

# The Role of the Media During the Cold War

Written by Alexander Stafford

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ALEXANDER STAFFORD, OCT 26 2013

This essay will serve as an introduction into the media's role during the Cold War. It will evidence how the media on both sides of the ideological division sort to produce, contribute and maintain political and cultural antagonism. The essay will also evidence how the main method of this was the development and distribution of political propaganda, both domestically and internationally. A Cold War proxy conflict and the involvement of the media will also be presented so as to offer a more detailed exploration of the media's behaviour. To begin, there will be a brief exploration of the historical context of the media followed by a detailed presentation of its actions.

To examine the media's role in the production, contribution and maintenance of Cold War antagonism, it is important to first examine the media in the correct historical context. During this time, the media predominantly consisted of, print, film, radio, and TV. This was prior to the popularity of decentralised media institutions such as electronic social media. This is worthy of note because as broadcasting requires large amounts of funding; centralised media is extremely susceptible to state control (Bernhard, 1999).

The Cold War is accepted to have lasted from 1947 to 1991. During this time, the media's predominant medium of communication evolved from radio and print into television. This change was accompanied along with the role of the media from a 'mouthpiece' of the state, to a more, *prima facie*, independent sector. The media's role in the production, contribution and maintenance of Cold War antagonism cannot be understated. When American aspirations for European capitalism seemed threatened; media in both blocs jumped into action. While the actions of the state-owned Soviet media would not be expected to take a watchdog approach, what may have been surprising was the extent to which the western media took a mouthpiece position (Carruthers, 2011).

The allegiance that the majority of the media took to government policy and the politicisation of its content began almost immediately with the start of the Cold War. This is evident with the early Cold War television reports often being scripted and sometimes produced by the defence establishment (Bernhard, 1999). This development of the media accepting governmental influence was essential to the production of public support for state actions. The initial role the media took was to motivate the post-WW2 populace into reaffirming and defending their national political and economic allegiances. While the private-owned Western media was obliging in the defence of Western economic and military interests, the state-censored soviet media was just as ready to defend theirs. All media succeeded in the production of public support for their government's actions against the foreign enemy. The Western Allied governments and the Soviet Union could never have produced or maintained sufficient public support and jingoism for the long conflict without the media's contribution (Doherty, 2003).

At the start of the conflict, media coverage of the Cold War between America, its allies and the Soviet Union served to escalate domestic fear of imminent destruction. "The Red Scare" campaigns of the Western media were presented on every applicable media source. The use of print with easily de-codable and emotive images helped to redefine national identity as a virtuous and patriotic America, against a dangerous and destructive socialist east. The media distributed extreme propagandist slogans such as "Better Dead than Red!" This type of politicised propaganda served to cause hysteria over communism and nuclear war (Bernhard, 1999). It worked to subdue any domestic sympathy for the enemy or resistance to the conflict that usually occurs during war. It was a calculated action to maintain public antagonism towards the enemy and rejection of their political and economic policies. The media extended the propaganda to every aspect of western life, from radio, film, television and print to even schools.

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The film "Red Nightmare" was taught as part of the standard curriculum and is evidence of the media providing state-sanctioned indoctrination of the populace. This act of media manipulation to create mass fear and paranoia cannot be undervalued, it was the conscious effort of the powerful to marginalise unpopular opinion and spread the dominate agenda. It also assisted in the solidification and polarisation of cultural differences and reinforced political ideology (Mikkonen, 2010).

Media pollicisation and propaganda techniques were also used as a direct tool against the enemy. There was a direct contribution of the media to the war effort which saw the media engaging in antagonistic psychological warfare. This was achieved by dissembling propaganda into the Soviet Union via the radio, as an attempt to spread pro-capitalist sentiment into the soviet population and create a more pro-Western culture. The Soviet media also used the medium of radio within its own states and other countries as a form of transnational propaganda. Because the Soviet media was state-censored; it sought to legitimise its appearance by camouflaging its production origins. The USSR had many "international" radio stations that were indeed located in the Soviet Republic. These actions of the media show the progression from a seemingly more passive producer of public support and political compliance, to an active tool of the war itself (Chisem, 2012). The media on both sides of the divide were responsible for the production of public opinion, the contribution of propaganda, and maintenance of antagonism via psychological warfare. However, many western media outlets, such as voice America, BBC, and, Vatican Radio, sought a different approach. While maintaining political loyalty to their nation states, there governmental brief was to project the positive aspects of their nations into the Soviet Union. This was a form of gentle, yet cohesive, diplomacy (Chisem,2012). It sought to counteract Soviet propaganda by subversively offering a positive view of the perceived enemy. While doing this, the Western media soon realised the relevance of the fact that the Soviet Union was not a homogeneous society. The colonial empire consisted of many nationalities, such as Ukrainians and those from the Baltic States. By tailoring radio announcements to individual minorities, the West was able to construct a long-term strategy of disrupting territorial integrity. This was profoundly antagonistic to the Soviet state, which feared the growth of domestic separatists (Chisem, 2012).

