

Churchill said that the truth needed a bodyguard of lies. The propaganda campaign which was part of the effort by both sides during World War 2 has been resurrected for the modern era. During the Cold War Soviet propaganda was often clumsy, but a lot of it was very subtle. All that was required was to change the minds of the audience you are addressing. There were many in the West who felt that the Soviet regime was more sinned against than sinning.

The digital era of social media has added a whole new dimension to the meaning of mass communications. During World War 2 Goebbels understood the power of having a radio in every household; both to control the domestic audience, as well as influencing the minds of the enemy. Autocracies rely on uniformity of thought to sustain their legitimacy. In democracies, so the theory goes, pluralistic media outlets mean that Government cannot control what people think. The rise of social media, bloggers and smart phones has seen a decline in readership of mainstream newspapers; add to this a plethora of cable and satellite news channels and we are faced with a babel of choices.

A recent gathering of military and media figures took place at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London' including our correspondent Nick Watts, to consider the twin issues of War in the Information age and the role of Strategic Communications (StratCom). Politicians and commanders need to be aware of the changed media landscape when they are considering military operations. Communications has been seen as an add-on to campaign planning. The days when journalists could be corralled into briefings with a junior staff officer are long past. Apart from freelance journalists, photographers and bloggers in war zones, there is the chorus of social media. The advent of the mobile phone means that everybody is now a cameraman. The smart phone made the Arab spring possible, but it has also enabled Daesh to promulgate its propaganda.

The twin threats of Russian disinformation (post Ukraine) and Daesh challenge western democracies and the NATO Alliance; aren't we supposed to be the good guys? Lenin identified the useful idiots who could be relied upon to relay the Moscow line in the West; nowadays these are called agents of influence. Stalin created the Big Lie and modern Russian spokesmen have copied this technique. In this new area of contestation language has come to play a significant role: There is no objectivity only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible is one quote attributed to Margarita Simonyan, editor in chief of Russia Today. Western media with an editorial commitment to impartiality struggles in the face of the idea that any opinion is true as long as it agrees with the point of view of the sponsoring government.

Daesh mirrors this philosophy by broadcasting a general line that Islam is under attack by the west and then identifies supporters and recruits them through encouraging messages on social media. Alienated youth looking for friendly contacts are easily led into a miasma which can turn them into killers. The west is catching up, but it has lost much credibility through the destabilisation of the Middle East which many attribute to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Speakers at the RUSI conferences were of the view that the media is already an area of contestation. Those who do not support a liberal internationalist / open society view of the world are muddying the waters just enough to give the mainstream of opinion pause for thought. As Russia demonstrated in the Eastern Ukraine, giving your opponent time is handing them an advantage which they will exploit.

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