Theorizing Psychological Operations Through Norm Entrepreneurship: The Cases of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty

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Abstract

This research examines the role of psychological operations as strategic instruments for normative change, with a focus on the Cold War broadcasts of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Using a constructivist framework, it identifies three key components shared by psychological operations and the norm change process: the agency of norm entrepreneurs, the use of framing techniques, and the intended normative influence. Through an in-depth analysis of archival documents, this research explores how the radio broadcasts reshaped public perceptions, countered Soviet narratives and promoted democratic norms across the Iron Curtain. The core findings reveal that psychological operations extend beyond simple information dissemination, operating as a dynamic and strategic approach for promoting norms. This approach relies on the employment of tailored framing and coordinated involvement of state and non-state actors, directed by intelligence agencies to craft and convey messages that foster desired normative shifts. These actors, identified here as norm entrepreneurs, bear responsibility for the planning and execution of psychological operations utilizing strategic communication skills to promote norms that resonate effectively with their target audiences.

Keywords: Psychological warfare, norm change, strategic communication, broadcasting, Cold War

Introduction

Psychological operations (PSYOPs) are deliberate efforts designed to communicate with target audiences (TAs) to cultivate specific emotions, attitudes or behavior within foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals and align their sentiments with national objectives (The Department of Army 1968: 1-1). These operations, often characterized by strategic messaging and information dissemination, utilize psychological tactics aiming to achieve specific objectives, ranging from altering public opinion to inducing specific behavioral changes among foreign populations.

This article seeks to explore the role of PSYOPs in facilitating norm change within a constructivist framework, focusing on how PSYOPs are deployed as tools for shaping societal

values and promoting desired norms. The research argues that psychological warfare shares a common foundation with the norm change process in three key areas: the agency of norm entrepreneurs, the strategic use of framing techniques and the goal of normative influence. In this context, it suggests that the PSYOPs agents function as norm entrepreneurs, who develop operational strategies that are carefully aligned with the unique historical, cultural, and identity characteristics of the target society to foster the desired norm change. This approach allows PSYOPs to go beyond simple manipulation, enabling them to be addressed as significant norm-promoting mechanisms that actively contribute to the construction of perceptions, values, and beliefs and the change of established norms through societal interactions.

In alignment with the research objective this article employs a qualitative approach that draws on archival research. The data were gathered from the Wilson Center Digital Archive from the special collection on Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL). This collection contains declassified United States (US) Government documents, mainly comprising Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports, memorandums and letters between key individuals involved in broadcasting during RFE and RL's CIA controlled period (1949–1971). All documents were analyzed solely by human review, without the assistance of any software. Through analysis of these documents, the study identifies the key institutions and individuals involved in RFE and RL operations, examines the norms and values being promoted, and investigates the framing strategies utilized in these psychological operations.

Drawing on these sources, the article aims to contribute to the constructivist literature by broadening the concept of state-led norm entrepreneurship. Traditionally, norm entrepreneurship of states has been associated with diplomatic and political actors; however, this research broadens the scope to include intelligence agencies employing PSYOPs elements. In doing so, it also addresses a critical gap in PSYOP literature, illustrating that PSYOPs serve not merely as channels for disseminating information, but as purposeful mechanisms for promoting specific norms within target societies. This expanded perspective offers valuable insights for policymakers, strategic communicators, and practitioners, highlighting the potential of PSYOPs as instruments for shaping norms and values.

To map out the argument, the first section explores the theoretical foundations of norms and norm entrepreneurship, examining how norms emerge, evolve, and gain acceptance. The second section explores the intersection of PSYOPs and norm promotion and identifies their core components. The third section presents RFE and RL as case studies, showing how intelligence agencies use these platforms to promote democratic norms in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The conclusion draws together these insights and highlights how intelligence agencies have engaged in norm entrepreneurship by employing PSYOP elements.

Norms and Norm Entrepreneurship

Norms represent a compelling subject across various scientific disciplines, providing intricate insights into human behavior and societal dynamics. Commonly defined as "collective expectations for the appropriate behavior of individuals with a specific identity" (Katzenstein

1996: 5), norms guide actors towards behaviors that align with shared societal values. These behaviors reflect a social expectation that certain actions are more appropriate than others (March and Olsen 1998: 951).

Norms are both evaluative and intersubjective: they label behaviors as right or wrong and emerge from social processes that embed shared expectations within a community (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 891). Through socialization, individuals are introduced to these norms, which establish what is considered "appropriate" based on the rules of a community. However, even within a community, norms are not dichotomous, but rather continuous entities. In other words, they do not merely exist or not exist, instead they "come in varying strengths with norms reaching "different levels of agreement" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 892; Legro 1997: 33). Furthermore, norms function as "animated entities"; they are neither fully formed, nor static constructs. While they exhibit relative stability, norms persist within a constant state of dynamism and flux, subject to processes of strengthening, weakening, and gradual evolution over time. Rather than existing independently of the communities that believe in and enact them, norms are "born anew every day," continually reconstituted as actors express them through their beliefs and actions (Hoffmann 2017).

