



Nicholas J. Cull in Conversation with Hadi Gharabaghi and Bret Vukoder

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Interview Information

Nicholas J. Cull is a Professor of Communication and Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, where he founded the graduate program in Public Diplomacy. Cull also serves as a board member of the Public Diplomacy Council. His seminal book, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge UP, 2008), provides an essential resource for any scholar of USIA. In its brilliant synthesis of primary sources, significant scholarship across multiple disciplines, and firsthand accounts of agency personnel, Cull's extensive work on USIA establishes foundational context and key entry points to understanding the dynamics of the agency's motion picture (and other media) operations, particularly insofar as they relate to the flux of American policy over the Cold War. In our conversation, Cull describes the breadth of his experiences while researching USIA—being among the first to develop a historical consciousness of the agency during a period at which it began to close its doors amidst the twilight of the Cold War. His story provides a springboard from which we discuss possible methods and lenses by which to engage its motion picture histories, the efforts to make that history visible across multiple disciplines, and the vast potential in continued research of the complicated USIA archive.

First Encounters with USIA, Navigating Its History, and Carving Out Methodology (late 1990s)

Hadi Gharabaghi: Please tell us about your experience with USIA, your research, and the processes and methods on which you primarily relied. Are there any particular moments or examples that exemplify that experience?

Nicholas Cull: I became interested in USIA for two reasons. I was interested in the Vietnam War, so, while working on my PhD, I started taking classes with Richard Falk, at Princeton University, on the understanding of the Vietnam War. So I was interested in the operation of JUSPAO and USIA's work during the Vietnam War. I started looking for a big book on USIA in Vietnam, and it didn't exist. Also, my first book deals in part with the work that Edward R. Murrow did to support Britain during WWII. I thought, well, it's interesting that Murrow went on to work for Kennedy as director of USIA. I wondered how his work for USIA was influenced by his time in London while experimenting with some of the British methods. And again, I looked for a big book on USIA, and it wasn't there. So after completing my book on British propaganda in America, I thought, well, why don't I write something about USIA?

I was teaching in an American studies department at that time, so I really needed to have an American project. The other thing I was interested in was apartheid in South Africa, but I wasn't going to get to write about that in an American studies department. The [USIA] project seemed like an appropriate project. Now, my initial idea was to write about how American public diplomacy

worked during crises, because it seemed very strongly evident in the non-USIA documentation that when something really bad happened, they looked to USIA to provide a solution. So I was interested in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, Watergate, etc. But then I realized, once I got into the USIA historical documents, that this is actually the whole problem. That non-public diplomacy people characterize public diplomacy as being a crisis response, so, to be effective, public diplomacy has to be there all the time. This made me think of the British slogan that they put out at Christmas time, "A dog is not just only for Christmas." I came to believe that public diplomacy is not just only for a crisis. Then this presented a problem for me as a writer because what was supposed to be seven chapters looking at the great crises and how USIA responded became a complete narrative, beginning in 1945 with the predecessor initiatives and going all the way, beyond the end of the Cold War, through the global war on terror. So I began writing a history.

This might sound strange, but I actually started researching the Kennedy period, and then I went back to the Truman and Eisenhower periods. So the first stuff I researched was Kennedy in Vietnam. So I applied for a British Academy fellowship to stay and research in the United States, starting at the National Archives. However, I was told that they had decided to move the archives. Everything was in a truck, and they had no idea when the documents would be moved to the archive. So the entire archive was unavailable. But there was still State Department material. This meant I could look at the Motion Picture Division stuff and State Department stuff, the information and cultural work in embassies. So I picked up a number of what I thought were interesting countries.

HG: I'm sorry, what year was that?

NC: This was 1995, going through to early 1996. This meant I had to work through the Presidential Library System. Then it became a question of applying for the grant to go to the presidential libraries where the documents were available for research, and these conditions shaped a project that emphasizes a top-down approach.

However, at the same time, I made contact with practitioners of public diplomacy, by good fortune. I had applied for a courtesy appointment at University of Maryland, College Park. Among their faculty was Holly Cowan, who had written a book on Voice of America during WWII [*The Voice of America: Propaganda and Democracy, 1941–1945*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990], and she expressed interest in my book and research. Incidentally, her brother, Geoff Cowan, was the head of Voice of America. So she introduced us.

Another amazing good piece of fortune was [connecting with] Melvyn Leffler, a major historian of the Cold War, who was among the fellows at the university. Leffler spent time in graduate school with Michael Schneider, who had gone on to be a senior official at USIA. Leffler introduced me to Schneider, who had a little office up on the sixth floor at the State Department, right up where the offices are mahogany. Schneider connected me into the alumni network of Voice of America and USIA. That was incredibly helpful for me, to be passed from person to person to person among these retired and retiring USIA people, who at that point were feeling that the agency—there was no hint that the agency was going

"[Michael] Schneider connected me into the alumni network of Voice of America and USIA...They wanted somebody to tell the story, and, as the project moved along, it became more and more important, and more and more emotion was invested in it by the people I was writing about."

to be wound down. They knew it was being underfunded. They wanted somebody to tell the story, and, as the project moved along, it became more and more important, and more and more emotion was invested in it by the people I was writing about. At one point, somebody actually broke down in an interview and said, “You must tell the world what we did. Tell them before we’re eliminated,” and actually cried during a conversation. Another highlight was somebody who served in Vietnam. He said he’d have me killed if he didn’t like what I wrote. “Believe me, I know how to do it. I know how to do it. I can have you killed. I know people.” [*laughter*] Came out from central casting. So it’s quite funny how people fulfill their stereotypes. So I was passed from person to person, which meant that there was a very natural dynamic with the older men, and at that time, I was a younger man—twenty years ago—and that was quite a natural nurturing process.

