas, values and policies that economic and political elites (some elected) have favoured" (Moloney, 2006, p. 41).

Is it useful to try to draw a line between propaganda and public relations? Will that line progress and inform our analyses of information and communication processes? L'Etang's (2006a) view is that there is a great deal of room for different interpretations and "the discussion about the relationship between public relations and propaganda has shifted from complex methodological debate to becoming embedded in ideological difference (p. 28). Accordingly, she goes beyond Walton's (1997) notion of

propaganda as potentially neutral to conclude that the very "discussion about propaganda is not so much about method but has itself become propagandised" (p. 28). In effect, whether propaganda is positive or negative depends to an extent on how the speaker or writer, sees it. So, for one person, certain discourses can be identified as propaganda without negative connotations, and another, the mere label propaganda discredits the message and the messenger.

One of the most influential pioneers of public relations was Edward Bernays, who has been characterised as "a farsighted architect of modern propaganda techniques" (Ewen, 1996, p. 3) and who also wrote a book entitled *Propaganda* (Bernays, 1928). In merging the two, Bernays (Bernays, 1952) coined the term "the engineering of consent" to illustrate the unbreakable link between public relations and public sentiment. "Any person or organization depends ultimately on public approval and is therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's consent to a program or goal" (p. 159). Such public approval is required to sustain the legitimacy of an organisation and such propaganda is required to keep a nation's citizens onside during a war.

It was Bernays' work, based on the behavioural and social sciences that introduced the two-way asymmetrical model of public relations – practitioners sought information from the public through research, as well as disseminating information to the public. Theories of propaganda,

persuasion and the "engineering of consent" informed this model of public relations. In J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig's (1992) later formulation: "The secret of successful manipulation was in understanding the motivations of people and in using research to identify the messages most likely to produce the attitudes and behaviours desired by an organization" (p. 288).

Much of Bernays' training took place in the Committee for Public Information (CPI). The CPI was the American propaganda machine of the First World War, which packaged, advertised and sold the war to the public and provided the basis for the strategies and practices of public relations in the United States. In fact, the CPI provided the model by which marketing strategies for subsequent wars, to the present, were shaped (Ewen, 1996). Ewen (1996) believes that for Bernays, "public relations was about fashioning and projecting credible renditions of *reality* itself" (p. 6) and that the practitioner's job was to influence and direct public attitudes.

Certainly, for Bernays, public relations was a vehicle for reconciling popular government with private economic interests, with public approval being essential for the success of any programme or goal (Bernays, 1952, cited in Lacey & Llewellyn, 1995, p. 48). In terms of international politics and, in particular, international conflict, public relations formed an essential part of the overall strategy. In the early 1920s, Bernays wrote that "governments act upon the principle that it is not sufficient to govern their own citizens well and to assure the people that they are acting

wholeheartedly in their belief. They understand the public opinion of the entire world is important to their welfare" (Bernays, 1923, cited in McNair, 1996, p. 42).

It is the approach to public relations and the philosophical assumptions that underlie the practices, which differ widely for scholars and practitioners: "Some see the purpose of public relations as manipulation. Others see it as the dissemination of information, resolution of conflict, or promotion of understanding" (J.E. Grunig, 1992, p. 6). The role of the public relations practitioner has grown in importance since the beginning of the 20th century as governments recognised the need to secure the consent of the public in pursuing foreign as well as domestic policies. It has become the job of the public relations professional to build consent and, therefore, "as the producer and disseminator of symbols which can contribute to the building of unity and consent around governmental policy, the public relations worker is of course, a propagandist" (McNair, 1996, p. 43).

Moloney (2006) focuses on public relations as "competitive communication for its principal's advantage" (p. 167) and, as such, it is very strongly aligned with the concept of propaganda. Suggesting that the word propaganda has been "exiled under a regime of vocabulary apartheid" (Moloney, 2006, p. 166), he claims that public relations has, instead, become the byword for those communicative acts which are

"persuasive, self-advantaging [and] often mass-mediated" (p. 166). In liberal democracies, where human rights, public debate and free elections are championed, Moloney reasons, there is no place for propaganda.

