Social Construction of U.S. Propaganda Organization: Discourse Analysis of the United States Information Agency (USIA)

Keywords
social constructionism, discourse analysis, organization studies, propaganda, United States Information Agency (USIA)

Junichi HIRAMATSU, Takushoku University

Abstract:
The purpose of this research is to examine by discourse analysis the social construction of the United States Information Agency (USIA), a first independent propaganda organization in peace time. The findings show that the USIA was organized as a result of social effects of the knowledge on American propaganda and propaganda organization accumulated by the U.S. political and governmental leaders since World War II rather than by a single reason of rationality, cost-efficiency, or legal institutions. Through this study, it can be understood how a propaganda organization in the U.S. government is dynamically constituted through the texts embedded in certain historical and social contexts.
1. Introduction

This paper examines by drawing on discourse analysis how the organizing of the United States Information Agency (USIA) was socially realized. The USIA should be interesting for information and organization scholars in that it was established in August 1953 as a first and last independent propaganda (foreign information) organization in peace time.

However, the USIA is still under-studied by those other than historians while even studying a security and propaganda organization such as the USIA is not well-developed (Grey, 2009; Osgood, 2006: 389). This paper tries to fill this research gap and to contribute to socio-informatics from the organization and discourse perspective.

2. Organization and Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is different in perspective and approach from other forms of qualitative analysis. It deals with the relationship between texts and contexts in human reality. It varies by research objectives but is premised on that human reality is socially constructed and social relations are embedded in certain texts and contexts. Organization, private or public, is human reality so discourse analysis is well suited for organization studies (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 6-8, 14, 19, 41).

The author surveyed the contextualized texts of U.S. political and governmental leaders during the period from World War II until after the establishment of the USIA. The findings and discussion go as follows.

3. American Propaganda, Propaganda Organization, and the USIA

3.1 World War II

The organizational origin of the USIA dates back to propaganda policies of the Franklin Roosevelt administration. Before the war, the State Department was conducting as part of “diplomacy” educational and cultural activities by using own emissaries. In 1938, Secretary of State Cordell Hull paid increasing attention to the value of civilian exchanges in Latin America and directed his subordinates to organize a cultural relations section within the State. It was this time when the post “cultural attaché” was created.

Russo-German Non-aggression Pact on August 23, 1939 pressed Roosevelt to impose a state of emergency nationwide. In August 1940, the president established the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs within the White House and designated Nelson Rockefeller as its chief. Rockefeller collaborated with the State and concentrated on the bi-national cultural/commercial advertisements to counter Nazi propaganda in Latin America.

In 1941, when Roosevelt commented on the Life magazine the coming “American Century,” the Coordinator of Information (COI) was established at the top level. Although first and last COI William Bill Donovan initially expected to be given a comprehensive authority both to “collect and analyze all information and data, which may bear upon national security” and to perform “supplementary activities” including propaganda, he encountered fierce opponents from other government bodies. War Secretary Henry Stimson, the Army G-2 (intelligence),
Hull, and Rockefeller all delivered their concerns to the president about the bureaucratic infringement by the Donovan’s office on information. Also, the “domestic” propaganda function was denied by Roosevelt himself as he differentiated propaganda tasks given to Donovan from motivating U.S. citizens. With that limited capacity, Donovan managed to give birth to its own subordinate propaganda organization, the Foreign Information Service (FIS) whose director was Robert Sherwood, a playwright and speechwriter for Roosevelt (Cull, 2008: 11-14; Dizard, 2004: 11).

There were philosophical differences between Donovan and Sherwood, however. For Donovan who was interested in secret military activities and impressed by German propaganda, the FIS was supposed to be a weapon of war using “a judicious mixture of rumor and deception...to foster disunity and confusion in support of military operations.” On the contrary, Sherwood followed the British practice of “Strategy of Truth” and insisted on civilian control separate from military operations. The FIS opened regional stations overseas called United States Information Service (USIS). The FIS also started in January 1942, a first American radio program and on February 24 opened its own radio station, the Voices of America (later Voice of America, VOA). From the beginning, the VOA continued trying to stand politically neutral in its broadcasting (Winkler, 1979: 27-8).

As the war grew heated and the discrepancies on American propaganda between Donovan and Sherwood increased, Roosevelt issued on June 13 the executive order providing that the COI was divided into two: the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of War Information (OWI). The OSS was headed by Donovan. As a military and intelligence organization, the OSS was decided to conduct secret “black” propaganda operations or “moral operations” including distributing false and/or unattributed materials, or controlling front organizations. The OWI was led by Elmer Davis, a journalist, author, and radio commentator. The OWI absorbed the FIS/USIS and the VOA, and its employees consisted of many kinds of non-military U.S. citizens and foreigners. The OWI was never entitled to access to the president unlike the Rockefeller’s office. Its responsibility was to “formulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government.” Davis further defined the OWI as “an information agency, setting forth the proposals of authoritative persons or agencies” (Cull, 2008: 14-5, 18; Winkler, 1979: 25, 31, 34, 42).

