

US strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda

SUMMARY

After the Cold War, countering strategic communications by foreign actors declined as a US foreign policy priority. The 9/11 attacks, however, reignited the need for the USA to respond to the propaganda of third parties such as Al-Qaida and, more recently, ISIL/Da'esh.

Various US government departments and agencies use both traditional and digital tools to approach susceptible audiences – by exposing the disinformation of third parties or by presenting a different perspective of events.

The Obama administration has revamped its counter-extremist communications over recent years, and the US State Department has launched a new Global Engagement Center to synchronise messaging to foreign audiences.

Meanwhile, the growing role of state-led media campaigns targeting foreign audiences by countries such as Russia has boosted calls for the USA to upgrade its public diplomacy efforts to adapt to new challenges.

At the same time, government action is challenged by the difficulties of inter-agency coordination as well as by legal protections limiting the use of strategic communications within the USA.



In this briefing:

- Strategy and priorities
- Responsibilities and tools
- Adversaries
- Insights and criticism
- Main references

Definitions of key terms

The US government [defines strategic communication \(StratCom\)](#) as '(a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences'. In the US toolkit of strategic communications, **public diplomacy** [seeks](#) to 'interact directly with the citizens, community and civil leaders, journalists, and other opinion leaders of another country' in order to 'influence that society's attitudes and actions in supporting U.S. policies and national interests'. **Global engagement**, frequently [used](#) in the context of countering foreign propaganda, relates to the way the US government presents its message to foreign audiences. In 2010, the US Department of Defense [updated](#) its definition of **propaganda** to refer solely to 'adversary communication', 'especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behaviour of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly'.

Strategy and priorities

US strategic communications [support](#) the broader US national security [strategy](#), which seeks to protect US interests through global American leadership rooted in the country's strength and values. In this way, US strategic communication policy synchronises the government's 'words and deeds' and deliberately communicates and engages with intended audiences abroad.

Since the 9/11 attacks, counter-communications have focused on the propaganda of [violent extremists](#). However, there have been calls in the US [Congress](#) for greater focus on threats posed by foreign states' information warfare strategies.

Reorganising 'outdated' efforts ...

The Obama administration and the US Congress have each sought to reorganise the government's disparate counter-communication efforts, long [criticised](#) for being outdated, lacking coordination and failing to engage foreign audiences with a unified strategy. The 2010 National Strategic Framework for Strategic Communications stressed the need to synchronise initiatives and strategy across the government, engage audiences with a positive vision, and engage more with local communities.

... and involving the private technology sector

The Obama administration has also focused on involving and/or exchanging with private sector [technology](#) companies on strategic communications issues. The leadership of the government is responsible for fostering a culture of communication between its different parts. The Obama administration's efforts to counter extremist propaganda were initially envisioned to directly confront ideologies, but the focus now includes indirect, local measures via the [Global Engagement Center](#), launched in 2016.

Historical background

Although the USA first used modern large-scale information warfare during World War II, its rivalry with the Soviet Union during the Cold War pushed it to develop extensive counter-propaganda capabilities. One such example was the US Information Agency ([USIA](#)), created in 1953 with the aim of understanding and influencing foreign publics in support of US interests; USIA led the country's strategic communications until it was disbanded in 1999.¹ In 1981, the US counter-information strategy was centralised under the Active Measures Working Group, composed of multiple US government agency representatives. In 1983, the USIA opened a service specifically devoted to information counter-measures against the Soviet Union, known as the Office to Counter Soviet Disinformation. Although the USA's attention to countering propaganda declined with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 9/11 attacks pushed it into an information war against terrorist groups, focused today on the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. At present, the USA does not have a central communications agency; instead, counter-measures to terrorist propaganda are spread across the different

Responsibilities and tools

US initiatives to counter foreign propaganda are broadly grouped under the different areas of government depending on the relevant department or agency mandate.

