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Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching

CART grants enable faculty and librarians to pursue research projects. Professors Thomas J. Mickey and Nancy Street, both of the Speech Communication Department, were recently awarded CART grants.

BEER BECOMES 19TH CENTURY COMMERCIAL PRODUCT

Thomas J. Mickey

My research is an application of interpretive theory to public relations practice which we might define as managing the image and public acceptance of any product or service. I am interested in the structure of the public relations text from a company as a way to understand a culture. By *text* I mean a brochure, an ad, or a booklet — all of which may be put out by the organization as a means of promoting a product.

In an interpretive theory, representations themselves no longer bear the burden of being “mere” representations, but are instead to be conceived of as the very “stuff” of our existence. When, for example, we talk about promoting beer as a product of the 19th century, we talk about how people thought about the product and thus dealt with it *from the language the breweries gave to the product.*

The Milwaukee Historical Society contains the archival material from several of Milwaukee’s larger brewer-

ies who started making beer in the 19th century. All the materials were donated by the beer makers, especially as they merged with other companies or their corporate headquarters moved. The names you will recognize immediately: Pabst, Blatz, Miller, and Schlitz. The material contains many ads, photos, news stories, tour information, and brewery parade memorabilia.

I was interested in finding out what words the breweries used to promote beer and what was the relationship between how the beer companies talked about the product and public understanding of the product.

In making beer meaningful to the culture the breweries used four themes: pure, healthy, American, and employing the latest technology.

First beer meant, according to the ads and promotional material, a pure drink. Schlitz beer told of its purity in this 1901 ad:

All over the world Schlitz beer is known and is the standard. . . Schlitz beer has owned the world’s markets by reputation for purity, maintained for half a century.



Beer advertisement, 1895

COURTESY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Wherever white men live, Schlitz is acknowledged the pure beer.

Then beer was called a *healthy* drink. In a promotional book called *Pabst Beer in the Home*, published in 1900, we read:

There is more beer consumed in the home today than ever before. It has come to be known that good beer is beneficial to the general health.

In an 1895 display ad from the Pabst Brewery the theme of beer as *American* is the focus. You see a woman in red, white, and blue holding a glass of beer. She is dressed in a flowing robe and at her feet you see many coins flowing from beneath her mantle. All that comes to mind is the Statue of Liberty. The copy reads as follows.

Two Good Things. Pabst Beer and Prosperity. Pabst Perfected Brewing in America.

Finally, a product like beer used the latest in *technology* as a way to tell people the product was well worth their investment. Several ads had pictures of the modern factories and metal containers for beer. The public accepted the view that beer-making was closely aligned with the most current use of inventions. Here is a quote from the Milwaukee newspaper of 1895:

The Val. Blatz Brewing company is the only establishment of the kind which is run entirely by electricity. The service is magnificent and the equipment perfect.

This meaning was not simply present in the way the beer companies put out their promotional material but also in the way that the public understood the product as found, for example, in the letters to the beer company and press clippings of that period. The discourse expressed an ideology in which people made sense of themselves, their families, America, and, most importantly, beer.

The discourse of the beer companies was often to counter the arguments of the Prohibition movement. This movement was strong in the mid-19th century. For the saloon keeper there was always the threat of shut-down. The saloon keeper feared his town would become a dry town.

Though the beer companies created one discourse about beer, the way the Prohibitionists talked about the product won national support and in 1920 Prohibition was passed.

What I argue here is akin to post-structuralist theory which argues no “given” reality beyond the language we use. Therefore our discussion about a “thing” can assume contradictory positions. The language we use to promote a product or service justifies that product in a particular culture and employs an ideology which favors the economic and political powers in the society. If people buy into the product or service, they buy into that ideology even though they may argue they never encounter the ads or promotion for a product.

Discourse about a product thus becomes the way the country thinks and talks about that product. At the same time that a company is putting words to what its product is or can do, the public is talking in that same terminology. Yet, there may come a time when another perspective, looming in the background, becomes the dominant frame of discourse for that product.

