

Propaganda:

A Tool of Strategic Influence

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Introduction

What is propaganda? What role has it played in U.S. public diplomacy and military information operations?

The prolific use of propaganda by all sides during World War I and World War II has led to a large degree of public skepticism with regards to modern attempts by the United States to employ the practice towards foreign audiences.

Though the historical implications of propaganda should always be of concern, those analyzing the subject should note that the U.S.' guiding principles towards the dissemination of information has historically promoted the use of facts.

For instance, during its first broadcast in 1942, Voice of America's William Harlan Hale set a precedent, stating, "The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth."¹

That tradition of disseminating factual information was upheld over 20 years later, when Edward E. Murrow, the Director of USIA in 1963, laid out his perspective on the issue during Congressional testimony in 1963, arguing:

*"American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that."*²



A propaganda photo produced by the Office of War Information in 1942.



The purpose of this factsheet is to demonstrate that, regardless of the emotion aroused by the term, “propaganda” has been and will remain a prevalent aspect of U.S. foreign policy. This fact sheet does not purport to place a moral judgment on its use, but rather explore its institutional and legislative basis as a tool for influencing foreign audiences.

Below is a brief look at the fundamentals of propaganda and the relationship it holds with public diplomacy and the U.S. Government.

Origin of the Term

Propaganda finds its root in the Latin word “propagare,” used to describe the process of aiding plant reproduction by using cuttings from the plant.

- The Roman Catholic Church assisted in the evolution of the term in the 17th century with the establishment of the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (the Congregation for Propagating the Faith).³
- During the French Revolution, the term began to gain a more political rather than religious connotation.⁴
- Continuing to evolve, by the mid-19th century, propaganda bore the political connotation it carries today.⁵

Definition

Propaganda has many “official” definitions, however many of these carry subtle nuances. In its basic sense, propaganda can be defined as:

- Ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause.⁶

Propaganda can be and often is completely truthful information. This information, while truthful, is often presented selectively to highlight some facts while omitting others that may present a differing view of an issue.

As the term propaganda received an increasingly negative association, policy makers sought to distance themselves from outright promotion of its use.

Illustrating this, Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 1965, established the modern use of the term “public diplomacy” which he said, “deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies.”⁷ Furthermore, in describing his effort to create a name for to the activities we now understand as public diplomacy, Gullion stated:

“To connote this activity, we at the Fletcher School tried to find a name. I would have liked to call it ‘propaganda.’ It seemed like the nearest thing in the pure interpretation of the word to what we were doing. But ‘propaganda’ has always a pejorative connotation in this country. To describe the whole range of communications, information, and propaganda, we hit upon ‘public diplomacy.’”⁸

Types

Propaganda comes in three different forms, white, grey and black:

- **White** propaganda is correctly attributed to its true source⁹ and generally uses facts and truthful messages in a persuasive manner. Although it relies on truth, it is often presented in a biased manner.¹⁰
- **Grey** propaganda does not have a specifically identified source, and conceals its originator.¹¹
- **Black** propaganda is falsely attributed to a source other than the true originator.¹² It can also describe the use of disinformation¹³ which spreads false information as truth to an audience with the intent that the audience does not realize it is being propagandized.¹⁴

Propaganda vs. Public Diplomacy

Propaganda is better categorized as a sub-set of public diplomacy, rather than being equivalent to public diplomacy. Dr. Nicholas J. Cull, a leading scholar on the subjects of public diplomacy and propaganda, lays out some of the key differences between public diplomacy and propaganda:¹⁵

