

Nov 04, 2016 by *Johanna Blakley*

Entertainment, Politics & Cultural Diplomacy ^[1]

When it comes to entertainment, leisure and play, people generally exercise more freedom of choice than in any other realm of modern life. They choose to watch a movie, play chess, go to a concert, or go shopping because they find it amusing. In short, look at the way people entertain themselves and you'll discover what people wish to do *for one's own sake*. If you're looking for a window into the global village, to assess its condition and its attitudes toward every imaginable aspect of contemporary life, there can be no better portal than global entertainment.

Last month, the Norman Lear Center, a research institute located at the USC Annenberg School, released findings from the second in a series of surveys we're conducting with Zogby International. The goal of the surveys has been to ascertain whether there is a connection between an individual's political beliefs and their entertainment and leisure preferences.

The stakes for cultural diplomacy are quite high: it has been notoriously difficult to prove that cultural diplomacy is an effective method to communicate a communal set of values across international borders. The Zogby/Lear Center surveys – which have been conducted exclusively in the United States so far, though we plan to take them global – reveal a strong connection between the way people amuse themselves and their political convictions. In addition, we found a remarkable willingness among respondents to admit to the impact that fictional entertainment has on their behavior in the real world.

The Zogby/Lear Center survey is unique in a few fundamental ways. Instead of asking respondents to describe their own political ideology, we created a political typology based on how respondents evaluated 42 statements about political values. Using statistical clustering analysis, the typology revealed three significant clusters of respondents: "reds," as we decided to call them, make up 41% of the national sample, while "blues" comprise 34% and "purples" 24%. The same respondents were asked about their preferred leisure-time activities and their favorite radio and TV shows, Web sites, movies, games and sports. The online survey was conducted August 19–28, 2008, including 3,167 adults nationwide and carrying a margin of error of +/- 1.8 percentage points. A previous survey, using the same political typology, was administered in June 2007.

Each of the three groups has distinctly different demographic characteristics, political beliefs and entertainment preferences (profiles of each group are available here). In fact, in the 2007 survey, we found that if the ideological group on the conservative end of the spectrum (Reds) demonstrated a preference for a certain TV or film genre, then it was very likely that the group on the liberal end of the spectrum (Blues) would demonstrate a distaste for that genre, and vice versa. Even the group in the middle of the spectrum (Purples) tended to gravitate toward

genres that the other groups disliked, except for dramatic and educational programming.

In the 2008 survey, we found that each group preferred different games (Reds selected Monopoly, Purples Scrabble, and Blues Trivial Pursuit) as well as different TV shows (the top pick for Reds was *Sunday Night Football*, while Purples chose *Law & Order: SVU* and Blues picked *60 Minutes*).

What respondents did tend to agree about, however, was that entertainment media –whether it intends to or not – contains political messages:

Eighty-four percent of all respondents confirmed that fictional TV shows and movies cannot avoid being political. That helps to explain why a majority of respondents (65%) admitted that they learn about political issues when they watch fictional TV shows or movies. We went on to ask whether they had ever taken action based on something they learned in a fictional TV show or movie and – as we have found repeatedly in our studies on TV and its impact on health behavior – we found that a large majority admit that they had:

Only 21% of respondents claimed they had not taken action, with another 5% saying they were not sure. It's important to note that we asked respondents to set aside news, documentaries and talk shows – programming that audiences expect to accurately depict the “real world.” Most people attend to the news, and news-related media, to gather information about the world and make informed decisions in their own lives. But our survey suggests that fictional programming also plays a key role in people's real lives, igniting curiosity and inciting conversations that may not have taken place otherwise.

The issue for cultural diplomacy is not necessarily whether the import and export of cultural products has an effect on people – I think there's no doubt that it does, and this survey demonstrates that audiences are aware of the impact that it has on them personally. More at issue for the United States is finding a way to accurately represent a populace that is deeply divided in terms of its ideological beliefs and its consumption of “popular” culture. Many have argued that blockbuster films tell more about the U.S. to foreign audiences than any governmental campaign ever could. However, U.S. blockbusters tend to tell a very limited set of stories about American life, mainly because they are designed, from inception, for global audiences (where filmmakers make over half of their box office revenue) and for a very small slice of the domestic audience – mainly young men. Even after a record-breaking summer U.S. box office, 41% of our respondents said they hadn't seen any of the films on our list (including *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man* and *Indiana Jones*). Consequently, the blockbuster films that many regard as a potent form of U.S. cultural diplomacy represent the cultural taste of a minority of Americans, many of whom are frustrated by the outlandish images of “America” flickering across screens in the global multiplex.

No doubt the United States would benefit from a sophisticated series of cultural diplomacy programs that make some effort to communicate a more nuanced portrait of American culture abroad. However, the Lear Center/Zogby survey also suggests that the U.S. and the international community would benefit from a program that exposes more Americans to foreign cultural products. When we asked respondents in 2008 how often they enjoy entertainment that was not made in the United States, almost half of Reds, the largest ideological group, said they “never” enjoy foreign entertainment. Forty-one percent of Purples

answered similarly. In our 2007 survey, we also asked what type of music they like: surprisingly, “world music” was the least popular genre for Reds, faring worse than punk, hip-hop, jazz and electronic music.

One of the most stinging rebukes we suffer from the international community is that Americans are insular in their taste and dismissive of foreign culture. We cannot blame Americans for any preference they may have for their own cultural products – most people, no matter what their nationality, prefer products that have been made with their specific taste in mind. In fact, most imported cultural products suffer some type of “cultural discount” upon introduction to a foreign market. Ironically, the wealth of domestic entertainment products has saturated distribution channels in the U.S., contributing to the formation of a self-proclaimed anti-cosmopolitan audience. This not only harms the U.S. image abroad, but deprives domestic audiences of the opportunity to discover other languages, other cultures and other ways of seeing themselves. In purely economic terms, U.S. citizens would surely benefit from a deeper competitive knowledge of the global marketplace.

The results from these surveys would be even more useful to the public diplomacy community if they were to reach beyond U.S. shores. Governments, industry and academia would be served well by a series of global opinion surveys that create a baseline for information about the reception of global entertainment products around the world. The results so far buttress the argument for funding cultural diplomacy programs, and they demonstrate the urgency of doing so in the United States in particular.
