All the President’s Media
by Michael David and Pat Aufderheide

During two October weekends in 1981, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators filled the streets of Western Europe’s major cities protesting the planned deployment of medium-range missiles in five European countries. Newspapers carried reams of commentary that the United States and its allies were facing the worst political crisis of NATO’s history.

Less than a month later, at the National Press Club, President Reagan presented a new European arms-control proposal to an audience of 200 journalists and a battery of television cameras that could carry his speech live to Europe and other parts of the world. For the first time in history, the Chief Executive was making a live telecast from Washington that was timed for foreign broadcast systems rather than the U.S. networks.

The specifics of the proposal have been forgotten by everyone other than the specialists. What remains notable is that with one targeted speech to the European opinion-molders, the President seized the public-relations initiative in Western Europe. He has never lost it. In the months and years since, the missiles have been deployed. The vast armies of anti-nuclear demonstrators in Western Europe have dwindled to platoons, their influence much muted, if not entirely silenced.

Nearly two years after that international coup de théâtre, the Administration faced another public-relations problem of immense proportions—the international backlash against the American invasion of Grenada. Its response was to arrange a global satellite videoconference with 40 press questioners at five American embassies in Western Europe. Also on the hookup were then-United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick in New York, two deputy assistant secretaries of state in Washington and, in Barbados, the leaders of two Caribbean governments that endorsed American policy.

A single global press conference did not by itself stop the public-relations battering that the United States was absorbing over Grenada, but combined with the quick withdrawal of most American troops, the electronic ploy helped lower the heat considerably.

Through shrewd use of the new communications technologies, the Reagan Administration’s foreign policy tacticians have been able to expand in quantum jumps the public-relations component of modern diplomacy. They can reach the media and opinion leaders of virtually all friendly and neutral countries more easily than ever before—without going through such filtering agents as Washington correspondents and diplomats. (Not surprisingly, the broadcast systems of the Soviet Union, its Eastern European allies, China, Syria, Libya, and Iran are closed to these USIA television initiatives. The Soviet bloc is reached by radio through the separately controlled Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe.)

In an earlier time, with similar propagandistic objectives, Metternich and Bismarck frequently wrote or planted editorials in foreign newspapers. The difference today is that the message can be delivered more swiftly and to a wider public than was possible then and even a decade ago. Moreover, to heighten credibility, it can be delivered in person, electronically.

Of course, it’s not just to pursue foreign policy goals that the Administration keeps up with every new turn in technology; for domestic controversies as well, the White House takes advantage of technological opportunities to convey its line directly to the public. So does every candidate for national office today.

During the 1984 Presidential primaries, for the first time since television entered into the process, the candidates’ media advisers did not set their plans primarily to meet the needs of the networks. Instead they gave priority to the brief noon and 6 p.m. airport stops that guaranteed the candidates direct live interviews with the anchors of the local television stations. Minicams and ENG microwave technology had made this possible. For the candidates, the setup was beautiful, giving them access to big local news audiences through a dialogue with the star anchors—often people of limited journalistic skills, who tended to serve up softball questions.

Indeed, the ratings races in local news everywhere in the country, which prompt heavy expenditures to promote the anchors, have benefited politicians as much as anyone. The anchor appears to be important, and a true journalist, if he gets to talk one-on-one with the candidates. The importance of raising the stature of the local anchor has...
in fact led to the formation of two Washington-based organizations, one called the Local Program Network and the other, Conus. They exist principally to set up satellite interviews with key government officials and other newsmakers for the local anchors of member stations. The concept and format serve the interests of both the interviewer and interviewee. Politicians can reach several major markets with a single trip to a television studio, and the anchors are aggrandized by talking to the same big shots the famous network correspondents once had all to themselves.

New technologies have helped create new audiences and potentially new political forces beyond the conventional stations and networks. When the U.S. House of Representatives opened itself up to live broadcasts six years ago, the main concern was what the networks would do with the material. No one could or did predict the emergence of a devoted cable television audience for the 435 House members, via C-SPAN. And in the past few years, a group of young conservative Republicans, impatient with their leadership being so accommodating to the Democratic majority, launched a form of parliamentary warfare to push their agenda of such issues as prayer in schools. Thanks in large part to their cable exposure, these congressmen, who in earlier times would have been relegated to obscurity, have become an important force in congressional politics.

