

Perspectives

Volume VI Issue 4, August 2014

In Memoriam:

Dan Kuehl (1949-2014)



Information Power, Public Diplomacy, and Television

by Russell C. Rochte

While I was preparing to write something appropriate for Layalina's *Perspectives*, my respected teacher, longtime mentor, generous colleague, and dear friend, Dr. Dan Kuehl, suddenly took a turn for the worse in his battle with pancreatic cancer and passed away on June 28th. Dan was a first-rate scholar of information warfare and public diplomacy who enjoyed an international reputation as a devoted teacher and prolific writer. A retired Air Force officer, he was a Plank-Holder in the Department of Defense School of Information Warfare and Strategy in the mid-1990s. He taught for 19 years at the National Defense University, where he headed the Information Strategies Concentration Program. In 2012, he joined the faculty of Mercyhurst University in his hometown of Erie, PA where, sadly, he succumbed to cancer after only a short while. Holder of a Ph.D. in history from Duke University, Dan also had a passion for the American Civil War and was a frequent author on the subject. His wisdom, counsel, quick smile, and infectious enthusiasm will be greatly missed.

Dan was amongst a very small group of thinkers who understood that international influence grows best through the honest and credible use of "national information power." Dan preached the power of the visual. He often said, "Do good things for the right reasons. Take pictures and publish the story. Repeat it over and over until they get it. Show the audiences the truth – they can handle it." What Dan meant was that, as Edward R. Murrow had said decades before, the best propaganda is the truth, and in the war against ignorance, intolerance, and indifference, meaningful television was perhaps our greatest weapon. Not the increasingly vulgar, formulaic, laugh-track infected tripe that oozes from our screens nowadays. Both Murrow and Dan Kuehl meant truthful news and uplifting programming with high production values and low PC-spin – programming that offered the viewer both entertaining stories and challenging truth about the greater world around them.

Private-sector-produced content representing the best that America has to offer is exactly what Murrow and Kuehl intended: highest production values, unassailable ethics, verifiably truthful representations whether flattering or not – programming that refuses to insult or pander to the viewer, programming that reveals the common humanity of us all regardless of ethnicities, religious views, skin colors, or accidents of geography. Compelling programming that confronts the issues of the day at the person-to-person level, yet in an entertaining style devoid of the usual editorial spin or government biases, so that the viewers can decide for themselves rather than be driven to a pre-determined conclusion. In short, quality television – whether hard hitting journalism or high quality television series – used as suggested by Murrow and later by Kuehl removes the petty politics and allows our common humanity to trump politics, to the end that understanding grows even if agreement does not immediately follow.

Isn't that what public diplomacy is supposed to be about?

This idea suggests a second observation, spurred by Dr. Amy Zalman's thought-provoking piece in the April edition of *Perspectives* on the need to re-imagine the "information instrument of power."¹ I heartily agree.

¹ Amy Zalman, "Getting the Information Albatross Off Our Backs," *Layalina Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (April, 2014), URL: <http://www.layalina.tv/publications/getting-the-information-albatross-off-our-backs-notes-toward-an-information-savvy-national-security-community->

If, as Dr. Kenneth Payne wrote in 2005, “the media are indisputably an instrument of war,” then we ought to be using this instrument to its fullest advantage.² Regretfully, we do not. Former Secretary of State Hillary

The USG [United States Government] does little to take advantage of the tremendous persuasive power of the visual – television – to positively shape the global information environment for the sake of national security.

Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2011 and famously said, “we are in an information war, and we are losing that war.” She went on to argue that, despite the popularity of Internet social media in the West, the U.S. Government had to find better ways to communicate via traditional media, because “most people [international audiences] still get their news from television and radio.”³

That was 2011. Critics may scoff and suggest that the “Internet revolution” has made traditional television obsolete. Yet, Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) research on contemporary media use in Egypt published just last March found that 94.1 percent of Egyptians continue to receive their news from [traditional] television on a weekly basis.⁴ Recent similar studies found nearly

by-dr-amy-zalman/.

2 Kenneth Payne, “The Media as an Instrument of War,” *Parameters* (Spring, 2005): 81. *Parameters* is the flagship journal of the U.S. Army War College, see <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/>.

3 Joby Warrick, “Clinton: U.S. losing global public-relations battle - to ‘Baywatch’ and wrestling,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2011, URL: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/02/AR2011030206898.html>.

