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Martin Rose: Supporting the Acrobat: Public Diplomacy & Trust

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Recently *The Guardian* reported the spokesman of a Pentagon-contracted PR company as saying that the company

“has consistently worked with the Iraqi media to promote truthful reporting across Iraq. Our clients, our employees and the Iraqis who support this effort have maintained a powerful commitment to battle terror with a powerful weapon – the truth.”¹

Translated into plain English this means:

“We have been paying Iraqi journalists \$1,000 a pop to insert, under their own bylines, articles by US military psy-ops writers, presenting *our* view of events in Iraq”.

And it turns out (to no one's surprise who remembers *Encounter*) that this goes on in the press of US allies too, to the tune of a \$300 million Pentagon programme. Text and translation sum up the dilemma of public diplomacy, and its present moral confusion. Suborning hacks is as old as the press: what is interesting here is the unblushing use of the word “truth” to describe a deliberately, overtly and proudly slanted view directed at unsuspecting readers as though it were objective.

The subtext is simple. Ostensibly written by Iraqis, this stuff might possibly achieve some traction: written by Americans it hasn't a hope. And this is representative of a problem we all face, not just in the Middle East, but to greater or lesser degrees across the world. Much that we say is disbelieved because of who we are, rather than being judged on its merits; and much of what those opposed to us say is given credence simply because they are not us.

This represents a huge trust deficit. Some of it is the legacy of tortuous 20th century history, but a good deal of it today stems from our invasion and occupation of Iraq. Whatever we think about that invasion, it is hard to refute the assertion that it has

¹ *The Guardian*, December 14th 2005, p6: *Britons named in US 'good news' furor*

diminished trust in Western governments across much of the Near and Middle East, and to a lesser but perceptible extent, across the developing world. It has contributed strongly to hostile accounts of Western behaviour which link – to our minds largely speciously – events in many countries of the Muslim ‘world’ where people feel themselves persecuted, and busily synthesize overarching and conspiratorial explanations of Western policies and behaviours.

How can we set about restoring a degree of trust to our relationships with people in Arab and Muslim countries? First we must acknowledge that this trust gap exists and that it is based on judgement (however faulty we may feel that judgement to be) of our actions and motives. Then we may think it useful to try to explain our thinking, motivation and actions. The two go together. Explaining ourselves without first acknowledging the nature of the problem is rather like the behaviour of English lady travellers in the 19th century: ‘speak clearly in English, and if the natives don’t understand, say it again, louder. If they still don’t understand SHOUT’. Or – as Prof. Marc Lynch put it - “an approach that combines vigorous military interventions with a dismissal of local opposition to them, offset by occasional patronizing attempts to ‘get the American message out’”.²

What is very clear is that trust in Western governments has come under strain, largely as the result of views of Western foreign policy. Domestically, the WEF annual tracking survey last month shows persistent decline in respondents’ trust in their own national governments, the UN, NGOs and global business: in 2005 all reached their lowest points since tracking began in 2001.³ Internationally, a Jordanian survey of opinion in the Near East, published earlier in the year, makes clear a number of interesting and relevant conclusions: Arabs hold generally negative views about Western behaviour in the region, but do not necessarily oppose the aims and values underlying that behaviour. What is crucial to their views is the disjuncture that they perceive between the principles expressed by Western governments and those that are actually and visibly applied on the ground. This disjuncture is widely seen – and not just in the Arab world – as hypocrisy.⁴

Research that Counterpoint, the think-tank which I head, commissioned recently in the Near East makes clear that (in one dimension) trust is directly proportional to distance from government. One respondent in Jordan said: “If the British Council parrots what the British Embassy says about Britain, we’re not interested. But there is a Britain we’d like it to show us – the Britain of the million marchers against the war in February 2003.” This shouldn’t really surprise us: governments and their direct representatives are elected to exercise *raison d’état*, to pursue their countries’ geopolitical interests. The ruthlessness that this often, necessarily, entails makes trust-bearing conversations with governments difficult, the more so when a government is committed to a foreign policy which its foreign audiences find unacceptable.