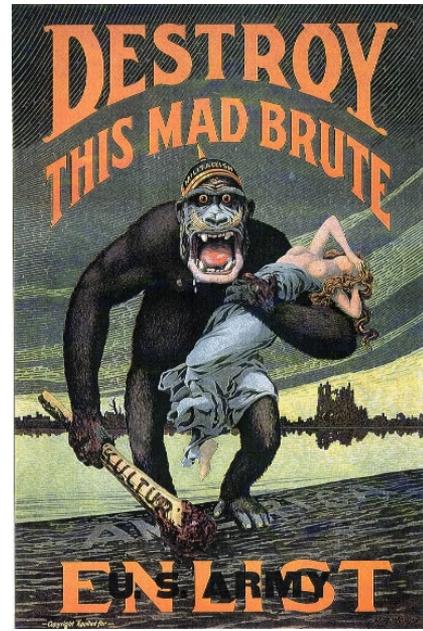
Propaganda	Public Diplomacy
Selective of truth	Based on truth
Rarely two-way	Often two-way
Listens in order to target	Listens in order to learn
Intended only to influence target	Can influence the originator
Tight agenda	Flexible agenda
Assumes others are wrong	Tends to be respectful of others
Closed	Open

U.S. Government Institutional and Legislative History

The use of propaganda in or by America is steeped in history dating back to the Revolution, with pieces like Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," a pamphlet which made the argument for American independence. Listed below is a chronological outline of some of the legislation and U.S. government institutions that have been tasked with conducting U.S. propaganda or related activities since the First World War:

- Woodrow Wilson created the Committee on Public Information with Executive Order 2594 on April 13, 1917,¹⁶ which was designed to generate and maintain public support for U.S. participation in World War I. It conducts activities domestically and overseas.
- The Office of War Information (OWI) was established on June 13, 1942 and operated until September 15, 1945.¹⁷ Its audience was both foreign and domestic.¹⁸ In 1943, Congress greatly cut OWI's domestic budget for FY1944, primarily over its publication "Negroes and the War."¹⁹

- The US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (Smith-Mundt Act), outlined the United States' plan to "promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries, and to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries."²⁰
- The United States Information Agency (USIA) was created on August 1, 1953, by the President's Reorganization Plan No. 8 and Executive Order 10477 as a consolidation of all the foreign information activities of the U.S. Government into one entity.²¹
- Smith-Mundt was amended in 1972 to specifically prohibit domestic dissemination of materials by USIA, stating that materials produced for foreign audiences "shall not be disseminated within the United States, its territories, or possessions."²² It has never contained wording pertaining to the Department of Defense or Central Intelligence Agency.
- The "Zorinsky Amendment" of 1985 amended the Smith-Mundt Act with the intention to solidify the prohibition on the "domestic dissemination of international information materials and products" while "attempting to curtail the intentional or unintentional propagandizing of the American populace through exposing it to public diplomacy materials whose purpose is to influence foreign public opinion."²³
 - It stated: "No funds authorized to be appropriated to the United States Information Agency shall be used to influence public opinion in the United States, and no program material prepared by the United States Information Agency shall be distributed within the United States."²⁴
 - Senator Zorinsky reasoned: "By law, the USIA cannot engage in domestic propaganda. This distinguishes us, as a free society, from the Soviet Union where domestic propaganda is a principal government activity...The American taxpayer certainly does not need or want his tax dollars used to support U.S. Government propaganda directed at him or her. My amendment ensures that this will not occur."²⁵
- The Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 abolishes the USIA, replacing it with the newly created Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs within the Department of State.²⁶ International broadcasting becomes institutionalized in the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The ban on domestic dissemination was subsequently applied to the State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors.



A propaganda photo produced by the Office of War Information in 1942.

