

Global Lies?

Propaganda, the UN and World Order

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Global Information Machine

The UN in the world: the DPI in the UN

The United Nations appears to be a very puzzling organization indeed. Although the Cold War was the single most important feature of international relations in the 40 years after the Second World War, a scholar could conclude in 1995 that the UN “played no major role”.¹ Similarly, at the end of the century commentators were lamenting the famous failures of the UN to keep the peace and avoid genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia.² However, during the first 50 years of the UN’s life, the representation of the body in Hollywood films had gradually changed from that of a benign institution in need of public support to that of a power-hungry predator, capable of invading the US or of blackmailing Chinese officials to force them to the negotiating table (see Chapter 3). Small, vulnerable states allege that the UN is controlled by the powerful countries that have permanent seats on the UN Security Council, the UN’s most powerful organ. The North American and European states counter that the UN is in the hands of African, Asian and Latin American states that gained a majority in the General Assembly in the wake of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s. At the end of the century the UN’s largest contributor, the US, stopped paying dues to the organization claiming the UN was mismanaged and inefficient.

The UN’s founders perhaps anticipated that the organization would engender such schizophrenic reactions when they created a Department of Public Information (DPI) as one of the first parts of the UN Secretariat in 1946. The basic function of the DPI is to inform the world of what the UN is and what it does. So we cannot fully appreciate its reason to be without a basic understanding of the role the UN plays in world politics.

When the UN was born on 24 October 1945, it was the completion of another important stage in the modern evolution of world politics. The first stage was the creation of the League of Nations after the First World War. The league was the brainchild of President Woodrow Wilson who, in his “Fourteen Points”, envisaged an international system based on the principle

of national self-determination, open diplomacy and an international body that would settle disputes. However, the league could not prevent the outbreak of world war again, and even before the Second World War was over President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill met to draft plans for a new world order. That proposal – the Atlantic Charter of 1941 – expressed the essence of Roosevelt’s belief in the connection between his notion of “four freedoms” and world peace. Roosevelt believed that in a world where these freedoms were guaranteed there would be less recourse to conflict. The four freedoms were: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The Atlantic Charter also reaffirmed the belief in the principle of national self-determination.

In 1942, 26 countries pledged to observe the Charter. Two years later, in 1944, China, the USSR, the UK and the US drafted plans for the world organization that was to become the United Nations. The British, Soviets and Americans later agreed on a voting procedure for the organization that gave them veto power in what was to become the UN Security Council. The United Nations Conference on International Organization opened in San Francisco in 1945, and two months later the UN Charter was completed and signed. The UN officially came into existence on 24 October 1945 when the required number of states ratified the Charter.

The Charter and various UN conventions and resolutions seek to establish codes of conduct in international relations that are designed to maintain world peace. Some of these principles include: the idea that there are basic “human rights” to which all people are entitled; respect for self-determination of peoples and the sovereignty of states; respect for the rule of law; peaceful resolution of disputes; and the norm of collective security. The other way the UN endeavors to maintain world peace is through the norm of functionalism. The UN Secretariat in New York City is the center of a functional system of international organizations (often called the “United Nations system”) that was theorized as a means of maintaining international peace. Functionalism is a theory of the organization of international relations which hypothesizes that international peace and welfare will be maintained by a system of functional international organizations, each responsible for a specific area of transnational interaction and concern (e.g. meteorology, civil aviation, health, etc.). It is based on four assumptions:³

- All states have a harmony of interest that allows them to cooperate for mutual benefit.
- Political and technical matters (such as health provision, civil aviation and the mails) can and should be separated in international relations.
- There would be no recourse to war if economic and social welfare were achieved throughout international society.
- Functional organizations would have a positive spillover influence on areas of international relations not yet covered by functional agencies.

Functionalism assumes that order in international relations is a higher goal than justice and equality. The man considered the father of functionalist thought, David Mitrany, promoted the “principle of functional representation” that said that parties who are deemed insignificant in the broader scheme of international relations or whose stakes in an issue area are relatively small could be excluded from decision-making. Small states would get “working democracy” in lieu of “voting democracy”, and they would be consoled by “an assurance of peace and a growing measure of social equality through the working of international service”. Mitrany justified this by asserting that the “formal principle of equality...at best has never been more than a political fiction”.⁴

The housekeeping affairs of the world are handled by a vast network of international organizations that adhere in varying degrees to Mitrany’s outlook on international affairs. All of these organizations are called UN “Specialized Agencies”. They have their own memberships, organizational structures, finances and internal politics. Some are actually older than the UN but became part of the UN system after the UN was created. By taking care of economic and social welfare it is assumed that at least one critical factor in the descent to war will be taken away. Chapters IX and X (Articles 55–72) of the UN Charter defined this network of agencies and the relationship they should have with the United Nations. They were described as bodies “established by intergovernmental agreement and having wide international responsibilities, as defined in their basic instruments, in economic, social, cultural, educational, health and related fields”, whose relationship to the UN would be through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Article 63 gave the ECOSOC the power to define the type of relationship Specialized Agencies would have with the UN and the responsibility for co-ordinating their activities through collaboration with the agencies themselves, the General Assembly and member states.

It is important that the Specialized Agencies were introduced in the UN Charter in Chapter IX, which dealt with the UN’s role in terms of international social and economic co-operation. Article 55 noted that “the creation of conditions of stability and well-being” were “necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations”. Based on this assumption, according to Article 55, the UN aimed to promote human rights, solutions to economic and social problems, cultural and educational co-operation and “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development”. Article 56 obligated UN members to pursue these goals. The definition of the Specialized Agencies and their relationship to the UN in Article 57 was presented, therefore, as a nexus to these assumptions about what should be the role of the UN in the new world order created after the Second World War.

This recognition of the link between economic and social welfare and peace is one key difference between the post-Second World War peace

system and the peace system that succeeded the First World War. So, for example, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) co-ordinates matters related to predicting weather and climate change, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) regulates air safety, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) deals with labor standards. Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) became one of the bodies most associated with debates about international communication, it was really a forum body for discussing and studying problems in the areas of education, science, culture and communication. It could not set international communication policy the way the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and Universal Postal Union (UPU) were able to in their respective areas of telecommunications and the mail.

One of the reasons why world peace remained elusive despite the creation of the League of Nations and the UN was the contradictory behavior of the powers that established these organizations. For example, during the era of the League of Nations, European colonialism in Africa and Asia progressed. Also, despite the high-minded proclamations of the Atlantic and UN charters, many people still had to engage in armed conflict to free themselves from imperialism after these documents were proclaimed; these conflicts included Algeria, Kenya and Vietnam. For several years after the US signed on to the UN Charter its citizens of color still had to wage a civil rights struggle to win the outlawing of discrimination in such areas as housing, public accommodation and employment. And although South Africa was one of the earliest members of the UN it maintained a system of racial apartheid for most of the succeeding 50 years. The African National Congress and its leader, Nelson Mandela – who became an international hero because his commitment to armed struggle cost him a quarter of a century in a South African prison – waged the anti-apartheid struggle. Similarly, the UN merely created a forum in which the competing claims of Jews and Palestinians for a state in the Middle East would be played out during the next 50 years.

So in many ways the project of the UN remains very much a work in progress. However, one would be hard pressed to find an argument for the view that there has been regression in the character of both international and domestic politics and that the UN has not been a key player in bringing about the progressive changes that have occurred. Some of the most prominent of these changes include the fact that the vast majority of the territories that were under the yoke of formal colonialism in 1946 are no longer in that situation; apartheid was ended in South Africa at the beginning of the 1990s; and since the founding of the UN humanity has not seen international conflict of the magnitude witnessed in the two World Wars.

During its first 50 years, the United Nations was composed of six principal organs: the International Court of Justice (the World Court), the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat.

The General Assembly was the most popular body because it consisted of all the member states of the UN, each of which had one vote, and was the world's best-known forum for the discussion of international affairs. A two-thirds majority of UN members present and voting was required for General Assembly decisions on the important issues specified in Article 18 of the UN Charter. On other matters, a simple majority made decisions. The General Assembly performed a key role in the execution of decisions needed to keep the UN functioning. For example, it decided the level of assessment for each member to share the organization's expenses, considered and approved the UN budget, and shared with the Security Council the responsibility for electing members of the International Court of Justice and for appointing the UN Secretary-General. It also elected the members of the Economic and Social Council and some members of the Trusteeship Council, as well as the 10 non-permanent members of the Security Council.

It is in the composition of the Security Council that the power differentials in world politics were most evident. Article 24 of the UN Charter gave this UN organ "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security". It had five permanent members – the UK, the US, the People's Republic of China, France and the Russian Federation – who had to concur with at least four other members of the council for any vote on an issue other than a procedural matter to be approved.

The range of activities supervised by the Economic and Social Council seemed almost limitless because it was the UN organ charged with promoting world economic and social welfare. The *United Nations Handbook* – an influential reference source on the UN published annually by the government of New Zealand – has summarized the work of the ECOSOC as follows:

ECOSOC makes or initiates studies and reports with respect to international economic, social, cultural, educational, health and related matters. It makes recommendations on such matters to the General Assembly, to the members of the UN, and to the specialized agencies concerned. It also makes recommendations for the purpose of promoting respect for, and observance of, human rights. It prepares draft conventions for submission to the General Assembly on matters within its competence and calls international conferences on such matters. It enters into agreements with specialized agencies and makes arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organisations.⁵

The International Court of Justice made decisions on cases submitted to it by states, and it provided legal advice to the UN organs and the Specialized Agencies. The Trusteeship Council was established to provide oversight on the administration of the various trust territories in existence during the early years of the UN, however by the end of the century all of these areas had ceased to be trust territories.

