

How a Broadcaster Influenced American Propaganda

- Or, how Edward R. Murrow told America's story to the world.



American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that.

Edward R. Murrow, May 1963

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Introduction

After World War II, The United States of America sought to win the hearts and minds of the people abroad by telling America's story to them¹. One of the main players in this game was the United States Information Agency (USIA) which since its birth in 1953 and during the Cold War used both modern technology and old fashioned diplomacy to reach the populations in, what the radio channel Voice of America called, the “prisoner countries”².

The world was reduced to a global village by almost immediate knowledge of events – and also reactions to those events – through new technology. The introduction of television and the general acceleration of communication in the 1960s gave the people of the world front row seats at international events. These new developments became important tools of public diplomacy, or as it was termed in the beginning of the 1960s, “propaganda”³. It was in this kind of media landscape that USIA played up against Kremlin's propaganda.

In my presentation at the ”Coming Together or Coming Apart” summer school at the Freie Universität in Berlin, one of my main arguments was that the personalities of the Presidents of United States and the personalities of the leaders of United States Information Agency (USIA) influenced the public diplomacy, or propaganda. I would like to elaborate on that argument in this paper.

Edward R. Murrow was already a famous broadcaster, when John F. Kennedy asked him to become his USIA Director in 1961. During World War II, he broadcasted from London, and in his TV show “See It Now”, he had opposed Senator McCarthy and won. Today, American Embassies all over the world have grants in his name sending promising young journalists to be educated in the United States. The term “public diplomacy” was coined by the Dean at Tuft

1 Inspired by USIA's motto from 1953-1999: ”Telling America's Story to the World”.

2 ”Policy Guidances”, in *Broadcasting Freedom – the Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, Arch Puddington, 314-321, (Kentucky: The University Press, 2000)

3 John W. Henderson, *United States Information Agency*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969), vii

University's Fletcher School⁴, and the Center for Public Diplomacy is named after Edward R. Murrow. All of this suggests that he had big influence during his three years as USIA Director.

Due to the brevity of the paper, I have chosen to focus on the early 1960s and the USIA Director acting at the time, and thus my research question is:

How did the personality of USIA Director Edward R. Murrow influence the public diplomacy of the U.S. in the early 1960s?

Theory and Method

The importance of the term or concept of public diplomacy in this paper requires a brief definition, so before going into how the personalities of President John F. Kennedy and USIA Director Edward R. Murrow influenced the American public diplomacy, or propaganda, in the early 1960s, it is important to understand what public diplomacy and propaganda really is, and if there is a difference between the two terms.

In international relations, public diplomacy is the communication with foreign publics to establish a dialogue designed to inform and influence. There is no one definition of Public Diplomacy, and it may be easier described than easily defined as definitions have changed and continue to change over time. It is practiced through a variety of instruments and methods ranging from personal contact and media interviews to the internet and educational exchanges. There is still debate on whether Public Diplomacy is propaganda or not.

The word “propaganda” derives from the 17th century Roman Catholic Commission of Cardinals which was set up by the pope for the propagation of the Catholic faith, but in the 20th century, the word or term has come to have pejorative associations such as lies, deceit and brainwashing.

⁴ A graduate school of international affairs

Propaganda can be defined as a kind of targeted communication with an objective that has been established *a priori*. It is a deliberate attempt to influence public opinion through the transmission of ideas and values for a specific purpose, but not through violence or bribery. Propaganda is produced to persuade its subject that there is only one valid point of view⁵.

To many people, and also to the USIA, propaganda is the preserve of “regimes” – and not something associated with democracies. This is why agencies like the USIA and Voice of America (VOA) wished to avoid the negative connotations of the term “propaganda”. Instead, the term “public diplomacy” came in play in the United States in 1965. Public diplomacy is in some ways propaganda⁶.

The United States Information Agency (USIA) was established to streamline the U.S. government's overseas information programs, and make them more effective. The United States Information Agency was the largest full-service public relations organization in the world, spending over \$2 billion per year and with bases in over 150 countries, to highlight America's world view, and bring into question the Soviet ideology. In 1948, the Smith-Mundt Act banned domestic distribution of propaganda intended for foreign audiences, but before 1972, the U.S. government was allowed to distribute expressly domestic propaganda through Congress, independent media (such as Radio Free Europe (in Eastern Europe) and Radio Liberty (in the former Soviet Union)), and schools.

