

A Liberalist View of Counterpropaganda: A Comparative Analysis of Western and Russian Disinformation Institutions

In today's digital era, there is an overwhelming amount of information for society to sift through¹ and in America specifically, the public has started to consider support from the government in sifting through troves of information. Pew Research reported in 2021 that 47 percent of American adults currently support the government taking steps to restrict false information, a significant increase from 2018, even if it means losing some freedom in accessing and publishing content.² This type of power (over information access) given to the State does not necessarily align with the liberalist values American society was founded upon and has historically advocated for.

In response to this global trend of overwhelming information, federal organizations are seeking solutions for their domestic audience by establishing counter-propaganda entities to disseminate truthful information. These institutions assist populations in identifying and delineating true from false narratives which is valuable for democratic societies.³ Efforts including refuting or creating counter-narratives have shown to be ineffective and resource-consuming, however, inoculation by encouraging the development of critical thinking has been proposed as a more effective effort.⁴ Some research has been focused on finding more effective options such as developing image and information literacy,⁵ yet these efforts may not be limited to democratic societies. As one philosopher said, the "real struggle is not between East and West, or capitalism and communism, but between education and propaganda,"⁶ stressing the point that governments will seek to continually educate their public, liberalist or authoritarian.

From the competing perspectives between liberal and realist goals, this paper seeks to compare Western and Russian counter-propaganda institutions. This paper analyzes the selected institutions through a "5 Laws of Media and Information Literacy" lens and identifies specific

features that set liberal institutions apart from their authoritarian counterparts. This paper seeks to address the similarities and differences of recognized Western and Russian counter-propaganda institutions. It hypothesizes that rational governments will support efforts that protect and empower their domestic audience and that government institutions employ and provide protection, education, and resources for their populations' information literacy, liberalist and authoritarian alike.

Methodology

The 5 Laws of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) were developed to underscore goals and objectives that reinforce human rights and counter the radicalization of extremism.⁷ They seek to strengthen a society's understanding of the functions of media in democratic publics, conditions under which the media operates, critically evaluate media content, engage with media for democratic participation (promoting dialogue), and build skills to produce user-generated content (empowering the individual for self-expression).⁸ For this comparative analysis, the framework used to analyze the selected institutions will include MIL laws 2) the recognition that every citizen is a creator of information, 3) information and messages are not always neutral in value or free of bias, and 5) MIL is not acquired at once, and encompasses knowledge, process, and assessment and continual evaluation.⁹ This framework constructs a 'for the people, to strengthen and protect the people' lens. The remaining laws focus on the individual citizens rather than the institutions selected for this study and therefore will be excluded from the evaluation framework.

This paper examines the mission statements or vision statements and selected commentary or products from the institutions for a surface-level analysis of their purpose. The strengths and weaknesses of each institution will be analyzed independently through the MIL framework and then their efforts through the liberal and realist perspectives are compared. It is

important to consider that the more strategic, and potentially effective, way to counter propaganda is to give people the skills and the “inclination to detect and discard disinformation.”¹⁰ Developing resistance to rumors and propaganda and encouraging a well-informed public can create a healthy civil society, therefore efforts to build a nation’s skill of critical thinking, which helps reject propaganda upon the first encounter¹¹ should be foremostly considered by state leaders to commission agencies to strengthen it.

Institutions

From a historical perspective, the first Western entity is the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) – the ‘propagandists for democracy.’ In the years leading up to World War II, scholars, editors, and university elite gained a desire to critically study propaganda and were some of the first advocates for information literacy. The IPA was established at Columbia University, in New York City, and existed between 1937-1942¹² to counter anti-democratic narratives and educate the American public with skills to critically detect and analyze propaganda.

