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The Information Revolution and Power

JOSEPH S. NYE JR.

One of the notable trends of the past century that will likely continue to strongly influence global politics in this century is the current information revolution. And with this information revolution comes an increase in the role of soft power—the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion and payment.

Soft Power Revisited

Fourth in a series

Information revolutions are not new—one can think back to the dramatic effects of Gutenberg’s printing press in the sixteenth century. But today’s information revolution is changing the nature of power and increasing its diffusion. Sometimes called “the third industrial revolution,” the current transformation is based on rapid technological advances in computers and communications that in turn have led to extraordinary declines in the costs of creating, processing, transmitting, and searching for information.

One could date the ongoing information revolution from Intel cofounder Gordon Moore’s observation in the 1960s that the number of transistors fitting on an integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years. As a result of Moore’s Law, computing power has grown enormously, and by the beginning of the twenty-first century doubling this power cost one-thousandth of what it did in the early 1970s.

Meanwhile, computer-networked communications have spread worldwide. In 1993, there were about 50 websites in the world; by 2000, the number had surpassed 5 million, and a decade later had exceeded 500 million. Today, about a third of

the global population is online; by 2020 that share is projected to grow to 60 percent, or five billion people, many connected with multiple devices.

The key characteristic of this information revolution is not the *speed* of communications among the wealthy and the powerful; for a century and a half, instantaneous communication by telegraph has been possible between Europe and North America. The crucial change, rather, is the radical and ongoing reduction in the *cost* of transmitting information. If the price of an automobile had declined as rapidly as the price of computing power, one could buy a car today for \$10 to \$15.

When the price of a technology shrinks so rapidly, it becomes readily accessible and the barriers to entry are reduced. For all practical purposes, transmission costs have become negligible; hence the amount of information that can be transmitted worldwide is effectively infinite.

WINNING STORIES

In the middle of the twentieth century, people feared that the computers and communications of the information revolution would create the central governmental control dramatized in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. Instead, as computing power has decreased in cost and computers have shrunk to the size of smartphones and other portable devices, their decentralizing effects have outweighed their centralizing effects, as WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden have demonstrated.

Power over information is much more widely distributed today than even a few decades ago. Information can often provide a key power resource, and more people have access to more information than ever before. This has led to a diffusion of power away from governments to non-state actors, ranging from large corporations to nonprofits to informal ad hoc groups.

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This does not mean the end of the nation-state. Governments will remain the most powerful actors on the global stage. However, the stage will become more crowded, and many non-state actors will compete effectively for influence. They will do so mostly in the realm of soft power.

The increasingly important cyber domain provides a good example. A powerful navy is important in controlling sea-lanes; it does not provide much help on the internet. The historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote that in nineteenth-century Europe, the mark of a great power was the ability to prevail in war. Yet, as the American defense analyst John Arquilla has noted, in today's global information age, victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins.

SOURCES OF POWER

I first coined the term “soft power” in my 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, which challenged the then-conventional view of the decline of US power. After looking at American military and economic power resources, I felt that something was still missing—the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than just coercion and payment. I thought of soft power as an analytic concept to fill a deficiency in the way analysts thought about power.

The term was eventually used by European leaders to describe some of their power resources, as well as by other governments, such as Japan and Australia. But I was surprised when President Hu Jintao told the Chinese Communist Party's 17th Party Congress in 2007 that his country needed to increase its soft power.

This is a smart strategy, because as China's hard military and economic power grows, it may frighten its neighbors into balancing coalitions. If China can accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, it can weaken the incentives for these coalitions. Consequently, the Chinese government has invested billions of dollars in this task, and Chinese journals and papers are filled with hundreds of articles about soft power. But what, precisely, is it?

Power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want. You can affect their behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion (“sticks”), inducements or payments (“carrots”), and attraction that makes others want what you want. A country may obtain the outcomes it

desires in world politics because other countries want to follow it—admiring its values, emulating its example, and aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness.

In this sense, it is important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts countries rather than coerces them.

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. It is not the possession of any one country, nor only of countries. For example, companies invest heavily in their brands, and nongovernmental activists often attack their brands to press them to change their practices. In international politics, a nation's soft power rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

PROPAGANDA PLOYS

China is doing well in terms of culture, but is having difficulty with values and policies. The world's most populous country has always had an attractive traditional culture; now it has created hundreds of

Confucius Institutes around the world to teach its language and culture. Beijing is also increasing its international radio and television broadcasting. Moreover, China's economic success has attracted others. This attraction was reinforced by China's successful response to the 2008 global financial crisis—maintaining growth while much of the West fell into recession—and by its economic aid and investment in poor countries. In the past decade, it became common to refer to these efforts as “China's charm offensive.”

Yet, as the University of Denver's Jing Sun observed in the September 2013 issue of *Current History*, China has not reaped a good return on its investment. This is not because soft power is becoming less important in world politics. It is a result of limitations in China's strategy—a strategy that overly stresses culture while neglecting civil society and the damage done by nationalistic policies.