In this regard, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) presented the norm life cycle for understanding the dynamics of agreement process on norms and for explaining the contingent nature of normative influence and norm change (Hoffmann 2017). The norm life cycle fundamentally describes the process of normative influence in shaping the behaviors of state and non-state actors in a three-stage progression. At each stage, different actors, objectives, and influence mechanisms are at play. The first stage, known as norm emergence, is in essence, a norm-building process. However, rather than occurring in a normative vacuum, this process unfolds with a highly contested normative space, where alternative norms and perceptions of interests compete (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 895-897). The second stage, norm cascade, occurs when influential early supporters persuade other actors to adopt the norm through a mechanism of socialization. At this stage, the norm gains widespread acceptance within the community via imitation. Finnemore and Sikkink refer to this as the "tipping point". Once a norm reaches this tipping point, it advances into the third stage, internalization, when it acquires a taken-for-granted quality and is followed automatically (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 902-904).

A norm's progression through the full cycle is not inevitable. Many emergent norms fall short of reaching the tipping point, and consequently, fail to bring about normative change. On the other hand, the initial stage of norm emergence is not spontaneous. While external events such as wars, crises in the international system, and the shifts driven by globalization or interdependence can act as triggers (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Berger 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), agency is required for normative influence. This agency is broadly represented by norm entrepreneurs who actively shape and advocate for emerging norms (Wunderlich 2013: 20). The concept of a norm entrepreneur, originating from sociology, is recognized as a crucial catalyst in norm dynamics. Norm entrepreneurs, possessing firm beliefs about what

qualifies as acceptable or desirable behavior within a given society, strive to persuade a critical mass to embrace a new norm. To accomplish this, they employ a communication strategy known as framing (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 897).

Framing involves the process by which communicators choose specific aspects of issues or events and emphasize them to promote particular interpretation, assessment, or solution. It fulfills four main functions in communication: defining a situation as a problem, diagnosing its causes, expressing a moral judgement and recommending remedies or improvements (Entman 2004: 5). Framing aims to encourage the public to place greater emphasis on specific social issues and to alter their perceptions and behaviors regarding these issues (Oxley 2020). In doing so, it involves the employment of persuasive techniques to create meaning, legitimize the desired normative order, and ultimately achieve social acceptance. Successful framing involves both persuasion and behavioral change (Payne 2001: 39).

Essentially, framing is the process of creating shared space within communication, where actors, their characteristics and relationships between them constitute the foundational components. From this perspective, framing's ability to generate persuasion and behavioral change is closely linked to how these components are interpreted by individuals and connected to the framed issue. Symbols, metaphors, stories and perspective that allow limited room for interpretive differences and align with social sensitivities determine the success of the entire frame (Budzynska et al 2022: 127-128). In addition to the cultural and linguistic features the success of the frame also depends upon the external conditions. These conditions can be summarized as the regular exposure to the frame, individual motivation and the presence of competing frames (Chong and Druckmann 2007: 110-116).

In the promotion of norms, norm entrepreneurs, who inherently depend on organizational platforms, are composed of state and non-state actors. Civilians (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), transnational social movements (Klotz 1995), non-governmental organizations (Nadelmann 1990; Müller 2013), private companies (Hurel and Lubato 2018), political parties (Dakowska 2009), transgovernmental coalitions (Risse-Kappen 1995), international organizations (Müller 2013) can be considered as norm entrepreneurs. States, once perceived primarily as norm takers, have gained recognition as norm entrepreneurs actively advocating for normative change (Shannon 2017: 10). Government agencies and public servants responsible for foreign policy making are regarded as the main component of the norm entrepreneurship of states (Davies and True 2017; Mikulova and Simecka 2013; Akçapar 2021).

Motivation of norm entrepreneurs is subject to debate. Norm entrepreneurs promote norms with empathy, altruism, and a commitment to certain ideas. These elements suggest that norm promotion is driven by specific ideals, with norm entrepreneurs concerning the security and welfare of their community (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 898). However, interpreting norms solely as expressions of ethical ideals devoid of material interests is misleading. In practice, actions are driven by a complex blend of self- interest, group interests

and self-affirmation. Norms should be conceptualized within this framework (Klotz 1995: 13). Therefore, norm entrepreneurs are not exempted from considerations of self- interest. They tend to avoid actions that contradict their own interests (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 898). Ideals centered on a commitment to public welfare serve as a focal point for entrepreneurs. As Jacobsen (1995: 291) notes, norm entrepreneurs are not descended from Mount Olympus; the norms they advocate often align with their personal interests as well.

The critical role of norm entrepreneurs in normative influence demonstrates that promoting shared beliefs and appropriate behaviors is achieved not through organic social processes but through deliberate strategic intervention. The following section examines the principles and strategies underlying PSYOPs, revealing their role in driving influence processes. This analysis provides insight into how PSYOP planners and executers engage in norm entrepreneurship by actively promoting and establishing norms to shape societal beliefs and behavioral standards within target communities.