Critical context for these comparisons relies on assuming the societal perspective during the time of IPA’s activation. Scholars from the 1940s all the way to contemporary voices recognize that there are intricacies of controlling a narrative to counter one could become a type of propaganda in itself.¹³ The goal of reaching an audience through tailored advertisements for effectiveness can surely overlap with an intent to align the audience’s beliefs with the narrators. Scholars build upon this context of the time, post-World War II, defining the critical challenge “over what constituted truth, knowledge, and meaning, as well as the proper standards of political judgement.”¹⁴ The intensity of not only physical fighting between the two world wars, but layered with the psychological fight for endurance, grit and will-of-the-country created a specifically challenging societal environment for both democratic voices and enemy narratives.

One concept that bridges the decades between IPA's era and the current echelons of counterpropaganda advocates is the idea that reasoning, media literacy education, and scientific processing would sufficiently counter the growing adversary narratives.¹⁵ Today's institutions echo the origination of Western "propaganda" thought that Clyde Miller, founder of IPA, proclaimed. Intellectuals are still addressing propaganda in three ways: suppression, countering and analyzing.¹⁶

The Swedish Psychological Defense Agency (PDA), a contemporary example, was established in 2022 to "lead the coordination and development of Sweden's psychological defense in collaboration with public authorities and other stakeholders in society."¹⁷ This entity integrates and supports government partners, civic institutions and municipalities, and the commercial and business sector for a whole-of-government approach to "contribute to strengthening the resilience of [their] population."¹⁸

The U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), another contemporary example, is charged with the mission to "direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate U.S. Federal Government efforts to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts."¹⁹ This entity includes "non-state" propaganda, as the GEC's original charge was to support counterterrorism and counter-extremism efforts under Pres. Obama's original direction for the agency.²⁰ The GEC also includes a wider net of customers of these counter-propaganda efforts including "the United States, its allies, and partner nations."²¹

The authoritarian example in this comparison is the "Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests." The entity was chosen because the task objectives are in a similar style as the Western examples, it is a clear committee, and it was one of the only entities with enough supporting

information for the analysis. The commission's tasks are the "summarization and analysis of information about the falsification of historical facts and events, aimed at belittling the international prestige of the Russian Federation," and the "production of a strategy of counteracting attempts to falsify historical facts and events, undertaken with the goal to damage the interests of Russia."²² This entity represents a more recent historical example, existing from 2009 to 2012, but this paper will also investigate where these tasks have emerged in contemporary Russian policy.

Comparison & Analysis

Starting with the IPA, the strengths of this entity come from its desire to research and understand how public opinion was influenced. It began at the core of the issue, questioning how a society gets swayed to believe certain narratives. The IPA worked to publish "monthly analyses of propagandistic rhetoric and current problems,"²³ and disseminate findings concerning the methods and channels that effectively influence the public.²⁴ The IPA disseminated this research and counter-propaganda scholarship through study groups in public schools and raised awareness nationwide.²⁵ Another strength was the IPA's early efforts to bridge two communities creating a "science of democracy," aligning with progressive and reformist-minded educators leveraging the same channels used to amplify support for political and social causes.²⁶ This adaptation of current effective channels (progressive social issues of the time) and attaching these narratives, was a 'smarter not harder' method to reach a broader audience. One critical note is that this agency was established and driven by a collective of citizens, banded together for the cause rather than a federally established entity. From a liberalist view, this "for the people by the people" type of charter could maintain credible legitimacy during complex political environments.

IPA efforts were not without weaknesses. It's objective to encourage America to critically detect "means of mass persuasion" was equipping the public against any source, even domestic sources at the time. Critics claimed the IPA's publicity campaigns, which leveraged progressive social issue channels, were "radical, unpatriotic and even dangerous."²⁷ The scholarship at the time was critically focused on a broad understanding of the influence of mass persuasive means—propaganda—but could have lacked the clarifications or attributions to "who" behind the propaganda they were addressing. The simple strengthening of critical analysis skills, to refute any rumor, and any disinformation, regardless of source may be a purely liberalist approach. An additional weakness is that the IPA efforts ceased in 1942, just as the conflict ramped up, due to a lack of funds.²⁸ The Second World War was emerging, where both Western and enemy forces would be using "means of mass persuasion" and thus, the encouragement to counter them could have felt unpatriotic.