However, it is in the arena of warfare and conflict that the term propaganda is most frequently used for the management of public opinion. Whereas in previous conflicts with similarities to Kosovo (the Falklands and first Gulf War), governments were able to control the dissemination of information through access restrictions to the war zone, the Kosovo conflict introduced new dimensions to the way in which information was revealed and relayed. Indeed, technological advances at the end of the century were so evident in the campaign in Kosovo that some have claimed it as the Internet war (see, for instance, Gocic, 2000; Horvath, 1999; Husic, 1999; P. M. Taylor, 2000b). It is beyond the scope of this project to develop a discussion of the "Web War" (P. M. Taylor, 2000b), but it is important to note that Yugoslavia was able to mobilise some support through this medium. At the beginning of the bombing campaign, websites were constructed quickly and underwent ongoing development as the conflict progressed.

In spite of a decade of war and sanctions, Yugoslavia was a developed European country with a good communications infrastructure supporting both global television and Internet access. Many of the population were literate in English (Husic, 1999) enabling them to communicate in

discussions on email lists, listservs and chat rooms. They provided alternative views about the conflict and email correspondence between people in Yugoslavia and friends and relatives living abroad was a major means of communicating the reality of war for the Serbs. The war on the Internet took a literal turn early on in the conflict when supporters of Yugoslavia "effectively shut down the official NATO website with a denial of service attacks, pinging the site repeatedly to tie up access" (Stratfor, 1999). The vast array of technological advances, the nature of the societies involved in the conflict and the immediacy of requirements for information, all contributed to how the conflict was presented and perceived.

Public relations as diplomacy and international relations

Diplomacy and public relations are linked together in many ways, particularly when it comes to international relations. Signitzer and Coombs (1992) identified theoretical similarities between public relations and public diplomacy. In particular, they identified the way in which diplomacy has moved from its more traditional format of diplomacy between individual representatives of government to showing more concern with "winning hearts and minds" of publics. Furthermore, traditional diplomacy, in moving beyond inter-governmental representation, is expanded into public diplomacy when "governments, private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public

attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions" (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 138).

L'Etang (2006b) also suggests there is common ground for public relations and international relations because of similar theoretical and philosophical frameworks. It is at the functional level that these two disciplines interact – representational (rhetoric, oratory, advocacy); dialogic (negotiation and peacemaking); and advisory (counselling) (L'Etang, 2006b, p. 374). When it comes to corporations or international organisations, the similarity in the work of diplomats and public relations practitioners becomes clear. Both of them manage public opinion: "Both parties have interpretative and presentational roles and both attempt to manage communication about issues. … [They] conduct much of their business via the media and are media-trained to provide appropriate 'sound-bites' on the issues of the day" (L'Etang, 2006b, p. 375).

For Grunig (1993), the important aspect of public relations within international affairs is that it should be ethical and symmetrical, that is, it should benefit mutual understanding and help "to build relationships among organizations and publics and to develop policies that are responsible to those publics" (p. 158). Grunig saw the value of practising public relations within the public diplomacy framework only when such practice was symmetrical and ethical, taking the dialogic aspect of symmetrical public relations as being paramount and thereby making it a

moral communication process.

L'Etang (2006b) notes a certain dissonance in this approach to public relations and diplomacy since public relations attempts to explain political action. Governments and organisations use public relations for maintaining their reputation and credibility and gaining a communicative advantage for themselves. They become the main contributors to the debates on particular issues and, as such, influence public opinion. This suggests that there is an asymmetrical perspective when governments and/or international organisations carry out such activities. Furthermore, the contribution to the debate may be in the form of lobbying for a particular viewpoint, or simply as a means of maintaining credibility as an organisation.

