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U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East

A Critical Cultural Approach

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A growing body of literature in the field of public relations has delved into the topic of public diplomacy; this growing interest in public diplomacy is juxtaposed in the backdrop of the recent increase in U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. Based on a critical analysis of U.S. pubic diplomacy strategies in the Middle East, the author argues that the traditional models of public diplomacy continue to circulate in current public diplomacy efforts. Drawing on a ritual model of communication and building on the theory of communicative action, the author articulates the need to apply a culture-centered approach in conducting international public diplomacy.

Keywords: *public diplomacy; public relations; subaltern studies; postcolonialism*

In the post-9/11 climate, one of the key strategies adopted by the Bush administration was the creation of the Office of Global Communications with the aim of winning over the hearts and minds of the people in the Middle East (Amr, 2004). The Office of Global Communications was assigned the important task of coordinating the global public relations efforts of the U.S. government through a variety of platforms such as advertisements, Web sites, radio programs, and news stories. U.S. public diplomacy efforts targeting the Middle East were intensified and greatly expanded under the direction of former advertising executive Charlotte Beers who was assigned the task of heading the State Department efforts (Amr, 2004). This recent increase in U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East is juxtaposed in the backdrop of the increasing attention given to the topic by public relations scholars (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Wang & Chang, 2004).

This surge in public diplomacy targeted to shift public opinion elsewhere in the world provides an excellent opportunity for interrogating the phenomenon and locating it within a lens of critical scholarship. A critical interrogation is particularly relevant, given the growth in public relations scholarship on public diplomacy that takes a more tactical approach to public diplomacy as an image-building exercise (Taylor, 2000a, 2000b; Wang & Chang, 2004). This body of scholarship, primarily targeting international public relations in the realm of government activities, assumes a skills-

based approach to public relations, suggesting strategies and tactics for improving public diplomacy efforts, without really challenging the dominant framework that continues to drive public diplomacy efforts.

In this article, I take a historical look at U.S. public diplomacy strategies in the Middle East and locate these strategies in the context of the past and present efforts of public diplomacy in the region. U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East were initiated in the Cold War climate of the 1950s to prevent the spread of the Soviet alliance, to maintain Western control on Middle Eastern oil resources, and to counter the anti-Western feelings created by the establishment of Israel (Battle, 2002). The Middle East provides an excellent case study because of the historic U.S. interest in the region for strategic reasons and the current security concerns stemming from the region. Current efforts in the Middle East have once again been initiated in the post-9/11 climate to build public support for the United States, to protect U.S. economic interests in the Middle East, and to build public opinion that is supportive of U.S. foreign policies (Amr, 2004).

Based on a grounded theory analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I build critical arguments about the location of power in the flow of communicative strategies under the rubric of public diplomacy and offer an alternative to the dominant public diplomacy model that informs praxis and scholarship in the area.[1] The discussion of past and current public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East is located in the backdrop of Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action, a theory that draws out the possibilities for ethical communicative exchange and meaningful communication among involved actors (in this case, nation-states via public diplomacy). The theory of communicative action provides the ethical backdrop for evaluating current public diplomacy efforts of the United States directed toward the Middle East.

I begin the literature review by briefly discussing the scholarship on public diplomacy, followed by a discussion of the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1979). Subsequently, the theory of communicative action provides a platform for interrogating U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East and for the conceptualization of the culture-centered approach as an alternative to the traditional one-way models currently circulating in the realm of public diplomacy efforts.

Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is a "government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). Public diplomacy is carried out typically through a plethora of activities such as media programs, cultural programs, and educational exchange programs. According to Wang and Chang (2004), public diplomacy is a form of international public relations. The authors argued that public diplomacy and public relations seek to reach out to target publics with the goal of maintaining and managing images and sharing a great deal of strategic and tactical commonalities. For Signitzer and Coombs

(1992), these two areas of communication overlap with respect to their objectives, processes, concepts, and tools. Public diplomacy involves the communication of a government to the people of another nation with the goal of influencing their image of the sender nation. To the extent that public diplomacy attempts to influence the perceptions and opinions of the members of the target state with respect to the image of the source (nation), it embodies a form of public relations.

Kunczik (2003) pointed out that public diplomacy is indeed public relations carried out by a nation-state directed at a foreign audience and comprises a plethora of public relations strategies and tactics that are played out only in a different realm than what is considered to be the realm of traditional public relations. In fact, an examination of the history of public relations demonstrates that the historical roots of the field of public relations are located in public diplomacy efforts such as the German and British public diplomacy initiatives, the public diplomacy conducted by the Committee on Public Information headed by George Creel, the work of Carl Byoir and Associates with foreign governments, and the role of Ivy Lee as a counselor to multiple foreign governments including the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany (Hiebert, 1966; Kunczik, 2003).

Wang and Chang (2004) pointed out that the two-pronged goals of the public diplomacy efforts are to create support for foreign policies and to generate better cultural understanding. Modern nation-states such as the United States "find themselves more and more in the area of public relations as they attempt to influence the opinion of foreign publics" (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 146). In summary, *public diplomacy*, as defined in this section, is the effort of a nation-state to build an image with the public of another state. Because the goal of public diplomacy is to achieve communication between nation-states, the discussion of public diplomacy is positioned in the backdrop of Habermas's (1979, 1984, 1987) theory of communicative action, which provides guidelines for ethical communication between participants.

Theory of Communicative Action

According to Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987), communication is made possible by reciprocal expectations regarding the truth, appropriateness, and sincerity of statements. The state of communicative action embodies a symmetrical distribution of opportunities among participants such that any proposal could be called into question, any proposal can be introduced, and participants are free to express any attitudes, wishes, and needs. In other words, central to the possibility of communicative action is the equal access of all participants to the discursive space in shaping the communication that emerges through the interaction. Also essential to communicative action is the openness of all participants to the possibility of being persuaded through the process of communication. In situations of communicative action, all involved parties remain equally open to persuasion via reasoned debate and argumentation.