4 Broadcast Board of Governors, “Research Series Presentation: Contemporary Media Use in Egypt,” March 13, 2014, Washington D.C. Also see the research brief at <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2014/03/Egypt-research-brief.pdf>.

half of all people in Turkey watch television for their news, and a remarkable 96 percent of Ukrainians depend upon some form of television for their news.⁵

Dan Kuehl taught that National Information Power was the broadest range of military, governmental and civilian capabilities that could be used to operate within the global information environment and influence the strategic context for the purpose of national security.⁶ Similarly, strategist and author Charles J. “Chuck” de Caro has written for years about his concept of “Softwar”: the use of global visual media (“television”) to shape another society’s will by changing its view of reality.⁷ At the time of his most widely recognized writing (1996), de Caro suggested that the U.S. had ignored the positive use of television to influence the course of human events for good around the globe. I suggest that, nearly twenty years later, little has changed. The USG continues to ignore the positive value of television (in all its forms) as a tool of information power.

Kuehl demonstrated the cultural element to national information power. De Caro provided a strategy for using television as a cultural instrument for good – slowly shaping opinions and behaviors around the world. Morrow insisted that the best propaganda was the truth. The U.S. news and entertainment industry clearly has the tools, the talent, and the capability. Yet the USG does little to take advantage of the tremendous persuasive power of the visual – television – to positively shape the global information environment for the sake of national security.

Just as Dr. Zalman’s article suggested we change our definition of information power, I suggest we update our thinking about “television.” Let’s define television as “moving pictures with sound regardless of format or delivery means.” Television defined this way is platform-agnostic: it doesn’t matter if the viewer receives the content via terrestrial or satellite broadcast, streaming video over the Internet to a computer, on a cell phone, in a

5 For Turkey, see <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2014/07/Turkey-research-brief.pdf>. For Ukraine, see <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2014/06/Ukraine-research-brief.pdf>.

6 Daniel T. Kuehl, “Defining Information Power,” *Strategic Forum* 115 (June, 1997): 3.

7 Chuck de Caro, “Softwar,” in *Cyber War: Security, Strategy, and Conflict in the Information Age*, ed. Alan D. Campen, Douglas H. Dearth, and R. Thomas Goodden (Fairfax, VA: AFCEA Press, 1996). See also numerous works by de Caro expanding his original concept. In 1996, de Caro wrote about global television; in 2010, he updated his wording to encompass all global visual media however distributed.

traditional cinema, or even via DVD – it’s all “television.” Therefore, I suggest that the conduct of public diplomacy (in part) via platform-agnostic television content is fundamental to the broadly based pursuit of national security objectives by means other than arms. It is entirely possible to create top-notch television programming and provide such content at cost, at a discount, or essentially free of charge to broadcasters on an international scale – especially those broadcasters who are hungry for affordable content to fill their programming wheel. The U.S. international broadcasting entities could even do it themselves. News and entertainment programming with

We must tell stories that capture and hold the audience’s interest and ultimately compel attitudinal and behavioral change in the target demographic.

high production values, employing highly telegenic talent acting in interesting stories that also happen to display and model positive social values and behaviors across the narrative arc, can be and should be provided. Such programming must be free of USG spin or heavy-handed preaching about such things as “democracy” or “American values” or other Cold War legacy topics and avoid topics that may be foreign or even irrelevant to viewers worldwide.

Such programming can offer more positive models within the context of the intended audience’s experience of daily life without becoming “preachy” – or even obvious. Such content creation and distribution qualities must be maintained over time by a guiding hand (an executive producer) not subject to the whims of politics – someone who can maintain the needful quality and direction “from creation to syndication,” as it were, and give truly strategic direction. One size does not fit all: this kind of content must speak to each intended audience where they are, show both the good and the not-so-good as truthfully as can be represented, and provide context and nuance so that the viewers can understand. We must tell stories that capture and hold the audience’s interest and ultimately compel attitudinal and behavioral change in the target demographic.

In the 1970s, Dr. Miguel Sabido created a methodology for creating positive social change through television programming when he was Vice President for Research for Televisa in Mexico. The “Sabido methodology” was developed for reaching audiences through quality programming, telling compelling stories that invite the audience to see an issue through the eyes of the main characters – to identify with them and eventually to change their own behavior because of the character’s change over the course of many episodes. This entertainment-education strategy is based upon deliberate character development within irresistible plot lines that provide audiences with nuanced characters (both good and not so good) with whom they can engage and follow as the character(s) themselves deliberate issues, develop, and change.⁸ Quality serial dramas developed in this way draw the audience in and challenge their thinking. Such programming also leads to positive social changes as audience members begin to model what they see as positive changes in the program.

