

Debate

Is Strategic Communication the Same as Propaganda?

The war on terrorism includes a communication front to obtain the support of world public opinion. The stakes are high for governments, the media, and government-owned media. This debate focuses on how government attempts to influence media. Scholar Philip M. Taylor argues that the free, democratic media of any country have become an unreliable mirror of society, requiring governments to conduct international information campaigns. Hussein Y. Amin describes the Arabic government media system as reactive and caught off-guard by the more effective competing media systems available as never before. James Piecowye, Zayed University, gives a more fatalistic view of developing Middle Eastern media contributions and the role of government information. Public relations professional John Paluszek finds clear reasons for governments to communicate strategically.

Strategic Communications or Democratic Propaganda?

PHILIP M. TAYLOR

Official spokespersons working for democratic governments have always been nervous about having their work described as “propaganda”. That, they maintain, is something which other, usually more unscrupulous, people do whereas they merely communicate “factual information” and “tell the truth”. Their process of selection, omission and packaging of information—which in fact puts them in the same game as journalism—is merely official “public relations”, a normal and indeed essential responsibility of accountable democratic government in the information age. When accused of “manufacturing consent”, they protest their innocence under what they hope will be the protective umbrella of labelling their work as

“information services” or “strategic communications”—or what the press call “spin doctoring”. This isn’t about manipulation, they insist. It is about informing the public.

The tensions that surround such work come into even sharper focus when the nation goes to war. Then, however, that overused axiom that truth is “the first casualty” raises the possibility that someone might be lying. In the current “war” against terrorism, now entering its second phase, it may in fact be more a question that the whole truth cannot be told. Nevertheless, such protests all at the same time reflect a fundamental historical misunderstanding of propaganda. They display either conceptual muddle or disingenuous semantics, and in the process perpetuate the democratic myth that propaganda is something conducted only by someone else, usually by an (undemocratic) enemy or potential adversary, and that it is about untruth. In this confusion, an entire range of euphemisms is created—including now an Office of Strategic Influence within the Department of Defense in Washington—in an attempt to distance the activity from the popular association of propaganda with lies and factual manipulation.

That democracies tend to delude themselves that they are not in the business of propaganda is, in itself, an inherent and fundamental weakness that is frequently exploited by their enemies. In the black-and-white world of “propaganda”, where democracies purport to exist by virtue of consensus through persuasion whereas non-democracies are all about coercion and force, denials about conducting propaganda are self-defeating. They also reflect an inability to see yourself through the eyes of others. Because democracies tend not to wage war against other democracies, this has led to an unfortunate trait in defining the “other” in the post-Cold War world, for example by redefining what used to be termed “rogue states” into an “axis of evil”. Because modern

democracies are relatively open and transparent in their practices, the assumption that others will see you for what you really are belies an understanding that “they” might perceive you differently. As a result, especially since their non-democratic enemies rarely allow free media to operate within their own borders, democracies lay themselves open in wartime to serious charges of hypocrisy, which takes some explaining away. For example, when the US government requested American news outlets not to run the bin Laden tapes and to be “very careful about what they say”, most complied but this was interpreted in many parts of the non-democratic world as yet another example of the “double-standards” of the American government in advocating the democratic principle of freedom of speech. Again, the complaints about al-Jazeera were interpreted in a similar light because, in fact, that Qatar-based station had for five years been breaking all the traditional state monopoly of news and views-based reporting that had been the norm in the Middle East. It had gained a substantial regional audience precisely because it did not follow any particular government line. Instead, it was branded “the CNN of the Middle East”, a mirror image which was inappropriate to its actual role (especially since the staff mainly prided themselves on having been trained by the BBC). And it was not without its irony that the Voice of America refused to comply with the White House request about not re-broadcasting the bin Laden tapes—causing in the process a massive row within the State Department which only served to demonstrate how much it had forgotten about the importance of credibility in the conduct of public diplomacy since the end of the Cold War.

