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A Strategy for US Public Diplomacy in the Age of Disinformation

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INTRODUCTION

“Would you rather have the bitter truth or more sweet lies?” This is the question posed by an [assertive series](#) of [videos](#) produced by the State Department in recent months, targeting [Russian audiences](#), that juxtapose statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin with evidence that he is lying about the course of the war in Ukraine.

The effort, alongside revelations laid bare by Washington and its allies at the start of the war, [reflects](#) a new understanding: that the information domain is perhaps the most consequential terrain that Putin is contesting and that it is an essential theater of the broader, emerging, persistent, asymmetric competition between liberal democracies and their authoritarian challengers.

As part of this competition, autocrats—in Moscow and Beijing, but also elsewhere—have leveraged multiple asymmetries. Both Russia and China operate vast propaganda networks that use multiple modes of communication—from [state media websites](#) to popular [social media accounts](#) to leading [search engines](#)—to disseminate their preferred, often slanted, versions of events. Both have spread multiple, sometimes conflicting, conspiracy theories designed to deflect blame for their own malfeasance, undermine the soft power of the United States, and erode the idea that there is such a thing as objective truth. Both also [deploy proxy](#) influencers to agitate anti-American sentiment and frequently engage in “whataboutism” to cast US policy as hypocritical to audiences around the world. Some of this content is targeted at broad swaths of the public within Western societies—in Russia’s case with the goal of polarizing them, and in so doing, weakening Europe and the United States from within. Other content is targeted at the global south, with the goal of eroding popular support for Western policies and, in China’s case, promoting alternatives to the Western model.

For the United States, like other democracies, an open information environment confers enormous long-term advantages, but it also [creates](#) vulnerabilities that can be exploited using low-cost tools and tactics, often with plausible deniability. Where democracies depend on the idea that the truth is knowable and citizens can discern it to govern themselves, autocracies have no such need for a vibrant, open, trusted information environment. In fact, autocrats benefit from widespread public skepticism in the notion of objective truth. Because autocratic regimes tightly control their own information environments, they are more insulated from criticism than democratic ones. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping effectively ban many Western social media platforms from operating within their borders in order to close space for dissent, all the while using them quite effectively to target audiences abroad. In doing so, unlike their democratic competitors, autocrats [face](#) few normative constraints on lying—a dynamic they freely exploit. As a result, autocrats have made remarkable advances in the contest that is now underway in the information domain.

To push back on these advances, the United States should leverage its own asymmetric advantages—including its economic might, cyber capabilities, soft power, and the legitimacy that comes from democratic governance—recognizing that successful competitors play to their strengths.

A focal point of US strategy should be to [harness](#) truthful information to contest the information domain, recognizing that competition in this realm is ongoing and there is a first mover advantage to setting the terms of the debate. Such an approach should entail simultaneously highlighting the strengths of liberal democracies (such as their openness to new information and ability to course correct, innovate, and improve) and the failures and false promises of authoritarian regimes (like kleptocracy and repression). It must do so not just to reach those who live in closed spaces, such as Russia and China, but to reach those who live in countries that are backsliding or where democracy is not fully consolidated.

This paper—which is based on conversations with more than a dozen subject-matter experts, including current and former diplomats—offers recommendations for updating US public diplomacy to compete successfully with Russia and China. The focus, however, is limited to US international broadcasting and strategic communication activities and does not include recommendations to improve other elements of US public diplomacy, including but not limited to cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges. The authors recognize that public diplomacy is not merely about crafting a winning message and that an effective US approach must include activities that lie outside of the information domain. This paper should therefore be viewed as an attempt at improving a piece of, but not the whole, public diplomacy puzzle.

THE STATE OF PLAY

Until recently, Washington's approach to handling state-backed information operations has been at best reactive. The Obama administration's response to Russian disinformation related to the Kremlin's 2014 aggression in Ukraine and to its sweeping campaign to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election was restrained to a fault. On the other end of the spectrum, the Trump administration at times seemingly experimented in real time with responses to China's shift toward more aggressive information operations. In 2020, for example, criticism from Chinese state-backed actors successfully [pulled](#) the State Department into a debate about how and why China's response to the Hong Kong protests was different from the United States' response to George Floyd demonstrations. These debates [played](#) out in public and on Beijing's terms, offering China a chance to deflect criticism at the United States' expense.