L'Etang (2006b) looks to Wight's (1994) framework in diplomacy to identify the theoretical relationship with public relations. Wight (1994) identified three main approaches to the underlying assumptions and diplomatic style of political communication and international relations. These approaches are useful in this thesis as they are compatible with Habermas' legitimacy framework, the issue of humanitarian intervention and the morality and values that are espoused in diplomatic channels.

Wight's (1994) first approach can be categorised as Machiavellian. This is to say it is essentially pragmatic and one-sided (one-way asymmetrical) in which competition and conflict are characteristics of international

relations. This approach – the realist position – demonstrates self-interest and "seeks to persuade publics to fall into line and governments to accommodate organizational interests" (L'Etang, 2006b, p. 384). Governments and organisations seek to enhance their own positions and the role of public relations is to persuade publics to conform to the attitudes and ideas of the government or organisation.

Wight's (1994) second approach is the rationalist position associated with the 17th century philosopher Grotius who argued that moderate negotiation was appropriate in diplomacy (Grotius, 2002). The emphasis rested on building good relationships and developing good reputations. This approach is concerned with "enlightened self-interest and reciprocity and can be likened to claims in the public relations literature which emphasize mutual understanding as an organisational goal" (L'Etang, 2006b, p. 384).

Wight's (1994) third approach is influenced by Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* and described as revolutionist. It "emphasizes a peacemaking approach in which the public interest is served by the world order. In public relations this is represented by the strong emphasis on public relations' potential to achieve transcendental mutual satisfaction and understanding between peoples" (L'Etang, 2006b, p. 385). It also corresponds with Grunig's (1993) symmetrical, ethical international public relations, which "provides a vital communication function for organizations, nations and even the world, helping to develop an

understanding among groups and eventually reduce conflict" (p. 138).

Wight's (1994) framework is useful in terms of the international nature of the public relations campaign conducted by NATO. It was essentially a realist approach (Machiavellian) to using public relations practices to reach as many publics as possible. The use of daily press conferences to provide NATO's view of the world was one-sided and pragmatic. This is also evident in communicating crises and their effect on the organisation's legitimacy. As such it provides a demonstration in practice that even contemporary supranational organisations, such as NATO, are far from practicing two-way symmetrical communication. It suggests that older international relations theory fits what NATO does much better than the Grunigian paradigm, which is the currently dominant theory in public relations.

Crisis communication and legitimacy

Outside of the Grunigian paradigm, public relations has developed considerable expertise on crisis communication that is highly relevant to NATO's attempts at legitimation. An organisation's legitimacy is at its most vulnerable in conditions of crisis when an organisation needs to communicate about an event or series of activities (Massey, 2004). A legitimacy gap (Sethi, 1979) can open when the behaviours and actions of the organisation do not conform to the expectations of key publics, making it difficult to maintain legitimacy. Perception management is mobilised

in a crisis when the perception is considered to be different from the reality. Larabee (1999) contends that "the theory behind perception management is that in a crisis, 'perception' is out of synch with 'reality' and successful managers must bring the two together, asserting control over the external and internal 'chaos' created by a disaster" (p. 109). This aligns with the Habermasian (1975) approach to legitimation. Legitimacy is given when publics perceive that a policy or a particular perspective is common sense and there is no contestation of the discourse. A legitimation gap occurs when the actual reality is perceived as not being aligned with the communication of it (Roper, 2001).

Much of the literature on crisis communication covers many aspects of how an organisation can allay the potentially negative outcomes of communicating under stress, how to communicate with particular publics, and the most efficient way of maintaining identity and image during a crisis. Heath and Millar (2004) define a crisis "as an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholders' interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis" (p. 2). The organisation's response to questions concerning its responsibility for creating, or allowing the event to happen, will be judged in terms of its credibility and ability to regain control over the situation.

