



Public Affairs in a Global Information Environment – Event Report

On April 22, 2009, at the Reserve Officers Association in Washington, DC, Mr. Mats Ekdahl - Director General of the Swedish Ministry of Defense - provided an overview of the current context for Swedish Board of Psychological Defense and elaborated on the role of media in sustaining Swedish democracy. Ekdahl presented the case that mainstream news media outlets are essential to the sense of “belonging” that supports and cultivates the common bonds of citizenship: civic activity, confidence, and trust. Based on this recognition, “community spirit” is the starting point for the mission of the Psychological Defense Board.

For Ekdahl, the centrality of the news media to democratic institutions is a crucial justification for the Psychological Defense Board. Social institutions and the sense of mutual dependency are linked to what he calls “media development,” which makes the media the principal source of “social capital.”

Ekdahl expresses concern in the present context because media development has evolved away from its roots as a facilitator of democratic accountability and social cohesion. In particular, as the “supply” of media products grows, the deluge of information makes it difficult to discern if some form of manipulation is present. Ekdahl argues that the boundary between independent media and crafted messages is hard to detect as the commercial media has transformed the amount of news and information content, diminishing the amount of “old media” providers, while increasing the amount of independent and commercially-oriented information sources not necessarily beholden to the norms and practices of objective journalism.

Ekdahl argues that the resulting “information surplus” is the key problem for psychological defense. It transforms the level of “attention” necessary for media consumers in a democracy and conceals the “shadow play” between actors – Ekdahl’s euphemism for influence campaigns. For Ekdahl, publics are susceptible to propaganda and their inability to see through such campaigns is a pivotal concern for democratic society.

The transformation of the media is significant. Ekdahl argues, “for centuries [old media] has been building up systems for gathering, assessing, and packaging” news.” As Ekdahl describes, once they are gone, “such systems can never be rebuilt.” The decline of news that enables and creates democratic accountability makes the industrialization of news (Ekdahl’s term for the rise of commercial media) relevant to the imperatives of psychological defense. So-called “old media” outlets provide most of the serious content on the Internet – and this industry is in decline. The rapid transformation and increasing financial hardships for the traditional news-gathering and distributing organizations presents a serious challenge for both democracy and by extension Psychological Defense. Ekdahl’s argument is that the erosion of these institutions leaves no comparable institutional capacity for the production of content necessary for democratic institutions to function.

The “Swedish Model”: Psychological Defense and Public Diplomacy

Ekdahl highlighted the historical development of the Psychological Defense Board (or SPF by its Swedish name), including that SPF emerged as a reaction to the historical context of the post World War II-period. He illustrated a series of factors that lead to the formation of SPF.

The relative proximity of Sweden to the Soviet Union, coupled with the sudden “Prague Coup” in 1948 contributed to the perceived need for some sort of entity to protect the Swedish nation from external propaganda. To avoid “Finlandization”, an organization was needed to provide “mental preparedness initiatives.”

During this period, defense and security related issues permeated Swedish society providing a political environment favorable to this kind of endeavor. As Ekdahl argues, in the 1950s, there was recognition that the only way to convey the truth was to ensure the presence of a wide variety of media.

Ekdahl suggests that the Swedish political culture of the time contributed to the formation of the psychological defense board. First, there was a recognized prioritization of defense-related activity. Second, there was (and remains) a political culture of consensus – allowing for the formation of a defense organization that was primarily a civilian operation. The Psychological Defense Board was orchestrated and governed by individuals from the military, the academy, government, and private business.

The principal justification for a Psychological Defense Board was that the growth of media was the “perfect terrain for psychological ambushes.” It proceeded from the basic insights of the “Two-Step Flow” hypothesis from American political communication research, recognizing the people were influenced not *directly* by media messages, but through trusted opinion-makers taking cues from mass media communication. Thus, SPF became a “separate, independent research outfit” that was institutionally flexible – due to its distinct position between the defense and civilian establishment. As Ekdahl described, the psychological defense board was “constantly ready to venture and investigate.”

SPF analysis focused on Authorities, Media, and Citizens – concepts that map onto a basic sender-receiver model of communication: *Senders – Conveyers – Recipients*. The research activities were warranted by the presumed vulnerabilities of democracy to disruptions in “information systems.” Ekdahl characterized this vulnerability as a potential for a crisis of credibility (with obvious parallels to core problematics in contemporary public diplomacy interventions.) If citizens lose “faith” in the media system, then democracy itself cannot work.

The early efforts of the psychological defense board research were directed at domestic public opinion about Swedish defense commitments. Subsequent research included path-breaking investigations into the disruption of communication systems during crisis scenarios. The organization also examined the implications of psychological warfare operations on news media sourcing during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. As part of this emphasis on crisis communications research – the Psychological Defense Board was involved in observation research in rapid response actions during disasters in the 1990s.

Ekdahl highlights two research projects as significant examples of the psychological defense board research efforts – where the organization was involved in both investigation and liaison activities between the government and the citizens involved:

- The MS *Estonia* disaster, focusing on how Swedes learned and reacted to the tragedy.
- The Indonesia tsunami disaster of 2006, where Swedish deaths outnumbered other Western countries.

Public Diplomacy, Preparedness, and the Challenge of Visibility

Ekdahl's assessment of the current situation facing the Psychological Defense Board operations and research agenda draws heavily on his understanding of the news media ecology: the rapid dissemination of news and information and the concurrent "visibility" of nation-states on the "global radar."

The current Swedish reaction to this environment is the formation of the National Media Preparedness Council – designed to provide a crisis management capacity that integrates efforts from the public and private sector and deals directly with the role of mass media in times of crisis.