Washington has begun to take a more proactive approach to strategic communication in the face of autocratic information advances. That was the case in the lead up to the invasion of Ukraine when the Biden administration quickly shared with the public intelligence about Putin's plans to stage a false flag attack. Throughout the course of the war, the administration has released information on Russia's military plans to disrupt them. For example, it has highlighted Russian troop death numbers and Russia's arms trade with Iran. The administration has also this approach to dealing with China; in February 2023, US government officials shared their assessment that Beijing was strongly considering providing military aid to Moscow in an effort to prevent it from doing so. Washington should that this approach is appropriate or will work in every instance—the credibility of US government pronouncements in these cases has benefitted enormously from corroboration by a mature and vibrant community of open-source researchers and investigative journalists. Nevertheless, as part of its strategy for updating public diplomacy approaches to respond to autocratic information advances, Washington can and should learn lessons from and build on these efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To update its public diplomacy strategy for success in an era of information competition with autocrats, Washington [should](#) adopt the following recommendations.

Prioritize and fill public diplomacy leadership vacancies.

Since the Office of the Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was established in 1999, it has been without Senate-confirmed leadership more than 40% of the time. There has not been a confirmed undersecretary since 2018. Until December 2022—nearly two years into the Biden administration—the Global Engagement Center was without an appointed leader, and both the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) were, for months, handled by acting officials. Without effective leadership, it is exceedingly

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difficult to execute an effective public diplomacy strategy; without empowered leadership, it is nearly impossible. Future administrations should prioritize filling public diplomacy leadership vacancies with experts who are empowered to be effective.

Redouble public diplomacy work in Latin America.

Through the first quarter of 2023, five of the ten fastest growing Russian state media accounts on Twitter targeted Spanish-language audiences, and three of the five most retweeted ones [messed](#) in Spanish. On TikTok, RT en Español is one of the [most popular](#) Spanish-language media outlets. With 29.6 million likes, it is more popular than BBC Mundo, El País, Telemundo, and Univision. And on Facebook, RT en Español currently has more followers than any other Spanish-language international broadcaster.¹

It is not just Russia that is succeeding in the region. China's Spanish-language broadcaster, CGTN en Español, has roughly six times more followers on Facebook than the United States' Spanish-language outlet, Voz de América.² Venezuela's TeleSur and Iran's HispanTV also have amassed sizeable followings, even though the latter has been banned from many US-owned social media platforms.

This is at least partly, if not primarily, a resource prioritization problem. In 2023, the budget for Voice of America's Latin America division [was](#) slightly more than \$10 million—less than half the budget for its Eurasia division and less than a quarter the budget for its East Asia and Pacific division. None of the 12 overseas bureaus [operated](#) by Voice of America are in Latin America. This reflects broader trends. From 2015 to 2020, US public diplomacy financing overseen by the State Department (educational and cultural affairs spending, excluding broadcasting) consistently [deprioritized](#) Latin America.

Given the extent of Russia's information manipulation efforts in Latin America, the United States should redouble its public diplomacy work in the region. This approach should include equipping the Global Engagement Center to invest in more monitoring and counter-disinformation efforts in the region to identify and expose hostile foreign propaganda. It could also include investments in Voice of America (VOA) broadcasting in Spanish, including opening a regional bureau in Latin America. To the extent possible, it should also include the facilitation of exchanges between Spanish-language journalists in the United States and their counterparts in Latin America, as well as public-private partnerships to create low-cost distribution and content sharing agreements that would allow for material created by Spanish speakers in the United States to reach audiences through local, trusted sources. As a country with 40 million native Spanish speakers whose national security interests are directly affected by events in the region, the United States cannot afford to cede the information space in Latin America to its geopolitical competitors.

Update public diplomacy messaging to reflect what makes the United States attractive today.

