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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 interchange 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 gaining the support of foreign publics have been an integral part of American history from its founding as a nation to its current superpower position. In 1776, Benjamin Franklin actively engaged the French government and distributed pamphlets in an effort to gain the support for American independence. Shortly after the War of 1812, Thomas Jefferson sought to counter the bad press America was receiving in Britain. In 1917, during World War I, President Woodrow Wilson created the Committee on Public Information, also known as the "Creel Commission," to build support at home and promote America's message abroad.[1]

Shortly before the start of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established first the Office of Coordinator of Information, followed by the U.S. Foreign Information Service.[2] Radio broadcast to Asia began within days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Broadcasts in Europe began 79 days after the U.S. entered the war. Both agencies were absorbed into the Office of War Information in 1942, as part of an aggressive domestic and foreign campaign that included Hollywood movies, extensive photography collection and patriotic posters.[3]

During the Cold War, America's foreign information programs grew substantially. The U.S. Information Agency (USIA), established in 1953, conducted a wide range of information and cultural exchange activities. The Voice of America (VOA) expanded its language broadcast, while its surrogates, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty sought to breakthrough the Iron Curtain. As Harold C Pachios, Chairman of the US Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy, noted,

"The height of USIA's prestige and acceptance probably occurred in the 1960s."[4] 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 marked a decade of sharp decline in funds and interest in foreign information programs. Many of USIA's posts abroad were cut back by one-third to one-half.[5] American cultural centers and libraries were closed, while positions dedicated to press and cultural affairs were eliminated.[6] Foreign Service officers practicing public diplomacy dropped 40 percent between 1991 to 2001.[7] The State Department's Educational and Cultural Exchange Programs appropriation declined by more than 33 percent from 1993 to 2001.[8] In 1999, the USIA was incorporated into the State Department, along with its budget and resources.

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 – either to win over allies or defeat enemies. Typically, the information campaigns begin with a strong presidential initiative.[9] When the president makes the decision to go to war, the first priority is to mobilize domestic and foreign support. New resources are pooled and funneled into an aggressive information initiative. The more intense the conflict, the more aggressive the information campaign. Often the president creates a new office or agency as well. President Wilson created the Creel Commission, President Truman the OWI, 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 Union in 1991, the symbolic end to the Cold War.

In keeping with this historic pattern, when President Bush launched the war on terrorism, he spoke out forcefully on the need to "do a better job of making our case" to overseas publics. However, because America had been enjoying a peacetime economy and mood during the period prior to 9/11, information programs and apparatus had to be re-established anew. Congress held hearings and increased funding for public diplomacy. The State Department appointed a new Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. The president created the White House Office on Global Communication to help coordinate America's message. A familiar trend.

Another, perhaps less obvious historical trend is that domestic concerns, rather than foreign policy goals, appear to guide the cuts in overseas information activities. In the case of WWI and WWII, domestic opposition to the war propaganda spurred Congressional action to effectively halt war-related information activities, domestic as well as foreign. Americans not only grow weary with war, but more so with the aggressive tactics used to sustain support for the war. Indeed, the tactics used during WWI and WWII were particularly aggressive and many of those involved in the campaign used their expertise to refine propaganda techniques while others develop American advertising and public relations practices.[10]

Not surprising perhaps, the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 that created the USIA specifically stipulated overseas information activities could not be used to lobby the American public. Ironically, many of today's commentators continue the tradition of advocating an aggressive ideological warfare and propaganda abroad yet are outraged if similar strategies are used at home – even though the Internet has made the separation between America's domestic and foreign publics purely theoretical.

A final feature of America's past information activities that appears even today is the competition between government agencies and departments, particularly between the departments of Defense and State.[11] Historically, the Defense Department appears to have taken the lead in initiating the information activities. Logically, this 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 program s remain issues at the start of a new century (2001) as much as they were in the middle of the last."[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 should rely on "truth" or "propaganda" to influence publics. 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 need to win increases the appeal and acceptance of propaganda. As peace looms near, American suspicions of propaganda resurface with a vengeance. Propaganda again falls out of favor. All government information activity labeled as "propaganda" is summarily curtailed.

Once again, the debate over propaganda has resurfaced in the War on Terrorism. Yet this time, "propaganda" is being used interchangeably with a new term "public diplomacy" to characterize all foreign information activities. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke began his piece in the *Washington Post* with the line: "Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or – if you really want to be blunt – propaganda."[15] Ambassador Kim Andrew Elliott began his piece in the *New York Times* with a similar line, "Public diplomacy – the current and gentler term for international propaganda…"[16]

Interestingly, while Americans appear to be against propaganda because of its *content*, they appear to define propaganda by its *source*, or who disseminates it. Coincidentally, the term entered American popular parlance tied to sinister foreign sources, "Nazi propaganda," and later, "Communist propaganda." This American tendency to define propaganda in terms of its source overlooks the fact that all communication is inherently biased, reflecting the perspective, needs, and desires of the communicator. It also blurs the distinct technical features that make each a strategic tool of persuasion during times of war.