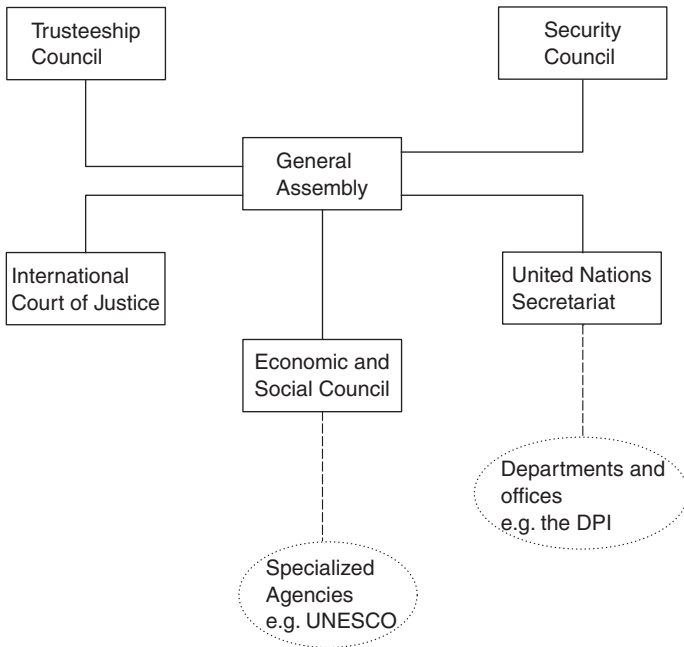


Chart 2.1 The DPI and UNESCO in the UN structure.

Chart 2.1 illustrates where the focus of this book, the DPI, fell within this structure. The DPI is a department within the UN Secretariat in New York. Because UNESCO had a mandate directly related to the work of the DPI, the chart also indicates the position of that organization within the structure of the UN system. UNESCO was a UN Specialized Agency that was affiliated to the UN through the Economic and Social Council, as all Specialized Agencies were.

In looking at any graphic description of the UN or the “UN system”, it is tempting to think of the various departments and agencies as being autonomous entities. However, it should be quickly explained that member states constantly try to micro-manage these bureaucratic parts and the programs they run. This feature of UN politics is perhaps best known in the case of the Security Council where much has been written about the use or misuse of the veto privilege of permanent members. But less well-known are the coalition politics, horse trading and rhetorical sparring that occur in the General Assembly and various committees over such programs as the DPI. As far back as 1960, the dynamics of policy-making in the area of public information attracted scholarly attention in two separate articles from Richard N. Swift and Leon Gordenker, two professors at prestigious American universities.⁶

A public information bureaucracy

Very few actors in international relations rival the information output of the United Nations system. Other very powerful information-producers in world politics include states – especially influential nation-states such as France, the UK, Germany and the US, which not only generate information through their embassies and other diplomatic offices around the world but also use “cultural (public) diplomacy” organs such as the British Council and the Alliance Française to disseminate their views on world affairs, trying to win friends and influence people. And transnational corporations such as Coca-Cola, IBM and Sony are also powerful information players, in this case using paid advertising and public relations in their quests to find and maintain markets in every corner of the globe. But while the information campaigns of corporations are to expand their markets and serve their shareholders, and states use their campaigns to pursue their national interests, the declared objective of the UN is to serve all members of international society. The functions of the various bodies in the UN system cover every aspect of human life, from World Health Organization (WHO) programs to eradicate diseases such as polio and smallpox, to the safeguarding of the rights and welfare of refugees by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to the protection of workers’ rights by the International Labor Organization (ILO). Many of these projects simply cannot work without information campaigns of some kind, ranging from making people aware of the availability of helpful resources to communicating with donor states and foundations to ensure the continued flow of resources.

A snapshot into this vast information bureaucracy was provided in 1995 when the DPI published a guide to help those searching for information about the various activities of the UN.⁷ The primary subject categories listed in the book alone numbered more than 250. The total number of UN offices, programs and Specialized Agencies was 53, the vast majority of which – 38 – had officers, divisions or departments devoted to “public affairs”, “external relations”, “information” or “press”. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had a “Public Affairs Division”, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) had an “Information Officer”, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) had a “Division of Public Affairs”. So the DPI is actually only one public information program among many, and in addition to its general mandate of promoting the work of the UN, at that time it was handling the specific public information needs of two departments at the Secretariat: the Department of Peace-Keeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs. The 1995 guide made no reference to the then dawning significance of the Internet. Just five years later, every single significant actor in international relations, especially the UN offices, programs and agencies, would be expected to have a presence on the World Wide Web and did so. This development added further information media and workers to the equation.

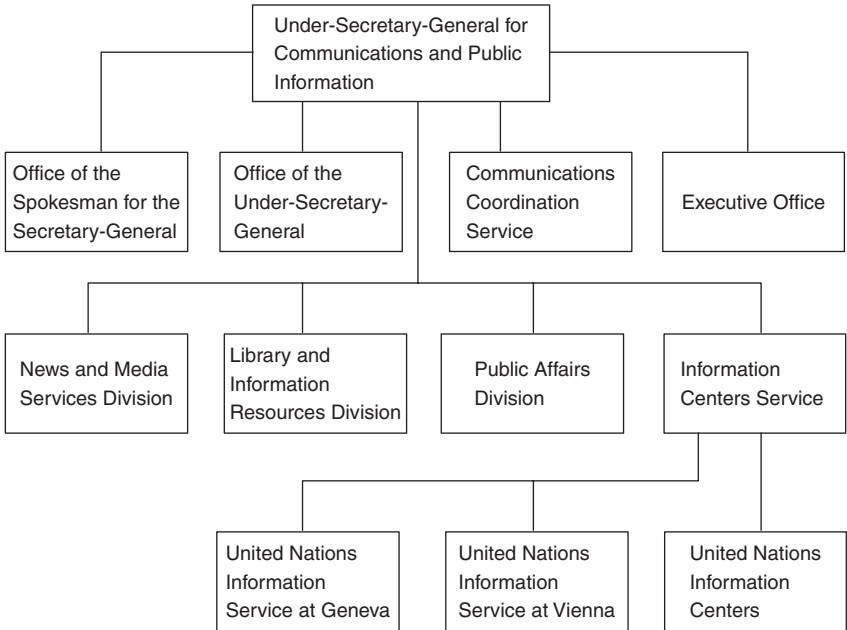


Chart 2.2 United Nations Department of Public Information – organizational structure 2001.

The United Nations' budget cycle covers two years, and the total UN budget for the 1998–99 biennium was US\$2.526 billion.⁸ The DPI accounted for 5.37 per cent of that figure (\$135 million), more than the UN spent on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (4.96 per cent) and International Justice and Law (2.10 per cent).

During the 1998–99 period there were 730 permanent posts in the DPI.⁹ The department's hierarchy consisted of the Office of Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information at the top, three divisions and one service on the level below, and at the bottom level the UN Information Service at Vienna and Geneva and the network of UN Information Centers around the world (see Chart 2.2).

The organizational configuration of the DPI at the end of the century was set out in a 1999 "bulletin" – the equivalent of an executive order – by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. This outlined the five dimensions of the DPI's work. The Department

- (a) Assists the Secretary-General in the discharge of his or her responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations and the mandates of the General Assembly, the Security Council and other United Nations

- legislative bodies in raising public awareness of the issues and aims of the United Nations and promoting an informed understanding of its work among all peoples of the world;
- (b) Provides a full range of public information services to the global news media, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, parliamentarians, business and professional organizations and other key redisseminators and directly to the general public, both at Headquarters and through its network of information centers abroad;
 - (c) Promotes the integration of the United Nations information outreach and support for an internal “culture of communication” through the in-house network of United Nations informational focal points and the system-wide Joint United Nations Information Committee; and keeps the Secretary-General and other senior officials informed of major news developments of direct relevance to the United Nations;
 - (d) Establishes and monitors, through the Publications Board, Secretariat-wide policies for the preparation, production, distribution and sale of print and electronic publications; coordinates the implementation of the biennial publications programme of the United Nations; manages the Dag Hammarskjöld Library; and provides comprehensive library services to delegations, members of the Secretariat and independent researchers;
 - (e) Coordinates and manages the United Nations home page and Web site; chairs the Interdepartmental Working Group on the Internet; and builds and maintains a multilingual, media-friendly United Nations presence on the Internet.¹⁰

The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information – a top-level UN civil servant who was appointed by the UN Secretary-General based on background and the need to have diverse geographical representation of UN officials and staff – ran the shop and was accountable to the Secretary-General. Answering to the Under-Secretary-General were Directors of the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, the Public Affairs Division, a News and Media Division and a Library and Information Resources Division. Also reporting to the Under-Secretary-General were Chiefs of the Information Centers Service and the Communications Coordination Service. In other words, the DPI included a myriad of diverse activities that represented the public face of the UN, including the guided tours of the UN headquarters in New York, the UN bookshop, the UN’s library and the accreditation of journalists covering the UN, its activities and special conferences.

