Spreading ideologies on the read/write web: Government use of meta-blogs as a tool for teaching democracy in the Muslim world

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Abstract

After 9/11, the necessity of improving the image of the U.S. abroad in order to prevent future attacks became painfully clear. As a result, the U.S. launched a series of initiatives aimed at influencing public opinion in Arab and Muslim countries. This paper will examine one of those initiatives – a Pentagon-sponsored news website aimed at the Maghreb region of North Africa. More specifically, it will focus on the *Maghreb Blog Review*, a meta-blog that is an integral part of the Magharebia news portal. Our analysis will show how the Pentagon is structuring arguments within that blog to illustrate and advocate the idea of democracy. It will also raise ethical questions about the lack of transparency behind both the authors of this blog, and the methods used for collecting blog posts.

Introduction:

In October 2004, the U.S. Department of Defense launched a controversial Internet news web site aimed at the Maghreb region of North Africa, a region that encompasses Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania. According to the U.S. European Command, the military organization in charge of U.S. military activities in Europe and much of Africa, the web site aimed to offer "accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments in the Maghreb" and was "designed to provide an international audience with a portal to a broad range of information about the Maghreb region" (Magharebia.com).

Magharebia.com's debut in cyberspace went relatively unnoticed until February 5, 2005, when CNN aired an Associated Press report about Magharebia that questioned the ethics of government-sponsored web journalism. The CNN report was a follow-up on an earlier news story, which had revealed that the Bush administration had a history of paying journalists or commentators to advance their agenda. Earlier that year, the Education Department was found to have funneled money through a PR firm to pay conservative commentator Armstrong Williams to promote President Bush's No Child Left Behind law. In a press conference held shortly after this debacle became public, Bush vowed that his administration would "not be paying commentators to advance our agenda" and that "our agenda ought to be able to stand on its own two feet" ("Bush," 2005, ¶2-4). Less than two weeks after president Bush made this promise, the Associated Press broke the Magharebia story and revealed that the Pentagon was currently paying correspondents to write stories for its news websites in both the Maghreb and the Balkans region.

The Balkans news portal, named Southeast European Times, is the older of the two and was set up during the U.S./NATO air offensive against Serbia in an effort to counter Serbian war

propaganda. The site employs roughly 50 freelance journalists who are hired and paid by the Anteon Corporation, a major Pentagon contractor based in Fairfax, Virginia. News reports suggest that the Magharebia site operates similarly and that it too uses Anteon to pay its correspondents (Mazzetti, 2005). In addition to relying on government-paid journalists, both sites also conceal their Pentagon affiliation on their respective homepages. The sites are designed to look like independent news portals to the unsuspecting visitor. The actual identity of the website sponsor is buried in a small disclaimer link on the homepage.

This paper will focus on the Magharebia web site and the role of its blog in the struggle to polish the image of the U.S. in the Maghreb, a mostly Muslim region. In this paper, we will examine how the Pentagon uses the Maghreb Review Blog to transform web journalism into a powerful and inconspicuous cyber-PR tool that ultimately ends up blurring the lines between public relations, journalism, public diplomacy, and propaganda. In order to do so, it is helpful to understand government attempts at influencing world public opinion in their historical context.

Background:

When looking at the historical role of the government in rallying war support, the Creel Commission and the Office of War Information stand out first. Their efforts led to the well known Uncle Sam and American Red Cross campaigns as well as to series such as "Why We Fight." These instances of public propaganda were overtly targeted at the American populace without hiding the government's interest and therefore received little resistance or criticism. Less likely to stand out, however, are the U.S. government's involvement in covert propaganda targeted at its enemies or at peoples more likely to be swayed by the ideals of its enemies. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union in many ways serves as a historical analog to what the United States appears to be attempting with websites such as Magharebia.

In June of 1950, the first Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) convened in Berlin. This conference, organized and funded by the CIA, was in direct opposition to a similar conference sponsored by supporters of the Soviet Union which was held a year before in New York. The eminent western thinkers recruited for involvement in the CCF would not discover the covert source of its funding until 1967 (Warner, 1995). The CCF recruited former communist writers as well as socially progressive thinkers in an attempt to solidify the non-communist left and counter the anti-Americanism of the postwar era (Worsthorne, 2003, ¶4). At its height the CCF had offices in 35 countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over 20 prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned news and feature services, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances. (Greensberg, 2005, ¶7-9)

