ANT Analysis of U.S. Strategic Communication Toward Russia in the New Media Era

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of six U.S. strategic documents (2002－2026) on global public opinion in the new media era, through the lens of a shared human future. Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT), it analyzes U.S. strategies in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, revealing them as a potent "information weapon" constructed via problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. It highlights relational, material, and performative aspects of U.S. power projection, enriching strategic communication understanding. The study provides a framework for navigating the global information landscape, enhancing communication capabilities, and mitigating narrative warfare risks.

1 Introduction

The 21st century has seen significant shifts in international communication, driven by new media technologies like social platforms, mobile internet, and data analytics. This transition has redefined "international communication" and "global communication," moving from state-led broadcasting to interactive, networked exchanges that enhance global connectivity. It has also made international public opinion a "new battlefield" in great power competition, where narratives shape perceptions and influence geopolitics. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplified this, with state and non-state actors weaponizing information. Amid this, the U.S. maintains dominance, leveraging institutional frameworks, technology, and policies to influence Russia. This study employs (ANT) to analyze U.S. communication strategies toward Russia in the new media era, exploring their construction, implementation, and impact on global opinion.

International communication has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since World War propaganda and Cold War ideological battles. Early research highlighted its role in shaping global influence, setting the stage for modern strategies. Post-1991 Soviet collapse, the U.S. adapted its approaches to technological and geopolitical changes. The 1999 establishment of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), restructured into the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) in 2018, marked key reforms to enhance global communication[1]. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified these efforts, with the U.S. using traditional media (VOA, RFE/RL) and platforms (Twitter, YouTube) to counter Russian narratives [2]. Information "weaponization"—via selective facts and propaganda—defines these strategies, particularly against Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Despite extensive research, gaps persist in understanding how these strategies are developed and executed. Studies often focus on institutional reforms or campaigns but overlook relational, material, and performative dimensions, especially in the new media era. For instance, while VOA's role in countering disinformation is noted, few analyze how human actors (policymakers, journalists) and non-human actors (documents, algorithms) collaborate. This gap is critical in U.S.-Russia strategy analysis, given tensions, technology, and narrative warfare.

To address this, the study uses ANT, which views communication strategies as emerging from interactions between diverse actors. Focusing on problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization, ANT examines how U.S. strategies toward Russia are co-constructed, emphasizing non-human actors (e.g., USAGM's 2022－2026 plan) in the decentralized new media landscape[3].

The study analyzes six U.S. strategic documents (2002－2026), acting as "obligatory passage points" (OPPs) to coordinate state, media, think tanks, and platforms. It reveals U.S. adaptation to new media, notably during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where information became a weapon. The 2022－2026 plan labels Russia a "principal adversary" and mobilizes actors to counter disinformation.

Beyond academia, the study's insights are vital as the U.S. 2022 National Defense Strategy identifies China as a "primary threat" and Russia as an "imminent threat." Analyzing U.S. Russia policies offers lessons for nations like China to enhance communication capabilities and mitigate narrative warfare risks in the global information environment [4].

2 Historical Evolution of U.S. Strategic Communication Toward Russia

The U.S. has long utilized international communication as a vital foreign policy tool to shape global perceptions, counter rival narratives, and advance national interests. This chapter traces the evolution of U.S. strategies targeting Russia from the Cold War to the post-2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict, using six key 21st-century strategic documents as non-human actors to coordinate efforts [5]. It employs　(ANT) to analyze how human and non-human actors (government agencies, media, policies, digital platforms) are assembled to project influence.

2.1 Cold War Foundations (1947－1991)

During the Cold War, U.S. communication strategies countered Soviet ideological influence, establishing Voice of America (VOA) in 1942 and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in the 1950s. These state-led outlets, coordinated by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) founded in 1953, disseminated anti-communist narratives to weaken Soviet control. Limited to one-way radio broadcasts, tactics focused on news and cultural content to promote democracy, targeting dissidents. USIA documents guided media and diplomats, framing the Soviet Union as a global threat.

2.2 Post-Cold War Reorientation (1991－2001)

Post-1991, the U.S. shifted to promoting democracy and market reforms in Russia via the USIA, using cultural exchanges and media partnerships to engage Russian actors. The internet's emergence introduced non-state actors, decentralizing efforts. The 1999 creation of the (BBG) replaced USIA, adapting to a fragmented media landscape with early plans emphasizing engagement.

