

KEEPING THE BALANCE BETWEEN ETHICS AND EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNICATION

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Today's geopolitics has become more and more complicated, alliances change and the geopolitical actors shift from the background to the spotlight very quickly. In such a volatile environment, communication is a critical tool wielded by states and non-state actors alike. The tension between maintaining communication ethics—grounded in truth, transparency, and respect—and the urgent demand for communication efficiency—speed, clarity, and impact—has become increasingly pronounced. This article analyzes the complex interplay of these forces, with a focus on the influence of digital technologies, social media and information warfare. Drawing on case studies of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and global COVID-19 messaging, it tries to illustrate how ethical compromises can undermine efficiency in the long term and argues for a balanced communication strategy that upholds ethical standards without sacrificing strategic effectiveness.

Key words: communication, geopolitics, ethics, efficiency, effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the interconnected, information-saturated era, geopolitical communication has become both a battlefield and a bridge. Nations and political entities depend on timely and persuasive communication to assert influence, shape narratives and mobilize support domestically and internationally (Nye: 2004; Pamment: 2013). However, the need for rapid and

impactful messaging often collides with communication ethics, which demand honesty, accountability and respect for audiences (Simons: 2008; Waisbord: 2018).

This article explores how the pressure for communication effectiveness and efficiency can both complement and conflict with communication ethics in geopolitical contexts by examining the role of technological advancements and

providing examples to illustrate the consequences of this balance or imbalance.

2. COMMUNICATION ETHICS IN THE GEOPOLITICAL ARENA

For the article, we used a qualitative research methodology based on two primary methods: literature analysis and organizational observation.

2.1. Literature Analysis

Ethical communication in geopolitics refers to adherence to universal principles such as truthfulness, transparency, fairness, respect for sovereignty and human rights. (Habermas: 1984; Simons: 2008)

These principles are vital for:

- Building trust between nations and publics;
- Supporting legitimacy in diplomatic actions;
- Facilitating constructive dialogue and conflict resolution.

In the following paragraphs, we will examine each of these principles individually:

Building trust between nations and publics

Trust is the cornerstone of any effective communication, especially in geopolitics, where misinformation or deception can

have far-reaching consequences. Ethical communication — based on honesty and transparency — creates a foundation of credibility between states and their publics, both domestically and internationally. When governments communicate truthfully, it reduces suspicion and fosters a cooperative atmosphere. For example, during diplomatic negotiations, when parties share accurate information about their intentions and capabilities, it prevents misunderstandings that could escalate into conflict. The establishment of trust also enhances the ability to form alliances and joint initiatives, as seen in longstanding partnerships such as NATO, where transparent communication maintains cohesion among member states (Habermas: 1984; Simons: 2008; Nye: 2004).

Supporting legitimacy in diplomatic actions

Legitimacy in diplomacy hinges on the perception that a state's actions and communications are honest, fair and respect international norms. Ethical communication contributes to this legitimacy by ensuring that states do not resort to propaganda, deceit or manipulation. For instance, a country that transparently explains its foreign policy decisions, even when controversial, is more likely to gain respect and understanding from the international community. This legitimacy is essential for enforcing

treaties, securing international support and engaging in multilateral organizations like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. Conversely, when states disseminate false narratives or conceal critical information, they risk diplomatic isolation and the erosion of their global standing (Simons: 2008; Pamment: 2013; Rid: 2020).

Facilitating constructive dialogue and conflict resolution

Ethical communication is vital in creating conditions conducive to dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. By committing to truthfulness and respect for all parties, communicators reduce hostility and open channels for negotiation. For example, during peace talks, unbiased and transparent information sharing helps build mutual understanding and allows conflicting parties to find common ground. This was evident in the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978, where direct and honest communication facilitated one of the most significant peace agreements in the Middle East (Bratic & Schirch: 2007; Habermas: 1984).

Additionally, during humanitarian crises, ethical communication ensures that all stakeholders have accurate information, preventing misinformation that could exacerbate tensions or lead to harmful

interventions (Simons: 2008; WHO: 2020). For example, during peace negotiations or humanitarian crises, ethical communication helps prevent misinformation that could escalate tensions or harm vulnerable populations. (Bratic & Schirch: 2007). The United Nations often stresses the importance of ethical communication to maintain international peace and security.

2.2. Effectiveness and efficiency in geopolitical communication

In the study of geopolitical communication, the distinction between communication effectiveness and communication efficiency offers a critical analytical lens for understanding how state and non-state actors construct, disseminate and manage strategic narratives on the global stage. Although frequently conflated, these two concepts represent distinct dimensions of communicative practice, each with implications for international relations and foreign policy outcomes.

