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Reclaiming the Narrative: The US and International Communications

May 4, 2022 | Potomac Institute for Policy Studies

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The Shining City upon a Hill

Not long ago, the United States was universally perceived as that shining "city upon a hill"¹—a modern nation founded solely on an idea and serving as a beacon of freedom for the whole world. For 40 years, an independent, federally-funded organization had promoted the core values of the United States, broadcasted local and international news, and shared free and open information with the rest of the world. Today, that organization, the US Information Agency (USIA), has largely ceased to exist and the world has lost a trusted, independent voice.

There Once was an Agency

The revolution in communications that connects people and nations online has placed the United States in a global competition of ideas ideas and memes. The US is ill-prepared to compete successfully in this realm. We are losing because we are not communicating a clear, coherent narrative of our intentions and actions in ways understood and trusted by the world. We have no coordinated plan for communicating that narrative and no national strategy for communications.

Americans aspire to certain values articulated in the founding documents that provide the core constructs of the United States, namely: **justice, freedom, peace**, and the **duty** to protect those values. But today, our nation is no longer actively sharing the strong belief in those values

with the rest of the world. The United States government, in particular, is no longer seen as a reliable source of truth. In 1999, the US State Department absorbed fractured parts of the USIA. It didn't take long for decision makers to realize that relinquishing an independent voice was a bad idea. Two years after the State Department took over the USIA, then-Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who had overseen the plan, expressed concern that folding USIA into the State Department might have been a mistake.² By 2001, the nation felt the loss of an independent and trusted voice telling our story.

The USIA's charter separated it from political bodies and provided governance that insured its independence, free from political influence. This independence, whether perceived or real, was lost when factions of USIA were absorbed into the US Department of State. Since then, the Broadcasting Board of Governors and other organizations have attempted to foster an independent voice on behalf of the United States. They have not maintained the level of trust previously held by USIA. The USIA was held in high regard and was generally believed to speak the truth concerning the United States—whether good, bad, or ugly.

Given this absence of authentic voice, we believe that our nation, and indeed the world, again needs to reconstitute an independent resource that can coordinate our messaging and relationships on the world stage, and in so doing, can earn back and maintain trust as a source of truth.

This new resource might be a new agency, like the USIA, or an independent function of an existing organization with authority and accountability to coordinate various agencies with tasking in public diplomacy and strategic messaging.

Projecting Truth and Countering Propaganda—USIA History

The desirability of a national source of public information has been recognized since the days of World War I. Various administrations created organizations designed to spread a national message to support our allies and counter our adversaries' propaganda. The Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 established the "Voice of America" as a communication outlet for foreign populations, created the Fulbright Program, and in these ways, was designed to "combat weapons of false propaganda and misinformation."³

Dwight D. Eisenhower had long advocated the need to conduct "psychological warfare," by countering adversary propaganda with a strategic and trusted message.^{4,5} In a campaign speech in 1952,⁶ Eisenhower emphasized a whole-of-government approach to strategic messaging (primarily to counter communist oppression), and the need to inspire world respect of American ideals using peaceful tools. He differentiated these strategic messaging goals from propaganda by stating that the purpose of the former is to "help free people stay free," by "winning the struggle for...minds" through a message with "spiritual strength."⁷

In 1953, President Eisenhower's "Jackson Committee" recommended creation of a separate agency for these purposes, and Eisenhower's 1953 Executive Order 10477 established the USIA.⁸ Based on the now-declassified Jackson Committee report, the USIA was established for overt communications, while covert channels were established separately, with all communications coordinated through the National Security Council to the president.⁹ Initially, the USIA was engaged in campaigns to support the President's "Chance for Peace" and "Atoms for Peace" proposals, both internationally and domestically.¹⁰ During the Kennedy Administration, famed newscaster Edward R. Murrow led the USIA, and tied the agency more closely to the CIA, to receive intelligence briefings, counter insurgency training, and advise local

issues and culture, particularly in Southeast Asia. There were some indications of USIA involvement in covert operations during Murrow's tenure.¹¹ While there was connectivity between the overt side of public diplomacy, and covert aspects of propaganda after Murrow's departure, the USIA refused to work with the CIA in most cases, and would not release any information that did not have full and accurate attribution.¹²

