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# THE SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS OF EMPATHY IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Claire Yorke

## Abstract

In strategic communications, dominated by concerns about the use and meaning of words, messages, images, and symbols for strategic influence and effect, there is growing recognition of the importance of empathy, but a limited understanding of what it might look like. Defined in its simplest form as the attempt to understand the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of another, empathy is both a communicative and a performative act. Its value is dependent on its ability to be demonstrated and understood, and its power can be harnessed by governments to connect with a wider audience and develop more responsive policies.

This article examines the varied dynamics of empathy through the lens of American politics at domestic and international levels. It argues that empathy is a multifaceted and complex concept with transformative power, but also with practical and political limitations, which deserves far greater attention from strategic communications practitioners.

**Keywords:** empathy, politics, communication, United States, presidents, strategy

## About the author

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*If our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, each one of us must try to heed the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."*<sup>1</sup>

President Barack Obama

## Introduction

In his farewell address as the forty-fourth President of the United States, Barack Obama spoke of the importance of empathy. The idea that politicians and citizens alike should do more to understand the manifold experiences, perspectives, and feelings of others as a means by which to improve politics and society has been a recurring theme throughout his political career.<sup>2</sup> More widely, the significance of the concept, and the potential perils of its absence, have returned to debates during the Presidential elections in 2016. Following the surprise win of Donald Trump some questioned whether there was a lack of empathy with Trump's supporters, and whether the Democrats had failed to understand the different lived experiences and various grievances of those who had been left-behind or marginalised by globalisation, free-markets, and the speed of technological and societal advances.<sup>3</sup> What the events of recent years, and electoral shocks of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom during 2016, have illustrated is the critical role of emotions in the political sphere and the need for politicians, leaders, government officials, and communicators to take greater efforts to empathise with their audiences.

In the domain of strategic communications,<sup>4</sup> dominated by concerns about the use and meaning of words, narratives, images, actions, and symbols for strategic influence and effect, the idea of empathy is a central but often overlooked concept.<sup>5</sup> However, recognition of its value is growing. Its significance in strategic communications lies not only in reaching out to an audience but also understanding them, in a way that is both active and iterative. The act of listening and seeking to

<sup>1</sup> Obama, Barack, 'Farewell Address', The White House, 11 January 2017

<sup>2</sup> As a Senator Barack Obama spoke about the value of empathy, and it is a theme in his autobiographical writing *The Audacity of Hope*.

<sup>3</sup> Itkowitz, Colby, 'What is this election missing? Empathy for Trump voters', *The Washington Post*, 2 November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> There are debates about whether the term is in the singular (strategic communication) as normally used in defence or plural (strategic communications). This article does not engage in this debate but uses it in its plural form to denote the importance of the concept to all practitioners and policy-makers and not just the defence community.

<sup>5</sup> In his primer on Strategic Communications, Steve Tatham defined strategic communications as: 'A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour.' Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008), pg. 7. In 2011, a Chatham House report on Strategic Communications took this definition as their point of departure: Cornish, Paul, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*, (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2011), pg. 4.

understand another itself communicates the value you attribute to them, even if you do not agree or support them. Through the lens of American politics, this article examines what this might look like and highlights the varied dynamics of empathy. It acknowledges that the art and practice of strategic communications involves a wide and diverse range of activities depending on the context of diplomacy, warfare, election campaigns, and domestic politics, and the role of empathy across these different areas is therefore variable and manifold. Recognising this dynamic, this article argues that it is a multifaceted and complex concept, with transformative power but also practical and political limitations, which deserves far greater attention from strategic communications practitioners. Given the potential breadth of such a topic, it explores the concept by drawing on examples of the way in which presidents and politicians communicate with the American public and foreign audiences about domestic and foreign policy, rather than, for example, examining the way in which alliances are strengthened, or how efforts to build relations in countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq could have employed empathy more effectively. In so doing, it provides a broad conceptual overview, and examines how the idea of empathy might be better understood, though in the process it highlights areas for further debate. Empathy can be a subjective concept that lends itself to different interpretations and perspectives, and as a result this area offers a rich vein of future conceptual and comparative research to develop the depth, detail, and practical dimensions of the approach.

This article begins firstly by defining the concept of empathy and how it might be measured. It then examines the concept as a form of performative and communicative action through the case of the United States and the way in which different Presidents have communicated in domestic and foreign policy. Thirdly, it explores the constraints on empathy to develop an argument that irrespective of the value of the concept, it is dependent on a number of external factors including personal disposition, the political system, the wider context, and the affective landscape.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, it aims to set out the case for why empathy is worthy of greater attention and open up discussion of the concept within strategic communications.

## 1. Placing Empathy at the Heart of Strategic Communications

Strategic communications is a central feature of both military and civilian political environments, however, there are flaws in the way it is commonly understood. Ambiguity around the concept can result in it being confused with media messaging and engagement. Defined in this way, it becomes about mapping an environment, designing and articulating messages, and identifying the audience in order to ‘hit send’ and inform, influence, or persuade them. In this form, it is incorrectly viewed as a linear and transactional interaction, rather than an iterative process, within a complex and mutually reinforcing communications environment that defies neat definitions. Rosa Brooks points to changes in official approaches in the late 2000s

<sup>6</sup> The idea of affective landscape relates to the emotional mood and the predominant, often palpable, and yet unquantifiable mood or feeling of the time. This article avoids engaging in a debate about the difference between emotions and affect and employs both terms as a way by which to speak of emotions and feelings.

when awareness of the importance of not just speaking but listening was growing among defense policy-makers keen to reform the government's approach to strategic communications:

'By the beginning of the Obama Administration, Pentagon reformers were urging a more nuanced understanding of what strategic communication might mean. Ideally, they argued, it should be less about what the Defense Department had to say than about considering how others might interpret the words and actions of U.S. defense officials. It should be a process of engaging, listening, and recognising that *all* military activities, from speeches and meetings with local dignitaries to aircraft carrier movements and troop deployments, have "information effects". *Everything communicates something.*<sup>7</sup> [emphasis added]

The idea that everything is a form of communication means that effective strategic communications should position the performative and communicative value of words, deeds, narratives, images, and symbols at the heart of the strategic process. It further requires recognition of the context and the narratives and themes used and the way they may be understood. From the outset, what is said and done, how it is communicated, and the context within which it is perceived and understood, has a direct effect on the ability of a government to achieve its strategic objectives.