The Characteristics of Psychological Operations

Psychological operations refer to planned actions to disseminate specific information to governments, organizations, groups, and individuals to influence their emotions, motivations, and behavior. These operations are strategically employed to produce desired psychological impacts that support the achievement of political or military objectives (Department of the Army 1968: 1-3). The intersections between PSYOPs and norm promotion are analyzed in the following section in the context of three foundational concepts: agency, framing, and normative influence.

Agency

In the realm of PSYOPs, the concept of agency plays a pivotal role in shaping and executing these initiatives. Agency refers not only to the individual actors involved but also to the collective entities that gather intelligence, strategize, and execute operations. PSYOPs begin with the collection of information on the prevailing political, cultural, and economic values, perceptions and attitudes of a society (Department of the Army 1966: 3-4). This process is instrumental in identifying the norms that need to be either reinforced or altered.

Rather than being a task undertaken by a single actor, the execution of PSYOPs involves a collaborative effort among various institutions such as intelligence services, ministries, government agencies and different units within the military. The nature of the operation determines the extent of this collaboration, which may also include non-governmental organizations, elite groups and individuals often referred to as "key communicators," who can impact political and social processes in the relevant country (Department of the Army 1966: 40). This wide array of participants brings together differing interests, requiring negotiation, coordination, and communication. The involvement of local actors can enhance the legitimacy and cultural sensitivity of the operation.

Framing

At their core, PSYOPs are aimed at shaping individuals' beliefs and perceptions using strategic communication methods to achieve persuasion. The key mechanism employed to persuade target audiences (TAs) toward the desired behavioral outcomes is framing. The basic steps for achieving persuasion involve formulating a primary message, identifying supporting message, discerning what appeals to the TAs and determining the most affective technique based on these insights (CIA 1958: 46; Department of the Army 1966: 8-9).

Encompassing various forms, these techniques are employed to present concise information by highlighting the desired aspects. They utilize meaningful and distinguishable symbols to communicate the desired message to the target audience. Symbols can manifest in visual, audial or a combination of both modalities (CIA 1958: 33; Department of the Army 1966: 10).

Technological advancements enable PSYOP symbols to be spread through various channels, tailored to the target audience and operating context. Despite recent technological advancements; radio has historically been the most effective medium for message transmission. Its advantages include accessibility for non-literate audiences, the ability to reach across national borders, cost-effectiveness, versatility as source of news and entertainment, and the capacity to create a strong emotional impact as it requires radio presenters. The regularity of programs not only cultivates a habitual engagement among the audience but also ensures a continuous exposure of listeners to the framed symbols (Department of the Army 1968: 4-3).

Normative Influence

In PSYOPs, behavioral modifications are achieved through methods that respect the autonomy and cultural context of the target audience, fostering more sophisticated, legitimate, and persuasion-based avenue for behavioral transformation (Department of the Army 1968: 2-6). To fulfill these conditions, each operation focuses on the societal aspects to achieve the intended outcomes. Information on crucial aspects such as the demographic composition, cultural characteristics, history, social, economic, political and military motivations of groups, the degree of independence of the judiciary and media are gathered and analyzed to execute the operation in the target country (Department of the Army 1968: 5-2). The aim is to gain comprehensive understanding of the country not just through statistical data, but by examining shared values, perceptions on military and political institutions, the capacity of political figures and leaders to influence thoughts, attitudes and behaviors of society (Department of the Army 1968: 2-6; CIA 1958: 77). In this regard, PSYOPs are closely associated with the social and relational dimensions. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and acknowledging shared meanings and perspectives among the target audience. In other words, PSYOPs focus on how different groups within a society understand and interpret information collectively. This approach ensures that the methods used are culturally sensitive and resonate with the shared values and beliefs of the target population.

Despite its combat connotation, PSYOPs are also strategically employed in peaceful contexts, such as nation building, peacebuilding, improving military-civilian relations and promoting human rights (CIA 1958: 12; Department of the Army 1966: 22-23; Department of the Army 1968: 6-7). Their objectives may include strengthening of democratic institutions, eliminating corruption, increasing political participation, maintaining civil order, and preventing illegal activities (Department of the Army 1966: 31). In this context, PSYOPs act as a guiding mechanism for appropriate behavior in a given community and are employed for promotion of new norms or the alteration of existing ones.

PSYOPs aim to assess target audience orientations to predict their attitudes in response to specific stimuli and create favorable conditions that influence these attitudes in the intended direction. An attitude is a state of readiness to react in a certain manner toward a specific stimulus based on underlying beliefs or feelings (CIA 1958: 71-82). Attitudes are deeply rooted in societal values, beliefs, norms, and roles in a given community. They reflect social needs and drive alongside material ones. Since material needs are uniform for every society, their identification is relatively more straightforward. However, social needs derive from sources such as identities, a sense of belonging, peer pressure derived from group standards, the need to comply with laws or regulations, traditions, beliefs within the country, and nostalgic perceptions, that is they do not rely on rational calculations (CIA 1958: 90-96). By resonating with the audience's existing values and social roles, PSYOP can create messages that are perceived as inherently credible and appropriate, thereby fostering more profound and lasting changes in behavior.