From a communication perspective, several key features make propaganda the tool of choice in certain contexts, and public diplomacy in other contexts. Propaganda deliberately manipulates the communication through a variety of techniques so that some aspect is hidden from the audience and the audience feels compelled to accept the message. With coercion as the goal, information control and deception are key to effective propaganda. Propaganda Institute identified many of the techniques such as "name-calling, labeling, bandwagon, etc" used to manipulate and control information.

Public diplomacy, by definition is just that – open public 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 is achieved through gaining audience trust and confidence. To gain trust, public diplomacy 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.

The technical features of propaganda – secrecy, deception 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. Secrecy allows the communicator to retain control over information and manipulate the element of surprise. The need to deliberately manipulate information is what makes propaganda and psychological operations such invaluable strategic tool of warfare.

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 information would be fodder for the international media and publics. It is perhaps for this reason that Professor Joseph Nye's prediction that future communication battles will be "a contest of credibility" is so astute.[17] Once a communicator loses credibility through either inaccurate or contradictory messages, the audience loses trust and confidence in the communicator and discounts all future messages. If the audience feels that its trust has been deliberately violated through manipulation or deception, the audience will be even more hostile and all future efforts to gain support will produce the opposite effect.

Up until recently it may have been possible to equate propaganda with public diplomacy. However, the dramatic changes in the international arena and the advent of advanced global technologies have crystallized the need to distinguish between propaganda and public diplomacy. In the international political arena, communication and information are used to effectively gain public trust and support for a government's policies. The audience must perceive a nation's public diplomacy as a win-win situation. On the military battlefield, however, communication and information are used to successfully defeat the enemy. It's a win-lose situation. To substitute propaganda for public diplomacy can undermine the effectiveness of each as powerful persuasive tools that nations can use during times of war.

ENDNOTES

[1] Much has been written about the U.S. Committee on Public Information known as the Creel Commission. For an overview of its place in American public diplomacy, see, John S. Gibson, "Public Diplomacy," *International Educator*, Vol. 8, no. 2-3, Spring 1998; for an excellent communication analysis of the Creel commission, see, Marion K. Pinsdorff, **"**Woodrow Wilson's Public Relations: Wag The Hun," *Public Relations Review***,** Fall 1999 v25 i3 p309.; and for an international perspective, see, Kazuyuki Matsuo, "American Propaganda in China: The U.S. Committee on Public Information 1918-1919" *Journal of American and Canadian Studies*, Journal #14, 1996 (Tokyo, Japan).
available online http://www.info.sophia.ac.jp/amecana/Journal/14-2.htm

[2] For more detailed historical overview, see "Daniel Guth, "From OWI to USIA: The Jackson Committee's search for the Real 'Voice' of America, *American Journalism*, 19, Winter 2002.

[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 School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, April 24, 2002

[5] Fred A. Coffey, Jr. "Our Crippled Public Diplomacy," USIA Alumni Association, September 2002.

[6] Donna Marie Oglesby, "Dog Food, Diapers, Diplomacy," Address to St. Petersburg West Rotary, February 19, 2003.

[7] Mike Canning, "New focus on public diplomacy," *Friends of the Foreign Service Bulletin*, n.d.

[8] Harold Pachios, "The New Diplomacy," Remarks to Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass., December 4, 2002

[9] Jackson, op. cit.

[10] Edward Bernays has also written extensively about his techniques, see *Propaganda* (1925) and *Crystallizing Public Opinion* in 1923. For analysis of Bernays, see, Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (NY: Crown, 1998) and Scott M. Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations A History* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

[11] Alvan Synder, "U.S. Foreign Affairs in the New Information Age: Charting a Course for the 21st Century," The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1994.

[12] For example, William Harlan Hale opened the first American sponsored radio broadcast in Europe on February 24, 1942 with "The Voice of America speaks. Today, America has been at war for 79 days. Daily, at this time, we shall speak to you about America and the war, the news may be good or bad, *we shall tell you the truth*."

[13] Guth, op. cite. p. 19.

[14] John Brown, "The anti-propaganda tradition in the United States," *Bulletin Board for Peace*," June 29, 2003.

[15] Richard Holbrooke, "Get the message out," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2001, page B07.

[16] Kim Andrew Elliott, "Is there an audience for public diplomacy?" *New York Times*, November 16, 2002.

[17] Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of Power* (NY: Oxford University, 2003), p. 68.