

Nov 04, 2016 by **Paul Rockower**

Stand-up Diplomacy: Humor as Public Diplomacy ^[1]

“If you are going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise, they’ll kill you.”

-George Bernard Shaw

I used to think that humor was one thing that didn’t translate in cross-cultural communication. In my travels, I had watched numerous attempts at jokes fail miserably as they got lost in translation or cultural nuances. Things often ended awkwardly amid the seemingly untranslatable nature of humor.

Looking For Comedy in the Muslim World

Yet when I was visiting Pakistan a number of years ago, I first saw the transmutable nature of humor while attending a concert in Lahore during *Basant*, a huge kite flying festival. Before the concert descended into riotous fun, there was a troupe of performers who took the stage for a little comedic interlude. I was surprised by the uncanny resemblance of a comedian to the *Seinfeld* character “Kramer,” complete with tall curly hair and similar “herky-jerky” mannerisms. Watching the “Pakistani Kramer” and some more recent comedic observations made me realize that, if done correctly, humor can be a potent force for public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is predicated on the communication of culture, values and ideas; humor represents a more oblique manner of communicating ideas, and therefore can be a powerful medium to conduct public diplomacy. The beauty of using humor as a means to transmit ideas is that the jovial nature of comedy can indirectly communicate weightier subjects in a lighthearted manner that can diffuse weighty realities.

In some regards, the influential nature of American humor can delve into notions of “soft power” related to Joseph Nye’s theories on attraction through culture. If imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, then one such example of American soft power can be seen through Egypt’s *El Koshary Today*, a satirical media endeavor akin to *The Onion* (“America’s Finest News Source”). While I have blogged a few times, semi-seriously, that Jon Stewart is the closest thing we have today to an Edward R. Murrow, and that he should be named chief of a reconstituted United States Information Agency, perhaps even Stewart’s style of satire constitutes a bit of soft power. With *Parazit*, considered the “Daily Show of Iran,” *Parazit*, considered the “Daily Show of Iran,” the Voice of America has found considerable audiences in Iran that tune in to the satirical programming casting fun at the Iranian regime and its idiosyncrasies — including many who wouldn’t usually tune in to VOA. I would also highlight the popularity of the VOA program *OMG Meiyu*, the teenybop language class production designed to teach American slang to China, as a point to burnish the case for a less serious

side of public diplomacy.

In the realm of people-to-people connections made through comedic interplay, perhaps nothing compares with live stand-up comedy. There have been iterations of comedy tours, such as the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, which helped challenge stereotypes and misconceptions of the Muslim world while walking an edgy politico-comedic line of satire. The program proved so popular that the comedy tour ended up with its own Comedy Central special.

More recently, a comedy tour called The Muslims are Coming barnstormed through the southern heartland America to help iconoclastically break stereotypes and perceptions about what it means to be a Muslim as well as satirize the Muslim-American experience. The troupe had Dixie in stitches, as they traveled through Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi to give free comedic performance in cafes, community centers, and theaters that light-heartedly dealt with issues of identity.

Finally, one of the more original public diplomacy ventures enacted by the U.S. State Department, has been to send an Indian-American comedy troupe to India for some comedic public diplomacy. Comprising three comedians of Indian origin- Rajiv Satyal, Hari Kondabolu, and Azhar Usman- the comedians poke fun at religious intolerance as a means to broach difficult discussions and bridge religious gaps. The “Make Chai Not War” tour kicked off on January 4th and visited seven Indian cities including Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, and Kolkata to carry out comedy shows and workshops. Regarding the tour, U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland stated:

The reason we decided to support this tour is because, among the things that they are known for is their talk about religious tolerance, about the importance of breaking down prejudices and about the positive experiences they had growing up as Indian-Americans in the United States.

Speaking to NPR’s All Things Considered, Michael Macy, the cultural affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy who helped arrange the tour, drew links to stand-up as a unique part of American culture. He stated, “This commitment to free speech, this commitment to free discussion of what can be difficult or sensitive topics, it's very American.” Rajiv Satyal, one of the comedians on the tour, elucidated the public diplomacy promise of the endeavor: “It's a measure of diplomacy and a message of religious harmony. We're not even really religious on stage. We might do some religious jokes, but it's more just bringing people together.”

The Make Chai Not War program is ultimately a brilliant public and cultural diplomacy move to communicate ideas of life in America and notions of American religious tolerance through a comedic voice—that the transmitters of that comedic voice also resemble the audience is doubly effective. Using comedy to communicate American cultures and values is both novel and effective. That the program was met with acclaim in India, and covered extensively and positively in both the Indian and American press underscores the importance of a bit of irreverence in public diplomacy.
