

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mitchell Polman](#)

Secretary Clinton's Culture Complaint ^[1]

During recent testimony in front of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee Secretary of State Clinton made a splash when she commented, "I remember having an Afghan general tell me that the only thing he thought about Americans is that all the men wrestled and the women walked around in bikinis because the only TV he ever saw was Baywatch and World Wide Wrestling." She went on to comment about the effect American media has on the image of the U.S. abroad. Predictably, the significance of her remarks were lost in the usual cacophony of howls about Al Jazeera and Russian media. The pertinent question that has been left dangling is – if the secretary's comments are accurate then what do we do about it?

Anyone who has spent a modicum of time overseas has their stories to tell about how people they met perceive the U.S. Whether or not such concerns are valid or not it wouldn't hurt to do a few basic things to improve the foreign public's knowledge of American culture. There is no need to create new agencies, expensive new programs, or reinvent wheels to improve the information foreigners receive about the United States. Here are my suggestions:

The Secretary has already taken one important step by drawing attention to the problem. When was the last time a Secretary of State decided to make an issue of the way pop culture affects people's views of America? The Secretary, along with the President and First Lady, should speak out on this when they travel overseas. They can suggest to foreign audiences that they try to learn more about American society and culture. All three enjoy tremendous popularity overseas and they should use that popularity to make appeals to the foreign public on this topic. Nobody would consider it odd if a French, Italian, British, Chinese or Russian leader made a similar appeal. Nobody should consider it odd when an American leader does either. The First Lady's program to fight obesity is a good model. It won't work to tell people to stay away from junk pop culture, but making it clear that there are other forms of music, film, and other culture that emanate from America may spark people's interest.

More funding for television co-productions. The State Department continues to operate a program to fund television co-productions with foreign journalists. The program was begun by the U.S. Information Agency and brings both regional and national television and radio journalists from all over the world to produce documentaries about life in the United States. (Full disclosure: I have worked as a contract producer on State co-production projects.) Funding for co-productions has plunged in recent years. State is now producing roughly 5-10% the number of co-productions that it was making in 2004. Some productions do involve cultural themes, but perhaps a certain percentage per country or region should be guaranteed. In my personal view, too many of the co-productions involved journalists coming to America to interview immigrants from their country on their lives in the U.S. I have found myself talking to people overseas who have watched some of these productions. They do get watched and discussed.

How about talking to Al Jazeera and other foreign broadcasters about exchanging culture related documentaries? Given the private nature of the American media market it would be

difficult for the State Department to arrange for an American media outlet to carry a program related to, say – Qatari culture. However, such a programming swap may give foreign outlets an incentive to carry more U.S.-related programs that go beyond the usual pop cultural fare.

Make better use of foreign journalists who are already in the U.S. According to State's Foreign Media Press Center there were 1490 accredited foreign reporters in the U.S. in 2008 and the number was growing. Undoubtedly, there are even more who are not accredited. Many of these journalists have to work odd jobs as taxi drivers or waiters just to make ends meet in America and do not have the resources to travel outside of Washington. Their media outlets don't either. Even the journalists from better off countries rarely get to travel outside of Washington and New York. Perhaps State can hold grant competitions to cover travel expenses for journalists who want to venture outside of Washington to produce or write stories involving American culture.

Even small micro policy changes may make some difference. As an escort on the International Visitors Leadership Program I traveled with a group of conflict resolution specialists to Little Rock, Arkansas. I don't think any appointment we had made as strong an impression on them as the visit we paid to a popular local music club. The big Texan blues musician who was performing sat down and drank with my visitors. The visitors were surprised to see a young couple, a white man and a black woman, dancing together unmolested. However, cover charges (which go to the musicians) were not covered by the small "cultural allowance" that visitors are given. They have to be paid for with the per diems that cover meals. Not surprisingly, it can be difficult to get visitors to go to such places when they have to part with per diem funds for it. Cultural allowance could be used for movies, museums, and any number of other things, but not music clubs. This policy may have changed in recent years, but it is an example of the small things that hinder improved cultural exchange. There may be other similar small policies elsewhere with exchange programs like it.

I have written essays previously with suggestions about what the State Department can do to improve knowledge of American culture such as the need for more American Centers. I have also suggested a program to bring foreign history teachers to the U.S. to learn about U.S. history. Those efforts will take time to create. There are things we can do right now with resources that State already has to improve the situation. All that's needed is for some follow-up to the Secretary's lament.