The Cases of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty

The onset of the Cold War marked a crucial moment in the international system, defined by the ideological disparity between the US and the Soviet Union. Soviet policies, as destructive, aimed to undermine Western power, promote communist partisanship, and control populations (Kennan 1946). In response, the US adopted strategic and constructive approach, to present its positive vision and guidance to the war-weary nations in Europe (Kennan 1947). Under George Kennan's direction of the Policy Planning Staff in 1948, the US initiated covert political warfare by establishing both Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL). As gray broadcasting entities, these stations aimed to promote democratic norms in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in line with US policy objectives. Defined as non-hostile covert actions with plausible deniability, gray broadcasting served specific interests by concealing its true origins, while presenting itself as originating from indigenous sources (Gray Broadcasting Operations 1958).

Agency

The foundations of RFE and RL were laid when State Department Policy Planning Director George Kennan and Assistant Director for Policy Coordination Frank Wisner proposed

utilizing nearly half a million émigrés from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe[1] in Western Germany to conduct PSYOPs to advance American interests (Johnson 2010: 8).

To operationalize this idea, Kennan (1948) suggested conducting political warfare against the Soviet regime by establishing liberation committees composed of influential political émigrés. In collaboration with the US government, these committees aimed to "form centers of national hope, to provide a potential nucleus for liberation movements" in Eastern Europe via unrestricted communication (Kennan 1948).

In 1948, the CIA, State Department, Defense Department and Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) officials decided to establish a "democratic and philanthropic organization" in New York, referred to in shortened form as the Free Europe Committee (FEC). This Committee was tasked with enabling a group of Eastern European refugees to disseminate democratic messages to their compatriots in Eastern Europe, primarily targeting Poland and Czechoslovakia. This dissemination would be carried out through radio broadcasts with the funding and equipment provided by the Committee, and the Committee would be responsible for ensuring that each refugee group prepared broadcasts suitable for their own language and culture (CIA 1948). The primary mission of FEC was outlined in greater detail by the OPC in 1949. The committee would provide policy guidance and financial support to anti-fascist and anti-communist intellectuals and political leaders from Eastern European states living as refugees, enabling them to advocate for the social, political and religious freedoms in their homelands. Financial support and project proposals would be channeled through the OPC, which served as a liaison between the FEC and various US government agencies including the Executive Office of the President, Department of State, Defense Treasury, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Federal Communications Commission (Office of Policy Coordination 1949).

In this vein, RFE began broadcasting in West Germany in July 1950 to the Soviet satellite states of Czechoslovakia and Romania, later expanding to include Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Albania. During the initial months of the operation, FEC focused on organizing meetings with the national committees from different parts of Eastern Europe seeking talented émigrés to take roles in radio broadcasting. By 1952, around 190 Czechoslovaks, 100 Hungarians, and 70 Poles were working at RFE facilities in different positions (Lockhart 1952).

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1 Emigration from Eastern Europe to the West during the Cold War period exhibits distinct characteristics. When the direct impact of Soviet domination is disregarded, emigration was not coerced, rather it was a response to both political repression and economic constraints, with emigrants facing significant loss of freedoms and liberties at home. Opportunities for liberty and freedom in the West, coupled with assistance and resettlement policies, facilitated this emigration. Nevertheless, émigrés were also strategically incorporated by the West into psychological warfare, intelligence gathering and paramilitary missions. The internal dynamics of émigré communities were aligned with these broader strategic objectives. Émigrés who defect to the West sustained their efforts toward their home countries through political and informational activities. These efforts ranged from sending money, goods, and printed materials to establishing underground networks and disseminating information through radio broadcasts. They preserved cultural, economic, and religious connections to their homelands on an international scale, engaging in activities such as lobbying. See, Anna Mazurkiewicz. 2015. Political Emigration from East Central Europe During the Cold War. *Polish American Studies* 72, 2: 65-82.

Following an agreement between the State Department and the CIA, on the necessity for radio broadcasting activities to cover Soviet Union, RL began its operations in 1953. The coordination of émigrés working in RL broadcasts as well as the monitoring and evaluation of radio programs, was guided by the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia (AMCOMLIB), an organization comprising anti-communist Russian and minority émigré groups from the Soviet Union (CIA 1954). AMCOMLIB was not only responsible for recruiting personnel to be employed in the broadcasts but also establishing a political center for émigrés to support potential resistance or to assist individuals seeking to defect (Office of Policy Coordination 1952).