In short, public diplomacy is a way of reaching out directly to foreign audiences rather than to foreign governments. Somehow, the term public diplomacy seems to be easier to accept for Americans than the term propaganda. In 1968, Professor in Political Science, Robert E. Elder, wrote in his book “The Information Machine – The United States Information Agency and American Foreign Policy”:

5 Nicholas J. Cull, David Culbert, and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion – Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2003), 317-323

6 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 327

“Americans distrust propaganda – especially government propaganda – yet they have allowed their government to fashion a powerful propaganda machine. This machine, which costs taxpayers \$170 million a year, is designed to convince people in the rest of the world that United States policies and actions are helpful to them, or at least not harmful to their basic interests.”⁷

His statement described the general feeling in the United States; propaganda is bad. Because of the restrictions of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, the USIA was never able to conduct propaganda within the U.S. or even to show the films it made without an act of Congress; hence the USIA's work was not known to most of the American people.

The term “propaganda” was in most cases not used officially by the USIA; only in internal letters and memos⁸. When the term “public diplomacy” was introduced in the U.S. in 1965, it was, in a way, a perfect piece of propaganda about propaganda because it gave the USIA a new phrase it could build new meanings around. Furthermore, by using the word “diplomacy” instead of, for instance, “public relations” it also gave the workers at SUIA a sense of working on the same level as diplomats hired by Department of State.

To explain what public diplomacy was in the 1960s (and to some extent still is today), I will provide some examples: It is Public Diplomacy when political and cultural leaders and journalists go on a trip to the United States paid by the U.S. Government under the educational exchange programs.

It was Public Diplomacy when Voice of America, the radio service of USIA, carried Neil Armstrong's words to millions when U.S. Astronauts landed on the moon for the first time.

It is Public Diplomacy when a U.S. performing artist is on a foreign tour sponsored by the U.S. Government, and when U.S. diplomats in the cities, the artist visits, publicize the tour and make arrangements for his performances.

It is not public diplomacy, however, when all of us today are “friends” with Monica and Chandler from

⁷ Robert E. Elder, *The Information Machine – The United States Information Agency*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), vii

⁸ According to Professor Ewa Hauser, Freie Universität, September 21, 2011

the American series “Friends”. This is more a kind of cultural imperialism, but that is a quite different discussion. These two series are not public diplomacy because they are made by private distributors. It would have been Public Diplomacy, though, if the State Department of the United States had been involved in the distribution in some way. Back in the 1960s, this approach was not that strange to the USIA. The agency – along with Hollywood producers – made several movies and documentaries which were showed overseas.

U.S. Security interests require that people around the world should not be hostile towards the United States and Americans. That is why the U.S. tries to define itself through deeds and words in ways that build global friendships – and if that is not possible; it tries to at least diminish hostility – to limit the intensity of anti-Americanism⁹.

In terms of choice of words, I will use both “propaganda” and “public diplomacy” throughout the paper. The term “public diplomacy” was not used by the USIA until 1965, the year after Edward R. Murrow left the USIA, and so this paper will mostly address the work done by the USIA after 1965 as public diplomacy and the work before as propaganda. To many scholars¹⁰, the two words mean the same, and when “propaganda” is used in this paper it is meant in the most neutral way.

Before analyzing what kind of influence President John F. Kennedy's USIA Director, Edward R. Murrow had on American public diplomacy; I will provide a short background on the USIA and Murrow.

USIA: 1953 - 1999

The United States Information Agency was established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in August 1953, and it operated as a public diplomacy agency until it was absorbed into the Department of State in 1999. When Eisenhower took office, he wanted to wage the cold war. As

⁹ Philip Seib, ed., *Toward a New Public Diplomacy – Redirecting U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), vii

¹⁰ Nicholas J. Cull, for instance, argues in the book *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion – Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* that propaganda is not immoral.

a soldier he had learned the value of the psychological dimension of power on the battlefields, he called it the “P-factor”¹¹. He thought that the information from the United States needed to come from an independent agency and thus created the United States Information Agency in 1953.

USIA quoted him for saying:

“It is not enough for us to have sound policies, dedicated to the goals of universal peace, freedom and progress. These policies must be made known to and understood by all peoples throughout the world”¹².

But the creation of USIA in 1953 was not the United States' first attempt at using propaganda to persuade the public.

During World War I, the Committee on Public Information used writers, speakers, dramatists, movie makers, publishers and men working with advertising to help tell the American story at home and abroad. The committee distributed more than 75 million copies of publications mostly to Americans but also abroad¹³.

