

Whose "truth" shall prevail?

PROMOTING A NATIONAL IMAGE

by Ben H. Bagdikian

In 1942, shortly after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and removed any lingering doubts about America's total involvement in world affairs, the Voice of America opened its inaugural foreign broadcast with the announcement: "Daily at this time we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth."

Today the Voice reaches an estimated hundred million people around the world. And today, as in times past, the Voice and its parent agency, the United States Information Agency, are being called naive and confused and charged with playing politics. In fact, since Ronald Reagan's arrival in Washington, there has been an exit of experienced professionals from both the USIA and the Voice, whether by resignation or firing, and also a radical, neoconservative narrowing of the definition of American public life. This has been accomplished by an administration of earnest innocents and has underscored the dilemma dogging the agency from birth: *which* "truth" or *whose* "truth" shall prevail?

Under the best of circumstances USIA is plagued with conflicts. At what point, for example, does a journalistic exploration of some aspect of national life affect the foreigner's image of America? The most distinguished director of the agency, Edward R. Murrow, refused to let one of his own famous documentaries—the subject was migrant labor—be shown to overseas audiences under USIA sponsorship. His predecessors and successors have been even more selective in determining which truths would be the official ones about America.

Certainly a democracy has basic problems with official propaganda of any sort. Because the purpose of propaganda is promotion, the tendency is to project a positive image, one that does not necessarily provide the whole truth. Within a democracy's own borders, to place limits on full disclosure is to limit democracy itself: Partial truths distort the meaning of consent of the governed; the citizens of a democracy deserve to know both the good news and the bad. But what happens when a democratic government speaks to foreign audiences in the hope of gaining their

support for its policies? Should the story of America be told in full, warts and all? Or is it simply irrational to expect our government to spread negative images abroad?

No matter what USIA itself may decide on such basic questions, it is buffeted by often dangerous winds from two directions. Like all other agencies of government, it is accountable to Congress, which appropriates its funds, and to the White House, which administers it. Both are political organisms and, at various times and with varying degrees of intensity, each asserts its own version of the "truth" about national policies and its own view of the world.

Periods of calm and respect for professionalism have alternated with periods of contention and intervention throughout the history of the USIA (now restored to its original name after a brief period as the International Communications Agency). But not since the devastations of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 1940s and early '50s has the agency come in for such a storm of criticism.

Senator McCarthy immobilized the agency both at home and abroad with his claims that spies, dupes of the Soviet Union, homosexuals, and still others were subverting it. He sent his staff to Europe to remove books from agency libraries (libraries meant to promote American-style freedom of expression as opposed to Soviet censorship). Chauvinists of all stripes joined in the hunt. At one point, leaders of the USIA were commanded to appear before a congressional committee and account for having sent Dizzie Gillespie abroad as a representative of American jazz. One Louisiana congressman had been offended by the choice of a musician whose roots were not in New Orleans and, moreover, played a trumpet whose horn had an unconventional upward tilt. (Gillespie's tour was a spectacular success, and particularly so in countries that were then critical of America's racial policies.)

Later, USIA and the Voice had to conform to the grim-lipped policies of John Foster Dulles. Here the official line was "liberation of the satellites"—the breakaway of the countries of Eastern Europe from Soviet domination. This was even more emphatically the line of VOA's unofficial cousins, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, then the dominion of the CIA and now operated by an appointed board. With such glib propaganda about the urgency of liberating themselves from Soviet domination, it was only natural for listeners in the Eastern bloc to believe that

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America was committed to supporting such moves. Then came the Hungarian rebellion of 1956, brutally put down by Soviet arms. When the United States made no attempt to intervene, its "liberation of the satellites" propaganda collapsed and America suffered perhaps its most serious loss of credibility.

PUNCH AND COUNTERPUNCH

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the Reagan appointees have learned nothing from the USIA's past errors and successes or from the international broadcast operations of other countries. The cold war has been revived by the Reagan administration, and the USIA and the Voice are now mobilized for narrow, short-term polemics. The agency is run by cold warriors, most of them inexperienced in foreign policy and relatively unfamiliar with the culture and values of the foreign audiences they address, and there has been a shake-up in the professional staff.

Before joining the new administration in an official capacity, Kenneth L. Adelman wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that messages to foreign audiences would be "Washington's major growth industry" because Mr. Reagan is a "gifted professional communicator." Adelman urged what he called "public diplomacy"—a direct attack upon each diplomatic or propagandistic move by the Soviets. In this formulation, "public diplomacy" is akin to aggressive psychological warfare. Adelman himself agreed that such a policy might "appear a little chauvinistic, even jingoistic" but contended that it reflected what was "felt by the Founding Fathers."

Those recently appointed to govern USIA and the Voice of America are unlikely to enjoy comparison with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, or John Adams. President Reagan has placed the agency in the hands of his friend Charles Z. Wick, whose background is in California real estate, nursing homes, and commercial entertainment (he wrote and produced the film *Snow White and the Three Stooges*) and whose first role in the new administration was as organizer of the lavish inauguration ceremonies. Wick is said to fear the activities of "Communist dupes" within the Voice and declared to a foreign policy group in a 1981 address on U.S.-USSR relations that "we are at war, whether de facto or declared."