In instances where persuasion is not so open, Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987) described *communication* as strategic action that is essentially asymmetrical because of the unequal flow of communication between the participants. Open strategic action

Table 1
Document Types Used for Analysis

Variable	Frequency ($N = 288$)	Percentage
Document types		
White papers	7	2.4
Policy documents	72	25.0
Reports	34	11.8
Memos	38	13.2
Tactical materials (scripts, magazines, etc.)	62	21.5
News releases	46	15.97
Interviews	29	10.1
Years		
1938 to 1950	57	19.8
1951 to 1960	63	21.9
1961 to 1970	13	4.5
1971 to 1980	7	2.4
1999 to 2004	148	51.4

is ends oriented, directive, and unconcealed whereas concealed strategic action hides the failure of the actor to meet the basic communicative presuppositions. In other words, under situations of concealed strategic action, the actor "deceives other participants regarding the fact that he or she is not satisfying communicative presuppositions" (Jacobson & Storey, 2004, p. 104). Concealed strategic action is further classified into conscious and unconscious deception. *Conscious deception* refers to those scenarios where the actor is "aware of the intent to behave strategically, and hence is attempting to deceive or lie" (Jacobson, 2003, p. 27) whereas *unconscious deception* reflects communication where the actor "deceives himself about the fact that the basis of consensual action is only apparently being maintained" (Habermas, 1979, pp. 209-210). The theory of communicative action provides the framework for examining the public diplomacy practices of the U.S. practices in the Middle East, leading to the following research question:

Around which central themes are the U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East organized?

Method

The current study used a combination of historical and grounded theory analyses. Given the historical emphasis of the current study on analyzing public diplomacy in the Middle East, a thorough search was conducted on government and academic indices and the World Wide Web to identify key documents related to public diplomacy in the Middle East (see Table 1). The types of documents that were retrieved were memos, policy statements, white papers, program scripts, news releases, radio pro-

gram transcripts, and interview transcripts dating from 1938 to 2004. The most important sources of information were the National Security Archive located at the George Washington University (www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv), the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, and the U.S. Information Agency Alumni Association (www.publicdiplomacy.org). The documents were selected from these archives and Web sites based on their relevance to the issue of U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. The hyperlinks provided on the sites were followed to retrieve additional documents. At the end of the multipronged search process, 238 articles were retrieved, dating from 1938 to 2004. The period ranges of the articles are presented in Table 1. The articles included government agency reports, memoranda, telegraphs, brochures, film scripts, policy papers, evaluation reports, statements, and press releases.

Data Analysis

I used the grounded theory method to analyze the data for this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As outlined by the grounded theory approach, data analysis was initiated with the preliminary phase of data gathering. Data analysis proceeded side by side with data gathering, and archival data collection continued until conceptually dense theory was derived from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used systematically to test the fit of new pieces of data with the emerging theoretical framework. The data analysis started with open coding to identify discrete concepts that could be labeled and sorted easily. For instance, a discrete concept was the geostrategic reasons underlying U.S. public diplomacy. Subsequently, the discrete concepts associated with the same phenomenon were grouped under conceptual categories. Concepts such as geostrategic interests and economic interests were grouped under the broader category of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Open coding was followed by axial coding that involved the formulation of relationships within and among the categories. Finally, theoretical integration was achieved by selective coding. At this stage, the relationships among the distinct categories were established at a more abstract level and were validated by returning to the data and finding evidence to support or refute the relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The documents reviewed for this project demonstrated five central themes that were reflected in U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East: U.S. interests in the Middle East, influencing the other, hidden agendas, propaganda–rural population dynamic, and propaganda–national elite dynamic (see Table 2 for the frequency of occurrence of the different themes). The themes were not mutually exclusive such that the same article could possibly be coded for more than one theme (such as U.S. interests in the Middle East and propaganda). The discussion of themes is juxtaposed in the backdrop of Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action.

Table 2
Frequency of Occurrence of the Different Categories

Categories	Frequency ($N = 288$)	Percentage
U.S. interests in the Middle East	43	14.93
Influence the other	219	76.04
Propaganda	89	30.90
Propaganda and the rural population	27	9.4
Propaganda and the urban population	33	11.5

U.S. Interests in the Middle East

The relationship of the United States with the Middle East has historically been dictated by U.S. goals of building secure spaces of support in the region along with opening up spaces of the newly liberated countries of the Middle East to U.S. capital. In addition, the petroleum produced in the Middle East is of great strategic interest to the United States and has been intertwined with the U.S. economy, thus centralizing the role of public diplomacy in the Middle East (National Security Council, 1954; U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], 2002). The following passage from a National Security Council document (1954) captures the core motives that drove early U.S. public relations efforts in the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s:

> The near East is of great strategic, political, and economic importance to the free world. The area contains the greatest petroleum resources in the world; essential locations for strategic military bases in any world conflict against Communism; the Suez Canal; and natural defensive barriers. It also contains Holy Places of the Christian, Jewish, and Moslem worlds, and thereby exerts religious and cultural influences affecting people everywhere. The security interests of the United States would be critically endangered if the Near East should fall under Soviet influence or control. (p. 1)

Noteworthy is the interpenetration of the military and economic interests in strategically locating the Middle East as a critical area of interest for the United States. These two interests have systematically dictated the public diplomacy efforts directed toward the Middle East, including current public diplomacy initiatives directed toward the region (see also USAID, 2002). The National Security Council document justifies the many reasons underlying the need for public relations efforts in this region. The articulation that the area contains the greatest petroleum resources in the world presents the logic that dictates neo-colonization; the natural resources of a colonizable space offer the promise for a colonialist intervention, thus calling for efforts of public diplomacy to serve national interests. The ability to control a space that is abundant with natural resources is central to the logic of the colonial enterprise. This economic logic is also reflected in a USAID (2002) document that discusses the importance of public diplomacy in creating accessible markets for U.S. products in the Middle East, stating that such strategic relationship "opens new, more dynamic markets for U.S.