3.2 Early Postwar Years

On August 31, 1945, President Truman abolished by his executive order the OWI. However, this order also stated:

the nature of present-day foreign relations makes it essential for the United States to maintain information activities abroad as an integral part of the conduct of our foreign affairs (Henderson, 1969: 35)

Under this understanding, the president ordered in late 1945 Secretary of State to create
propaganda programs “to be conducted on a continuing basis.” As such, the State took over the functions of the OWI/VOA/USIS and the Rockefeller’s office. In a press release that year, the president explained that the United States would not “outstrip the extensive and growing information programs of other nations” but “endeavor to see to it that other peoples receive a full and fair picture of American life and of the aims and policies of the United States Government.” Publisher William Benton, who took office in September as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, echoed the president’s views on American propaganda. In a congressional statement on January 3, 1946, Benton urged the Congress to clearly discern between American “information” and Russian “propaganda” (Henderson, 35, 37).

On March 12, 1947, Truman began the so-called “containment” anti-Soviet foreign policy. This idea derived from Minister George Kennan’s argument that the Soviet Union was internationally expansionist so the U.S. must tackle it by economic, military, diplomatic or “psychological” measures. The National Security Act of July 26 1947 established the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as a successor of the OSS and the National Security Council (NSC) for the coordination of national security policymaking at the highest level. In December, the NSC decision (NSC4-A) specified the CIA as a body of implementing the whole “covert” action programs including black propaganda. NSC 10/2 in 1948 further asked the CIA for the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) for covert action which was ordered to ask for policy guidance, in peace time from the State, and at war from the Department of Defense (DoD). The DoD initially hesitated to get involved in both overt and covert propaganda in peace time. Except for Generals like Dwight Eisenhower or Robert McClure, the U.S. military was inclined to think that it should discriminate “psychological warfare” which is conducted only at war from “selling democracy” which was thought to fall within the State (Paddock, 2002: 47-8, 129-30).

In the summer of 1947, a congressional group co-chaired by Alexander H. Smith and Karl E. Mundt visited the USIS European posts and pointed out that communists were “conducting aggressive psychological warfare against us.” “In order to prevent this, to safeguard our national security, to promote world peace and implement our own foreign policy, ...a strong and effective information and educational exchange program is essential.” Thus, on January 27, 1948, the Smith-Mundt Act was signed into law after more than a hundred times modifications. Under this act, the State again organizationally drew the line between media and cultural/educational propaganda. The main objectives of this act were to ban domestic propaganda and “to promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries, and to increase mutual understanding” across the world (Henderson, 1969: 41-2).

After late 1949, the Soviets started the “hate America” propaganda campaigns. NSC 68, which Paul Nitze in the State’s Policy Planning Staff drafted on April 14, 1950, accordingly argued for the “methods short of war” to “reduce the power and influence of the USSR.” At this critical junction, Edward Barrett came to the State as the Assistant Secretary. The OWI veteran and journalist, Barrett advised Truman to
practice "Campaign of Truth" to reveal the Soviets' "deceit, distortion, and lies" (Belmonte, 2008: 40).

Since venting Warfare 15, awakened name of the comments the Czech Republic. Following suit with the RFE, the Radio Free Asia in 1951 for communist China and the Radio Liberation (later Radio Liberty) in 1953 for the USSR initiated their stand-alone campaigns. The CIA radio stations and the VOA overlapped in radio broadcasting but different through American propagandist lens. The RFE/RL was mostly staffed by émigrés from the listening countries and broadcasted their comments on internal matters to the limited number of countries in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the VOA did not use the voices of other countries but those of America in the name of the U.S. government (Belmonte, 2008: 42; Dizard, 2004: 142).

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 awakened the U.S. military to create on January 15, 1951 the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare (OCPW) with Robert McClure as its head. The DoD and the OCPW then began inventing a strategy for psychological warfare. Since then, the OCPW had been at odds with the CIA over covert propaganda. McClure even raised a question in 1953 of whether the CIA would become the "fourth service" (Paddock, 2002: 88-89, 103, 131, 135).

In April, 1951, the Truman administration created the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) to "coordinate" propaganda policies. However, the views on the role of the PSB were divided among its members. The CIA and the PSB staff described the body as the "command post" which would coordinate all of major policies contemplated by the government. The State, who feared to lose its leadership in foreign policy, tried to limit the PSB's role to only providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information on individual psychological programs (Osgood, 2006: 43-5).

3.3 Establishment of the USIA

On January 20, 1953, Dwight Eisenhower was elected to the presidency. Eisenhower was the first president contender who dealt in public with American propaganda. On February 2, the president said in his State of the Union message that he would "make more effective all activities of the government-related international information" (Henderson, 1969: 48).

At the request of the president, two presidential committees were built for reviewing the Truman's "Campaign of Truth." As early as January 19, the President's Advisory Committee on Government Organization was established for this purpose, headed by Nelson Rockefeller. Five days later on January 24, the President's Committee on International Information Activities headed by William Jackson also got started by analyzing the entire range of U.S. Cold War policies covert as well as overt.

