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Public Diplomacy and Propaganda: Rethinking Diplomacy in the Age of Persuasion

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NANCY SNOW, DEC 4 2012

On September 11, 2001, a reporter contacted me to put the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks into a propaganda context. He was familiar with a little book I had published, *Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America's Culture to the World*, about my two-year federal government work at the U.S. Information Agency, an independent foreign affairs propaganda agency that operated from 1953-1999. Needless to say, given the enormity of that day, I had no desire at that time to intellectualize the attacks in the context of a new information war. It was nevertheless clear that the propaganda war—in mind munitions—was the defining ingredient of international relations. Much of my research, speaking and writing since that time has involved the intersection of propaganda studies with public diplomacy. From that perch I look at diplomacy in a critical international communications perspective. Benghazi, Libya doesn't signify just a place but also a persuasive, ideological battleground between the White House and Congress on Sunday morning talk shows, and on YouTube and Facebook. Events don't just happen as points in history but instantly emerge as competing narratives where truth is not as important as believability. In the "greed is good" era of the 1980s the famous bumper sticker read: "He who dies with the most toys wins." In the information and image wars of the 2000s, the bumper sticker reads: "He who dies with the most 'likes' wins."

So what's the difference between propaganda and public diplomacy? Propaganda is source-based, cause-oriented, emotion-laden content that utilizes mass persuasion media to cultivate the mass mind in service to the source's goals. Its utilization is not good or bad as all social institutions (government, commercial, citizen-based) use propaganda for their own purposes. The ethical questions associated with propaganda involve its means/ends agreement or lack thereof and its asymmetrical exchange of information that always favors the sponsor of propaganda. At its best, propaganda involves pro-social causes that do not stray too far from the truth. At it worst, propaganda serves strictly a pro-source function that uses whatever means necessary to fulfill its goals. The renowned political scientist Harold Lasswell, like the French scholar Jacques Ellul and the public relations guru Edward Bernays, believed that propaganda is a tool or weapon of modern technological society and that no one propaganda prevails, only competition. Lasswell wrote:

"Propaganda as a mere tool is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle...the only effective weapon against propaganda on behalf of one policy seems to be propaganda on behalf of an alternative."

And American broadcast journalist turned government propagandist Edward R. Murrow, who directed the U.S. Information Agency under JFK, told the U.S. Congress in the Cold War era, "truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst."

In the United States, conventional wisdom holds that propaganda in a democracy is utilized mostly during times of national crisis. It's a term that most Americans are quite uncomfortable acknowledging as a pervasive feature of our society, from commercial hucksterism to military heroism. It is no accident that a U.S. career diplomat, Edmund Gullion, coined the less in-your-face term "public diplomacy" in the 1960s while serving as the founding dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Public diplomacy, like propaganda, is linked to power. Consider the most referenced term of public diplomacy, soft

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power, coined by Joseph Nye. Soft power, unlike hard power, is based on indirect behavioral influences such as culture, values and ideology that direct nations toward interdependence over confrontation. Public diplomacy, or diplomacy to publics, puts human interaction front and center in far less manipulative ways than propaganda. Ideally, the target audience is more like a prosumer (proactive consumer) consuming messages from the sender that ranges from a public affairs officer to the head of a nongovernmental organization, but also proactively responding and persuading back in a two-way exchange of ideas. I like to think of public diplomacy as not just a euphemism for a kinder, gentler propaganda, but also as a tool in the modern day diplomat's toolkit. This is not our mother's diplomacy. Today a citizen blogger is as much a public diplomat as any Undersecretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. Likewise, an exchange student or scholar can transform his thinking and behavior through direct, face-to-face engagement with host nationals and then build on the relationship through social media.

In this essay I would not purport to convince that propaganda and public diplomacy are interchangeable terms, just relatable. They fall apart and come together across intersections in the minds of disparate groups. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke wrote an op-ed six weeks after September 11 that wondered how the United States of America was caught off guard by the terror attacks. Selling the U.S.-led war on terror would be marked by many names:

"Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or — if you really want to be blunt — propaganda. But whatever it is called, defining what this war is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance."

The war on terror, as pointed out in my book, *Information War*, was perceived as a propaganda war of terror by some and the ultimate public diplomacy campaign by others. For instance, we may remember what the Bush administration dubbed the start of the invasion of Iraq: Operation Shock and Awe. Was that a sound public diplomacy tactic? Hardly. It did foreshadow the difficult road ahead for an administration trying to win the compliance of Iraqi citizens in rejecting their own government, as bad as Saddam Hussein was, for that of an occupying power that saw its mission as liberation.