This was not the only example of how much the most advanced communications society in the world had downgraded official efforts to project its image abroad since the Reagan years. The early use of the word “Crusade” and the naming of the war against terrorism as “Operation Infinite Justice” were serious presentational errors that will take a lot of recovering from in the minds of certain people from Palestine to Pakistan. If anything, they confirm the suspicion that “Great Satan” is all about

world domination. Yet equally, these errors illustrate the need to improve considerably on Washington’s “strategic global communications”. In other words, they suggest that America needs to get its overseas propaganda act together.

But that propaganda effort needs to be within the democratic tradition that has evolved during the course of the twentieth century. This tradition is summarized by the phrase used in World War II, namely the “Strategy of Truth”. Of course, the very nature of the war against terrorism, especially in the realm of secret intelligence, means that it will not be possible to release certain information into the public domain—at least not until the war is long over. But it was ever thus. Even in our information age, matters such as operational security and force protection require a high degree of secrecy. However, Washington needs to tell “its truth” to counter the lies that are frequently told about American motives. For example, between 11 September and the end of 2001, a morass of misrepresentations, half-truths and disinformation was circulating throughout the Muslim world, perpetrated and perpetuated by the supporters of the Taliban. These included the assertion that “4000 Jews failed to turn up for work” in the World Trade Center on 11 September because they had been tipped off by Mossad which, in collusion with the CIA, was really behind the attacks because the US had long been planning an assault on Afghanistan to take control of its oil pipelines. Similarly, the news that Mohammed Atta’s passport had been found in the WTC rubble when not even the black boxes had survived, or that his suitcase containing incriminating evidence had not been loaded onto his plane, was simply dismissed as incredible. It was pointed out that none of the transcripts of recordings made by doomed passengers on their cell phones described the hijackers as “Arabs”. Blaming Muslim terrorists initially for the Oklahoma bombing had ultimately proved wrong, after all. Reports that two of the hijackers had been living it up in Florida strip clubs prior to the attacks were also dismissed because such “martyrs” were devout Muslims. Then, a false rumour spread around the world on the Internet that footage shown on

CNN of Palestinians celebrating the attack on the World Trade Center was in fact taken during the Gulf War. Understanding the reasons why such falsehoods fall on such fertile soil and become “truths” in the minds of the “other” is an essential component for understanding “why they hate us so much”.

One of the quintessential rules for any successful wartime propaganda—or counter-propaganda—is to “know your enemy”. However, the downgrading of US public diplomacy, epitomized by the absorption of the USIA into the State Department in 1999 and the reduction of VOA broadcasts to the Middle East, suggests that many had come to believe that American power would largely speak for itself. When a nation goes to war, even a democratic nation, there is a tendency to accept the need to conduct propaganda. What is less well recognized is that when a nation conducts peace, there is equally a need to conduct propaganda on behalf of that peace. In the discipline of international relations, this is now described in terms of exercising “soft” power. The 11 September attacks reveal the need for this more than any other single event in recent history. The failure to explain the motives behind American foreign policy, especially concerning Israel, left an information vacuum which was then vacated by the morass of lies, rumours and disinformation generated by its adversaries. This, in turn, fuelled the kind of hatred, resentment and sheer fanaticism that motivated 19 individuals to board domestic American civilian passenger jets and fly them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and one other unsuccessful target, killing thousands of people in the process. To increase since 11 September the number of hours broadcast in Arabic by the Voice of America, or summoning Hollywood executives to the White House, is a bit like bolting the stable door after the horse has bolted. The fact remains that democratic governments need to explain themselves in times of normalcy as well. Indeed, the failure of the United States to do this adequately may be one of the main reasons for the attacks. Once again, it also helps to explain the agonizing over “why they hate us so much”.