Sabido developed a number of social content serial dramas (*telenovelas*), which were all broadcast on Televisa: *Acompañame* (“Accompany Me”), *Vamos Juntos* (“We Go Together”), *Caminemos* (“Let’s Walk”), *Nosotros las Mujeres* (“We the Women”), *Por Amor* (“For Love”), and *Los Hijos de Nadie* (“Nobody’s Children”). All were focused on introducing and encouraging family planning in Mexico. These *telenovelas* were on the air from 1977 to 1986; in the same period, Mexico saw a 34% decline in its rate of population growth. Based in part on the methodology’s success in changing behaviors, the United Nations Population Prize was presented to Mexico in May 1986 as the foremost success story in slowing the rate of national population growth in the world at that time. Since then, the Sabido methodology has been successfully employed across Asia, Africa, and Central America to address such sensitive issues as HIV/AIDS, abortion, and prostitution.⁹

Television used this way can help win Mrs. Clinton’s lamented information war. To be sure, it will take time – perhaps decades – to undo the damage done by the continuing flood of low-brow (and increasingly vulgar) U.S. private sector programming which has proven offensive in many ways to multiple audiences around the world. The damage done by aggressive and militaristic foreign

8 The Population Media Center, “Sabido Methodology-Background,” URL: <http://www.populationmedia.org/what/sabido-method/>.

9 See The Population Media Center website cited above for additional examples and results, especially in Africa.

interventions may take even longer to overcome. The question is, of course, how to do it?

In February 1946, U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Moscow, George Kennan, authored the now-famous “Long Telegram.” The Long Telegram, and the related 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article also authored by Kennan (under the pseudonym “X”), described the strategic threat of the Soviet Union as well as a strategy to deal with it. That vision became the grand strategy of the United States throughout the Cold War: “Containment.” Kennan clearly and accurately analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet Union, and proposed the methods to defeat it – without direct military action.¹⁰

This is not, however, the entire story. The over-simplification of Kennan’s conceptual framework as merely Containment loses the point of the story. Kennan’s framework was much more than just military and political containment of Soviet aggression. He advocated a robust program to confront the challenge on all fronts, including engaging all of American society to guard against ideological defeat at home even while pursuing victory abroad.¹¹ With that strategy, though sometimes sorely tested from without and occasionally bent almost beyond recognition from within, the United States and her allies persevered through the Cold War and emerged the victors.

In recent years, however, we have faced a different challenge and, as Mrs. Clinton correctly judged, we are experiencing considerable failure. For whatever reasons, the USG has all but ignored the strategic information environment, the cognitive domain of conflict, and the adaptation of Kennan’s suggestions to a similar problem. We have not correctly comprehended the nature of the threats, much less the kind of wars we face. We have not educated the U.S. public in a truthful, realistic, and matter-of-fact manner about the adversaries we oppose. We have not committed the power of our tremendous resources of talent and treasure to a long-term effort to (as the DoD doctrine puts it) “shape” the international information environment. Thus, we have not prevailed in the battles of narrative – at home or abroad. We have no coherent national information strategy at all.

¹⁰ See “George Kennan and Containment” in the online *Short History of the Department of State*, at URL: <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/kennan>.

¹¹ George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” can be read in its entirety at URL: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1946-02-22&documentid=6-6&studycollectionid=coldwar.

Instead, the majority of our recent efforts have rebounded to our detriment. The Broadcasting Board of Governors, home of the Voice of America and other official USG international news programming, has been strongly criticized for failing to succeed at missions that aren’t theirs to accomplish, indicating a woeful misunderstanding of roles and missions of public diplomacy, international broadcasting, the Department of State, and private sector media.¹² The USG international media presence is in tatters, and as Mrs. Clinton rightly pointed out, our private sector programming often works at cross-purposes to our national security objectives.¹³ The U.S. private sector generally succeeds at “info-war for profit” (advertising), but the USG fails at “info-war for national security.” The job to be done is not advertising alone, of course, and the responsibility is not the BBG’s alone. The political/information warfare lessons of the Cold War, and of World War II, have been forgotten in our fascination with “cyber.” Others, like Russia, have adapted to the information age and now exploit the global information environment for their purposes far better than we do for ours (consider the recent efforts in fomenting political instability in Ukraine, for instance).¹⁴ These other political actors have done so without the incredibly deep bench of talent and tremendously robust funding that the U.S. could bring to bear. We can, and must, do better.

A recent legislative initiative may be headed in the right direction. In late July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R.4490, the United States International Communications Reform Act of 2014. Amongst its other provisions, this bill noted, significantly, that “United States international broadcasting should seek to leverage public-private partnerships, including the licensing of content and the use of technology owned or operated

¹² James J. Carafano, “It’s time for Congress to hit the ‘reset’ button on public diplomacy,” *The Washington Examiner*, April 13, 2014 online edition, URL: <http://washingtonexaminer.com/its-time-for-congress-to-hit-the-reset-button-on-public-diplomacy/article/2547165>. The BBG is the independent federal agency that oversees all U.S. civilian international media and also the name of the board that governs those broadcasts. The BBG broadcasts include the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa), Radio Free Asia, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and TV Marti). For more, see www.bbg.gov.

¹³ Warrick.