These examples of government officials and politicians employing technological innovations to spread their messages point up a paradox of the communications revolution. The technology holds the promise of being highly democratic in giving more people an opportunity to communicate to diverse audiences. But the reality is that government has the money and the sophistication to mobilize the technology for its purposes.

No group has mobilized modern technology more determinedly for government purposes than the United States Information Agency—the government's overseas propaganda arm. Because the agency's material can by law be distributed only abroad, few Americans are aware how quickly the USIA has transformed communications technology into an important adjunct of diplomacy.
The TV President is using satellites to pitch his policies directly to the masses here and abroad, sidestepping the Washington press corps.

The transformation has not been without controversy, in part because the Reagan Administration has not been subtle about its anti-Soviet objectives. As USIA director Charles Z. Wick recently put it in a speech to some university students, "... this country's ability to articulate foreign policy issues—and its very survival—may well depend on the extent to which you can use and master the tools of mass communications."

For the Administration, the object is to beat the Soviets at the propaganda game. For Wick, the mission is to use every modern tool available to achieve that goal, especially since the United States, by his account, is coming from behind. This USIA chief once confided to his tape recorder, "My own view is that... the Communists know how to use our media better than we do."

The Reagan-Wick objective of beating the Soviets in the propaganda contest is not unlike that of Edward R. Murrow when he ran the syndication. Murrow was the kind of journalist to whom Winston Churchill would give his time. Wick came into office announcing, "I don't know anything about foreign affairs, and I don't know anything about journalism."

Throughout his time in office, Wick has continued to be controversial and flamboyant, and given to such gaffes as illegally recording his phone calls. But as Wick said in justifying his appointment, "I do know how to make things happen."

And to make things happen, Wick & Company have taken advantage of the whole panoply of powerful television technology to beam the Administration's propaganda message to the masses in allied and neutral nations.

Since its first days in office the Administration has been driven by a Cold War view of the propaganda battle. The foreign policy transition team back in 1980-81 emphasized how the Russians were outspending the Americans in propaganda by at least five to one. Instrumental in the team's thinking were advertising executive Peter Daly, later named ambassador to Ireland, and Kenneth Adelman, who became director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Both advocated a more combative approach in countering Soviet propaganda and selling the message of the Administration. In an article in Foreign Affairs, Adelman predicted that disseminating the American message abroad would become Washington's "major growth industry" in the coming years, and added, "For better or worse, the masses are the subjects and no longer merely the objects of historic change."

Adelman’s predictions of propaganda growth were certainly on the mark. As domestic programs were being cut and curbed, the budget for USIA expanded from $457 million in 1981 to $796 million for the current budget year. The agency's film and television division, once a poor relation of the Voice of America and other USIA offshoots, enjoyed an even more dramatic increase, from $15 million last year to $28 million. President Reagan's belief in the USIA mission, much akin to his belief in the Pentagon's mission, certainly helped. So too did the long-time personal friendship of Charles and Mary Jane Wick with the President and First Lady.

Even before the President's reelection, his foreign policy team agreed to continue its programs to spread the American message. National Security Council Directive 130 asserted that "strategically targeted information and communications assistance to other countries" should be "an integral part of U.S. national security policy and strategy." Broadcasting and especially television, it mandated, should have the highest priority, "as the most effective means of communicating truth directly to the peoples of the world."

The results of that directive can be seen every weekday morning in a modern but already seedy office building in downtown Washington, where USIA's television operations are headquartered. Inside, the studio setting and atmosphere resemble those of TV stations around the country. From 8 to 10 a.m. every Monday through Friday, USIA transmits by satellite to U.S. embassies in Europe a program service called Worldnet.

A dozen diplomatic posts now pick up the transmission; by the end of the year the number is expected to reach 60. The programming is also available, free of charge, to anyone in Europe with a dish capable of receiving satellite transmissions—mainly broadcast stations and cable systems. With cable expanding in Europe, the potential audience will soon reach 20 million. As one European cable executive remarked, "Those cable systems are hungry for programming and probably will be quite happy to use it."