The most important assets of the CCF were the prominent literary journals it covertly sponsored, including: *Encounter* based in London, *Preuves* based in Paris, and the *Kenyon Review* based in the United States (Rogin, 2000). These journals attracted works by the literary giants of the time including Bertrand Russell, T.S. Elliot, Albert Camus, Mary McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter, W.H. Auden and William Faulkner (Kodat, 2005). The CCF also sponsored exhibitions by American abstract expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell ("Art," 2003). These high-profile writers, artists and musicians willingly lent their voices and works to support the cause of the CCF, a cause that most would likely not have supported had they known of its direct government connection. This high-brow social movement held far more prestige than the prospect of supporting what some considered the neo-fascist policies of the American government. According to Michael Warner, "somehow this organization of scholars and artists—egotistical free-thinking, and even anti-American in

their politics—managed to reach out from its Paris headquarters to demonstrate that Communism, despite its blandishments, was a deadly foe to art and thought"(¶1). By winning the cultural war, initiatives such as the CCF helped secure an overall victory in the Cold War.

In recent years, the communist threat has been replaced by the threat of Muslim extremists. Magharebia attempts to carry many of the CCF initiatives into the computer age. Magharebia's coverage of local football scores, traffic, employment, news, weather, cinema, and recipes is as innocuously apolitical as the CCF's previous support of literature, music, and the arts. This follows other shifts towards a less overtly political, more covert vehicle for American ideas. The Voice of America (VOA) has carried American news and propaganda over shortwave and FM radio to much of the world since 1942. By 2002, however, the VOA had lost much of its audience in the Middle East, particularly among young Muslims. In a move to target a younger audience, and inspired by the chief executive officer of Westwood One, the VOA stopped operations in the Middle East and was transformed into a new radio station. Radio SAWA is a more youthful version with a focus on Arabic, Spanish, and English popular music, along with unconventional local and world news. According to a Broadcasting Board of Governors' survey, "Radio SAWA is reaching 51 percent of its target audience and is ranked highest for news and news trustworthiness in Amman, Jordan" (Ford, 2004, p. 8).

Although Radio SAWA, whose name comes from the Arabic word for "together," has gained significant market share, it is uncertain whether it has had a positive influence upon its target market's perceptions of the United States (Dizard, 2004). Some concerns expressed about Radio SAWA have been non-ideological and more pragmatic. Independent panels of Arab-language experts said Radio SAWA "did not match Al-Jazeera in terms of quality and that

parents would prefer that their teenagers not listen to Radio SAWA because its broadcasts contained such poor Arabic grammar (Kessler, 2004, p.A12).

Radio SAWA can be seen as a precursor to Magharebia in that it signals a shift towards a more covert, popular culture based approach toward public opinion management. Both of their names reflect the local language. Unlike the Voice of America, which is conspicuously pro-American, these names however suggest to be the voice of the region. As we shall see, Magharebia plays on many of the same interest areas as Radio SAWA and tries to reach a similar demographic.

The Magharebia Initiative:

The Magharebia initiative must be understood in the wider context of the Bush administration's war on terror and its image problems with foreign audiences as a result of that war. After the 9/11 attacks, several government commissions and task forces charged with providing recommendations on how to avoid future attacks, pointed out that the U.S. needs to start doing a better job at getting its story and message across to Muslim and Arab audiences ("Committee on Government Reform," 2004; "Department of Defense," 2003; Ford, 2004). One of the most common conclusions drawn from these government reports was the realization that in order to win the hearts and minds of these audiences, more attention needs to be paid to advanced communication technologies. For instance, the report of the advisory group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World (Djerejian, 2003) calls for a transformation in "the way the U.S. communicates its values and policies" (p. 8), and argues that "given the strategic importance of information technologies, a greater portion of the budget should be earmarked to tap the resources of the Internet and other communication technologies more effectively" (p. 9). Given these recommendations, Magharebia was launched to accomplish the following goals:

(a) to improve the image of the U.S. in a predominately Muslim region and to repair image problems caused by the war in Iraq; (b) to increase support of U.S. policy and ideology in the region; (c) to offer an alternative voice to that of Islamic fundamentalism; (d) to counter misinformation about the U.S. spread by foreign media outlets.

According to Air Force Lt. Col. Derek Kaufman, a spokesperson for the U.S. European Command, Magharebia is "trying to reach a youthful audience that is potentially ripe for extremist messages and terrorist recruitment" (Burns, 2005). The idea behind Magharebia is to reach young Muslims who are undecided about U.S. policy and to get them to become more supportive of the U.S. before Islamic fundamentalists can win them over to their cause. Part of the rationale for targeting a young Muslim audience through the medium of the Internet, was a finding from an opinion poll conducted in Arab and Muslim countries, which suggested that "those with Internet access are more favorably inclined toward American values and culture — and fall within the younger age cohorts" (Djerejian, 2003, p. 41). Furthermore, young people under the age of 17 are an increasingly important demographic because they constitute more than half of the population of the Arab and Muslim world (Djerejian, 2003).