Empathy can be an asset in this process. Defined in its simplest form as the attempt to understand the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of another, its power can be harnessed by governments to connect with a wider audience in order to inform or influence them, or champion a cause. The practice of empathy, and the process of stepping outside of one's own position is important for the light it sheds not only on the interests or thoughts of others, but also on the role that emotions and feelings play in shaping and driving people's different views of the world. As primatologist Frans de Waal states: 'Perspective-taking by itself is...hardly empathy: It is so only in combination with emotional engagement.'<sup>8</sup> It is this idea of emotional engagement, of the personal connection, particularly the relationship between the individual and the collective, which is significant in this instance. However, this article develops this concept to argue there are variants of empathy that can be more strategic and intellectual manifestations of considering the perspective of another.

Politics is an inherently human interaction involving the way in which people construct their societies and manage the development of communities. In participatory and representative democracies, it is people, both as individuals and collectives, who determine the course of state actions and inform the norms and values that shape the system. In contrast to the literature that argues humans are rational and dispassionate actors, this article argues that ideas of reason and emotion cannot, indeed should not, be easily or neatly separated. People are inherently emotional beings, responding not only to ideas of reason or logical interests, but to feelings such as pride, grief,

<sup>7</sup> Brooks, Rosa, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2016), pg. 88.

<sup>8</sup> De Waal, Frans, 'Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy', *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008): pg. 285.

shame, or hope, and to recognition by others of these experiences.<sup>9</sup> Emotions, such as fear or joy, tend to govern what it is one values and the decisions that follow.<sup>10</sup> As Lauren Berlant contends, the political space in the US (or anywhere) is not rational but a 'scene of emotional contestation'.<sup>11</sup> For those who believe politics is the preserve of rational thought and the pursuit of interests, work on emotions is too often seen as a soft and irrational component that defies requirements for quantifiable and demonstrable metrics. Yet such a belief can be both limiting and detrimental to the development of effective communications. Politics is not only about politicians and government articulating how they will meet the interests and needs of society, but about providing a vision and range of objectives that respond to the requirements and expectations of the public, mobilises people, and speaks to identities and affective forces.

Empathy as a *means* of communication helps to provide this form of connection. If a communicator can articulate in a convincing and credible way that they understand people, that they 'feel their pain' as President Bill Clinton once stated, they can be seen as a representative of their needs and interests. To some extent, Donald Trump was successful in this regard as he could read the emotions and experiences of a certain sector of the American population in order to galvanise support from them. An ability to speak to an audience in a way that resonates with their emotions and provokes popular appeal should not be conflated with empathy, however there are interesting areas of intersection between the two that pose further questions for the way in which empathy itself should be understood.

Beyond renewed interest in contemporary debate about the value of empathy, an established and growing body of academic literature explores the concept within international affairs and politics and develops understanding of its complexity. The work of Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler is instructive for its analysis of the role of empathy, and associated concepts of trust, in diplomatic transformations and the reduction of the security dilemma.<sup>12</sup> Neta Crawford writes of the integral and overlooked role that passions play within international relations, focusing on fear and

<sup>9</sup> There is a growing literature on this topic, which unfortunately is beyond the bounds of the current article to explore. However, interesting and important works on this include: Lebow, Richard Ned, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mattern, Janice Bially 'A Practice Theory of Emotion for International Relations', *International practices* (2011); Ross, Andrew A.G., *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Moisi, Dominique, *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope Are Reshaping the World* (Anchor, 2010); Saurette, Paul, 'You Dissin Me? Humiliation and Post 9/11 Global Politics', *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006); Hatemi, Peter K., and Rose McDermott, *Man Is by Nature a Political Animal: Evolution, Biology, and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that the response to 9/11 in the USA was not dispassionate, but based on a genuine sense of threat, fear, and grief at the shock and horror of the event. The Iraq War in particular was not a logical or rational extension of the initial event.

<sup>11</sup> Berlant, Lauren, 'The Epistemology of State Emotion', in Austin Sarat (ed.), *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, (University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Booth, Ken, and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wheeler, Nicholas J., 'Investigating Diplomatic Transformations', *International Affairs*, no. 2 (2013).

empathy,<sup>13</sup> and the way in which they can be institutionalised within organisations, transcending the boundaries between individuals and groups.<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Pedwell has critiqued the liberal and neo-liberal approaches to the concept through the lenses of post-structuralist, gendered, and queer theory to illustrate its complex and multifaceted role in transatlantic relations.<sup>15</sup> Naomi Head examines the dimensions of the concept in her work on conflict, trust and empathy,<sup>16</sup> as well as the politics<sup>17</sup> and the costs that accompany it.<sup>18</sup> However, there is limited work on its valuable role within strategic communications and the political sphere and the practical implications of its application.

There are different forms of empathy and it can be understood as both an affective and a cognitive dimension of human interaction. The affective dimensions refer to the way in which empathy can be seen as a natural feeling, or an emotional impulse felt for another or a group of people. In this innate form, as de Waal articulates, it rests on an assumption that, with some exceptions and limitations, empathy is often an inherent trait of humans and animals.<sup>19</sup> Within the social sciences, however, greater attention is placed on cognitive empathy, an idea that assumes conscious deliberation and attempts to be empathetic. Recognising this distinction between the cognitive and affective, while further acknowledging the way that emotions inform and shape cognition, this research does not look at innate empathy but instead focuses on three forms of empathetic engagement: interpersonal empathy; strategic empathy; and manipulative empathy. These forms assume a greater role for cognition and intellectual reasoning in empathy, although emotions are not entirely absent.

