



Beyond Public Diplomacy

by David Hoffman

WEAPONS OF MASS COMMUNICATION

"How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?" This question, plaintively posed by long-time U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke, has been puzzling many Americans. Osama bin Laden apparently still enjoys widespread public approval in the Muslim world (witness the skepticism in many Muslim countries toward the videotaped bin Laden "confession" released by the White House in December). Indeed, the world's superpower is losing the propaganda war.

"Winning the hearts and minds" of Arab and Muslim populations has quite understandably risen to the top of the Bush administration's agenda. Military operations abroad and new security measures at home do nothing to address the virulent anti-Americanism of government-supported media, mullahs, and madrassas (Islamic schools). Moreover, as the Israelis have discovered, terrorism thrives on a cruel paradox: The more force is used to retaliate, the more fuel is added to the terrorists' cause.

But slick marketing techniques and legions of U.S. spokespersons on satellite television will not be sufficient to stem the tide of xenophobia sweeping through the Islamic world. When antiterrorist ads produced by the U.S. government were shown recently to focus groups in Jordan, the majority of respondents were simply puzzled, protesting, "But bin Laden is a holy man." The widespread antagonism to U.S. regional policies themselves further limits what public diplomacy can achieve. Until these policies are addressed, argues American University's R. S. Zaharna, "American efforts to intensify its message are more likely to hurt than help."

As the United States adds weapons of mass communication to weapons of war, therefore, it must also take on the more

important job of supporting indigenous open media, democracy, and civil society in the Muslim world. Even though many Muslims disagree with U.S. foreign policy, particularly toward the Middle East, they yearn for freedom of speech and access to information. U.S. national security is enhanced to the degree that other nations share these freedoms. And it is endangered by nations that practice propaganda, encourage their media to spew hatred, and deny freedom of expression.

TERROR, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPE

Washington's immediate response to the attacks of September 11 was to try to figure out how best to spin its message. The chair of the House International Relations Committee, Henry Hyde (R.-Ill.), called for the State Department to consult "those in the private sector whose careers have focused on images both here and around the world." As a result, former advertising executive Charlotte Beers has been appointed undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, and even the Pentagon has hired a strategic communications firm to advise it.

Once the stepchild of diplomats, public diplomacy has only recently taken its rightful place at the table of national security. The communications revolution has made diplomacy more public, exposing the once-secret work of diplomats to the global fishbowl of life in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the cast of actors in international affairs now includes nongovernmental organizations, businesses, lobbyists, journalists, and Internet activists. In an era of mass communications and electronic transmission, the public matters. The "street" is a potent force and can undermine even the best-crafted peace agreement.

Fully aware that the war on terrorism requires the cooperation of both world

leaders and the Western and Muslim "streets," Washington turned to the news media to disseminate its message. At home, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice persuaded U.S. networks to limit videotaped broadcasts from bin Laden. And abroad, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice President Dick Cheney took turns strong-arming the emir of Qatar to rein in the transnational satellite TV channel al Jazeera, which the emirate partly funds. When Voice of America broadcast an interview with the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, its acting chief was quickly replaced. U.S. psy-ops (psychological operations) radio messages to Afghans — broadcast over Afghan airwaves from transmitters on converted ec-130 aircraft — sounded like the Cold War rhetoric of a 1950s-era comic book.

Rather than resorting to censorship and counterpropaganda, Washington should make use of the greatest weapon it has in its arsenal: the values enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The State Department should make the promotion of independent media a major priority in those countries where oppression breeds terrorism. It is no coincidence that countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, where the public has little access to outside information or free and independent news media, are the very places where terrorism is bred. Indeed, the unrelenting and unquestioned anti-Western propaganda in those countries' media creates fertile ground for suicide bombers and would-be martyrs. The State Department should therefore apply strong diplomatic pressure, including perhaps the threat of making future aid conditioned on compliance, to influence governments in these countries to adopt laws and policies that promote greater media freedom.

continued

Congress has begun to realize the importance of media in reaching the Arab public, and it is considering appropriating \$500 million to launch a 24-hour Arab-language satellite television station to compete with al Jazeera and the half-dozen other Arab satellite stations that are gaining in popularity. Ironically, Arab states are equally concerned that their own message is not reaching Americans. A week after the September 11 attacks, information ministers from the Persian Gulf states (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) gathered in Bahrain to discuss launching a new English-language satellite television channel. One only has to imagine the improbability of such a channel's succeeding in the U.S. market to predict the reaction to an American satellite channel among Arabs. Moreover, even when effective, overseas broadcasts leave no rudimentary foundations in place on which the democratization of Arab and Muslim societies can begin.

