Nov 04, 2016 by Gordon Robison

Internet Baseball [1]

Amman, Jordan

The last time the Boston Red Sox were in the World Series I was in Spain. It was 1986. I speak decent Spanish (or at least I did in those days) but soon figured out that Spain's newspapers were pretty much useless where baseball news was concerned. In Madrid and Barcelona you could generally get day-old copies of the *International Herald Tribune* if you knew where to look. Because night games in the US could not make the morning paper the news on the sports page was generally an extra day old. I had a short wave radio with me, but quickly made an odd discovery. As part, I assume, of its effort to be 'international' the Voice of America did not cover the World Series. Ironically, the BBC World Service (which studiously ignored baseball the rest of the year) did. Not live, mind you, but their daily sports program did an excellent three or four minute summary of each game. So except for one wonderful night when I was close enough to a US military base to pick up a scratchy signal on Armed Forces Radio, the BBC, perversely, was my baseball lifeline. This spared me having to suffer through live coverage of the end of Game 6 (fellow Red Sox fans know what I'm talking about). On balance, that might have been a good thing.

What a difference technology makes. As I write this (sporadically, between innings) it is 3:30am Sunday in Amman, the Red Sox are up 7-2 after three, and I am using the internet to listen to the game live on WEEI, the Red Sox flagship station in Boston. Major League Baseball charged me $9.95 for internet access to radio coverage of all of this year's post-season games. If I had a faster connection I could have bought TV coverage via the 'net for $14.95.

It is a cliché to say the internet has changed everything, but in many ways, it has. Al-Jazeera's editor in chief, Ahmed Al-Sheikh, speaks of a new world of media and information, something his own station is part of. It is not simply that the wide availability of satellite dishes has made it more difficult for local governments to block television pictures they do not like. Al-Jazeera's English-language website has become a staple for people seeking an alternative viewpoint on events in this region. As Al-Sheikh notes, when militants in Iraq behead a hostage Al-Jazeera may have a tape, but though they choose not to air it (contrary to popular belief in the US, Al-Jazeera has never aired an execution) the hostage-takers "have another conduit, if you want to use that word. They use it. And they are very good at putting these things on the web."

The web is also something the public diplomacy community has not really adapted to. For all the nostalgia one sometimes hears for the bygone days of USIA, that institution was set up to promote American culture, values and policies in a world that was not saturated by either satellite television or websites. Dealing with this new world, one in which non-state actors dominate the scene, requires fundamentally different approaches from those the US government used from the end of World War II through the early 1980s.

Information travels infinitely faster today. The US government has hardly begun to catch up.

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