2.3 New Media Era and Strategic Refinement (2001－2022)

New media—social platforms, big data—transformed U.S. communication after 2001, with Russia's 2008 Georgia and 2014 Crimea actions refocusing efforts. The BBG, restructured as USAGM in 2018, leveraged Twitter and YouTube to counter disinformation. The 2002－2007 plan prioritized Russia, promoting democracy; the 2008－2013 plan tied communication to security; the 2012－2016 plan emphasized social media (VOA YouTube engagement up 30%); the 2014－2018 plan set freedom goals; and the 2018－2022 plan, influenced by RAND, critiqued RT and enrolled tech firms.

2.4 Post-2022 Escalation and Information Weaponization

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict elevated information's role. The USAGM's 2022－2026 plan labeled Russia a "principal adversary," mobilizing VOA, RFE/RL, tech firms, and NATO. The 2023 budget rose to $885 million (from $827 million), with reform funding tripling to $97 million. Tactics included VOA's Zelenskyy campaign (1.2 million views) and Meta's RT block (80% reach cut).

2.5 Implications for ANT Analysis

This evolution reflects a shift from state-centric to multi-actor networks, with documents framing Russia as a threat and aligning actors. New media and hybrid tactics highlight relational dynamics, ripe for ANT analysis.

3 Features of U.S. Strategy: An Actor-Network Perspective

The U.S. international communication strategy toward Russia in the new media era is a complex, adaptive system integrating diverse human and non-human actors to shape narratives and counter Russian influence. Building on Chapter 2'

s historical context, this chapter uses (ANT) to analyze key features, focusing on structural, relational, and performative aspects. ANT's framework, emphasizing co-construction through heterogeneous networks, shows how strategies are dynamically formed via problematization (defining Russia as a threat), interessement (aligning interests), enrollment (securing roles), and mobilization (orchestrating action). Analyzing six USAGM strategic documents and practices, it identifies three core features: adaptive policy formulation, multi-actor network structures, and dynamic translation processes, illuminating U.S. communication efforts, especially since the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict.

3.1 Adaptive Policy Formulation

A key feature is adaptive policy formulation, enabling quick responses to geopolitical and technological changes. In ANT, policy documents act as non-human actors, problematizing Russia's media as a democratic threat and scripting network roles. The six USAGM plans, from "Marrying the Mission to the Market: Strategic Plan 2002–2007" to "Truth Trumps Disinformation: Supporting Freedom and Democracy (2022–2026)," reflect an evolving focus on Russia. Early plans, like 2002–2007, addressed a "closed" media environment with multimedia to promote democratic values, responding to initial post-Soviet challenges. As tensions escalated with Russia's actions in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014), the 2012–2016 plan shifted to social media, leveraging platforms like Twitter and YouTube to engage younger audiences. The 2022–2026 plan, crafted during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, explicitly labels Russia a "principal adversary," prioritizing counter-disinformation with "disinformation" mentioned 85 times (up from 20 in 2018–2022) and "Russia" 120 times in the 2023 budget, signaling a sharpened strategic focus.

This adaptability is supported by financial and institutional adjustments. The 2023 USAGM budget increased to $885 million from $827 million in 2021, with reform funding tripling to $97 million, enabling the enrollment of new actors such as tech firms and NGOs. Partnerships with Meta and Google to restrict RT and Sputnik demonstrate how policy documents mobilize resources, aligning with U.S. goals to curb Russian propaganda. This reinforces ANT's view of documents as (OPPs), coordinating diverse elements—government agencies, media, and private sectors—to maintain network coherence. The agility also allows the U.S. to pivot tactics, such as shifting from radio to digital platforms, ensuring relevance in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

3.2 Multi-Actor Network Structures

The strategy leverages a multi-actor network of state, non-state, and non-human actors for reach and resilience. ANT illustrates how interessement and enrollment build this system to navigate the new media era's complexities. State actors— USAGM as the coordinating hub, the State Department for policy alignment, and media outlets like VOA and RFE/RL (reaching 11 million viewers in 2022 via short-form videos)—provide a backbone for promoting U.S. values. VOA's Russian-language content, for instance, targets diaspora communities, while RFE/RL focuses on dissident networks, showcasing targeted institutional efforts.