In contrast to the resentment and suspicion that would likely greet a U.S.-sponsored satellite channel, however, a large market does exist in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world for home-grown, independent media. People who have been propagandized all their lives welcome the alternative of fact-based news — as experience in the former Soviet territories and post-Suharto Indonesia attests. Although having open media does not automatically guarantee moderation, it does at least open new space for moderate voices that can combat anti-Western propaganda. A free press can also become the advance guard for democracy by facilitating multiparty elections, freedom of expression, transparency of both government and business, improved human rights, and better treatment for women and disenfranchised minorities. In the World Bank's World Development Report 2002, an analysis of some 97 countries found that those with privately owned, local, independent media outlets had less corruption, more transparent economies, and higher indices of education and health.

THE DAMNATION OF FAUST

Since September 11, Americans have faced the grim reality that hatred of the United States has become endemic in many countries around the world. U.S.-backed repressive rulers such as the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, Suharto in Indonesia, and General Sani Abacha in Nigeria, while discreetly making deals with their American patrons and often enriching themselves from oil revenues, have proven their piety to the masses by encouraging the state-controlled press to demonize America. The media have thus provided the government a safety valve through which to redirect anger from local social and political failures. U.S. policymakers, meanwhile, have willfully ignored this growing time bomb of popular discontent as long as the oil has kept flowing and friendly regimes have remained in place. This Faustian bargain threatens both the United States and its Middle Eastern allies in the long run, as the events of September 11 amply demonstrated. America has been made captive to the repressive domestic policies of these authoritarian regimes.

Nowhere is this threat greater than in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden is, in many ways, that country's true son, a product of the contradiction between the sheikdom's support for U.S. strategic interests and the virulent anti-Americanism that the Saudis cultivate and export from their mosques and madrassas. After the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were set aflame, al Qaeda's publicist-in-chief set light to the tinderbox that is the Arab street.

For someone who scorned modernity and globalization, and who took refuge in an Islamic state that banned television, bin Laden proved remarkably adept at public diplomacy. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, bin Laden turned to al Jazeera to reach the two audiences that were essential to his plans — the Western news media and the Arab masses. Uncensored and unconstrained by any of the countries where it is received, al Jazeera's satellite signal delivered bin Laden's exhortations directly to some 34 million potential viewers across the Middle East, northern

Africa, and Europe. Americans watched, mesmerized, as al Jazeera's exclusive access to bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan scooped the suddenly impotent Western news media. The Bush administration, not knowing quite how to react, has alternately courted and vilified the network (and even reportedly bombed its offices in Kabul).

Most Americans have heard of only al Jazeera — and that only since it became the sole conduit of bin Laden's taped exhortations. In fact, however, a half-dozen other Arab-owned, transnational satellite channels had begun broadcasting to the Middle East five years before al Jazeera went on the air. The dowdy Saudi-financed Middle Eastern Broadcasting Centre (MBC), a direct-broadcast satellite channel run out of London, attracts a slightly larger audience than al Jazeera's for its news programs and twice the audience overall.

And al Jazeera's access to the most wanted man in America has led many pundits to exaggerate the impact of satellite broadcasters in the Middle East. Although many television watchers in the Middle East choose satellite TV because it is less censored, the prohibitive cost continues to depress viewership. In addition, the international satellite stations cannot offer the local and national news that viewers want. Finally, the reach of print media is limited by low literacy rates. These drawbacks leave state television and radio channels the more practical and popular alternative.

That al Jazeera would one day come to be the chosen vehicle for anti-American terrorists would have seemed improbable when the station first went on the air in November 1996. After years of strictly censored, state-controlled television channels in the Arab Middle East, taboo-breaking interviews with Israeli leaders and criticism of Arab regimes made al Jazeera seem, at first, like the Arab equivalent of CNN. After the second intifada began in September 2000, however, the network's coverage veered

continued

sharply toward the incendiary. As Professor Fouad Ajami argued in *The New York Times Magazine*, “the channel has been unabashedly one-sided. Compared with other Arab media outlets, Al Jazeera may be more independent — but it is also more inflammatory. ... Day in and day out, Al Jazeera deliberately fans the flames of Muslim outrage.”