Current U.S. Institutions which Inform or Influence

Communications techniques geared towards influence, which some may label propaganda, are utilized by the U.S. Department of State, Department of Defense, Broadcasting Board of Governors, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

While these institutions also have wings for Public Affairs (PA), the purpose of public affairs differs from elements that use propaganda. Broadly speaking, propaganda is intended specifically to influence an audience's opinion or actions rather than simply to "inform" as do public affairs. Below is a current list of the main U.S. Government entities currently associated with informing or influencing foreign publics:

- The U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force all have units dedicated to the dissemination of propaganda. These units conduct what is referred to as Military Information Support Operations (MISO).
 - MISO activities were previously formally known as Psychological Operations (PSYOP).²⁷
 - According to a joint military publication, MISO, a subset of the umbrella terms Information Operations (IO) or Inform and Influence Activities (IIA),²⁸ "are planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals."²⁹
 - A 2004 Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum outlines the primary difference between Public Affairs and Information Operations: "PA's principal focus is to inform the American public and international audiences in support of combatant commander public information needs at all operational levels. IO, on the other hand, serves, in part, to influence foreign adversary audiences using psychological operations capabilities."³⁰
- The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is an independent federal agency supervising all U.S. government-supported, civilian-run international media. The BBG's mission is "to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy."³¹ Broadcasters within the BBG network include the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa), Radio Free Asia, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and TV Marti).³²
- The Central Intelligence Agency has historically been involved in a number of initiatives designed to influence public opinion both domestically and abroad.³³



A U.S. Army helicopter dropping leaflets during a MISO mission.

- The State Department’s Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs mission “is to support the achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by informing and influencing foreign publics and by expanding and strengthening the relationship between the people and Government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world.”³⁴ It envelops the Bureaus of Educational and Cultural Affairs; International Information Programs; Public Affairs; and the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications.³⁵

Modernization of Legislation

The original Smith-Mundt Act, passed in 1948, has been amended several times over the years. The most recent amendment came in the form of The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act, passed in 2012 as part of the FY13 National Defense Authorization Act. The modernization has stirred some controversy being characterized by critics as a change that allows the U.S. Government to propagandize its own citizens.³⁶ This is not an accurate interpretation.

The Modernization-Act essentially updated the Smith-Mundt Act in the following ways:

- The Act removed the restriction previously in place that banned government material produced for overseas consumption from being made available to the American public.³⁷
- It contains language specifically indicating that the Act only applies to the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.³⁸
- According to the Act, “The Secretary [of State] and the Broadcasting Board of Governors may, upon request and reimbursement of the reasonable costs incurred in fulfilling such a request, make available, in the United States, motion pictures, films, video, audio, and other materials prepared for dissemination abroad or disseminated abroad.”³⁹
- The act states: “Nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit the Department of State or the Broadcasting Board of Governors from engaging in any medium or form of communication, either directly or indirectly, because a United States domestic audience is or may be thereby exposed to program material, or based on a presumption of such exposure. Such material may be made available within the United States and disseminated when appropriate...”⁴⁰
- American citizens can now have their requests for information produced by the Broadcasting Board of Governors legally fulfilled.⁴¹
- U.S. international broadcasters have long held internet assets and websites that did not prevent access by Americans. The modernization act renders it legal for people in the United States to access material that they were already viewing daily via search engine queries.⁴²

Conclusion

To many, propaganda evokes thoughts of nefarious actions and the ill-intentioned manipulation of information. While this may sometimes be true, propaganda is, in its simplest form, the selective presentation of information in a manner intended to promote a specific train of thought. While propaganda can sometimes be an extremely powerful tool of persuasion, it is by no means always effective nor is it necessarily a deceitful tool used exclusively by those with harmful intentions.

Public diplomacy and propaganda have had a contentious relationship, largely because both deal with influencing public opinion, propaganda is just one subset of public diplomacy. Though propaganda and public diplomacy both seek to influence public opinion, they follow a different set of guiding principles. Public diplomacy involves a much larger sphere of influence, focusing more on the creation of mutual understanding through open dialogue and increased cultural and educational interactions.

As propaganda exists in many different forms, both overt and covert, it is ultimately the responsibility of the individual to determine the extent of influence it is able to bear on public opinion.

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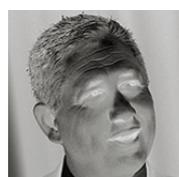
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