The processes of information collection and analysis of RFE and RL bear a resemblance to the intelligence cycle, a process unique to intelligence organizations. Their intelligence gathering unit operated outside of the radio stations, where the editorial staff and studios were located. This unit integrated information provided by the émigré networks in Western Europe and visitors from the Iron Curtain with newspapers and other documents before relaying it to the evaluators in the Information Department. After cross-checking, evaluators forwarded the data to program assistants so as to determine its suitability for broadcast (Macdonald 1951; Overton 1955).

RFE and RL operations functioned under the "people speak to people" principle, wherein émigrés assumed roles as key communicators – an essential component in psychological operations. Numerous distinguished writers, journalists, academics, politicians, and bureaucrats who had fled political repression in their countries, served as program presenters. Among these figures, the most notable was Józef Światło, a former lieutenant colonel in the Polish secret police and directly involved in Gomulka's 1951 arrest.[2] Swiatlo defected to the West and produced a series for Polish RFE, revealing the inner workings of Polish political system including politically motivated arrests and the torture of the detainees (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Poland 1955).

Framing

As part of their strategic communication initiative, both RFE and RL broadcasted 20 hours daily – RFE in five Eastern European languages and RL in 17 languages including minority languages within the Soviet Union. Both stations employed framing techniques aligned with the updated operational objectives and tailored to the characteristics of their target audiences, ensuring that messages were conveyed with maximum impact. In the early years of the

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2 Władysław Gomułka, Secretary of the Polish Workers' Party, was one of the key figures in Poland's liberation and in the formation of provisional government after the Second World War. Advocating for Poland's political and economic autonomy, he pushed for a more independent socialist path rather than strict adherence to Soviet directives. This stance led his arrest in 1951, as Soviet controlled Polish secret police (Ministry of Public Security) accused him of "right-wing nationalist deviation". His case, known as "Światło's revelations," became a symbol of Stalinist purges in Poland. See, Anita J. Prazmowska, 2011. Władysław Gomułka in *Mental Maps in the Early Cold War Era, 1945-68*, ed. Jonathan Wright and Steven Casey, 109-128.

RFE operation, the primary objectives of the broadcasts targeting Eastern Europe focused on strengthening hopes for liberation, encouraging defection to the free world, supporting resistance movements and deterring cooperation with the Soviet regime (Wisner 1950). The initial broadcast themes were centered on the narrative that the "freedom-loving" nations of the free world could triumph over Soviet tyranny. To achieve this, citizens of the satellite states needed to be aware of "Soviet lies" on various issues from their peaceful intentions to the high standards of living under communism and they needed to be armed with the truthful information to counter Soviet narratives (Office of Policy Coordination 1950).

Following Stalin's death in 1953, the limited relaxation introduced by the "new course" led the CIA to assume that latent aspirations for national independence might be emerging within the satellite states. With the weakened leadership in the satellite states, it was anticipated that in areas not seen as directly challenging Soviet domination, independent national actions might be pursued. This could potentially encourage Eastern European nations to move toward greater freedom, independence, and the formation of representative governments. In this regard, FEC was tasked with developing customized broadcast plans, tailored to each European state (CIA 1956a).

RFE broadcasts were designed to frame Eastern European states as "captive nations" deprived of their freedom by the Soviet Union. In line with this, the broadcasts promoted liberalization, decentralization of institutions and the establishment of local governments modeled after those in the free world and frequently reported on anti-Stalinist developments in the region. Membership in The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) was depicted as "the exploitation of the captive nations' human and natural resources" for the sake of Soviet Russia's economic and political interests, while the Warsaw Pact was portrayed as a form of "colonial" exploitation that undermined the national defense capabilities of captive nations and served the security interests of Soviet Russia (CIA 1956a).

A few months after this CIA guidance, popular uprisings erupted in 1956 first in Poznań and later in Budapest. Drawing parallels between two events, the CIA recommended framing these movements as manifestations of an "irresistible desire for real freedom" in RFE coverages (CIA 1956b) and characterizing the role of Soviet troops in the Hungarian uprising as a "crime" and an "outrageous indignity." As the Soviet troops maintained their presence in Hungary, all RFE stations were instructed to adjust their broadcasting content. To avoid provoking further Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe, the Hungarian and Polish RFE stations were directed to transition from "opposition radios" to cease broadcasting that was critical of the Nagy and Gomułka governments[3]. The tone of commentary programs was to be softened, focusing on

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3   The Poznan Uprising in June 1956, led by industrial workers erupted over low wages and poor economic conditions. Protests escalated into an anti-government demonstration and led to Władysław Gomułka's return to power in October following public demands. While Soviet troops mobilized to intervene crackdown, Gomułka's negotiations with Khruschev prevented military action. He secured limited autonomy from the Soviet Union, introduced moderate reforms and reduce repression. Encouraged by Poland, Hungarian students and intellectuals and began organizing demonstrations in Budapest in October. Peaceful protests quickly escalated when the government ordered security forces to fire on demonstrators. As the uprising spread, Imre Nagy became Prime Minister, initially seeking compromise like

facts rather than offering any tactical advice or recommendations for opposition groups. In contrast, the Czechoslovak, Romanian, and Bulgarian RFE stations continued to function as opposition radios without content adjustments (Comprehensive Guidance for Radio Free Europe Broadcasts 1956).