Throughout the Cold War, the USIA opened libraries at embassies in closed countries, sponsored thousands of cultural exchanges, established over 200 public affairs offices throughout the world that fostered social media engagement, and provided access to world news through its Voice of America radio network; each with intent to bring truth and balance to even the most closed societies. By the end of the Cold War, the USIA had a well-connected global network of radio and television broadcasting, cultural and educational exchange programs, and open access libraries providing a wide array of knowledge—often serving as the only source of free information. The USIA adapted with changes taking place in communications technology; having a budget of around \$1 billion per year, offices and outlets throughout the world, and a staff of over 10,000 people.

However, the agency was not free of controversy, and concerns were raised that the agency could be used to promote polemical administration policies,¹³ despite its charter to exercise overt public diplomacy. In 1972 and in 1985, Congressional action effectively prohibited USIA from domestic dissemination.¹⁴ This lack of transparency may have heightened fears that the USIA was engaged in propaganda, and prohibitions were removed in the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012.

The USIA began to lose favor—and funding—in the late 1980s and '90s. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War seemed to lessen the need for psychological warfare. Communist ideology had seemingly been defeated, and the desire for a "peace dividend" inspired cost cutting across the US Department of Defense and Department of State. The USIA's billion-dollar budget was an easy target. Infighting and budget cuts created dysfunction that hurt the organization, and the USIA was defunded and absorbed into the State Department in 1999.¹⁵

But, in this defrocking, valuable capabilities were lost. Many worldwide assets, such as free libraries, were shuttered. Perhaps most significantly, the US lost much of its ability to understand and influence real audiences within adversary and allied nations, alike.

The USIA was able to remain well-respected and trusted by demonstrating significant success in messaging, and helping to create and maintain the coalition during *Desert Storm* and *Desert Shield*. An argument can be made that the USIA was one of the organizations that helped the United States to prevail in the Cold War. The news provided by the USIA media organizations was largely of local interest to the nations where they were broadcasting, and US news was portrayed openly and honestly, inclusive of events such as civil rights issues in the '60s, Watergate in the '70s, and the political scandals of the '90s. Exchange programs, such as the Fulbright program, created generations of scholars and world leaders who had been exposed to US culture and who were educated in US institutions. A 2008 survey of USIA alumni noted the difference between public diplomacy and propaganda, and largely credited USIA with creating international understanding and support for the US and its policies.¹⁶ The alumni pointed to values of credibility, respect, and truthfulness as the most important assets for public diplomacy professionals who are working in overseas regions. They rated public diplomacy efforts during the Cold War as having been "good" or "excellent," yet a majority felt that by 2008, US public diplomacy was marginal or poor.

Strategic Communications Abhors a Vacuum

The events of September 11th 2001 provided a harsh view of how much had been lost due to the demise of the USIA as it had been. The 9/11 Commission quoted the view of NSC staff that by spring 2001, US public diplomacy was so diminished in the Middle East that "we have by and large ceded the court of public opinion" to Al Qaeda.¹⁷ This same lack of US public diplomacy was true in Europe, Latin America, and East Asia.¹⁸

Many USIA functions were absorbed into the Department of State's "Board for International Broadcasting" and the "Global Engagement Center" (GEC). These agencies

still exist, but they neither have the breadth and depth that the USIA had, nor operate independently from any given administration. The GEC's mission, for example, embodies the mission of countering adversary propaganda—specifically, to "recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations."¹⁹ But, countering foreign propaganda requires a messaging strategy, coordination with multiple information sources, and, most importantly, a source that is trusted because it operates outside of political influence. With the loss of many overseas offices and resources, the remnants of USIA lack connectivity to regional influences and knowledge and, therefore, are relatively impotent.

