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Public Relations, Pelosi, and the U.S. Public Diplomacy Machine [1]

U.S. public diplomacy programs aim to cultivate connections between foreign publics and the United States, which in theory fosters greater understanding of the United States, its motivations, and ultimate policy objectives. It should make sense of U.S. politics and reveal a more "objective" picture of the stewards of U.S. policy, who act at the behest of the American people. And it's not an exact science. Strongly entrenched negative views about the U.S. in the Middle East (and elsewhere) continue to push the State Department towards new ideas for how this can be accomplished.

One of the more recent efforts involved the State Department seeking the advice of the public relations community in a conference in January of this year. A report on this conference was released on April 12, summarizing how public diplomacy should be the province of U.S. business just as much as the responsibility of the government. In my previous posts on this topic, I noted some concerns about how more business-oriented notions like "branding" and ideas related to marketing might not be compatible with the idealistic goals of public diplomacy, nor with the reality of how nation "brands" accumulate loyalty. Nevertheless, the conference was an exercise in re-imagining something that might "work" in the long run.

But I think that the conference reaffirms a more general observation: public diplomacy is an abstraction of nearly everything that communicates the ideas public diplomacy planners believe should be persuasive for foreign audiences – U.S. values, ideas, and institutions. Reaching out to the PR industry is more than just looking for new communication competencies. It's recognition that there's a lot out there that speaks for America. R. Nicholas Burns, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, stated at the conference that public diplomacy should involve activities that communicate "…about values, our way of life, our use of power. We can win the battle of economic ideas, but we need the public diplomacy machine to win it." By "machine," he implied the added footprint of U.S. business around the world.

At the most basic level – this conference validates the now obvious notion that the touch-points foreign publics share with the U.S. are a kind of public diplomacy. The point of contact, whether it is through pop culture, economic activity, media representation, or military force, speaks volumes about the U.S. Of course the loudest voice in the sphere of U.S. public diplomacy has been U.S. foreign policy itself, and the concurrent flow of administration arguments to justify its wildly unpopular Middle East strategy. So that's the de facto public diplomacy – teaching the Arab world about U.S. intentions.

So how does "actual" public diplomacy (or as the historian Nicholas Cull quips, "the people who get paid to do it") compete with the megaphone of U.S. Middle East policy? That's been the burning question since the flood of reports calling for better public diplomacy began in

2001.

Let’s take Radio Sawa as an example. Radio Sawa is currently beamed to Arab countries that have strongly negative views about the United States. It is a mix of popular Western and Arab music, and it also includes venues for audience participation and "objective" news reporting. Norman Pattiz, the communications leader responsible for Radio Sawa claimed in 2002 that:

> "Our mission is a journalistic one," said Pattiz. "Our mission is to promote freedom and democracy through the free flow of accurate, reliable, and credible news and information about America to audiences overseas. Our mission is to be an example of a free press in the American tradition."

Basically, Sawa cultivates a familiarity with the journalistic values endemic to U.S. culture. It represents U.S. democracy. I would argue that while stations like Sawa are probably helpful in the long run, policy planners need to understand the communicative impact of U.S. politics more generally. Arab media coverage of U.S. political events teaches about U.S. culture as well. Analysis of this coverage reveals what message is getting across, and how the U.S. is being interpreted. That’s relevant for U.S. public diplomacy.

For example, what better way to convey the workings of a democracy than an election? One could argue that the 2006 November elections, which witnessed a dramatic transfer of political power in the United States, was demonstrative of U.S. values and institutions in a very direct way. How did the Arab press cover it?

Jihad El-Khazen declared in the November 9 edition of the pan-Arab Al-Hayat:

> "I expected that Bush and the Republicans would lose, but the extent of their defeat was beyond my expectations, despite remarkable indications at the eleventh hour. In their electioneering, the Republican candidates propagated the belief that they had nothing to do with President Bush and his 'shipwreck.'"

Across Arab media outlets, both online and in print, the event was heralded as a repudiation of the Bush administration's policies. More important for public diplomacy, this was often framed as a transition of power *carried out by the will of the American people* . The election was not depicted as rigged. It was democracy in action.

Fast forward a few months to Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s controversial visit to Syria in early April of 2007. While the U.S. media worked itself into a momentary (and largely unwarranted) frenzy over whether the trip was appropriate, this moment was also an event laden with public diplomacy implications. Could this trip demonstrate the pluralistic nature of American politics, and counter Arab media portrayals of the Bush administration as an autocratic and ideological regime? Ultimately, how did the Pelosi visit function as part of the "public diplomacy machine?"

The results are not entirely encouraging, and reflect a cynicism in Arab media over the direction of American politics and possibilities for U.S. policy change. The very same Jihad El-Khazen stated in the April 10 issue of Al-Hayat that:

I hope that no Arab, especially in Syria, would misunderstand the truth about the policy of the head of the Democratic majority in Congress.

El-Khazen was reminding his audience that there are less differences between Bush's policies and those of his Democratic opponents than probably imagined. Meanwhile, a public opinion poll conducted on Al-Arabiya.com on April 11 revealed that a large number of people believed Pelosi's visit to Syria was "merely a struggle between the two main parties in the United States," rather than a significant change in U.S. policy. Much of the coverage on Arab television outlets Al-Jazeerah and Al-Arabiya reflected the frame that the visit was a political maneuver, and some commentators noted that Syria was using the event as stunt for its own propaganda efforts.

Despite the *political competition frame* that dominated Arab coverage of the trip, it generally did show that competition was possible in the politics of American foreign policy. And that in itself may be constructive for public diplomacy. Representing U.S. foreign policy as something more than the whim of a President works toward demonstrating the democratic political culture of the United States.

Events such as these are significant moments. They impact the ongoing ebb and flow of messages that define and contextualize public diplomacy. Their representation in media concretizes the symbolic communication in public diplomacy. And, these events are often beyond the control of public diplomacy planners. This means that those responsible for public diplomacy need to be attentive to the actions that speak for the United States, and their subsequent representation in crucial foreign publics. The Rapid Response media analysis unit formed by Karen Hughes is an obvious example of this kind of attention. Also, there is a paradigmatic (or at least stated) trend spreading through the State Department to understand that every action, every foreign service officer, and every public statement they make carries some form of public diplomacy quotient. While the State Department seems to be "getting" this point – I wonder about the rest of U.S. leadership. The "public diplomacy machine" is the product of communicative action (both intentional, symbolic, or otherwise). If this is true, what can we expect if our politics communicates our values?