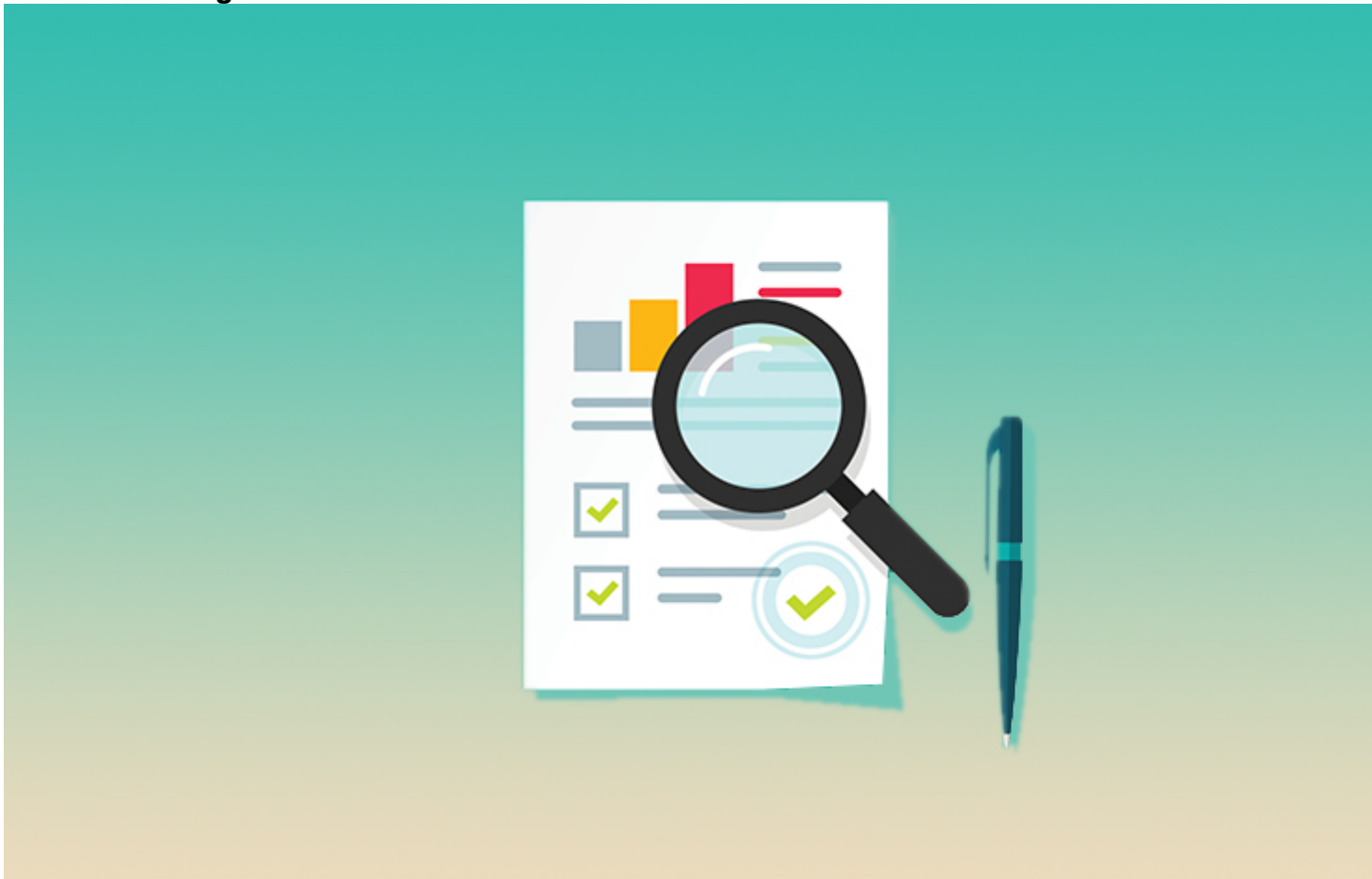**Thumbnail Image:**

Sep 08, 2020 by Vivian S. Walker

Teaching PD & Information Instruments of Power in a Complex Media Environment [1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *CPD Faculty Fellow Vivian S. Walker is Executive Director of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) and co-editor of the August 1, 2020 ACPD report, "Teaching Public Diplomacy and the Information Instruments of Power in a Complex Media Environment." Read more of Walker's writing for the CPD Blog here.*

As the United States again postures itself for an era of great power competition, it is important for our military and diplomatic leaders to engage effectively in an increasingly complex, and often hostile, media environment. To build a body of expertise around the teaching of public diplomacy, information and influence activities, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (ACPD) convened a group of military and civilian educators and practitioners at the National War College in Washington, D.C., in January 2020 to share theoretical approaches and best practices.

