

Anna Podciborska

**“Pixie Dust” *Ameryka* magazine within USIA’s programming to Poland
1959-1992**

History Department, Gdansk University, 2025

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Summary:

Anna Podciborska’s thesis is excellent. Forty years into my studies of public diplomacy I am seldom surprised let alone *exhilarated* by reading a piece of research, but I felt that way about her thesis. It is really well written and sets out an original and carefully told story of US magazine diplomacy in Cold War Poland. Podciborska presents her material deftly but also manages wonderfully to bring in theorist insight from IR, sociology, and other disciplines too. Clearly, she is a talented researcher. Her thesis shows that she has a thorough understanding of public diplomacy studies. There are many directions in which she could take her work. As with all able young researchers, I am keen to see what she does for the ‘encore’.

Podciborska’s thesis is over 300 pages long including four large chapters and appendices. It is structured into an **introduction** which outlines the

methodologies and theorists whose approaches she applies to the evidence that she has collected; a **first chapter** giving a general history of the United States Information Agency and the US government's general approach to public diplomacy during the Cold War; a **second chapter** explaining the nature and format of Ameryka magazine. This chapter introduces Ameryka to the core disciplinary concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and propaganda; a **third chapter** analyzing the content of Ameryka based on core positive themes of US prosperity/social mobility, technology, Polish-American diaspora links (including religious themes); a **fourth chapter** extends the analysis by considering Ameryka's framing of more general aspects of American life including life and art, race/class, and the issue of gender. Appendices cover technical procedures from computer work, cover art from Ameryka, and well-chosen samples of Ameryka's visual messaging. The thesis has an appropriate and accurate bibliography and abstract.

- 1) An assessment of **general theoretical knowledge** specific to the discipline.

Podciborska's thesis reflects an excellent general theoretical knowledge of public diplomacy studies and particularly its history. All the core approaches are engaged and discussed during her early chapters including Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and propaganda studies. Her literature review is first class and sent me to Amazon to order a couple of recent texts whose publication had escaped me. I was touched that she has made extensive use of my own writing on USIA but was impressed that she had also consulted Hixson, Belmonte, Richmond, and other authors that I always recommend when asked. She mixes work in Polish and English language. She relates and discusses the key milestones within the history of US public diplomacy, including the input of Edward R. Murrow and the famous *Beacon of Hope* report from 1963 which reflected an upgrading of US cultural diplomacy during the Kennedy administration.

Beyond the historical knowledge Podciborska introduces a number of theoretical approaches and tools which are deployed in her theoretical analysis. Much is taken from media studies, cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. Theorists in her tool box include Stuart Hall, Marshall McLuhan, Robert Entman, Norman Fairclough, and on image interpretation Gillian Rose.

She draws most from the writing of Clifford Geertz and his methodology of 'thick description.'

2) Ability to **conduct independent research**

This thesis reflects an exceptional ability to conduct independent research. Podciborska demonstrates her ability to use what I consider to be the essential methodologies for this kind of work. She draws excellent material from archive sources having used the National Archives in Washington DC, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Archive; the historical archive of the State Department's Cultural Bureau (held at the University of Arkansas) and others. Podciborska makes full and detailed use of published documents within the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series. Podciborska has corresponded with and interviewed several veterans of US public diplomacy and consulted the compendium of diplomatic oral histories held at the Library of Congress. She makes use of digital sources including archived newspapers.

Podciborska shows herself well able to apply theorist from the wider field of cultural studies and visual anthropology to the material that she has

collected. I particularly enjoyed her engagement with the visual storytelling of Ameryka magazine.

3) Assessment of **originality**

I see this as original both in its subject matter and its methodological approach. There has been no detailed treatment of the Polish language version of Ameryka, and I consider the recently-published overview of the Russian language version to be partial as it only addresses the gender aspects of the publication. Strengths in Podciborska's work include many extended discussions and analyses of content. The background is fascinating. It is amazing to me that the magazine circulated so broadly, or indeed that the Russian version was a favorite of the Kremlin's resident materialist, Mrs Viktoria Brezhneva. Material is presented both with an eye to its value to the United States and its significance to the lost world of Cold War Poland. Passages that appealed to me particularly were the discussion of US motorboat ownership rates (a 20% figure which seemed unbelievable to Poles); descriptions of literary content including samples from cutting edge science fiction writers like Philip K. Dick; social movement-content like the words and music to 'This land is your land.' It is fascinating to see the link

made in Ameryka magazine between citizenship/social responsibility and consumption.

Podciborska contributes to many of the enduring themes of US Cold War public diplomacy such as gender, tech/space, social mobility, race/civil rights and the ebb and flow of these themes across the period of the Cold War. I expect that the race relations material will be of greatest interest to readers as this remains such a live issue within the representation of the United States.

The application of theorists like Stuart Hall and Clifford Geertz to this material is – in my experience – an original approach. I also think that Podciborska's attention to the Polish-American content is especially interesting. Diaspora diplomacy has become a significant subfield of Public Diplomacy studies. Its emphasis has been on contemporary diaspora approaches, especially the efforts of India, Romania, Mexico and the Philippines. A case from US approaches during the Cold War is both original and welcome.

Suggestions for revision:

While Podciborska has brought first class material from the Reagan library an ultimate published version would be enhanced by the consulting the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter. I see the Eisenhower and Johnson collections as the most important of these as the libraries include most collateral material regarding the operation of USIA. Significant collections to check include the papers of Abbot Washburn (Eisenhower's deputy director of USIA) and Leonard Mark (Johnson's director of USIA for the later years of his presidency). I identified no errors in Podciborska's thesis except a paragraph that appears twice on page 38.

While I appreciated the charts which Podciborska has created to present the content within Ameryka, I was unsure about the thinking within the disaggregation of categories. It occurred to me that by separating Christianity, church and religion into three separate categories and democracy/freedom into two categories the salience of these topics within Ameryka is diluted.

I think that a non-Polish audience might need a little extra background on the nature of Polish life during the period covered by Ameryka including a clear explanation of what the communist Polish government was prepared to

allow the circulation of a magazine presenting so dramatic and spectacular a view of life in the capitalist west. This makes me curious about the Polish archival record around the magazine. I would also be curious to know if/how Polish readers recall the magazine. Such voices are inaccessible to non-Polish researchers right now and will soon – owing to age – be beyond us all.

I am unsure that the ‘pixie dust’ title will work beyond the thesis. I’ve heard that term used ironically by veteran public diplomats to actually mock the idea that good public diplomacy can be deployed to fix bad policy or relationship – sprinkled on – when the reality is that public diplomacy should be part of the creation of the policy in the first place.

There are many approaches that Podciborska might take to publication. I am sure that the greatest career benefit would be from a monograph, however some elements could be usefully expanded into free standing articles or contributions to collections on particular PD themes like gender, science or diaspora.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this is an excellent thesis which meets all the requirements of theory, research and originality required for the doctoral degree and the launch of a significant career. Podciborska and her supervisor are to be congratulated.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nick Cull". The signature is written in a light grey or blue ink.

Nicholas J. Cull

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11 April 2026