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American Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World: A Strategic Communication Analysis

By R.S. Zaharna, November 1, 2001

During a national press conference, President Bush, speaking about American efforts to reach Arab and Muslim audiences said, "we are not doing a very good job of getting our message out." This may be the American understatement of the 21st century.

Following the events of September 11, Americans were consumed with shock, grief, and anger. Understandably, the magnitude of the events, coming less than a year into his presidency, caught the Bush administration off guard. In that respect, the communication initiative focused on the American public was quite remarkable. Within a period of 72 hours, Bush dramatically changed his communication persona from folksy governor of a large state to a leader of international stature, he responded to the emotional mood of his national constituency, and most significantly, he managed a delicate balancing act between the immediate calls for military action and the patience needed to conduct a complex overseas military operation. Judging from opinion polls, congressional action, and media reports, Bush succeeded in rallying the majority of Americans around his agenda. The communication strategy worked.

The Queen on Our Side

If harnessing American support was first on the communication agenda, garnering international support was second. In this regard, British-American communication is notable. Given the high number of British casualties suffered in the New York attack, the British public could have held the U.S. responsible for the deaths of British citizens on American soil. Instead, Bush rapidly sought to transform an American tragedy into an international cause and used the British audience to connect to Europe at large. In his address to Congress, Bush included a direct appeal to the British public. Further, in a dramatically visual alignment of power, British Prime Minister Tony Blair attended Bush's address, sitting next to the American president's wife. Similarly, in a reciprocal break with custom—this time on the British side—Queen Elizabeth, with the American ambassador at her side, witnessed the playing of the American national anthem during a moving ceremony at the changing of the palace guards.

The American-British communication represents perhaps the epitome of effective public diplomacy. First, the communication appears two-way or reciprocal, rather than simply one way

with America dictating its policy to others. Second, the communication has been highly symbolic, reflecting a keen understanding of cultural sensitivities and national symbols. Third, the communication appears to be emotionally congruent with the public mood; “amazed,” “surprised,” or “stunned” are not part of the vocabulary of the relationship. Finally, the communication appears to be truly public, representing not only an exchange between the leaders of two countries, but the people as well.

If the shared cultural and linguistic heritage of the British-American communication pattern offers the ideal in public diplomacy, the American communication with the Arab and Muslim world represents—to paraphrase Bush’s understatement—the less than ideal.

Where the U.S. Has Stumbled

It also helps illustrate the specifics of where the U.S. stumbled.

First, the communication has been primarily one way. America announced its intentions to go after the terrorists and those who harbor them, stating “You are either with us or against us.” Such ultimatums are often perceived as threats and initiate a cycle of defensive communication in which the audience is immediately cued to get their guard up. Defiance, not cooperation, is often the response.

Second, the communication revealed little understanding of the significant cultural and national symbols of the region. When Bush said in a press conference that he was “amazed there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about,” he illustrated the mirror phenomenon in communication. When one is not understood by the other, it is often an indication that one does not understand the other either. This is clearly the case in the administration’s communication. There was the use of the word “crusade” at the outset. Then came American efforts to silence the pride of the Arab world, the Al-Jazeera news network.

Third, the communication of American officials appears conspicuously out of alignment with the public sentiment in the region. If this is being done deliberately, it is a high-risk communication strategy. Such strategies often backfire. If American officials are unaware of how incongruent their communication is, this is worse. America becomes vulnerable to a cascade of politically adverse “surprises.” American officials then wonder how such “intelligence failures” occurred.

Finally, the communication has remained at the level of the heads of states. In keeping with the traditional diplomacy of the past, America has focused its efforts on securing the support of leaders in the region, leaving those leaders the task of securing the support of the people there. Instead of being able to rally their people, more and more of these leaders are alienating themselves from their publics. The more America shifts its communication burden onto these leaders, the more vulnerable they become. The loss of American-allied regimes may well be the ultimate cost of America’s public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world.

Learning Communication Lessons the Hard Way

In a recent editorial, American Ambassador Richard Holbrooke captured the sentiments of many officials in Washington, “How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world’s leading communications society?” The irony is that it is precisely because Osama bin Laden is perceived as a man in a cave that he is able to communicate effectively with the people in his region. This is perhaps one of the many cues eluding American officials and the lessons from this distorted communication exchange.

The first critical lesson in crisis communication is the need to get the message out quickly to the affected publics. By seizing the communication initiative, one can help minimize the spread of rumors that inevitably emerge in a volatile emotional climate. In a crude but effective way, Osama bin Laden, through his taped message to Al-Jazeera, realized the fundamental importance of public diplomacy in this age of instant global communication. He took his message directly to the affected publics.

In contrast, the need for America to communicate its intentions appears to have come as an afterthought to its massive military and political initiatives directed at the region. In the days immediately following the attacks against the U.S., it became readily apparent that the U.S. would seek military retribution. This message was further underscored politically by high-ranking American officials shuttling around the globe to build an international coalition. It was not until after these military and political initiatives were initiated, that the administration recognized the need to communicate to the affected public.

By failing to seize the communication initiative, America lost control of its message. In communication, perception—not reality—is what matters. Perception is what makes spin possible despite an abundance of facts or logic. From the American perspective, it was clearly a “fight against terrorism.” In contrast, from the perspective of those on the other side of the ocean targeted for attack, America appeared to be gearing up for a full-fledged assault on the Muslim world. The common denominator of all the targets was “Muslim country.” American rhetoric had frequently interchanged terrorism with radical Islam in its past communications. The negative perception of hostile American intentions was solidified by the way the U.S. president framed the conflict: “You are either with us or against us.” In short, us against them.