So this is an unashamed argument for the

need of democratic states to conduct propaganda, in peace as in war—but not in the popularly understood meaning of the word. The argument is premised on the basis that the free, democratic media of any country have become an unreliable mirror of the true nature of that society by virtue of the increasingly commercialized environment in which they now operate. Hence, to project a truer, more balanced, image of that society, governments need to conduct international information campaigns—which some may call propaganda—in order to ensure that their “truth” prevails. There are many who will find this suggestion anathema to democratic values, but my argument is that such people misunderstand not only the nature of propaganda but also that of democracy itself. Propaganda is about persuasion, and democracy is about consensus. Any attempt to persuade people to abide by a commonly held set of rules (laws) and principles (values) is not incompatible with toleration of minorities, acceptance of the “other” or respect for law and order. Nor is the desire to keep certain things secret until after the enemy has been defeated. Censorship and propaganda may be opposite sides of the same coin, but if democracies are to protect themselves from highly secretive international terrorists who have no qualms about murdering thousands of innocent civilians, then they must recognize that their value systems need to be explained and justified in a proactive manner and not simply left to speak for themselves. We all have to explain ourselves if people object to our actions. The debate is really about *how* this should be done.

Democratic propaganda is not about telling lies; to do so would be utterly counterproductive. In World War II, the motto of the British Ministry of Information was to “tell the truth, nothing but the truth and *as near as possible* the whole truth”. In fact the very word “truth” is an obstacle to understanding the concept of propaganda. For example, in 1943 the Americans dropped a leaflet over German lines in Italy telling the enemy troops that, if they surrendered, they would be well treated and greeted with a breakfast of bacon and eggs. This was true, but the German soldiers simply

did not believe it because it seemed incredible to them. Credibility is thus a more useful word, as is the phrase “credible truths”, in understanding democratic propaganda.

The principal themes of anti-American, and indeed anti-Western, propaganda revolve around US policy towards Israel, globalization (i.e. “coca-colonialism”) and now “a war against Islam”. The West, led by the US, needs to convince the opponents of these policies and values that they are ultimately designed to benefit as many people as possible rather than to oppress them. This is no small order. Prime Minister Tony Blair talks of a “gulf of misunderstanding” that needs to be bridged by explaining “what kind of people we really are”. But, following the triumph of free-market liberal capitalism at the end of the Cold War, the kind of people we look like in the eyes of the “other” are secular, racist, greedy, arrogant, immoral and duplicitous. For example, every violent attack against a Muslim or a mosque in Britain and the US was given prominent coverage in the Middle Eastern press. The refusal to return home the remains of the hijackers (even though they are unlikely to be identified) was regarded as another example of Western “contempt” for Islamic values. The failure to embrace the Real IRA or the Basques as “international terrorists” is another example of Western “hypocrisy”, the greatest of which, however, is Western policy towards Israel.

The most effective propaganda is that which is conducted hand in hand with policy. You have to deliver what you promise, and only time will tell if the Middle East peace process resolves this major source of anti-American resentment. Western aid for the Muslims in Bosnia, Kuwait, Kosovo and East Timor needs to be emphasized or else other dominant themes of resentment, such as the presence of US troops in the Holy Land of Mecca or Anglo-American bombing of Iraq and the deaths of “a million Iraqi children” will continue to prevail. Until the reasons for these policies are explained fully—and are seen to be justified—there will be no short-term propaganda success.

When nations go to war they need to believe that the reasons for doing so are “just”, “justified” and “justifiable”. Although we are

now witnessing a new kind of “war”—in which that very word, defined in international law as armed conflict between two or more nation-states, seems inappropriate—the failure to explain the campaign in Afghanistan in terms other than traditional popular understanding of “war” also seems a critical mistake. This campaign against international terrorism may take years to wage, and it will need to be fought on “fronts” not normally associated with exciting or compelling media coverage—in the realm of diplomacy, public and private, in the realms of secret intelligence, finance, law enforcement and humanitarian assistance. Demonizing the enemy—especially an elusive one such as al-Qa’eda and Osama bin Laden—has only short-term advantages. The real long-term objective is to change hearts and minds, to persuade others that one’s cause is not incompatible with peaceful coexistence, the rule of law and equality of opportunity. But that in turn needs to address the root causes of suspicion that this is not merely more Western hypocrisy. When more people are afraid of becoming the victims of crime than are actually statistically likely to become actual victims of it, then we live in a world where perception is often more important than reality. I am not arguing for an increased dissonance of image and reality, but rather for an increased synergy.