Aligned with its objectives – promoting a more democratic Russian alternative to the current regime, altering the Soviet attitude toward the non-Soviet world, and deterring Soviet aggression—RL primarily added a positive dimension to the émigré radio concept. The programs sought to "stimulate disaffection" with the existing system by portraying Soviet living conditions as inferior to those in the West and highlighting Soviet aggression as the true reason for the West's rearmament. It was advised that broadcasts emphasize the "heroic struggle" of the Soviet Union against Hitler and its alliance with the West during World War II. Moreover, considering the respect still held for Stalin, RL broadcasts were advised attribute the Soviet system's flaws to "corrupt officials" rather than to Stalin himself. These early broadcasts, which drew clear distinctions between Soviet leadership and groups like the Red Army and police, were ultimately designed to encourage defections of Soviet personnel to the West (CIA 1953).

Until 1956, RL programs focused on the military and bureaucratic upper strata, referred to as the "Soviet vlast" in CIA reports. However, with the Hungarian Revolution, the focus shifted to the Soviet soldiers stationed in Hungary and the student, intellectual, and worker groups in the Soviet Union. Messages during this period emphasized that Soviet soldiers were once again being armed against the people of a friendly country. The world, including other communist and socialist regimes, condemned the Soviets, and that the events in countries like Hungary and Poland were manifestations of popular will. Hungarian grievances, such as poor living conditions, lack of freedom and democracy, were portrayed as similar to those of Soviet citizens. It was stressed that these issues stemmed from the Communist Party dictatorship, and that Hungary's victory could improve conditions for Soviet citizens. The messages urged Soviet citizens to learn from these events and resist supporting the regime's repressive measures (Radio Liberty 1957).

Later, the RL audience was categorized into three distinct groups: the apathetic group, harbored disaffection toward the regime but suppressed their hopes on change; the patriotic group, loyal to the regime, who encountered the broadcasts by chance; and the waverer group, who did not express sympathy toward the broadcasts but followed them in search of an alternative to the Soviet system. For broadcasts targeting the first group, it was decided to provide hope and encouragement, emphasizing that the communist system and the current regime were not inevitable. For the second group, the message was that RL was not an anti-communist radio station but aimed to help the Soviet people improve the existing system.

Gomułka. However, under growing pressure, he directly challenged Soviet control and declared Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. In response, the Soviet Union invaded on November 4, 1956. Nagy was arrested and executed in 1958. See, Johanna Granville. 2003. Reactions to the Events of 1956: New Findings from the Budapest and Warsaw Archives. *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, 2: 261-290.

For the third group, the broadcasts would convey new ideas and approaches to changing the current regime (Tuck 1962).

In the 1960s, prior to the termination of covert funding, the CIA viewed Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts and the economic and political ferment it brough, combined with the implications of the global decolonization movement, as opportunities for RL. Following the 1950 decision by the US Congress to define non-Russian Soviet nationalities as "captive nations", RL was encouraged to use the term captive nations without mentioning specific groups and emphasize the right of self- determination (Radio Liberty 1960). However, self-determination was framed not as secession, but as promoting a sense of common cause and mutual cooperation among the various ethnic and national groups within the Soviet Union (Radio Liberty 1970).

Normative Influence

RFE and RL focused on promoting freedom and liberty as core values and contrasting democratic Western ideals with Soviet restrictions. These broadcasts aimed not only to disseminate information but to influence the attitudes of listeners in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

RFE broadcasts emphasized freedom to disrupt the integration of Eastern European satellite states with the Soviet Union, encourage defections, and foster an environment for potential resistance movements (Wisner 1950). For RFE, freedom encompassed more than political autonomy; it included freedom of expression, thought, assembly, worship, press, as well as freedom of internal movement and communication with the non-communist world. By highlighting these democratic rights, RFE encouraged Eastern Europeans, especially influential elites, to adopt democratic values as national goals. (CIA 1956a).

RL's mission was to dismantle the Soviet government's monopoly on information and challenge the "distorted communist worldview of Soviet citizens" by introducing a clearer understanding of the free world (CIA 1970). RL broadcasts offered Soviet national groups the vision of an alternative regime that encompassed the possibility of a life under a free and democratic rule respecting rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and the press (Office of Policy Coordination 1951). This vision promised liberation from Soviet tyranny, police oppression, hunger, fear, and state intervention (CIA 1953).

RFE and RL presented ideals such as freedom, democracy, and human rights as universal standards that were morally superior to those offered by communism. RFE's broadcasts consistently emphasized "freedom" as an overarching theme, suggesting that personal and national autonomy from Soviet influence represented a normal and aspirational state (CIA 1956a). Similarly, RL broadcasts encouraged Soviet listeners to question the legitimacy of their government's control over free circulation of information, individual freedom and political expression, presenting democratic life as not only viable but also highly desirable. Through these broadcasts, RFE and RL created a normative framework in which listeners

aspired toward Western democratic values, highlighting them as the desirable alternative to Soviet ideology (Office of Policy Coordination 1951).