The second Western example, the Swedish PDA, derives its strengths from its clear definitions of its goal and what is considered disinformation. It defines the purpose of psychological defense as a "safeguard of an open and democratic society, the free formation of opinion," as well as define malign influence as "attempts to weaken national resilience and the populations will defend the country... changing people's perceptions or influencing behaviors and the decision-making in society."²⁹ These articulations provide not only a clear objective and delineation of their purpose, but it is also a warning of malign efforts that currently exist. In alignment with the IPA's distinct language, the defense is aimed at strengthening the "population's ability to detect and resist malign influence campaigns."³⁰

One weakness, not necessarily rooted in the organization itself, but rather the context and limitations of these types of efforts, is that the PDA recognizes it requires a whole-of-society approach. A collective policy may work better in a nation with less divided parties as apparent in

the current American context, but the same critics of IPA's time could prevent the PDA's efforts from reaching their highest potential. One example of a PDA campaign is "Get the tools, don't be fooled"—an information literacy toolkit including concepts such as "Watch Out" for disinformation, "Think Twice" before sharing potential misinformation and assisting propaganda efforts, "Check the Source," and "Look for Official Information" from government, verified or confirmed websites and platforms.³¹ In the absence of any analysis regarding the reach of this campaign, a simple review of the website shows this article is a release-only product, rather than having a dissemination and integration plan attached. Although the quality of the message resonates with current MIL values, the connections, or links to other platforms, such as social media, present a limitation in reach. Even in a product where they encourage seeking official information from verified sources, the product itself has very few sources cited.

For the final Western example, the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center was originally established under President Barack Obama's executive order to create an interagency entity charged with coordinating U.S. counterterrorism messaging. An archival webpage states its original mission was to "expose ISIL's true nature, and that of other violent extremist organizations, thereby diminishing their influence and decreasing these organizations' allure in the eyes of potential recruits."³² With the shift from extremist propaganda to state-actor efforts, the GEC has refined its current objectives towards Russian and Chinese threats. The current mission's apparent first report since the shift concerns the "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem."³³ Further research could look for the deliberate turning point, but for this paper's analysis—the adaptation to emerging threats is a strength for the GEC. Conversely to the IPA, this counter-propaganda institution endured two distinctly different conflicts.

GEC products look incredibly like the PDAs in that they are reports or products intended to create approachable MIL concepts or attribute malign efforts of foreign actors to a general audience. Unfortunately, the GEC products also lack the engagement or dissemination indicators for a wider audience. The value of these products is not only in the quality of the reports but also in the dissemination tactics and strategies. The IPA's method of using progressive channels and purposefully reaching young adults through study groups could be a lesson learned for agencies such as the PDA and the GEC.

The fourth and authoritarian institution, the “Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests,” illustrates the same ‘narrative correcting’ intent but from a Russian viewpoint. In addition to the previously stated tasks, this charter proposed implementation plans aimed to counteract attempts to “falsify” historical facts or events that damaged the nation's interests, and management of these attempts to falsify and neutralize the possible negative consequences.³⁴ Understanding that cultural and lingual translation differences are present, the efforts of this charter are extremely similar to the Western examples. At a basic level, these institutions seek to identify, counter, and manage the negative impacts of disinformation on their society and beyond. This commission existed from 2009 to 2012³⁵ and was issued under President Dimitry Medvedev in a post-Soviet Union environment. President Medvedev claimed this commission would “fight malicious and aggressive attempts to deny the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany,”³⁶ which is a very similar determination (aside from the conflict context) to the other Western agencies’—to fight malicious and aggressive efforts against national interests.