While the US lacked an independent strategic coordinated messaging strategy, messaging by others grew exponentially. US communications lacked overarching guidance. One communications expert has stated: "One possible reason for the cacophony of discordant messages—in addition to the sheer volume of information—is the lack of a clear, articulate strategy from the national leadership. Without this, the leaders of each department, agency, and office are left to decide what is important. In most cases the answer is to use the organization's communication efforts to advance its own interests."²⁰ With the proliferation of other nations' information, voices, and channels, the situation continues to worsen.

Today, there is intense competition for cognitive influence. The Internet and its ability to spread messages globally enables any individual to communicate with almost the same force and breadth as a nation. People worldwide are bombarded with competing ideas that are promulgated as "truths." The United States is not well-positioned in this competition. To regain and maintain leadership, the US should better diffuse ideas to attract populations to the ideals of democratic societies.

Both the US Department of State and Department of Defense acknowledge the need for strategic messaging. Still, responsibility for strategic communications remains fractured within these departments. In the State Department, the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs departments, as well as the Office of Congressional

and Public Affairs each have responsibilities and processes for creating and executing strategic messaging within specific spheres of influence. The Defense Department has a detailed process for approving strategic messaging plans, but the substance of such messaging is left to individual departments and commands. These efforts have no unifying strategy, no executive level messaging plan, no guidance, and little evidence of coordination between them.

Regaining the Narrative

In the absence of a coordinated strategic narrative, the United States is consistently placed in a reactive posture. Control of current narratives has been ceded to others.

The need to create a coordinated, effective strategic narrative was explored in a recent public forum of experts in the communications field.²¹ The forum discussion on strategic messaging and global competitiveness revealed that the US needs a coherent and consistent strategic messaging campaign to address global competition in the information space. Panelists emphasized that the lack of a stable strategic narrative puts the US at risk of alienating allies and driving competitors to more aggressive engagements. Uncoordinated messaging can be counterproductive. Reactions to misinformation promulgated by others and attempts to counter propaganda are not prime venues or vectors to fortify US messaging. Once one is reacting to misinformation promulgated by others, attempting to counter propaganda, it is too late to instill truth.

To illustrate the need for a national-level strategic messaging strategy, it is instructive to look at examples of messaging from the past decade.

Attempts at persuasion. Through public and private communications, over a period of years, the United States attempted to persuade the Chinese not to weaponize space. According to a 2013 study for the Department of Defense, the campaign had the exact opposite effect.²² It pushed China into believing they needed to accelerate their programs, and prompted views of the United States as untrustworthy, in part because of what was perceived as contradictory messaging. US messaging did not consider the background and experiences of decision makers that they were trying to influence, or how the Chinese perspective would interpret and analyze the US statements and actions.

Messaging through actions. In the 1990s, the US sent China a message of support for Taiwan by running US war ships through the Taiwan Straits. On December 19th, 1995, the USS *Nimitz* transited the Taiwan Straits at the same time that the Chinese government was conducting coercive diplomacy via military exercises to influence the Taiwanese elections. The United States asserted that this transit was unplanned, and was merely avoidance of weather. But direct links can be drawn between this event and the initiation of Chinese anti-ship missile programs, which have since matured and complicated the US' ability to operate freely in the Pacific. Again, US action incurred the opposite and undesired reaction.

Messaging through publications. Because the United States is an open society, messaging can occur through public review of official documents. Recently, the US government has taken a more aggressive posture toward China in official publications. The 2018 US National Defense Strategy stated that China uses "predatory economic practices to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea."²³ The 2021 Interim National Security Strategy Guidance speaks of our "growing rivalry with China" and calls China "the only competitor capable of potentially combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."²⁴ Official publications are intended for US audiences, but Chinese government officials have equal access to them. Some official US documents treat China as a collaborator and other documents depict China as a competitor, while still others regard China a threat and adversary. It would take a cohesive narrative to reconcile these conflicting ideas so as not to foster negative reaction from China, while still making clear the US intent not to allow China to continue aggressive actions in regions that affect our allies and partners.