goods and services" (p. iv). The key point portrayed in the justification above is the need to thwart communism and its growth in this region; in other words, U.S. intervention in the Middle East is located as a reactionary measure to communist expansionism, relegating the economic argument to a secondary position. It is pointed out that the security of the United States was likely to be threatened if the Middle East were to slip under the control of the communist bloc. The need for public diplomacy efforts is articulated in the context of growing public anger and distrust in the Middle East toward the Western colonizers:

> Current conditions and trends in the Near East are inimical to Western interests. During recent years the prestige and position of the West have declined. The nations of the Near East are determined to assert their independence and are suspicious of outside interest in their affairs. In particular, the influence of the United Kingdom has been weakened, with distrust and hatred replacing the former subservience. France is also disliked and distrusted because of her refusal to free Morocco and Tunisia and because of her former role as a mandate power in Syria and Lebanon. (National Security Council, 1954, p. 1)

The implied articulation is that public diplomacy efforts are needed because the nations of the Near East are determined to assert their independence and are suspicious of the efforts of external actors. In this sense, the aspiration of the people in the Middle East for independence is presented as a barrier to Western interests in the above excerpt, a barrier that needs to be overcome so the colonizing process may continue.

Worth noting is the implied despair at the fact that the Near East is independent, and distrust and hatred for the West have replaced the subservience of the inhabitants of these historically colonized spaces. Implied in the excerpt is the nostalgic reminiscence of the days of former subservience in the Near East. This nostalgia is juxtaposed in the backdrop of the tendency toward neo-colonization, which is aptly described in the following prescription:

> The U.S. should . . . conduct secret military-political conversations in the near future with the UK regarding development of the "northern tier" concept as an indigenous movement, not linked formally at this time with the Western Powers or with Western defense organizations except through the participation of Turkey. (National Security Council, 1952, p. 7)

Particularly evident is the secrecy here, which suggests that the public diplomacy efforts being discussed here embody concealed strategic action as outlined by Habermas (1979). Although on one hand, as demonstrated in this quotation, one of the primary objectives of U.S. intervention in the region is the expansion of military presence in the Middle East, the grounds for this expansion are created via public diplomacy efforts. Much like the role of missionaries in precolonial times, public relations practitioners (in diplomacy positions) play a very important role in creating public support for the colonial intervention in the Third World.

The public diplomacy efforts of the 1950s are thematically continued into the U.S. discourse of international public relations in the post–Cold War, post-9/11 period

(Amr, 2004): "Today, we face a similar long-term and serious challenge to national security. Congress should therefore undertake initiatives of outreach towards Muslim-majority countries similar to those during and after the Cold War" (p. 43). The security-driven motives of strategic U.S. public diplomacy is further embodied in the following excerpt (Djerejian, 2003):

> Since September 11, 2001, the stakes have been raised. Attitudes toward the United States were important in the past, but now they have become a central national security concern. Although the objective of foreign policy is to promote our national interests and not specifically, to inspire affection, hostility toward the U.S. makes achieving our policy goals more difficult. (p. 19)

The above excerpt squarely locates U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the context of U.S. security interests. It further goes on to elaborate that the central objective of foreign policy is to promote national security and not to inspire affection between the Middle East and the United States. In addition, efforts toward creating a positive relationship, the author suggests, are important only to the extent they minimize the resistance to achieving U.S. policy goals. Embodied in the message is the "real" commitment of U.S. public diplomacy to penetrate the Middle East and remove the barriers that prevent the diffusion of certain U.S. policies in the region. This U.S. objective of creating favorable spaces for diffusing U.S. foreign policy is accomplished through the public diplomacy efforts (USAID, 1999, 2002). In other words, central to public diplomacy is the objective of influencing the receiver countries without being open to persuasion, reiterating the strategic nature of communication in public diplomacy efforts. To the extent that the public diplomacy efforts are primarily driven by the exploitative tendencies toward serving national interests by using other nations, they are unlikely to offer possibilities for dialogue and mutual understanding. Particularly, the hidden motives underlying public diplomacy efforts suggest that these efforts are forms of concealed strategic action (Habermas, 1979, 1984). Such concealed strategic action fosters mistrust and misunderstanding rather than promoting communicative action among involved actors.

Influencing the Other

The historical review of the Middle East documents demonstrates that public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East are constructed within the realm of informing and influencing the publics in the Middle East (Beers, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b; Djerejian, 2003). In this sense, the communication flow is almost always conceptualized as a one-way flow of persuasive strategies from the United States to the Middle East, reiterating the notion of strategic action theorized earlier. The ultimate goal is to achieve changes in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in the Muslim population of the Middle East. The framework of influencing which defines the logic of U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East puts the onus of change on the receiver of the message. *Influencing* not *understanding* is defined as the primary objective of U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

Whereas the United States is the sender of the messages, the ultimate goal is to achieve changes in the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of the traditional receiver—the audience in the Middle East—through the use of one-way mass-mediated channels. These fixed positions of sender and receiver, and the assigned roles related to these positions, are played out in the following address delivered by Charlotte Beers (2002b), undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, at the military academy of South Carolina: "But we're not as comfortable at what it takes to influence others—especially when the audience is hostile. The effort to influence requires persuasive communication, which we certainly had to master in the private sector—or be left behind" (n.p.). In her speech, Beers compared public diplomacy efforts to marketing, drawing out the importance of achieving the desired perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral change in the target audience. Drawing on the lessons learned from marketing, Beers outlined some key steps for public diplomacy in the Middle East, suggesting the importance of clear and simple messages, inclusion of emotions in the messages, and the need for formative research in message design. Public diplomacy, as outlined by Beers, is persuasion and is, therefore, likely to succeed when it operates on the basic principles of persuasion.