As a weakness, this commission came under great criticism from the European Union as merely a project to penalize anyone who analyses history through perspectives counter to the Russian view,³⁷ and demonstrates fundamentally political, not historical, efforts. A tertiary

weakness of this commission stems from the content and methods it employs to manage the falsification of history. The objective to correct historical facts “aimed at belittling the international prestige of the Russian Federation”³⁸ is a uniquely authoritarian goal, based on a desire for a favorable perception of the government, rather than the Western agencies’ objective—to equip the society with accurate information.

Although the commission did not survive, in a similar enduring fashion to the GEC’s ability to adapt efforts towards contemporary threats, the “National Interests of the Russian Federation in the Foreign Policy Domain,” document leverages the same objectives the commission was established to achieve. The tasks addressing the falsification of history are stated almost verbatim, coupled with an expansion of their MIL and resistance goals. Language such as “protect the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests,” “develop a safe information space, protect Russian society against destructive information and psychological influence,” and “ensure that Russia is perceived abroad objectively,”³⁹ are included. This language represents the same national desire that the Swedish and American agencies also claim in their mission statements. The Russian’s forty-eighth task explains the effort to form “an objective perception of Russia abroad, strengthening its position in the global information space, countering the coordinated anti-Russian propaganda campaign carried out on a systematic basis by unfriendly states and involving disinformation, defamation and incitement to hatred, and ensuring free access of the population of foreign states to accurate information,” which rings true and aligned to the Western institutions’ goals, only opposite in adversary.

Conclusion

From a U.S. perspective, if one were to read the directive to ‘facilitate the dissemination of information abroad to promote peace and understanding, develop and establish friendly relations between states... and ensure the free access to creation and dissemination of

information,’ they would most likely assign a Western nation or liberalist government to these goals. However, those statements are from the Russian Foreign Policy section for Information Support.⁴⁰ The strengths across the institutions rest in their ability to clearly articulate the definitions of counterpropaganda or malign narratives as well as their ability to adapt and endure through a dynamic geopolitical environment. The weaknesses of these institutions may, although not researched as deeply as possible in this report, rest in the limits of dissemination and audience reach of their campaigns.

The objectives and goals across the analyzed institutions, including the authoritarian example, align effectively under liberalist ideals—the progression of federal organizations ‘for the people, by the people, to protect the people.’ Yet, these objectives are only the surface of the government’s intent and desires. Future analysis could examine a more comprehensive collection of the products and narratives these agencies employ in hopes to ‘counter malign efforts and propaganda’. This deeper analysis could illustrate key differences between liberalist and authoritarian “informing” tactics. Although the objectives and mission statements of these agencies uphold a liberalist outlook, identifying the use of facts or falsities, narratives or persuasion, and verified or fictitious sources (such as ‘bots’) could determine a true difference in these approaches. Future studies could investigate effective ways to manage, organize, and limit information access, creation, and literacy within domestic populations.

This analysis was done with an American bias, through a liberal lens, and focused purely on sentiment similarities of the published objectives. As an alternate perspective, an evaluation conducted through a realist lens could posit these objectives are all aligned under a realist (state) priority to ensure its domestic population is receiving and consuming the “right” information, propaganda or not. Another perspective could also look at the intent and tactics, rather than the goal statements, and critique the contradicting methods to inform their domestic audience. Just as

parents may have opposing views of protecting their children, nations may have opposing approaches to “protecting” the people, some may include restricting information with great firewalls or extreme nationalistic narratives amplified by “troll farms.”

From an international relations frame, this report is one example that demonstrates a reality in which differing governments and ideologies can still have parallels and common ground which offer an avenue for understanding and potential cooperation. Both authoritarian and liberal counterpropaganda objectives, past and present, appear to be aligned under one simple value or ideal— to protect their nation from malign interference and create the space for free thought and decision-making. In today’s complex, competitive, and volatile geopolitical environment, seeking commonalities or analogies that bridge ideological gaps and ultimately maintaining the search for an understanding of other government’s objectives is crucial for uncovering steps toward peace and security.

