

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

The Kremlin's Channel ^[1]

Students of public diplomacy and propaganda are quick to point out the difference between the two, but sometimes it's not so easy. One man's strategic government effort to communicate with foreign publics can be another man's tendentious information blitz to smear the reputation of another country.

Nowadays, the clumsy and blunt-edged attacks that characterized the state-owned media of the Soviet Union are a thing of the past, and even a less than open media environment — such as that in Russia, China, Iran or Cuba — is unable to totally prevent the movement of information and ideas across national borders via satellite and Internet.

But a caveat is in order. As Russia's media environment at home becomes less free and more dangerous for practicing journalists, the Russian government resorts to more propaganda-like approaches to its overseas public diplomacy.

For instance, consider "Russia Today", a Russian government-funded daily TV news program that airs in most major media markets around the United States. Besides light feature material on Russian society and culture, travelogues, etc., "Russia Today" offers news items and analysis. If Western media have reported some negative development — say, the murder of a journalist and human rights lawyer in downtown Moscow — "Russia Today" will cover it too, but then go on to provide some broader "context" that seeks to limit the damage or shift the blame.

Fair enough. But as media in Russia become more monochromatic, so too does Russian public diplomacy. If Putin appears at Davos blaming the world economic crisis on American mismanagement, then for Russian public diplomacy America becomes the scape goat for all of Russia's current economic ills. As Peter Lavelle, one of the American "faces" of Russia Today, concluded a recent RT blog, "I can't see how anyone can really disagree with Putin's diagnosis and prognosis."

Lavelle offers the Kremlin view on what Obama now needs to do in order to "recast Russia-US relations," proceeding to list demands that could have been reprinted from an old copy of Pravda: The U.S. should stop "meddling," should stop "seeking security at the expense of other[s]," stop "seeking to claim the moral high ground" since "all across the board civil society and political rights have eroded in America over the past eight years. The US has no moral right to lecture any country on human rights." The "short list" goes on, (including "the U.S. should stop claiming Russia uses energy as a political weapon"), but never pauses to consider what Russia ought to do. (Presumably, whatever Putin says.)

Even yesterday's Superbowl football contest provided the occasion for a political dig. Against the backdrop of partying Steeler fans, Russia Today's correspondent noted that Bank of America reportedly spent \$10 million staging its own Superbowl party. At the White House, as the U.S. President hosted his own gathering to watch the game, was "Barack Obama just

ignoring that Bank of America had spent so much money or was he unaware?" the reporter gravely asked. "It's hard to say and it seems that Americans aren't getting the answers to these questions until all of the money seems to be gone."

Or so it seems.

As the Kremlin's channel, Russia Today has every right to practice its old-new style of public diplomacy as it pleases. But it will appear more like old-fashioned propaganda than new fashioned public diplomacy if it adopts a strident anti-U.S. tone. Particularly if the Kremlin at the same time continues to pressure Russian domestic media, such as Novaya Gazeta and radio station "Ekho Moskv," whenever they fail to toe the Kremlin line.

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