RFE and RL sought to expose the deficiencies of the communist way of life by contrasting it with the achievements of the West. This strategy aimed to destabilize the appeal of Soviet narratives, encouraging listeners to perceive them as limiting (Office of Policy Coordination 1950). RFE highlighted the failures of communist governance and showcased Western cultural, scientific, and artistic achievements, urging listeners to reconsider their acceptance of Soviet lies. By presenting democracy as a source of cultural and intellectual vibrancy, RFE prompted listeners to critically evaluate their own regime (Office of Policy Coordination 1950). RL's broadcasts introduced Soviet listeners to perspectives that contradicted the official Soviet narrative, fostering a sense of disillusionment with the supposed intellectual and moral superiority of the communist system (CIA 1953).

The primary objective of both RFE and RL was to create and strengthen the political and intellectual infrastructure necessary for democratic demands in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. To achieve this, RFE strategies included reinforcing the agency of their audiences through the enlistment of governmental and private "opinion moulders". These included political, religious, women and youth leaders, as well as media and trade unions (CIA 1956). RL on the other hand, focused on empowering Soviet citizens in their struggle against the Kremlin. In these broadcasts, Western allies were portrayed not as liberators but as sympathetic supporters with no intention of interfering in Soviet internal affairs (Office of Policy Coordination 1952), enslaving or destroying Soviet people (Office of Policy Coordination 1951). This tactic prevented the perception of democracy as an external imposition and instead made it a self-selected goal, aligning with the concept of self-determination (Radio Liberty 1970).

The credibility and legitimacy of the objectives of RFE and RL rested on strict adherence to certain standards of appropriateness. Themes promoting "immediate liberation or active revolt" (Letter to DeWitt C. Poole 1950) or provoking "hasty and unwise reactions" against the Kremlin were strictly prohibited (Office of Policy Coordination 1950), particularly during sensitive events such as the Hungarian Revolution (Comprehensive Guidance for Radio Free Europe Broadcasts 1956) and the Poznań Uprising (Wisner 1957). During the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, despite requests from some high-level Czechoslovak officials, the broadcasts encouraging active resistance were banned at the expense of eroding public trust in the radio stations (Waltin 1968). While supporting the uprising or marginalized groups might seem advantageous for US interests in the short term, the primary objective of the RFE was to cultivate democratic norms within the population and to mitigate potential for disruptive Soviet interference. Consequently, authorities recommended a more cautious approach to prevent bloodshed and avoid accountability for provoking violence. This strategy underscored the importance of refraining from actions that could provoke Soviet retaliation, thereby safeguarding the operation's long-term achievements.

In a similar vein, RL broadcasts were explicitly prohibited from speaking on behalf of any government in exile or reflecting the views and interests of any refugee or exile group (Office of Policy Coordination 1951). A clear distinction was made between the Soviet regime and the Russian people. Past mistakes by the West in understanding Soviet dynamics were acknowledged and the historical struggles of the Soviet people were honored to foster respect and empathy. Given the widespread affection of the Russian people toward Stalin, any criticism directed at the regime was advised to be delivered subtly, focusing on corrupt elements within the system rather than direct attacks on Stalin himself (CIA 1953). This approach was closely related to RL's objective of promoting democratic norms by resonating more effectively with the audience and minimizing the risk of alienation.

The extent of the influence of RFE and RL on listeners was evaluated using foreign intelligence agency reports, correspondence from listeners and, most importantly, annual surveys. By 1954, the Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish RFE were reaching wide audiences and receiving around 100 listener letters monthly (Operations Coordinating Board 1954). In Poland, RFE were accessible to nearly one million radio receivers, with no countermeasure able to block them (Zharov 1951). Given similar conditions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, the Polish government requested Soviet support for bloc-wide jamming (Polish Proposal for Bloc-wide Coordination 1953).

Annual surveys with defectors were crucial in assessing RFE's influence. Conducted through émigré networks in nine Western European cities, these surveys explored how RFE influenced defectors' decisions and shaped their views on political and economic issues. In 1966 alone, 1,675 interviews with Polish defectors were conducted, all were regular RFE listeners (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Poland 1967). Additionally, after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the US State Department and the American Embassy in Bonn conducted a series of interviews with Hungarian refugees seeking asylum. The interviews that took place at the American Refugee camp in Salzburg aimed to understand RFE's influence on the revolution. All interviewed refugees confirmed that they regularly followed RFE broadcasts. While most noted that the broadcasts did not explicitly encourage armed revolt, they cultivated aspirations for freedom, an improved quality of life, and a spirit of passive resistance (Rechnagel 1956). In a 1957 letter to Khrushchev the chiefs of Radio Moscow in Germany linked the revolutionary movement in Hungary to RFE's émigré network activities in Western Europe and its "objective and impartial" broadcasting policy (Romantsov, Turtushkin and Zholkver 1957).