Interpersonal empathy is one of the most visible forms of empathetic engagement. It generally relates to the direct relationship and rapport that exists between two people.<sup>20</sup> Interpersonal empathy can evolve through time and proximity with another, or through a sense of shared experience or common bonds. As Cameron notes, empathy can be both something that occurs *in* communication (during contact with another), and emerges *as a result of* communication.<sup>21</sup> It might be instantaneous, such as the way in which two politicians meet and feel an affinity or connection, or it may be a result of conscious practice. Within the context of strategic communications,

<sup>13</sup> Crawford, Neta C., 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships', *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Crawford, Neta C. 'Institutionalizing Passion in World Politics: Fear and Empathy', *International Theory* 6, no. 03 (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Pedwell, Carolyn, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and 'Affective (Self-) Transformations: Empathy, Neoliberalism and International Development', *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Head, Naomi, 'Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', *International Journal of Peace Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>17</sup> 'A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine', *Review of International Studies* (2015).

<sup>18</sup> 'Costly Encounters of the Empathic Kind: A Typology', *International Theory* 18, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>19</sup> De Waal, Frans, *The Age of Empathy*, (New York: Harmony, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Ideas of proximity (spatial and ideological) and intimacy are integral to the way in which empathy is conceptualised. See for example: Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy*.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Cameron cited in Head, Naomi, 'Transforming Conflict Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', pg. 41.

however, it is also about the way in which a communicator can articulate their awareness of the feelings or perspectives of a collective. For the majority of the public, the appeal of any politician or public figure is rarely based on personal or intimate knowledge of them, but on an intangible (and perhaps unscientific) but palpable feeling that this is the best or most appropriate person for government and that they are closest to their beliefs and values.

In part, interpersonal empathy is due to disposition, and an ability to connect to people. Former Vice President Joe Biden was adept at and well-known for, this form of personal connection, and could use it to build relations across Congress. However, this capacity for connection does not mean it is necessarily innate, indeed it can be learned, developed, and consciously employed as part of communication. This can be seen in the response to an audience question on the economic crisis during the second Presidential debate in 1992. In a contrast of styles, George Bush Senior intellectualised the problem, asking the audience to understand what he saw and did in the White House. Whereas when Bill Clinton spoke he made it personal, and related it to the pains and difficulties people in his state had felt, and his first-hand understanding of their experiences.<sup>22</sup> Good communicators, however, may be perceived as credible and empathetic to some, but dishonest and misguided by their political opponents. The ability to connect is subjective and bound up with ideas of credibility, trust, legitimacy, and reputation.

Strategic empathy is a cognitive form of empathy that assumes it can be instrumental as a political or strategic asset in developing longer-term relations, or advancing a certain cause. It speaks to the tenet of the strategist Sun Tzu to ‘know your enemy’,<sup>23</sup> but expanded beyond the context of warfare means to know your audience.<sup>24</sup> As part of this, it can be, to varying degrees, consciously constructed and communicated to facilitate cooperation or build bridges with others. Matt Waldman speaks to this variation in his work on the failures of knowledge and understanding in the US policy towards Afghanistan. He argues it was an inability to really know who the Taliban were and understand their context, history, and motivations that led to difficulties for the Americans.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, work on misperceptions and a failure to grasp the motivations or intent of another has a long history in international relations scholarship, most notably in Robert Jervis’ work *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* that points to people’s inability to see the other, their inherent cognitive biases, and the way beliefs shape policy approaches.<sup>26</sup>

Strategic empathy is arguably the most relevant to strategic communications. It assumes a conscious effort to design policy approaches with the other side in mind, to consider the implications of one’s actions, and to communicate certain messages.

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<sup>22</sup> Clinton, Bill and George W. Bush, Second Presidential Debate, 1992 and for commentary on this see: Marc Ambinder, ‘Feeling Your Pain’, *The Week*, 5 October 2012

<sup>23</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of audience is itself open to further definition, and it is used in its broadest sense in this instance.

<sup>25</sup> Waldman, Matt, *Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why the U.S. Must Empathize with Its Adversaries*, (New America Foundation, April 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Jervis, R., *Perception and misperception in international politics*, (Princeton University Press, 1976).



In this sense, empathy can have an instrumental function, as a means by which to realise an outcome. Implicit within the concept is the idea that it is conducive to long-term strategic objectives, and whilst it implies that the understanding gained of another should have certain mutual benefits, as through consideration of another more nuanced and tailored policy might emerge, these benefits may be asymmetrical. Moreover, although a more intellectualised approach, it should not deny the power of emotions in achieving the strategic objectives.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, manipulative empathy hints at the darker side. In this form, through intimate knowledge of another, particularly of their weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and grievances, actors can pursue their own self-interests at the expense of another. Indeed, Booth and Wheeler point to the ability of empathy to undermine enemies as well as reconcile with them.<sup>28</sup> Empathy is used to exploit another, rather than to seek a better response to their needs, interests, or expectations. This assumes, however, that empathy is considered a morally neutral concept, rather than an idea imbued with expectations of positive intent.<sup>29</sup>

Although the terms are sometimes conflated, empathy is similar to, but not synonymous with, sympathy or compassion. As political philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues: ‘a malevolent person who imagines the situation of another and takes pleasure in her distress may be empathetic, but surely will not be judged as sympathetic. Sympathy, like compassion, includes a judgement that the other person’s distress is bad’.<sup>30</sup> Within the concepts of compassion and sympathy are certain moral compulsions to respond, whereas empathy does not necessarily require action. However, as De Waal argues, empathy can facilitate sympathetic feelings.<sup>31</sup> Both sympathy and compassion hold further communicative value beyond the scope of this research but nevertheless deserving of further study within strategic communications.

Empathy cannot yield perfect or accurate knowledge, but within these concepts of empathy is the importance of recognition. This does not imply that one must agree with or respond to the point of view of an individual or group, but that a conscious and deliberate effort is made to recognise their standpoint, their grievances, the history and narratives that have shaped their position, and to communicate that recognition. It involves acknowledging the validity of another.<sup>32</sup> As sociologist Thomas Lindemann argues: ‘recognition is crucial for emotional reasons—not only for increasing an actor’s self-esteem, but especially for avoiding shame (dishonour)

<sup>27</sup> The idea of passion is integral to strategic thought, comprising one element of Clausewitz’s trinity. Howard, Michael, Peter Paret and Rosalie West, Carl Von Clausewitz: *On War* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Waldman, Thomas, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics*. pg. 237

<sup>29</sup> This opens up broader and important debates about the moral components of empathy, and whether empathy is, or can be, morally neutral, which is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>30</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C., *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pg. 302.