Because I’m interested in movies, I made sure that all the while I was finding out about what the cultural offices were doing and what the area directors were doing. Moreover, I was tracking both radio and motion pictures. I managed to get to see George Stevens, and after speaking to him, I talked to all of the major motion picture directors. They were amazingly happy that somebody was interested in their work and had seen their films. It was really a very pleasant experience. I went to see Charles Guggenheim [1924–2002]. He had an office in Georgetown. I went to see Leo Seltzer [1910–2007] in New York, and I went to see Bruce Herschensohn [1932–2020] in Claremont, California. Strangely enough, I was politically most distant from Bruce, but we got on really well, and he was very helpful in talking about his films. So that’s how I was able to do independent publications on films as well as the big stuff on the books, maybe three or four freestanding articles and chapters just on the motion pictures.

Finding Voices from the Agency and Making Its History Visible

Bret Vukoder: It’s funny. I came to my work on USIA with a very similar impulse when I began my recently completed dissertation project—investigating crises. Like you, I also recognized the limitations of [the framework]. So I worked on the 1956 Hungarian crisis, JUSPAO during the Vietnam War, and the Soviet-Afghan war in the early ’80s. It’s such an incomplete way to tell the story. But given the difficulty of stitching together a narrative regarding the whole of the USIA history, did you find those interviews [with USIA alumni] crucial relative to [the availability of] archival or secondary texts? Were they really what congealed much of your scholarship with USIA, those experiences with alumni?

NC: I think a lot of the time the alumni would put in the color. It’s like I’m getting different things from different places. I am getting the skeleton from the archives, and the color from the interviews, and something else from the audiovisual materials. That was a helpful process. Sometimes the archive had actually been disposed of for various reasons. I don’t think the motion picture branch papers existed. I had materials that were held by the historical branch of USIA. They kept some materials to tell their own story, but the actual motion picture branch papers had been destroyed. So it was quite difficult piecing stuff together. The other thing about motion pictures is that, quite often, they were using contractors. So people would bid on a project, and the filmmaking happened outside of USIA. The agency would get a finished film, same way it was buying a table and a chair from another contractor.

HG: You mentioned that these people were eager to see you in the sense that someone was finally researching and writing about this project. So is it realistic to assume that the agency didn’t really

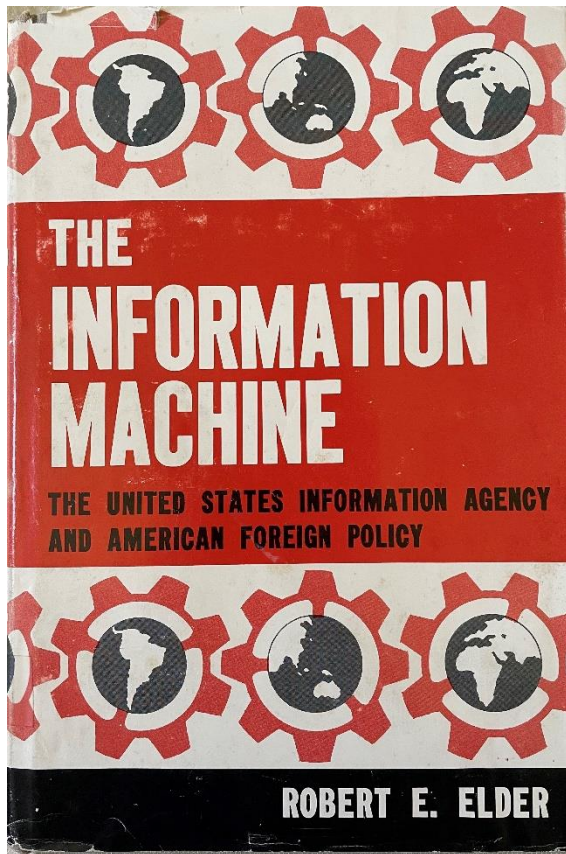


Figure 1: The Information Machine (1968), book cover

[Robert Elder, *The Information Machine: The United States Information Agency and American Foreign Policy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968)]

produce much of a history of its own?

NC: Yes, that is quite true. In fact, it couldn't, because of the Smith–Mundt Act. The agency was forbidden from talking about itself domestically, or it interpreted the law to preclude domestic history projects relating to USIA. So it wasn't until the [George H.W.] Bush administration that it was even possible to freely access the archives. This was the reason I had no book to read. You couldn't research it. They couldn't release the material, they thought, for researchers. There was a book on the organization written in 1968 [Robert E. Elder, *The Information Machine: The United States Information Agency and American Foreign Policy*, Syracuse University Press, 1968]. There was a book Tom [Hans] Tuch wrote about public diplomacy in 1990 [*Communicating with the World: U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1990]. It really was a field that hadn't been hardened and walked in.