The media of the Cold War era can even be accredited with the marketing of the conflict. It was American journalist Walter Lippmann who entitled the conflict as a 'Cold War' due to the lack of direct military warfare (Slaughter, 2012). However, the lack of military conflict was only absent between the UUSR and America. Because of the mutually assured destruction (M.A.D) of the two nuclear powers; the Soviet Union and the West only engaged in proxy wars with satellite states. One such example is the Vietnam War of 1955-1975. The U.S. government viewed involvement in the war as an essential preventative measure to halt the communist takeover of South Vietnam. This was part of the West's strategy of Communism containment.

The Vietnam War was termed as the first 'TV war' by Michael Arlen (Slaughter, 2012). This was due to the media coverage of the conflict now becoming exceedingly reported through television. It was also accompanied with strong and emotive pictures, such as the Pulitzer Prize winner 'Vietnam Napalm' (Bernhard, 1999). The television coverage of the conflict was relentless and lasted for several years. While news coverage at the beginning of the conflict was often scripted and pro-Western, this reporting was not. The media had unfettered access to the conflict and took more independence in their reporting. Accordingly, the public reaction to constant exposure of war brutality also changed. The Western media moved away from its position as a governmental mouthpiece, and began to adopt a more watchdog approach (Carruthers, 2011). It was this change, combined with the graphic reporting of the war, which has since been accredited with the thwarting of American victory. The media's role is seen to have stoked domestic anti-war sentiments in the American public by presenting them with the atrocities of war into their own living rooms. This occurrence shows a decline of the media's role in maintaining antagonism and public support for conflict (Mikkonen, 2010).

The most obvious and crucial act of the media, which eroded the public antagonism towards the Soviet Union and support towards the conflict, was the publishing of the Pentagon Papers. Several newspapers, including the The New York Times and the Washington Post, printed extracts of the governmental documents which were classified as top secret (Urban, 1997). These papers revealed a deliberate government distortion of previously reported statistics that had been perceived as undesirable. The distortion concerned the numbers of casualties and successful operations, which were significantly worse than previously stated. The media now evidenced to the people how the

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government had misled them concerning the facts of war. What the media did here was reposition themselves as the only reliable information distributor and eroded confidence in the government. Subsequently, domestic reaction to this Cold War proxy conflict changed. Domestic and international anti-war movements grew, and the media was responsible. This saw the mass rejection of 'McCarthyism'; the accusation of disloyalty to the country for opposing the war which had worked before to marginalise dissent (Doherty, 2003).

What it is now evident is that throughout the Cold War, the media played a central role in the production and maintenance of antagonism between both sides of the conflict. Both the Soviet and Western media outlets denatured each other as inferior and maintained "us and them" rhetoric. Dominant views were enforced and detractors were marginalised. The media produced virtuous national identities to legitimise themselves and denounce their enemies. (DOHERTY,(2003) A substantial contribution of the media to the maintenance of Cold War antagonism was the creation of a prolonged state of fear. Sensational propaganda and politicised reporting developed a societal fear of imminent destruction and severe paranoia. This assisted the government in the harvesting of a supportive population. The media also worked as a direct tool of the conflict by communicating to the population of the Soviet Union. This in itself was an extremely antagonistic action that worked very well as a soft power method of the west (Bernhard, 1999).

When the media changed to an increasingly watchdog position of reporting, some of the antagonism that it had produced against the Soviet Union became directed at the national government. In all, the media was the Cold War's protagonist in cultivating and maintaining antagonism within the bipolar divide. It achieved this with sensational reporting, and exploitation of cultural divides, the maintenance of societal fear and the production of propaganda. It's most explicit and direct contribution to Cold War antagonism was the production of a subversive communication strategy with the enemy's populace.

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