The current NATO definition of propaganda is that it is “any information, ideas, doctrine or special appeals, disseminated to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly”. This is an interesting definition because it was agreed by 16 (now 19) member countries that are democracies and whose number includes such fascist regimes as Italy and Germany. But arguably even more relevant is the semantic origins of the word originating in the seventeenth century from the Vatican’s Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the dissemination of the true faith)—with the operative word being “faith”. This body was set up in 1622 to defend the Catholic religion from the growing incursions of Protestantism, as part of the Counter-Reformation. In other words, it was recognized that, when certain value sys-

tems came under attack—in this case a religious creed—they needed to be defended, and that this should be done by a reaffirmation of the values that were being challenged. In the context of a “clash of civilizations”, which some perceive to be happening now—not that this is a “war against Islam” but that certain fundamentalists argue that it is—a mechanism for the defence of free-market democratic capitalism as a value system should come as no surprise to anyone.

In the field of propaganda, there is rarely such a thing as telling the whole truth. But you can tell your truth, and if that differs from the beliefs of others then the argument needs to be made on your truth’s behalf. This involves admissions of weaknesses as well as projections of strength. But it also involves the formulation of policies that can carry public support, not just at home where the people by and large can be expected to support the nation’s military, but also abroad where public opinion is becoming increasingly significant in traditional societies. That was the real significance of al-Jazeera. And it was the failure of Western public diplomacy to address street-level public opinion (because it has traditionally been directed at elite audiences) that allowed age-old resentments and fears (whether justified or not) to fester and fuel the training camps of the fanatics. Besides, many of the hijackers were well-educated individuals and so the problem does not lie solely at the level of ignorance. It is the argument which needs to be won in the minds, and not just the hearts, of people who fundamentally disagree with a particular way of life. And if this sounds daunting, it is because it will require a strategic communication campaign directed at a new generation of young people who are quick to throw stones at people they think are oppressing them, keeping them hungry and starving them of the opportunity to live long and prosper.

The dangers of not embracing propaganda in defence of democratic values as a canon of faith are thus greater than those of embracing propaganda as a reality of the function of the modern state in the information age. The first stage is to admit that this is so, for this in turn is a strength in so far as it reflects a genuine com-

mitment to one’s own faith, one’s own “truth”. After all, democracy is all about a recognition of one’s own strength *and* weaknesses, it is about respect for “others” and it is about coexistence with those that are different. It will remain for those who wish to challenge “dominant ideologies” to be able to do so, and for their right to difference—and dissidence—to be protected.

Propaganda, Public Relations, and Journalism: when bad things happen to good words

JOHN L. PALUSZEK

US Secretary of State Colin L. Powell flinched as the blow landed. Fortunately, it was only a “virtual punch”, a question from a Norwegian student in London: how does it feel “to represent a country commonly perceived as the Satan of contemporary politics?” It was delivered on Valentine’s Day, 14 February 2002 (of all days) with Secretary Powell the “star” guest of a global MTV program, *Be Heard* (yes, MTV!) in which young adults around the world—in India, Egypt, Italy, the UK, Argentina and, even, Washington, DC—peppered him with questions and assertions that were sometimes quite unpleasant. Being the consummate (although late-to-the-game) diplomat, America’s top international policy maker and spokesman handled all comers with empathy, tact, sincerity and, most importantly, the truth as he saw it.

Did his appearance on the show represent propaganda, public relations or journalism? For that matter, what was the nature of all those post-11 September appearances of American foreign policy leaders on the al-Jazeera Qatar-based Middle Eastern broadcast network—as well as the many hundreds of “strategic communications” efforts by nations dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century? Probably all three, but you decide as we parse the central question here: in this age of globalization, the proliferation of “people power”/ democracy, and the continuous evolution of sophisticated communications technology, how should nations use strategic communication responsibly?