I had a mixed experience in the field. If you write a book about things that people didn't know about an agency, that people didn't care about at the time, people don't care about the book. People were much more interested in reading a book about the things they've already read a book about. I felt nauseated that another book about how the CIA paid for this or that to happen in the 1950s would get

published and get all kinds of attention. Yet something that was actually really new, that people didn't know, would be ignored because USIA, whatever [the reason], was not a glamorous agency domestically. The agency was so far-reaching in what it did and how it considered information. There is this amazing speech from 1968 in which the USIA director, Leonard Marks, says that one day computers will be connected in a vast network. That there will be a library speaking to a library. And this is what the future is going to be—some interconnection of computers. He is saying this in 1968, so even before the first experiments with packet switching and computer interconnection.

HG: And this happened at the onset of the revolutionary movements.

NC: Yes, absolutely. There are good parts in the way in which the historian becomes caught up with their subject. There's good emotions from the witnesses, but there's also the negligence that killed USIA. At some level, people who know about USIA become interested in it, and people who don't know remain uninterested. There are tiny subjects that you can get everybody totally pumped about. So people are always interested in jazz diplomacy. A terrific film came out last year, *The Jazz Ambassadors* [2018], and it worked very well. There was also some level of interest around the Family of Man exhibits, especially with continental intellectuals. So there is a sub-subfield here. Then

I suspect the topics of Vietnam, and Africa, and the field concerning the representations of African Americans are important. These topics crop up in a number of college classes, including books by Tony Shaw and Mary Dudziak, which are regularly cited. I think it's getting better now that the movies are readily available on YouTube.

BV: We've had very similar experiences. A part of our work, we feel, is almost evangelizing what USIA is and the opportunities that come with that scholarship. So every time we've been at a conference showing film clips, that immediately sparks interest. It is unfortunate, I think, how much attention topics like the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Western Europe gets relative to USIA. But at the same time, maybe we are at the turn of the tide. There are a few projects that we know of in the works right now. So maybe that will propel some research forward. Anyway, I fully agree with your observation regarding the way the public imaginary goes toward topics such as CIA while a massive USIA corpus remains unnoticed.

HG: So we are talking about an enormously influential agency operating behind the scenes. It had offices in the United States fully involved with the governmental processes. And it had branches all over the world actively injecting money and resources into postcolonial societies that accepted them because they needed infrastructure and resources. So what we have today is half a century of practices shaping the world without being accounted for in terms of historicizing institutional and public memories. We have historicized knowledge of the postwar and Cold War world that is essentially and systemically incomplete. In terms of my own archival research, the Syracuse Group goes to Iran on United States and Iran government contracts, stays there for a decade developing documentary filmmaking and institutions, and expands the mission to neighbor countries, etc. I see here infrastructural steps toward establishing national cinemas through large-scale modernization. Infrastructure, in other words, is the key term here.

So if we consider the invisibility of historicizing memory of the USIA's operation from this perspective, I think we are dealing with something quite serious here. Following up your story of the developing USIA research, yes, we are all part of a growing movement by now, although a slow one. In terms of the USIA research outside of the United States, scholars from a few countries have visited National Archives in the United States and researched the USIA collection. What these scholars often find is some films here and there. More importantly, the paper trail of USIS activities really elaborates on the production culture. This helps scholars connect the dots and construct the bigger picture within local histories. Apparently, USIA kept a detailed paper trail. There are also national archives throughout the world, and they have kept some films but almost no paper trail! So scholars have to come to the United States to unearth the nuances of binational USIS operations undergirding the production culture of the films they find in their national archives. So coming back to the points you made, USIA is an agency without a historical memory. We are talking about an enormously influential player whose conduct has not been factored into scholarship due to the exigency of the Cold War that set in motion half a century of amnesia. And now this collection has become available.

Discussing the Syracuse Group in Iran and Opportunities to Uncover Local Histories

BV: Hadi, do you think this might be a good time to watch a little bit of the short documentary *Iranian Snapshots* and talk about local operations?

HG: Definitely. I think it is a great idea to watch this film together. So the Syracuse Group made this short film in 1952. The group arrived in Iran in 1951. They were a collection of film crew collected from nine American universities that offered any type of film program at the time, including USC and UCLA. So this group was formed under the Syracuse Audio-visual Center, and it was among the most expensive projects of its kind. Not only did they make village films, they came up with the slow-rhythm format itself. The justification was that Americans could not get Iranian villagers to respond positively to American-made training documentaries shown to them. They got mad at the villagers because villagers were laughing at the movies. So survey reporters started complaining, and this conversation amounted to an exploratory mission saying, "Okay, we are sending this group for some local filmmaking, and we'll see what happens."

They started filming Iranian villagers inside Iran and created these films while working with the Point Four Program on subject matter. Point Four would report malaria as a health problem, and a film project about malaria control would receive permission and budget for shooting. And this process continued back and forth. Over the next few years, they started training filmmakers in documentary. Then they literally started building a documentary lab and studio for Tehran University, which later turned into a form of media governance as part of Iran's nationalizing project, serving both as a documentary institution and one for media control. Anyway, here are the Syracuse people filming themselves in 1952.