- **National Security Staff (NSS)** – High-ranking members of the White House's team dedicated to national security issues lead [coordination](#) efforts across the US government to ensure a cohesive communications policy.
- **US State Department** – As the leader in US public diplomacy, the [Department](#) is responsible for communicating directly with international audiences. In this vein, in 2011 the [Department](#) created the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), which sought to confront extremist ideologies directly. In 2016, in response to the new emphasis on indirect counter-measures, the CSCC was [upgraded](#) and [rebranded](#) as the Global Engagement Center ([GEC](#)). It now focuses on creating 'third-party content' in addition to US content, while 'nurturing and empowering a global network of positive messengers' by providing 'seed funding and other support to NGOs and media start-ups focused on countering violent extremist messaging', among other things. Furthermore, the State Department [reinforces](#) journalistic practices globally, raises the profile of crimes committed against journalists, and publicly denounces state-sponsored disinformation.
- **US Department of Defense (DOD)** – The DOD handles military communication operations, divided into Information Operations (IO) and Defense Support to Public Diplomacy (DSPD). Significant DOD counter-measures, such as the disabling of websites that present a threat to US military operations, are conducted in [cyberspace](#). Among other things, the DOD [conducts](#) psychological operations (PSYOPS), intended to 'convey selected information and indicators' with the aim of influencing foreign audiences.
- **Intelligence agencies** – Under the coordination of the Director for National Intelligence ([DNI](#)), US intelligence agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency ([CIA](#)) and the National Security Agency ([NSA](#)), research and analyse foreign public opinion, communication techniques and violent extremist messages, in order to find ways to best counter them. Many agency operations are not publicly disclosed.
- **International broadcasting** – The Broadcasting Board of Governors ([BBG](#)) is responsible for US government-funded broadcasting programmes, such as the Voice of America ([VoA](#)) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty ([RFE/RL](#)). These programmes broadcast content aligned with US foreign policy to an estimated 165 million people.
- **Other** – [Multiple](#) other agencies, such as the Department of Homeland Security ([DHS](#)), which analyses foreign communications to determine threats to the US homeland, and the Department of Justice ([DOJ](#)), which develops frameworks for agency action, also perform complementary tasks related to strategic communications.

Adversaries

Although US efforts to counter extremist propaganda have become increasingly focused on the ISIL/Da'esh media, largely due to its [sophistication](#) and the group's [influence](#) in and beyond the Middle East, other groups, such as Al-Qaida, are still targeted by US counter-propaganda measures. A new bill, for a Countering Information Warfare Act, was [introduced](#) in the US Senate in March 2016 to counter Russian and Chinese

disinformation and propaganda. Historically, Cuba has also been a target of US counter-measures, one such example being Florida-based radio and television broadcaster [Radio and TV Martí](#), which seeks to provide Cubans with information to rival Cuban state media.

Insights and criticism

Accomplishments

The US government [notes](#) the challenges in measuring the success of US StratCom, posed by the difficulties involved in observing audience perceptions and distinguishing the effects of US communications from other influences, and the long time-frames required for measuring perceptions. Some examples of government accomplishments include the GEC's Twitter [account](#), which had produced 12 000 total tweets and gained 26 600 followers as of June 2016, or Washington's recent partnership with Abu Dhabi to establish the United Arab Emirates-based [Sawab](#) Center, a project aimed at amplifying Muslim anti-Da'esh voices through social media.

Shortcomings and constraints

In response to congressional allegations of [insufficient](#) action to confront Russian information manipulation, US Senator Rob Portman co-sponsored the abovementioned bipartisan [Countering Information and Warfare Act](#) bill. The bill envisages a State Department-led 'Center for Information and Analysis Response', which would [integrate](#) US agency counter-measures in a new way against 'counterfactual narratives' developed abroad. In 2015, Members of Congress sponsored [the US International Communications Reform Act](#) bill, aimed at reforming international broadcasting operations, perceived by some legislators as outdated and ineffective. Congress has also sought to [restrain funding](#) for the DOD's [controversial](#) psychological operations. Agency counter-measures have also been criticised for running [contradictory](#) operations, as in the case of a jointly operated Saudi government-CIA fake jihadi website, which the DOD shut down after assessing that it posed a risk to US troops.

The [Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948](#) stipulates that information distributed by the US government for foreign audiences cannot be disseminated within the US. [Supporters](#) assert that the law rightfully protects US citizens from manipulation by their own government, while critics claim the law restrains US public diplomacy by creating an artificial 'firewall' between foreign and domestic audiences.

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