In the 1920s, the notion that foreign propaganda had tricked the U.S. into entering the world war was spreading and the term got the earlier mentioned connotations of deceit. The State Department continued to make information available to its overseas officers to distribute to the foreign press, but there was no systematic information program in the U.S. between the two world wars¹⁴.

U.S. propaganda during World War II can be divided into two stages. The first period from September 1939 to December 1941 was characterized by neutrality and the second period during

11 Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81

12 USIA 1st Review of Operations, August-December 1953, as quoted in Cull. *The Cold War*, 81

13 John W. Henderson, *The United States Information Agency*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969), 25-27

14 Henderson, *United*, 28

American involvement in the war where the government mobilized a major propaganda effort through the Office of War Information (OWI). During the second period of the Second World War, the U.S. used propaganda to inform troops through films such as “Why We Fight” and to motivate its civilian population. This was also in this period of time, in February 1942; Voice of America (VOA) began transmitting. It transmitted short wave news broadcasts in German and French to occupied Europe, and by the end of the war its number of broadcast languages had significantly increased. VOA survived the war and became the core of U.S. propaganda in the following Cold War¹⁵.

With President Eisenhower's conviction of the power of the P-factor, propaganda was championed during his presidency¹⁶. When he oversaw the reorganization plan that brought USIA into existence, the overseas apparatus of the new agency kept the name it had borne from the time of Office of War Information, namely the embassy based United States Information Service (USIS), which was also the name known by the subjects of the American propaganda overseas¹⁷. USIA provided a home for the aforementioned Voice of America, and it facilitated a worldwide distribution of books, magazines, radio programs, press releases, magazines and documentaries that would not have been circulated without the presence of the USIA¹⁸.

It appears that the importance of public diplomacy diminished after the ending of the Cold War. USAID became the lead agency in the democratization of Eastern Europe rather than USIA. And in 1999, most of USIA's functions were passed to the State Department under an undersecretary, where it is now called International Information Program (IIP).

15 Cull, Culbert and Welch, *Propaganda*, 447-450, 423

16 Cull, Culbert and Welch, *Propaganda*, 450

17 Henderson, *The United*, 52-53

18 Cull, Culbert and Welch, *Propaganda*, 414

Murrow: Broadcaster and USIA Director



Illustration 1: President Kennedy welcomes recently appointed Director of the United States Information Agency, Edward R. Murrow, his wife Janet and son Casey to the Washington New Frontier.

Born Egbert Roscoe Murrow¹⁹ in North Carolina (1908-1965) and raised in the Pacific Northwest in the state of Washington. He later changed his first name from Egbert to Edward. He took an undergraduate degree in speech and rhetoric which armed him for a career in the rising radio industry. In 1935, Edward R. Murrow joined the CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), and two years later he moved to London to cover the emerging international crisis. When the Nazi Blitz hit London in September 1940, his live broadcasts brought the war into American living rooms, and some argue that they played a vital role in turning the tide against American isolationism²⁰.

In the 1950s, he rose to television fame with a news documentary called “See It Now”²¹. It was in this program, Murrow focussed on Joseph R. McCarthy, a Junior Senator from Wisconsin who

19 Cull, Culbert and Welch, *Propaganda*, 192

20 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 254

21 ”See it Now” was narrated by Edward R. Murrow and produced with Fred W. Friendly. The two programs sent in March and April 1954 caused McCarthy – and McCarthyism – to a downfall are part of the plot of the movie “Good Night and Good Luck”

was strongly opposed Communism²² .

When John F. Kennedy became President of the United States of America in 1961, he selected Edward R. Murrow as USIA director.

Murrow suffered from lung cancer in his later years at the USIA, and when Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, he was already seriously debilitated which brought about his early retirement in 1964 and death in 1965.

USIA in the early 1960s

In January 1961, two speeches made world headlines. The first one was made in secret by Nikita Khrushchev in front of a select group of Soviet propagandists, and it was released to the press twelve days later. In the speech, Khrushchev formally declared his intention to extend the Communist revolution and sponsor “wars of National Liberation” around the world. His words terrified the United States.

The second speech was delivered in public by newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy. He matched Khrushchev's words by saying that the U.S. would “*pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty*”²³.

Both Soviet and American propagandists were alarmed, and they broadcasted the words around the globe. An ideological struggle ensued that was fought in the newspapers, classrooms, on the airwaves and cinema screens of the developing world – and also in the Eastern European countries²⁴.