The bureaucratic organization of the DPI underwent a number of reconfigurations over the years, including changing its name to the Office of Public Information (OPI) from 1958 to 1978,¹¹ but the basic functions of most of its components remained the same. The Technical Advisory Committee that recommended the UN have a public information program suggested

the creation of a global network of information centers that would be conduits for the two-way flow of information between the UN and its public. By 2000 there were over 60 such centers, covering all regions of the world.¹² The network came under the supervision of the Chief of the Information Centers Service. Similarly, the News and Media Division was made up of three units – a Press Service, a Radio and Television Service, and a Media Monitoring and Analysis Section – that conducted basic activities of the DPI throughout the years of its existence. The Press Service generated press releases and a number of publications for the media and general public. It also accredited journalists covering the UN. The Radio and Television Service produced a number of news and documentary audio-visual programs and also maintained the UN's audio-visual and photo libraries, and the Media Monitoring and Analysis Section reported on how the UN was covered by the world's media.

Although the Public Affairs Division had the most elaborate and varied brief of the DPI's divisions, ironically it had the smallest staff. Of the 730 permanent positions at the DPI during the 1998–99 period, only 47 were in Public Affairs, compared to 275 at the information centers (the largest allotment of permanent staff) and 133 in the News and Media Division (the second largest).¹³ The Public Affairs Division's Promotion and Planning Service promoted the thematic focus of the UN's work in such areas as "sustainable development" and "human rights" by helping to develop and propagate the initiatives used by the UN to gain awareness, such as special



Figure 2.1 United Nations Radio commentators report on a meeting of the Security Council, 18 April 1973. At the time the DPI's Radio Services disseminated productions in 40 languages for rebroadcasting in 145 states and territories.

decades, international years and conferences. Its Public Liaison Service ran the guided tours, produced exhibits, maintained the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Resource Center at UN Headquarters, ran the annual DPI/NGO conference, and co-ordinated the annual Training Programme for Broadcasters and Journalists from Developing Countries.

The Library and Information Resources Division included the UN's library, the Publications Service, which published a number of UN periodicals, and the Sales and Marketing Section, which "establishes and exploits a market for United Nations publications and related items, and supervises the United Nations Bookshops in New York and Geneva".¹⁴

Operating out of the Under-Secretary-General's Office was the Communications Coordination Service, a focal point for the strategic planning and management of the UN's public information policy. It was also the part of the DPI charged with "managing and enhancing the United Nations presence on the Internet, including the United Nations Web site in all official languages".¹⁵

The Communications Coordination Service was established in 1999 and was one of two strategies devised by the Kofi Annan administration to tackle the long-standing problem of co-ordinating the various parts of the public information work of the UN and the UN system. The second strategy was the creation of the post of Director of Communications in the Office of the Secretary-General to co-ordinate a Communications Group that consisted of representatives from the Specialized Agencies and all departments in the Secretariat. The Group, which included the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, met frequently to devise a common public information strategy for the United Nations.¹⁶ Early in the UN's life, in July 1946, the new DPI and the Specialized Agencies met to see how they could co-ordinate their work, and this led to the creation of the Consultative Committee for Public Information (CCPI), which comprised representatives from the Specialized Agencies and the DPI. The DPI served as its secretariat and met once a year.¹⁷ In 1974 the CCPI was merged with the Programme Committee of the Centre for Economic and Social Information to form the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC). JUNIC became the forum in which public information professionals in the UN system met to discuss and co-ordinate their activities as well as plan campaigns. It reported to the UN's Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), a body chaired by the UN Secretary-General, which met twice a year. The ACC was created in 1946 at the request of the ECOSOC to supervise the implementation of the agreements between the United Nations and the Specialized Agencies. Its mandate expanded over the years to include the promotion of co-operation within the UN system of organizations, and its name was eventually changed to the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).

The DPI was supposed to be at the center of the public information practice that JUNIC co-ordinated. However, this fact could sometimes be lost

because the public information programs of the UN system were so numerous and extensive. The rapid increase in public information activities during the 1970s prompted a 1983 report from the Secretary-General's office as a reminder of the intended role of the DPI in these matters:

In the medium-term plan and programme budget documents, the impression is conveyed that the Department of Public Information is the only point of information activity within the United Nations. From 1971 on, however, there has been an ever-growing dispersion of information functions and resources to other departments and offices. It is estimated that for the 1982–1983 biennium there are at least 72 posts outside the budget for the Department which are being utilized for information programmes. While there are some advantages to be gained from such an approach, it would be prudent to ensure that the Department, which was designated by the General Assembly as the focal point for co-ordination and implementation of the information activities of the United Nations, is able to exercise that role.¹⁸

Each year JUNIC also presented a report to the United Nations Information Committee, the body of the General Assembly that oversaw the United Nations public information program. The General Assembly set up the Information Committee in 1978 during the heady days of the proposed “New International Economic Order” (NIEO) and the “New World Information and Communication Order” (NWICO). Its predecessor was the Consultative Panel on Public Information that was created by the General Assembly in Resolution 1405 (XIV) of 1 December 1959 “to advise the Secretary-General on information policies and programmes in order to ensure maximum effectiveness at minimum cost”. The new committee met once a year and provided the Secretary-General with a “general framework for action in the information field”.¹⁹ Although by 2000 both the NIEO and the NWICO movements were more part of UN history than contemporary policy, the Information Committee's brief – from a 1979 General Assembly resolution – had remained the same. It existed:

- (a) To continue to examine United Nations public information policies and activities, in light of the evolution of international relations, particularly during the past two decades, and of the imperatives of the establishment of the new international economic order and of a new world information and communication order;
- (b) To evaluate and follow-up the efforts made and the progress achieved by the United Nations system in the field of information and communications;
- (c) To promote the establishment of a new, more just and more effective world information and communication order intended to strengthen peace and international understanding and based on the

free circulation and wider and better balanced dissemination of information and to make recommendations thereon to the General Assembly...²⁰

Membership of the Information Committee grew steadily from 66 in 1979 to 95 by 2000. Its annual sessions in the spring ran for as long as two weeks, and its annual reports were several pages long. Its debates and reports were the most insightful windows into divisions among UN member states concerning international communication and trends in UN public information policy-making. Indeed, it can be argued that the Information Committee became, over time, much more than a forum for debate and the overseeing of UN public information policy; it was an arena in which states and political groupings of states sparred on their propaganda wars and from which they sought UN propaganda support during conflicts. For example, the committee's 2001 report stated that:

One delegation denounced the aggression against it in the form of radio and television broadcasts from another country as flagrant violations of international law. Those were illegal acts that were being committed using increasingly sophisticated technology, he said, and he demanded a cessation of that aggression. Exercising its right of reply, another delegation noted that this was not a constructive interjection, to which the former delegation responded that the money used on the media aggression could be put to good use by the Organization and reiterated his condemnation of this aggression against his country.²¹

Similarly, later in the report it was noted that:

Several speakers called for increased dissemination of information on the question of Palestine, and called for an enhanced role for the Committee in uncovering the facts related to the suffering of the Palestinian people and the acts of aggression perpetrated against them. One speaker mentioned that the archives of the United Nations were filled with information, reports, resolutions and recommendations related to the question of Palestine and the internationally accepted rights of the Palestinian people, and stressed the need for the Department to utilize those documents through all means to expose the oppressive policies to which the Palestinian people were being subjected.²²

Each year, the Information Committee tried to accommodate all of these contentious exchanges within draft resolutions that eventually went to the full General Assembly for passage. In 2001 the committee's Draft Resolution A on "Information in the Service of Humanity" recommended that the member states of the General Assembly uphold the principles of the NWICO.

Draft Resolution B on “United Nations Public Information Policies and Activities” was specifically directed to the UN’s public information program, committing the DPI to such imperatives as multilingualism in its output, helping to bridge the “digital divide” and promoting special UN conferences.

Although these General Assembly resolutions shared the posturing and rhetoric of resolutions passed on other topics, the creation of the Information Committee had serious consequences for the workload and ideological role of the DPI. The new committee was more than a “talk shop”; it was where actual projects to rectify global communication problems were proposed for the DPI to complete. For example, in its 2000 report the committee said the DPI “should maintain and improve its activities in the areas of special interest to developing countries ... and that such reorientation should contribute to bridging the existing gap between the developing and developed countries in the crucial field of public information and communications”. It also urged the DPI to “enhance its role” in the “efforts of the Secretary-General in closing the digital divide as a means of spurring economic growth and as a response to the continuing gulf between developed and developing countries”.²³

In pointing attention to the inequalities in international communication, the Information Committee was being loyal to the brief given to it by the UN General Assembly in 1979 in Resolution 34/182. However, although the committee was sticking to the letter of its purpose, the substance of its recommendations with respect to the DPI were contradictory. While it reaffirmed General Assembly Resolution 13 (I), the brief for the work of the DPI, it drifted from that very same brief by suggesting that the DPI undertake work well outside its remit. This was what occurred in 1981 when the DPI began running a Training Program for Broadcasters and Journalists from Developing Countries. Between 1981 and 2000 the DPI trained in New York 303 media professionals from 100 countries.²⁴

The role of the DPI was also expected to expand in another way. In addition to the expectation that it would play an active role in rectifying information and communication inequalities, the General Assembly began specifically identifying the DPI as the UN counter-propaganda organ in national and regional struggles in which the UN was a key player. On this matter, the motivating factor was the increased role of propaganda as a tool for conducting international relations – one of the key trends of international politics in the twentieth century (see Chapter 6).