<sup>31</sup> De Waal, ‘Putting the altruism back into altruism: the evolution of empathy’, pg. 286.

<sup>32</sup> The related and interesting idea of respect is examined in Wolf, Reinhard, ‘Respecting Foreign Peoples: The Limits of Moral Obligations’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 19, no. 1 (2016).

and humiliation'.<sup>33</sup> Empathy assumes a more active process of considering, and recognising, the existence and validity of diverse, contradictory, and unpalatable views. In this way it goes beyond the ability to have a message resonate with an audience.

Furthermore, empathy is about more than understanding the world from another person's perspectives or being aware of their feelings, it is an interactive act. It involves an ability to reflect on one's own role and the way in which one's words and actions have affected another. This element of the definition is critical to the concept of empathy as articulated by Booth and Wheeler in relation to the Security Dilemma. Defining a particular form of empathy they term the 'Security Dilemma Sensibility' they note it is:

'an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's own actions may play in provoking that fear.'<sup>34</sup>

It is an idea echoed in Jervis's work on understanding state behaviour which advocates an approach that incorporates both the operational and psychological environment within which decisions are made. This includes the beliefs policy-makers have about the world and those in it.<sup>35</sup> This requirement for self-reflection and conscious consideration of one's own beliefs, and the nature of self in relation to other, whether individually or collectively, moves the idea of empathy beyond merely understanding another point of view. It is this mediating dynamic, the recognition of the potential past and future implications of one's own words and deeds that imbues the concept of empathy with more positive connotations: that through awareness of the effect of one's behavior, this behavior is moderated or adapted to take the thoughts and feelings of another into account, though this is not always the case. Had American policy-makers reflected more in 2003 on the historical experience of foreign interventions within the Middle East, and the distrust many in the region felt to interference from outside, would the Iraq War have still been considered the best way to bring stability to the region?

Empathy is not easily quantified, yet this should not disqualify it from analysis. There have been limited attempts to provide a methodology for analysing it.<sup>36</sup> However, as empathy is considered to be something that is communicated and transmitted through words and deeds, as well as personal reflections, some scholars of empathy have

<sup>33</sup> Lindemann, Thomas, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (ECPR Press, 2011), pg. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics*, pg. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Jervis, Robert, *The Logic of the Images in International Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1989), pg. 4. For interesting and recent quantitative research on this see, for example: Yarhi-Milo, Keren, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries', *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>36</sup> One exception is political psychologist Ralph K. White who addressed the lack of criteria in international affairs by developing his own. This informs the criteria employed here. See White, Ralph K., 'Empathizing with Saddam Hussein', *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991).

examined it through discourse analysis.<sup>37</sup> This research uses the same methodology, employing a light-touch discourse analysis to identify empathy according to a number of criteria:

- evidence of perspective taking, and seeking to understand different sections of society and their political, historical, structural, and social-economic context
- awareness of one's own words and actions and how this might be perceived
- evidence of discussions of the importance of understanding another point of view and acknowledgement of recognition

In contrast, the absence of empathy can be viewed through the following criteria: an inability or unwillingness to take the perspective or analyse the views and position of others; misrepresentations and lazy representations of others, in this instance political opponents and supporters of the other party, including stereotypes and images that reduce the other side to negative caricatures. It might include:

- de-humanising images and language
- asserting oneself and the group one represents as right with no regard for the other side
- refusing to acknowledge the interests or perspectives of the other side during interactions

Although this may be subjective, these criteria provide a useful guide by which to develop and test our understanding of the concept and through which to engage with the central ideas of strategic communications.

## 2. Of Policy, Politics, and Presidents

For governments, such as the United States, empathy has value both domestically and in foreign policy. This section turns to the way in which it has featured within these domains, and the variable role it has played. In a political context, empathy can connect an individual, such as a President or political representative, with a collective, such as a specific group, community, or section of the public. It is a means by which one can claim to speak for many and help one's image and message resonate with and attract its intended audience. This relationship between the individual and the collective is central to understanding the power of empathy and emotions more widely. Indeed, in this context empathy cannot be seen as a stand-alone tool but as part of a complex affective network of many competing and complementary emotions

<sup>37</sup> For examples of those who have used a discourse-based methodology see Cameron, Lynne J., *Metaphor and Reconciliation: The Discourse Dynamics of Empathy in Post-Conflict Conversations* (Routledge, 2012); Cameron, Lynne J., 'The Interactional Dynamics of Empathy', (2012); Head, 'Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', (2012).

within communications and human relations.<sup>38</sup> Challenging the dichotomy between the individual and the group in the study of emotions in international relations, Neta Crawford explores the ‘institutionalising’ of passions, and points to the way in which organizations, or in this instance collectives, incorporate passions into structure knowledge and practices.<sup>39</sup> Yet it leaves further questions about the way in which this is done in practice and does not address the relationship in a political sphere. Hutchison and Bleiker instead argue that it is the representation of emotions and understanding is key. Firstly, because the absence of direct and perfect knowledge of another means analysis is dependent on representations through words, sounds, images, actions, and other forms. Secondly because ‘representation is the process through which individual emotions become collective and political’.<sup>40</sup> Sara Ahmed speaks of the stickiness of emotions, the way in which emotions give meaning to ideas and imbue actions or words with power based on the way in which they move us.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the content of strategic communications may speak of interests and reasons, such as security and prosperity, and yet successful communication speaks to emotions and feelings, and the way they are represented. It is the ability of words to move people to act, or respond—whether through emotions such as fear, anger, hope, or pride—that gives them force and meaning. The way in which a message resonates with a public is therefore critical, as is awareness of the affective landscape within which such messages are transmitted and received. This is dependent on both the content of the message and the interests it addresses, as well as its tone and ability to rouse emotions.

The narrative of kinship with the ‘common man’ is one example of empathy as a strategic means that is not new to political rhetoric. Indeed, neuroscientist Drew Westen argues that it is integral, as the art of political persuasion is based on (neural) ‘networks and narratives’.<sup>42</sup> Through his contrast of the election campaigns of Bill Clinton and John Kerry he points to two key messages in politics—that a candidate is presidential, and that they can relate to the experiences and perspectives of their electorate. Where Clinton succeeded in his political narrative, he argues, Kerry failed to communicate to the electorate that he was like them, that he understood their backgrounds and their experiences.<sup>43</sup> A striking example of this strategic form of empathy can be found in the inaugural speech of President Richard Nixon on 20 January 1969 where he invoked similar images:

I also know the people of the world.