2.2.1. Communication effectiveness

Communication effectiveness refers to the extent to which geopolitical messages achieve their intended strategic and policy objectives. It emphasizes not only the accurate transmission and

reception of information but also the message's capacity to influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors among target audiences (Nye: 2004; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle: 2013). Within a geopolitical context, effectiveness may be assessed through the lens of strategic narrative theory, which posits that actors seek to shape shared understandings of international order and legitimacy through carefully crafted storytelling (Miskimmon et al. : 2013).

For instance, when a state publicly frames a territorial dispute as a defense of international law rather than a unilateral land grab, the effectiveness of this communication lies in its ability to garner diplomatic support and legitimize its actions in the eyes of global audiences. Similarly, soft power campaigns aimed at building long-term international goodwill rely heavily on sustained, effective communication to embed favorable images of a state within foreign publics (Nye: 2008).

2.2.2. Communication efficiency

Conversely, communication efficiency pertains to the optimal use of resources—time, economic costs, technological tools—in disseminating geopolitical messages.

Efficiency focuses on the operational aspects of communication: the speed of delivery, the breadth of reach and

the minimization of material and symbolic costs (Entman: 2008). In an era characterized by instantaneous digital connectivity and global media networks, geopolitical actors increasingly prioritize rapid, scalable and cost-effective messaging strategies.

Social media diplomacy (“Twitter diplomacy”), for example, allows leaders to broadcast official statements to global audiences in real time, bypassing traditional intermediaries and reducing logistical constraints. However, while such channels enhance efficiency, they also risk sacrificing nuance and context, potentially undermining overall effectiveness if the message is misinterpreted or generates unintended backlash.

2.2.3. The tension and interdependence between effectiveness and efficiency

While analytically distinct, effectiveness and efficiency are deeply interdependent in practice. A communication strategy that is highly efficient but fails to resonate with its intended audience ultimately lacks strategic value. Conversely, a highly effective campaign that requires disproportionate resources or lengthy timelines may prove unsustainable or vulnerable to counter-narratives.

From a constructivist perspective, where the power of ideas

and narratives shapes international outcomes, both effectiveness and efficiency are central to a state's ability to enact "discursive power" (Hopf: 1998; Wendt: 1999). Actors must continually balance these dimensions to maintain credibility, respond rapidly to crises and adapt to evolving geopolitical landscapes.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY ON COMMUNICATION ETHICS, EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

3.1. The impact of technological advancements and AI driven tools

Technological advancements, especially social media and AI-driven tools, have transformed geopolitical communication. The following paragraphs will examine these factors in detail.

Social Media Platforms: Enable real-time dissemination and direct engagement with global audiences, but also facilitate the spread of misinformation and propaganda. (Waisbord: 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan: 2017). Algorithms often prioritize sensational content, risking ethical breaches for efficiency gains.

Deepfakes and AI-generated content: they present new ethical dilemmas by creating realistic but false images and videos that can deceive and manipulate public

opinion (Rid: 2020).

Surveillance and data analytics: Governments may use data-driven insights to tailor messages effectively, but risk violating privacy and ethical standards. (Zhao: 2007)

While technology boosts communication efficiency by enhancing reach and immediacy, it simultaneously complicates adherence to ethical standards, demanding vigilant oversight and responsible use.

3.2. Tensions and trade-offs between ethics and effectiveness

The relationship between ethics and effectiveness in geopolitical communication represents a core tension that shapes strategic decision-making and public diplomacy outcomes. While the ultimate goal of communication campaigns is often to achieve effectiveness — that is, to influence target audiences, shape narratives and accomplish political or strategic objectives — this imperative frequently conflicts with ethical considerations rooted in norms of transparency, truthfulness and respect for audiences.

In practice, states and other geopolitical actors are often tempted to prioritize persuasive impact over moral integrity. For example, during international crises or conflicts, strategic communication campaigns may rely on selective presentation

of facts, emotional appeals or even disinformation to achieve rapid mobilization of public support or to undermine adversaries. These approaches might be highly effective in the short term, but can erode credibility, undermine democratic values and damage long-term legitimacy (Bjola & Holmes: 2015; Nye: 2008).