But al Jazeera is far from the worst of the Arab and Muslim news media outlets, which generally see their role as “mobilizational” vehicles for an Islamic society under siege from the forces of Western globalization, U.S. hegemony, and Israeli domination of Palestine. Western journalists such as Thomas Friedman have highlighted some of the most egregious examples of the kind of partisan, inflammatory stories emanating from the Middle East. These include editorials in Egypt’s leading newspaper, *al-Ahram*, suggesting that the United States deliberately poisoned relief packages and dropped them in heavily mined areas of Afghanistan. Other oft-repeated stories assert that Jews were warned to stay away from the World Trade Center before September 11 and that leather belts exported by the United States could sap male potency.

The obstacles to winning the propaganda war in such a context are formidable. Ajami enumerates them: “The enmity runs too deep. ... An American leader being interviewed on Al Jazeera will hardly be able to grasp the insinuations, the hidden meanings, suggested by its hostile reporters. No matter how hard we try, we cannot beat Al Jazeera at its own game.”

MEDIA FRENZY

The best way for Washington to reverse the tide in the propaganda war is to support those forces in the Muslim community that are struggling to create modern democracies and institutionalize the rule of law. That the majority of the Muslim world disagrees with many aspects of U.S. policy does not preclude those same people from also craving more independent and pluralistic media based on Western-style objective journalism. In many Muslim countries, globalization and the communications revolution are opening up new opportunities for

independent media that local journalists and media entrepreneurs are eager to seize. Even repressive governments will find this pressure hard to resist, because modern media are essential gateways to the globalized economy.

Media are also directly embroiled in the Middle East’s love-hate relationship with America. Young people in particular — and the majority of the populations of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, and Iraq are under 25 — are simultaneously seduced and repelled by American culture. The most popular show on MBC is *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* The same youths who shout “death to America” go home to read contraband copies of Hollywood magazines. What the Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan refers to as Islam’s “cultural schizophrenia” — the struggle between tradition and Western secular modernity, between fundamentalism and globalization — haunts the souls of many Muslims and sometimes erupts in factional violence, as in Algeria or in the Palestinian territories.

Iran, a country still dominated by fundamentalist clerics, where the conservative judiciary has suspended or closed at least 52 newspapers and magazines and jailed their most outspoken editors since 1997, provides a strong example of the pent-up demand for open media. When fully 80 percent of Iranians voted for the reformist President Muhammad Khatami in August 1997, they indirectly cast their ballots for the freedom of expression he champions.

This demand for more media diversity will only increase throughout the Middle East and South Asia as regional satellite television and radio channels continue to encroach on the sovereign space of Muslim nations. Pakistan is grappling with several Urdu satellite TV channels that emanate from its rival, India. Satellite broadcasts produced in Los Angeles by the son of the former shah of Iran reportedly sparked riots in his homeland after a loss by Iran’s national soccer team. The French-based Canal Horizons satellite network has millions of subscribers across northern Africa. Faced with competition from satellite television, many Muslim states have been forced to reconsider their

monopoly control over the media. State television channels, freed from government censorship, would be well positioned to recapture audience share for their national news programs.

In addition, as Western influences inevitably penetrate traditional Muslim culture — through film, satellite television, international radio broadcasts, and the Internet — citizens in these societies are starting to notice the shortfalls of their state media’s stodgy, rigidly censored, and propagandistic news. And these viewers are voting with their remote controls. When relatively independent and objective news reports were first broadcast on Russia’s *Itogi* news program, for example, the program became an overnight sensation.

Under pressure from both satellite stations and foreign media, many countries with large Muslim populations have reluctantly recognized the need to open their media space to privately owned, independent channels. Lebanon, Jordan, and several of the Persian Gulf states are now introducing new commercial broadcast laws. Thirty independent television channels and 11 independent radio stations operate in the West Bank. Even Syria has allowed its first-ever privately owned and operated newspapers to start publishing. Indonesia is licensing its first independent local television channels, and the Nigerian parliament has authorized, though not yet implemented, a law to introduce commercial radio.