¹⁴ See, for example, Bridget Kendall, “Russian Propaganda Machine ‘worse Than Soviet Union,’” *BBC News Magazine* (June 5, 2014), accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27713847>.

by non-governmental sources, where possible, to expand outreach capacity.”¹⁵ It must be noted that this bill is not yet law, as it has not passed the U.S. Senate. But wording such as that quoted may be a glimmer of light in an otherwise presently darkened arena. Whether the production and broadcast of such content as I’ve described above is done under the auspices of a U.S. Government agency, a private-sector producer via a grant

Does the nation and its leadership have the political will to dedicate itself to an honorable and enduring (but hard to objectively measure) victory via patient persuasion in place of the satisfyingly quick and obvious (but temporary) rewards of armed coercion?

from the USG, or a wholly private sector entity makes little difference as long as the content meets the quality standards and purpose discussed above.

Taken together, Murrow’s vision, Kuehl’s paradigm, de Caro’s strategy, and Sabido’s method clearly indicate the possibilities of a deliberate use of the television medium to achieve national security objectives while remaining truthful and ethical – no “propaganda” allowed. Our government sector has individuals who understand the problems and see the solutions (despite the interposing bureaucracy). Our private sector has abundant talent

15 United States International Communications Reform Act of 2014, H. Res. 4490, 113th Cong., 2d sess. (April 28, 2014): H7-8. The entire bill may be read at URL: <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/sites/republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/files/HR4490A%20-%20Suspension%20Text%20%28FINAL%29.pdf>.

and the capabilities necessary to pursue the strategy suggested. What is lacking is the enduring strategic vision to use what the nation already possesses in order to prevail over time in the global information environment. The remaining questions include: when will the USG see the light; who will become the champion of such a strategy; and does the nation and its leadership have the political will to dedicate itself to an honorable and enduring (but hard to objectively measure) victory via patient persuasion in place of the satisfyingly quick and obvious (but temporary) rewards of armed coercion? The DoD alone cannot provide enduring victory in the cognitive domain of conflict.

Mrs. Clinton said in 2011 that we were losing the information war. By all accounts, we are still losing in 2014. The imperative to re-imagine information power includes the tremendous opportunity to re-engineer our public diplomacy efforts using that most ubiquitous of info-age tools: television. Whether we continue on the path to ignominious defeat in the strategic information conflict or achieve a victory of narrative over the long term will be determined, in some measure, by whether or not the USG recognizes and embraces a robustly funded and expertly prosecuted long-term program of public diplomacy telling stories based in truth and pursued via global television.¹⁶ Such an effort will require time, treasure, and talent, as well as the dedication to persevere with the strategic end in mind across multiple administrations. It will also require the moral compass to resist the pressures of propagandistic spin for short-term political gains. It would be far less expensive and much less bloody to change minds over time through truthful, high-quality television (supported by other aspects of national power to be sure) than to repeatedly change regimes forcibly through armed intervention. The latter hardens resistance almost immediately and makes life-long enemies; the former makes friends or, at least, grows mutual understanding over time. Were he still with us, I think Dan Kuehl would agree.

16 It was Joseph Nye who famously said that national success in the information age depends not only on whose army wins, but also on “whose story wins”; Joseph. S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 105. For an critical view on soft power with specific regard to Russia, see Joanna Szostek, “Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of ‘Soft Power’?,” *East European Politics & Societies* 28 no.3, (August 2014): 463-486.

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author, alone, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Intelligence University, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.



Mr. Russell C. Rochte (Jr.) is a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel. A long-time student of the late Dr. Dan Kuehl, he had the privilege of teaching alongside his mentor on the faculty of the National Defense University prior to his military retirement in 2005. Since that time, Mr. Rochte has taught a variety of courses on information power and the nexus with strategic intelligence at the National Intelligence University in Washington, DC. He has also spoken by invitation to domestic and international audiences at the National Defense University, the US Army War College, the Marine War College, the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany, and at a variety of events on topics in Strategic Information Power. Mr. Rochte holds degrees from the University of Michigan (BA), Troy University (MS), and George Mason University (MA). He has also completed additional post-graduate work in information assurance and systematic theology. He is a Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP). Mr. Rochte is a member of the Public Diplomacy Council and the Senior Information Operations Advisory Council.

Perspectives is an opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc. *Perspectives* is edited by Lenore Bajare-Dukes. Leon Shahabian serves as Senior Editor.

While the views expressed here are solely those of the author, Layalina President and Senior Editor of *Perspectives* Leon Shahabian was from 2007 through 2011 a frequent guest lecturer in the late Dr. Dan Kuehl's classes at National Defense University and misses him dearly.

Layalina Productions, Inc. helps bridge the divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective television programming and publications. Layalina is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation funded through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the U.S. and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.Layalina.tv for more information.