One of those is Greenwich Cable Systems outside London, a service authorized decades ago to serve 3,000 subscribers in an area with poor TV
reception. Carried live, the USIA programming reaches a small lunchtime audience and so far has drawn little response, said sales and marketing director Alan Hill. But Worldnet is likely to gain a bigger British audience when the United Kingdom goes full tilt for cable and/or direct broadcast satellite service (DBS).

The daily Worldnet schedule opens with America Today, a half-hour TV talk show. After delivering a straight news cast, two anchors bring on guests for interviews. On one typical morning a White House aide discussed Nicaragua, and then a congressional budget committee staffer tried to describe the budget-making process to the foreign audience. No one would mistake the intensity of the questioning as being Ted Koppel-like. And there was, of course, no element of confrontation or debate on Nicaragua.

Next comes a five-minute lesson in American-style English, and then a film, usually about space or science. After that, for exclusive use in embassies, is a taped rebroadcast of the ABC news.

This is the routine fare. The real blockbuster of the USIA productions are the interactive press conferences—satellite linkups of Washington with the foreign news media. These follow no fixed schedule but are being mounted with increasing frequency; there have been more than 100 since the first in November 1983. Vice President George Bush and just about every top foreign policy official in the Administration have appeared.

"Imagine what John Kennedy could have done during the Cuban missile crisis," remarked Alvin Snyder, director of the USIA's film and television service.

"Or if we had had this during the Korean Air Lines incident. We could have piped our message all over the world."

President Reagan made his first live appearance on a hook up with the Spacelab shuttle astronauts (one of whom was a West German) and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who was in Athens on an official visit. ("This is one heck of a conference call," the President joked.) The program was aired live in the Federal Republic, and the American Embassy in Bonn estimated some 20 million Germans either tuned in or read about it. Worldnet has carried two of the President's State of the Union addresses and last fall's Presidential debates.

The debate provided one of the rare appearances for the Democrats. Except for those, as of mid-1985 only three congressional Democrats had taken part in the international press conferences. USIA's Snyder gave the reason: "Worldnet has been the vehicle to explain foreign policy abroad, and that's who's been on—the people who can explain it. They are, most often, Administrators.

Most of the programs are aimed at Western Europe, but they have been at times directed to other continents. On one occasion there was the simultaneous hookup of five continents. This was a program that preceded the United Nations Women's Conference, and on it the chief U.S. delegate, Maureen Reagan, the President's daughter, took questions from such culturally distinct places as Nairobi, New Delhi, and Bogotá.

The conferences are done with two-way audio and one-way video, which is standard for the form today, even in its commercial use. This means that the participating foreign journalists who gather at the U.S. embassies can see and hear the Washington official, but the official can only hear the questioners. Some foreign reporters are not pleased with the arrangement. British correspondent Jonathan Steele complained in The Guardian that the questions were rationed and the microphones controlled by the embassy staff; moreover, he deplored the lack of eye contact between questioners and officials. This was after a satellite session with Assistant Secretary of State Langhorne Motley, which Steele said provided little more than "the U.S. propaganda line on Central America." Worldnet, he concluded, "serves the cause of an overwhelmingly powerful propaganda machine. It does little for the truth."

John Snow, the Washington correspondent for Britain's Independent Television News (ITN), offers a criticism that even the USIA's television professionals would not dispute: "The technique is hardly new, and the format would never make it on American TV."

As television programs, the satellite conferences are primitive stuff—but the point is not to get the whole broadcast.
Presented live in Western Europe, it's to have it excerpted for the various national news shows. Rarely are the excerpts identified as USIA-originated. "I wouldn't have thought it necessary," an ITN spokesman huffily told a London Observer columnist who raised the question.

Virtually all the news conferences are conducted entirely in English. This does not deter the non-English-speaking broadcasters, who add translations for the news clips. Sometimes the non-political programs turn out to be the most controversial. The foreign press was openly resentful at the session with Donna Tuttle, Undersecretary of Commerce for

Through advanced communications technology, the Reagan team has found new ways of reaching the people without subjecting its message-of-the-moment to critical analysis. The genius of the new media is that they eliminate the middleman, and in the case of the White House the middleman has always been the Washington press corps. Both with Worldnet and the satellite feeds to local American stations, the Administration has been able either to remove completely a journalistic filter or to replace one filter with another.

