

## **Looking for Public Diplomacy in Saudi Arabia: Finding Proxies and Suggestions for New Strategies**

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What qualifies, exactly, as a successful media campaign of public diplomacy? Does success equal a change of attitude in a target population or perhaps just a recognition that a message is reaching a target audience? In the case of Saudi Arabia, the impact of current United States public diplomacy campaigns may need to be reconsidered.

In her recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Under Secretary of State Margaret Tutweiler suggested that the United States needs to “support those programs and activities that go to the bottom line” of reversing the deterioration of the way the United States is perceived in the Middle East. Recent efforts by the Broadcast Board of Governors, such as the youth-oriented Radio Sawa and the newly launched *Al-Hurra* (the Free One, in Arabic) satellite television network are an attempt to curb this deterioration. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether or not public diplomacy efforts like these are actually working.

I recently had the fortune of participating in a trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, organized by the Saudi American Exchange. While participating in this exercise in cultural diplomacy, I took advantage of my access to those who might actually be exposed to some of the United States campaigns of public diplomacy to ask about the campaigns. Given anecdotal evidence about the skeptical reception of these campaigns in the region, I was not altogether surprised with what I discovered.

Radio Sawa, as the Broadcast Board of Governors (BBG) proudly reports, is extremely successful in the highly targeted youth market. I asked my Saudi counterparts in the exchange program, who were all college undergraduates, what they thought about Radio Sawa. Nearly everyone I asked answered that they enjoyed listening to Sawa, and that they thought it was a great mix of both Arab and Western music. Their answers seemed to reflect the BBG's claims about the success of Sawa's market penetration.

At the same time, however, they were equally dismissive of the news and information portion of the broadcast. Said one Saudi college student, "We just don't listen to it." Another said, "I don't know anyone who takes that seriously." One student went so far as to say that they felt it was an attempt at "brainwashing." The Saudis seemed unequivocally sure that it was government propaganda. Interestingly, no one expressed any significant indignation about the propaganda aspect that they perceived in Sawa. If anything, there was just a sense of casual acceptance. And, in perhaps a note of politeness toward their American guests, no one mentioned anything about Sawa's news segments being perceived as Israeli propaganda (a charge that has been leveled in some accounts).

When I asked about the new United States satellite television channel, *Al Hurra*, their responses were markedly different. Of the students that I asked, very few had actually watched Al Hurra, but nearly everyone had heard about it or knew someone who had watched it. I asked them about what they thought of the television channel, and their reactions were less than favorable. Most dismissed it as a blatant attempt at propaganda. One student responded with an air of incredulity, "Al Hurra? The *Free* one?" Another student said that he had no plans to watch it, but wasn't all that concerned if others did.

He said that his father, however, was so opposed to the station that he had his satellite receiver permanently block Al Hurra because he felt it was a form of “brainwashing.” Even so, as with Radio Sawa, there was no obvious sense of offense at the presence of Al Hurra amongst the Saudi students. Instead, I was left with the impression that their unspoken question was “what was your government thinking, anyway?”

So what does that say about the United States public diplomacy campaigns? Are they doing their job? If the United States is ultimately concerned with the effectiveness of their campaigns, and if effectiveness is measured in attitude change, then they need to be focused on what is actually shaping these attitudes and opinions. In other words, the United States needs to look to what is functioning *as* public diplomacy and how that shapes Arab public opinion.

The proxy for public diplomacy in Saudi Arabia, based on my conversations with the Saudi students, is the news media. Nearly all of those I questioned expressed concern over the way in which they are portrayed in the American and western media. The Saudis are, in fact, quite immersed in the sphere of global news flows. One Saudi explained to me that the Saudis are inundated in what he called a “post-modern” news environment. They receive news from the West, including CNN, BBC, and even FOXnews. In addition, they receive news from MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting), Orbit, Al-Arabiya, and of course, Al-Jazeera. This amounts to what he called an over-exposure to news and information – which is not without consequences. Some simply withdraw from the steady stream of negativity, while others choose the media outlets that provide stories framed according to their predisposed beliefs. Interestingly, I was told that some Saudis watch FOXnews to deliberately arouse their anger (almost as a form of entertainment).