Polish leader Lech Wałęsa later affirmed RFE's influence on the Solidarity movement famously asking in a 1990 interview, "Is the Sun important for Earth?" (Johnson 2010: 1). Intelligence reports from 1983 corroborates this statement, noting that Polish RFE supported the Solidarity movement through a series of coordinated actions directed by the CIA. These efforts included establishing an overseas base to centralize Solidarity's activities, supporting the creation of an "underground state" and influencing the Catholic Church, particularly the faction aligned with Cardinal Glemp, to counter any accommodationist stance and encourage the Church's resistance to state policies (Flako 1983). In fact, RFE's strategy toward the Catholic

Church, extend back to a period predating the Solidarity movement. The Church, regarded as the principal challenger to the communist regime, was depicted in the broadcasts within the context of the state-church controversy. This approach aimed to support preservation of the Church's freedom, autonomy and its influential position in Poland, fostering an expectation that a powerful Church would remain in a consistent struggle with the communist government (Meyer 1959).

In contrast, assessing the influence of RL broadcasts proved more challenging. Merely listening to the broadcasts, let alone sending letters to the stations, placed average Soviet citizen's "liberty and possibly life at risk" (CIA 1953). Due to economic constraints, only one in 100 people had the radio equipment to listen to broadcasts at home, and many had to listen in groups, risking being reported, as the housing conditions in the Soviet Union typically required multiple individuals to share a single room. Nonetheless, despite all these risks, testimonies indicate that RL broadcasts were listened to collectively also in radio repair shops and even in military tanks (Radio Liberty 1956). Consequently, unlike RFE, RL primarily targeted elite groups, with a significant portion of its audience being bureaucrats and military personnel within the official hierarchy.

In 1955, to better assess RL's impact, the CIA commissioned Wilbur Schramm, a scholar in mass communication at Stanford University, to report on the estimated influence of Radio Liberty. Schramm's analysis, which included interviews with operational stakeholders, intelligence reports and survey data, concluded that RL had significantly influenced a small elite group in the Soviet Union and had increased their defection to the West by 200% (Schramm 1955). Despite the difficulties associated with sending letters abroad, by 1969, the station was receiving 1,000 letters annually and was able to reach 90% of Soviet territory, despite ongoing Soviet jamming efforts (CIA 1969).

Conclusion

This research explores the role of psychological operations as tools for normative change, examining how these operations leverage societal values, interests, and the unmet needs of societies to shape collective behavior and understanding. In non-combat applications, PSYOPs aim to reshape norms related to peacekeeping, human rights, and civil liberties by aligning their strategies with the characteristics of target audience. This approach requires careful analysis of cultural, political, historical and demographic factors to ensure resonance with the target audience's perceptions and address both material and ideational needs. The roles of institutional and individual agencies, along with persuasion channels and framing techniques, are critical in this process.

This research examines Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty as illustrative cases that underscore the role of agency, framing techniques and normative influence in PSYOPs, presenting these operations as instances of norm entrepreneurship. Beginning their broadcasts in the early 1950s, RFE and RL promoted democratic ideals such as freedom of thought

and expression, free and fair elections, and resistance to authoritarian control in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Their approach prioritized building societal solidarity and encouraging alignment with democratic governance and global interconnectedness, while avoiding exacerbation of violence and separatism. Through the broadcasts, RFE and RL helped align local aspirations with broader democratic principles, positioning these media outlets as powerful tools in norm promotion. From planning to execution, all involved actors functioned as norm entrepreneurs, utilizing the strategic bargaining opportunities provided by their organizational platforms.

The primary challenge in this research was to determine the normative influence of the operations. The archival documents used often contained redacted and unreleased sections. This challenge was addressed by cross-checking CIA documents with translations of foreign intelligence service reports and by supporting and validating findings through secondary sources.

In conclusion, the clandestine nature of PSYOPs has historically limited a comprehensive understanding of these operations: However, this research reveals their role in state-driven norm entrepreneurship, where state institutions – predominantly intelligence agencies – strategically deploy PSYOP elements to shape social norms, influencing public sentiment and social structures on a global scale. By uncovering this hidden aspect, this research aims to contribute to the literature on norms and norm entrepreneurship by broadening the understanding of how states shape and transform societal norms through covert mechanisms, with intelligence agencies positioned as norm entrepreneurs.

Additionally, this research aims to provide a systematic foundation for PSYOPs research, by offering critical theoretical insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in this field. It positions PSYOPs as essentially instrumental in facilitating normative shifts that sustain and advance state-driven agendas. By introducing a theoretical framework largely absent in current literature, this research not only enriches academic discourse on PSYOPs but also holds the potential to encourage future research through interdisciplinary approaches and alternative archival sources. Expanding the understanding of PSYOPs as mechanisms of norm promotion offers a deeper understanding of state influence, and the covert processes by which norms are constructed and disseminated.

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Acknowledgement