The UN was at the forefront of the propaganda war during the apartheid regime of South Africa over the two key issues of the country’s occupation of what was to become the new state of Namibia and white minority rule in South Africa.²⁵ General Assembly resolutions singled out the DPI as the UN department that would lead the charge against South Africa’s well-known efficient propaganda machine. For example, General Assembly Resolution

number 31/150, of 20 December 1976, stated that the Secretary-General should direct the DPI to

...acquire and distribute appropriate films on Namibia...

- (b) To prepare, in consultation with the South West Africa People's Organization, a film on the contemporary situation inside Namibia and the struggle of the Namibian people for genuine national independence;
- (c) To continue publicity through television, radio and other media;
- (d) To continue to give publicity to the United Nations Council for Namibia and the South West Africa People's Organization on television in the United States of America and other major Western countries, in order to mobilize support in those countries for the genuine national independence of Namibia...

The resolution also went on to say that the DPI should: "continue to make every effort to generate publicity and disseminate information with a view to mobilizing public support for the independence of Namibia". DPI-run projects, especially the production of over a thousand radio programs annually, were among the factors that eventually led to Namibian independence in 1990 and non-racial elections in South Africa four years later.²⁶ This "good propaganda" campaign of the UN is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

The DPI was singled out in a similar fashion with regard to the question of Palestine. General Assembly Resolution 50/84(C) of 15 December 1995 requested the DPI to

... disseminate information on all the activities of the United Nations system relating to the question of Palestine, including reports on the work carried out by the relevant United Nations organizations;

- (b) To continue to issue and update publications on the various aspects of the question of Palestine in all fields, including materials concerning the recent developments in that regard and, in particular, the achievements of the peace process;
- (c) To expand its audiovisual material on the question of Palestine, including the production of such material;
- (d) To organize and promote fact-finding news missions for journalists to the area, including the territories under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority and the occupied territories;
- (e) To organize international, regional and national encounters for journalists;
- (f) To provide, in cooperation with specialized agencies of the United Nations system, particularly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, assistance to the Palestinian people in the field of media development.

In 1995, the DPI launched an annual training program for Palestinian journalists and broadcasters. The program was part of the DPI's "Special

Information Program on the Question of Palestine” and was designed to assist the Palestinian people in strengthening their media capability. Eight Palestinian journalists participated in the first training program, held from 6 October to 22 November, attending briefings by officials of the UN and UN Specialized Agencies, participating in a one-week skills training workshop with CNN in Atlanta, two weeks of classes at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, and one week of briefings at US government branches. For the rest of the 1990s the DPI ran a similar program each year for more or less the same number of Palestinian journalists.

The fact that the Information Committee originated with the rancor at the UN over the NIEO and NWICO is very significant because it provides a lens through which not only the nature of the Information Committee’s debates and decisions but also the type of tasks the DPI was called upon to perform in the successive years can be assessed. The increased involvement of the DPI in “service” projects to redress the world’s communication “imbalances” of the type described above began at the same time that UNESCO – the Specialized Agency mandated to do such work – was stymied by the US and UK. These two most powerful members of UNESCO actually quit the body in the early 1980s on the grounds that its championing of the NWICO was unwanted “politicization”. UNESCO lost a quarter of its budget from the withdrawal of the US, UK and Singapore, and was therefore forced to tone down its radical program of international communication reform. As a result the new Information Committee was to be the vehicle that transferred this ideological project to the UN Secretariat and, more specifically, to the DPI.

In addition to continuing the NWICO discourse, the Information Committee was also essentially a means by which the member states attempted to maintain their control over the DPI, making it clear that the power of DPI bureaucrats over UN Secretariat public information policy would always be subject to careful scrutiny and control.

Perpetual re-evaluation

Over the first 50 years of the UN, three themes recurred in relation to its public information program. The first was controversy over waste and mismanagement, the second was a desperate search for more clearly defined “target audiences” for the UN’s public information campaigns, and the third was uncertainty over the role of UN public information policy and practice within international politics.

Expenditure and management

Because the DPI had been plagued with questions about its worth and competence, it had been subject to what seemed like perpetual re-evaluation throughout its existence. Evaluation and re-evaluation of programs that use public funds are the norm in order to avoid waste and corruption. But just

a few years into the life of the UN questions were being raised as to whether the money spent on public information was not a waste in itself. So began a history that involved the DPI frequently under attack and subject to a number of periodic reviews to define its mission, refine its techniques and ensure that it did not waste UN funds. Two matters were constant features of the first 50 years of the DPI – calls from the General Assembly for spending on the DPI to be cut, and calls from the General Assembly for the DPI to carry out more tasks.

In the early days, the DPI was the focus of UN spending on public information, but by the mid-1970s the UN system as a whole had a public information bureaucracy that included the DPI and several Specialized Agencies devoted to spreading the word about the UN and its interconnected parts. The growth in UN public information work was a result of the expansion of the UN system, and also of the evolution of international politics. Decolonization created scores of new states and expanded the realm of international public opinion to be cultivated, the number and importance of NGOs increased, and there was a greater need for collective action through the UN on such transnational issues as the environment, refugees and health. In 1948 the UN's total budget was \$38 388 000 and the first public information budget accounted for about 10 per cent of this (\$4 080 000). But in 1971 the UN budget was \$192 149 300 and the proportion of money allocated to public information had declined to 4.15 per cent (\$9 245 563).²⁷ In 1979 the UN system as a whole spent \$52 114 000 on public information work, a figure that included money from the regular budgets and extra-budgetary sources; the resources spent on public information were increasing rapidly as the comparative figure for 1977 had been \$13.5 million less.²⁸ In 1977–78 the entire UN system had information offices in 74 cities, amounting to “148 information points”.²⁹

It was just six years into the life of the United Nations that the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information was claiming that “[t]he demands for public information services from the United Nations far exceed the budgetary resources placed at the disposal of the Department by the General Assembly”.³⁰ This comment was quoted in a review of the DPI's “Basic Principles” by an 11-member Sub-Committee of the General Assembly's Fifth Committee with the aim of helping the General Assembly formulate an appropriate 1953 budget for the DPI. According to the sub-committee: “the basic policy of the United Nations, in the field of public information, is... to promote to the greatest possible extent, within budgetary limitations, an informed understanding of the work and purposes of the Organization among the peoples of the world” (see Appendix V). To keep within these “budgetary limitations”, the sub-committee suggested the DPI should make its clients pay for more of the materials that were then distributed free. Number 10 of the principles said that although free distribution of materials was needed to carry out public information work, the DPI should “actively

encourage the sale of its materials" whenever possible, and that in some cases "it should seek to finance production by means of revenue-producing and self-liquidating projects". However, the sub-committee's attitude to spending by the DPI was contradictory. While the Basic Principles were that the DPI's work should occur "within budgetary limitations", the sub-committee recommended in its report consideration of establishing a United Nations Press, similar to a university press, and noted in number five of the Basic Principles that the UN should have its own broadcasting facilities. These two proposals certainly would have added considerably to the cost of the UN's public information program had they been implemented.

The 1953 Basic Principles were a distinct renovation of those of 1946 because of their stipulation that the DPI devote special attention to the needs of "under-developed areas". In successive years the DPI would undertake a number of projects to serve the perceived needs of disadvantaged groups and regions, a mission that, though noble, provided further strain on the department's budgetary and human resources. The sub-committee's justification for this significant policy innovation was that:

In view of the high importance which aid to under-developed areas has come to assume in relation to many of the Organization's activities, it was felt that a specific directive to pay particular attention to the special problems and needs of such areas might appropriately be included in any basic policy statement relating to information services. It was considered, moreover, that since the tasks that might usefully be undertaken in the field of public information are practically limitless, special consideration should be given to the needs of those areas where, in relation to other areas, information media are less fully developed.³¹

However, the UN was so preoccupied with the cost of its public information program that within a few years it appointed an "Expert Committee" to recommend "possible modifications to ensure a maximum of effectiveness at the lowest possible cost".³² Experts found that because the term "budgetary limitations" in the 1953 Basic Principles was never defined, the net effect was a "series of ad hoc cuts in information expenditure".³³ In 1956 the General Assembly's Fifth Committee had recommended that spending on public information (excluding the Visitor's Service and the Sales and Circulation Service) should be limited to \$4.5 million annually within three years. However, the Secretary-General drew attention to this problem of the General Assembly specifying tasks for the UN's public information operations while at the same time calling for thrift. "The Assembly itself, while emphasizing the need for economy, has not specified any activity which should be cut out or cut down," a memo from the Secretary-General's office declared.³⁴

During the next 20 years the problem of an expanding public information program with diminishing resources would get worse and would be

compounded by the fact that the players in the UN system's public information bureaucracy became more numerous. The expanding UN bureaucracy motivated the UN to explore ways in which there could be greater co-ordination throughout the system. From 1968 the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) began a series of investigations on co-ordination and co-operation among the members of the UN system. Its particularly critical report on co-ordination in public information was released in 1981 and castigated the UN system for essentially wasting scarce resources by simply not co-ordinating public information policy and practice. "One dares not, at present, even speak of integrated actions or joint programmes in the field of public information," the document concluded.³⁵

This assessment by an internal unit of the UN is very significant in light of the historical context. The UN, particularly UNESCO, was at the time embroiled in the debate over the NWICO. NWICO advocates had placed the need to end world communication imbalances on the agenda of UN public information policy-making by asking the DPI and other UN public information organs to carry out media training and to publicize the NWICO concept. By the mid-1980s both the US and the UK had quit membership of UNESCO, claiming that the organization was not only threatening freedom of the press by promoting the NWICO but that it was also mismanaged. The JIU report is some evidence that a number of the criticisms of the UN made by NWICO detractors at the time were not far from the mark. While the NWICO sought government policy and action to end global communication disparities, the UN itself was a poor example of what more government activity in the field of information and communication might mean.