The person who dubbed the Saudi news situation as “post-modern” admitted that he himself watched the BBC, which he felt was the “most objective,” although he was willing to put up with the BBC’s “occasional obvious bias.”

These news flows are embedded within the larger context of cultural products and entertainment that stream into homes in Saudi everyday, edited of course to reflect Islamic cultural preferences. During my stay in Saudi Arabia, I was never far from a television sporting a multitude of channels and a surprising selection of American programming. I could not help but think that any consideration of U.S. public diplomacy, especially a public diplomacy based on strategies of communication and persuasion, needs to be cognizant of the existing flows of news, culture and information that is already being consumed and shaping the “hearts and minds” of the Saudi people.

The “problem” that the proxies for public diplomacy present the United States is that they tell the story of the United States outside the control of the United States government. That fact prompted the renewed drive for the BBG to tell “our side of the story” – yet it would seem, at least from my inquiries, that current efforts may be for naught. The United States does not control the messages in the already legitimated sources of information about U.S. policy – the media people already watch. They have no methods to manage the ways in which the United States and its policies are represented in the media that is actually being accessed. While I acknowledge the BBGs attempts to address this lack of official “voice” for the United States, it does not change the fact that a series of other voices are already serving as the *de facto* voice of America, and have done so for some time.

It is no small irony that arguments to dismantle the United States Information Agency (USIA) in the 1990's now come to reflect the reality on the ground in Saudi Arabia. The argument went that after end of Cold War priorities, public diplomacy could be relegated to other institutions like CNN, who would carry the values and interests of the United States globally. The globalization of media organizations, however, saw to it that CNN would not be the only voice – and now we have a multitude of storytelling going on the Middle East (much to the chagrin of the American foreign policy-makers). The question becomes, then, how does the United States address this chorus of media voices?

The thorny issue of U.S. image and information management, I believe, cannot be solved through “hypodermic” models of media intervention, but need to be addressed by a more sophisticated strategy that is at least partially reflective of cultural sensitivities in the region as well as more recent developments in communication and media theory.

First, is important to recognize that the “magic bullet” theory of mass media lost its currency decades ago and should be abandoned in United States campaigns. If anything, my experience illustrates that the Saudi's are quite media literate and are capable of actively interpreting and resisting U.S. government policy messages. Rather than a magic bullet, media campaigns need to reflect the realities of media utilization and communication patterns “on the ground.” While media effects theories like “cultivation theory” might suggest something about long term effects of exposure to the messages of United States campaigns, it assumes that the audience is actually tuning in.

Recognizing that communication patterns can be contextually determined means there needs to be more serious formative research prior to campaign design, must like the

efforts that have gone into various health information campaigns around the world.

Formative research could build on the already recognized significance of interpersonal communication in the Arab world, as well as the ways in which certain types of messages could generate culturally specific meanings. Emerging scholarship on network theory could also go far to design media strategies that promote the spread of ideas and concepts effectively. My point is that there are resources in communication theories to draw from, and currently, there doesn't seem to be much in the way of theory-driven public diplomacy.

If anything, there is another kind of knowledge at work in U.S. campaigns. Norman Pattiz of the BBG has touted that the success of broadcasting expertise in the United States should be applied to the Middle East. His argument, that we should take advantage of our marketing and broadcasting competencies, assumes that this knowledge is transferable. To some extent, I think this is true – and the prevalence of other international broadcasting in the region is a testimony to that. Nevertheless, has the United States taken a serious look at the assumptions behind how it addresses people living in the Middle East? Assumptions about the nature of the audience, their beliefs, and their receptivity to messages ultimately frame the message. Assuming that the audience is a pool of media “consumers” in the traditional Western sense not only runs the risk of missing the ways in which stories are interpreted, but could also quite possibly fuel existing suspicions of Western consumerist culture. How the United States frames its messages as well as addresses its audiences, it would seem, does not ring true to the stories that govern how those in the Middle East view their world.