Where non-governmental interlocutors are available as alternatives, they seem to be able to earn and retain trust more effectively, which should not surprise us, since they are not seen as primary actors in the making and acting out of foreign policy. The quotation above makes clear that the Jordanian speaker expects the British Council, as an organization at arm’s length from the government, to be able to represent the plurality of British opinion better than the representatives of government do – or can. He also clearly

² Marc Lynch, *Taking Arabs Seriously*, *Foreign Affairs* Vol 82/5, Sept/Oct 2003

³ Globescan for the World Economic Forum, 15th December 2005

⁴ *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within*, Centre for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, February 2005

expects the British Council to represent not official policy but a much broader snapshot of thought, action and opinion in the UK. Indeed, he expects the British Council to represent in Jordan the biggest mass protest *against* government policy that has taken place in Britain for many years, and would respect us for doing so. What does this mean?

It means that this Jordanian has a much more mature and sophisticated idea of what public diplomacy is all about than many Western chanceries and foreign ministries. He wants a picture of what he might call 'the real Britain'. He doesn't want it sorted out into what the British government does and doesn't see as supportive of its own position: he wants the raw and diverse material of our society. Of course this is partly because he is looking for signs of opposition in the UK to a foreign policy that he doesn't much like. But he is also, if perhaps only dimly, aware that the 14th February demonstration mobilized very large numbers of Muslims and non-Muslims *together* in London – and that this sharing of political activism was a richly symbolic moment for British multicultural society. He also, perhaps, suspects that a society which allows, reports and even *fêtes* a mass demonstration against government policy might have something to teach his own about political pluralism and self-confident democracy.

This is the very antithesis of bribing ghost-written newspaper articles into foreign newspapers. It represents the difference between a self-confident and a self-doubting society. A self-confident society knows that its pluralism, its ability to handle a diversity of conflicting opinions, its freedom to protest outside as well as within the formal political process – that all these are its strength and its unique being. A self-doubting society excludes criticism, disallows the expression of dissent in front of public audiences, buys column inches and bullies organizations that don't toe the line.

Now of course no Western society is one or the other; and no government's public diplomacy is one or the other, either. There is a permanent tension between the virtue of honesty and the necessary vice of dissimulation, and any of us who work in public diplomacy are constantly buffeted by winds from both directions. What is important, I think, is to understand clearly the choices that face us – and for this purpose I shall caricature a little.

On the one hand we can see a public diplomacy that is slavish in its support for government. Its job is to win hearts and minds. As an unnamed military official is quoted in news reports (referring to the same Iraq cod-journalism programme). It "was designed to counter terrorist ideology and sway foreign audiences to support American policies."⁵ But if we are honest about it, what we actually see is a devastating lack of confidence in the power of American ideas and ethics to compete in an open market: they can apparently, in the view of the Pentagon, only be sold effectively under a false label.

And this is the besetting paradox of a public diplomacy that is tied closely to government policies: the more clearly yoked public diplomacy is to policy, and the less visible, tangible independence it has, the less notice anyone will take of it. Actually, it pollutes its environment. Iraqis – and heaven knows, they are only now beginning to learn how to read a free press after thirty years of Ba'hist drivel - will now look at anything written in support of US policy and say to themselves "Well, we all know the Pentagon paid for *that*." Even when it didn't. This is a sort of ideological strip-mining – a wanton disregard for long-term trust, in the hope, small as it is, of short-term gain.

⁵ *The Guardian*, 15th December 2005, p15, *Iraq intelligence was wrong – but I was right to take us to war, Bush insists*

What is the alternative, then? It seems to me that we need a hugely more imaginative public diplomacy in this 21st century world. What we think we learned from the Cold War isn't very relevant any more, for all sorts of reasons. On the one hand, it is arguable that public diplomacy was much less important in the collapse of communism than its proponents maintain – an exaggerated case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. On the other, the post-Cold War world has seen a major shift from ideological to cultural engagement. Where once public diplomacy was a crowbar that could usefully be inserted in the cracks of the other ideological position to break it down, it is now a much more elusive and ambiguous instrument.