At the time, public information bureaucrats, the ACC and the Committee for Programme and Co-ordination (CPC) had all recognized the need to avoid duplication, and therefore a number of ad hoc working groups had been established under JUNIC. JUNIC had started a process where public information work would be co-ordinated according to yearly plans of action.³⁶ In keeping with the tenor of the times, the common theme chosen by JUNIC for 1980–81 was the New International Development Strategy and the promotion of the NWICO. Sub-themes were the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade and the International Year for Disabled Persons. However, out of the \$52 million spent by UN agencies on public information work in 1979, \$387 019 was devoted to joint projects, the bulk of which went to two initiatives: the monthly newspaper *Development Forum* and a "World Newspaper Supplement".³⁷ It is indeed interesting that UNESCO – the agency spearheading the NWICO – was singled out by the JIU as one of the least enthusiastic about co-operation and co-ordination. The agency told the JIU that each UN organ had specific objectives and programs that did not make co-ordination and co-operation among agencies in public information easy.³⁸ The report concluded: "So long as the Member

States of the United Nations system continue to permit publicity on individual organizations or their heads – building up empires – instead of making them co-ordinate their efforts towards the global aims of development as envisaged by the New Economic Order, the role of JUNIC and the contribution of the members of JUNIC will remain a formality”.³⁹

Doubts regarding the worth and efficiency of the public information program continued into the 1980s. At one point the CPC recommended that the DPI’s budget be suppressed to “well below average” growth and the money saved be redeployed to the transport programs of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).⁴⁰ No doubt one reason why public information was seen as expendable was the inefficient way in which some very public areas of it was conducted. For example, subscribers to the *UN Chronicle* received only six issues in 1984 even though it was supposed to be a monthly, and there were gaps between the publication dates of the English, French and Spanish versions.⁴¹

By the late 1990s there had been a number of cuts in the DPI’s funding and manpower, reductions so severe that a Task Force appointed by the Secretary-General to look at the DPI emphatically said in 1997 that the cuts had gone far enough. However, in 1999 the CPC still expressed concern that “the inadequacy of resources was the cause of a number of difficulties faced by the Department in implementing its activities”, and that “because of the reduction in resources, many United Nations information centers could not play a meaningful role”.⁴² Despite the “culture of communications” that was heralded for the UN by the Task Force and by the DPI leadership afterwards, in 1999 the CPC reported that the DPI was still having problems identifying its audiences, getting policies through the slow bureaucracy and decentralizing the distribution of information.⁴³ The CPC lamented the lack of an efficient, speedy means to respond to press queries and noted that there were “no guidelines on media relations issued to the Secretariat as a whole, and senior officials do not feel encouraged to speak to the press”.⁴⁴

Target audiences

Are the DPI’s clients individual members of the public, or media and government organs that disseminate information to individuals? In other words, should the DPI be viewed as a mass-media outlet to the general public or more as a wire service the audience of which is actually news media? The fact that the UN has had difficulty answering such a basic question helps explain why the DPI suffered from an identity crisis throughout the first 50 years of the organization.

The ambiguities began with the founding principles of 1946, which said the DPI should “promote to the greatest possible extent an informed

understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations among the peoples of the world”, and in order to do so “should primarily assist and rely upon the co-operation of the established governmental and non-governmental agencies of information to provide the public with information about the United Nations”. The DPI was charged with ensuring “that peoples in all parts of the world receive as full information as possible about the United Nations”. The department was also to open “branch offices” as soon as practically possible (see Appendix II). Such wording implies that the DPI’s clients would be both news organizations and the general public. However, the matter becomes complicated when one considers that the UN has been shy about reaching over governments and propagandizing foreign publics, a de facto violation of the principle of national sovereignty. More intriguing is the fact that public information work that is not focused on a particular opinion class is likely to be ineffective or inefficient. Similarly, the target audience can vary according to the issues concerned.

The Expert Committee that had reviewed public information policy and practice in 1958 found that the DPI (or OPI as it was then called) could not answer the basic question of to whom UN public information programs should be directed. It suggested that the audience be made up of four categories:

- (a) Those governmental agencies and public institutions that are concerned with influencing public opinion, for example, Ministries of Information and Institutions for political, social and economic research.
- (b) Those persons and organizations concerned with the media of mass communication and professionally engaged in providing information, instruction and entertainment to the peoples of the world – editors, journalists, writers in the press and other publications, as well as those responsible for the planning of radio, television, graphics and cinema production.
- (c) Those persons and organizations that show real interest in the aims and activities of the United Nations and are ready to commit themselves in service to it – including international and national United Nations associations and other non-governmental organizations with general and special interests in political, social, economic and educational questions.
- (d) Persons and institutions concerned with education. This would include Ministries and Departments of Education, schools, colleges and universities, teachers, professors and other eminent educationalists.⁴⁵

According to the committee: “The existing pattern of information activity [was] too diversified to be effective”.⁴⁶ The reorientation it recommended would entail “a shift of emphasis in the method of dissemination of information from ‘mass approach through media of mass communication’ to the selective approach of public relations, and working through existing organizations, governmental and non-governmental, and through individuals who are disseminators of information and exercise influence, or, occupy

positions involving exercise of influence in the formation of public opinion".⁴⁷ In effect the recommendation was that the DPI should adopt a "two-step" model of communication for the diffusion of its ideas. The model (then popular with American communication consultants) suggests that the appropriate means of fostering social change is to first reach opinion elites, who will then provide direction for the rest of society below⁴⁸ (see Chapter 5).

Although the DPI used the famous means of social communication that had been subject to much scholarly investigation over the years, in the following years there would not be any serious study of the UN's target audiences or the impact of its messages for fear of the UN actually becoming too powerful a player in international politics. The idea that the DPI existed to communicate indirectly with the public provided a buffer against criticism that the UN might be trying to undermine the power of governments, an issue raised in 1972 in a study by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). The study originated from doubts over international public awareness of the UN expressed by Secretary-General U Thant at the Twenty-First Session of the UN General Assembly. It was concerned with "the role of the news media in spreading information on the world organization, and with the coverage of United Nations policies and activities by the world press, radio, and television", and it was intended to provide "some bases for practical thinking about possibilities of widening and improving public information on the United Nations, of making the world organization better known and better understood".⁴⁹ The UNITAR investigation questioned why the Basic Principles of UN public information policy were not being revamped to keep in step with the times. For example, the 1946 principles stated that the UN "cannot achieve the purposes for which it has been created unless the peoples of the world are fully informed of its aims and activities". But the UNITAR report pointed out that it was not possible for the world to be ever *fully* informed; *adequately* informed might be more reasonable, but then this still begs the question of *how much* and *what kind* of information is adequate. Also, *all* people of the world do not have to be informed of all aspects of the UN's activities. In particular cases, only *some* constituencies (e.g. governments and special interest groups) need to be informed of specific UN initiatives. Another example is that the existing principles suggested the DPI should "primarily" assist and rely upon the co-operation of established governmental and non-governmental information agencies, and "supplement" the work of these organizations. However, the UNITAR study saw the UN as not having the means to directly reach the world's publics because: (a) governments deliberately did not want it to do so and did not want to lose control over their domestic information environments; and (b) the DPI did not have the resources. The report added that:

As a matter of fact, the amount spent yearly by the United Nations on *all* information activities would not suffice to cover even 15% of the budget of one of the major international news agencies. The total yearly

operating costs of the “big five” (AP, UPI, Reuters, Agence France Press [sic], TASS) probably amount to more than the whole regular budget of the United Nations.⁵⁰

Fourteen years later a CPC investigation concluded that within the DPI there were no common understandings of what “impact” meant, or even who the “target audiences”, “end-users” or “redisseminators” were. The reviewers blamed this lack of agreement on two factors:

First, individual divisions have traditionally interpreted these terms in the light of their own role and responsibilities regarding, for example, press, films or radio audiences, and this tradition persists... Secondly, many of the outputs are designed to reach very specific audiences, which tends to discourage the use of common definitions.⁵¹

There was also the additional problem that the DPI did not even do routine evaluations, and this seemed to be a deliberate policy. The CPC reviewers offered three explanations for this:

First, it has been pointed out that there is no consensus among Member States on how the opinions or attitudes of target audiences should be changed. For example, certain issues that are regarded as politically sensitive, such as human rights and disarmament questions, are frequently cited by the Department as a reason for not measuring impact. The second factor that impedes the conduct of impact studies is that target audiences are often not usually clearly defined, therefore making the change of awareness or perception even more difficult to measure. The third factor is that while staff members within the Department generally review qualitative feedback on end-user reaction, it is rarely systematically analysed.⁵²

The international role of UN public information

If there is reluctance to clearly define a target audience then it is obvious that there must also be ambiguity about what is the exact role of UN public information policy in international relations. Indeed, the reluctance to have a clearly defined target audience is due to the UN’s shyness from making the DPI a stronger player in world politics.

