

## Utilization of the United States' Soft Power in Intimidating the North Korea Autocracy, Case Study: *The Interview Film* (2014)

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### Abstract

A contentious Hollywood sarcastic action comedy film became a hot topic in 2014, sparking an increase of hostilities between the two countries, the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In an era when tensions between liberalism and communism are lower than they were during the Cold War, this film's reappearance raises a sensitive issue between those two countries. The United States uses its dominance in the global entertainment industry through numerous its film productions that are in high demand by the global community as a type of soft power diplomacy to intimidate its political/idealist adversaries and influence global public opinion to support it. Propaganda through communication media such as posters, radio, television, movies, music, and even social media posts like today has been commonly used since World War II to mobilize public opinion in supporting or justifying an international actor's interests. Although its performance is not as fast as hard power, it can influence and encouraging decision makers or countries to place their positions in international relations, even leading them to use hard power to support these interests. Through constructivism and using the film *The Interview* as a case study, this research paper aims to analyse and describe the utilization soft power on propaganda by the U.S. 'to intimidate its political/idealistic enemy, namely North Korea with its autocracy.

### 1. Introduction

The political messages conveyed by soft power are not delivered directly. The effectiveness of soft power is determined by the context in which it is used [2]. It takes multiple attempts and deep understanding to convey the underlying interests or political messages in a way that is more meaningful or acceptable to the recipient or target. The study argues by the existence of Hollywood with its popular in movie industry, make the U.S. as a country whom have a great deal on owning soft power [2], and it give the chance for the U.S. to utilize its potential strength intentionally on soft power diplomacy, it could be seen by most of movies that produced by Hollywood are tend be peppered with U.S. political messages that are consumed by most people around the world.

The release of *The Interview* in 2014 triggered some reactions not only from the movie's admirers but also from the governments of both countries are mentioned on the movie as background story. The North Korean government's reaction turned out into threatened the security of the United States, which led to a geopolitical cyber conflict. North Korea indicated hacked into the computer network of Sony Entertainment, the production company that financed the production of the movie and declared some statements against the making of the movie, reading it as an 'Act of War' by the U.S. [3]. The poster, the trailer, and the film itself clearly show that the film aims to intimidate the North Korean government by satirizing its autocracy where the two main characters on the movie shown aim to overthrow the regime of Kim Jong Un, by assassinating him. Not just for a few seconds or a scene, but the main idea of the movie was a satire on or even criticizing the autocracy of North Korea, we know that both countries have a different acceptance of criticism, while in the U.S. there is freedom of expression, but not in North Korea, which strictly rejects criticism even from its own people.

Observed the controversial phenomenon that happened also the reactions and tensions emergence between North Korea and the U.S. after *The Interview* released, encourage to raise this issue into the research. The research aims to analyze the utilization of soft power which combine with pop cultural in enhancing the success of diplomacy or any international relations form before stepping up into realization any hard power based effort such as military aggression or economic sanction, and so on,

with The Interview movie as case study of utilization of the U.S. soft power to further its foreign policy against the North Korea by criticizing its autocracy through movie media.

## 2. Methodology

In order to understand the utilization of soft power diplomacy by the U.S. to intimidate the North Korean autocracy through The Interview, the methodology of this research will use case study with qualitative method to examine data empirically. The data are taken from the literature, media, and speeches as resources for this paper, which help the author to elaborate the case with the theory, so that it can be validly interpreted. The use of constructivism perspective as theoretical framework of the study considered ideally examine the utilization of The Interview as the U.S soft power tool to North Korea autocracy which implicates the relationship between the two nations. Thus, the research question of the study is how the utilization of the movie The Interview as a soft power of the U.S. to fight the political/idealistic enemy North Korea by intimidating the autocracy from constructivism perspective?