The method of discourse analysis fits an interpretive view of public relations, especially because when we argue that getting the right word or sound bite in ad or other media form can make or break a company, a product, a service, or even a politician, why not look at what the words are saying? In that word or sound bite we see an ideology about the product, about the culture, and about ourselves in relation to the product. All of that comes across in the choice the company makes in its public relations and marketing communication.

RESEARCHING TRANSNATIONAL RADIO

Nancy Lynch Street

My first direct encounter with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as a serious influence upon the democratization of the Soviet Bloc occurred in August 1990, while researching a project with Boston College professor Marilyn J. Matelski. In Poland, we visited the Shrine of the Black Madonna at the Jasna Gora Monastery in Czestochowa, arguably the most sacred site in all of Poland. Following the viewing of the Black Madonna, we were surprised to find ourselves in a room overflowing with Solidarity memorabilia, heightening our awareness of the partnership between the Church and the media in the triumph of the Solidarity Movement in Poland.

To some observers, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the demise of communism and the triumph of capitalism and democracy. Transnational radio systems such as Vatican Radio (VR), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America (VOA) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), have all been credited with playing a significant role in the downfall of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the formation of independent nation states. We set about attempting to validate this perception.

The first phase of our research seemed to confirm our initial impression in Czestochowa, i.e., that transnational radio must have had significant impact upon the democratization of Eastern Europe. However, our work at RFE/RL headquarters in Munich, Germany led to a somewhat different perspective and the need to develop new questions. This new direction was in large part due to our findings that well-conducted audience research was not possible within East-

ern Europe or the former Soviet Union before 1989. We realized that there was no reliable numerical data base for some of the claims made by both RFE/RL and the VOA regarding the impact of transnational radio upon the democratization of the former communist states.

world-wide service and VOA-Europe broadcasts in English with programming based upon scripts written primarily by Americans.

Voice of America is in fact the voice of the U. S. government. Thus, it is not incidental that the VOA is headquartered in Washington, D. C. From

These are people (in the recently released countries of the former Soviet Union) who have spent the last 75 years struggling with the poison of government run media. They are very, very sensitive to the issue of how it sounds, is it credible enough."

For years, Americans have railed against government-controlled media everywhere, advocating the free press approach followed in the United States. Why then is the American government proposing more (and invasive) government control over information dissemination in other countries? Phasing a federalized RFE/RL into the VOA under the aegis of the United States Information Agency increases the propaganda quotient and diminishes journalistic integrity. Further, if we know, as we do, that the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe retain the old hierarchy — often run by former communists — and media infrastructure in place, often manned by Soviet-trained journalists, why not continue to offer them (as RFE/RL now does) an alternative voice and training in Western journalistic principles, practices and ethics? As Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, said in a letter to President Clinton in March 1993, "this radio station [RFE] is helping the citizens of our country as well as in the whole Eastern Europe, to create a democratic awareness and conduct...its journalistic standards are a model for our mass media." Thus, the prevailing view from Washington seems shortsighted — but then, when have we ever done the "vision thing"?



National Regional Headquarters of Solidarity Trade Union, Gdansk, Poland, 1993

Our research program further evolved when in August 1993, it seemed (the situation is now different) that only one American transnational radio system would survive Congressional economic cutbacks. In the quest for survival, RFE/RL and VOA were jousting rhetorically, each backed by the positive claims of former dissidents and current heads of state in Eastern (or Central) Europe, in the media and in the Congress.

Our interviews with the management staff at the three radios made it clear that a distinction must be drawn between RFE/RL and the VOA. Like CNN (and unlike RFE/RL), VOA is a

broadcast content to home base and lifestyle, VOA is as American as mom's apple pie. Unlike RFE/RL, it was not meant to be a surrogate facility, "to speak for those who cannot speak," nor has it ever taken on that role. Merging these two divergent broadcast facilities and philosophies may, in fact, diminish them both. As Kevin Klose, former Moscow correspondent for the *Washington Post* and present director of Radio Liberty, puts it:

"Journalism, well done, is very powerful and very fragile, you start messing with it, its sense of self, its independence from the people who pay its way and things start changing in the cadres' head and pretty soon, very quickly, it's up the antenna and out.