[Cull, Bret, and Hadi watch the film together.]

NC: Fantastic film.

HG: Yes! The last scene shows the Syracuse crew introducing themselves on camera one by one, including the collaborating Iranian members. I found it completely by accident on YouTube. I researched my dissertation for ten years and was not able to find these people on camera until recently.

NC: When was this film made, and for what kind of convention?

HG: This is the time that the group gets together and basically starts evaluating their own work. They started formulating audiovisual conventions, and it became a regional phenomenon. I think the first one was in Italy when they saw the village film for the first time in 1953. USIS organized the event and started organizing more events in the Middle East.

NC: Well, the project is already connected to the Marshall Plan. I think there may be more availability of Marshall Plan films because they're connected to the archives in Germany, Austria, and others. I know the Deutsches Historisches Museum did a very nice anthology of Marshall Plan films.

HG: Quite interestingly, the event of screening the film in Rome is a crucial detail here, because it serves as the evidence linking the Syracuse Group's experiment in Iran with Marshall Plan films. What the health experts discovered in these films is the Iranian village films, a blueprint of village character for the third world, basically. And I think Marshall Plan films were doing something slightly different in terms of reaching the rural populations. At the outskirts of the operation, when they got to Italy, Turkey, and Greece, they started seeing this village life that was different from the European and American ones.

NC: I know that in the UK, they succeeded in setting up a Central African film unit to do this kind of educational filmmaking for the remaining colonies that were directly ruled by the UK. They had some very interesting experiences just trying to work out what people can learn from film because it seems clear to them that it's not as intuitive as they thought.

HG: Brian Larkin spent ten years in Nigeria researching his book, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* [Duke University Press, 2008], in which he summarizes this period that you are referring to—Anglophone Africa. John Grierson was also involved after he left Canada.

NC: He was trying to do stuff with UNESCO.

HG: He was trying to bring the United States and Soviet Union together working on a postwar documentary operation, but he was not able to work with the State Department on projects that later became the Syracuse Group's overseas documentary operation in Iran and beyond. Then Grierson started working with UNESCO in trying to figure out how to deal with postwar modernization through film. And people who experimented with the modernization film in the UK traveled to India and established similar village film projects. So the basic premise was how to use film in addressing modernization for 90 percent of the world population, who did not live in cities at the time. So the audiovisual conference that people refer to in this film will become a transnational phenomenon that was organized in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and India. All these countries had established audiovisual centers, and these conferences looked like academic events. People would go to these conferences and share skills of audiovisual modernization, which was operating through USIS branches and audiovisual representatives.

Along these lines, if documentary, for example, was established in Iran, the first television station was established in Iraq. USIS seized on an opportunity to explore possibilities of television broadcasting before the leftist revolution of the late '50s. This is an ongoing project. We try to help colleagues to find local histories in the paper trail that correspond to such research at the National Archives. Emerging scholars try to find traces of postwar audiovisual histories in their local archives, and they find almost nothing. Suddenly, they find boxes and boxes of paper at the National Archives here, and it blows their minds away. They are thinking, "Why can't I find this in my own country? So this is the early Cold War USIA archival story."

Mapping USIA's Institutional Details with Its Motion Picture Histories

BV: Maybe as a quick coda on this, in your view, Nick, looking at the paper trail and filmic evidence like this, in what way would you see more localized histories serving as a boon or complement to the USIA research that is already out there, or as a way of building upon your work?

"I think the important thing is I always saw my work as a general map. My intention was always that other people would fill in the more detailed squares on the map and could orient themselves based on broad patterns. I had access to the top-down story, so I thought it's best if I put that in now when I have the opportunity to do it."

NC: I think the important thing is I always saw my work as a general map. My intention was always that other people would fill in the more detailed squares on the map and could orient themselves based on broad patterns. I had access to the top-down story, so I thought it's best if I put that in now when I have the opportunity to do it. And I was lucky to be able to speak to every director and deputy director from every area of USIA. I now have a unique personal connection to people going all the way back to WWII. The other people with that kind of connection have now died. So it was important to me to get the top-down story told, which was in my power. And I just trusted that the thematic stories would follow.

It does seem to be happening that people can build the material that relates to the countries that they care most about. There's a lot of scholars out there who are interested in the bilateral story. They want to know about Norway. They want to know about Turkey. They want to know about USIA in Greece. And this just grows outward. It's interesting that we have these countries where the agency was doing a little local production, such as Philippines, Lebanon, Vienna—where they had regional production centers. I think in the Philippines, they were doing feature films. I think in Iran, they were doing animations. I ran into stuff where the Iranians were quite cross at the American animations, because they were doing things with Nasreddin Hoja, and they felt it was inappropriate for foreigners to try and tell those stories.

HG: Was that with Iranians or with the Turks? We are still wondering about that question. To my knowledge, Turks and Arabs refer to him as Hoja Nasreddin, and Iranians call him Mulla Nasreddin.

BV: We have seen the digital copies of those Nasreddin films, and they're incredible, but we're unsure of the pedigree and the details behind them.