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Movies Part of Soft Power as Foreign Policy Tools

Since the Cold War era, the character of interactions among international actors no longer only depends on hard power, like under military or armed force. The United Nations establishment is the beginning of a new form of interaction between international actors that is more negotiable to avoid casualties and material loss that is diplomacy. This type of interaction requires actors to have such power that they can persuade their counterparts to gain a mutual understanding of each other's interests, so this interaction is not about how many actors can kill the enemy, but how many actors can form an alliance to perpetuate their interests [2] [4]. The utilization of soft power indicated as capable tools to persuade other counterparts to create mutual understanding and could accommodate this type of diplomacy adjusting recent international relations circumstance. Before going to the negotiating table of diplomacy, each of the actors should know his own bargaining position in this negotiation and should try to make the other feel attracted and have a mutual perception about what is to be negotiated, and this process will run smoothly only through the intervention of soft power, otherwise, it will end with a conflict.

The definition of soft power is the capability to achieve the aim through attraction and persuasion rather than through pressure or transaction [2]. The attraction could be gained by adopting culture, political ideals, and foreign policies that are universal acceptable. If a country's policies or ideals are seen as acceptable by others, then soft power has worked. It is more effective to make an alliance by gaining their respect and approval of our idea. So, we do not have face a massive damage and spend a lot of expense as we do with hard power through war to sway them to our position. Something persuasive and agreeable is always more effective and acceptable than coercion, such as human rights, democracy, etc [2]. Joseph S. Nye in his book 'Soft Power' classified three resources of soft power; there is a culture that has values to attract others, political values when practiced both at the domestic and foreign regions, also foreign policy [2]. Hence, the character of culture or values that are considered success in adapting into soft power, should be the one which has universal value to accessing the attraction. Once its success is promoted, it will increase the probability of resulting the desired outcome caused by the attraction.

And as time passed, this manipulation or persuasion effort began to be applied through popular culture whereas more acceptable through entertainment media such as movies [5], to pass on the values to be conveyed in order to shape specific political and cultural ideas along with one of the three resources of soft power cited by Joseph Nye, which are political values and foreign policy while sometimes related with war. The use of movies as a medium of political propaganda in persuasion efforts to promote political principles embraced by state actors is one example of soft power media examined in this case study. This refers to the role of movies as a powerful soft power tool for legitimizing war, murder, and illegal actions under the guise of defending a specific country's political perspective [5]. This idea also supported by Chomsky statement about the role of media to control public opinion make it has strength to manipulate and persuade which is reliable component of soft power, and may subsequently be used by policy maker to further their objectives [6]. The use of media, especially movies like applied in this case study, has been commonly used since World War II to provoke the people of a specific country to

support a country's domestic or foreign policies [5], but along with geopolitical shifts and a world order, the practical is no longer only targeting people under certain national boundaries but spread widening into global citizen.

### 3.2. Soft Power Projecting: The U.S. Foreign Policy through Movies

The U.S. government realizes that transferring its liberal values requires a long process that is no longer relevant if it only relies on using hard power, instead it needs a persuasive process to get the audiences to embrace the values where soft power has the role on it. Like mentioned on the introduction section, the effectiveness of utilizing soft power cannot be applied as simply as Indonesians drink Starbucks does not mean they will let the U.S., represented by Freeport, exploit the \$15.2 billion valued gold mines in Papua. Or like Adidas and Nike are worn by the people of Iraq could stop them on weapons of mass destruction policy, or Russian consume McDonald's but does not guarantee they will convert to liberalism. This lengthy and persuasive process undoubtedly necessitates a tool that may continuously stimulate the transfer of the values to be imparted, such as movies as its soft power for supporting its foreign policy. The U.S. has empowered its media consistently and systematically well to disseminate its political values, proofed by the existing its massive media industry, such as Voice of America (VOA) as representation for presenting America's positive image to the world and Hollywood as symbol biggest entertainment business in the world where it produces popular movies globally [5].

Another proof of utilization the U.S. soft power as political propaganda tool to succeeding its foreign policy is by the involvement of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. military by start placing their agents to Hollywood in the early 1950s [5]. The emergence of CIA and Pentagon in Hollywood as the propaganda designer whom developing strategy and tactic for transmitting the U.S. ideology which sometimes perfected it with science touch for justify the propaganda [5]. CIA also started Operation Mockingbird which officially formed to orchestrate public opinion not only Americans but also globally to the U.S favor and actively promoting the U.S foreign policy and Western ideology [5]. The granting of broadcast licenses for Hollywood movies including for those movies are contained with propaganda element by authorized the U.S institutions, also indicates the support of the U.S. government on utilization movies as soft power to intimidate its rivals.