Moreover, effectiveness-driven strategies can conflict with the principle of respecting audience agency. When states frame messages using fear, threat inflation or other manipulative techniques, they deprive audiences of the ability to make informed, autonomous judgments (Gilboa: 2008). This tension is further complicated by the affordances of digital platforms, which favor emotionally charged and simplified content, amplifying the trade-off between reach and ethical responsibility (Manor: 2019).

From an ethical standpoint, geopolitical communication should ideally strive for a balance that upholds normative commitments to accuracy and respect for human rights while, still pursuing strategic objectives. This notion is reflected in the emerging concept of “ethical effectiveness,” which emphasizes that durable strategic gains are more likely to be achieved through credible and morally sound communication

(Seib: 2012).

Ultimately, the question is not whether effectiveness or ethics should be prioritized absolutely, but how they can be integrated in a manner that reinforces both immediate objectives and long-term trust. Scholars argue that credibility, once lost, is difficult to regain and that ethical lapses may produce counterproductive effects, such as backlash from domestic or international audiences (Cull: 2009). Thus, sustainable geopolitical communication requires navigating these trade-offs carefully, recognizing that effectiveness achieved at the expense of ethics can ultimately undermine strategic interests.

The urgency of geopolitical crises often compels state and non-state actors to make difficult communicative choices, frequently privileging speed and strategic advantage over ethical considerations. In moments of heightened tension—such as military conflict, international sanctions or regime change—governments may feel pressured to act decisively and communicate rapidly, even if doing so requires compromising foundational democratic principles. One of the most common trade-offs is the sacrifice of transparency in favor of effectiveness. Faced with the risk of public panic or adversarial exploitation, authorities

may withhold critical information or selectively frame narratives. While such actions can produce short-term stability and operational clarity, they often erode long-term public trust and institutional credibility. This dynamic reveals a central dilemma in crisis communication: the need to manage immediate threats while preserving the legitimacy of democratic governance.

In addition to withholding information, some actors actively disseminate propaganda or disinformation to shape public perception or undermine opponents. Disinformation, as Rid (2020) notes, often blends truthful and false elements in ways that obscure fact from fiction, making it especially potent in the digital age. Similarly, Pomerantsev (2019) highlights how contemporary regimes use emotionally charged narratives to confuse audiences and solidify domestic control. Such tactics may produce short-term strategic gains—rallying nationalistic sentiment, justifying policy actions or discrediting foreign adversaries, but they also compromise the ethical foundations of public discourse. The normalization of disinformation can lead to increased polarization, cynicism, and the delegitimization of objective truth, particularly in democratic societies.

3.3. Tensions and trade-offs between ethics and efficiency

Another trade-off in times of crisis involves the simplification of complex geopolitical issues for the sake of public comprehension.

Communicators often distill intricate international dynamics into clear-cut narratives that audiences can readily grasp. While this can improve message penetration and coherence, it risks misrepresentation and manipulation. As Tuchman (1978) argues, the media's tendency to "frame" stories in a way that fits pre-existing templates often strips away nuance and context. Similarly, Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model suggests that meaning is frequently constructed through dominant ideological positions, which can marginalize alternative interpretations. In simplifying the message, essential truths may be omitted, leading to misunderstanding and the reinforcement of uncritical national or ideological biases.

These patterns point to a broader ethical tension between effective crisis communication and the values of accountability, transparency and truth. Communicators in geopolitical crises are often caught in a balancing act, where the urgency of action conflicts with the deliberative nature of ethical engagement. The cumulative effect of prioritizing

efficiency over ethics can be profound, reshaping public trust, media landscapes and institutional norms. As such, understanding these trade-offs is essential for evaluating not only the strategic outcomes of crisis communication, but also its moral and democratic implications.

The urgency of geopolitical crises often forces actors into difficult choices:

- Compromising transparency for speed: Governments might withhold sensitive information to control narratives or avoid panic, which improves short-term efficiency, but damages long-term trust.
- Using propaganda or disinformation: States may deliberately distort facts to weaken adversaries or bolster domestic support, compromising ethics to achieve rapid persuasion. (Rid: 2020; Pomerantsev:2019)
- Simplifying complex issues: To ensure quick comprehension, messages might omit nuance, risking misunderstanding or manipulation. (Tuchman: 1978; Hall: 1980)
- These trade-offs highlight the complex balancing act

between communicating ethically and efficiently.