I have seen the hunger of a homeless child, the pain of a man wounded in battle, the grief of a mother who has lost her son. I know these have no ideology, no race.

<sup>38</sup> For an interesting exploration of ‘circulations of affect’, see Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict*.

<sup>39</sup> Crawford, ‘Institutionalizing passion in world politics: fear and empathy’.

<sup>40</sup> Hutchison, Emma and Roland Bleiker, ‘Theorizing Emotions in World Politics’, *Ibid.*, no. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

<sup>42</sup> Westen, Drew, *Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (PublicAffairs, 2008), pg. 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 10.

I know America. I know the heart of America is good.

I speak from my own heart, and the heart of my country, the deep concern we have for those who suffer and those who sorrow.<sup>44</sup>

Nixon was not a man known for his affective or interpersonal empathy, indeed he often preferred solitude and was not considered a people-person, yet he intellectually understood the utility of shared experience as a means by which to connect to the American people.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, he understood the context, and the mood, speaking at a time of domestic unrest and frustration with the government. Other Presidents have used similar approaches. Although her work emphasises empathy as an affective rather than a cognitive trait, Colleen Shogan illustrates its varying yet consistent role in US presidents through a comparison of Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.<sup>46</sup> She points to empathy as a disposition, or character trait, that facilitates one's ability to connect with others, and she argues that where George W. Bush was at times lacking in overt displays of empathy, such as after Hurricane Katarina in New Orleans, Bill Clinton could be seen to demonstrate an excess of understanding, to the detriment of his reputation.<sup>47</sup>

This idea of disposition is important for how empathy is conveyed and how an individual is perceived, as the credibility of the communicator is integral to the significance and meaning attributed to the message. Once again this can prove problematic as the idea of how one's disposition is perceived depends, in part, on the standpoint of the listener or audience. President Barack Obama cites empathy as a fundamental principle that his mother had instilled in him from a young age.<sup>48</sup> It is part of his personal ethos and originates in part from his background and own personal experience.<sup>49</sup> As Ta Nehisi Coates points out, Obama in many ways made a conscious choice to be Black and yet as a President of mixed race, he was simultaneously able to speak with ease to multiple communities as one of them,<sup>50</sup> an attribute Terrill refers to as 'double consciousness'.<sup>51</sup> In June 2006, when still a Senator, he spoke to graduates at a Commencement Address at Northwestern University about the need for greater empathy: 'There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit—the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the

<sup>44</sup> President Nixon, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1969.

<sup>45</sup> Nixon spoke from first-hand experience here. He had grown up in relative poverty in California and lost two brothers by the age of twenty-one, as well as experiencing conflict during the Second World War.

<sup>46</sup> Shogan, Colleen J., 'The Contemporary Presidency: The Political Utility of Empathy in Presidential Leadership', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Obama, Barack, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Canongate Books, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Recent research on empathy often cites Obama because of the emphasis he placed on the concept within his approach to politics and society, see, for example: Carolyn Pedwell, 'Economies of Empathy: Obama, Neoliberalism, and Social Justice', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 2 (2012); Shogan.

<sup>50</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi, 'My President Was Black', *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Terrill, Robert E., 'Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union'', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 4 (2009).

immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.<sup>52</sup> His belief in the power of empathy, did not necessarily always translate into good interpersonal relationships however, and he was not always able to bridge difficult interpersonal relations on Capitol Hill or develop a rapport with leaders such as Russian leader Vladimir Putin. As a counter point, might it be that the greater knowledge one has of certain people, the less inclined one might be to work with them as a result of increased awareness of their interests and objectives and the incompatibility with one's own beliefs and values?<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to Obama, Donald Trump has made no claims that empathy is a part of his ethos, nor indicated a public disposition towards it. His personal style involves an impression of plain-talking, avoiding political correctness, and calling out perceived failures in the system. He has succeeded nonetheless in tapping into a mood and into emotions of fear, distrust, and pride among certain sectors of the population to galvanise support. At a time of a perceived diminution of trust in the establishment, Donald Trump's message is reinforced by a cultivated image that he is a maverick and a political outsider, and therefore knows the grievances of the average citizen outside of the political bubble.<sup>54</sup> Although, interestingly, his calls to support blue-collar workers and veterans and represent them in government come from limited, if any, experience of that world.<sup>55</sup> That some people feel he listens to, and understands them and their experiences and perspectives, poses interesting questions for how empathy is conceived.

Indeed, having an understanding of the strategic utility of empathy in political discourses does not by extension make one empathetic. Referring back to the difference between emotional resonance and empathy, although Donald Trump may be able to articulate and reflect an understanding of the grievances and the aspirations of those who voted for him, demonstrating his use of strategic empathy, it is difficult to argue that he is empathetic or believes empathy to be as significant a principle as does Barack Obama. If empathy, as defined above, involves the ability to reflect on the influence of one's own words and actions on others, Trump has shown little understanding of the implications of his rhetoric when he referred to Mexicans as rapists, or demeaned women and people with disabilities at his rallies,<sup>56</sup> even though through this he tapped into and reflected the feelings of fear or distrust within some of his target voters. Instead this is evidence of dehumanising language, and an assertion of being right at the expense of others: thus demonstrating an absence of empathy. Yet, this perhaps reveals a subjective bias: is it empathy only if it conforms to one's own sense, as an observer or analyst, of what is appropriate, or just, or moral, or palatable? In many ways empathy is meant to bridge uncomfortable

<sup>52</sup> Obama, Barack, 'Obama to Graduates: Cultivate Empathy', Speech at Northwestern University, 19 June 2006.

<sup>53</sup> This is an interesting example as it points to the boundaries of empathy, and the intersection of empathy and ideas of interests and values.

<sup>54</sup> For an example of a critique of the Washington Post article see Willingham, Emily, 'Yes, Donald Trump is a Master of Empathy', *Forbes*, 3 November 2016.

<sup>55</sup> President Obama has also not served in the military, though he gained experience working with the working-class during his time as Senator in Chicago.