The traditional role of public diplomacy in image building falls within this category of attempting to influence the other through tactical public relations activities. Tactical public relations activities in the post-9/11 public diplomacy efforts include a print and electronic pamphlet titled *The Network of Terrorism*, a publication titled *Iraq: From Fear to Freedom*, a print and electronic pamphlet titled *Voices of Freedom*, an Arabic youth magazine, and an 18-minute documentary titled *Rebuilding Afghanistan* (General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003). Other tactical public diplomacy tools include U.S. international broadcasting operations such as the *Voice of America*, WorldNet Television and Film Service, *Radio/TV Marti*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *Radio Free Asia*, *Radio Sawa*, and *Radio Farda* (GAO, 2003). The primary form of communication used in the public diplomacy efforts is mediated communication where the mass media serve as conduits for diffusing the messages of the United States.

The framework embodied in mass-mediated public diplomacy efforts is one way; the opportunities for influencing are primarily located in the hands of the sender (the United States) whereas the receiver (the Middle East audience) is positioned in the fixed location of the passive audience that is influenced by the public diplomacy message. As defined by Habermas (1979, 1984), these efforts at influencing the other through one-way communication where the opportunities for influence are not equally distributed may be categorized as strategic action. In addition, the public diplomacy efforts at influencing the Middle East are often presented within entertainment contexts, with the message of influence being hidden and embedded rather than explicitly laid out; the intentions of the sender are often hidden under layers of entertainment content. The use of entertainment to implicitly embed messages of U.S. promotion is propaganda because it conceals the purpose of the strategic action. The next section discusses the link between U.S. public diplomacy efforts and propaganda.

Hidden Agendas

Not only is U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East framed primarily in the realm of influencing the Middle East but also the efforts at influencing are typically hidden, often embedded within broader entertainment-oriented messages (see *Funding for Public Diplomacy*, 2002). Such efforts may be categorized as propaganda because they involve "the manipulation of symbols as a means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters" (Laswell, 1942, p. 106). A document describing a U.S. propaganda program for Iran stated that "the successful penetration of the country on this level would ultimately provide a sound foundation for the dissemination of information about the U.S.A. and its policies" (Foreign Service of the United States of America, 1951, p. 1). The propaganda program sought to create a positive climate for the United States in a cultural context where the image of the United States was threatened by the prospects of the spread of communism. The targets of the program, described as the U.S. Information and Educational (USIE) Exchange Program, were the rural sectors of Iran, and U.S.-generated messages were diffused via visual-oriented media to appeal to these rural sectors. Such media included "films, film-strips, posters, photo displays and exhibits supplemented by radio, press, and educational books and pamphlets" (Foreign Service of the United States of America, 1951, p. 1).

The hidden agenda becomes evident when U.S. Public Affairs Officer E. C. Wells (1953) quoted a chief editor of a Tehran newspaper, "I wish to thank you for the two stories you sent us. Both have been used in our paper. It is our policy to fight communism in this country with everything we have" (p. 7). Yet another report published by the United States Information Agency stated that

> the U.S. Government has increased its efforts to get across the story of U.S. aid through (1) stimulation of the local press in the area to report tangible evidences of progress (USIS-arranged press trips to going projects provided one means); (2) press releases; (3) films; (4) radio programs; (5) pamphlets; and (6) discussion meetings . . . the benefits of American private investment in the area have been reported, especially through stories in the *News Review*. (Operations Coordinating Board, 1955, p. 3)

In the above excerpt, the propaganda activity is launched as an integrated communication campaign, with a plethora of media components serving the key purpose of building the image of the United States in the Middle East. The public relations exercise in image building is further evident in the arrangements made by U.S. public affairs officials with Iranian intellectuals to write pro-U.S. stories such as "Road to Salvation" and "Contrast between American and Russian Methods in International Affairs." (Operations Coordinating Board, 1955, p. 3) The clandestine nature of the public relations exercise is evident in the following excerpt from a telegram[2] sent by the American Embassy in Iraq (1952) to the Secretary of State:

> Altho we do not (rpt not) intend give publicity to arrangements with Movaghar [person writing the pro-U.S. stories] neither do we intend having any dealings with him which if publicized by anti-Amer press shld cause US any embarrassment. He will write a ltr to

> IIA describing magazine as purely cultural undertaking, state he understands IIA interested in helping Iran cultural development, and ask if IIA cld assist. IIA cld reply stating it was interested in Iran cultural matters of non-polit character and wld be glad subscribe for 1,000 copies of first issue and might be prepared to subscribe for subsequent issues. . . . Emb will provide editorial servicing, i.e., layouts, article illustrations and for special articles requiring good illustrations, the necessary paper stock and special inserts to be printed by EPC. . . . Thru design collaboration, embassy can control positioning of articles placed. . . . Emb concern is primarily to establish credence by judicious use of current editorial matter and then gradually to develop and use more direct hard-hitting anti-Sov material. (n.p.)

Despite the fact that the Embassy primarily sponsored and supported the magazine, it presented this support under the umbrella of a cultural initiative. It is critical to note the use of the cultural argument to push a clearly political agenda. Culture serves as the conduit for presenting U.S. interests and for casting the United States in a positive light; it serves as the cover for U.S. public relations strategies. The documents also point out the gradual switch in strategy from judicious use of editorial matter to developing more hard-hitting overtly anti-Soviet materials. The important United States Information Agency (USIA) goal here is to create a positive buzz around American private investment in the region. The benefits of U.S. private investment are communicated in a concerted effort via a plethora of media. The United States is portrayed as the savior, the agent of peace that serves the people of the Near East. Here is a description of a 4-page brochure:

> The burden of the leaflet is a comparison of the words of the Soviet Union, illustrated by a dancing bear, and the deeds of the Free World through the agency of U.N. Pictures show health aid, food and clothing distribution, and rehabilitation training, contrasted against Soviet youth demonstrations. (Wells, 1953, p. 3)

American valor is juxtaposed in the backdrop of the evil nature of the Soviet Union. As described earlier, a key goal of U.S. communication activities in the Middle East was to create public fear of communism; this negative depiction of communism was simultaneously presented with U.S. capitalism as the positive choice. This effort to inculcate public fear is well articulated in the following description of a leaflet:

> Tale of the beautiful red flower: 4-page, $6'' \times 8''$, two-color, produced by EPC for USIS Tehran; created by Publications section USIS Tehran. The story is an allegory in which a red flower resembling the Venus Fly Trap symbolizes Soviet communism (which is never mentioned), and in which lazy and frivolous bees are lured to destruction. Illustrations accompanying the text draw a clear analogy between bees and unwary people. Fifteen thousand, four hundred copies produced; 3,000 copies distributed. The text of this brochure has been picked up as an editorial by Iranian newspapers. (Wells, 1953, p. 3)

The public relations agenda of the United States focused on the concerted effort to create a negative image of the enemy nation—the Soviet Union. In demonizing the enemy and cultivating fear in the public about the enemy, the United States sought to

create a more positive environment for its interventionist strategies. The print media–based U.S. propaganda is also evident in the launching of *Hi* magazine in 2003. *Hi* is a glossy 72-page magazine about Arab-American life and is produced in Arabic; the magazine is primarily targeted at Middle Eastern youth. Yet another document (the script for a short, animated motion picture) captures U.S. propaganda against the Soviet Union. The camera shot depicts an animated map of the Soviet Union, with tanks and guns rolling over to its borders, and hammer and sickle at the center of the map. The voice-over reads,

> The action of one country during the past few years has given new, vital meaning to the principle of Collective Security. It has now become necessary that all countries who wish to preserve their freedom unite in a common defense. To see that this is true you have only to look at the map . . . the map of international Communist expansion since 1939 . . . the map of the new Soviet Empire! (American Embassy in Iraq, 1952)

Once again, the demonization of the enemy seeks to create panic in the audience. The planting of the seeds of fear is expected to generate public sentiments against the ever-expanding empire of the hammer and the sickle. The United States was quick to realize that one of the most critical target audiences for the communist expansion was the rural population; therefore, it focused much of its public relations efforts on the rural segment.

After more than five decades, the U.S. public diplomacy strategies reflect the same one-way flow of communication intended to convince publics in the Middle East of the virtues of the United States via information and entertainment programs. For instance, in 2002, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, an agency of the U.S. government, created *Radio Sawa* that can be heard across 12 cities in the Arab region. Amr (2004) provided the following description of the radio station's success:

> The data also shows that Radio Sawa listeners are more likely to have more favorable attitudes toward the United States in all three countries. In Jordan, Radio Sawa listeners had a 37 percent favorable attitude toward the United States as compared to 22 percent of non-listeners. In Kuwait, the percentages were 49 and 54, respectively. And in the UAE, the percentages were 42 and 57, respectively. (p. 33)

It is critical to point out the measurement of success in the context of the goals of the United States to create a favorable image in the Middle East. Similarly, the advisory group on public diplomacy recommends the use of television to spread the message of U.S. policy because television gives widespread reach and high penetration rates (Djerejian, 2003). A policy paper on U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East recommended the use of the Internet, given its heavy usage among the youth. Amr (2004) wrote,

> A key finding is the youth across the Islamic world who have Internet access are more likely to be open to creative thinking and exposed to the variety of global opinions and information. As such, they tend to hold views that share more commonalities with Amer-

ica. Indeed, the polling data shows that Internet access is likely to increase openness to American values. (p. 44)

Particularly relevant in the above excerpt is the suggestion for focusing on U.S. diplomacy efforts via avenues such as building access to new media because of the positive correlation between Internet access and openness to American values. The emphasis on the youth is a critical point in U.S. diplomatic efforts because the youth constitute the future of the country. The ability to persuade this sector of the population would ensure early conversion and easier diffusion of U.S. values and ideals. The emphasis once again is not on understanding but on molding and shifting the beliefs, values, and ideals in the Middle East, reflecting concealed strategic action (Habermas, 1987).

Propaganda and Rural Population

Beyond creating spaces of political support for the United States within the Middle East, programs such as the USIE program were targeted at maintaining the power of the political elite within the Middle East. This nexus between U.S. interests and the national elite in Third World countries is presented in the following depiction of the goal of the USIE program discussed here:

It would be a long range program closely integrated with all the plans for economic development. In scope it would be designed for the entire rural population of Iran. The mental attitude of this large rural population complicates our task in Iran. As a whole, they have a deep and abiding hatred and distrust of the ruling class which leads them to the belief that our economic and military aid programs are designed to further strengthen the ruling class they regard as their oppressors. Every effort must be made to mitigate the strength of this feeling which is definitely encouraged by the Soviet. (Foreign Service, 1951, p. 2)

Notice that the above excerpt first problematizes the rural population as a hard-to-reach population because of the deep-rooted hatred for the ruling class among this population. Therefore, the document outlines the goal of U.S. public diplomacy efforts to mitigate this hatred for the oppressive forces of the ruling classes because such hatred breeds the grounds for Soviet-style resistance. Particularly relevant is the key strategy of U.S. efforts in diffusing public participation in democratic processes to oppose oppression and self-aggrandizement among the elite classes.

Propaganda and National Elite

On one hand, the U.S.-generated programs supported the coercive forces of the national elite and ensured the subversion of popular movements against the status quo. On the other hand, U.S.-created educational exchange programs indoctrinated the national elite in U.S. values. The identification of the national elite as the primary target audience of U.S. public relations efforts is embodied in the following excerpt:

> Target group 1—the Shah, Royal Court and wealthy landowners represent a conservative group vitally interested in preserving Iran's integrity, which if they could be stirred to more positive action would represent the strongest possible rallying point for all anti-communist elements. . . . Target group 2—University professors and students, secondary school teachers and students, professional men, including government employees—are a most important group as they represent the public opinion molders, leading the multiplicity of movements now current in Iran. (American Embassy in Iraq, 1952, p. 1)

Through its educational programs, the United States sought to sell the Western agenda to the national bourgeoisie. This indoctrination of the national elite in Americanism is described in the following excerpt:

> The Educational Exchange programs of the State Department have continued to emphasize the importance of the Western-orientation of intellectuals through education leaders and specialist grants. In FY 1956, the U.S. provided for a substantial increase in the number of grants for leaders and foreign specialists for the countries of the Near East, in some cases doubling the number of such grants available to the country. . . . Political, military and labor leaders, news editors, intellectuals and students have received special attention both by personal contact and through presentation of doctrinal publications, as well as copies of the New York Times, New York Herald-Tribune, and various American intellectual and news magazines. (Operations Coordinating Board, 1955, p. 4)

The exchange programs of the 1950s have currently received additional boost in the post-9/11 United States. In 2003, U.S. $245 million were spent on exchanges (Amr, 2004). Amr (2004) recommended the creation and maintenance of databases of Fulbright, Humphrey, and other exchange scholars because this constituency can play an active role in deepening understanding. The attempt to influence the national elite via education is also documented in the U.S. attempts at placing propaganda materials in strategic positions in the libraries. An executive memorandum written by E. C. Wells (1953), public affairs officer, described the U.S. public diplomacy efforts in strategic placement of educational materials such as books in libraries in Tehran, stating that

> a device to feature the display of anti-communist books in the Library was worked out by placing a special shelf in a prominent position in the Library. . . . The most popular titles were David Dallin's RISE OF RUSSIA IN ASIA and Walter Bedell Smith's MY THREE YEARS IN MOSCOW. . . . The Library also displays photo exhibits arranged by the Exhibits section which occasionally and usually indirectly point to the advantages of the American form of government over the communist state. (p. 3)

The central role of libraries is further evident in a document sent by the American Embassy in Tehran to the Department of State on January 12, 1951. The document stated that one of the important tasks facing the embassy is to build new libraries that would circulate topical American magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest*. U.S. efforts at creating pro-U.S. values through education materials have continued into the new millennium, and although the touch and feel of the efforts

have probably changed, the key objectives remain the same. The libraries of the 1950s have today been replaced by U.S.-sponsored American Corners, targeting the educated elite via new ways of knowledge dissemination. The pamphlets of the 1950s have now been replaced by CD rooms. Here is a description of these American Corners (Amr, 2004):

> In late 2000, a new concept called "American Corners" emerged and was first implemented in Russia. Today, that concept is targeted for spread across Muslim-majority countries. The American Corners are smaller versions of the old U.S. libraries. But instead they are placed in locales such as local libraries and shopping malls, so that they can give more direct exposure to the population. They provide books, CD rooms, Internet access, and a local staff person. The goal is to provide some of the interactivity of the old library services plus the capacity to directly answer questions about the United States. (p. 31)

Discussion

This article examined the public diplomacy processes engaged in by the United States in creating positions of support for U.S. interests in the Middle East, demonstrating that these processes typically reflect concealed strategic action (Habermas, 1979, 1984, 1987). Current public diplomacy efforts being implemented in the Middle East embody the one-way flow of communication of early development campaigns; the emphasis is on massaging the minds of the public, on building an image and shifting public opinion about the United States. As demonstrated through the current study's findings, the efforts of reaching out to publics in the Middle East are driven by motives of gaining public support for U.S. policies in the Middle East, securing profitable markets, and creating a positive image of the United States. The key objective of the efforts is to persuade without being open to the possibilities of persuasion. Through these efforts of public diplomacy, U.S. policy makers believe that favorable values will be created toward modernity and the American way of life. In instances where communication from audience members is received, such feedback is used to further the goals of the sender; an honest input from the audience is not desired or sought out. To the extent that public diplomacy efforts are centered on creating an image and changing public perceptions in recipient cultures, they represent a monologue because they seek to gain power over the receiver (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Buber, 1958; Howe, 1963; Matson & Montagu, 1967).

The international public diplomacy efforts are driven by their attempts to convert through the creation, management, and dissemination of communicative materials. This one-way penetration of communicative meanings to achieve U.S. goals is aptly captured in the following recommendation of the advisory group (to the House of Representatives) on public diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim worlds (Djerejian, 2003):

> Before we present . . . recommendations however, we must make an effort to separate questions of policy from questions of communicating that policy. . . . It is not . . . the man-

date of the Advisory Group to advise on foreign policy itself. While the United States cannot and simply should not simply change its policies to suit public opinion abroad, we must use tools of public diplomacy to assess the likely effectiveness of particular policies. (p. 22)

The advisory group stated that its goal was to communicate to the Arab and Muslim worlds about the policies of the United States, not to influence U.S. policy making. In fact, the group reiterates that the United States should not modify its policy to suit the publics of the Middle East. Inherent in this suggestion is the one-way flow of communication, the articulation of monologue (Matson & Montagu, 1967); whereas the beliefs, values, and perceptions of the recipient publics need to be changed to be in tune with U.S. goals, the United States should not modify its policies based on feedback and input from the region. In other words, any real inputs from the publics of the Middle East that would suggest that U.S. policy in the Middle East be modified are undesirable. Instead, diplomacy in its current form is used as a platform for using audience data to craft persuasive messages that seek shifting the underlying values and beliefs in the Middle East. Audience inputs conducted in the form of market research are used to diffuse U.S. interests in the population. Inherent in the above conceptualization is the oppressive force of public diplomacy that seeks to alter one culture to suit the preferences of another culture, based on differences in access to power. Although communication here is created to assess the effectiveness of the policies being pushed, it does not create a sense of understanding between the involved stakeholders because of the coercive and unequal framework within which it is conceptualized. The analysis provided in this article documents the historical continuity in concealed strategic action adopted by U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

The public diplomacy campaigns originating from the 1950s and continuing into current practices demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to formulating a preconceived problem and accompanying solutions before entering into the diplomacy effort (such as cultivating distrust for the Soviet bloc and fighting terrorism). The public relations exercise in public diplomacy efforts is simply to push the solutions in an attempt to solve the preconceived problem via persuasion, reflecting asymmetrical communication (see Grunig, 1989; Kent & Taylor, 2002). The articulation of problems by the sender without engaging the cultural members of the receiving space reflects a myopic conceptualization of the communicative process, leaving a great deal of space for misconception of the problem and accompanying solutions. The absence of the receiver from the initial communicative process inundates the discursive space with noise and misunderstanding.