There are some archetypal on the U.S.' utilization of Hollywood movies, such as it tends inserting their political messages and foreign policy subtly into Hollywood movies aiming to persuade the audience and aimed the change. For example, when Hollywood movies triggered normalization lawsuits to gain rights in China, according to the testimony of a young a Chinese activist after seen many scenes in Hollywood movies about going to court, and they learn to normalize going to court to fight for their rights [2]. The other archetypal is the background stories of Hollywood movies are adopted by the most recent occupied interest of the U.S. foreign policy at the time, so they tend to produce relatable Hollywood movies along with their current political condition. In the Cold War era, most of the movies produced at that time were about U.S. foreign policy against Soviet communism, such as Star Wars (1977), Rocky (1976), The Manchurian Candidates (1962), etc.

After September 11th incident, Hollywood started to produce movies dealing with the fight against terrorism, such as James Bond's 'Casino Royale' (2006), World Trade Center (2006), The Road to Guantanamo (2006), etc. And recently, U.S. foreign policy has been more concerned with criticizing a dictatorship government and the use of nuclear weapons such as The Interview (2014) and The Dictator (2012). The genre and style of movies that Hollywood produced on raising certain issues is parallel with its survey about market demand, thus the transferring values become more acceptable along with soft power principle, such as The Interview (2014) which contains by satirical humor genre. The Interview represents the U.S.'s core cultural value that is 'freedom of expression', as a tool to embed the U.S. liberalism idea in satirizing humor context, which is rated more effective for attracting, accessing, and has a high chance of being accepted by many public masses through various classifications (age, gender, occupation, nation) rather than pouring doctrine this critic about the North Korean autocracy into a boring formal documentary film or a long duration political oration and lecturing.

### 3.3. How intimidating *The Interview* is and why?

Through *The Interview*, the U.S. put an effort to persuade its global audience to justify the U.S. liberalism and democracy against the values of communism adopted by North Korea autocracy led by Kim Jong Un, which is considered authoritarian and no longer credible to be used in state government nowadays. The movie contains several scenes which shown the U.S negative perspective and stigma toward North Korean autocracy. The *Interview* tells the story of two American journalists, Aaron Rappaport and David Skylark, whom a 1000 episodes-aired in the US talk show name Skylark [1]. On the minute 15.00-15.40 and 17.58-18.09 of the movie it shown that they were invited to meet the Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un, for doing interview session in Pyongyang, while on the minute 24.50-25.17 the two main figures implicitly receiving orders from CIA to assassinate the dictatorial leader of North Korea as an effort to fall the absolute regime. During of the movie, several scenes highlight the negative perspective of the U.S. toward North Korean autocracy such as on minute 21.08-21.10 and 21.15-21.21 which shown how Kim Jong Un described as a dictator and brutal leader who tortures, terrorizes and starves his own people from the U.S mass media perspective, and on minute 19.21-19.25 and 24.14-24.30 which talk about North Korea nuclear plan to destroy the world. The rest scenes of the movie contain by revealing other crimes and suffer which has done by North Korea autocracy led by Kim Jong Un to the North Korean people.

On minutes 01.09.28-01.09.40, 01.14.31-01.18.13, 01.18.42-01.18.53, and 01.25.34-01.27.57 demonstrate how abusive Kim Jong Un is to his people and how totalitarian dictator, murderer, manipulator and liar he is. The movie attempts to prove that Kim Jong Un is nothing more than a manipulative, nasty, and dangerous authoritarian leader according to the screen on minutes 33.16-33.44. Through this movie, the involvement of U.S. government symbolized by the emerge of CIA's whom drive on Skylark's mission, pictured as the protagonist who wants to overthrow the autocracy and abusive regime of Kim Jong Un by asking Rappaport and Skylark to kill and prove to the world that Kim Jong Un is just an ordinary man and not a God as he propagates to his people, and framing the autocracy of North Korea as the antagonist part. On the last part on minute 01.42.10-01.42.18 and 01.46.36- 01.46.50 of the movie, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) shown holding the first democratic elections as a movement for a liberated North Korea after the fall of Kim Jong Un's regime [1]. All in all, the movie explicitly shown the U.S. negative perspective to the dictatorship of North Korea autocracy a corrupt and ruthless form of government and utilize this movie as tool to propagandize its intention to carry out a revolutionary movement to correcting the North Korea government like shown on minutes 25.27- 25.45. Historically, the debate between the liberals and the communists is still ongoing and this geopolitical rivalry is still a part of the U.S. foreign policy agenda and a political message that *The Interview* wants to convey.