In order to accomplish their goals, Pentagon officials realized that their current strategies, especially their psychological operations (PSYOP), needed revamping ("Department of Defense," 2003). PSYOPs refer to activities employed by the Department of Defense to influence foreign public opinion in favor of U.S. ideology. Although leaflets and loudspeakers have long been the media of choice for the dissemination of PSYOP messages, the Information Operations Roadmap document published a year before the launch of Magharebia, identified the Internet as a desirable PSYOP delivery system. The Pentagon's endorsement of Internet technology came amid their realization that the U.S. was good at winning wars, but needed to do

more to win the public opinion battle – or, as one Pentagon official put it: "We have never been outgunned in any battle, but we are constantly being outmedia-ed" (Merle, 2005). The Pentagon thus decided that in order to influence their target, they had to touch their emotions through the use of cutting-edge types of media (Merle, 2005). While the Internet would provide the medium, the message would be delivered to the region in the form of a voice of moderation (Burns, 2005).

The Pentagon's strategic plan was implemented on a tactical level in October 2004 when the Magharebia news website was launched. The site features news stories, sports, and other information about the Maghreb in Arabic, English, and French. Although a critical Internet user could identify the sponsor of the website by clicking on a disclaimer link on the homepage, the fact that the site is actually run by the Department of Defense is concealed pretty well, especially when considering that the banner proclaims the site to be "the news and views of the Maghreb". Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, criticized the website for creating the impression that it is not a government site (Iacono, 2005). He argued that Magharebia is indeed deceptive and that it "looks like a news site unless a visitor looks at the disclaimer, which is sort of oblique" (Starr & Shaughnessy, 2005).

Another interesting feature of the website is the so-called Maghreb blog review. "Blogs (short for "weblogs") are periodically updated journals, providing online commentary with minimal or no external editing" (Kline & Burstein, 2005). There is no explanation on the Magharebia website as to what exactly the blog review is or how it works. Contrary to what the traditional definition of a blog might suggest, the blog review is not a space for Internet users to share their views on politics and social issues, but a patchwork of blog quotes, collected from the North African blogosphere and cut and pasted back together by an unidentified Magharebia editor. The Maghreb blog review can be understood as a meta-blog, a blog that synthesizes the

opinions of bloggers from all over the Maghreb region into one centralized weblog. The question that naturally arises is how such an unconventional tactic would fulfill the Pentagon's objective of changing public opinion in the region in their favor.

As we mentioned before, most of the Magharebia content consists of news stories either pulled from news wires or written by correspondents who were hired and paid by the U.S. Department of Defense through a contract with military subcontractor Anteon Corp. According to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the correspondents aren't told what to write (Rumsfeld says, 2005) and European Command officials who run the website supposedly do not edit the stories (Burns, 2005), but have admitted to changing headlines to make them fall more in line with the American message (Burns, 2005). At the same time though, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, contradicted Rumsfeld's assurance by insisting that Anteon only hire correspondents who "will not reflect discredit on the U.S. government" (Starr & Shaughnessy, 2005).

If the Magharebia website was to work, it needed credibility in the eyes of its audience. However, the website correspondents had already lost their credibility because of their ties to the U.S. government, and the possibility of edited content further hurt the website's trustworthiness. Pentagon officials also realized that the increased outside scrutiny as a result of the website's news coverage limited what they could get away with. The Pentagon responded by launching the Maghreb blog review the same week the CNN story aired.

The blog review allows the Pentagon to circumvent these criticisms by creating a space for opinion pieces, all-the-while maintaining full editorial control over the content of these pieces and piggy-backing on the credibility of citizen bloggers. In a way, the blog review provides the best of both worlds for the Pentagon. Issues of credibility are set aside by relying on quotes from

actual bloggers instead of Pentagon-paid journalists, and content control is maintained through careful quote selection. The blog review thus offers a way to disseminate an American message in the voice of the local population – a strategy that may help increase the credibility of the message. Although there is no research on North African audiences, results from a poll conducted in Europe and the U.S. suggest, that "Americans and Europeans trust the opinions of 'average people' [i.e. bloggers] more than [they trust] most authorities" (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. 96).

Notice though, that the Pentagon did not relinquish control of the message. Maghrebian bloggers can't post to the site. In fact, they can't even control which part of their original post to one of the many North African blogs gets reposted on the Maghreb blog review. The message is crafted entirely by an unidentified Magharebia editor. Whether or not the quoting of soundbite-like blog excerpts is an ethical practice, is of course debatable.