In the absence of relational meaning construction between sender and receiver and in light of the hidden agendas of U.S. policy served by the communication programs, the public diplomacy efforts represent concealed strategic action and create scenarios of mistrust and misunderstanding. The paradox here is that instead of achieving understanding between cultures (as should be the goal of public diplomacy), the public diplomacy function has historically bred the scenario for further misunderstanding and perpetuation of violence by imposing a particular set of meanings and policies on

the Middle East. The opposition to the United States and its policies has continued despite the billions of dollars spent on international public relations efforts targeting the Middle East. The continuous diffusion of U.S.-sponsored leaflets, books, movies, television programs, and radio programs since the early decades of the past century have bred environments of mistrust and misunderstanding by taking the voices of the region for granted and by stealing the agency of the people of the Middle East in actively participating in shaping foreign policies and influencing issues that affect them. These one-way models of international public relations could help us understand the eruption of violence and terrorism in the region and the escalating climate of negative public opinion vis-à-vis the United States. What then are the alternatives to the traditional one-way approach of public diplomacy?

These traditional public diplomacy efforts that are theorized and practiced within the domain of influencing the members of the receiver culture through the manipulation of symbols constitute propaganda (Laswell, 1942). Similar articulations are made by Kunczik (2003), who suggested that U.S. public diplomacy efforts embody propaganda because such activities seek to manipulate "symbols as a means to influencing attitudes on controversial matters" (Laswell, 1942, p. 106). In this sense, to the extent that the public diplomacy efforts focus on improving a country's image abroad, the differentiation between public diplomacy and propaganda is merely a semantic game (Kunczik, 2003). Nevertheless, I argue in the next section that public diplomacy offers the opportunity of offering alternative frameworks beyond the realm of propaganda. To the extent that public diplomacy efforts offer the opportunity to create platforms for communicative action, they provide meaningful alternatives to the traditional propaganda function that has dominated much of the public diplomacy work. The international public relations literature provides an alternative to this traditional model of public diplomacy by articulating the importance of culture in public relations and the effect of culture on organizational processes (Sriramesh, 1992, 1999; Sriramesh & White, 1992). In addition, Grunig's (1989, 1992) seminal work on symmetry in the public relations literature offers a platform for alternative theorizing in the domain of public diplomacy. In the rest of this article, I offer an alternative to the colonizing one-way stance of public diplomacy efforts of the United States by articulating the culture-centered approach as a viable strategy for conducting international public diplomacy. The alternative I propose builds on a vision for peaceful coexistence of nations and seeks to minimize global security threats in the world through the process of mutual dialogue (Anderson et al., 1994; Buber, 1958; Freire, 1970, 1973).

A Culture-Centered Approach

The culture-centered approach centers on relationships between cultures, as opposed to the traditional one-way approaches that focus on changing meanings in receiver cultures based on unequal access to power that defines the positions of the sender and the receiver in the communicative framework (Dutta-Bergman, 2004, 2005). Founded on a ritual view of communication and embodying the cocreational

perspective of public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2003; Grunig, 1989), it focuses on building relationships between cultures, foregrounding dialogue, and engaging in a process of mutual sharing of meanings between the participating cultures (see Grunig, 1992; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Dialogue serves as the tool for the culture-centered approach. The emphasis of the culture-based approach is not on transferring meanings from one location to another such that these meanings may be essentialized in the day-to-day lives of the members of the receiving culture but on creating mutually understandable meanings generated through the dialogue between cultural participants. Instead of strategizing about the best ways of persuasion as embodied in the dominant public diplomacy models that represent monologue (Johannesen, 1971), the culture-centered approach privileges the dialogue between participating cultures (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Relationship building, in this context, is not driven by predetermined objectives; the goal of the actors in the relationship is not one of persuading each other to adopt particular value frames but one of developing a mutually satisfying relationship by engaging in dialogue.

The relationship is driven by respect and the desire to develop an understanding of each other and the value systems that drive the cultural participants. The acknowledgement and emphasis of the value systems of the participants provides the basis for the dialogical process that is built on mutual trust between the participating actors (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Gandhi (1936) pointed out that this mutual trust is built on ultimate sincerity and commitment among the participants, which is impossible to attain as long as communication is driven by self-serving goals within a competitive framework:

> Methods hitherto adopted have failed because rock-bottom sincerity on the part of those who have striven is lacking. . . . If the recognized leaders of mankind who have control over the engines of destructions were wholly to renounce their use, with full knowledge of its implications, permanent peace can be obtained. This is clearly impossible without the Great Powers of the earth renouncing their imperialistic design. This again seems impossible without great nations ceasing to believe in soul-destroying competition and to desire to multiply wants, and therefore, increase their material possessions. (quoted in Kripalani, 2000, p. 111)

The typical identities of the sender and the receiver as conceptualized in the transmission models that inform past and present U.S. public diplomacy efforts are replaced by continuously metamorphosing identities and relationships that evolve through the dynamic process of meaning making. Important in the culture-centered approach is the role of context as a shifting and dynamic element that informs the meanings that are created (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). By focusing on dialogue, the culture-centered approach foregrounds context in the creation and interpretation of meanings. The policies and actions that emerge as a result are context driven; context here is not simply an additional variable in the model but the central element of theory building and application development. As a result, the policies that emerge from the

discursive space of culture-centered public diplomacy are dynamic and adaptive to the coconstructions of the participants.

The culture-centered approach is a conduit for communicative action because it emphasizes the opportunities for reaching mutually meaningful understandings through the dialogical-dialectical process. The emphasis on mutually meaningful dialogue ensures that both parties have access to the discursive space and are able to participate equally in influencing the outcomes of the dialogue. To this extent, the role of public diplomacy expands from the realm of simply seeking to influence the receiver audience with respect to a particular policy to the realm of participating in dialogue as a way of reaching at decisions related to policy that impact the involved actors.