The Berlin Wall was also built in 1961, and it proved to be a gift for the USIA. The Agency made a photographic exhibition called “The Wall” which toured worldwide – among other things it showed the iconic picture of a frontier guard in midair as he leapt to freedom across the barbed wire.

USIA also made a documentary called “Focus Berlin: Barbed Wire World”, but most importantly,

22 The Fletcher School, Tufts University, Edward R. Murrow biography, accessed on October 13, 2011
http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Murrow_Collection/Biography

23 John F. Kennedy, as quoted in Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and The United States Information Agency*, 189

24 Cull, *The Cold War*, 189

USIA understood that the best propaganda came from independent witnesses and so it helped the West German Government bring in 750 foreign journalists to report on the building of the wall²⁵.

When Kennedy was assassinated, it was Voice of America who brought the news to the world, and somehow this underlined the importance of international communication during Kennedy's presidency.

Analysis: “Warts and All”

When John F. Kennedy held the aforementioned speech, VOA transmitted it in Arabic, French and Swahili in Africa; in fact 56 countries knew about it through movies, pamphlets, books and comic books made by the USIA. John F. Kennedy had an eye for publicity²⁶, he had won the presidential election with the help of television²⁷, and he understood that he needed to deliver on his promise to rebuild America's international image through a global campaign. At first, he wanted CBS Director Frank Stanton as USIA Director to lead this campaign, but he declined and instead suggested Edward R. Murrow.

When Murrow was appointed USIA Director, he brought with him prestige as a well known broadcaster and journalist, and he did much to raise the national profile of the agency²⁸.

Publicly, Edward R. Murrow emphasized the importance of balanced reporting and open media by using the expression “warts and all”²⁹; he spoke of the Voice of America as an organ of truth, but at the same time he expected to be able to manipulate its content as policy dictated³⁰.

Murrow was a disappointment to the people at Voice of America. He came with a reputation of having defied McCarthyism and having championed balanced news, but in reality Department of State pressured to shape the news at the radio station³¹.

25 Cull, *The Cold War*, 201

26 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 207

27 Cull, *The Cold War*, 191

28 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 415

29 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 254

30 Cull, *The Cold War*, 190

31 Cull, *The Cold War*, 194

Murrow understood that in order for USIA to be successful, he needed to keep good contacts with Congress, the White House and heads of government agencies³². He knew that he would only succeed as Director of the USIA if he had access to the President, and he only accepted the position because he understood that he would be informed on policy matters³³.

Two of his key staff were well placed with the Kennedy camp and made sure that Murrow to a much greater degree than his predecessors had a close association with the President³⁴. His Deputy Director, Donald M. Wilson, was a friend of Robert Kennedy, and his Deputy Director of Policy and Plans was Tom Sorensen, who was the brother of Kennedy aide and speech writer Ted Sorensen³⁵.

In spite of the best intentions and good contacts in the Kennedy camp, Murrow's Agency did not always get firsthand knowledge of new policy strategies. When the Bay of Pigs Invasions was planned, Murrow was left in the dark. The promised Department of State guidance on how to present the landing, due 3 days before the invasion, never came. The Director of Voice of America, Henry Loomis, learned of the invasion from the radio on his way to work on April 17. Loomis rallied Voice of America to expand its Spanish language broadcasting in Latin America from the usual hour of programming to 19 hours a day. VOA maintained this marathon broadcasting until the defeat of the landing on April 22. But it was hard for the VOA to establish the facts of the invasion because it was not in on the take off of the invasion. It attempted balanced coverage, but without the correct information, it was misinforming the listeners. Kennedy noted Murrow's fury over being left in the dark and feared that he would resign³⁶.

The Cuban Missile Crisis led to changes in the structure of USIA. Murrow felt that the USIA had been used as a cover by the CIA, and that this could endanger the credibility of his Agency. Besides trying to avoid this, Murrow strengthened Tom Sorensen's policy office, so it could

32 Henderson, *The United States*, 57

33 Cull, *The Cold War*, 193

34 Henderson, *The United States*, 57

35 Cull, *The Cold War*, 193

36 Cull, *The Cold War*, 196-198

better coordinate future political messages of agency output. Despite these changes, the Bay of Pigs Invasion had made the United States slid back a notch in world opinion³⁷

During the Kennedy years, USIA also did other things than trying to cover the Bay of Pigs. When Alan Shepherd became the first American in space in May 1961, USIA ensured that the coverage was as open as possible³⁸. It sent out scientific background, photographs, and Shepherd's own report to 90 USIS posts which resulted in newspapers around the globe stopping their presses to run USIA material. One of Kennedy's major foreign policy initiatives was the Peace Corps. USIA made sure that the world knew about the American youth volunteering all over the world, while the Soviet youth could only go abroad except under strict control³⁹. Another big issue to Kennedy was Latin America, which USIA reported first-class reactions to while expanding its activities in the area. It created new posts and sent trained staff to work with students and labor leaders, and Voice of America expanded its Spanish language programs for Latin America.