Not that there are not ideological positions taken, whether by al-Qaida's leaders or by President Bush. But there is wide understanding today that setting our public diplomacy agendas in terms of ideological binaries is ineffective. Ayman al-Zawahiri may be a Cold Warrior of a new type, but our attentions as public diplomatists are not focussed on him. Our concern – to stay, as an example, with Dr al-Zawahiri's home country – is with the huge number of unemployed, alienated young Egyptians who are thwarted and alienated by political, economic and social conditions beyond their control. Our job is to find ways of relating to them that, over time, make democracy, freedom of speech and internationalism seem more attractive as ways out of their predicament than tacit support for a cyber-caliphate or some notion of violent *jihad*.

Our job is trust – the building of the sort of relationships, at every level, which give rise to (all too hypothetical) comments like: “Well, if the Americans – or the British - say that, it *must* be true.” How do we do it? Well, lesson one is that trust isn't something that – as we so often hear said – can be purposefully built. Trust is an odd commodity, like a fist, or a lap, those elusive parts of the body that are sometimes there and sometimes not. As an eminent British theorist of trust said to a conference we organized recently, “You can't *build* trust. There are only three things you can do with trust: give it, earn it and fritter it away.”⁶

I maintain that the job of public diplomacy is to earn trust. It is a long-term, not a short-term activity. Of course there is a whole dimension of short-term concerns in public diplomacy: how actually to deal with the consequences of short-term news and political cycles. But we need to be clear that most such activities are the consequences of long-term failure. If we spent as much time earning trust as we spend earning dollars, pounds and euros, a good deal of this fire-fighting would be being done in a much more amenable environment.

Earning trust: the phrase has a thoroughly moral ring to it – and so it should, because the generation of trust is the bedrock of a free society. We are talking about global social capital. A public diplomacy based on trust-earning has two levels of objective, one national and the second international. Nationally, there is a competition to be trusted: our hypothetical comment here would be something like “Well, if the Americans - or the British – say it, it's much more likely to be true than if the Ruritians say it.”

This is important, and for many will itself be an end-product in national public diplomacy. Another comment made during our research in the Near East was the remark by an Egyptian respondent (from which neither you nor we can draw much comfort) that “tuning to the BBC does not mean that people accept everything aired as the ultimate

⁶ Onora O'Neill, former Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge and 2002 Reith Lecturer on *A Question of Trust*.

truth, but when compared to CNN, the BBC is regarded more favourably, in the same way that Britain looks grey compared to the black US”. But in that depressingly negative comparison is the germ of an answer – and the answer is constant, low-level, effort to be *trustworthy*.

There is a higher level. This involves recognizing on a practical rather than just a theoretical plane the consequences of globalization. The first consequence is that not just capital and communication flows, but ethical currents too, are global. We can no longer behave in one way at home and another around the world and expect to get away with it. If illustration is needed, it is to be found in the way the recent European tour of Secretary Rice – she of America’s dialogue with the world – was dominated by European concerns about extraordinary rendition and torture. Or the flashing round the world of digital images from Camp Breadbasket and Abu Ghreib. Behaviours and attitudes that aren’t acceptable in London or Washington can no longer be confidently deployed in Islamabad or Bagram or Tashkent – and particularly so when we preach as consistently as we do the virtues of democracy, human rights and liberty. The globalized market for ideas and ethics is increasingly transparent, and other traders than us know very well how to arbitrage it.

The second consequence flows from the first. Interdependence in this increasingly transparent world demands that we mutualize our ethical standards and behaviours. The British Foreign Office describes itself as “Advancing Britain’s interests in a juster, more prosperous and more secure world”, a phrasing which seems admirably to recognize the dependence of any nation’s interests on the quality of life for the people of the rest of the planet.