As an example of where public diplomacy and propaganda are truly intersecting, let me share a personal story. In August 2011 I taught graduate courses in Marketing Foreign Policy in Israel at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. It was an incredibly rewarding teaching experience to have on the eve of the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. I learned much from my students and from the everyday people—religious or not, political or shopaholic, Arab, Jewish, Christian, secular or religious, conservative or liberal. It made me thankful that I get to do what I love: teach and learn. While living in Tel Aviv, I was struck at how difficult it must be to live full-time as a citizen of Israel. According to the Anholt Nation Brands Index, Israel's nation brand image in the world is the most negative ever measured. While Israel is known to the world, it is not liked; in fact, many loathe the country. There is a very active global boycott of the nation.

I know about all the enmity. Before I left to teach in Israel, I shared my upcoming teaching assignment with friends and acquaintances. I was excited and anticipatory. It had been an emotional and intense spring and summer living with my elderly mother as she has ventured in and out of the hospital. (She's fine now). I was looking forward to this ironically relaxing edu-vacation, even knowing that I was heading into a place that garners highly negative emotions. Many I told about my plans were aghast that I would endorse the nation-state of Israel by accepting an opportunity to live and work there. My answer was simple: "I'm a global educator. I go where I'm invited to teach." I explained that international visiting scholar opportunities did not translate into endorsement of specific government policies of a host country. I'm sure this answer didn't satisfy those who thought I had no business travelling to Israel. I've learned that you cannot please everyone all the time. I thought of my teaching exchange as both a public diplomacy scholar and as an unofficial public diplomat.

Does my going to a so-called 'enemy state' make me a less worthy human being? Or is it possible today that we can learn to disagree with each other without reinforcing enemy images? I'm the first to condemn violence perpetrated by any actor, whether individual or nation-state. But would my not going to a place I yearned to visit have made any difference in the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis? I don't think so. Had I not gone, I would never have been able to sit with my Fulbright friend Inas and her family for an Iftar dinner in East Jerusalem followed by

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fireworks that lit up the scrumptious cool air of the city.

Eleven plus years ago it was the United States (and the American president) reflecting on “why do they hate us?” On this year’s anniversary, a top ambassador in Benghazi lost his life along with three other Americans as a result of a spontaneous mob fuelled by a sophomoric anti-Muslim video or by a planned terror attack. The competing narratives persist.

The German philosopher Martin Buber comes to mind as I think about where we are in international relations, particularly as it relates to discourse and dialogue. Buber was a dialogic theorist who said that we must learn to engage with each other in a manner that respects and considers the perspectives of the other. He called this relationship the “I-Thou” encounter. You can be wedded to your deeply held beliefs and values and make yourself open to your partner in communication. It does not have to be an either/or proposition if you think of your communication partner as having a legitimate perspective. What I have learned from my understanding of public diplomacy and propaganda is that it is possible to move beyond impulsive hatreds that shut off communication to a more respectful public dialogue that allows us all to express ourselves, even if we disagree. What this translates into sometimes is a hate the policies, love the people, dichotomy. It’s not a perfect solution but it allows people to dissent from official policy in pursuit of the public good.

The alternative prospect, fomenting hate and killing the ‘inhuman other,’ is our new version of mutually assured destruction.

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Nancy Snow is a Full Professor in the College of Communications at California State University, Fullerton and Adjunct Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California. She specializes in global communications, American media history and philosophy, persuasive communications and opinion writing. She is a recognized global expert in propaganda and public diplomacy studies. The author or co-editor of seven books, she can be reached at <http://www.nancysnow.com>.

About the author:

Nancy Snow, Ph.D (American University) is Emerita Professor at California State University, Fullerton, longtime Adjunct Professor at the University of Southern California Annenberg School, and a former Visiting Professor of Public Diplomacy at Syracuse University Newhouse School. Her visiting faculty engagements include China (Tsinghua), Japan (Keio, Sophia); Korea (Ewha Womans University), Israel (Reichman/IDC); Sweden (Lund University), and Malaysia (UiTM). She is a recognized global expert in propaganda and public diplomacy studies and is the author or co-editor of fourteen books in six languages.