

Nov 04, 2016 by *Emily T. Metzgar*

On Missed Opportunities ^[1]

In late June, *The Washington Post* had an article highlighting efforts by the American Embassy in Islamabad to correct the record when inaccuracies about the United States appear in the Pakistani press. Then, last Friday, the weekly public radio show *On the Media* had an interview with the lead spokesman for the United States Embassy in Islamabad, Larry Schwartz to discuss the effort reported in *The Washington Post's* earlier article.

Both media items offer valuable insight into the challenges official Americans face overseas as they work to present policy accurately while simultaneously acknowledging the range of opinions often held by Americans on those same issues.

Both media items also shed light on the frustrations U.S. officials feel as falsehoods, misrepresentations and malicious interpretations of actual facts about the United States are presented to often already suspicious foreign populations. For American diplomats serving abroad, addressing these challenges is part of the job description.

But the recent appearance of those two items in national media also highlights a few facts about the importance of context, or lack thereof, in reporting of international issues in American media. And this in turn points to the need for expanding our understanding of the practice of public diplomacy – both abroad and at home.

First, the appearance of *The Washington Post* article on June 27 followed by the *On the Media* report on July 10 is a neat illustration of the intermedia agenda-setting effect in action. That's the academic description of a phenomenon recognized in both domestic and international reporting: When one media outlet reports on a subject, other media outlets are likely to follow suit, either by re-reporting the already-known facts or attempting to add to the story with additional reporting or commentary. This phenomenon plays out every day in media outlets from *The New York Times* and NPR to *TMZ* and *The National Enquirer*. It's the dynamic at the core of our understanding of pack journalism. Where one media outlet leads others inevitably follow.

Second, although any thoughtful coverage of foreign policy issues is always welcome in the American media context, both aforementioned pieces fail to overcome a common problem in American reporting and commentary: episodic versus thematic framing of issues and events. Briefly described, that problem is understood as the media's tendency to offer blow-by-blow reporting of the newest facts without connecting those facts to a broader context – a context necessary for understanding the significance of the facts at hand. In short, neither of these two articles refers to the Embassy's efforts as what they are: public diplomacy. Indeed, these two stories can only be seen as missed opportunities to raise awareness about public diplomacy among American journalists, and by extension, the American public.

These omissions raise the question of whether American public diplomacy efforts are overlooking a key audience: American journalists. Blasphemy? Perhaps. But consider it for a

moment.

The Department of State spends millions on sponsored exchange programs to bring foreign journalists to the United States for exposure to the American press and political system. Indeed, just this spring the State Department issued a call for proposals to establish a program for bringing Pakistani journalists and public policy experts to the United States. Clearly such an effort is not unrelated to recently reported efforts to improve impressions of the United States in Pakistan.

But is it enough to address just one side of the equation? Should the United States be dedicating some resources to ensuring that American journalists themselves understand the priorities of public diplomacy outreach efforts? To ensure that American journalists can recognize public diplomacy efforts on their face? To help American journalists do a better job of critiquing and praising American public diplomacy efforts around the world? To provide context for discussions about efforts to improve the American image abroad?

The institutions of American public diplomacy, undergirded as they are by the outdated Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and other related legislation are, in practice, kept from undertaking full-fledged public relations efforts in the United States. Indeed, by some interpretations, they are prevented from allowing stateside Americans easy access to the content they produce. But the media and political environment in which those regulations were imposed is long-gone and there is growing awareness of the need for an overhaul of that legislative regime.

While a full-throated argument in support of modernizing the Smith-Mundt Act is well beyond the purview of this piece, politely suggesting that nascent discussions of such reform should include consideration of outreach to American journalists is not. Does it matter if U.S. journalists recognize and understand the priorities of American public diplomacy efforts abroad? It should.

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