Heath and Millar (2004) observe that the "manner in which the

organisation addresses this responsibility serves as a turning point for it: Respond well and survive the crisis; respond poorly and suffer the death of the organization's reputation and perhaps itself" (p. 2). This is a qualitative judgement statement that relies on professional expertise to find an appropriate response that will resonate with publics (Stauber & Rampton, 1995) and thereby avoid a legitimacy gap (Sethi, 1979).

Heath (1997) argues that by using a strategic issues management approach, the effects of a crisis can be mitigated: "Crisis conditions and events can be lessened by effective strategic business planning and an appropriate sense of corporate responsibility that is implemented by effective operation and personnel procedures" (p. 290). Thus, guidelines have been developed within the public relations industry that identify best practice for dealing with crises (see, for instance, Fearn-Banks, 2001; Heath, 2004; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001).

Fearn-Banks (2001) concludes that crisis communication must be considered in the light of the fact that crises are likely to happen. If an organisation is prepared for the crisis and behaves ethically and professionally, it is likely to recover. It is important to have a crisis communication plan, but more important is a proactive public relations plan in order to prevent crises occurring in the first place.

However, such plans do not necessarily provide the answers to particular crises. Unusual events, especially in time of conflict and war, usually

require clear and definitive answers on such questions as: who is to blame,? What happened? How is it going to be fixed and how will the organisation change its activities to learn from the crisis? Issues management is a proactive approach to dealing with crises and as such can certainly be considered as part of the post-crisis stage. Seeger et al. (2001) agree that there is usually no dispute about the actual facts of the crisis, but cause, responsibility, blame and what needs to be done to remedy the situation are almost always contestable. The explanation of the crisis is important to the publics who want to know what remedial action has been taken to prevent further crises. This, then, returns crisis for consideration in terms of issues management.

Monitoring issues can have a significant impact on the way an organisation responds to a crisis. Through research, the organisation will have an idea of how its principal publics are likely to react to its performance and any crisis that may eventuate. As Heath (1997) suggests, if an organisation is engaged in issues management, the crisis will be identified before it occurs and a crisis management plan will be in place to respond to the event. It should identify "points in the organization's operations where if a problem were to occur it would generate public outrage and uncertainty" (p. 303).

When a crisis occurs, an organisation's first concern must be in terms of its reputation or legitimacy, for without maintaining legitimacy, the organisation's right to exist may be called into question. If publics perceive

that the organisation is not behaving in line with social norms and values, then its legitimacy will come under public scrutiny (Metzler, 2001). Therefore, the communication strategies that are chosen in response to a crisis should not only aim to provide the facts and explanations, but also should stress the legitimacy of the organisation by making its actions understandable and acceptable (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

Crisis communication strategies

The development of crisis communication strategies has been a major concern for public relations scholars and practitioners for some time. It has also been the subject of many case studies and discussions about how organisations communicate under stress. According to Seeger et al. (2001), research shows that when an organisation communicates as openly and as accurately as possible, the organisation is more likely to be successful in maintaining its reputation. From this research, they put together eight guidelines for managing a crisis, suggesting essentially that an organisation should build on good stakeholder relations and image before the crisis occurs, engage in crisis planning by ensuring a crisis management team is in place to coordinate and assess the responses. When faced with a crisis the organisation should communicate not only openly and accurately, but also quickly, be consistent with messages and monitor reactions in the media.

Hiebert (1991) drew on the first Gulf War in a discussion of public relations as a weapon of modern warfare. When it came to crisis management, the rules of communicating crises were: "Tell as much as you can and tell it fast; centralize the source of information with an effective and well-informed spokesperson; deal with rumours swiftly; make as much as available to the press as possible; update information frequently; stay on the record and never tell a lie" (p. 31).

Coombs (1995) developed a similar "repertoire of crisis-response strategies" (p. 449) that provides messages to shape public perceptions of the crisis itself and how the organisation is involved in order to repair the organisational image. These strategies fall into five categories, each of which has several tactics associated with it. In fact, what Coombs (1995) provided was a choice of tactics to be used to communicate with stakeholders, depending on the type of crisis occurring.