NC: Yeah, I ran into negative reactions [in the paper trail] and can't remember where that material was. But I'm sure they were reactions out of Baghdad.

Then there's the Latin American material, which was crossing over into television work where USIA was developing soap operas. And there are people in Latin America who remember watching the USIA soap operas just on regular TV. They had a thing called *Nuestro Barrio* about a doctor fighting communism in a barrio in Latin America. This was one of the most-remembered television programs of the '60s in Latin America.

HG: You haven't written about these stories in your books to the extent that you're talking about them here, is that correct?

NC: I just talked about it in passing, but there isn't much. At some level, the exciting part comes when you've actually got the film in front of you, and you can talk about the themes. There's something to be said that the thing existed, that it happened. I find it quite useful to find references to these things in the mainstream American press. *Washington Post* did a piece on *Nuestro Barrio*. Then, talking to people from these regions, they have strong personal memories about being exposed to the material. But as soon as we're talking about nontheatrical film, we have this problem

of exhibition. My friend Marsha Gordon, who works on domestic exhibition of nontheatrical film, runs into this problem all the time. They can find the films, but how do you actually prove that they were seen by anyone?

In fact, I've been able to do something with my work on the anti-apartheid movement. If you can get a film with an unusual title and put it into a digital newspaper search, you can, for the first time, find evidence that a film was actually shown because there is a little advertisement for the film. So the more that newspapers in the developing world are digitized, the more chances we'll have to see that these films are actually exhibited.

HG: How about the documents that exist in the paper trail that show specific films, the lists of the films shown in specific cities? I think it's called the 104D series, which also supplies evidence that USIS starts in 1944 and goes all the way to 1951. Then this record keeping stops. It's detailed. Sometimes it even mentions how many people were watching a particular film. It's detailed to the point that it sometimes even notes the groups within the audiences, such as student groups, educated engineer groups, the worker groups.

NC: I found some of that stuff. Often you're looking at something someone has left in the archives that they didn't think anybody would really be interested in. It's amazing, the longevity of a particular film. So I found that OWI films were still being used fifteen, or possibly even twenty, years after the war. Some of them, like *Autobiography of a Jeep*, were such favorites with people they still liked to look at them in the 1970s.



Figure 2: Autobiography of a Jeep (1943) and I Am a Truck (1955), selected images
[NARA 208.300 and NARA 306.5324]

HG: I have a fascinating story. First of all, there is an ingenious Korean film that is called *I Am a Truck* (Ki-young Kim, 1953, USIS), which is an impression of that film that shows up in Korea. Furthermore, my research was kick-started on this idea of a wartime film that was made in 1942 that has a giant mouse filling the screen. This close-up of the mouse was responsible for the Syracuse Group going to Iran. Apparently, Iranian villagers kept making fun of the scene, saying that Americans have too much food in the US. They feed their mice, and they grow too big. This got the American officials involved crazy enough that they sent a crew to Iran. Things like that. Anyway, I

could not find the film for a long time. All I could find were these anecdotes that called it the “giant mouse story,” and some references mention a Disney film, etc. I finally found the film a few years ago with the help of a colleague. So this precisely confirms your point that circulating American documentaries was quite influential in terms of their popularity and governing use. These records testify to such popularity. There was this fascination with American documentaries that had reached a level of sophisticated storytelling. I think this is an untold story of its own.

Conceptualizing Public Diplomacy and “Documentary Diplomacy” Across Multiple Disciplines

HG: Anyway, should we move toward a more theoretical conversation? We come from film and media studies. There is no “public diplomacy” as a theoretical concept. What we have is the “public sphere” that builds from Habermas. By now it’s canonical research, and it was written in 1969 [at the height of the leftist revolutionary movements] and translated into English by the end of the Cold War. Then researchers started searching for and identifying public spheres, especially outside the US, for almost a decade. So how can we bridge the two concepts today? We are all part of this cluster of communications, culture, and media studies, but we have developed almost different cocoons around ourselves. I came up with this phrase, “documentary diplomacy,” as I try to explain to people a rich history. So we want to hear your perspective. What are possible solutions, possible ways of theoretical bridging?

NC: Well, this is a problem. What I found is that people don’t necessarily understand the same thing, even when they’re working within the field of public diplomacy. And there is this kind of disciplinary approach that [posits] government as necessarily negative. So I would have a critical position on a lot of what the US government did historically, but I would tend to think of what USIA did as being positive and USIA diplomats as being dissenters within the institution. Of course, that’s just not the way that they’re seen outside. That can be quite a shock when you run into scholars who think of them as being part of the deep state, basically.

In my most recent book, called *Public Diplomacy* [Polity, 2019], I quote a really interesting piece of research that was done soon after 9/11, which interviews past public diplomats about their priorities during the Cold War and then present public diplomats about their priorities following the outbreak of the war on terror. The diplomats were asked where did they put winning the Cold War as a priority, and where do they put defeating global terrorism as a priority. I think winning the Cold War was priority number seven, and defeating terrorism was maybe priority number six, when they were thinking about the present time. Their priority was that the United States should understand the world and be understood by the world and that there should be a conversation. So I think there’s really a tremendous gap between the reality of life in public diplomacy and what people imagine that it’s like. Part of the problem is the frame of propaganda, which the same public diplomats put around their work in order to get funding. A major problem is the internal deception necessary in order for this to be funded, because no one on Capitol Hill would give money to say we need foreigners to change the country.

