The Droning of STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION and PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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IN THESE DAYS of smart bombs and unmanned drones delivering lethal payloads, we sometimes see strategic communication and public diplomacy as little more than engineering problems. We have jettisoned real people from our conception of warfighting, and we have forgotten that foreign audiences have emotions more complex than the electrical circuitry in modern munitions.

I am an anthropologist who, 21 years ago, traded backpack and quinine for a three-piece suit, Hartmann carry-on luggage, and Dramamine. I travel a lot, but I do so in search of contemporary narratives and mythologies that moderns create to account for how the world works. I organize these stories into "grand narratives" and consult with corporations, public communication agencies, and governments on how to understand the public's mind and mood and communicate with them.

Using an amalgam of ethnography, narrative analysis, and semiotics, I uncover the ways people design information, emotion, and belief to create their own brand of meaning. No more product-oriented focus groups and survey questions for me! I voyage into peoples' internal dialog, exploring nuanced attitudes, opinions, and reflections about life.

Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, I asked a group of Russians, "What is life like, nowadays?" Their replies boiled down to: "It's better now, but it wasn't worse under communism." You can't quantify such a complicated notion in a survey statistic.

The mind evolved to act, not think. It doesn't wait for Rosetta stones. Recent evidence in neuroscience demonstrates that emotion is the most important factor in the making of meaning. People constantly create emotionally-based narratives to make the fog of life manageable. Each brain is actually three brains—base, limbic, and neocortical—and they can be at odds with each other, authoring different, complicated, even contradictory stories.

A misguided assumption in public diplomacy is the notion that all people are rational actors, who, if they can just be pragmatic, would basically think like Americans; in other words, we think the world is a mirror image of us. This is a dangerous failure of imagination.

Our methods for assessing public opinion are similarly dubious. A recent poll indicated that most Americans were experiencing a rat's nest of emotions about the war in Iraq. Within one day—or even one hour—they felt "yes,"

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"maybe," and "no." Given conflicting "facts" and emotions, they couldn't find their way out of the maze. Nevertheless, in the face of complexity, we deploy the same old polling questions—mechanistic, made-for-TV questions such as that asked of an Iraqi just after Baghdad fell: "How do you feel about being free?" (To which the Iraqi replied, "I think freedom implies security. We still don't have security.")

Our government's conception of people is too simplistic. Why does the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy believe it can change minds inclined to be against us by showing foreigners videos with man-on-the-street testimonials about the good life in the U.S.A.?

And what about the opinions of Americans, supposedly the most open-minded people in the world? When I talked with a group of Americans about their perceptions of Japan and the Japanese, I asked them, "What is the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear the word Japan?" The most frequent responses were Yoko Ono, Bruce Lee, and Godzilla.

I replied, half-mockingly, "What do you mean? Yoko Ono has lived in New York most of her life; Bruce Lee is Chinese practicing a Korean form of karate; and Godzilla, well, Godzilla is a cinematic creation." Many yelled back that I was wrong.

I heard: "Yoko Ono *is* Japan. She took away what we liked best: the Beatles. That's what Japan does. It invades and takes things away from us, like car markets." Others said, "Bruce Lee and Godzilla are the same thing: bent on destruction and can't be stopped. That's Japan."

So much for the cold logic of engineering. Brain circuitry always sees to it that connotation trumps denotation, and that prior belief runs roughshod over thought.

Just a few years ago a Nobel Prize in economics was awarded to two researchers, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, who explained some of the all-too-human ways people calculate risk, uncertainty, and desired outcomes in their dealings with the world. The Nobel laureates didn't conceive of people as one-dimensional stick figures operating in an idealized vacuum. They said people are not logical, rational actors who think in a linear fashion; rather, they decode the world symbolically and metaphorically using emotionally-based reasoning.

Since we know this, why not bring this knowledge to bear on public diplomacy, strategic military communications, PSYOPs, and information warfare?

Vaclav Havel, speaking to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in 1990 after he became the Czech president, said the world needs "understanding over explanation." He suggested we stop seeing the world as governed by finite laws that humankind can direct through the scientific method of successive approximation. Havel advocated comprehending meaning from the inside out, in its unfolding.

Our current government's style of strategic communication and public diplomacy works from the outside in. It demonstrates little insight into human behavior and fails to understand that the old "push-dominate" paradigm of public diplomacy is outmoded. You can't capture hearts and minds. Moreover, neuroscience is now telling us that the juxtaposition of "hearts and minds" is a false dichotomy.

The task is not coercion or even persuasion; people—all people—possess a story about themselves to themselves, involving aspects of their identity that are latent, not fully constituted. If, through you, they feel that they can become more of themselves, their attachment to you is formidable. We must get this right now, not later, or the U.S. will be in Iraq for another decade, and terror in the Middle East–or in our own heartland—will go on and on. ***MR***

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