From Propaganda to Public Diplomacy
In the Information Age

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After 9/11, the need to win “battle to win the hearts and minds” of foreign publics surfaced within American political consciousness as if it were a new phenomenon when actually foreign information activities have been a critical component of America’s war time strategy since the American Revolution. America’s historical record, however, reveals a stop-and-go pattern that appears tied to recycled debates that emerge and submerge with the ebb and flow between war and peace.

The most salient debate is whether government-sponsored information activities are manipulative “propaganda” or valid “public diplomacy.” Even during the War on Terrorism, the propaganda and public diplomacy are viewed as interchangeable substitutes instead of as two distinct strategic tools of persuasion. However, according to global opinion polls, America’s post 9/11 public diplomacy appears to be producing more adversaries than allies. It may be time to re-think the old thinking of equating propaganda with public diplomacy in the new Information Age.

Historical Trends & Debates
Information activities aimed at informing, influencing and seducing public opinion have been crucial to American foreign policy since the War of 1812, Thomas Jefferson sought to counter the bad press America was receiving in Britain. In 1917, during World War I, Woodrow Wilson created the Committee on Public Information, followed by the U.S. Foreign Information Office. Both agencies were absorbed into the Office of War Information, established in 1942, as part of an aggressive domestic and foreign information campaign. The Voice of America (VOA) expanded its language broadcast, while its surrogates, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty sought to break through the Iron Curtain. As part of the Cold War, America’s foreign information programs grew substantially. The U.S. Information Agency, established in 1953, conducted a wide range of information and cultural exchange activities. The Voice of America (VOA), with its language broadcast, while its surrogates, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty sought to break through the Iron Curtain.

Harold C Pachios, Chairman of the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, noted, “the height of USIA’s prestige and acceptance probably occurred in the 1960s.” Not coincidentally, this was also the height of the Cold War as well.

In contrast to the steady growth of foreign information programs from the 1950s to the 1980s, the 1990s saw a major drop. As funds and interest in foreign information programs decreased, the ebb and flow between war and peace also appeared tied to recycled debates that emerge and submerge with the ebb and flow between war and peace.
The dwindling resources and programs reflected a distinct historical pattern in American public diplomacy. During times of conflict, information becomes a key component of the war effort. Domestic concerns, rather than foreign policy goals, either to win over allies or defeat enemies. Typically, the information campaigns begin with a strong presidential initiative. When the president makes the decision to go to war, the first priority is to mobilize domestic and foreign support. New resources are pooled into aggressive information initiatives. The more intense the conflict, the more aggressive the information campaign.

Throughout World War II, domestic opposition to the war propaganda was particularly aggressive and many of the initiators of the campaign used their expertise to refine propaganda practices while others developed American advertising and public relations.

Not surprisingly, the Smidt-Mundt Act had specified that overseas activities could not be used to lobby the American public. Therefore, many of today’s commentators continue the tradition of aggressive ideological warfare and propaganda.

The White House Office on Global Communication to help coordinate the preparation of the Office of Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. The president created the USIA specifically stipulated overseas in the Creel Commission, President Truman the OWI, and President Eisenhower the USIA.

Then, as each war gradually draws to a close, so does the campaign. The extensive wartime information apparatus is dismantled in the process. The Creel Commission stopped its domestic activities the day after the pre-armistice agreement was signed to end WWI and halted its foreign information activities several months later. Within months after the end of WWII, President Truman signed executive order abolishing the Office of War Information. Similarly, the decline of USIA’s extensive programs began soon after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the Soviet foreign publications purely theoretical.

Union in 1991, the symbolic end to the Cold War.
makes sense. Information activities are vital to the war effort because they secure and maintain domestic and foreign support as well as reduce opposition.