This is when there were some congressmen launching their harsh attacks against U.S. propaganda and alleged communists inside the government. The House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Government Operations Committee of the U.S. Senate chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy called for
the abolishment of the State’s propaganda division and the VOA replete with alleged “commies.” Their arguments were based mostly on speculations or political motives.

After the death of Stalin on March 5, the USSR began moderating its propaganda overseas from “hate America” to “peace offensive.” On April 7, the Rockefeller Committee recommended the establishment of “a new foreign information agency” under the NSC. Partly responding to this, Eisenhower submitted on June 1, 1953 to the Congress the Reorganization Plan No.8. The subsequent official reports continued to express different views on American propaganda and propaganda organization. The report issued by the Hickenlooper committee of the Congress suggested either giving greater autonomy to the State’s propaganda organization or creating an independent agency while keeping the function of exchange-of-persons under the State in order to prevent it from being political and too closely associated with propagandists. The Jackson Committee’s report on June 30 did not directly tackle the new information organization issue. Instead, it stressed the importance of overall propaganda coordination and recommended the establishment of an Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) under the NSC.

The influential but not decisive individuals in the government were Eisenhower, Rockefeller, C. D. Jackson, or State Secretary John Foster Dulles. Eisenhower claimed to distinguish between overt and covert propaganda. C. D. Jackson, a WWII veteran, was a member of the Jackson Committee and the first “psychological warfare” adviser to the president from February 1953 to March 1954. Dulles personally thought that the State should concentrate solely on traditional “diplomacy” and foreign “policy” so he wanted to abandon its propaganda or liberation “operations.” He even tried to disband the VOA, against which C. D. Jackson soon warned. He also ordered his subordinates “to find a basis of cooperation with McCarthy” to avoid being criticized by the Congress (Henderson, 1969: 48-52; Osgood, 2006: 77-85; Belmonte, 2008: 52; Dizard, 2004: 67).

Based on the Reorganization Plan, the USIA was legally established on August 1, 1953, absorbing the propaganda functions of the State, Mutual Security Agency (MSA), Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA), and occupied areas other than cultural and educational exchanges. On October 28, in a press release Eisenhower stated:

The purpose of the United States Information Agency shall be to submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communications techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace (Henderson, 1969: 65).

Former VOA consultant Theodore Streibert became the first Director of the USIA. He confirmed the president’s commitment by promising that the USIA keeps “avoiding a propagandistic tone.” The USIA distributed fact-based information on American life and policy through radio, publications or exhibits to the foreign public except for high-level governmental officials. Simultaneously, the USIA (not the VOA) often engaged in “unattributed” (gray) propa-
ganda activities. The USIA used abroad the name “USIS” to avoid the misunderstanding that the USIA was a U.S. “intelligence) agency” (Cull, 2008: 102; Osgood, 2006: 89-90).

That said, the USIA could not become a leader or coordinator of U.S. propaganda among the government. The USIA made overt and gray foreign propaganda materials together with other federal organizations under the State’s guidance. The USIA also had to keep the virtually master-servant relations with the State, the CIA and the DoD since unlike them, the USIA had no authorities to make policy and USIA officials had no chance for high-level promotion at least until 1964. Plus, the Director of the USIA firstly had the access to the OCB but not to the NSC. The USIA was even challenged from inside. The VOA often insisted on its journalistic independence from the State and the USIA (Dizard, 2004: 68-9; Cull, 2008: 178, 261).

4. Discussion

The findings show that the USIA was organized as a result of social effects of the knowledge on American propaganda and propaganda organization accumulated by the U.S. political and governmental leaders since World War II rather than by a single reason of rationality, cost-efficiency, or legal institutions. The discourse on U.S. propaganda and propaganda organization revolved around political, bureaucratic, or professional negotiations.

As illustrated above, WWII brought about the texts and contexts where both cultural/educational and overt/covert propaganda should be organized separately while professionals in military-civilian, intelligence, or diplomacy continued to compete for propaganda. Following this tradition, the USIA was discursively positioned as an overt and gray foreign information organization to counter enemy propaganda and to explain American life and policy on a factual basis. At the same time, the USIA was depicted in a negative way by American political and government leaders as a non-military, non-intelligence, non-diplomatic, non-cultural/educational, and non-domestic operational organization with little bureaucratic privilege.

Although there were some powerful American leaders in the organizing of the USIA, their texts could not be completely immune to the American historical and social contexts. Educational and cultural exchanges continued to be recognized as separate parts of American propaganda. After the ambitious efforts by the COI, few U.S. leaders dared to advocate for a single centralized propaganda organization. Consequently, the USIA was independent but just one of the propaganda organizations in the government with no authority over central coordination and covert/domestic propaganda affairs.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the social construction of the USIA. Through the analysis of the related discourse, it is concluded that the organizing of the USIA was achieved as a result of social effects of the knowledge on American propaganda and propaganda organization accumulated by the U.S. leaders in the political and governmental arena since World War II. The under-
Social Construction of U.S. Propaganda Organization

standing of the organizational fluctuation of the USIA since the 1960s requires more research and discussion.

References