

Nov 04, 2016 by **R.S. Zaharna**

# **Culture Posts: Giving Voice to Publics** <sup>[1]</sup>

Last week, before the world caught on fire over a film clip, I wrote about the paradox of value promotion in public diplomacy. No matter how appealing promoting one's values may be, trying to do so in a global arena is fraught with difficulty. Yet, because values are integral to a nation's communication, public diplomacy will inevitably reflect those values. What's happening between the U.S. and publics in the Islamic world reflects the immediate consequence of the paradox of value promotion – both sides are trying to communicate what they value, but rather than being understood – they are less so.

The more they persist in their efforts, the more likely the cycle may escalate. In the long term, a battle over value promotion is a no-win scenario in today's global communication arena. To be savvy, public diplomacy strategists need to find ways to give voice and bring the public into the public diplomacy equation.

## **Value Contests**

Let me speak first to the immediate term, then the long term, of trying to play out value contests.

In the short term, value promotion can cause more misunderstanding rather than less. Greater misunderstanding often leads to greater frustration. Unresolved frustration often leads to anger. That's the chain.

There is also the communication chain. When people become frustrated that their verbal efforts to communicate aren't working, they often resort to more disparate physical means.

The chains explain how anger develops, but they do not justify violence – physical, verbal, or visual. It is important to recognize that verbal and visual violence can be as damaging to human spirit as physical violence is to the life and limb. Verbal assaults that strike the soul can take longer to heal than physical ones. Images seared in the mind are difficult to erase, if ever.

While anger may be the emotion, violence does not have to be the inevitable or the only avenue of expression.

## **Digital Protest Venues**

An immediate short term step that an entity can do in a crisis situation is to try to create public communication channels for publics to express strong emotion – confusion, discontent, anger. This strategy of capturing and trying to diffuse hostile public sentiment was done in several domestic U.S. crises by using the social media. One technique was setting up a 'gripe' Facebook page. A similar strategy was used in Singapore: the very same social media tools

that had been used to spark the public outrage were used to capture and contain that outrage.

Here is where U.S. public diplomacy must be creative and innovative in adapting its expertise in social media. Rather than using the tools to get the U.S. message out, the tools are creatively used to give others a voice.

Philip Seib, in a personal email, put a nice label on this strategy: it is “providing electronic protest venues.”

Naturally, there will be those whose interests are in promoting violence, not quelling it. However, physical forms of communication are costly. Most people seeking communication want to be heard and understood. By creating a credible a space or forum for verbal expression, the need or justification for physical expression becomes less pressing and others are less able to exploit public sentiment.

The need to give voice is not just an immediate short term strategy. Creating channels for publics to communicate -- or speak to power – is especially important for a superpower.

## **A Second Wakeup Call**

Since 9/11, much of public diplomacy has focused on how nations can get their messages out--how to strengthen their voices. Engagement and networks are more efficient strategies for communicating to or with publics.



If 9/11 was a wakeup call for state-centric public diplomacy; the events by publics over the past couple of years should be a second wakeup call to explore the public role in public diplomacy. Publics are participatory. They are networked. They are increasingly communication savvy.

Strategic public diplomacy is no longer communicating to or even with publics. It is integrating communication *from* publics.

For the U.S., as a superpower, it is not about “being heard,” but about giving voice to those who feel they are not. The U.S. may lament that it is not understood and feel compelled to work harder and shout louder.

But much of humanity across the globe shares that frustration of not being understood and wants to shout louder. Yet, unlike the U.S. government, they do not have the means or resources. That imbalance of communication power further fuels frustration.

## **Mutuality**

Building bridges in an interconnected world represents a mindshift in thinking from “mutual interests” to “mutuality” as the basis of global communication. The tendency is to look for mutual interests and benefits – finding what two parties have in common. If there is nothing in common, the one without power loses. “Mutuality,” as outlined in a British Council report , is unconditional recognition of the needs of the other. Kathy Fitzpatrick also wrote about  “mutuality” in her CPD fellowship .

To be effective in a connected network world, the U.S. as a superpower needs to shift its

perspective from thinking of “mutual interests and benefits” with equally powerful players to “mutuality” and adjusting its power with less powerful players. We live in an interconnected world. The publics around the world have seized on the reality. Adopting the mindset of mutuality will help ease the communication tensions and create communication bridges instead of battles.

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