The organization is described by Ekdahl as "points of contact" – a latent capacity to react to events, that draws upon the institutional "knowledge base" regarding "threats, risks, and points of vulnerability." The Council also serves to "work towards mutual understanding between media and the Swedish government."

Ekdahl argues that the public/private arrangement is voluntary, and that the Swedish government has no stated objective of "telling the media what to do." The Council reflects what Ekdahl acknowledges as a particular Swedish experience of government and private cooperation and expresses some doubt as to whether the model can be replicated across national contexts.

The Swedish arrangement is presented by Ekdahl as something directly relevant to how nation-states can prepare for and anticipate the consequences of how media portray events. The global flows of media and communication require governments pay attention to how media outlets present distinct vulnerabilities (such as how actions and events are framed in media outlets outside the control of the nation-states). Ekdahl cites the case of the Danish cartoons controversy in the Muslim world as an example of a largely unexpected crisis in which a coordinated response was lacking. Ekdahl stated, "We need a broader conception of security – in order to detect threats. Not just focusing on current risks, while failing to notice potential threats..." He argues that this kind of preparedness and proactive action has been alternatively described as "media diplomacy" and "media security" – though these formulations all acknowledge that the contemporary media environment requires some form of *problem detection* and a capacity to *react* effectively.

Ekdahl also argued for a proactive public diplomacy that is particularly relevant for countries with no prominent international profile. For example, in many populous countries (such as India, China, and Indonesia), little is known about Sweden. Public diplomacy efforts are required to disseminate "information on Swedish democracy, and Swedish values." Ekdahl's justification builds on what he describes as the ladder of communication. Communication begins with interests, leading to knowledge, followed by trust. As he argues, what is *not known* is implicitly *not trusted*. However, Sweden requires relationships built on trust, to be prepared when crisis scenarios develop. Ekdahl argues for long term, relationship-building activities (such as exchange programs modeled on the U.S. Fulbright programs) as a proactive, anticipatory policy to minimize the impact of future media-related crisis scenarios and events.

Current Communication Challenges

Ekdahl's concluding remarks focused on an assessment of the global communication infrastructure, specifically on how the capacity of information delivery has increased the speed and complexity of information structures and how audiences relate to such information. He describes that this has

allowed media industries and media audiences to grow alongside risks to nation-states. The risks are reflected in the kinds of communication enabled by this infrastructure.

Ekdahl provided a number of examples, including “attacks on digital information structures” and the use of pictures and caricatures as part of a “War of images.” The increase of symbolic communication appears to “overcome limitations of languages” in media-based international conflict.

This environment justifies the presence of units similar to the Swedish Psychological Defense Board, with particular expertise in understanding and explaining potential threats present in global communication flows. While Ekdahl acknowledged that the Psychological Defense Board may be a “uniquely Swedish invention,” it is not unprecedented (Switzerland and Singapore have similar entities). The concept of psychological defense should not require complicated “creative hybrid” organizations that might confound bureaucratic and legislative stakeholders seeking to implement a similar program.

The need for psychological defense is clearly evident in the contemporary media landscape, and the inability of nation-states to control their image. The rapid unraveling of traditional media sources vital to democratic institutions is made more difficult by the nature of how people perceive messages. “It is harder to get people to doubt lies than to believe truths.” Therefore, a psychological defense is necessary.

Discussion

A considerable amount of the participation from the audience dealt with the application of the Swedish model to the U.S. context, and in particular on the persistent difficulties in resolving current institutional arrangements for American public diplomacy. The following issues and points were discussed:

- Part of the Swedish Total Defense concept includes ongoing relationships with private companies, and the management of the Swedish brand via the Swedish Institute.
- Sweden does considerable *domestic* reporting, though international polling is managed by the embassies.
- Sweden is admittedly just as vulnerable as Denmark to a “cartoon controversy.”
- The West is just as vulnerable to psychological operations.
- Semantic Infiltration – the use of language over time to shape the news agenda and terms of debate is acknowledged as important, though Sweden does not analyze such content. Swedish research focuses on media distribution and technologies.
- The current Swedish efforts have no dealt directly with counter-radicalization in Swedish immigrant communities (though there is recognized need to do so).
- The Swedish Psychological Defense Board is (was) not tightly integrated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- The media-as-filter facet of the described model of communication may be breaking down. More research is required to see how the media function in social integration and cohesion.
- “Industrialized news production” suggests diminished capacity for serious news, but increased role of images in making arguments and informing audiences.
- Knowledge Management may be an important field dealing directly with the problems of information overload (what Joseph Nye called the “paradox of plenty”). However, this

may not be as much of a “problem” as was previously understood. Technologies such as Google dissect and repackages information on demand.

- New Media may be a likely environment to make innovative partnerships to leverage media for public diplomacy; though this may involve risks of losing message control.
- Message control as an objective involves potential negative consequences for nation-states.
- The only way you can control the “message” is to control the environment of the media better than your adversary.
- Previous American models (e.g. – inter-agency message management during the Reagan administration) provide some workable arrangements in the contemporary context – regardless of new media presence.

Conclusion

Ekdahl’s argument is that the Psychological Defense Board is a defense to psychological warfare. While many participants expressed some skepticism over the possibility of such a program in the United States (erroneously citing, for example, the Smith-Mundt Act) it was evident from Ekdahl’s testimony that the Psychological Defense Board is primarily an analysis unit and not a producer of domestic information. The basic recommendation is to provide some form of institutional capacity to anticipate and react to media-driven crises.

Written by Craig Hayden and Matt Armstrong



www.ArmstrongSIG.com
info@ArmstrongSIG.com