In 2009, Beijing announced plans to spend huge sums to develop global media giants to compete

*More people have access
to more information
than ever before.*

with Bloomberg, Time Warner, and Viacom, using soft power rather than military might to win friends abroad. As George Washington University's David Shambaugh has documented, China has invested billions in external publicity work, including a 24-hour Xinhua cable news channel.

China's soft power, however, still has a long way to go. A recent BBC poll shows that opinions of China's influence are positive in much of Africa and Latin America, but predominantly negative in the United States and everywhere in Europe, as well as in India, Japan, and South Korea. Similarly, a poll taken in Asia after the 2008 Beijing Olympics found that Beijing's charm offensive had not been effective.

China does not yet have global cultural industries on the scale of Hollywood, and its universities are not yet the equal of America's. But more important, it lacks the many nongovernmental organizations that generate much of America's soft power. Chinese officials seem to think that soft power is generated primarily by government policies and public diplomacy, whereas much of America's soft power is generated by its civil society rather than its government.

Great powers try to use culture and narrative to create soft power that promotes their advantage, but it is not an easy sell when it is inconsistent with their domestic realities. For example, while the 2008 Olympic Games were a great success, Beijing's crackdowns shortly thereafter in Tibet, in Xinjiang, and on human rights activists undercut its soft power gains. The Shanghai Expo in 2010 likewise was judged a success, but it was followed by the jailing of Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo and the artist Ai Weiwei. In the world of communications theory, this is called "stepping on your own message."

And for all the efforts to turn Xinhua and China Central Television into competitors of CNN and the

BBC, there is not much of an international audience for brittle propaganda. As *The Economist* reported, "the party has not bought into Mr. Nye's view that soft power springs largely from individuals, the private sector, and civil society. So the government has taken to promoting ancient cultural icons whom it thinks might have global appeal."

Given a political system that relies on one-party control, it is difficult to tolerate dissent and diversity. Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party has based its legitimacy on high rates of economic growth and appeals to nationalism. The nationalism reduces the universal appeal of "the Chinese Dream" promoted by President Xi Jinping, and encourages policies in the South China Sea and elsewhere that antagonize its neighbors. For example, when Chinese ships drove Philippine fishing boats from the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, China gained control of the remote area, and from a domestic nationalist point of view, the action was a success. However, it came at the cost of reduced Chinese soft power in Manila.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has recently called for an effort to increase his country's soft power, but he might consider lessons from China the next time he locks up dissidents or bullies neighbors such as Georgia or Ukraine. A successful soft power strategy must attend to all three resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others. Investment in government propaganda is not a successful strategy for increasing a country's soft power.

POSITIVE SUMS

The development of soft power need not be a zero-sum game. All countries can gain from finding attraction in each other. Just as the national interests of China and the United States are partly congruent and partly conflicting, their soft powers

From *Current History's* archives...

"In many respects it was the most important pronouncement made by any statesman since the active fighting ceased two years ago. It held forth the possibility of a sane economic reconstruction of Europe and a gradual restoration of normal world trade and production that is so much needed. But the discussion it received soon revealed the hates, fears and national selfishness by which Europe is torn apart, and especially the deep cleavage between the totalitarian communistic and the democratic capitalist countries."

Sidney B. Fay "The Marshall Plan," September 1947



are reinforcing each other in some issue areas and contradicting each other in others.

This is not something unique to soft power. In general, power relationships can be zero- or positive-sum depending on the objectives of the actors. For example, if two countries both desire stability, a balance of military power in which neither side fears attack by the other can be a positive-sum relationship. Likewise, if China and the United States both become more attractive

in each other's eyes, the prospects of damaging conflicts will be reduced. If the rise of China's soft power reduces the likelihood of conflict, it can be part of a positive-sum relationship.

In the long term, there will always be elements of both competition and cooperation in the US-China relationship, but the two countries have more to gain from the cooperative element, and this can be strengthened by the rise in both countries' soft power. Prudent policies would aim to make that a trend in coming decades.

The twenty-first century is experiencing two great power shifts: a "horizontal" transition among countries from west to east, as Asia recovers its historic proportion of the world economy, and a "vertical" diffusion of power away from states to nongovernmental actors. This diffusion is fueled by the current information revolution, and it is creating an international politics that will involve many more actors than in the several centuries since the Treaty of Westphalia enshrined the norm of sovereignty.

But power diffusion also affects relations among states. It strengthens transnational actors and puts new transnational issues on the agenda, such as terrorism, global financial stability, cyber-conflict, pandemics, and climate change. No government can solve these problems acting on its own. In seeking to organize coalitions and networks to deal with such challenges, governments will need to exercise the powers not only of coercion and payment, but also of attraction and persuasion. ■

From the archives
of *Current History*...

"When I refer to the religious character of communism I mean that it commands in its adherents the depth and intensity of emotional fervor that is usually associated with religion at its height. Moreover, it claims intellectually to cover the whole scope of life. There is nothing in thought and life that is not affected by its claims; it has, one might almost say it is, a body of dogmas as fixed and unyielding as that of any church that ever existed."

John Dewey

"Religion in the Soviet Union: An Interpretation of the Conflict"
April 1930

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