My first reaction to learning about the creation of a new government agency, the US Agency for Global Media, was one of complete surprise and ANGER. Does not the US government already have at its disposal enough purported media - VOA and democracy support groups, NDI, collaborating media and a wide range of related agencies? And now enters a new kid on the block. Not really new, but the same old and well-known bully wearing a new set of clothes, with deep pockets itching to pick fights.

I always liked the quote of Mark Twain about the choices between being informed or misinformed: “If you don’t read the newspaper, you are uninformed, if you do, you are misinformed.”

There is lasting truth in this quote, and not only in terms of print media but all media outlets. Nowadays there remains only a thin line between media truth and propaganda, fake news and allegations thereof! Even HBO is
After Truth: Disinformation and the Cost of Fake News will uncover and bring to light the “rising phenomenon of ‘fake news’ in the US and the impact that disinformation, conspiracy theories, and false news stories have on the average citizen.” But it is not only the US; fake news is often sanctioned and exists on the global level, as we are well reminded by the following catchphrase.

**Wag the Dog**

Keep in mind that modern propaganda, regardless of who produces it, is often indistinguishable from privately produced news. It is by-and-large truthful and accurate, but gently guides a reader or viewer to adopt a particular point of view, rather than inundate him or her with an obvious political message that is devoid of truth or the semblance of truth under the guise of being used for insidious ends.

However, “Propaganda, to be effective, must be believed.” To be believed, it must be ostensibly credible, so as to justify the actions. There also must be some veneer of truth, or at least things which can be accepted as truth. Whether it be Nazi-era movies, such as Uncle Kruger, or modern-day blockbusters, such as American Sniper, successful propaganda always follows this principle.

But it is not only fledgling countries which are faced with media influences that are less than mundane, and many so-called independent media outlets are far from independent. If some propaganda had been successful, we could have avoided WW2, as the well-intended documentary Spanish Earth, about the Spanish Civil War, made clear that conflict was a dry run for the carnage to come.

But nowadays spin doctors, movie producers and policymakers are one and the same. That is why civil society and NGOs need to understand that they just got in bed with those who are working outside of official channels, often tied with some who are the closest to the Deep State, including innocent appearing sources such as Wikipedia.

It would be too easy to blame what is happening with the modern-day media on the CIA and USAID, the only culprits to be challenged. Wikipedia is also alleged to be a professional propaganda organisation which allows fake news and outright illegal propaganda to dominate the internet.

But the media spin is not taken to heart by all. The US Agency for Global Media, formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which broadcasts news and information about the United States and the world to audiences abroad, is more often than not far from involved in pure media spin. It gets away with it because it targets a foreign audience, and few in the US are even aware of the organisation and its mandate. The question that, therefore, begs, is what exactly its agenda is? Whether it really achieves what it claims to achieve by way of national security is also questionable.

**But let’s first look at Global Media’s predecessor - the Broadcasting Board of Governors.**

Matt Novak, writing for the tech blog Gizmodo, described the BBG as the "propaganda arm" of the US government. He speculated that its alleged role in propagandising on behalf of the US government was a reason for the denied entry of Jeff Shell, its director, to Russia in July of 2016.

It comes as no surprise to learn that the old organisation was explicitly forbidden from being broadcast inside the United States, under laws that prohibit the government from releasing propaganda domestically, especially that concerning US citizens.

During consideration of recent legislation allowing access by American citizens to US-produced propaganda, critics voiced concern that lifting the restrictions could result in information designed to influence foreign audiences being used against American citizens. Proponents countered that the ban made it difficult for Americans to access and evaluate this content.

Even as recently as August 2019, AP reported that the new law signed by Obama did not allow propaganda in the US. However, all these attempts to shield Americans from homegrown propaganda fail because they eventually get access to that same propaganda indirectly through the many websites that present US-funded fake news pieces as legitimate news. These seem to be written by legitimate organisations, at least at first impression.

Effectively this means that US government-funded sites are lying, not only to an international audience but to the American people as a whole. There are many readers who may unknowingly access these sites while searching for
alternative views outside of the MSM, and take them at face value, as they are funded by the US government.

It is still questionable whether the amendments to the Smith-Mundt Act now allow materials created by the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the nation’s foreign broadcasting agency, to be directly disseminated in the US. Nonetheless, it is hoped that they do not repeal the Smith-Mundt Act, but rather lift some unnecessary restrictions on the domestic dissemination of government-funded fake media.

It should be agreed that American taxpayers’ money shouldn’t be funding propaganda for American audiences, and especially that directed against US citizens, but this is effectively what is happening under the guise of the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012.

The original intention of the law is being circumvented. One only needs to read: “Apple Pie Propaganda? The Smith-Mundt Act before and after the repeal of the domestic dissemination ban” to know what is going on in the name of spreading the truth!

As the Northwestern Law Review clearly reveals, “there is little evidence that the State Department and the BBG have any desire to ‘propagandize’ the American people, [and in some cases against Americans]. It is critical to establish safeguards now—before the United States enters into a new conflict or engages in some other highly controversial activity—that will prevent the federal government from covertly influencing public opinion within the United States. The government will continue to speak, and the American people must know whom they are listening to.”

It was also noted in the above-highlighted article that “the best rules are ones that are enacted before they are needed.”

“USIA on steroids”

It is all about informational warfare, “information vs. disinformation.” Previously the lead organisation involved in this battle was the United States Information Agency (USIA), the propaganda arm of the US government, which was dissolved in 1999.

It is however understandable why the US is now trying to go back to Cold War tactics in the media war. American soft power, which used public diplomacy as a key instrument during the Cold War decades, has recently been in decline.

Against this backdrop, it was James Clapper, the former Director of National Intelligence, who recently said that the US needed something like USIA again. Actually, he just told Congress that there was a need for a “USIA on steroids.”

There are more than just claims to be made as to how the media game is being played upon. This has been well documented by the Washington Post.

In 2016, Congress authorised the establishment of a Global Engagement Center/ US Agency for Global Media, that, although originally imagined as a mechanism to counter the Islamic State militant group, was soon framed by its legislative backers as part of a pushback against what it claimed was Kremlin-backed media manipulation.

However, in fact, it is being used to stifle independent media in places like Georgia and the former Soviet Union, and even attacking US citizens for exercising their rights of free expression. As a result, everything now gets painted as anti-Western, even normal discourse by local media outlets. But that is where the money is—and such a site has to produce evidence that it is earning its keep.

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