The United States and other liberal democracies have struggled to find a coherent post-Cold War message in part because the things that attracted people to the West—the allure of US consumerism, rock music, the freedom to travel, individualism—are all available, at least to some degree, in many repressive countries. As Russian media researcher Vasily Gatov [has noted](#):

“Today the Kremlin has co-opted and spun many elements of this ‘freedom’ personality. Western cultural symbols such as pop music and reality television sit next to Kremlin hate speech and renewed authoritarianism on Russian television, proving that you can watch

MTV while spurning democracy, drive a Mercedes while imprisoning dissidents. Freedom of movement and religious freedom have been granted, while Kremlin propaganda works hard to undercut the allure of other political freedoms.”

As a result, the United States has frequently relied on emphasizing its support for human rights and democracy and its efforts to extinguish corruption. But these narratives may [resonate](#) primarily with elites, missing important parts of the population, or, worse, be spun as hypocritical.

Instead, US public diplomacy should focus on themes that continue to attract global audiences, including the United States’ capacity to enable innovation and entrepreneurship, its technological and scientific achievements, and its support for freedom of choice, movement, and expression. This could entail lifting up stories of immigrants to the United States who have succeeded in living their own American dream, sharing scientific and technological advancements in the United States that will impact the world, and contrasting free speech and debate in the United States with censorship under authoritarian rule. Messaging could also highlight the failures and false promises of autocracy, noting that Russia and China are positioning themselves as “anti-imperialist” and “anti-colonial” powers while at the same time pursuing expansionist foreign policies, and as “anti-censorship” warriors while simultaneously tightly controlling their own information environments.

Public diplomacy should also, where necessary, directly and candidly address the United States’ faults—avoiding the impulse to paper over shortcomings, while maintaining optimism that the country can improve. The ability of Americans to criticize their government and course-correct may well be attractive to audiences living under repressive governments that squash dissent. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, for a US government-funded entity to show the confidence to assess the United States constructively, but honestly. It is also an approach that could effectively undercut foreign propaganda that seeks to weaponize the United States’ real and perceived imperfections.

Develop a tactical playbook for dealing with whataboutism.

“[Whataboutism](#)”—or the practice of responding to an accusation with a counter-accusation—is an effective rhetorical device when deployed against the United States because it creates false equivalencies; it is not an effective device when deployed by the United States for the same reason. Public diplomats should avoid going tit-for-tat on each claim made by a state-backed actor. Instead, the response should call out the competitor’s tactics and intent and highlight the strength of an open system that allows scrutiny and debate through press and personal freedoms that do not exist in repressive countries. With that in mind, before acting, US messengers should weigh the benefits of responding against the risk of drawing attention to content that would otherwise go largely unnoticed. Where a response is deemed prudent, it will then be important to select the most effective messenger.

Empower frontline messengers with twenty-first century tools.

Despite some salient overarching messages, what foreign audiences find appealing (or not) about the United States almost certainly differs from country to country and region to region. USAGM regional bureaus and public diplomats in the field are best positioned to determine the messages that are best suited for their respective audiences and should be given latitude, within a strategic framework, to create and distribute content that resonates. However, this should not be done on the basis of “best guesses”. Frontline messengers should be equipped to leverage powerful social media listening and audience analysis tools to understand the interests and concerns of global audiences. These tools should be coupled with market research and advanced social metric analytics that can improve evaluations of their messaging campaigns and other deliverables, allowing messengers to gauge the performance of their content. Washington should also consider whether AI systems could be used to quickly translate USAGM or other high-quality content for dissemination.

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Improve and expand upon content-sharing mechanisms, like the State Department's Content Commons, that allow for seamless, approved social media and digital content to be shared across government agencies.