Among the many problems that such a view of public diplomacy faces are the ineluctably short term frame of reference that most policy-making actually has; and the lingering ‘untrustability’ of government. Both are addressed, to different degrees by demonstrative, ostentatious independence. I don’t mean by this that public diplomacy organizations should be free agents, flouncing round the world independently of their governments’ policies and positions, taking moral stances on policy that conflict with government imperatives. Far from it. What I have no doubt of though, is that the job of promoting a nation’s position globally is complex and can be usefully segmented. The Egyptian I quoted a moment ago knows very well that the BBC is ‘owned’ and funded by the British government, and makes his assessments of its trustworthiness in that light. He also – and for the same reasons – allows the trustworthiness of the BBC to reflect back upon the government that owns it and allows it an independence that is quite unthinkable in Egyptian terms.

The same is true of the British Council: as another Egyptian put it, “having too close and obvious an association between the two [British Council and British Embassy] may not be helpful”. There is no suggestion that the Council isn’t part of the representation of the UK abroad, or that it should pretend not to be: of course it is, and of course it shouldn’t. But the *visible* distance, the arm’s length relationship that we maintain, is vital. The message is clear: our job is to represent Britain and its cultures and peoples, not simply the government of the day. We are here – we say – for the long term, and a good deal less vulnerable to the short-cycle vicissitudes of international relations than are our embassies. As Gamal Abdel Nasser recognized when, in the thick of the Suez crisis, expatriate British Council staff were finally withdrawn, long after their diplomatic colleagues: he ordered the Egyptian staff to keep the British Council open.

Since 9/11, and since the July bombings of last year in London, we have all thought a great deal about security, and most public diplomacy discussions are shaped, at least subliminally, by that thinking. But this too needs to be looked at in terms of segmenting efforts. There is, it goes without saying, a vital, central place for the work of our security services in detecting and neutralizing threats to public security; a vital, central place for our diplomats in steering our relations with countries around the world in directions that serve our national interests; and there is a vital, central place for those who handle information, explanation, rebuttal, briefing and crisis-management.

But there is also a role, just as vital and just as central, for the operators of a self-confident, long-term public diplomacy, a public diplomacy of engagement and trust-earning. Like every organization in our business, we have been thinking hard in recent years – and months – about what we can most effectively do to address the widespread alienation of young people across the world that leads to aggression, despair and occasionally violence. There are pressures on all actors in this arena to come up with quick fixes – actions and programmes that address a supposed “radicalization” of Muslim youth. Actions that can be held up for approbation in speeches and manifestos. Conceived in this way these would be essentially quick-fix political actions with a low expectation of impact, because they would not recognize the long-term nature of the problem; and because they would begin by imposing an external and contested analysis on the phenomena they address.

Precisely because public diplomacy is a long-term business, we are now reaping the results of our investment in it in the past. Particularly, perhaps, of the mid to late 1990s, when our eyes were focussed on eastern Europe and not on Afghanistan, Iraq or the wider ‘Muslim world’. By the same token, our investment now will not bear fruit in 12 or 24 months – and it is naive to suggest that it will. If we have a function in the earning of trust, we are talking about a decade, even perhaps a generation, of hard work. It means building links of every kind, personal, educational, political and cultural. It means purposefully joining in the weaving of dense and complex fabrics of interconnection and interdependence. Our purpose should be to identify places in this great weaving process where honest, open intervention can make a difference to the building of transnational civil society.

Arguably the greatest public diplomacy success in Europe during the last 50 years has been the massive exchange of young people between France and Germany after the last war. Thousand upon thousand of young people were given direct experience of their recent ‘enemy’; and the result is a closeness amongst that Franco-German generation – the generation that still leads Europe - which was unimaginable in 1945. At the same time the UK, with no such instrument of mass interchange of young people, struggles with the legacy of an unresolved relationship with Germany: only last month a BBC motoring correspondent caused a fairly typical controversy by reviewing a German car as having ‘thousand year brake pads’ and a GPS that took the driver inexorably into Poland. The triumphs of the US in this area include the building of lasting personal links through Marshall and Fulbright schemes.