Five categories were identified, each of which also had sub-strategies: non-existence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering. In the first category of non-existence, the aim is to eliminate the idea that a crisis exists; distance strategies are used when the organisation acknowledges that there is a crisis, but that the link between the organisation and the crisis itself is somewhat tenuous. This is intended to make the crisis more acceptable by making excuses or justifying that the situation is not as bad as it may seem. These distance strategies are particularly relevant to

NATO's crisis responses in this study.

Ingratiation strategies are more concerned with the opinions about the organisation itself and are used by making the organisation appear in a much more positive light. This can also contribute to the transcendence strategies that contextualise the crisis more beneficially so that publics are led to consider the crisis from a more positive angle (Ice, 1991). The mortification strategies admit to responsibility and offer some form of repentance, usually by way of compensating the victims in order to get the public to forgive the organisation. The final strategy, suffering, "is unique among crisis-response strategies" (Coombs, 1995, p. 453) in that it aims to become the victim of the crisis and thus win the sympathy of publics.

The response to a crisis is generally selected in terms of the threat posed to the organisation. The response needs to fit the actual situation as well as ensuring that any response should not intensify the culpability of the organisation thereby threatening its survival (Coombs, 2002). Thus, each event should be evaluated in terms of whether it is a problem or a crisis. A problem can be dealt with by using the accommodative strategies suggested by theories of apologia and image restoration (Hearit, 2001) that tend to focus on helping the victims of an unpredicted event. Coombs (2002) suggests a threat grid be used to identify the level of the crisis and whether it, in fact, threatens the survival of the organisation.

These strategies of finding the right words and conventions to explain crises provide a checklist for practitioners, but it is important also to look beyond the checklists to the broader contexts in which crises arise. Tyler (2005) approaches the issue of crisis communication from a postmodernist perspective of the organisation as a storytelling system. The organisation has official stories, which provide the outside world with the story and culture of the organisation. When a crisis occurs, the official story is often upset and the narrative disrupted. This opens up a contest in which competing narratives counter the organisation's dominant story and sometimes produce "alternate narratives of which the organization is often wholly unaware" (Tyler, 2005, p. 567).

This, Tyler (2005) suggests, may upset the more traditional guidelines to the way communication should be approached. After all, when the spokesperson tells the story accurately and quickly, as crisis response strategies demand, it is the story that has been conceived by the power elite of the organisation, which may or may not be the "truth". Holtzhausen (2000) picks up this point in an examination of the modernist interpretation compared to the postmodernist perspective on truth:

> postmodernists accommodate many diverse ideas and perspectives, including the modernist perspective. However, where modernism maintains that it has found the real truth, the postmodern holds that this truth is merely the viewpoint of some dominant groups in society and should not be privileged over another viewpoint. (p. 96)

Thus, in any crisis, an organisation must be concerned with the outcomes of the way the crisis is dealt with in the first place. It also needs to deal with other narratives that may compete with the narrative of the organisation. Therefore, the organisation should be concerned with the actions they take so as to not only alleviate any suffering involved but, by doing so, provide solid ground for maintaining public support for the organisation.

This review draws on theoretical perspectives that underpin public relations practices that enabled NATO to maintain and enhance its organisational legitimacy during the Kosovo Campaign. The theory underpinning the empirical analysis provides an "imaginary road map" (Mackey, 2004) to aid understanding of these processes and examine a central question posed in this thesis: How did NATO legitimise itself as a viable organisation for the 21st century?

My understanding of the answer also draws heavily on techniques of critical discourse analysis. These enable the researcher to illuminate the processes and practices at work in language. Accordingly, the next chapter moves from the public relations literature to explain the methodology

of critical discourse analysis and the nature of the data selected, gathered and analysed.