The USIA's activities grew steadily in the Soviet Union. In July 1966, the press could report that Moscovites were lining up for hours to get copies of *Amerika* magazine, and high school students could be seen beneath the Kremlin walls dancing to Voice of America music on their transistor radios.

The Bay of Pigs kept popping up in American foreign policy, though. In the aftermath of the invasion, Vietnam emerged as a place to show American power, and also a place symbolically linked with American global reputation.

When the U.S. set up a counterinsurgency task force in South Vietnam, USIA was part of it. USIA should develop South Vietnamese radio broadcasting, support information for the strategic

37 Cull, *The Cold War*, 197-198

38 Cull, *The Cold War*, 198

39 Cull, *The Cold War*, 194

hamlet program, and present the Diem regime to foreign media. Murrow was concerned about Diem because he wanted to use defoliant chemicals; he worried that it would get bad press. Kennedy approved the use of defoliants anyway, and Murrow then added that the use of chemicals should always be presented alongside arguments for using it when mentioned. For some reason, the use of defoliant chemicals never became an issue in the global press and thus did not alienate the United States from world opinion like Murrow had feared⁴⁰.

In spite of his lung cancer, Murrow's agency played a key role in easing the trauma overseas of the transition from Kennedy's assassination to Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency⁴¹. It was USIA who had the responsibility to maintain the illusion of confidence when Lyndon Johnson took over as president. By broadcasting his speeches, USIA introduced Johnson to the world. It sent out information on him to 103 countries emphasizing his foreign policy interests, it made more than a million pamphlets in 18 language versions, and it made sure to translate books about Johnson.

Discussion

With a background in journalism and broadcasting, Edward R. Murrow brought with him immense hope for a more balanced propaganda when he became USIA Director. He said that he wanted to paint the United States with “warts and all”, suggesting that American propaganda would also carry the less attracting American news. In fact, it proved to be difficult to let, for example, Voice of America broadcast without pressure from the State Department.

Murrow also wanted to be in on the political decisions, but was left in the dark during the Bay of Pigs invasion. He tried to overcome the difficulties of working with the Department of State through staff close the Kennedy camp and by re-organizing the USIA. So, even though Murrow is praised today for the changes he made during his time at the USIA, he also met obstacles.

When Diem wanted to use defoliant chemicals in Vietnam, Murrow's concerns about bad press

40 Cull, *The Cold War*, 218-219

41 Cull, Culbert, and Welch, *Propaganda*, 254

were not heard by the Kennedy administration. It appeared to be pure luck that the story had minimal impact on the world opinion at the time, but it could also be due to careful framing on Murrow's part.

USIA remained very faithful to Kennedy and showcased his foreign policy initiatives in various ways, and when Kennedy was assassinated, it was largely because of the USIA and Voice of America that the world remained confident with the United States and the new President, Lyndon B. Johnson.

Conclusion

Edward E. Murrow came to the USIA with a background in broadcasting. He said yes to the position as Director at the United States Information Agency in the belief that he would be part of the “take offs” in new policies, but it proved to be hard in real life which the Bay of Pigs invasion also showed.

In spite of the difficulties, USIA and Murrow stayed loyal to the Kennedy administration and worked hard to make his foreign policy stances known to the world. USIA grew in the third world countries under Murrow, and the Agency had many successes with placed material in foreign media, e.g. when the United States had its first man in outer space. Under Murrow's stewardship, it opened many more posts particularly in Africa, increased radio broadcasting in Latin America, and increased translations of 'appropriate' U.S. books for dissemination abroad.

In other words, Murrow did what he could to tell America's story to the world under the circumstances.

Murrow is still being praised at American Embassies with grants in his name, because he managed to influence American public diplomacy while at the same time living up to the expectations of both President Kennedy and President Johnson.

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