In 1946 the role of the DPI was made very clear by historical circumstances. The UN had taken the place of the failed League of Nations, and needed to get its message out and win over public opinion. In addition, racist war propaganda had played a key role in the war just ended, and the international system needed a communication actor that would counter tendencies to incite war via mass media in the future. However, 20 years

later the international system had grown much more complex. The basic problem was now whether the DPI should be a passive provider of information or actually try to move international opinion and action. Related to this basic problem was the issue of how the UN could determine that the public information program was in fact meeting its objectives.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Secretary-General U Thant described the DPI as an “international information service”⁵³ and the Secretariat was claiming that the UN could not afford to be antagonistic through its public information activities since its primary goal was to resolve conflict:

In terms of policy, these limitations derive from the fact that, essentially, the United Nations is a political organization, charged with the task of containing and comprehending – in the hope and with the object of harmonizing – conflicting interests, in the common cause of promoting peace, fundamental human rights and respect for international law, so as to attain social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. These ends are pursued by the Organization through its various principal organs and through the functional institutions and bodies established by it – whether in the political field or in those of economic and social development. Given this central political reality, it would seem to follow that any and all information activity conducted on behalf of and under the collective authority of the total United Nations membership could not deviate from the basic political postulates of “objectivity” and “universality”. It must necessarily confine itself, particularly when dealing with matters of controversy, to its mandate merely to “make available” to “all the peoples of the world through any appropriate media”, information which is strictly “objective and factual”. Thus, United Nations information programmes, no matter to what field they relate or how actively or purposely they are conducted, must continue to be fashioned and articulated essentially as programmes aimed at explanation and clarification and not exhortation.⁵⁴ [Underlining in original document]

The same 1971 document suggested that the DPI’s job must be “to tell the peoples of the world, not what to think, but what to think about”. However, the next paragraph contradicted this in its explanation of cases where there should be exceptions to this rule.

At the same time, in certain fields, where the Organization itself has, as a whole, taken a definitive and action-oriented stand – as, for example, economic and social development, promotion of human rights, decolonization, elimination of racial discrimination and, more recently, protection of the human environment – the United Nations Office of Public Information cannot any longer restrict itself to merely neutral stances or statements. It must go beyond this and actively identify itself with these

universally approved causes and movements. Not to do so would not only be falling short of historic responsibility and potential but neglecting binding directives from legislative organs.

... However, in pursuing this more active role in support of United Nations goals – be they economic and social or political – OPI must continue to draw a clear distinction between “active” and “activist”. Thus, while it must expand its activities in such required fields as economic and social development, decolonization, the elimination of apartheid and racial discrimination, the expansion must be an activity which itself remains essentially objective and informational and does not cross ... the “boundary” separating it from propaganda or promotion.⁵⁵

Therefore the UN would only have an “active” public information program on topics defined as “universally approved causes and movements”. Presumably these would be initiatives for which there was overwhelming support at the General Assembly. However, as will be revealed later in this book the numeric majority of African, Latin American and Asian states at the UN would mean that the passing of a number of General Assembly resolutions with very large majorities did not necessarily get the UN out of hot water. Famous cases of this include UN policies on Palestinian statehood and apartheid in South Africa, developed by popular support in the General Assembly but often contrary to the foreign policies of the small minority of states that were the UN’s most powerful members by virtue of their economic and military power, particularly the US and the UK (see Chapter 4).

In the 1970s the Secretariat continued to describe public information work in a two-dimensional way. It was informational, and “active” only on select “safe” issues, i.e. those for which the UN had solid backing. These were called “universally approved causes and movements” in 1971, and “future of the world” issues in 1977 – “disarmament, food, health, environment, industrialization, trade, racial discrimination and meeting the basic needs of the poorest groups in developing countries within the framework of a new international economic order”.⁵⁶ The UN’s work on these issues had produced more world conferences and placed a greater strain on the organization’s public information resources. In addition the public information services had to make changes and adjustments in response to an increased number of mandates from the legislative organs of the UN. More and more of these issues related to economic development, as a 1977 report explained:

As the need to restructure the world economy has emerged as a major pre-occupation of the international community and consequently the United Nations system, a growing proportion of the efforts of the information services of the system have had to be directed towards general economic and social problems. Since these general problems are of concern to the international community as a whole as well as to international organizations

individually, the latter have been seeking a common understanding of, and a common approach towards, the information aspects of these problems. Developmental issues, by the very fact that they have had to be dealt with in a co-ordinated way, have thus played the role of a catalyst.⁵⁷

The 1970s was in fact a period in which broad transformations in the UN's work and image became very clear. The DPI's administrative response to the need to become involved in more global campaigns was to establish a number of "thematic task forces" to cover such topics as disarmament, decolonization, outer space, apartheid and human rights.⁵⁸ But as the UN became more involved in the problems of the developing world, its image in the richer countries waned. Reporting on the DPI's radio news, a 1977 Secretariat document said "there had been a decline of interest in developed countries, balanced by a growing receptivity in developing countries".⁵⁹ It reported a decline "in the acceptance by United States commercial stations" of UN documentary films.⁶⁰ "Political decisions of the United Nations receive by far the greatest attention from news media in Africa, especially those related to African problems," claimed the review's Annex.⁶¹

The UN was becoming aware of such changes in the receptivity to its messages because at the same time it was grappling with the problem of how to properly gauge the *impact* of its public information campaign. This is a particularly tricky problem for an organization that eschews propaganda and avoids offending member states while at the same time claiming to promote international causes. Assessing impact does mean research into whether or how attitudes, actions or policies have changed as a direct result of public information practice, and the UN walked this tightrope by interpreting "impact" as data on audiences and the extent to which DPI output was used. "Determining the impact of a subprogramme intended to create deep understanding and awareness of the United Nations is obviously an even more difficult undertaking than making systematic and comprehensive surveys of the news media," the 1977 report noted.⁶² However, in the UN's defense such research on cause and effect is scarce even in other social areas, for example the relationship between advertising and consumer behavior or the relationship between the presence of floodlighting and the incidence of burglaries. In 1982 the UN did propose a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the DPI, and as part of that effort it was suggested that communication scholars be asked to carry out an evaluation of DPI publicity for a "time-limited major United Nations event", such as an international year, and that this would "assess the impact of the Year on the various sectors of world public opinion".⁶³ But, an in-depth evaluation of the DPI published in 1983 still continued the trend of suggesting the "impact" of the DPI could be gauged by collecting data on its production and the demand for its output, not in looking at exactly how the DPI was a player in changing the course of international politics.⁶⁴

It was not until the administration of Kofi Annan – the most media-savvy of all UN Secretaries-General – that a systematic attempt to define more clearly the DPI's role both within the UN and in international politics emerged. This might have been due in large part to historical circumstances. In 1997, when Annan assumed office, who could deny the tremendous impact of the media in international politics? The term “CNN factor” had joined the lingo of international relations to describe the capacity of international electronic media networks to be more efficient collectors and disseminators of information than government diplomatic channels (see Chapter 6). Hate radio and television were critical dimensions of genocide in places as different as Rwanda and Bosnia.

Shortly afterwards, in March 1997, Annan announced that the public information strategy of the United Nations needed to have a “reorientation” in three main ways: to better serve re-disseminators of information, utilizing the latest information technology; to have the “information capacity” of the Secretariat better serve the “substantive departments”; and to decentralize and refocus resources to make greater use of local resources.⁶⁵ A month later Annan appointed a nine-member Task Force⁶⁶ on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities. The body submitted its 34-page report, *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations*, in August 1997. The investigation summed up the main weaknesses of the DPI as

the inexplicable absence of an organizational communications strategy; the dispersion of responsibilities for communications across the four units without overall direction or coordination of activities; the commitment of the bulk of the communications' budget to disseminating institutional information – which in essence describes the work and priorities of the Organization – without adequately catering to strategic communication, which is designed to enhance the Organization's substantive capacities through strengthening its global leadership position and through building support among its crucial constituencies.⁶⁷

The Task Force clearly felt that the DPI's problems went deeper than the Secretary-General had suggested in his charge. Changes in the administrative structure of the DPI were not enough on their own; there needed to be a change in the fundamental principles that guided UN public information work. The DPI had to cease being passive – disseminating institutional information – and become a real player in changing the character of international relations, producing what the Task Force called “strategic communication”.

To implement such revolutionary change, the Task Force recommended a new set of principles for the UN's public information program. It suggested that public information be elevated to “the heart of the strategic management” of the UN, and that a “culture of communications” should exist in

the whole organization. Public information campaigns should place less emphasis on abstract principles and focus more on the actual work of the agencies of the UN system. The image constructed should be that of the UN as a unique forum for creation of consensus about world problems and the channeling of that consensus into action. The Task Force also recommended that the principles behind the organization of the UN's public information program be changed. The Secretariat should be given more autonomy from the General Assembly and the Information Committee to determine public information practice. UN public information programs should focus more on the local relevance of the organization's work, and be flexible enough to adjust to changing priorities.