This transgresses journalistic politics, which may be a matter of minor concern where it involves foreign reporters, but around the country. Too many New York and Washington journalists think people on the other side of the Hudson or Potomac don't know anything."

But NBC News White House correspondent Andrea Mitchell points out that the increase in local interviews via satellite has already been accompanied by diminished access to top officials for national reporters and by fewer Presidential news conferences.

"My main concern," she says, "is that Ronald Reagan is not accessible to the public through the media. The one-on-one interviews with local anchors do not fulfill that obligation. It's valid to ask a local question, but you wouldn't expect a local anchor to spend the time I do studying the intricacies of, say, strategic defense."

While technology has taken the President personally into the provinces, it also has taken the provinces to Washington. There are now more than 50 local television news bureaus in the capital, or about triple the number that existed at the start of the Reagan Administration. With local news programs becoming big money makers and expanding their air time, having a Washington correspondent has been both a status symbol for the stations and a way to get new stories. But ever conscious of pacing, local news still demands very short stories and brief sound bites (excerpts from taped interviews), which usually leaves little room for analysis or skepticism. These bureaus have been a joy to congressmen, who use TV's mania for brevity to produce what amount to video press releases. As politicians, what they want mainly is visibility with their constituents, especially visibility as responsible public servants.

Because they too have much to gain from harnessing the new technologies, congressmen of either party are not likely to fret over the fact that, from now on, Presidents will have such new tools at their disposal that they will be able to sidestep the press at will and conduct diplomacy without diplomats.

Reagan now has the ability to control the kinds of media that can put him in direct touch with the people, and congressmen who are enjoying similar advantages are likely to say, "More power to him." More power to the President is an issue to ponder. The new technologies give the Chief Executive a sales apparatus for his policies that no previous President has ever had. If that should prove to upset the American system of checks and balances or in some other way alter our form of government, then we may all wonder one day, in another Administration, why we didn't keep it from happening back when we could.

'The us had this during the Korean Air Lines incident,' contends one USIA official, 'we could have piped our message all over the world.'

Tourism, because the conference turned out to be blatantly promotional. But two of the bigger hits with the overseas press were medical programs—one on hypertension, addressed particularly to the Middle East, the other with artificial heart experts Robert Jarvik and William DeVries.

USIA officials believe the single most effective conference was the one held just after the Soviets announced they were dropping out of the Los Angeles Olympics. A satellite session with Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and Olympics committee president Peter Ueberroth was carried live throughout Asia and much of Africa; the USIA credits this conference with convincing some wavering neutral nations to stay in the games.

But Worldnet's successes on behalf of the Administration could well be offset by the growing irritation of foreign correspondents who are based in Washington. "Maybe they [in the Administration] think it's easier to speak to people who don't know what's going on here," said Le Monde Washington correspondent Bernard Guetta. "And maybe it's good for a small news outlet. But I should think their target would be the most influential media."

Exacerbating their disgruntlement are comments like the one by an Italian journalist who, after a satellite session with arms-control director Adelman, wrote: "One doesn't have to go to Washington to enter into contact with the principal representatives of the Administration."

gets a bit more dangerous with the domestic breed.

Last January, the White House announced it would set up its own television studios to facilitate interviews between local stations and top Administration officials, including the President. Protests from professional journalistic organizations stopped that plan cold, but even without studio facilities on the premises the White House is able to use the new outside services—Local Program Network (LPN), Conus, or Viscom's V.I.P. satellite-interview network.

An Administration official can go to the Washington studios of LPN, for instance, and do serial interviews—running five to 10 minutes each—with the anchors of key stations in many of the largest cities, thus handling a batch of interview requests in a single sitting. Members of the station consortium pay several hundred dollars a week for the service, which allows them to lay claim to a news exclusive even though it's a multicity exclusive and may smack of propaganda.

This development heats up the rivalry between network and local-station television news.

Says Lou Adler, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association: "The Administration has no less a right to use facilities to get its message across than any trade association. We all want to present ourselves in the best possible light. It's a good thing if Mr. Reagan becomes more available to journalists