The new policy as it has emerged is one of "counter-punch," involving a response to every Soviet move and argument with a countermove and counterargument. This is nothing new to USIA and Voice productions, though usually in the service of long-term goals. Current programs

appear to serve short-term polemical goals and, ironically, have a good deal in common with Soviet-style responses to U.S. moves. Much of the present policy seems to ignore a number of important factors:

1. Soviet broadcasts are not highly successful internationally. The ICA's 1979 survey of the Third World audience for Soviet programs indicated that listeners found the broadcasts too propagandistic, too politicized, and too predictable—the very characteristics that the Reagan administration has sought to heighten in delivering messages from America to the world.

2. Although the USSR is obviously a major concern, there is more to America's relations with the world than its competition with Moscow. In the long run the North-South split threatens global stability even more than does the split between East and West. In the latter case, chaos is held at bay by a mutual interest in preventing nuclear war and other crises and in preserving a developed, relatively intricate industrial base. There are no such constraints on an increasingly desperate and unstable "South." Yet U.S. policy in the last three years has exacerbated divisions between the developed and the less-developed nations and has demanded that the Third World line up behind the U.S. in condemning the Soviet Union. And there are other problem areas. In the same period the U.S. has had troubled relations with its major allies as well as with Canada and Latin America.

3. "Psychological warfare" has only a narrow audience and is the approach least likely to sway the uncommitted. Much of the recent output of the USIA merely offers additional fuel for the fires of anti-Soviet activists and dissidents. For the rest, the tone of such messages ensures their sounding irrelevant, boring, or frightening. It is likely that most people who listen regularly to the Voice or attend USIA functions and read its literature are among the more sophisticated and socially conscious citizens of foreign countries. Already inundated with the shrill messages of their own highly politicized societies, these people are relatively immune to anything that sounds "a little chauvinistic, even jingoistic," to borrow Mr. Adelman's words. Among older listeners there are memories of the "liberation of the satellites" message and *its* ensuing fiasco; among many more there is fear that heated rhetoric may trigger nuclear annihilation.

4. The USIA and Voice materials face a good deal of competition on the international airwaves. VOA is not even the top-rated international broadcaster. All major states,

COMING

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and some small ones like Albania, have ambitious foreign broadcast programs, some for more hours of the day and in a greater number of languages than are offered by the Voice. With so many sources of information to choose from, listeners are unlikely to be swayed by largely chauvinistic-sounding messages. And in societies with their own compelling problems, there is little interest in the stereotyped exchanges between the Soviet Union and the United States.

5. American propagandists who lack experience in foreign relations and knowledge of foreign cultures are condemned to making unnecessary if innocent errors. For example, during the Eisenhower-Dulles years, USIA undertook a major international campaign to advance "People's Capitalism." To unsophisticated officials this seemed a direct counter to the Marxist rhetoric of "the masses" and "socialism." They were apparently unaware that in many societies, including India's, "capitalism" is synonymous with gouging and cheating. A huge campaign had to be withdrawn. The entire problem could have been avoided had anyone seen fit to consult even briefly with U.S. experts in major foreign cultures.

The most recent evidence of the narrowness of present-day USIA operations is the "black list" compiled by agency officials. Among the prominent Americans *not* to be called upon to explain American life to foreign audiences are such people as Walter Cronkite, John Kenneth Galbraith, Coretta Scott King, Ralph Nader, and Senator Gary Hart. *Recommended* for such speaking tours are presidential counselor Edwin Meese, White House speechwriter David Gergen, and neoconservative editor Norman Podhoretz. It is an image of America that looks for all the world like a handout of the committee to re-elect the president.

MODUS OPERANDI

Any discussion of overseas broadcasting inevitably turns to the British Broadcasting Corporation. The BBC, the most trusted international broadcaster in the world, is non-polemical and interesting, aims for long-term credibility, and is relatively free from any short-term tinkering by the regime in power. To its advantage, it is a nonofficial agency, and one that developed its quality programming in the long period of independence that preceded its use by the government. That circumstance would be difficult for any nation to duplicate, not least of all the United States, which has not developed a strong, well-funded, and independent noncommercial broadcasting structure. But the U.S. can begin to emulate the BBC's mode of operation, in which decisions about content are made by its own professionals, if the USIA is insulated from short-term official manipulation and if it aims for long-term goals with a stable staff.

The present combination at USIA—"counterpunching" short-term goals and a leadership of amateurish ideologues—would seem the least promising arrangement possible. The audience for international messages is more sophisticated than can be reached by commercial advertising techniques. And short-term goals usually create future problems. The world changes and foreign policy changes. "China the enemy of America," the short-term policy pursued in 1969, stood in the way of "China the friend of America," the policy of 1972. A nation's foreign policy should have a longer half-life than advertising campaigns for soap. **WV**

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