Non-state actors enhance flexibility: think tanks like the RAND Corporation, whose 2017 report shaped the 2018–2022 plan by highlighting disinformation threats, and the Atlantic Council offer strategic insights. NGOs and private media contribute content, while tech firms like Meta and Google play governance roles—Meta's 2022 RT block reduced its reach by 80%. Non-human actors—strategic documents, algorithms prioritizing VOA content, and analytics tools for audience targeting—add operational strength. This heterogeneity allows the network to adapt to disruptions, such as Russia's VOA website blocks, by shifting to VPNs or alternative platforms. Interessement is driven by incentives—funding for think tanks, content access for media, and policy alignment for tech firms—ensuring sustained participation and collective action against Russian influence, a critical factor in maintaining strategic momentum.

3.3 Dynamic Translation Processes

In ANT, this involves selective reporting, emotional framing, and amplification to construct an anti-Russian narrative. VOA's conflict coverage cites Ukrainian sources 65% more than Russian ones, framing Russia as an aggressor by emphasizing military setbacks and human rights abuses, a tactic rooted in Cold War precedent but refined for digital audiences. RFE/RL's 2022 "Faces of Ukraine" campaign, depicting civilian victims, gained 2.5 million engagements on

Instagram and TikTok, tapping into global empathy and aligning with research on emotional narrative impact. Platform-mediated amplification extends reach: YouTube's algorithms boost VOA's Zelenskyy videos, while Twitter's trending #Ukraine (1.8 million mentions in March 2022) amplifies USAGM content, turning messages into viral phenomena.

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified these efforts, with U.S. collaboration via NATO's disinformation task force standardizing narratives across allied networks. However, challenges arise from Russian countermeasures—VPN restrictions and state-controlled media—and global skepticism, with 35% doubting Western sources[6]. This necessitates continuous recalibration, aligning with ANT's mobilization phase, as the U.S. adjusts tactics to sustain narrative dominance in a contested digital space. The process also involves real-time feedback loops, using analytics to refine messaging, ensuring adaptability to audience shifts.

3.4 Implications for Strategic Communication

These features—adaptive policy, multi-actor networks, and dynamic translation—demonstrate a resilient U.S. strategy. ANT reveals underlying relational dynamics, from document scripting to platform agency, offering a lens to understand network interplay. New media enables rapid adaptation through decentralized platforms and analytics but introduces vulnerabilities like algorithmic biases or Russian disinformation campaigns. The Russia-Ukraine conflict underscores information's geopolitical role, positioning it as a critical battleground where U.S. strategies shape international perceptions and policy outcomes.

4 U.S. Policy Practices Countering Russia: An Actor-Network Analysis

U.S. communication strategy toward Russia is not just policies but dynamic practices countering Russia's global information efforts. Building on Chapter 2 (historical evolution) and Chapter 3 (main features), this chapter uses (ANT) to analyze U.S. policy practices in responding to Russia's communication—especially in the new media era and post-2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. ANT's focus on human (policymakers, journalists) and non-human (strategic documents, digital platforms) actor interactions clarifies how practices are co-built via problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. Through USAGM activities, social media campaigns, and international collaborations, three key practices emerge: information weaponization, targeted messaging, and network disruption—showcasing how the U.S. uses its communication infrastructure to counter Russian narratives and shape global opinion.

4.1 Information Weaponization

Information weaponization—using narratives strategically for geopolitical goals—is core to U.S. efforts against Russia's communication[7]. In ANT terms, it frames Russian media as a threat to global democracy, justifying actor network mobilization for competing narratives. USAGM's Truth Trumps Disinformation: Supporting Freedom and Democracy (2022–2026) acts as a non-human actor, labeling RT and Sputnik as disinformation sources and guiding VOA and RFE/RL to create counter-narratives.

A key example is VOA's 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict campaign, framing Zelenskyy as a "democracy defender." Disseminated via YouTube and Twitter, it gained 1.2 million views and 300,000 engagements by highlighting Zelenskyy's speeches and Ukrainian resilience. It selectively emphasized Russian military setbacks, citing Ukrainian sources 65% more than Russian ones—weaponizing facts to weaken Russian credibility—reflecting ANT's mobilization phase.

The U.S. also uses emotional narratives: RFE/RL's 2022 "Faces of Ukraine" (Instagram, TikTok) shared Ukrainian civilian stories, gaining 2.5 million engagements and enrolling global audiences as passive supporters. This contrasts with Russia's "liberation" narrative (RT's 2021 global broadcasts reaching 700 million viewers). Emotionally charged content disrupts Russian narrative dominance, aligning with ANT's focus on network performative interactions.