Everybody in the diplomatic world, at some level, understands that there needs to be a two-way process. Foreign ideas need to make America a better place. They understand that. But that's not outwardly spoken about. It can be spoken about in Europe. It can be spoken about in many countries. In fact, the tragedy of some countries is that—and I find this when talking to people in sub-Saharan Africa—there is no idea that they might have something that the rest of the world needs. They have no sense of the richness of the place. They're so used to

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being told what to think or do. The assumption is that they automatically assume a pupil status rather than the teacher status that they might actually be better positioned at. I find that very troubling.

HG: In fact, our colleague Mark Williams also has this idea that through historicizing and publicizing the discourse of the USIS activities, we reach a point today that people can actually teach us from outside and we can be open to that exchange. So I hear a version of that here, and it's groundbreaking and eye-opening in that sense.

NC: Well, when the Carter administration began in 1977, they came up with this concept called the "second mandate." The theory was that USIA should be as much about bringing foreign information into the United States as taking information about the United States and exporting it to foreigners. The problem was that they didn't. They gave the agency the mandate, but they didn't give it the budget. So there were only two or three projects, and one of the most effective projects was about child literacy, getting together all the different television producers in the world who worked on child literacy projects and bringing them to Florida for a week, where they could all talk to each other. It included people from the BBC, but also people from the Syrian Arab Socialist Baath Party who were interested in child literacy. As a result of that, PBS developed the show [Reading Rainbow \(1983–2009\)](#).

BV: I had no idea.

NC: Yeah. It's very much a beloved show. But that's one of the very few examples of a USIA project flowing the other way. Today there are other things for which the State Department has projects, like [Center Stage](#), which is designed to bring foreign performers into the United States to perform other than places like New York and Boston—who would see foreign performers anyway—to places like Arkansas. That side of things is, I think, underdeveloped and not understood.

In a way, part of what you're sharing, Hadi, is almost like a misdelivered message. The message, which was supposed to be about using communication for education purposes and understanding purposes, was somehow misdelivered during the Cold War and used for ideological division and separating people, not bringing them together. This is like an audiovisual equivalent of the limits of UNESCO, that it becomes a venue for the problems of the Cold War. And we don't even have the vocabulary to talk about this kind of stuff without falling back on ideologically divisive vocabulary.

HG: We hope this conversation opens these things, the fact that we at least have a conversation about such issues. My hope is that we can bring people from public diplomacy into the conversation,

into sharing ideas and making this kind of exchange—at least at an academic level—possible so people can learn from each other. It seems that academia itself is becoming, in some way, oblivious to the reality of the big picture.

NC: One problem that I had to deal with was a prejudice within the field of historical studies against audiovisual evidence. So I was already interested in film as evidence just based on what my grandparents talked about when I was growing up and being fascinated by the films that were possible to see on TV when I was a kid. By chance, I applied to the University of Leeds as an undergraduate, and there was this little core of scholars who were interested in film, particularly Nicholas Pronay, who had been an assistant to John Grierson and Philip Taylor. They were involved in the International Association for Media and History. And that really connected the people who were interested—both historians who wanted to talk about audiovisual history and practitioners who wanted to make TV using audiovisual history in the correct way. So I got to know Jerry [Jerome] Kuehl, who was the archives producer for *The World at War* (1973–1974), and Christine Whittaker, who worked with *Yesterday's Witness* (1969–1977) and a number of other really important BBC audiovisual programs. What the International Association for Media History tried to do is to bring the practitioners together with the historians so that we could strengthen one another's work. However, in the '80s, it was really difficult to talk about film as evidence. It was completely minimized as a source, not seen as a legitimate thing to study. It seems very strange that we're still not completely out of that. Even the scholars who work on manuscripts expect a level of deference, but if you are doing something really complicated on a feature film about a prisoner-of-war camp, you aren't taken as seriously.

Or even worse, [there is a] prejudice against comedy. Recently I have become very interested in the work of a comedian in South Africa whose performance is to dress up as a woman, as a diplomat who is sympathetic to apartheid. When Mandela came to power, he asked this character to come and do an interview because he knew people would watch. And he started slipping policy messages into an interview with a male comedian dressed as a woman satirizing racism. It's so complicated, but somebody like Mandela understood if he's trying to reach ordinary people, he has to use the vernacular—he has to use television, and not just the news, because he was particularly trying to reach policemen. He figured that there isn't a white policeman who's going to sit and listen to a speech by a black politician on the evening news, but put it into a comedy special on New Year's Day, and that's a way of connecting with those people. Really intelligent politicians can see potential in this stuff, and there are the ones who don't laugh at it, who feel assailed by it. It's the difference between Kennedy and Trump, really. Kennedy thought it was an opportunity if somebody was impersonating him, while Trump is just offended.

