

Influencing public opinion and engineering consent

Mass Media

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The mass media is today universally recognised as one of the fatal, deadliest and essential tools of war. All states, whether big or small, are constrained to use appropriate tools in their vast media arsenal (covering a wide spectrum in the print, electronic and traditional media), with deftness, to influence the people - natives as well as foreign, in a subtle way, in a bid to convince them about the legitimacy of their war cause.

Julius Caesar (40 BC-100 BC) is believed to be the first person who extensively used the communication techniques to win support of the Greek citizens for his campaigns. Since then the use of media as an integral component of war has increased steadily.

Use during world wars

In modern times, the USA used the mass media as a tool of war during the World War I to convince her citizens about the need for America's plunging into war. At that time, Woodrow Wilson had just been re-elected as President for a second term, using the slogan, "He kept us out of war."

When America's war with Germany became imminent in 1917, Wilson felt uneasy about the citizens' reaction to joining a war that had been wracking Europe for the last three years. During those days, 40 different groups were active, agitating against American involvement. Opposition to the war was so tremendous that 10,000 people rallied in Chicago to denounce America's drift toward war. Radical groups urged Americans to refuse to get killed/wounded for "the profit takers."

Enthusiasm for the war was largely confined to the elite Eastern establishment, mostly Republicans and Anglophiles. Their leaders like JP Morgan, had loaned heavily to the Allies and faced bankruptcy if the Germans won.

Opposition to war can be vouched from the fact that when, on April 2, 1917, Wilson asked the Congress to declare war, 1500 pacifists swarmed the Capitol and began arguing with pro-war legislators.

In view of the citizens' anti-war sentiments, Wilson felt tempted toward accepting military establishment's proposal for iron control on the Press through a censorship law. Publicist George Creel, who knew Wilson since 1905, convinced him that America needed not suppression but the expression of a coherent pro-war policy. Creel argued, American opinion about the war was "muddled" by the German and Allied propaganda. He persuaded the President to launch a Committee on Public Information. This Committee composed of three cabinet members and Chairman Creel, while over 150,000 persons worked for it.

In a memoir he wrote in 1920, Creel described that the Committee's goal was creation of "a passionate belief in the justice of America's cause that would weld the American people into one white hot mass instinct with fraternity, devotion, courage and deathless determination."

Creel's first test was on June 5, 1917 when combat age Americans were to register for the draft. Remembering the draft

riots of the Civil War, Senator James Reed (Missouri) had warned that the streets of American cities would "run red with blood on registration day."

A month before the day of reckoning, Creel unleashed his most potent brain-child: the Four Minute Men (FMM). From 12 to 21 May, some 75,000 orators floated the idea to moviegoers that the registration day should be a festival of honour for the future draftees.

The response was spectacular. On June 5, 10 million men signed up without a murmur of protest. The FMMs spoke at lodge and labour union meetings, lumber camps, and even on Indian reservations. College FMMs operated in 153 institutions of higher learning; while junior FMMs did so in 200,000 high schools in support of the Liberty Loan drive.

Creel claimed after the war that his orators had given 755,190 speeches to 314,454,514 Americans, reaching over 11 million people a month. Major newspapers reported 900,000 lines on them.

Not content with his achievement, Creel began publishing "Red, White and Blue Books," expanding speeches by Wilson into high-flying paeans to America's war aims. He also published books hurling ferocious attacks on Germany. Creel produced feature films, drenching public in patriotic fervour and also earning handsome profits.

Creel's next test came in September 1918, when America decreed a second draft call, registering every male from 18 to 45 years, aimed at adding 12.80 million to the rolls. By now America had been at war for 18 months, and casualty lists were being published in newspapers daily. A violent anti-war swing was a real possibility.

Creel lashed his Four Minute Men to fresh rhetorical heights, while his advertising division shipped ready-to-use full-page ads to 18,000 newspapers. Working round-the-clock, Creel's staff mailed out 20 million copies of the "Selective Service Register," a potpourri of questions and answers about Army and the draft, plus instructions, exhortations and appeals.

On September 12, 1918 some 13,975,706 men registered, again without any protest. Freud's nephew and propaganda genius - Creel, thus, succeeded in mobilising the spirit of a reluctant nation to win a victory that changed history.

Again, during the World War II, the Allies and the Axis powers extensively used the media to mobilise their citizens and demoralise the adversaries. Aircraft were used to drop highly persuasive leaflets. The Germans dropped a leaflet on the Italian front carrying inscriptions in Urdu for influencing the Indian soldiers in the Allied army.

Creating fear, uncertainty

Before 1991 ME war, America first created strong anti-Iraq sentiments and then smashing Iraq's war potential within hours of the attack. Now, the Americans have perfected their practices. Much before the actual war, they start using the media to soften ground for impending attacks by creating a climate of fear and uncertainty. Media representatives flock the

likely war zone. When they see that nothing was happening, they try to justify their presence by reporting non-events to look like major events, signaling the start of war.

America used this technique before attacking Afghanistan. Journalists in thousands rushed to Pakistan. Their dispatches served America's interest by demoralising some people and governments in Afghanistan's vicinity.

However, the Taliban exposed the US propaganda by using Al-Jazeera television's network. Being the only channel with a live link with Kabul, international news networks, including CNN and BBC, had no option but to link up with it when there was something to report. The impact baffled America, forcing it to advise CNN not to telecast messages unedited.

Media control

In war with Afghanistan, through media control and censorship, America wishes to restrict coverage of Muslim perspective on terrorism and the US attack and also public exposure to information that could ignite debate on the causes of terrorism or American foreign policy towards the Muslim; while seeking to muster support for the war.

In the past, it is alleged that American leaders have carried out terrorist acts against American citizens/assets and passed on the blame to others. In 1962, they planned terrorist acts and blamed Cuba for those acts, aimed at creating popular sentiment for invading Cuba. Code-named "Operation Northwoods," its objectives included: to shoot down the replica of a passenger flight; create military casualties by blowing up a US ship; and launch a terror campaign in Miami and Washington DC and then blame Cuba for all those acts.

During the war, Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats attacked intelligence gathering ship "Liberty" on June 8, 1967. When American jets came to protect it, Defence Secretary Robert McNamara ordered the jets not to do so, and allowed the Israeli attack to continue. Thirty-four Americans were killed and 171 wounded in this pre-planned attack.

Reverting to September 11 attack, some people think that it could only be executed by one of the countries, including Israel, which have software for remote controlling the planes from land, making the pilots helpless in the process.

Before attacking Afghanistan, America through a media blitz, painted the Taliban to be bad guys and a threat to world peace. Through card stacking and media manipulation, America blacked out completely Taliban Government's success in restoring rule of law - a feat in a turbulent land - eliminating poppy cultivation and dewatering of the country. On the other hand, the USA concealed crimes committed by some of the component parties of the Northern Alliance - her local collaborators - during their 1991-94 rule over Afghanistan.

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