Several reactions either from North Korea or the U.S. came six months after the release of *The Interview*'s trailer on December 23rd, 2014. The North Korean Foreign Ministry deemed the release of *The Interview* as an 'Act of War' and commented, "The film's offensive plot cannot be forgiven and crosses the line" [3]. In the headline of a North Korean state news agency, the North Korean Foreign Ministry also stated, "The provocative plot leads to an explosion of outrage and fury within our army and among the people" [3]. North Korea also stated, "... mercilessly stomp on those who ... insult or slander even so much as a strand of hair of our top leadership" [3] [7]. This angry statement ends with a threat toward the U.S.: "If the U.S. government allows or protects the film, there will be a firm and merciless response" [3] [7]. The escalation tilted toward a geopolitical cyber conflict when FBI indicated that North Korea involved in a cyber hack criminal act into Sony Entertainment's computer network, the company whom financing the production of *The Interview*. The hackers, namely 'Guardians of Peace,' caused extensive damage by attacking the Sony network's internal system, deleting data, disabling computers, publishing embarrassing emails, and accessing sensitive data such as payroll records [8].

These North Korean protests toward the movie were judged excessive from the U.S. side. The cyber hack in response by the North Koreans damaging Sony's internal network triggers a geopolitical cyber conflict that not only threatens national security but also attacks the core value of the U.S., which is freedom of opinion and speech. According to the FBI statement that North Korea's actions intended to harm the U.S. business and limit the rights of American citizens to have a freedom of expression [9]. As



a result, President Barack Obama stated that the U.S. will respond to it proportionally [10] [11]. Obama criticized the Sony's decision to postpone the release date of the movie, he stated if Sony confirmed to him in advance about the best decision that should be made, then he will direct them do not to postpone it otherwise it will put Sony into the pattern of this cybercriminal intimidate to, and that is not who the U.S. is [10] [11]. This case attracts an unordinary the U.S. response against North Korea and ended up by giving another financial sanction on North Korea [8]. The U. S's concern is not only about their own national security either in public and private sector, but also about their image in the world since this case was watched by the whole world and they see about how the U.S. responds. The U.S. government took an appropriate step as they won't be taken for granted by the situation and also anticipate from encouraging audience to think this incident is not a cross line for the U.S. [12].

Those reactions by the North Korea and feedback that given by the U.S. among this case could be claimed as something 'staged' but what is the urgency to make such 'drama' into the media which absorb by public? According to Chomsky statement regarding the role of media cited on previous section, analyzed that the U.S. act is related with its commitment 'to control the public mind', where they aware the role of media in contemporary politics to encourage people to wondering what kind of a world and society that we want to live in ideally [13]. Thus, the appearance of *The Interview* and the series of reactions afterward, plus the information about the CIA involvement in Hollywood to control the U.S. media content for fight over ideology and foreign policy are considered to clarify the U.S. effort to control public opinion regarding the idea of an ideal society from the perspective of the U.S [5].

The utilization of *The Interview* by the U.S. as soft power tool in criticizing the autocracy of North Korea also could be analyzed from constructivism perspective as theoretical framework in this study. Cited from the constructivist concept of Alexander Wendt about the elements should be contained of an event/phenomenon to form into a social structure is by having three elements; shared knowledge or shared understanding/expectation, material resources which acquire meaning for human action, and the last is practices [14]. The existence utilization of *The Interview* by the U.S. as soft power tool in criticizing the autocracy of North Korea was sourcing and composed by shared knowledge among the U.S., North Korean and global citizen about the war between liberalism versus communism. The Cold War history that known by global society for decades has role as shared knowledge which become one of element that forming and triggering the propaganda between the U.S. and North Korea in our social structure today and led the U.S with utilize *The Interview*.