As the duration of the war progresses, the foreign information activities appear to expand militarily, politically, and economically. Other agencies become involved. Competition emerges. Noteworthy, the nature and purpose of information appears to shift depending on whether State or Defense has the upper hand. When the Defense Department is actively involved in the overseas information activities, the tendency is toward secrecy, control and manipulation of information. When the State Department or USIA takes the lead, the focus is on truth and accuracy. 12

This historical trend appears to be repeating itself in the current War on Terrorism. As David Guth observed shortly after the post 9/11 information campaign began, “The control and direction of US overseas information programs remain issues at the start of a new century (2001) as much as they were in the middle of the last century.” 13

### Propaganda and Public Diplomacy in the Information Age

Underlying all of these historical trends appears to be an unresolved debate over whether America’s information activities make propaganda the tool of choice in certain contexts. John Brown speaks to the surfacing and submerging of the American debate over propaganda. 14 In writing about America’s “anti-propaganda” tradition, he observed that during times of war, the tendency is to attribute successes and failures of propaganda to the technical features that make propaganda effective in certain contexts. From a communication perspective, several unresolved debates over whether America's information activities make propaganda the tool of choice in certain contexts should rely on “truth” or “propaganda” to influence publics. 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communication in a global communication arena. Because the audience is free to accept or not accept the message, persuasion through coercion or control is not applicable. Instead, persuasion must be absolutely credible if the government stands any chance of success. Thus, the persuasive value of public diplomacy is tied to its credibility: the more credible a government’s public diplomacy is, the more persuasive it is.

Context and purpose greatly suggests when and where a government should employ public diplomacy versus propaganda. In the international arena, communication and information are used to public trust and support for a government’s policies must perceive a nation’s public diplomacy as a win and coercion – make it a highly effective tool of military operations. During war, military strategy demands secrecy and deception in order to keep the opponent off-guard, demoralized, or confused. To substitute propaganda for public diplomacy can manipulate information is what makes propaganda and psychological operations such invaluable strategic tool of warfare.

The technical features of propaganda – secrecy, deception, manipulation information would be fodder for the international media and public relations and persuasion strategies are being used. 

The technical features of public diplomacy – public, open, interactive global communication – make it a highly effective foreign policy tool for informing foreign publics of a government’s policies and intentions and for gaining their support. However, credibility is vital. In fact, credibility is the most important asset that a nation seeks attain and to preserve. In the international communication environment, the slightest hint of deception or manipulation of the audience feels that its trust has been deliberate through manipulation or deception, the audience will lose trust and confidence. To gain opposite effect, up until recently it may have been possible to substitute propaganda with public diplomacy. However, the advent of advanced technologies have crystallized the need to distinguish propaganda and public diplomacy. In the international arena and the advent of advanced technologies have crystallized the need to distinguish propaganda and public diplomacy. In the international arena, communication and information are used to public trust and support for a government’s policies must perceive a nation’s public diplomacy as a win. Secrecy allows the communicator to retain control over information and manipulate the element of surprise. The need to deliberately use during times of war.

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undergraduate degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University and graduate degrees in Intercultural Communication from Columbia University.

ENDNOTES


available online http://www.info.sophia.ac.jp/amecana/Journal/14-2.html


3 For historical record of the Voice of America, see its website: www.voa.gov; for anecdotal account, see Alan Heil, Voice of America (NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

4 Harold C. Pachios, The New Diplomacy, Remarks to Woodrow Wilson

Association, September 2002.


9 Jackson, op. cit.

10 Edward Bernays has also written extensively about h Propaganda (1925) and Crystalizing Public Opinion in 1'


13 Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern Univer

14 For example, William Harlan Hale opened the first Ar

radio broadcast in Europe on February 24, 1942 with ““

America speaks. Today, America has been at war for 79

time, we shall speak to you about America and the war,

15 good or bad, we shall tell you the truth.”


17 John Brown, “The anti-propaganda tradition in the Un


19 Richard Holbrooke, “Get the message out,” Washingto


21 Kim Andrew Elliott, “Is there an audience for public c


22 Joseph S. Nye, The Paradox of Power (NY: Oxford Univ