The current situation with Russia presents a different set of messaging challenges. Russia's objectives and motivations differ from China's. As we are seeing in events in the Ukraine, Russia has a more advanced disinformation and deception apparatus that requires that the US employ different approaches to convince the Russian populace—and the rest of the world—that democratic ideals are worthy values of governance. To be effective, a messaging strategy must incorporate understanding of history,

culture, and the media environment of the target nation. In the case of Russia, the messaging strategy requires effective ways to undercut and displace false narratives promulgated by official Russian information agencies.

The United States faces mass propaganda designed to disrupt and divide societies. US efforts to counter the narratives that are controlled by others often fail because the US government lacks the global trust it once enjoyed. As a result, the United States is seen as internally conflicted and unable to control the operations of our own government.²⁵

Cognitive Security—Truth Fighting its Way above the Noise

A cornerstone of a new and independent US information agency would be a focus on improving cognitive security, worldwide. Cognitive security is a new and emerging field that addresses how information provided to individuals and groups can be used to influence their beliefs and cognition, preventing them from forming their own rational beliefs based on truth and factual information.

In today's world, it is necessary to combat adversarial use of perception management, disinformation, and strategic deception. While there is nothing new about adversaries' use of these tactics, they have become far more effective given globalization and the speed of communications. Disinformation can now be targeted based on profile information concerning the recipient, rather than simply indiscriminately broadcast.

Historically, China has made considerable use of strategic deception through perception management. A 2009 study notes that they call it "psychological warfare."²⁶ The study states that "if China can discern its competitor's thought process through intelligence and guide it through deception and perception management, then it stands to reap considerable benefits as it pursues its own goals on domestic and international fronts." In 2013, the American computer security firm, Mandiant, revealed the extent of Chinese military cyber espionage efforts involving "Unit 61398" targeting US companies and individuals.²⁷

As well, Russia has been highly effective at strategic messaging, whether via disinformation campaigns

during the Cold War, through the coordinated use of diplomatic language, and/or the use of cyber-attacks. A warning was imparted to Estonia by cyber means in 2007.²⁸ Prior to the 2008 Russian incursion and occupation of portions of Georgia, a cyber messaging campaign was used.²⁹ Various financiers of the Russian Internet Research Agency and members of the Russian intelligence unit known as the GRU, are currently under US indictment for spreading cyber disinformation during the 2016 US election campaigns.³⁰ The recent invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by Russian strategic messaging,³¹ which reportedly continues to be quite effective in Russia as of this writing. Thus, we are seeing real-time experiments and engagements in countering disinformation through crowd-sourced intelligence and other messaging tactics.

The US has long been committed to the belief that people everywhere have the right to the truth, and to establish beliefs based on access to accurate information. Cognitive security includes practices, methodologies, tactics, and tools to defend against social engineering attempts—intentional and unintentional—to cause manipulations and disruptions to cognition and sensemaking.³²

A reconstituted independent force such as the USIA could help establish a higher degree of cognitive security. The challenge is greater than it was a couple of decades ago, as the world—and communication technologies—have changed. The new organization could seek to establish trust through independence and dissemination of accurate information, in languages and context appropriate to the recipients. We are not advocating, nor would the population tolerate, countering disinformation with disinformation. A consistent and uniform message based on a strategy that conveys accurate and balanced information, worldwide, could replace a cacophony of uncoordinated ad hoc messages delivered by multiple agencies and multiple voices.

Such an independent function with the necessary authorities to create and manage information strategies would also require understanding the messages directed at US citizenry and proactively countering disinformation before it causes harm. Recently, in deterring Russian tactics in Ukraine, the United States pre-emptively released key intelligence information. With the increasing availability

of open-source intelligence, such an approach might be effective, generally. Without stifling free speech, the agency could provide broader access to information, coordinate the messaging, and provide clarifications and access to the multiple views on events.