The State Department's Content Commons provides public diplomacy practitioners access to a searchable library of on-demand, cleared, royalty-free content options. But the current repository offers limited and at times disappointing options, particularly in video format. The commons could be a valuable resource, particularly for public affairs sections that do not have the ability to produce quality in-house content. To make it so, the State Department should:

- o **Expand the video and social media content library.** The current library of video content largely consists of press briefings and diplomatic remarks. At a minimum, the commons (or a similar content sharing system) should be expanded to include more content produced in the field, allowing public diplomats to find, share, sample, and repurpose content across public affairs sections. Ideally, the commons could host a wider selection of content, including USAGM-produced originals, cleared and licensed independently produced content, and infographics, templates, and other visual assets that would allow public diplomats to tap into professionally produced digital materials.
- o **Allow content inputs from across the US government.** Public affairs departments of various US agencies have different messaging priorities, as do the public affairs sections of various embassies. However, there are instances where various departments and sections could amplify or repurpose high-quality content. For example, a public affairs section in a country where the US military is respected could share a top-performing post from the Department of Defense on its channels. The ability to share content between and among different parts of the US government would allow public affairs staff to access high-quality materials that could engage their respective audiences.
- o **Engage the private sector.** Licensing and distributing content produced by the private sector is challenging, not least because production companies and studios usually have distribution agreements with global partners. There are workarounds, however, including sharing and distributing older titles (particularly those produced for children) whose exclusivity rights have expired or independent documentaries or shorts that may not have global distribution deals. The United States' best storytellers are not, typically, employed by the government, but the US government should find creative ways to showcase them.

Feature authentic local voices.

Both Russia and China frequently use authentic domestic voices—for example, those of local journalists and activists—to improve the reach and resonance of their messaging and to add a layer of legitimacy to it. The United States could borrow an element of this approach that is in keeping with its values and elevate the voices of local investigative journalists and civil society leaders, including rights defenders, in USAGM content. Doing so may help the content resonate with local audiences, especially in places where Washington may not be highly trusted.

SITUATING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY WITHIN A BROADER INFORMATION STRATEGY

Updating the United States’s approach to public diplomacy is just one element of a broader information strategy that Washington should adopt. This strategy should draw on its most valuable advantages—from advanced cyber capabilities to global financial markets, rule of law, and strong network of partners—many of which lie outside of the information domain. Washington could, for example, use its advanced cyber capabilities to limit the ability of its competitors to manipulate information—as it reportedly did by [taking](#) the Kremlin’s proxy troll farm operation offline for a few days around the 2018 midterms, by [launching](#) an operation targeting Iran ahead of the 2020 presidential election, and by [conducting](#) “full spectrum operations” around the 2022 midterms. Washington could also leverage the strength of its financial markets to impose costs on individuals and entities that undertake information manipulation campaigns at the behest of a state. These efforts can complement and support efforts to compete with Russia and China in the information domain using public diplomacy.

There is much that the United States can do within the information domain too, in addition to improving its own messaging capabilities. Washington should continue to support independent media abroad, particularly in places where democracy is backsliding, since independent media keeps citizens informed and holds power to account. And Washington should work with democratic partners to develop and advance a common model of data governance that supports a free and open internet, since Russia and China are working to extend their domestic models of information sovereignty around the world. With that in mind, Washington should promote freedom of information globally. Doing so confers two advantages: it supports democratic values and puts autocrats at a disadvantage, given that their grip on power depends on stringent information control. Meanwhile, Washington should equip itself to conduct more robust oversight of social media platforms, creating incentives for companies to increase transparency and user control, which affirm democratic principles. All these measures will be important complements to an updated public diplomacy strategy designed to succeed in an era of information competition.

LOOKING AHEAD

The emerging competition between liberal democracies and their democratic challengers is asymmetric in nature, and it is increasingly taking place far from military battlefields in nontraditional spaces. The information domain is first among them. Digital information technologies have made it increasingly possible for autocrats to capitalize on the openness of democratic societies to rattle them from within and to disseminate propaganda around the world, to the detriment of US interests. Washington needs a strategic approach to pushing back on these advances that is designed to meet the moment and that draws on its strengths. There are several steps such a strategy should entail—both within and beyond the information domain. But an updated approach to public diplomacy should be a central component.

By prioritizing and filling public diplomacy leadership vacancies, redoubling public diplomacy efforts in Latin America, updating its messaging to reflect what makes the United States attractive today, developing a tactical playbook to deal with whataboutism, empowering frontline messengers with twenty-first century tools, improving and expanding on content sharing mechanisms, and featuring more authentic, local voices, Washington can position itself for success in today’s information environment.

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