But will stronger local media simply add to the chorus of anti-Americanism and strengthen fundamentalist Islamic voices? Might empowering the independent press have unintended consequences, such as the fall of friendly regimes? True, the road toward free expression leads to many uncertainties. But there is ample evidence, from the Sandinistas of Nicaragua to the Albanian rebels in Macedonia, that bringing opposition groups into the body politic provides nonviolent alternatives to civil strife. Even some members of the Saudi ruling family are coming to understand the logic of free expression as a more effective safety valve than militant propaganda. In a recent interview with

continued

The New York Times, Prince Al-Walid bin Talal bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia said, "If people speak more freely and get involved more in the political process, you can really contain them and make them part of the process."

The question, moreover, is not whether a more pluralistic media will open the airwaves to Islamic fundamentalists; that cat is already out of the bag. In several Middle Eastern countries, Islamists already operate their own stations. Al Manar television in Lebanon and al Mustaqbal in the West Bank town of Hebron are closely affiliated with Hezbollah and Hamas, respectively. Because these stations employ higher standards of journalism than local state-run media, they have enjoyed sizeable audiences who come to them for the quality of the news, if not the Islamist messages and propaganda they scatter within. Citizens not necessarily sympathetic to Hezbollah tune into al Manar to balance the official lines they hear from Beirut and Damascus.

The real issue, then, is whether moderate voices can be equipped to compete with these radical and government forces in the Muslim world. Those in the Middle East who espouse alternatives to militant Islamism must begin to compete at the same level, or they will be left without audiences.

GATEWAY TO DEMOCRACY

Experience in eastern Europe suggests that providing assistance to local, independent media is a vital way to promote freedom and democracy. As Soviet power waned in the late 1980s, maverick local broadcasters took to the airwaves with unlicensed broadcasts, often pirating programs from Western satellites or playing bootleg videotapes. In 1989 the first pirate station, Kanal X, in Leipzig, East Germany, went on the air from a transmitter on the roof of Freedom House, after state television had stopped broadcasting for the evening. As the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, dozens and then hundreds of pirate stations in eastern Europe and the Soviet republics sprouted up in basements, factories, and apartment complexes. The media revolution was on.

Joining the fight, Internews, a nongovernmental media organization, created a news exchange linking six independent television stations in Russia. With training, equipment, and technical advice, these barely viable stations began to grow and attract audiences. For the first time, people in Russia and the other former Soviet republics were able to see local news, not just the broadcasts from Moscow.

U.S. government assistance for independent broadcast media began in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and grew rapidly during the 1990s. In that decade, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided \$175 million in media assistance in eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. All told, more than 1,600 broadcasters and 30,000 journalists and media professionals have benefited from U.S.-sponsored training and technical assistance programs. More than a dozen national television networks emerged from these efforts, reaching more than 200 million viewers. As a result, citizens in every city of the former Soviet Union now have a variety of channels from which to choose.

Of course, there have also been serious setbacks on the road to media freedom. As independent broadcasters in the region become stronger and reach larger audiences, they face increasing pressure from local authoritarian governments. In April 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin's government engineered the hostile takeover of NTV, that country's main national independent television channel, and this January, a Russian court ordered the closure of TV6, the last remaining independent national broadcaster. In Ukraine, President Leonid Kuchma has been implicated in the gruesome murder of an on-line journalist, Heorhiy Gongadze, who had been critical of the regime. And free media outlets continue to be repressed in the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus.

Despite these setbacks, independent media remain a force for democratization in each of the former Soviet republics. The power of local, independent

television is perhaps best illustrated by events in Georgia on October 30, 2001. When Rustavi-2, an enterprising station in Tbilisi whose reporters had been trained in investigative journalism by Internews, uncovered allegations of corruption and drug trading in the Ministry of the Interior, the government tried to shut it down. But as officers from the Ministry of State Security arrived at the station, the news director broadcast the action live. Hundreds and then thousands of people poured into the streets in protest. Two days later, President Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to dismiss the entire government. And Rustavi-2 is still on the air today.

In the Balkans, where Slobodan Milosevic's seizure of the TV transmitters surrounding Sarajevo precipitated the civil war in Bosnia, independent radio and television stations, supported by the Soros Foundation, USAID, European governments, and others, played critical roles in maintaining democratic opposition. Radio stations braved constant harassment to bring alternative views and news from outside the region, making it impossible for Milosevic to maintain his control on information — or, ultimately, of his own country.