This all connects. There is a failure to see the world as it is and a desire to study it in terms of the way that it was, using legacy mechanisms and methods. Part of the reason that people study what a newspaper says is because that's what was important seventy years ago. I find problems right now. So I talk a lot about cultural diplomacy, and sometimes national governments ask, "What can we do?" I got called in to give evidence in Canada with a nice group of senators from Canada. I asked them which YouTubers they approached. They weren't familiar with any of them. They really were unaware that there were these people called YouTubers who are famous the world over, who the United Nations was bringing in as spokespersons. So the Canadian government had not only not approached Canadian YouTubers, but they were unaware of the category of person. The lag is unbelievable, how long it takes for these technologies to be understood and integrated into policy. It takes a very long time. As scholars, this is part of what we're dealing with. You look at where people

are getting their approaches from. The Frankfurt School, I think that's interesting stuff, but maybe what they thought about playing records on radio is not the last word in understanding what we're going through now.

Building a Lexicon and Canon for USIA Motion Pictures

BV: In a follow-up to this thread, as Hadi also expressed, so much of what we're hoping to do with this issue is to find ways to take the wonderful institutional research you've done and create practical means by which to do more localized research projects. I come from film studies training as well as literary studies. At least where I came from, I was drilled in the study of classical Hollywood cinema. We looked at the works of Thomas Schatz and those of Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, and the ways that the structure of the studio informs the aesthetic and thematic output of the films themselves. You know what a Warner Brothers picture is. You know what an MGM picture is, etc. I'm wondering if one means by which we can maybe begin to recover some of these localized histories is to do more institutional work, specifically within the realm of film studies, creating a lexicon like that of the Classical Hollywood Cinema for USIA films, for public diplomacy films. Are we then better able to recover, [describe, and situate] some of these unexplored film genealogies?

NC: I think so. One of the tasks is canon building to just have a sense of "These are the ten great USIA films." Make sure that people know *The Wall* [1962], *The Five Cities of June* [1963], *Evil Wind Out* [1963], *Nine from Little Rock* [1964]—the films that show up in the archive. So I would try to be led by the documents where the embassy would say, "We've had a great response to film X," or the old field officer that would say, "It was amazing showing *Years of Lightning, Day of Drums* [1964] to audiences," and how much that meant to people. So I would tend to be led by the written archive to tell me what films I had to pay most attention to. Otherwise, I could look at a film and then do a detailed reading of it, and then realize that it was not shown to anybody. Now, that could still be fascinating as a particularly innovative profile of somebody. It could be a breakthrough and have value as a film that didn't get released. But that should only be an option once everybody knows the films that were released and were widely screened and started to actually structure the understanding of a particular issue. I think, particularly, the Kennedy obituary film is very important, then James Blue's *The March* [1963].

BV: Pretty much everything by Bruce Herschensohn too.

NC: I think Herschensohn is amazing because he's so good visually, but he's also good in terms of the language and in bringing it all together. And he came up with music too. He would dictate the melodies, and then he had this guy, Jack Cookerly, who would orchestrate it for him. He was unbelievably talented. Even when he's talking to Nixon—and I had read some of the memos that he wrote to Nixon—I could see that his memo was almost like describing a film to Nixon. He would write little notes to Nixon to get him not to resign that said, "Mr. President, I can imagine a boy in the future who's confronted by a tremendous problem and he's thinking, 'Should I give up?' And then he thinks, 'No, I won't give up, because Richard Nixon didn't give up,' and I want you to think about that child. You can ride this out, you don't need to resign because of Watergate." Nixon writes back and says, "Bruce, you've been so loyal to me, and nobody's been more loyal. But I am afraid this is something I have to do." So the idea is that he's almost trying to make a film on paper as a way of communicating to Nixon. I think that he's a compulsive filmmaker, that he couldn't stop. He also

wrote commentaries for the radio, which are amazingly well done. For terrible things [laughter], but amazingly well done. He really is just a phenomenal communicator.

BV: Yes, he writes cinematically. I remember a piece he wrote in 1980, maybe, for the *New York Times*. He's criticizing the transitional period with USICA and compares USICA to a "prostitute," whereas USIA under Frank Shakespeare was an elegant woman. So the colorful language he uses is very brusque and direct, but as you said, he is an incredibly talented, cinematic writer in so many ways. But speaking to Herschensohn and James Blue, if we were to construct this canon, what would be the best operating principles? Would we look at the motion picture director? The presidential administration? Or [should we approach it] in an auteur sense? Let's look at the films of Herschensohn, Seltzer, and Guggenheim. What would be some of the key principles to establishing this canon?

NC: That's a good question. At the moment, people search these materials by theme. So they want to see all the films that are to do with race, with the space program, with gender, or with Vietnam. So identifying auteurs would be against the grain. I suggested that with my piece, "Auteurs of Ideology" [*Film History* 10, no. 3 (1998), 295–310], trying to think about the strength of individual filmmakers.

BV: It's a very difficult process. We've talked about the archive a little bit, and it's hard to always trace who directed a given film. And there is very little metadata associated with the films right now beyond the robust 1996 document that gives us the [data on the] production company, year released, year retired. To identify the themes, we have to be very local with our study but also very global with it at the same time to begin to construct that canon.