Reconstituting an Independent Strategic Messaging Capacity—Someone Has to Be in Charge

Reconstituting a capability similar to the USIA does not necessitate a new agency with direct control of all former USIA resources and functions, provided it has the authority and responsibility required to coordinate those functions across government agencies—it does not and cannot begin in a vacuum. USIA existed in the past, and it atrophied due to budget cuts and was absorbed into government. The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 updated authorities in the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (now known as the US Agency for Global Media [USAGM]) to globally disseminate information. The Voice of America still exists, albeit as a considerably reduced entity. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) exists as a private corporation with US government funding. The USAGM supervises the Voice of America, RFE/RL, and other media outlets. However, since 2017, the USAGM has been led by a presidentially appointed CEO rather than a bipartisan board. In forming a new organization or agency that can coordinate and guide these messaging functions, lessons learned from prior mistakes could inform existing and newly developed structures as a basis for reinvigorating US strategic messaging.

A new information agency would be different from prior iterations because the world has changed politically, economically, and technologically. Methods of effective strategic messaging are now more sophisticated, and messaging can be better tailored to the target audiences with consideration of history and culture, and not just language. The new agency would need to draw upon expertise in messaging and regional cultures, utilizing both staff and advisors.

Enabling legislation would require careful crafting. The charter would need to ensure the independence of the organization and maintain its continuity across administration and legislature boundaries—free from political

influence. Messaging should conform exclusively to accurate information, while still reflecting American core values. It would need to develop the trust of world, without taint of propaganda, but also proactively counter misinformation and deception that might be perpetrated by other nations and/or groups. The organization would ultimately be responsible to the American public, through budget and law.

One of the great messaging challenges is to convey the uniqueness of the US concepts of “individual freedom” and “individual rights.” The US form of democratic government enables the individual to rank above the state in many instances (for example by directly voting for leaders at many levels of government, or in exercising certain constitutional rights). This idea rankles many foreign governments because it diminishes the importance of the party, castes, leaders, nobility, and government institutions. US democracy also motivates participation of individual citizens and serves as a beacon for much of the world’s population. It supports ideals that include opportunities for the individual to progress up the economic and social scale. The charter of the agency should support the use of effective messaging to demonstrably relate the ideals and aspirations that make the US form of government admired.

If We Don’t Control Our Narrative, Others Will

The United States is in a global information competition, where messaging is used by adversaries as a weapon against US interests. With its messaging strategies widely distributed, the United States is not effectively communicating a coherent narrative of accurate and favorable support for American ideals. Without understanding competing narratives and without contacts and strategies for countering disinformation, the US will lose the information war.

For the United States to be successful in this fast-paced societal-level competition, it must promote narratives that best support the US position in the global commons. To establish trust, the narrative should be based on our founding core ideals and the information must be presented fully and accurately, devoid of political or marketing influence.

The Mission of the Former USIA

President Dwight D. Eisenhower drove the founding of the United States Information Agency (USIA) that led the strategic messaging and public diplomacy campaign during the entirety of the Cold War. The USIA's mission as originally constituted was to:

- Present and explain to foreign audiences US government policies and actions;
- Describe and explain American society, thought, and institutions;
- Provide objective and reliable news, commentary, and information about US and international events; and
- Provide surrogate programming where local governments curtail the free flow of information and where surrogate programming is in the US interest.

Techniques for effectively motivating attitudes and behaviors, inspiring loyalty, and drawing people closer together have been championed by US corporations in their marketing and branding campaigns. Their techniques include developing an understanding of the audience's experiences and culture. Similar techniques can and should be adopted for a US messaging strategy.

The entity must coordinate an uncomplicated narrative that supports true goals in a strictly nonpartisan way, such that they can endure across administration and congressional change. Expertise assuring that messaging is heard and understood according to its intended effect (by the intended audiences), can be drawn from decades of advanced research and experience in regional histories and cultures.

The US must be consistent in maintaining a narrative domestically and abroad, and must be prepared to combat disinformation spread through numerous communications pathways in today's digital world. Trusted independent sources are necessary to achieve this desired level of cognitive security. The USIA was largely trusted as a defense against foreign propaganda. Given that disinformation is so easily distributed, such a trusted resource is needed now more than ever.

Endnotes

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