

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alex Franklin*

Hollywood: Cultural Diplomacy at Its Loudest and Angriest ^[1]

There seems to be a consensus that Hollywood has a huge impact on America's image around the world. There just doesn't seem to be any consensus on what to do about that.

Hollywood movies and television shows can tell stories of the triumph of the human spirit. They can tell stories of Americans working to overcome adversity and tragedy. They can show stories of love and loss and redemption. But the movies and television shows that tend to receive the most attention and incite the loudest reactions here and abroad are the ones that show the excesses of freedom: sex, violence, and the worst crimes and behaviors of our citizens.

There's been a great deal written about the extreme content of these films and shows and the people responsible: They go too far. This is bad for society. Hollywood is trying to bring about the downfall of Western Civilization.¹ Well has anyone bothered to talk to 'Hollywood' about this? And exactly whom are you supposed to talk to? Well, for starters you can talk to me.

I work in the movie business and for several years I was a Studio Executive. My specialty was horror movies, including some of the most violent, graphic ones ever made. A New York film critic labeled these movies "torture porn" although I think he meant it as a compliment. Ask me about my work, and ask me whether Hollywood thinks about the effect of our movies and television shows on America's image and I'll tell you the answer: No. We don't.

Hollywood is unique among American industries because what we produce lies squarely at the intersection of art and commerce. Our movies and television shows, which are among America's most popular cultural exports, sometimes cost hundreds of millions of dollars to make and they are financed by gigantic corporations, but at their core, these cultural exports are the artistic creations of individuals thus they are protected by the first amendment.

Neal Rosendorf notes the predicament this causes for those in the field of public diplomacy and foreign policy:

The hard part of all this for the U.S. government is that it has limited influence over the content and international marketing goals of Hollywood's film and TV offerings, and no way to know what will or won't be popular, at home or abroad... to a considerable extent, U.S. policy formulators will have to keep doing what they've always reluctantly done about the export of popular culture, that critical but unpredictable element of soft power. They'll have to bite their nails, cross their fingers, and have faith that on balance the entertainment industry will serve, not

undermine, the goals of American public diplomacy.

Don't expect much cooperation from Hollywood. We're not interested in that balance. Our primary goal is escapism, and the most escapist movies and shows are the ones that display the worst elements of American culture. Simply put, those who consume our entertainment content in mass quantities are more interested in stories about sex and violence than they are in stories of responsibility and civil obedience. And that will never change.

Even our greatest diplomatic minds struggle to identify solutions. In *American Idol After Iraq*, Nathan Gardels writes about an interview with Madeleine Albright in which she says:

What to do is something of a conundrum for a liberal society feeling its way into a future where information spreads everywhere nearly instantly. "We can't be in favor of censorship, of course," Albright continues. "What we're left with is a plea to the creators of entertainment that they must develop a sense of propriety. They have to develop a sense of civic responsibility -- only with a global scope because that is the world we live in today."²

Ms. Albright's plea will never work. Hollywood is in the business of entertaining people. We think that it's our responsibility to create and produce whatever we think the public wants. And we will never let propriety or civic responsibility get in the way of doing that. Ask us if we worry about the global impact of our product and the most honest answer you'll get is that we don't think that's our job, and the first amendment, in most of our minds, validates that idea.

In fact, I'll take it a step further. On occasion, a movie or television show does have some kind of cultural impact. If that impact is positive, or something that the creators and producers intended, you'll often see them taking full credit. But if the impact is negative or unintended, you'll rarely see anyone admitting a mistake or taking responsibility. The pervasive feeling in Hollywood is that the first amendment absolves us in Hollywood from any result that we didn't intend.

So what are people responsible for protecting and improving America's image and foreign relations supposed to do about the often-negative impact of Hollywood on America's soft power? What are people engaged in public and cultural diplomacy supposed to do about people like me?

You can try to go over my head. It won't work. The media moguls will tell you their hands are tied. They'll tell you that their responsibility is to run businesses, not to discourage creativity. They will defend all of the worst content Hollywood produces by telling you that it's their job to do whatever is necessary to keep thousands of people employed. And they're right. Besides, it's not these moguls and leaders who are making the real creative decisions anyway.

The answer is that practitioners of public and cultural diplomacy have to figure out a new way to understand the people like me who create Hollywood content. And that includes writers who write scripts filled with sex and violence in order to get noticed. That includes filmmakers who put lurid and shocking images into their films and shows in order to get higher ratings or bigger box office. That includes studio and network executives who sift through the piles of

new scripts and ideas and choose the most exploitative ones because we think that's what audiences will like. If you really want to understand the culture of Hollywood, then these are the people you need to understand: the working class of Hollywood who write, direct and produce this stuff because we're trying to achieve the American dream.

For my part, I'm going to try to help improve that understanding. In the coming months, I'm going to examine some of Hollywood's most violent and extreme movies and television shows, its loudest and angriest cultural exports, and talk to the working class men and women who made them. I'm going to ask them about their reasons for making these movies and television shows, whether they've ever considered the potential global impact of their content, and whether they care. And I will report what I find here on the CPD Blog.

For such a long time it has seemed like the agendas of Hollywood and Public Diplomacy are completely incompatible. And maybe that's true. In exploring this topic, I have absolutely no idea what will come of this. But bite your nails and cross your fingers, because this will not be gentle.

¹I always find it amusing that the same people who complain that Hollywood is controlled by bleeding heart liberals who hate America also complain that Hollywood is controlled by soulless corporations who will do anything to make money.

²*American Idol After Iraq: Competing For Hearts And Minds In The Global Media Age*, by Nathan Gardels and Mike Medavoy, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 (pg 94-95)