3.4. Case Studies

3.4.1. The Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The Russia-Ukraine conflict offers a vivid example of the struggle to balance ethical communication and efficiency:

Information Warfare: Both Russia and Ukraine engage in strategic messaging campaigns to influence global and domestic audiences. Russian state media has been accused of spreading disinformation, including false narratives about military actions, which challenges ethical norms, but aims to efficiently control the narrative. (Rid: 2020; Pomerantsev: 2019; Zhao: 2007). Ukraine, on the other hand, utilizes social media to rapidly share frontline updates and rally international support, emphasizing transparency to build trust. (Vaccari & Chadwick: 2020)

Ethical Dilemmas: While Ukraine prioritizes truthful reporting to gain legitimacy, the fast pace of conflict sometimes leads to unverified or emotional messaging, risking misinformation. Russia's approach favors message control and disinformation, sacrificing ethics for short-term efficiency, but

risking international backlash and credibility loss.

Outcome: The conflict illustrates that sacrificing ethics can undermine communication efficiency over time by eroding trust and mobilizing counter-narratives from international actors.

3.4.2. COVID-19 Geopolitical Messaging

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of communication ethics and efficiency on a global scale: (Kreps & Kriner: 2020; WHO: 2020).

Government transparency was supported in countries like New Zealand that emphasized transparent, consistent messaging to efficiently inform and engage their citizens, building public trust and compliance with health measures. (Simons, 2008; Bratic & Schirch: 2007)

Misinformation spread widely in countries whose governments delayed disclosures or downplayed risks in order to avoid economic panic or political fallout, prioritizing efficiency in controlling the narrative, but undermining ethical responsibility. This delay led to confusion, skepticism, and inefficient public health responses globally.

The World Health Organization stressed transparent and ethical communication to manage the pandemic collectively, but competing national interests sometimes led to fragmented and contradictory messaging, illustrating the tension between ethical communication and efficiency in a geopolitical context.

3.5. Strategies for Achieving Balance

Balancing communication ethics and efficiency requires:

Strategic transparency: Disclosing what can be ethically shared promptly, while protecting sensitive security information. (Habermas: 1984; Simons: 2008)

Verification before dissemination: Ensuring messages are accurate and credible to maintain long-term trust.

Ethical use of technology: Leveraging digital tools to enhance communication reach without enabling misinformation or privacy violations. (Wardle & Derakhshan: 2017; Zhao., 2007)

Audience-centered messaging: Respecting cultural and contextual differences while maintaining factual integrity.

Institutional frameworks: International bodies should promote guidelines and accountability standards to harmonize ethics and

efficiency. (Bratic & Schirch: 2007; Pamment: 2013)

CONCLUSION

In today's complex geopolitical environment, communication ethics and efficiency are deeply intertwined, yet often in tension. While rapid, efficient communication is vital for influence-building, crisis response, and the projection of soft power, the abandonment of ethical standards risks misinformation, loss of credibility and unintended escalation of conflicts (Nye: 2004; Simons: 2008; Rid: 2020). The integration of advanced technologies — including real-time social media dissemination, algorithmic amplification, and AI-generated content — has further intensified these challenges, creating an environment where speed and virality often take precedence over accuracy and accountability.

The drive for efficiency may push state and non-state actors to adopt sensational or emotionally charged messaging strategies designed to achieve immediate impact. However, such approaches can undermine long-term strategic interests by eroding public trust and delegitimizing future communication efforts. Indeed, as global audiences become more discerning and information-literate, credibility emerges as a critical strategic asset; once lost, it is exceedingly difficult to recover

(Nye: 2008; Bjola & Holmes: 2015).

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of geopolitical communication extends beyond truthfulness to include respect for audience autonomy and the avoidance of manipulative tactics. For instance, the deliberate use of disinformation campaigns, deepfake technologies, or astroturfing to simulate grassroots support may yield short-term tactical gains but carry significant reputational and diplomatic costs (Bennett & Livingston: 2018; Bradshaw & Howard: 2019). Over time, reliance on ethically dubious methods can provoke domestic backlash, foster international condemnation, and compromise a state's normative soft power.

A balanced approach that integrates ethical considerations into communication strategy is thus imperative. Upholding principles such as transparency, accountability, and factual accuracy not only mitigates the risk of strategic blowback but also reinforces legitimacy and enhances the perceived integrity of the actor on the international stage. Ultimately, sustainable geopolitical influence depends on cultivating trust-based relationships with both domestic and foreign publics — a goal that can only be achieved when ethical standards are treated not as constraints but as integral components of effective statecraft. By harmonizing ethics and

efficiency, states can secure a durable foundation for communication efforts that advance national interests while contributing to global stability and cooperative international order (Nye: 2004; Simons: 2008; Rid: 2020).

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