ENDNOTES

1. Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich. *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html.
2. Mitchell, Amy, and Mark Walker. “More Americans Now Say Government Should Take Steps to Restrict False Information Online Than in 2018.” Pew Research Center, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/18/more-americans-now-say-government-should-take-steps-to-restrict-false-information-online-than-in-2018/>.
3. Goldstein, Sigrid. *Informed Societies: Why Information Literacy Matters for Citizenship, Participation and Democracy*. London: Facet Publishing, 2020.
4. Hornik, Richard. “A Strategy to Counter Propaganda in the Digital Era.” *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe* 14, no. 2 (2016): 61–74.
5. Ibid. 61-74.
6. Ibid. 61-74.
7. Grizzle, Alton, and Jagtar Singh. “Five Laws of Media and Information Literacy as Harbingers of Human Rights: A Legacy of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science.” In *Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism*, UNESCO, 2016.
8. Grizzle & Singh, “Five Laws of Media and Information Literacy as Harbingers of Human Rights.”
9. Ibid.
10. Hornik, “A Strategy to Counter Propaganda in the Digital Era,” 70.
11. Ibid.

12. Fondren, Elizabeth. “‘We Are Propagandists for Democracy’: The Institute for Propaganda Analysis’ Pioneering Media Literacy Efforts to Fight Disinformation (1937–1942).” *American Journalism* 38, no. 3 (2021): 258–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2021.1950481>.
13. Bauer, Aaron. “Glittering Generalities: Reconsidering the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.” *International Journal of Communication* 18 (2024): 19. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21783/4549>.
14. Ibid., 19.
15. Schiffrin, Anya. “Fighting Disinformation in the 1930s: Clyde Miller and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.” *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 27. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17931/3848>.
16. Miller, Clyde R. *How to Detect and Analyze Propaganda: An Address Delivered at Townhall*. New York: Town Hall, 1939.
17. Swedish Psychological Defense Agency. “Mission - The Swedish Psychological Defense Agency.” 2022. <https://www.mpf.se/en/mission/>
18. Ibid.
19. Global Engagement Center. “Mission & Vision.” U.S. State Department. 2024. <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>.
20. Global Engagement Center. “Mission Statement.” Archived, 2016. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/gec/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Engagement%20Center%20is,Obama%20on%20March%2014%2C%202016>.
21. Global Engagement Center, “*Mission Statement*,” 2024.
22. Medvedev, Dmitry A. Presidential Decree No. 549. May 15, 2009. Указ Президента РФ от 15 мая 2009 № 549 «О Комиссии при Президенте Российской Федерации по противодействию попыткам фальсификации истории в ущерб интересам России» Chancellery of the President of the Russian Federation. <http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=052421>. <http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=052421>.
23. Fondren, “*We Are Propagandists for Democracy*,” 259.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 259.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 259
28. Ibid.
29. Swedish Psychological Defense Agency, “*Mission*.”
30. Ibid.
31. Swedish Psychological Defense Agency. “Get the Tools - Don’t Be Fooled.” 2024. <https://www.bliintelurad.se/en/>
32. Global Engagement Center, “*Mission*,” Archived.
33. Gabrielle, Lea. “GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.” *Remarks and Releases*, August 5, 2020. Accessed June 27, 2025. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/briefing-with-special-envoy-lea-gabrielle-on-the-gec-special-report-pillars-of-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/>.
34. Medvedev, “*Presidential Decree No. 549*.”
35. Darczewska, Jolanta. “The Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests (2009–12).” *Institute of National Remembrance Review* 3 (2021): 127–176.
36. European Parliament. *Question for Written Answer E3777/09 to the Commission*, “‘Commission to counter attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia's interests’

established in the Russian Federation by decree of President Medvedev.” Answered July 16, 2009. Accessed June 27, 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-7-2009-3775_EN.html.

37. Ibid.

38. Medvedev, “*Presidential Decree No. 549.*”

39. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”. 2023.

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

40. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. “*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.*”