<sup>56</sup> J. A. 'Donald Trump Boasts of Groping Women', *The Economist*, 8 October 2016; David A Graham, 'How Donald Trump Speaks to—and About—Minorities', *The Atlantic*, 3 May 2016.

divides and to shed light on the different lived experiences of others in order to inform perspectives and generate greater understanding, irrespective of what might be done with such awareness. For example, one can seek to understand another point of view, but still disregard that knowledge or use it for manipulative ends. Therefore, for the concept to have definitional integrity, does the disposition and character and intent of the primary actor matter? One could argue it does in interpersonal empathy, and yet perhaps in the context of strategic empathy the successful pursuit of an objective is the priority. Addressing the parameters of this is important to the way empathy should be understood, and how the term is used.

In foreign policy, strategic empathy can provide a means by which to develop cooperation with other countries and cultures through both public statements and private meetings. When President Nixon went to China in 1972, breaking decades of animosity between the two countries, he used rhetorical claims about the importance of understanding one another in his public speeches, despite his intellectual pragmatism throughout the discussions. In a banquet held to thank the Chinese for their hospitality he reflected on the history of China, and the symbolism of the Great Wall for the Chinese people in a speech that sought to illustrate his understanding of the Chinese people and his hope for the future:

‘I thought of what it showed about the determination of the Chinese people to retain their independence throughout their long history. I thought about the fact that the Wall tells us that China has a great history and that the people who built this Wonder of the World also have a great future. The Great Wall is no longer a wall dividing China from the rest of the world. But it is a reminder of the fact that there are many walls still existing in the world, which divide nations and peoples. The Great Wall is also a reminder that for almost a generation there has been a wall between the People’s Republic of China and the United States. In these past four days, we have begun the long process of removing that wall between us.’

He spoke of the common interests that united the two countries, and the importance of their distinct beliefs and differences, and the significance of independence and security for them each.<sup>57</sup> The idea of understanding, however strategic, was built in to the Shanghai Communique. Nixon sought to find ways to build the relationship with the Chinese leadership through the private discussions while maintaining the compatibility of their different world views. This should be seen predominantly as an intellectual and strategic approach to the idea of empathy and its role in messaging.

Obama used empathy in his public efforts to build bridges with those to whom the United States had maintained lengthy antagonisms. In his Cairo Speech in June 2009, President Obama eloquently articulated a vision for the Middle East and the relationships between the West and the region. It was a speech designed to repair damage done by the dominant narratives of the War on Terror that had

<sup>57</sup> President Richard Nixon’s Address at the Reciprocal Dinner in Peking, Box SFSM PPF 073, President’s Speech File 1969-74, Presidential Personal File, President’s Speech File, 25 February 1972, Peking, China – Reciprocal Dinner

created a monolith of Islam and led to further tensions in the region.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it incorporated recognition of the rich cultural and scientific history of the Islamic world and its wider contribution to the world. As the unrest, violence, and instability that followed the Arab Spring demonstrated, however, a commitment to such a vision is harder to deliver in practice.

In foreign policy interpersonal empathy is also important, as is finding common ground; seeking to understand a diplomatic counterpart can yield strategic rewards and help bring about diplomatic transformations. In December 1984, British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, met Mikhail Gorbachev in the UK before he became General Secretary of the USSR. In an interview after their meeting she stated:

I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together. We both believe in our own political systems. He firmly believes in his; I firmly believe in mine. We are never going to change one another. So that is not in doubt, but we have two great interests in common: that we should both do everything we can to see that war never starts again, and therefore we go into the disarmament talks determined to make them succeed. And secondly, I think we both believe that they are the more likely to succeed if we can build up confidence in one another and trust in one another about each other's approach, and therefore, we believe in cooperating on trade matters, on cultural matters, on quite a lot of contacts between politicians from the two sides of the divide.<sup>59</sup>

Her famous statement captures this power of interpersonal relations in contributing to significant shifts in international relations. Moreover, the approaches of Nixon and Thatcher above highlights a fundamental element of empathetic engagement: that one can seek to understand without acquiescing to, or agreeing with, the other. Such efforts involve careful management, however, that recognises the symbolism of such rapprochements and the potential reticence of a domestic population to do business with another state after periods of hostility. In this regard, the public and private expressions may differ, or be mediated by political considerations.

### 3. The Contours and Limitations of Empathy

Empathy does not have the power to deliver strategic objectives or a political victory on its own, yet understanding its value and leveraging its potential requires that one equally recognises its limitations. This section points to how, irrespective of the way in which empathy can contribute to more effective communications, there are natural constraints on more empathetic communication and limitations to its potential. Indeed, in spite of its value, empathy is no panacea, nor is it, on its own, transformative. Psychologist Paul Bloom has written extensively about the perils of empathy and the way in which it can make people more tribal, can distort judgement, and pervert morality. By identifying with a certain group, or being moved by the emotional story of an individual, he points to the way in which people can overlook

<sup>58</sup> Obama, Barack, 'Remarks by the President at Cairo University', 4 June 2009, The White House.

<sup>59</sup> Margaret Thatcher speaks to BBC, Thatcher Archive: COI transcript, 17 December 1984.



the bigger picture or disadvantage those outside of the empathetic narrative.<sup>60</sup> Instead of empathy, enmity can serve political purposes. It can be in the interest of different sides of a political debate domestically, or for two states internationally, to demonise one another.<sup>61</sup> A clear delineation of ‘them’ and ‘us’ can help to develop support and strengthen political or national identities around a set of values and ideas. This was evident in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States when George W. Bush characterised America’s political enemies Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, as the ‘axis of evil’. This was part of the dominant narrative for his strategic objectives.