Policy is not determined a priori; rather, it is a product of a coconstructive process arrived at through the dialogue between the participating members. Dialogue was first conceptualized as a theoretical approach to public relations in the work of Pearson (1989), who suggested that ethical public relations is based on a dialogic system, and not on monologic policies (see Botan & Taylor, 2003). The concept of dialogue in public relations was further developed by Botan (1997), who posited that dialogue "elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization" (p. 192). The dialogic relationship is characterized by such qualities as "mutuality, open-heartedness, directness, honesty, spontaneity, frankness, lack of pretense, non-manipulative intent, communion, intensity, and love in the sense of responsibility for another" (Johannesen, 1971, p. 375).

Johannesen (1971) further stated that "the essential element in dialogue is turning toward, outgoing to, and reaching for the other. And a basic element in dialogue is 'seeing the other' or 'experiencing the other side'" (p. 375). In other words, dialogue is enacted in the process of reaching out to the other participant, based on the willingness to become completely involved with each other. For Buber (1958), dialogic communication calls for genuineness, empathy, unconditional positive regards, presentness, spirit of mutual equality, and a supportive communication climate. The notions of genuineness and reciprocal commitment are articulated by Friedman (2004) in his description of dialogue:

> If it is the interaction between man and man [sic] which makes possible authentic human existence, it follows that the precondition of such authentic existence is that each overcomes the tendency toward appearance, that each meets the other in his personal existence and makes him present as such, and that neither attempts to impose his own truth or view on the other. (p. 100)

The emphasis on dialogue in the culture-centered approach suggests the ability of cultural participants to communicate openly and honestly, without feeling as if one is being judged. The dialogical space fosters "free expression, seeks understanding, and avoids value judgments that stifle" (Johannesen, 1971, p. 376).

Central to the theorization of the culture-centered approach is the location of power that informs the relationships between cultures. By being actively aware of the critical

role of power in the relationship between two cultures, the approach seeks to resist the traditional one-way flow of communication (determined by differences in access to power) by replacing it with a mutual commitment to valuing human dignity and diversity of values among cultural participants (see Grunig, 1989, for similar articulation in the symmetrical model of public relations). The awareness of the power differential in the relationship gives the participants a starting point for creating a space that is equally accessible to both participants; this awareness also provides a framework for minimizing the exercise of power based on superiority (see Dutta-Bergman, 2005).

What emerges as a result is a sense of understanding among the engaged participants based on reflexive engagement. This sense of understanding informs policies and communicative strategies of all engaged members rather than the unidirectional influence exerted by the more powerful actor on less powerful ones as embodied in the one-way models based on access to power. At its core, the culture-centered approach metamorphoses the way public relations campaigns are conceptualized, designed, and implemented. By locating culture at the center of theorizing about communication processes, it predicates human dignity in cross-cultural relationships. By celebrating the relationship between cultures, it shifts the role of public diplomacy theorists and practitioners from informing and persuading to understanding, dialoguing, and relationship building.

Communication scholars and practitioners working on public diplomacy can facilitate the development of relationships and work toward the creation of platforms that allow opportunities for developing mutual understanding rather than imposing a particular set of values on a culture through one-way public diplomacy efforts that emphasize sending out messages through leaflets, television, radio, or Internet (Beers, 2002a). Tactically, the culture-centered approach builds on community-based strategies that focus on exploring mutually meaningful points of entry into the discursive space and include participatory methods of communication. For instance, town hall meetings and public discussion forums can serve as important tools for promoting mutual understanding through dialogue between cultures. However, the choice of participatory channels is not solely adequate to ensure that the culture-centered approach is being practiced. The success of the culture-centered approach depends on the sincerity, genuineness, and mutual respect among the participants; it depends on the intent that drives the communication process. The participants need to be open to reciprocal communication to be able to achieve understanding based on a culture-centered perspective.

The importance of the genuineness of intent is evident in the following example. In her report on public diplomacy in the post-9/11 climate, Beers (2002a) discussed then Secretary of State Colin Powell's appearance on MTV (with a viewing audience of about 375 million globally), where he took questions from global audiences in building the U.S. image abroad. In his response to a question regarding the perception of the United States as the Satan of contemporary politics, Powell stated,

Satan? Oh well. I reject the characterization. Quite the contrary. I think the American people, the United States of America, presents a value system to the rest of the world that

>is based on democracy, based on economic freedom, based on the individual rights of men and women. . . . We are a country of countries, and we touch every country, and every country in the world touches us. (n.p.)

Powell used the event as an image-building exercise, demonstrating a monologue rather than a dialogue, using the event as an opportunity to influence the other without being open to the possibility of "listening" to inputs. A culture-centered approach would recommend that instead of using the question as an opportunity for image building, Powell should have participated in dialogue about the values and beliefs underlying the perception of the United States as the Satan of contemporary politics, exploring the underlying policies and practices that contribute to such perception, and perhaps altering those aspects of U.S. foreign policy that underlie this resentment of the United States. The application of a culture-centered approach would change the event as an opportunity for image building to a dialogical platform for discussion of real issues based on a sincere commitment to mutual understanding and participating in dialogue about U.S. policy abroad where both parties remain open to change.

Central to relationship-based public relations is the very idea that both participants in the relationship can be equally affected; that both participants are open to the possibilities of change based on the lessons learned from engaging in the relationship; and both participants are sincere and committed to the relationship. In other words, the adoption of the culture-centered approach in U.S. international public diplomacy implies the openness of the United States to change and modify its policies based on the meaning drawn from the dialogue with other cultures. Change in this context flows multidirectionally and influences the many participants in the cultural process. The culture-centered approach informs us of new ways of looking at public diplomacy beyond persuasion-based propaganda to the promotion of understanding between cultures.

Notes

1. In this case, the grounded theory approach provides the methodological tool for examining the key themes that emerge in the U.S. public diplomacy documents. These themes offer the backdrop for developing the critical arguments articulated in this article.

2. The unconventional spellings reflect the fact that the communication presented here is a telegram.

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