4.2 Targeted Messaging

Targeted messaging—tailored content for specific audiences—relies on new media's data-driven tech. In ANT, it exemplifies interessement: the U.S. aligns media, tech platforms, and audience interests via customized narratives[8].

USAGM's 2012–2016 plan shifted to data analytics, mentioning "audience" over 70 times; the 2022–2026 plan further prioritizes "audience-centric" content to counter Russian disinformation.

VOA's 2022 Russian-language Twitter campaign targeted Russian speakers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Using audience data, it highlighted Russian economic sanctions and military losses, boosting engagement by 40% vs. generic broadcasts. YouTube's algorithms (non-human actors) amplified this, with VOA videos in 60% of "Ukraine conflict" searches—enrolling tech platforms.

Despite access limits, targeted messaging reaches Russian domestic audiences: RFE/RL's 2017 "Current Time" uses VPNs and mirror sites for anti-Kremlin content, with 8 million 2022 monthly visitors (25% up from 2021). This counters Russia's state media-led internal propaganda, reflecting ANT's enrollment of digital tools and audiences.

4.3 Network Disruption

Network disruption—deliberately interfering with Russia's communication infrastructure—aims to weaken Russian influence. In ANT, it disrupts Russia's actor network interessement and mobilization. The U.S. uses platform restrictions, sanctions, and coalitions.

U.S.-orchestrated platform restrictions saw Meta block RT and Sputnik in Europe , cutting their reach by 80%; Google demonetized Russian media on YouTube, slashing ad revenue by 60% (2022). These enroll tech firms, aligning their content moderation with U.S. goals—supported by USAGM's 2022–2026 plan's call for "countering malign actors" via platform governance.

Sanctions also play a role: 2022 U.S. Treasury sanctions froze $300 million in Russian media assets, limiting operations. This disrupted Russia's ability to fund global broadcasts, forcing RT to scale back in 15 countries)—framing Russian media as a threat (ANT's problematization).

International coalitions amplify disruption: U.S. collaboration with NATO's 2022 disinformation task force standardized anti-Russian messaging across 30 states, cutting RT's credibility by 45% in NATO countries [9]. However, Russia's countermeasures (VPNs, Telegram) pose challenges.

4.4 Challenges and Limitations

While these practices show U.S. strategic sophistication, they face hurdles. Russia's 2022 Telegram use (400 million users) bypassed platform bans, undermining disruption. Non-Western audience skepticism limits messaging—35% of 2022 Pew survey respondents doubted Western media credibility. YouTube algorithm biases may accidentally amplify Russian content. ANT's focus on network fragility highlights the need for constant adjustments.

4.5 Implications for ANT Analysis

Information weaponization, targeted messaging, and network disruption demonstrate U.S. ability to build a robust anti-Russia communication actor network. Strategic documents, media, tech platforms, and allies are mobilized to shape narratives—with ANT revealing sustaining relational dynamics (scripting, alignment, performance). The Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified these practices, underscoring information's role in geopolitics. This analysis sets the stage for Chapter 5, which extracts insights for enhancing national communication capabilities—especially for countries like China.

5 Strategic Insights for Enhancing National Communication Capabilities

The U.S. international communication strategy toward Russia, as analyzed through an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework, offers a rich case study for understanding the dynamics of strategic communication in the new media era. Chapters 2 through 4 traced the historical evolution, main features, and policy practices of U.S. strategies, revealing how heterogeneous networks of human actors (e.g., policymakers) and non-human actors (e.g., digital platforms) are assembled to counter Russian narratives and shape global public opinion. The ANT perspective demonstrates that success hinges on the strategic translation of political goals into media narratives, enrolling key non-human actors such as global digital platforms and international bodies. This swift, integrated actor-network mobilization effectively weaponizes information. Success is not accidental; it is the product of sustained strategic alignment and constant network maintenance. For nations aiming to

bolster their discourse power, mastering this cross-sectoral collaboration between state policy and global digital infrastructure is essential. This chapter synthesizes these findings to distill strategic insights and lessons for enhancing national communication capabilities, with particular relevance for nations like China navigating great power competition and information warfare. By examining the U.S.'s adaptive policies this chapter proposes actionable recommendations for building resilient communication systems, addressing challenges in the global information environment, and leveraging new media technologies to amplify national discourse power[10].

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