Fostering empathetic engagement in strategic communications, therefore, requires potentially uncomfortable efforts to consciously imagine the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of foreign actors for whom government officials and publics may feel strong animosity. In December 2014 Hillary Clinton spoke at Georgetown University about the importance for American ‘smart power’ of respecting and empathizing with America’s enemies:

‘This is what we call smart power, using every possible tool and partner to advance peace and security, leaving no one in the sidelines, showing respect even for one’s enemies, trying to understand and in so far as psychological possible empathize with their perspective and point of view.’<sup>62</sup>

Such a call provoked further questions about the wisdom and morality of such a move, particularly as it related to groups such as the Islamic State (IS). One week later, during a Foreign Relations Select Committee hearing, Secretary John Kerry was questioned about this assertion by Senator John Barroso (Republican, Wyoming).<sup>63</sup> In his response he asserted his confidence that Clinton did not include IS in her call for empathy, yet it raises valid questions for strategic communications practitioners about the boundaries of empathy. If it is seen as conducive better to understand the Russian government, does the same hold true for terrorist organisations? If empathy is valuable as a strategic asset, where do the boundaries of such understanding lie? Empathetic engagement risks being perceived as weakness, or a soft option that compromises the national interest. The ability of a leader to be seen as empathetic and for it to contribute to strategic objectives can therefore be dependent upon whether they have an authoritative voice and strong leadership. Such important philosophical and political questions about the boundaries of empathy are deserving of far greater attention, but it should be emphasised that the act of empathising does not mean condoning acts of terror or atrocities. Empathy is not agreement or support. Instead by engaging with such points of view, however unpalatable, it may

<sup>60</sup> Bloom, Paul, ‘Against Empathy’, *The Boston Review* (2014); ‘The Baby in the Well’, *New Yorker* 20 (2013); ‘The Perils of Empathy’, *Wall Street Journal* (2016).

<sup>61</sup> For an interesting account of this in conflict situations see, for example: Jabri, Vivienne, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester University Press, 1996); Hedges, Chris, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Clinton, Hillary R., ‘Hillary Rodham Clinton Speaks on Security, Inclusive Leadership’, *Georgetown University*, 3 December 2014

<sup>63</sup> Testimony from Secretary of State John Kerry, ‘Authorization For The Use of Military Force Against ISIL’, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 9, 2011

yield alternative and creative solutions that provide insights into the root causes of their actions, and generate awareness of the weaknesses in the official response, so as to reduce the potential of such groups to do harm.<sup>64</sup>

The use of empathy as a means by which to achieve strategic objectives is, in part, dependent on an alignment of words and deeds. Whether an election campaign, a diplomatic transformation, or a business deal, strategic communications is not just the articulation and dissemination of a message to a targeted audience. There is a consensus within the literature that strategic communications is the effective communication and alignment of words, images, and actions in their manifold forms, in the pursuit of strategic objectives.<sup>65</sup> Political promises and talk of understanding the concerns of different groups must therefore be supported by corresponding actions and practices in order for these to remain credible claims. Moreover, as the modern media environment makes it hard to segment an audience and deliver different targeted messages to specific groups, the coherence of any communication, in words and deeds, is therefore vital. If empathy is about recognizing the value of others, and alternative perspectives or experiences of the world, the communication of that recognition must simultaneously reach the principle target group, while equally articulating to other groups the value of such understanding. This is not easily achieved.

In spite of a President's articulated vision for his Administration, no one individual can realise or deliver on their promises alone. A President is situated at the centre of a complex network of simultaneously competing and mutually interacting audiences. They must speak and respond to the expectations, demands, and requirements of their immediate cabinet, of their political party, of their chosen constituencies (the dominant groups whose causes they have chosen to represent), of the wider electorate that includes both supporters and opponents, to their opposition, and to their foreign allies and adversaries. Their ability to empathise is therefore predicated on important questions of with whom should they empathise, and why? This question is central to the application of the concept to the real-world. Such efforts are not without costs and compromises. Whereas Trump's identification with the predominantly white working class of industrial areas has been seen to have alienated certain minorities and the liberal left, as Johnson neatly articulates: 'Obama's own politics of empathy and hope inevitably prioritised some forms of social exclusion and marginalisation, and downplayed or dismissed others.'<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup>..... This area is deserving of greater development. However, interesting work has been done on the idea of 'Red Teaming' and considering how groups such as ISIS might think and how governments might therefore respond. See, for example: Zenko, Micah, *Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking Like the Enemy*, (Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, Nov 2015); The UK Ministry of Defence has produced work on Red Teaming, HMG Ministry of Defence (DCDC), *Red Teaming Guide: Second Edition*, January 2013.

<sup>65</sup> See Cornish, Paul, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke, 'Strategic Communications and National Strategy', (2011); Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (e-Book: Praeger, 2011), pg. 3. See also: Ingram, H. J. T., 'A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications', (The Hague 7: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016). No 6.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, Carol, 'The Politics of Affective Citizenship: From Blair to Obama', *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 5 (2010): pg. 505.

Naomi Head constructively develops a typology of the costs of empathetic encounters (epistemological, cognitive, emotional, material, and embodied).<sup>67</sup> In addition to this are the loyalties and relationships that are put at risk by attempting to understand an adversary, political outsider, or unpopular group.

For President Obama, despite his consistent public advocacy of empathy in politics, there have been structural, political, and societal constraints that have contributed to an inability to deliver fully on his vision. The inability, or unwillingness, to respond sooner to the crisis in Syria is one example where compassion for suffering was not met by political action for a number of reasons. Indeed, the imperatives of political office require prioritisation and a decision over which battles should be fought with Congress and other influential constituencies. In attempting to reach out to the Iranians, for example, to develop negotiations on their nuclear capabilities, Obama was unable to win over sections of Congress who felt the deal undermined American power and security. It would become a part of Donald Trump's platform that the Iranian deal was bad for America and a sign of weakness, reflecting the concerns of many Republicans. Tensions were further increased with the Israeli government who perceived his actions as betraying a long-standing American loyalty to the country. For any leader, empathy is balanced by the variety of competing public and private expectations, and the need for political popularity and consensus to push through legislation. It is mediated by the requirements for strong leadership and compromise on policy priorities.

A further problem highlighted by the recent American elections, and the divisions in American politics more generally, is that the difficulties lie not only in an individual's ability to connect with a collective, but for multiple collectives (such as Republicans and Democrats and the different camps within those two umbrella groups) to empathise and connect with one another. In her work on affective citizenship, Johnson points to the way in which emotions can unite individuals into collectives in society to develop forms of citizenship.<sup>68</sup> For her, 'Obama's politics of empathy... is an attempt to develop a citizen identity that is more compassionate and socially connected than extreme neo-liberal forms of the abstract, self-reliant citizen.'<sup>69</sup> Yet such ideas will fail to unify citizens who have very different political logics, or alternative conceptions of the role of the state, the individual within the state, and their individual and shared obligations and responsibilities to society.