Besides improving the credibility of the Pentagon product, the blog review also exerts an ideological influence by reinforcing American values. One of the most remarkable features of the blog review is its tendency to cast issues from multiple angles. Blog quotes seem to be selected in a way that ensures that both sides of an issue are discussed in the column. Although one might argue that this practice prevents the Pentagon from taking sides and pushing a particular issue, what it does, is showcase a healthy debate and push the American ideals of freedom of expression and democracy. The following excerpt from a recent blog review in which the Muslim faith is discussed, nicely illustrates this concept:

> Two weeks ago, Foulla started an e-debate suggesting secularism as a system to stop violent tendencies in the Islamic world. While many replied that the idea could work, some thought it was not a very good idea.
>
> "Secularism might be the healthier choice for political lives, but it would be very unfair to the poorer part of society as separation of church and state would

cause them to lose a very important tool [Islam] to defend themselves," noted Atmani.

Since Islam is not the issue, Soumiaz, another Moroccan blogger, replied back asking, "Is it the different interpretation we have available then? That confuses most of us…I think that the question is whether we should reopen the doors to al-Ijtihad?"

Foulla agreed by saying "What really scares me is that some Islamic laws are based on Ahadiths that are not even true. So when you try to argue, you have 80 per cent of the listeners against you… Maybe we better talk about Ijtihad instead of secularism."

Ijtihad was welcomed by some bloggers participating in the discussion as a more viable alternative than secularism. [. . .]

Though she had missed most of the discussion, Chighaf interrupted, saying "I am following now, and I have learned a lot and we should have discussions like this more often in the Muslim world." [. . .]

In this example, the selection and arrangement of quotes is meant to illustrate that a healthy debate will lead to a middle ground position that may satisfy both parties. The blog review thus provides the voice of moderation that the Pentagon had set out to create in first place. It also guarantees that "the United States has a strategic stake in ensuring that the citizens of Arab and Muslim countries have access to the wealth of democratic ideas and values [. . .] that the Internet can now help deploy" (Djerejian, 2003, p. 41) – a recommendation made by the advisory group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World.

Discussion:

Unlike traditional public relations campaigns, information on how the government assesses the outcomes of its Magharebia endeavor are hard to come by. Since Magharebia is sponsored by the Department of Defense, publicly available information is limited to news stories and declassified government documents. While there is no specific assessment information available at this point, we do know that the 9/11 Commission Report has charged the

government with making sure that program effectiveness is and can me assessed. We also know that as of August 2004, similar websites, such as the one run by the State Department and named Highmag.com, were evaluated based on the number of hits they generated and more specifically, based on the number of return visits by the same Internet users (Committee on Governement Reform, 2004). It is probably safe to assume that similar data is used to establish the effectiveness of the Magharebia site, especially since the disclaimer page admits to logging certain information, such as the Internet user's domain name and the date and time of the visit. According to the disclaimer, "information is collected for statistical purposes. The US Department of Defence uses software programs to create summary statistics for such purposes as assessing what information is of most and least interest or identifying system performance or problem areas" (Magharebia.com)

Considering the public scrutiny the Magharebia website was submitted to because of the publicity it received in the U.S. news, Pentagon officials had to mend the relationship with its domestic audience. In response to the criticism, the Pentagon decided to launch an internal investigation of its PR contracts. The investigation was completed several months later, at the end of December 2005, and concluded that no laws against covert propaganda had been violated. The report cleared Magharebia of disseminating covert propaganda and argued that its government-sponsored identity had been properly disclosed. To the domestic public, this investigation made the Pentagon look willing to question its own practices and ready to stop them if they were deemed illegal. It projected the image of a self-critical organization – an image that was further reinforced when Lawrence Di Rita, the chief investigator, argued that such websites may ultimately do more harm than good because they draw so much negative criticism.

In much the same way that the CCF had attracted the thinkers, writers, and artists of its day to create anti-communist rhetoric in support of the United States agenda, new technologies such as those employed by Magharebia, enlist the community of journalists and lay-journalists to provide material for the advancement of U.S.-style democracy in the Muslim and Arab world. In a sense, the agents whose ideas will be used to support the United States agenda may be ignorant of the fact of their complicity. Theorist James Shanahan suggests a trend within popular culture which creates "propaganda without propagandists," a social structure which produces propaganda which is, "subtler, less overt, and perhaps, over the long run, more effective than the traditionally overt and covert 'black' and 'white' propaganda of recent history" (Shanahan, 2001, p.2). Clearly, however, the propagandist is still alive and well within the framework of Magharebia, manipulating quotes and headlines but all the while hiding in the very commonsensical "middle ground" of structured debate between parties not engaged in a dialogue. Whereas the CCF members mingled with other glitterati in the cultural capitals of the world, here a similar, yet more choreographed discourse is created in a virtual social world where anyone can eavesdrop. The Internet allows for the disjunct of space, place, time, class, and status. The question is whether or not a play as structured as any of Plato's dialogues will resound as a true conversation and an exercise in democracy.

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