

Nov 04, 2016 by [R.S. Zaharna](#)

Culture Posts: Exposing the Battle of U.S. Values in the Smith-Mundt Debate ^[1]

Greetings from Washington. Along with the warmer temperatures and afternoon summer thunderstorms, a firestorm has erupted over a Congressional amendment related to U.S. public diplomacy. I put this post under Culture Posts, because the ferocity of the debate has had little to do with the technical aspects or merits of the legislation itself. At stake, and what the argument was really about, were iconic American values. The debate also reveals a surprising lack of understanding about just what is public diplomacy in the modern era of global communication. Indeed, rather than amending an old law, U.S. public diplomacy needs a new mindset.

At first the amendment seemed like a no-brainer update from the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 to the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012. As the foundation of contemporary U.S. public diplomacy, there is a ton of background available on the original Smith-Mundt. A good running start is at [Mountainrunner.us](#). The original legislation established the U.S. Information Agency with the mission of “informing and influencing foreign publics.” While the USIA has since been dissolved, the implicit understanding that public diplomacy targets “foreign publics”—not the domestic public—has remained a cornerstone assumption in U.S. public diplomacy practice and scholarship. Interestingly enough, numerous other countries assume the opposite—effective public diplomacy begins with the domestic public.

The reason the bill seemed like a no-brainer was because the Internet had made the distinction between foreign and domestic publics irrelevant and the bill effectively obsolete. Legally and philosophically, however ... and this is where the debate takes off ...

Anatomy of the Smith-Mundt Debate 2012

As is often the case when debates take on an outsized proportion there is usually buried symbolism. The raging battle on the surface is often a cover for issues that have deeper emotional significance. Trying to douse emotional flames with intellectual reason often only further fans the fire while submerging the original emotional triggers even deeper. Indeed, how the commentators spoke about the Amendment or tried to frame the issues only fueled the debate.

I decided to look take a closer look at the anatomy of the debate.

The debate grew exponentially in terms of quantity and intensity. On May 15, Representative Thornberry issued an 836-word press release announcing the amendment (HR 5736). The first news article went out within hours. The battle of the blogs started on May 18 after a posting on [Buzzfeed.com](#) with the headline, “Congressmen Seek to Lift Propaganda Ban,”

The BuzzFeed.com post not only changed the language from the original press release from public diplomacy to “propaganda,” but made it sound as if the reporter had obtained a news scoop rather than a press release—A sure tactic for generating interest among a wider audience.

Within a week, Technorati listed nearly 30 blog entries. Factivia.com had more than 60 entries on the topic. John Brown's Public Diplomacy Review and Blog, perhaps the meeting ground for the debate, grew from one entry in third position on May 18, to more than 11 entries in a single day, to 54 entries totaling 16,642 words. And that was the first week. The original BuzzFeed.com post had gone viral with close to 200,000 views.



The debate grew in intensity. Bloggers on the right as well as the left attacked the amendment. Perhaps another indication that the debate was deeper than ideological differences was that opposition to it crossed the political spectrum. The emotionally charged language was similarly indicative. There was talk of “sock puppets” and “brain washing.” One prominent Progressive blogger warned of “the creeping fascism of American politics” that “would allow the Department of Defense to subject the U.S. domestic public to propaganda.” Suddenly, the military was included, which was not a far stretch but nevertheless inaccurate.

Adding to the debate were those trying to figure out what the fuss over “propaganda” was about. The word “propaganda” appeared to evoke a visceral response in older commentators, some who spoke from “personal experience.” For many younger commentators propaganda just seemed like another form of persuasion, which was reflected in their blog titles: “Propaganda? So What?” “Much ado about State Department ‘propaganda’”; “Dial back the outrage.” Again this happened from the liberal Mother Jones to the conservative The Blaze. The Blaze, which features a promo for the Tea Party movement on its video, actually switched its feelings about the amendment from “Disconcerting and Dangerous” to a roundtable history lesson by a panel of young commentators. They all had to read from their research notes and struggled to keep a straight face. ([Video here](#))

To foreign observers, the Smith-Mundt debate may have looked rather confusing, if not odd. Public diplomacy scholar Robin Brown at Leeds University tweeted as much:

Robin Brown ?@rcmb: From outside the US Smith-Mundt domestic dissemination ban looks a bit odd. But apparently if you lift it US is doomed (May 20)

The intensity and speed with which the debate was spiraling suggested that the underlying, deeper issues at stake were significant. Indeed, the debate pitted two iconic American values against each other.

Appeal of the Future: Innovation & Opportunity

The very name of the bill – the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 – resonates strongly and positively with future orientation that has long been a prized American value. Anthropologists have documented it. American politicians have catered to it. And, American immigrants who left the “old country” behind have embraced it. As a young nation, vision meant looking forward to the quest for the new, the improved, the opportunity for change, or the challenge of innovation. While there may be the tinge for nostalgia here and there, the appeal for Change and Hope (of the future) tend to triumph.

So, in the one corner, there is the appeal of future orientation. This explains the “history lessons” about Smith-Mundt as well as the references to “modern”, “advanced” communication technologies and the need to “update” or “modernize” the “obsolete” or “outdated” “decades-old” 1948 bill.

American Individualism

In the other corner is an even stronger American value orientation: individual freedom. If one peels back the language about “propaganda” it is about the fear of a loss of individual freedom and autonomy. The government will “take control,” the public will be “vulnerable” or “fall prey” to “brain washing” and other powerful forms of control.

If one looks closely, propaganda is often linked to an authoritarian or totalitarian regime, as was the case of the [Thornberry press release](#). The anti-authoritarian appeal goes back to the American colonists and their rebellion against the King. Propaganda is also associated with deception, or more bluntly, lying by the authorities. Deliberate deception on the part of the government? Heaven forbid. America’s Founding Fathers built “checks and balances” into the foundation of the U.S. government structure. And lest the government forget its place, there are “the people” and of course, the “watch dog” press. While U.S. public diplomacy may be okay for “foreign” publics – including specifically targeting the youth of other countries, to expose the U.S. public to U.S. public diplomacy is a call to arms.

The images echo these iconic American values. There is the appeal to the modern, represented by technology. The image below was featured by the

piece mocking the new “brainwashing” law.



Pitted against the fear of loss of individual freedom, are the images, albeit dated, of government “propaganda.”