Finally, empathy, as already outlined, is a communicative and performative act. Its value is dependent on its ability to be demonstrated and understood. As a message it is neither transmitted nor received in a linear direction. Instead, it is an interactive process that forms part of a broader and complex message in a communications environment. Within this environment, communications are transactional and simultaneous, being sent and received, mediated, and interpreted through multiple channels and imbued with varying meanings according to the sender, the receiver, and the broader context. The changing media environment has both helped and hindered the capacity of politicians to connect to people.

<sup>67</sup> Head, 'Costly Encounters of the Empathic Kind: A Typology'.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, 'The politics of affective citizenship: From Blair to Obama'

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pg. 504.

The growth of social media and technology facilitates a greater plurality of voices within political discourse. Its accessibility lowers the entry-point for people to engage with contemporary debates and to share information across a wide network of friends, acquaintances, or interested followers. The evolution of this media environment, and the growth of social media, has made it possible not only to connect directly and instantaneously with the public at a domestic level, but for politicians and others to reach out and engage with people in other countries.<sup>70</sup> However, the instantaneous and ubiquitous nature of modern media can simultaneously make it harder for politicians to be heard and understood, and it requires coherence between words and deeds across multiple audiences. In 2009 Nik Gowing articulated challenges posed to governments by advances in technology and the media. He argued that the pace of change and proliferation of new forms of media was outstripping the ability of political and business leaders to respond effectively. As a result it makes leadership more fragile, undermines the processes of democratic governance, and calls into question the credibility and reputation of traditional sources of information.<sup>71</sup> As McLuhan presciently observed, ‘The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.’<sup>72</sup> Renewed discussions about a ‘post-truth’ or ‘post-fact world’ appear to point to an important shift in the nature of trust in official information and the ability for political messages to be undermined by different alternative sources.<sup>73</sup> This will have implications for the ability of leaders, policy-makers, and politicians to connect with their audience, and to be trusted as official representatives.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Recognition of the power of the media to shape public opinion and gain popularity or achieve strategic objectives, has at times led to strategic communications focusing too much on the construction and dissemination of a message at the expense of thinking about what it signifies, and how it reflects the central workings and objectives of government. One consequence is that, in the development of strategy and policy, a seemingly good solution is found and then messages and communications are shaped to fit as a secondary part of the process.

<sup>70</sup> Shirky, Clay, ‘The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change’, *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>71</sup> Nik Gowing, ‘Skyful of Lies and Black Swans’, (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 2013), pg. 33.

<sup>73</sup> This is an emerging discussion within news media and there is currently limited work on the implications of recent political developments for truth in the academic literature. See for example: Fallows, James, ‘Paul Ryan and the Post-Truth Convention Speech’, *The Atlantic* (2012); Davies, William, ‘The Age of Post-Truth Politics’, *New York Times*, 24 (2016).

<sup>74</sup> Trust is often discussed as an important component in relation to empathy. For insightful and useful work on this topic see Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics*; Head, ‘Transforming Conflict Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue’.

Empathy in strategic communications is not about better understanding an audience in order to tailor a message more accurately. If used correctly, it should reinforce processes of critical thinking in the initial stages of strategy development. As Tatham argued: ‘when conveying information we must consider not just technology—but of greater importance—the culture, history and traditions of our intended audiences’.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, through considering a situation through the eyes of another, through taking into account the context, the affective landscape, and the implications of one’s prior words and actions, empathy should contribute to more reflective and responsive communications, which are more sensitive to different audiences and can foster greater connection to people. Reason and emotion do not need to be viewed as distinct areas, but as mutually reinforcing and overlapping to various degrees according to the circumstances.

Empathy is no panacea, nor is it possible to convey one’s efforts to understand everyone simultaneously successfully without diluting the authority and credibility of the core message. Nonetheless, it is a means by which to develop communications that are more self-reflective and attuned to the experiences and perceptions of different audiences. It is something that can be learned, cultivated, and practised, but practitioners and officials need to be more comfortable with the ambiguity and intuitions that accompany it. It should be expected that benefits of more empathetic communications will take time to accrue. Empathetic discourses and practices are, as has been outlined above, dependent on the credibility of the communicator and evidence of attempts to understand another, and this is not instantaneous.

Although the ability to connect with an audience, or to be able to read and work a room, can yield great political effect, for empathy to have integrity and meaning as a concept, and for it be effective within communications and politics, it is worth considering it in relation to the Aristotelean trinity of rhetoric: ethos, pathos, and logos. That is to say, it has to be seen to be a part of the character and disposition of the communicator for it to be perceived as sincere by the widest possible audience; there are no guarantees empathy will be perceived as credible or trusted by everyone. In order to move necessary crowds and galvanise support for a campaign or governing administration, the understanding and recognition of grievances and emotions, as well as interests, must form a part of official communications and the public rhetoric of politicians and their team. Finally, it must be articulated in a way to reflect simultaneously the logic of different audiences, speaking to their concerns and their worldview, and making sense as a means by which to achieve strategic objectives, build bridges, and allay concerns.

This article has sought to highlight the value and limitations to the field of strategic communications through a broader sweep of the concept of empathy and its application. There are inherent limitations of depth and detail to such an approach, and it is, in many ways, a starting point for a much broader discussion. Further research is needed to examine examples of successful and unsuccessful strategic communications efforts, and the way in which empathy varies in different interactions. For those who research empathy and are interested in its political and strategic

<sup>75</sup> Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom 2008), pg. 6.

implications, there are a number of important questions for further research: does it suffice for empathy to exist in discourse if it is not there in practice? How much does personal disposition matter in developing empathetic politics? To what extent does the intent of the communicator matter if it yields the intended result? Finally, there are useful discussions to be had about the interaction of reason and emotions, particularly in relation to different forms of strategic communications activities.

At a time of political change and unexpected developments, calls for greater empathy in politics provide a valuable occasion for the political establishment to move beyond its own echo chamber and engage more widely with sectors of society who have diverse experiences of a changing globalised world.

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