Once the U.S. defined the conflict as “us” versus “them,” it was not that difficult for bin Laden to frame the message, or what the conflict was about. He used one of the most powerful tools of persuasion: identification. What Holbrooke and others missed is that it is precisely because bin Laden is perceived as a lone man in a cave—the epitome of the underdog—that he was able to use that image to woo support. The more the U.S. demonizes bin Laden, the more he will emerge as an icon symbolizing the struggle of the weak against the strong.

A second important facet of public diplomacy is the need to adapt one’s message to reflect the cultural sensibilities and needs of foreign audiences. America cannot communicate with foreign publics the same way that it communicates to Americans and expect to be understood by non-Americans. Intercultural communication does not work that way.

For Americans, facts, figures, rational, and logical arguments are the way one builds a compellingly persuasive case. Dispassionate objectivity is contained so as not to weaken the

validity of the facts. In the Arab world, emotional neutrality, in an emotionally charged context, can be perceived as deception. If one hides one's emotions, what else is being hidden? The choice of National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice was perhaps the worst choice for America to try to recoup its message. Trained as a Soviet-American specialist, Rice speaks in the language and manner of one superpower to another. Her tone alone was enough to alienate the audience.

The man in the cave demonstrated a clear understanding of his audience; thus it is not that surprising that his audience understood his message. It is that mirror phenomenon again. When one thoroughly understands the audience, the appropriate tools, strategies, and tactics almost define themselves. More important than speaking in Arabic, bin Laden spoke in the cultural style that spans wider than the Arabic-speaking world. He spoke to evoke feelings, not logical explanations. He used the simple imagery of metaphors that resonates with the personal experience of an uneducated public. He tapped into historical references in a region steeped in history. He harnessed the power of religious symbols that worked as emotional cues to spark his audience to action. And, he did it in a cave.

The third critical lesson is credibility. Credibility is the cornerstone of effective persuasion. America has a credibility problem. Technically, it is a source credibility problem, which means no matter how many times the Pentagon changes the name of the military operations or the color of food packages or how many interviews the White House gives to foreign correspondents, there will still be a problem. Namely, America as a source is not believable.

America's credibility problem stems from the perceived duplicity between American ideals and American policy. From the perspective of the people in the region, what America says it stands for—justice, liberty, freedom, human rights, equality, fairness—is not reflected in its policies. One hears repeated reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraqi sanctions. The reason they haunt the U.S. message is because both resonate strongly with people's perceptions of American duplicity. What America does, through its policies and practices in Iraq and Palestine, speaks louder than all of the official statements coming out of Washington. Until America addresses its policy in the region, American efforts to intensify its message are more likely to hurt than help.

Developing a Communication Strategy for the U.S.

Public diplomacy has come of age. In this era of instantaneous global communication, the official voice of governments has been reduced to a factor of one—among many voices. The U.S. and other governments can no longer rely solely on official communication channels. In an era of increasingly vocal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are active on a number of global issues, the policies of the U.S. and other governments are more likely to be questioned than accepted. Finally, in an era when international crises are increasingly the norm rather than the exception, the U.S. and other governments are vulnerable to the power of rumors and misperceptions unless they have a crisis communication plan in place ready to respond. America's public diplomacy needs all of the above.

To reach its public diplomacy goals, the U.S. will need to master the tools of intercultural and public communication. In an international crisis situation, America will be fighting on two communication fronts. America's first priority is communicating domestically, gaining and retaining the support of the American people for its foreign policy objectives. The second front is the affected publics of other countries. America cannot communicate with non-Americans in the same way it communicates with Americans. More important than the overcoming linguistic hurdles are the cultural nuances that shape the efficiency and effectiveness of a message. More intercultural training is needed and that intercultural awareness needs to be visually demonstrated in official American communication.

An often neglected aspect of public diplomacy is the research or information-gathering side of a target audience. American officials clearly have a need to develop a better understanding of the country's audience in the Arab and Muslim world, however, they may have to explore more creative methods than relying on public opinion polls—as is characteristically done with the American public. Public opinion polling is critical for devising effective communication strategies, however, when used to develop policies, they can be perceived as manipulative. A subtle, but an important, distinction.

Public Diplomacy Essential, But Not Enough

American public diplomacy will also have to be creative in selecting the communication channels to reach affected publics. The mass media can be a double-edged sword. In the American experience, the mass media has been a highly effective and credible tool for reaching the public. As one network slogan suggests, "More Americans get their news from X Network, than from any other source." In the Arab world, more people get their news from their neighbors or people whom they know. After a long history of government censorship and control of the mass media, people are incredibly sophisticated in reading between the lines and deciphering credible facial expressions. If America relies primarily on the mass media to get its message out, it may find its message further distorted on a mass media scale.

Finally, America must address its source credibility problem, namely the perceived incongruence between America's ideals and American policies. If America is concerned about peace in the Middle East, it must actively work to restore the Middle East peace process. If America is concerned about human rights, it needs consistency in its censorship. If America is sincere in its efforts to halt aggression, it must work vigorously to halt all forms. The worst thing that could happen at this stage is if America, in its goal to stop the spread of terrorist aggression, becomes itself labeled as the "aggressor." This distinct possibility would be the greatest travesty to those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001.

Public diplomacy alone cannot address America's credibility or image problem in the region. For that, American officials may need to reassess the country's policies so that they reflect the best of America to others. No amount of spin in public diplomacy will compensate for an American foreign policy that negatively affects others. In communication between peoples, actions still speak louder than words.