The Task Force explained the difference between the past "institutional" communication of the UN and the "strategic" communication it needed to produce:

The key difference between strategic and institutional communications is that the former proceeds from a fully developed sense of the direction in which the organization wants to move opinion. Various communications techniques are then enlisted to that end. Strategic communications involves a process that begins with identifying the *what* (what is the vision of the United Nations' role and objectives that is to be promoted), the *how* (which vehicles such as press relations, public information and constituency-building are to be used in promoting this vision?), and the *who* (to whom are communications to be targeted; which NGOs, interest groups, parliamentarians, press organs, members of the policy community, elements of the general public?) of a concerted communications strategy. The guiding strategy is aimed at making the United Nations a more powerful and effective advocate for the programs, policies, and values its members seek to advance. Without such a strategy, institutional communications are likely to be fragmented, reactive, and to have little cumulative impact on public opinion. Strategic communications aim not just to affect but also to mobilize public and specialist opinion on behalf of the United Nations.⁶⁸

On more than one occasion in the report the Task Force described the necessary strategic communication as "public diplomacy". In the study of international relations, and its sub-field of international communication, public or cultural diplomacy is one of the tools states use to conduct their external relations (see Chapter 1). Public diplomacy is never the only strategy used to extract results. Instead it is defined as the use of culture to directly support conventional diplomacy, or even to reach beyond governments and communicate with foreign publics where conventional diplomacy does not exist or has broken down.⁶⁹ Although public diplomacy is most often associated with US foreign policy practice, by the end of the twentieth century

states as varied as communist China, Serbia and Syria were using what was called “public diplomacy” as part of their foreign relations.⁷⁰

Methods of public diplomacy include international broadcasting, control of news flows, war propaganda, educational exchanges and even maintaining “information” centers to provide a ready supply of data to promote the sponsoring state’s prestige and policies. It can be said that there is little difference between public information work and public diplomacy. However, there are major differences between the prospects of a state as opposed to the United Nations in conducting public diplomacy. Governments are more unitary entities that can more coherently determine their interests, devise policy and directly implement public diplomacy programs. In contrast, the policy-making process of the UN is much more complicated, and the will of the majority in the General Assembly will not necessarily be translated into UN policy because of the powers of the Security Council and the veto powers of its permanent members. Also, it has been the policy of the UN to avoid such strategic communication on most controversial international issues for fear that it might either anger some member states or violate its own principle against promoting propaganda. Some issues – such as the South African apartheid and human rights – have been considered so safe that the UN has had no qualms about devising and implementing very successful strategic communication programs related to them, but on a whole range of other international topics the UN has been gun-shy. This all begs the question of whether it is realistic to expect an international organization like the UN – with its power differentials and bulky organizational structure – to be able to implement a meaningful public diplomacy program. Public diplomacy assumes a unity and decisiveness that is often beyond the UN.

Although the UN’s “Medium-Term Plan for the Period 2002–2005” was produced three years after the Task Force’s report, there was little evidence that it was invigorated with the spirit of strategic communication advocated by the Task Force. The plan proposed that the UN’s public information program aimed simply “to increase awareness and understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations among peoples of the world”.⁷¹ The use of the term “culture of communication” was one indication of the influence of the Task Force, but the plan was in no way a strategy for launching the UN into public diplomacy or an international communication strategy that would mobilize instead of just inform. According to the plan, the public information strategy would be “based on the premise that public information and communications should be placed at the heart of the strategic management of the United Nations and that a culture of communications should permeate all levels of the Organization as a means of fully informing the peoples of the world of the aims and activities of the United Nations”.⁷²

The target audiences would be various components of “civil society” (such as the media, business and professional organizations, and educational

institutions), and although it was projected that the DPI would devise “campaigns” and “mobilize support” for these, the language used to describe the indicators of objectives having been met was very timid, with nothing to suggest that the DPI wanted to rise to the challenge posed by the Task Force: there would be success if there was “an increase in the coverage of United Nations activities by newspapers, radio, television and relevant Internet sites worldwide and in the level of interest shown by the target audience; an increase in the number of requests for and enquiries about the promotional products and services; an increase in the number of visitors to the United Nations web site; and an increase in the number of visitors to United Nations premises under the guided tour programme”.⁷³ Ironically, the list of tasks the General Assembly wanted the DPI to carry out was continuing to grow despite this obvious problem in evaluating its work. The 2002–2005 Medium-Term Plan listed 46 General Assembly resolutions as the basis for the DPI’s legislative mandate, 36 of which were from the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly alone! Also, following the Task Force’s report there was renewed emphasis on a communication development role for the DPI. According to the plan:

In order to contribute to bridging the gap between developing and developed countries in the field of public information and communications, particular attention will be given to areas of special interest to developing countries, and, where appropriate, to countries with economies in transition. In particular, attention will be given to the special needs of African countries and the least developed countries, keeping in mind that most developing countries are not fully benefiting from the information revolution and the information technology gap is widening.⁷⁴

The Task Force on the DPI was a good example of what was taking place within the UN at the end of the century. There was no disagreement on whether there should be reform – the only questions were regarding how that reform would occur. This explains why Kofi Annan had declared that there would be reform at the DPI before he announced the Task Force, and not the other way around. Annan viewed the Millennium Summit of 2000 as a way to show the world a new United Nations. The JUNIC report for 2000 explained the link between this summit and the renovation of the UN’s public information program:

... the main objective of the Millennium Summit [was] the repositioning of the United Nations at the beginning of the new century. Accordingly, the corresponding communications strategy needed to show the United Nations as a renewed and changing organization, relevant to the broad range of aspirations and concerns of the peoples of the planet and essential in the search for global solutions to global problems.⁷⁵

In later years reviews and reports of the public information work of the UN would reveal that the organization continued to grapple with the past and what Annan and the Task Force felt should be its future. In 2000, members of the JUNIC “raised the issue of the distinction between public information and advocacy, and agreed on the need to discuss that matter in more depth”.⁷⁶ More revealing still was the Secretary-General’s “Millennium Report” issued in March 2000 in advance of the Millennium Assembly of the world’s political leaders that took place at UN headquarters in New York later that year. The report made no explicit reference to the public information role of the UN in the three strategic priority areas identified, and this omission is striking because of the great attention the document paid to the role of public opinion and the communication revolution within global society. Secretary-General Annan noted that the communications revolution had three main impacts: (a) higher expectations of humanitarian intervention in places where there was human desperation; (b) a revolution in the nature of commerce; and (c) heightened global self-awareness.⁷⁷ He made reference to the largest ever survey of public opinion, which was conducted in late 1999 on a sample of 57 000 adults in 60 countries over six continents. Although the UN scored higher ratings than did governments, less than half of the respondents rated the UN as satisfactory.⁷⁸ Another indication that the DPI had its work cut out for it came elsewhere in the document, in Annan’s comment that the UN was not fully exploiting the potential of information technology in “providing the world’s people with information and data of concern to them”.⁷⁹

Having said all of the above, it could be argued that those who expect and advocate a rational, co-ordinated UN public information strategy are expecting the impossible in light of the nature of UN politics. Leon Gordenker’s study of UN public information during the Korean War found that from as early as this period there was “no articulated program for the use of mass communications channels”.⁸⁰ Gordenker also identified (several years before the UN’s internal studies of the 1970s) the problem of trying to measure the effectiveness of the DPI in terms of “people reached” instead of “influence”.⁸¹ It is very doubtful that the DPI’s contradictory mandate could produce order from what often resembled chaos. As far back as 1960 Gordenker concluded that:

Contradictory instructions provide no rational basis for judging the work of the office. No one could estimate with any accuracy how closely the peoples of the world would approach full information on the United Nations, how much supplementary effort would be needed, what was propaganda and where or in what situations more rather than less effort might be needed – and above all how much money should be devoted to such efforts. The OPI nevertheless had to prepare a program and a budget. The General Assembly had to examine it. Without a clear standard, the examination inevitably fell into confusion.⁸²

The hot seat

The story painted above indicates that the post of head of the DPI should be one of the least attractive positions in the UN Secretariat, and one of the most difficult to fill. It is.

During the first half-century of the UN, the job came with unwritten expectations that seemed almost impossible to fill. To competently run the UN's publicity requires a comprehensive knowledge of its vast bureaucracy or the sense to hire key staff with that knowledge. The head should also be not so engaged with UN culture that he or she is out of touch with world public opinion, and because of the communications revolution it is imperative that the DPI head be knowledgeable about the latest mass-media technologies in order to ensure the UN is using the best means possible to efficiently disseminate its message. Needless to say, the lucky candidate must also possess that rare skill of running a department deemed by the most powerful members of the General Assembly as a waste of money, and to which the General Assembly as a whole allocates more chores without committing the required resources.