It is unfair, however, to be overly critical of applying market strategies and competencies to the production of public diplomacy media campaigns when they seem dwarfed by the “competition”. As the Saudi’s I questioned said, no one was paying much attention to the message, and there is certainly no shortage of media alternatives. Viewing current U.S. campaigns as an exercise in corporate brand promotion, it would seem that the campaign planners may need to take better stock of their competition and the saturated nature of the Middle East media market. Perhaps future public diplomacy campaigns should more aggressively embrace the methodologies and skill-sets of marketing analysis and public relations. Understanding the communication environment, engaging in guerilla marketing tactics, and leveraging the full spectrum of media exposure seems the most logical approach to increasing the presence of what the United States wants to say to the Middle East audience. Given the somewhat ambivalent reception of public diplomacy imperatives in the traditional spheres of American foreign policy decision-making, it does not seem that such a strategy shift is imminent.

Of course, there are limits to the powers of communication theory and marketing know-how, especially when what is to be communicated is subject to such skepticism in Middle East audiences. Advocates of public diplomacy like Margaret Tutweiler state that the goal of public diplomacy is to communicate United States views in an undistorted way, so as to combat the negative representations present in other media in the Middle East. Communicating a policy clearly, however, does not change the fact that U.S. policy in its unaltered state may still be unpalatable to the publics targeted by these campaigns. As Andrew Kohut explained in his criticism of public diplomacy at the Arts and Minds

Conference in 2003, public diplomacy can't make up for the policies that are fundamentally offensive. "It's not the messenger, it's the message."

In conclusion, it appears that the Saudis, for their part, are simply too media savvy to be receptive to United States broadcasts in ways that the planners of these projects had envisioned. As stated previously, however, I did not sense any direct hostility towards these broadcasts – but more a lack of being taken seriously as an alternative source of meaning about their world. Communication theory tells us that we are dependent on the media systems that give us information, but that these systems themselves are embedded in larger societal contexts and hierarchies of power. If the United States is to add another "voice," it needs to be aware of the media system it is becoming a part of, and all the competition and modes of access that the media system represents. To not do so would be both unrealistic and wasteful.

At the same time, campaigns should be reflexive enough to be both culturally aware *and* self-critical. As Nancy Snow noted in her article "Al-Hurra Who?: Haven't you heard We're Free; They're Not?" even the name *Al-Hurra*, while signifying freedom, implies that other local media are *not* free, and assumes the presumptive notion that Middle East audiences yearn for the media that will set them free. This reflects the perhaps unintentional arrogance behind public diplomacy campaigns as well as the strategies of the current U.S. administration to promote Western values in the region. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal, as quoted in the March 22, 2004 issue of the *Arab News*, summed it up best when commenting on the recent democratic reforms proposed for the Middle East by U.S. President Bush. He noted that calls by the United

States for reform and advancement assumes “as if for all these years we had not been doing anything and had just been waiting for direction from outside.”

If, as Undersecretary Tutweiler and other public diplomacy advocates remain true to their objective in directing a public diplomacy strategy that is focused on the “bottom line,” then perhaps future media interventions will reflect more awareness of how media that serve as proxies for American public diplomacy function in the everyday lives of the Middle East audience. This might mean that future campaigns will more enthusiastically incorporate the strategies and knowledge that have made commercially-driven communication so successful, in order to more effectively *compete* in the Middle East media market. At the same time, any consideration of the “bottom line” should be tempered with the sober reality that United States media campaigns cannot function as flak for foreign policies that are disagreeable to the target audience, especially if the message is framed without consideration of its reception as arrogant and insensitive. Ultimately, these two concerns are dependent on each other. The United States cannot begin to tell its story if no one listening. And, if people *are* listening, are those people going to accept the story that they hear? Future public diplomacy campaigns depend on successfully dealing with both concerns.