Opinion: Government-funded publishing house

By Amanda Laugesen

In 1952, a group representing the most important trade, university, and educational publishers in the United States met in New York City to incorporate Franklin Publications.

Some of the men (and they were all men) had been active in the Council of Books in Wartime during the World War II. Then, they had helped to produce the Armed Service Editions that took popular books to the fighting troops, and the Overseas Editions that had taken American books in translation into liberated Europe.

At this meeting, with the Cold War setting in, publishers once again decided to support the U.S. government. The new Franklin Publications would "win hearts and minds" across the globe.

As in World War II, publishers initially thought this could help develop truly global markets for American books while also demonstrating the patriotism of the publishing industry. But the Cold War was a very different kind of war, and publishers quickly found themselves involved in a more complicated situation.

Franklin Publications (later Franklin Book Programs) was funded by money from the U.S. government, and for a number of years it worked closely with the United States Information Agency (USIA) to promote American values through print across the world. Its work involved securing translation rights with American publishers (such as Alfred A. Knopf Inc., Macmillan, D. Van Nostrand, and McGraw-Hill) for particular books, and organizing contracts with publishers and printers in countries where its offices operated to produce them.

Franklin's publications were sold, rather than distributed free of charge, to ensure that they helped to develop a commercial capitalist book infrastructure of bookshops and distributors. Franklin opened offices around the world, including in Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. These offices were run by citizens of the home country, many of whom had studied in the United States or had some other tie there. These offices employed prominent local educators and cultural figures from their countries to help with translation, and in the promotion of Franklin publications. Franklin's headquarters were in New York, with a small staff who frequently traveled to the field offices to provide advice and monitoring. Back home, they liaised with Washington and the book industry.

Franklin's effort to promote American books was not purely a Cold War propaganda exercise, although the USIA tended to regard it as such. From the start, Franklin's dynamic leader, Datus Smith, former director of Princeton University Press, was careful to establish a degree of autonomy for the organization and to ensure that book choices were made by the overseas offices and not dictated by the USIA. But as time went on, Franklin staff (and the publishers and scholars who served as directors on its board) chafed at the control the U.S. government placed on them. Book choice in particular was a source of continuing tension. Franklin sometimes stood up to USIA—and paid the price in reduced funding.

What did Franklin publish? Franklin's focus reflected both the popular USIA choices of classic American literature, such as Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women," as well as practical texts and nonfiction considered useful for developing nations. Many texts weren't just straight translations, but also included prefaces by notable intellectuals that explained the book's relevance.

In some cases, whole sections might be replaced by locally written content. When Franklin decided to produce Arabic and

Persian editions of Edward R. Murrow's popular anthology "This I Believe" (based on his radio show where famous people discussed their beliefs), some chapters were replaced with those that highlighted the views of prominent Islamic and Middle Eastern figures. The text also helped to assist the United States' broader vision of promoting Islam and religious faith as a counter to Communist irreligiosity.

Those who worked with Franklin believed in the power of books and reading as a means to create a better world. But they also believed that a subtler approach to the promotion of American culture—that is, to recognize and respect the cultures of the countries they operated in—was more effective than heavy-handed propaganda. Franklin officers in the field were anxious not to be seen as "Ugly Americans." They increasingly aimed to show that their work was development work, helping to foster a book industry where previously there was none (or very little of one). Once they had succeeded in this, they would depart. When the Franklin office in Cairo eventually was closed in 1978, Datus Smith reflected that he felt "no sadness about our withdrawal from Cairo. Our objective from the beginning has been the establishment of local capability, and this is the crowning proof of our success."

But as much as Datus Smith declared that he was in no way an American imperialist or an Ugly American, the realities of operating abroad made such assertions questionable. For example, Franklin's work came under fire in Egypt from nationalists who saw American culture as a fundamental threat to Arabic culture and the sale of imported books crippling to an Egyptian cultural industry. As one Egyptian journalist wrote: "National thought must be allowed to live and flourish." In Indonesia, initial public support for a program to help the country reach its educational and literacy goals changed as Indonesian nationalism increased: under the Sukarno regime, educational and cultural development was to be state-directed and not imposed or aided from without. Like the

USIA's libraries, which were sometimes the target of protests, Franklin books, even if in translation, were regarded as potent symbols of American power.

American (and British) dominance in publishing in the developing world, as well as the Soviet attempt to distribute, free of charge, communist texts, circumscribed the choices of readers. Despite Franklin's efforts, this publishing imperialism tended to stunt the growth of indigenous publishing in many countries. But imported books did, nevertheless, still play an important role in the lives of the common reader in developing nations. What readers made of books such as "Little Women" remains a mystery, but textbooks and nonfiction were popular reading choices in developing nations throughout this period. Such books matched the needs of students, professionals, and other aspirational readers who used these texts for practical purposes.

As Franklin distanced itself from the USIA through the 1960s, it sought funding from other sources, including the governments in countries where they operated, American foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller, and other agencies, notably the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Franklin's focus accordingly shifted to building publishing infrastructure, as well as meeting the requests of foreign governments. Notably, Franklin worked closely with the Iranian government and the Tehran office became its most successful operation. Franklin helped Iran establish a printing press with an American loan, secured paper supplies, and helped to produce vast numbers of textbooks for Iranian schools and literacy programs.

The Iran story demonstrates the complications of these kinds of book programs. The close relationship with the Shah's regime was beneficial insofar as it secured profitable contracts for the books it produced. Franklin had some cooperation with the Shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf, in the production of a Persian version of Benjamin Spock's "Baby

and Child Care.”

But the Iranian regime was not a democracy, and the books it translated ultimately did little to promote democracy, even if they may have helped buttress the uneven modernization efforts of the Shah’s regime (which, arguably, may well have hastened the 1979 revolution). Perhaps even more problematically, working with the Shah’s regime, a violator of political and human rights, undermined the very principles that Franklin purported to stand for—intellectual and political freedom.

Franklin’s real legacy was less with the books it helped to publish and more with its push to develop book infrastructure. The Iranian offset printing plant that Franklin helped to fund appears to still be operating, and Iranian publishers today acknowledge the work the Franklin office did (under the directorship of Homayoun Sanati) in modernizing the Iranian book industry. Franklin had more mixed results elsewhere. In Africa, for example, it was difficult to make any kind of headway as Franklin confronted both British publishers—well entrenched even after independence—and issues such as the multiplicity of African languages that made translation a challenge and the production of sufficient numbers of books unprofitable.

The story of Franklin shows the contradiction that the Cold War posed for the United States: a desire to assert American values abroad, along with the need to compromise those values in a complicated political reality. And although some Americans may have had good intentions in getting involved abroad, those on the receiving end of their philanthropy didn’t always want it (or wanted to fashion such aid in ways that best reflected their own needs and desires).

In the late 1960s, it was revealed that the CIA was covertly funding a range of cultural organizations. The revelation only compounded the increasing skepticism toward cultural efforts abroad. Franklin defended itself by saying it had only

received funds from the Asia Foundation (which had indeed been funded by the CIA) and had not knowingly received CIA money.

But the damage was done. Franklin struggled on through the 1970s, but funding dried up. Publishers questioned the business value of Franklin, and lost the patriotic intent that had inspired their support for Franklin early in the Cold War. Contentious leadership at Franklin after Datus Smith's departure made it even harder for the organization to survive. And, in 1978, Franklin Book Programs (as it was then known) ceased operations.

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