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The Information Revolution and Soft Power

By Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

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

Information revolutions are not new – one can think back to the dramatic effects of Gutenberg's printing press in the 16th century – but the current information revolution is changing the nature of power and increasing its diffusion. The current information revolution, sometimes called "the third industrial revolution," is based on rapid technological advances in computers and communications that in turn have led to dramatic decreases in the cost of creating, processing and transmitting, and searching for information. One could date the current information revolution from Moore's Law in the 1960s -- the capacity to double the number of transistors on a computer chip every 18 months. As a result, computing power doubled every couple of years, and by the beginning of the twenty-first century it cost one-thousandth of what it did in the early 1970s. In 1993, there were about 50 websites in the world; by 2000, that number surpassed 5 million. Today, about a third of the world population is online; by 2020 that 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 between the wealthy and powerful: for a century and a half instantaneous communication by telegraph has been possible between Europe and North America. The crucial change is the enormous 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 by a car for $10-15. When the price of a technology declines 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. In the middle of the twentieth century, people feared that the computers and communications of the current 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 smart phones and other portable devices, their decentralizing effects have outweighed their centralizing effects.

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. As I describe in The Future of Power, this has lead to a diffusion of power away from governments to non-state actors ranging from large corporations to non-profits to informal ad hoc groups. This does not mean the end of the nation-state. Governments will remain the most powerful actors on the global stage, but the stage will become more crowded. And many of those other actors will compete effectively 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 19th century Europe, the mark of a great power was the ability to prevail in war, but as John Arquilla notes, in today's global information age, victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins.

I first coined the term "soft power" in my 1990 book Bound to Lead that challenged the then conventional view of the decline of American 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. It 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 more surprised when Chinese President Hu Jintao told the 17th party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007 that China 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 it can accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, China can weaken the incentives for these coalitions. Consequently, the Chinese government has invested billions of dollars in that task, and Chinese journals and papers are filled with hundreds of articles about soft power. But what is it?

Power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want. One 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 wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is also 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 people 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 non-governmental activists often attack their brands to press them to change their practices. In international politics, the soft power of a country 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.)

China has always had an attractive traditional culture, but now it has created hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world to teach its language and culture, and China is increasing its international radio and television broadcasting. Moreover, China's economic success has attracted others, and this has been reinforced by it successful response to the 2008 financial crisis. In addition, China has reinforced its attraction by economic aid to poor countries. In the last decade, it became common to refer to these efforts as "China's Charm Offensive." But as Jing Sun explained in the September issue of Current History, and as recent polls show, China has not reaped a good return on its investment. This is not because soft power

is becoming less important in world politics, but because of limitations in China's strategy which overly stresses culture, and neglects civil society and the damage done by nationalistic policies.

China's soft power still has a long way to go as measured by recent international polls. 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 non-governmental 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, but much of America's soft power is generated by its civil society rather than its government.

In 2009, Beijing announced plans to spend billions to develop global media giants to compete with Bloomberg, Time Warner and Viacom to use soft power rather than military might to win friends abroad. As David Shambaugh has documented, China has invested billions in external publicity work including a 24 hour Xinhua cable news channel designed to imitate Al Jazeera. But for all its efforts, China has had a limited return on its investment. 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, everywhere in Europe, as well as India, Japan and South Korea. Similarly, a poll taken in Asia after the Beijing Olympics found that China's charm offensive had not been effective. 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, the 2008 Olympics was a great successes, but shortly afterwards, China's domestic crackdown in Tibet, Xianjiang, and on human rights activists undercut its soft power gains. The Shanghai Expo was also a great success, but was followed by the jailing of Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo and the artist Ai Wei Wei. In the world of communications theory, that is called "stepping on your own message." And for all the efforts to turn Xinhua and China Central Television into competitors for CNN and the BBC, there is little 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 party control, it is difficult to tolerate dissent and diversity. Moreover, as the party has based it legitimacy on a high rate of economic growth and appeals to nationalism, it not only reduces the universal appeal of "the Chinese Dream", but it 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 Shoals last year, China gained control of the remote area, but at the cost of reduced Chinese soft power in Manila. But from a domestic nationalist point of view, the action was a success.

Vladimir Putin has recently called for an effort to increase Russia's soft power, but he might consider these Chinese lessons 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 of 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 to increase a country's soft power. The best propaganda is not propaganda.

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 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. If China and the United States, for example, both become more attractive in each others' 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 that can be strengthened by the rise in both countries' soft power. Prudent policies would aim to make that a trend in this century.

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