The report, "Teaching Public Diplomacy and the Information Instruments of Power in a Complex Media Environment," captures their findings, offering, for the first time, a set of joint deliberations on conceptualizing, understanding and teaching the information space.

The report examines trends in the conceptualization of the information space to include: the connectivity, content and cognition analytical framework; the role of global public attitude assessments in defining public diplomacy strategies; and how rhetorical strategies shape audience response. The report then looks at influence effects such as the impact of cultural bias and media campaign structure. Finally, the report reviews current approaches to teaching public diplomacy for a digital age such as the use of simulation tools and original case studies.

In another first, this report provides a set of academic course overviews that illustrate current military and diplomatic approaches to the teaching of public diplomacy and the information instruments of power. At the same time these overviews serve as a useful indicator of existing trends in preparing national security practitioners to engage effectively in today's competitive information environment.

Key Findings

Expert findings focused primarily on the related challenges of developing effective audience engagement strategies, untangling influence effects and mastering rapidly evolving information technology tools and resources.

1. Getting Intended Audience Buy-In

In order for public diplomacy, influence and information operations to be effective, they must be based on detailed knowledge of key audience interests and perceptions. Such knowledge includes consideration of existing conditions, beliefs and attitudes that influence cognitive as well as behavioral responses to messaging content. Acquiring this knowledge is especially challenging in today's complex media environment, in which multiple sources compete for audience attention and emotional responses to content that defies rational assessment.

The lack of public trust in government and media institutions also significantly compromises messaging effectiveness. Practitioners need to understand how audiences respond to message content and how to leverage soft power resources to build public trust in the source and the message. Practitioners must also hone their rhetorical skills in order to be persuasive in this intensely competitive information environment.

2. Reassessing Assumptions about Influence Effects

Without agreement among both scholars and practitioners as to the basic definitions of influence effects, it will be difficult to establish the foundation for a common defense against malign influence operations. At the same time, it is necessary to assess ingoing assumptions about the nature of influence as well as the degree to which cultural and linguistic biases shape approaches and responses to influence strategies.

Finally, while there are plenty of case studies for classroom use that describe the activities and platforms used by foreign actors to achieve hostile influence objectives, very few of them focus on why and how they work. In order to prepare practitioners to design effective counter disinformation campaigns, scholars and teachers must move beyond simplified conclusions about message impact to understand influence, persuasion and media-based effects.

3. Incorporating Technology, Interactive Engagement and Expertise

The global media space is defined by a near infinite amount of data produced and disseminated by rapidly evolving information technologies. Therefore, approaches to teaching effective information and influence strategies in diplomatic and military training institutions must prioritize technology and data management.

Within the Department of State, for example, public diplomacy training has shifted to include modules on data literacy, audience segmentation, media landscape analysis, and impact measurement and evaluation. Education at these institutions has also become increasingly interactive, pushing students to acquire hands-on experience in information and influence operations. Wargames in particular can promote the application of doctrine to real-world challenges. Students are also learning directly from active duty experts how to adapt information tools and capabilities to the demands of hybrid warfare.

Conclusion

In a complex and mutable media environment, it is absolutely essential that information outreach, advocacy and influence initiatives are coordinated across the interagency to assure consistent and cohesive messaging, programming and impact assessment. This requires a basic shared understanding of the scope and components of the information space in all its complexity, as well as broad knowledge of the full range of information instruments—what they are, how they can be best deployed, and their strategic and operational effects.

This shared knowledge and understanding of the information environment begins in the classrooms where future foreign policy practitioners—military and civilian—are educated. We hope this publication marks the beginning of a sustained and productive exchange of ideas and a genuine commitment to improving the way we conceptualize and teach the global information space. Our national security and prosperity depend on it.