


Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Tarnishing of What Should Be Public Diplomacy's Golden Age ^[1]

Technology is running amok, trampling public diplomacy efforts for almost everyone.

Because of its misuse by most, Satellite TV technology is worsening, rather than aiding efforts to communicate with publics abroad. The ease by which TV satellites can be accessed to distribute signals to practically anywhere, has caused professional communicators to become lazy, and to run their efforts on autopilot.

The trashing of public diplomacy is not really the fault of technology. It is the fault of those who abuse the tool, and who are dazzled to distraction by it.

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy defines public diplomacy as "focusing on the ways in which a country (or multi-lateral organization such as the United Nations) communicates with citizens in other countries." Going a step further is the US Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World , which calls public diplomacy outright "promotion of the national interest."

But public diplomacy has been found to be most effective, not by radiating messages to the masses by TV satellites, but through credible interlocutors who are locally regarded with great esteem, and whose views and opinions are accepted by the masses. As Sir James Fitzjames Stephen remarked in 1873, "The way in which the man of genius rules is by persuading an efficient minority to coerce an indifferent and self-indulgent majority."

During the Cold War, in our worldwide television operation in the administration of President Ronald Reagan at the now-defunct U.S. Information Agency, we used a hybrid of this model, that had become known as a two-step flow of communication. The concept was advanced in the 1950s by professors Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, and involved not only the central participation by an esteemed individual who was believed by the majority, but also one who was able to explain complex issues in simple, understandable language. The individual was also expert in interpreting issues, to relate them through symbols and gestures to the cultural heritage of audiences, much as early Greek philosophers instructed their students in poetry.

Our philosophers, as it were, at the USIA on our TV satellite broadcasts, were recognized, authoritative news reporters and commentators, TV celebrities in their respective countries, who had great credibility with their audiences. We had them participate in our programming to good advantage in gaining public support abroad on controversial issues, such as the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the need to strengthen NATO by placing "defensive" missiles on European soil aimed at the Soviet Union, and the "Star Wars" missile program whose objective was to destroy enemy missiles in space, to name only a few.

Today, in the era of easy access to TV satellites, the only thing that seems to matter is the

size of the audience. TV systems that are state supported, like al Jazeera, or supported by viewer licensing fees, like the BBC, fashion themselves as independent, commercial broadcasters in search of commercial sponsors. Al Jazeera seeks advertisers in the US for its planned English news channel, while the BBC wants to sell space on its web site to commercial sponsors, to the dismay of private entrepreneurs who do not have the cushion of public funding. The BBC has also recently touted record worldwide audience figures for its radio facilities, in surveys funded by the BBC.

Unlike the U.S. Information Agency of old, which fashioned its program approach based on how Plato would instruct his students, and communication models formulated by the world's leading social scientists, the U.S. government's latest offering on its TV satellite service to Iran defies description. The Chicago Tribune reports that America's TV satellite service to Iran, to help precipitate a regime change there, as America prepares to discuss nuclear issues with Iran's president, features a young actress wearing a short skirt and leather boots, who takes viewers on a tour by rock bands that appear in underground garages.

It's not at all like the satellite TV programs we would prepare in advance of President Reagan's summit meetings with the Soviet "Evil Empire."