NC: Some of the presidential libraries are more interested in this than others. My recollection is that the Johnson Library was interested. They also have material connected to Leonard Marks—his private papers, as well as the USIA materials and presidential correspondences with USIA. I think I got material from the Johnson Library, and of course that's the time when USIS was transitioning from George Stevens over to Bruce Herschensohn. USIA's films in the '50s had a slightly different vibe, and a lot more material was being innovated in the field with the regional production centers. I think that George Stevens really had an idea of creating something that was closer to a National



Figure 3: Jacqueline Kennedy's Asian Journey (1962), selected image

Director, Leo Seltzer [NARA 306.7838]

Film Board concept, and he said he admired Grierson. There's a reason why he goes on to create the American Film Institute. That was kind of what he wanted to do at USIA. And he certainly wanted to create a school so that people will be learning from each other. And the hothouse feeling that was associated with the GPO film unit in Great Britain, the Crown Film Unit, and the National Film Board in Canada—he wants people to learn from each other and get excited from each other. I think he's

quite disappointed by the partisanship in the United States. He told me he couldn't believe how badly it had blown up. I think it was during the Jackie-Kennedy-in-India film [*Jacqueline Kennedy's Asian Journey*, 1962] that he just sat in the middle of Dupont Circle with his head in his hands and thought, "I don't know what I'm going to do. This has done so much damage." Luckily, I suppose, in the longer run, nobody noticed.

A Brief Aside Concerning Regional Production Facilities

HG: I have a question, a quick return to these regional centers that were involved in production. I can't recall reading it in your work. Is this something that you have written about particularly?

NC: No, I just remember it.

HG: Would you please go over it, then, for us one more time?

NC: There's one in Vienna, one in Beirut, and one in the Philippines. They were called regional production facilities.

HG: Iran was a production site as well.

NC: Yeah, they had established a network. I was very aware, during my research, that they were creating materials that were important in these places, but I couldn't access them because they hadn't been sent back. And they weren't laterally available. So most of the Philippine productions were anticommunist material, and I can't remember where the site of production facilities in Latin America was.

HG: I think these centers were probably very instrumental and influential for creating regional flow and regional supply and everything.

NC: They would also produce print publications. They created posters. I don't know if you regularly use the Library of Congress diplomatic oral history, but that's the place where this stuff turns up.

BV: That was a godsend when I found it during my dissertation, about 30 to 40 percent into the process, and it completely changed the way I approached it. The *Frontline Diplomacy* series, [led by] Charles Stuart Kennedy. That is one of the few spaces in which one can [currently] get some of the rich regional, local details.

Building a Historical Consciousness within the U.S. Government

HG: I am following up on a thread in which you mentioned that academic people are still not interested enough in USIA research. So to what degree has your research contributed to an institutional consciousness for government people?

NC: This is an actual issue with the State Department now, where they have decided now they run public diplomacy, that public diplomacy has to be retroactively built into documents on American foreign policy. Now it's called the Foreign Relations of the United States. I'm looking at those

volumes as they come out, and they're doing a good job. They know that they just have another three or four volumes to go, and then they'll get all the way up to 1999, and public diplomacy will be fully within the State Department. So they're now retroactively integrating public diplomacy history into the wider history of the State Department. They're also doing that with the Diplomatic Studies Center, which is like a visitor center attached to the back end of the State Department.

HG: So these have not been done before. These are new initiatives.

NC: Yes, and another part of the story is exhibitions and the way in which films were integrated into the exhibition process, where films would be commissioned to be shown at expos. The whole idea of visual diplomacy and design diplomacy is something that I'm involved with and trying to get people to think about. If we take the parallel story of the National Film Board of Canada, some of the best movies were created as centerpieces for pavilions, and the United States still commissions films for pavilions, but the last few films have been really terrible. *[laughter]* I like what's happening with the upcoming Dubai pavilion. And that's because they asked me about it. *[laughter]*

HG: I have not heard this news that you just brought up. It seems to me that the successors of USIA are still actively operating while still rendering themselves invisible in the eyes of the mainstream media in the United States.

NC: Every now and again, somebody notices. The commercials that the State Department commissioned following 9/11, the so-called Shared Values campaign, were noticed by people around the world. "Think Again, Turn Away" was a series of counter-radicalization films that were put out, and those were noticed. But these campaigns can also be mocked. For instance, the films that were done in the '90s about the damages of war, called "Crimes against Humanity," were about how children suffered psychologically while growing up in war zones. It was a fantastic film and won all kinds of awards, but nobody knows about it outside of a very small group of people who work on the Balkans.

HG: I'm so happy we had this conversation. The amount of material that I had no idea about. There is so much that needs to be done, but there is so much that is already there that can become a conversation. I think that's incredibly valuable. This issue is aiming to show how USIA factors into the practice of film and media studies, and now we have this larger conversation of public diplomacy, half a century of public national and international history. This institutional history is so important for moving our field forward. It's been quite an exciting and humbling experience. I'm really thankful we had this chance to chat.

BV: I echo Hadi. We hope our work can help provide more foundation for scholars in our field and create bridges between disciplines. But you've already done so much toward those goals, and we're extremely grateful to have your voice as part of the issue. Thank you so much for taking the time.