

Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America's Culture to the World

By Nancy Snow

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A Book Review by

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Nancy Snow's book was originally published in 1998. Her third edition discusses what is at stake for the United States and for its propaganda/public diplomacy in the current global context. A decade earlier her focus was America's shift in public diplomacy post Cold War (1989) until 1999.

Snow's third edition covers the U. S. Presidential eras from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama. A fundamental lens through which she views public diplomacy and propaganda is an economic one. When she first published her short book (which she calls a pamphlet) public diplomacy was driven by the economy. Witness the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), which in Snow's view was disastrous for the economies of the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Her most recent edition of *Propaganda, Inc.* shifts from the economy to how America sells itself to the world rooted in the "Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld trinity", as propounded by Karen Hughes, "Bush's second term public diplomacy czar", who was responsible for the "Four E's" directive of public diplomacy: Engage, Exchange, Educate, Empower.

Snow says that this American "war of ideas against radical Islamism", has three strategic pillars:

- (1) to present a positive vision of American freedom and opportunity to the world;
- (2) to isolate and marginalize violent extremists; and (3) to "foster a sense of common interests and common values between Americans and people of different countries, cultures and faith".

(2010: 15-16)

Snow outlines three characteristics of propaganda stated by Everett Rogers in *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach*, which are: 1) intentional, 2) advantages the persuader, and 3) one-way. "This is why", she writes, "I favour the use of the word 'propaganda' over 'public diplomacy' to describe the modern operations of the US Information Agency" (still an independent agency at the time of the publication of the first edition of her book). She is quite

direct: “I consider the USIA a public relations instrument of corporate propaganda which ‘sells’ America’s story abroad by integrating business interests with cultural objectives” (2010: 86).

These last few quotes from Snow’s work underline the importance of this book. It is not an academic tome (which Snow readily confirms) but it is an extended essay for academics and the general public at large, the latter of which, in the opinion of this reviewer, is a readership ripe for understanding propaganda in all its national manifestations.

Snow addresses a long-standing block in our coming to terms with propaganda. She properly notes that “in many parts of the world today, and in most dictionaries, propaganda has no inherent negative connotation”. The clarity of this sentence alone speaks volumes to our inability as western cultures and nations to acknowledge that we are engaged in propaganda worldwide. Once this becomes evident, can our realization that we live in an age of propaganda be far behind? This notion finds its roots in *Propagandes*, Jacques Ellul’s seminal work, published almost fifty years ago.

To underscore the current importance of Snow’s book, one ought to note that one of her most recent publications, *Persuader-in-Chief*, an analysis of public diplomacy by the current U.S. President, Barack Obama, is out of print. There is anecdotal evidence that the American and Canadian publics are re-discovering the core meaning of propaganda, hence a plausible explanation for this other work of Snow’s being depleted.

Nancy Snow is an author and academic whose contributions are paramount to our understanding the world in which we live. She addressed a conference on Influence and Fighting Propaganda held in October of 2010 by the Information Operations Institute of the AOC whose purpose it is to “reunite men tied together through the common bond of having served in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) as Electronic Countermeasures (ECM) officers”. She noted that the vast majority of international American influence came not from educational, cultural and artistic communicators but from the military and missionaries. Her observation opens the door for a fundamental discussion of influence.

In 17th century North America, Jesuit missionaries submitted annual reports of their work in New France. Known as *The Jesuit Relations*, these reports were destined for their Jesuit superiors in Rome and France. During the winter of 1637-38, a Jesuit missionary to New France, Père Paul Le Jeune, S. J., wrote a very brief treatise of “how to spread the faith among the savages [as he called them]” (*Jesuit Relations 1637-1637*, Volume 14, pages 124-129). His thoughts have great relevance for public diplomacy and propaganda almost four centuries later. Nancy Snow’s basic approach to public diplomacy is mutual understanding. But Le Jeune’s outline for “converting” the people among whom he lived may contribute to Snow’s challenge, even though at first glimpse one might conclude that “converting” has very little to do with “mutual understanding”.

Le Jeune outlines four means whereby one can assimilate a people to one’s ideology but, ironically, in the process the individual thinking he is doing the assimilation becomes himself part of his target group. First, and most importantly, one must speak the other’s language to understand and be understood; one must care for the health of the population (this second point goes beyond the diseases imported by the French); one must educate (yet in the process, as the *Relations* indicate, some of those educating found themselves educated by their “students”; and, finally, one must establish an infrastructure for economic survival and well being.

The notion of being immersed in the other’s culture, to care for the physical and mental well-being, to ensure the survival of those whom we encounter, is a fundamental design for “soft power” as public diplomacy is being defined (hard power emanates from the military).

Snow's underlying conclusions in this volume argue for a second look at propaganda as most of the world sees it, thereby facilitating communication on the target audience's own terms. By so doing, she allows us to look at mutual understanding across nations in a decidedly practical light.

It may be no accident that in her prior work, *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, (edited by Nancy Snow and Phil Taylor), the final essay by David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla, presents a consideration of noopolitik. The authors defined noopolitik as "an approach to statecraft . . . that emphasizes the role of informational soft power in expressing ideas, values, norms and ethics" (2010: 355).

What is fascinating about this concept is that "noopolitik" is derived from the term *noosphere*, first used over seventy years ago by Father Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit and palaeontologist, in describing the information sphere surrounding the planet akin to the biosphere and the atmosphere. Given Dr. Snow's inclusion of this particular article in the book, and her articulation of the seemingly contradictory role of the military and the missionary in fostering new approaches to public diplomacy, I would suggest that her underlying philosophy and her principles from which she derives her global vision could well be aligned with and stem from such an ethical tradition. This may be worth bearing in mind in anticipation of her upcoming biography of Edward R. Murrow, noted broadcaster and head of the USIA under president Kennedy.

About the Reviewer

Dennis Murphy (Ph.D., University of California at Santa Barbara) has taught since 1970 in the Department of Communication at Concordia University. He has acted as consultant and advisor at the Department of Behavioural Sciences of the Semmelweis Medical University, Budapest, and has lectured at Université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand. From 2001 to 2005 he was Executive Director of University Communications for Concordia. He retired as Professor Emeritus in September of 2010 but continues to teach an online course, "Propaganda and You" through eConcordia/Knowledge One.

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