*The Interview* as material resources which second element of social structure on constructivism acquire meaning as soft power for those two actors, the US and North Korea because there were interactions from both based on historical knowledge in which they are embedded [15]. *The Interview* becomes a soft power for the U.S. in giving beneficial context, because it symbolized 'freedom of expression as the U.S liberalism core value that criticizing to the autocracy of North Korea. The different interpretation about *The Interview* by North Korea in negative context, showed from how their reaction toward the release of the movie and declare it as 'act of war'. For North Korea, *The Interview* was considered as symbol of criticism, propaganda of insulting toward the communist government which risk to a national security threat and the fallen regime which is a nightmare for communist.

And the last element of social structure on constructivism perspective is practice. *The Interview* phenomenon will not become a part of social structure in international relations if no practices that relate among those actors, which we know that the U.S. and North Korea practice as rivals for decades [14]. *The Interview's* story adapted by the rivalry relationship that has been practiced between the U.S. and North Korea over decades and is wrapped in sarcastic action comedy genre, with assumption these propaganda messages could reach the subconscious of its audiences easily without feeling treated with coercion referred to Joseph S. Nye statement about the character of soft power, which should be easy acceptable.

#### 4. Conclusion

The utilization of *The Interview* as the U.S. soft power tool to intimidate the North Korea autocracy could be understood and proofed by fact the use of media communication for propaganda tools in international relations since World War II. Although, some opinions argued that the existence of *The*

Interview is no more than an entertainment media or a marketing product and no relation to propaganda on the political field [16], but it should be underlined that the emergence of a media product is inspired by the realities that occur in society. Media is the result of collaboration between reality and ideas that are reflected in what society wants, hence it is a reliable tool to shape people's mindset towards an opinion as Chomsky stated. The granting of broadcast licenses for Hollywood movies globally by authorized U.S. institution and also information about the involvement of CIA in Hollywood through Operation Mockingbird on designing the propaganda are evidence about the utilization of the movie by the U.S. as soft power to further its foreign policy. And it also applicable on The Interview context, since The Interview is a Hollywood product that own by the U.S. and clearly the movie contained fully penetrated of political messages from the U.S. perspective that satirize North Korea's autocracy.

Analyzation about the utilization of the U.S. soft power through The Interview in intimidating North Korea autocracy through constructivism perspective could be understand by three elements on constructivism in shaping into social structure, they are 1) shared knowledge, 2) material resources which acquire meaning for human action and 3) practices. The output received from emerging The Interview as the U.S.' soft power propaganda tools is something that comes up from shared knowledge that absorbed from history between liberalism and communism during Cold War. The Interview is material resources which acquire meaning from discourse that built by existed war between liberalism and communism in our society, whereby the U.S. captured as protagonist and the Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un as the antagonist on the movie. From practices element, the utilization of The Interview as soft power to further foreign policy of the U.S. reflected by the conflict among both nations which has been practiced in decades.

To sum up, the depiction and exploration of how and why the utilization of The Interview film considered soft power by the U.S. as a tool of its foreign policy to intimidate the autocracy of North Korea on this research gives a contribution to International Relations studies to enrich the fragmentation of International Relations studies or unit analysis regarding power, thus to do not neglecting any form of the potential power of a state or any global actors. By the time, the more various and complex the issue being raised in International Relations studies, then it should be followed with the various approach as well. Both hard power and soft power have their own function in diplomacy purpose which complete each other. When hard power functioned as completion with coercion, then soft power a pre-step which was done before led into hard power if needed. The Interview is interpreted as a pre-step strategy before going into the usage of hard power such as military intervention, and economic sanction by collecting the agreement of the public to legitimate the U.S. perspective toward the autocracy of North Korea, thus it could be a justification for the conflict between the U.S. and North Korea.

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