Our work after the terrorist violence of the first years of this century, and as similar attacks continue to be a feature of the landscape, is straightforward, but not easy. It is to build understanding and earn trust. By increasing familiarity and personal connections between young people of different cultures, by encouraging travel and language-learning,

sport and professional interdependence, we build the mentalities of the future and condition choices that will be made, perhaps far, in the future. It isn't a quick fix, and amongst our greatest challenges is to continue arguing successfully for this patient, long-term approach while editorialists and politicians demand tangible results yesterday.

I'll end by acknowledging, very willingly, that it is not just us in the public diplomacy business who are preoccupied with trust. In the UK a good deal of work has been done (but not, I think, published) by the No. 10 Strategy Unit on the 'drivers of trust', a phrase which elegantly sidesteps the building/earning issue. The results are very interesting. They are ranked in order of importance, as follows:

1. Perceived trustworthiness
2. Intention
3. Listening and learning
4. Respecting
5. Knowledge and familiarity
6. Competence.

It gives me a good deal of comfort to see 'perceived trustworthiness' in first place. It sits on top of a pyramid, like the performer standing on the shoulders of another five acrobats. These five beefy gentlemen, with their stripy shirts and waxed moustaches, are a very good image of the elements of a successful public diplomacy. The glosses are mine – and come from an explicitly public diplomacy angle, which I'll ask No. 10 to forgive me for.

Intention: the clarity and openness of purpose which does not deny national interest but sets it in a wider and generously understood global context. Our motives need to be open and well understood. They will not always be popular, but engaged disagreement is preferable to a dissimulation that will almost always be revealed, and seldom at a time of our choosing.

Listening and learning: the clear apprehension that successful public diplomacy is not about messages but about the quality of listening and the way we internalize and implement what we hear. There is a mode of listening to be deployed here which I call 'demonstrative listening' – the sort of representation that the great actors of the English stage, men like Garrick and Kemble and Betterton, understood very well. It involved exaggerated gesture and emphatic facial expression in poses that could be engraved and labelled 'Surprise', 'Horror' and 'Love'. In other words it is not enough simply to listen: we need to show that we are listening, by *the way* we publish, comment, respond and rebut.

Respecting: a commitment to equitable relationships (what we in the British Council would call 'mutuality'); and an acknowledgement that history has, in different ways, usually privileged Western cultures in their dialogue with others, so that the onus is often on us rather than our interlocutors to display respect in the first instance. Respect is rather like trust in this way – it must be given before it can be returned. *Demanding*

respect is always seen as aggressive and counterproductive. *Giving* it yields remarkable dividends.

Knowledge and familiarity: the need for familiarity with other cultures has never been greater as ICT, travel and migration bring us nose-to-nose with the rest of our world. But ignorance is remarkable. In the UK foreign language learning seems to be in disastrous decline (though when we say this we often forget those of us who speak Urdu and Gujarati, Bengali, Persian and Farsi as second languages). Survey after survey shows staggering levels of popular ignorance about – and lack of interest in – ‘abroad’, both in your country and ours. This is not a platform for successful public diplomacy, and we need to be actively conscious of the ‘reverse mandate’, the responsibility that we all have for increasing that understanding by bringing home the world’s thinking.

Competence: we know – and need no convincing – that public diplomacy is a highly professional business. But if I am right about where its future lies, it will demand of us a fast-moving and fast-developing skill-set. We need to rethink what competence means in the public diplomacy business; and we need to start training ourselves for it now.

And finally – the acrobat on the top of the human pyramid, with the biggest biceps and the waxiest moustaches of all: **Perceived Trustworthiness**, wobbling but still up there.

Long may he retain his balance.

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