As if the realities of the job are not enough, the DPI and its head had to deal with the occasional semantic downgrading of the place of public information within UN bureaucracy. From 1958 to 1978, as mentioned earlier the name was changed from *Department* of Public Information to *Office* of Public Information, a significant demotion within the UN hierarchy. Similarly, the person heading the department has not always held the title of Under Secretary-General (USG), but the lower ranking of Assistant Secretary-General (ASG). Ironically, although the tenure of Kofi Annan brought the "culture of communications" to the UN, his initial plans were to replace the DPI with "an Office for Communications and Media Services".⁸³

The head of the DPI who lasted longest in the post was actually the first – Benjamin Cohen of Chile (see Table 2.1) – who was in office for eight years. When Cohen was appointed in 1946 he was paid the princely tax-free annual salary of \$13 000 and up to \$7000 in allowances.⁸⁴ Forty-one years later, the first and only woman to head the DPI – Thérèse Paquet Sévigny of Canada – assumed a job that paid well over \$100 000, with allowances to match.⁸⁵

The decision of who gets the job of Under Secretary-General in charge of public information is subject to the same political balancing act as all top-level UN posts, however the first 50 years show that it certainly helped to be Asian and Japanese if one aspired to the position. In the 54 years from 1946 to 2000, five of the heads of the DPI came from Asia and together ran the department for a total of 21 years. The only region that came close to this was South America, with three officials and a total of 14 years in the office, though Cohen accounted for eight of these years. Significantly, very rarely were North Americans or Europeans in the post, and when they were this was never for long. Thérèse Paquet Sévigny (1987–91) was the only North American to run the DPI in the twentieth century, and the only

Table 2.1 Assistant or Under-Secretaries-General for communications and public information, 1946–2000

1946–54	Benjamin A. Cohen (Chile)
1955–58	Ahmed S. Bokhari (Pakistan)
1959	Alfred Katzin (Acting Under-Secretary General) (Union of South Africa)
1960–65	Hernane Tavares de Sá (Brazil)
1966–67	José Rolz-Bennett (Guatemala)
1968–71	Agha Abdul Hamid (Pakistan)
1972–78	Genichi Akatani (Japan)
1979–86	Yasushi Akashi (Japan)
1987–91	Thérèse Paquet Sévigny (Canada)
1992	Eugeniusz Wyzner (Poland)
1993	Marco Vianello-Chiodo (Italy)
1994–97	Samir Sanbar (Lebanon)
1998–2000	Kensaku Hogen (Japan)

Europeans – Eugeniusz Wyzner of Poland and Marco Vianello-Chiodo of Italy – were in charge for only a matter of months.

This paucity of DPI heads from powerful, large countries that might have many enemies was due to the same reason why UN Secretaries-General did not come from such states. Their control of such high-profile jobs would only add to the power differential they already enjoyed in the Security Council and the existing perception that the UN is a tool of the powerful in the international system. Another significant factor was explained by UN scholar Leon Gordenker as far back as 1960, when he noted that over a period of a number of years the DPI's budgets and expansion were supported by a bloc that included the Latin American states and some mainly poor countries that supported the Latin Americans. Gordenker attributed this early backing to "the personality and popularity" of the fellow Latin American, Cohen.⁸⁶

In contrast, Japan has been a state in search of power at the UN, and the position in charge of the DPI has provided a means to achieving that end. The lack of Japanese in UN service to match Japanese financial support of the organization was one of the best-known stories of the UN's first 50 years. The career diplomats Genichi Akatani, Yasushi Akashi and Kensaku Hogen were the only Japanese to be so highly ranked at the UN Secretariat. When Hogen was appointed, *The Nikkei Weekly* used the opportunity to report on why so relatively few Japanese were in international diplomatic service with international organizations. The periodical noted that despite Japan's contribution of "15.65%, or about 166.7 million dollars, of the U.N.'s 1997 budget, Japanese accounted for only 104, or 4.2%, of the U.N. Secretariat's 2,461 managers, technical experts and other ranking staff".⁸⁷ Reasons given to explain why there were so little Japanese in the field included: the difficulty of Japanese in learning foreign languages; the unattractiveness of UN salaries

to Japanese; Japan's lifetime employment system that worked against labor mobility; and the fact that there were fewer people in Japan with Master's and doctoral degrees compared to in other industrialized countries.⁸⁸ However, by the end of the 1990s the situation did seem to be improving. Japanese won posts as heads of the WHO and UNESCO, and as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, though not without problems. For example, Hiroshi Nakajima left the WHO under a cloud of "accusations of highhandedness and incompetence",⁸⁹ Akashi's last years with the UN included a stint as Special Envoy to the former Yugoslavia, a failure, and Hogen's stay at the DPI was brief, unspectacular and marked by staff dissatisfaction. Hogen's next stop was not a position within the UN, but as Japan's Ambassador to Canada and to the International Civil Aviation Organization in Quebec.⁹⁰

One benefit of having Japanese officials in the top seat at the DPI was that it provided an incentive for Japanese foundations to financially support some very significant public information projects. Akatani secured Japanese foundation money to underwrite a series of articles on world development that were published in influential publications, a project that would later prove to be controversial during his successor's term⁹¹ (see Chapter 3). During Akashi's time in office the Soka Gakkai foundation gave \$160,000 to the DPI to launch the UN's Oral History project, a series of interviews with prominent retired UN officials that was eventually conducted in collaboration with Yale University and lasted well into the 1990s.⁹²



Figure 2.2 Yasushi Akashi of Japan ran the DPI for seven years (1979–86) before becoming famous in several more high-profile posts, such as UN Representative in Cambodia (1992), Special Envoy to the former Yugoslavia (1994–95) and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (1997–98).

Unlike some other responsibilities at the Secretariat (such as peacekeeping), the position at the top of the DPI during the UN's first half-century did not often attract much controversy outside of the usual annual struggles over the department's budget. However, Hernane Tavares de Sá of Brazil, who ran the DPI from 1960 to 1965, published a book a year after leaving office in which he made it clear that he did not like much about the UN nor the people running it. He came out in support of the US government's vetting of American UN employees, which was permitted by the Secretaries-General of the time.⁹³ Tavares de Sá's racist rantings in the book against black people were ironic not only because for five years he was responsible for projecting the UN's message of world peace and harmony but also because he came from a country where the majority of the population has some kind of African ancestry. His discussion of Africans in *The Play Within the Play: The Inside Story of the UN* displayed a pathological hatred. He spoke of "underdeveloped Afro-Asians" and "sophisticated Europeans",⁹⁴ and said African delegations hosted the most expensive parties because they felt "inferior about their color".⁹⁵ According to the Brazilian, the wives of African delegates spoke "no civilized language" and knew "only an obscure African dialect".⁹⁶ However, he did identify one type of African that he did like, and that was the "tame African". "They have an indefinable family air about them," he said in explaining this African. "Well-dressed, urbane, articulate, and lazy, having a family connection with the prime minister or the president of their country, they are usually the African version of a Western playboy".⁹⁷

For Tavares de Sá the large numbers of African states that got representation in the General Assembly in the wake of decolonization was clearly a negative occurrence. He described a General Assembly debate in which Africans were especially vocal as "dominated by countries without political maturity, economic significance, or civilized background", and questioned the value of having a "world forum dominated by scores of unimportant and irresponsible countries".⁹⁸ He summed up his opinion on how Africans were treated at the UN by declaring that no one "dares say anything resembling the truth about the black continent".⁹⁹ So presumably he was daring to do what lesser mortals could not.

Also surprising here in the case of Hernane Tavares de Sá and the power structure of his time is that before he was appointed by Dag Hammarskjöld, as Under-Secretary for Public Information, he was awarded (in 1959) Columbia University's distinguished Maria Moors Cabot Award for promoting friendship and understanding in the Western hemisphere in the field of journalism!

Ironically, however, it was not during the tenure of a Japanese that the DPI got negative press about the home government affiliation of its head. Soon after taking office, Thérèse Paquet Sévigny had to admit that she had erred in deciding to award \$200,000 in short-term DPI contracts – over half of the

total – to Canadians.¹⁰⁰ The error, in not being sensitive enough to the politics of the UN, was made by a communications executive who came to the DPI in 1987 with no background in diplomacy. All heads of the DPI before and after her, up to 2001, were career diplomats. Thérèse Paquet Sévigny came to the DPI from the post of Vice-President for Communications with CBC/Radio Canada, and before that she had been a journalist and advertising executive.¹⁰¹ Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar had broken with tradition and appointed a media professional because this was another one of the several occasions in the history of the DPI when it was felt the department needed an overhaul. A year into the job Paquet Sévigny said the plan was for her to “design a new structure for the organization’s information and archive activities, as part of an overall reform of UN structures, staffing, and procedures”.¹⁰²

In the case of Paquet Sévigny there was clearly a vision of what someone with her background could achieve in the post. However, there were also cases where actual professional competence in the field of communications obviously took a back seat to the other criteria Secretaries-General used to fill top jobs, especially the factors of nationality and the intensity of lobbying by particular national or regional interests to get the position. Certainly



Figure 2.3 By the turn of the century, still only one woman had the distinction of running the DPI. Thérèse Paquet Sévigny of Canada is shown here, in a 1987 photo at the start of her four years in office, sharing a light moment with staff as she presents a plan to restructure the DPI.

sophistication, cosmopolitanism and a genuine commitment to the high ideals of the UN were not taken seriously when Brazil's Hernane Tavares de Sá was selected!

Instead of a renaissance following the tenure of the first woman and non-diplomat, there followed a decade of much instability at the helm of the DPI, a reflection of the doldrums within which the UN Secretariat as a whole found itself. The relatively successful two terms of Javier Perez de Cuellar as UN Secretary-General were followed by the one disappointing term of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, continued failure of the US and other states to pay dues, and the most famous UN peacekeeping debacles in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda. During the 1990s no one held the position of head of the DPI for more than three years.

Sadly for the department, critics of the UN continued to single out the DPI for criticism and associate its name with wasted resources. That was the case in the 1950s, and it was also that way in 2001. "The U.N. public information office is a swollen monstrosity and needs to be cut severely," the US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke, said in a parting shot. "They are not up to date. The documentation services pile up documents nobody reads, in six official languages."¹⁰³ However, in the DPI's defense, taking cheap shots at the UN is much easier than fixing its problems. Also, it is highly unlikely that an organization designed to prevent another World War will escape criticism. The DPI's fortunes are intricately linked to those of the UN, and the UN's image before world public opinion is both a challenge for the DPI to manage as well as a problem that is bound to stigmatize the department as well. It is to this question of the DPI in relation to the overall image of the UN that this book will now turn.