

Thumbnail Image:



[Russian Disinformation and U.S. Public Diplomacy](#) ^[1]

Russian disinformation campaigns are a hot topic these days, but fake news emanating from Moscow is hardly a new phenomenon for U.S. public diplomacy. However, the same phenomena that have allowed the Russian infowar to target the U.S. are also making it more difficult for U.S. public diplomacy efforts around the world.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union did its utmost to spread negative stories about the U.S. to foreign audiences, portraying real phenomena in the worst possible light (such as poverty or racism) or alternatively inventing stories altogether. Headlines in Soviet publications and those controlled or influenced by Moscow, for example, claimed that U.S. capitalism was on the verge of collapse or that HIV was created in a U.S. laboratory.

Then, the Soviets planted stories in sympathetic outlets around the world but were rarely able to get traction for their disinformation in mainstream U.S. or Western media. Today, they can disseminate such stories directly via the internet. Back then, they hoped that communist sympathizers or journalists on the take would help spread the message. Today, they can depend on a helping hand from polarized Western publics—on the right and left—distrustful of their governments and

mainstream media.

Today the barriers to entry for disinformation are low, allowing it to live and move around vast social media spaces rather than simply on the pages of low-quality newspapers.

During the Cold War, the target was public opinion in developing countries and Western Europe. The goal was to drive wedges between the U.S. and their allies by showing the U.S. as an unscrupulous, aggressive, failing society. Today, by contrast, Russia's target audience includes the U.S., and the goal of disinformation is to get people to doubt the very possibility of truthful reporting, rendering audiences apathetic and disinterested in politics. The Soviets tried to create false facts. Russian troll farms try to convince people there is no such thing as facts and no media can be trusted: hence, the motto of *Russia Today* (which *The New York Times* magazine recently labeled, "[the most effective propaganda operation of the 21st century so far](#)"): "Question More." David Maraniss, associate editor of *The Washington Post*, [was asked recently to identify the biggest danger to journalism](#). His answer was, "the denigration of the search for truth." This is equally a challenge for effective U.S. public diplomacy.

Russia's denigration of the idea of an objective truth serves two purposes: it allows Russia to more easily spread malicious, false information about the U.S. with impunity, and it allows Kremlin-controlled media outlets to more easily find voices (usually leftist academics) who will discount critical U.S. reporting about Russian actions.

Sadly, it is often fairly easy to get audiences to discount the possibility that media can produce trustworthy information about anything. In societies that for years only had access to controlled media that they distrusted, getting them to extend this profound skepticism to other media outlets is not that difficult. One of us observed this while teaching in Central Asia around the time of the Ukrainian Maidan uprising: a group of young, English-speaking, well-educated students from all the "Stans" simply had bought into the Russian-driven narrative, mostly consumed on social media, that the Maidan events were inspired by fascism and funded by the CIA.

Countering disinformation was never an easy task for U.S. public diplomacy, but today it is infinitely more difficult. In the past, U.S. diplomats could depend on the high professional standards of the U.S. media to help debunk disinformation, but today the barriers to entry for disinformation are low, allowing it to live and move around vast social media spaces rather than simply on the pages of low-quality newspapers.

In the past, U.S. diplomats could also rely on the consistency and credibility of official government messages. This is much harder today when the president of the United States himself popularizes the term "fake news" and routinely seeks to delegitimize reporting he doesn't like. Or simply lies. In other words, Trump seems to accept the central premise of a lot of Russian propaganda, which is that all news is biased and partisan, and the search for objective truth is a fool's errand. So counter-messaging by U.S. officials will face difficult hurdles so long as Trump is in office.

In the U.S., some advocate simply shutting down the access Russian media operations enjoy on U.S.-based social media: witness the recent decision by Twitter to no longer accept ads from *RT* and *Sputnik*. This, of course, doesn't help U.S. diplomats focused on foreign audiences. But the problem with such an approach is deeper. As Nina Jankowicz argued in [a recent op-ed](#), trying to eliminate *RT*

and other Russian outlets is not the solution. Not only would this run counter to the spirit of a free internet and the right to free speech, but, as Jankowicz argues, such responses fail to grasp that there is a receptive audience for Russian messages because so much of the U.S. public distrusts government and mainstream news outlets.

A more effective U.S. diplomacy approach to 21st century disinformation requires two things.

First, “fake” news facilitated by social media recalls the media environments of developing countries or those in transition: low journalistic standards, low barriers to entry, an inability or lack of interest in checking the veracity of documents, a general distrust of information provided by authorities and political control of media outlets. The public diplomacy response thus can and should draw on well-established training, capacity-building and exchange programs designed for such environments but extended to more countries. Ongoing, traditional public diplomacy programs that support free and independent journalism and alternative media outlets, as well as exchange programs that give foreign students, journalists and other professionals a first-hand glimpse into American society and some sense of an objective “truth,” [should be strengthened, not defunded](#), as another way to combat the effects of Russian disinformation.

Second, as Jankowicz argues, education on how to be a savvy media and information consumer has to be part of the solution, both in the U.S. and overseas. Jankowicz highlights a U.S. government-funded, International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX)-implemented program in Ukraine called “Learn to Discern,” which has trained 15,000 people in critical thinking, source evaluation and emotional manipulation. U.S. public diplomacy should have much greater access to such tools, and there is no reason that similar training should not become standard in U.S. high schools and universities.

The existential threat of the Soviet Union may no longer exist, but U.S. public diplomacy now faces an equally global and profound threat to one of the bedrock principles of democratic governance, which is that an informed citizenry is both possible and necessary. Of course, this challenge to the Enlightenment-rooted notions of objectivity, truth and fact-based knowledge is also faced by media professionals, educators and educational institutions and will require a sustained, coordinated effort by all of these groups to successfully fend off the assault by nihilistic ‘no-truth’ brigades.

Photo by Jürg Vollmer | [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)