In addition to the independent broadcasters that are on the front lines of conflict and are often shut down for their troubles, thousands of other stations contribute to the building of a culture of democracy and civil society in more banal, quotidian ways. Josh Machleder, an American advising TV-Orbita in Angren, Uzbekistan, explains, "Residents of the town call in when they have problems. The TV station does a news piece about it, it gets shown to the town, and to the authorities, and usually the problems are resolved. Thus, the station makes government work. When the authorities tried to close the station for broadcasting critical material, there was such a protest from sponsors and residents, that the station began working again within three days."

This kind of independent local broadcaster could help open the closed societies of the Muslim world to

continued

democratic culture. Exposing journalists to international news standards can develop habits that will moderate the tone of news reporting. If experience in non-Muslim countries is any indication, well-produced, objective, indigenous journalism will get higher ratings than either exhortative reports from state news organs or more distant news from satellite broadcasters. Ultimately, audience will always drive the media.

LETTING MUSLIMS SPEAK

In the aftermath of the military victory over the Taliban, the United States should move swiftly to help establish diverse and democratic media in Afghanistan. Given the weak infrastructure and the fragmentation of Afghan society, there is a clear danger that rival warlords will promote their own separate radio and television channels, exacerbating ethnic and other social divisions. An international broadcasting commission, under the auspices of the United Nations, will need to be established to work with the transitional government to license broadcasters, assign frequencies, and regulate content to preclude incendiary messages. Regulating hate broadcasting is a contentious issue, but this kind of authority proved especially useful in postwar Bosnia and Kosovo in preventing ultranationalist political factions from using the media to foment violence.

Only indigenous news outlets can provide Afghanistan with what it most needs — independent sources of news and information that Afghan citizens from any ethnic group will recognize as fair and impartial. A congressional proposal for a Radio Free Afghanistan made sense when the Taliban still controlled the country, but the United States must now turn its attention and resources to helping local Afghans develop their own media outlets. Having a Radio Free Afghanistan up and running would make it much more

difficult to create successful local media enterprises, because the U.S.-run station would drain limited resources, inflate local salaries, lower advertising rates, and compete for talent and programming. For the same reason, the United Nations should also avoid the temptation to set up its own channels, as it did rather unsuccessfully in Cambodia, East Timor, and Bosnia.

The international community should therefore support an indigenous state radio and television channel such as Radio Kabul, which is already operating, to unify the country and reestablish national identity. The interim government will initially not enjoy widespread legitimacy as an objective news source, so the national broadcaster should be established as a public channel, editorially separate and insulated from the government.

Local stations will also have an important role to play, providing the community news on which civil societies are built and making a dynamic contribution to local economies. The United States and the international community should help train and finance other nongovernmental, independent channels that could set the standard for good journalism and lead through competition. Finally, the international community must be prepared to underwrite Afghan media, both public and private, since the economy cannot be expected to generate sufficient advertising revenue for many years to come. Otherwise, the media will become a tool for control by local warlords.

As the war on terrorism moves beyond Afghanistan, the Bush administration should likewise extend the media assistance program that the United States first pioneered in eastern Europe to the Middle East. In completely closed societies such as Iraq, Iran, and Libya, foreign broadcasting will continue to be essential to providing outside information

— as it did in the Taliban's Afghanistan, where two-thirds of Afghan men reportedly listened to the BBC and Voice of America. But in other countries where the opportunities for alternative local media exist, the United States should assist the development of independent newspapers, Internet service providers, on-line content providers, and local radio and television channels.

To promote more balanced and moderate media, the United States can provide expert assistance in media law and regulatory reform and provide journalistic training and technical assistance. Americans should lend their help with no strings attached, however — even when those media criticize America. The United States will appear duplicitous if it tries to support independent news outlets while simultaneously manipulating information or engaging in counterpropaganda. America falters when it does not keep faith with its democratic ideals. U.S. government support for independent media in eastern Europe has been scrupulous in this regard. American support for media in Muslim countries should be held to the same high standard, especially given the suspicion with which the United States is viewed there.

Freedom of speech and exchange of information are not just luxuries; they are the currency on which global commerce, politics, and culture increasingly depend. If the peoples of the Muslim world are to participate in the global marketplace of goods and ideas, they will need access to information, freedom of expression, and a voice for women and disenfranchised minorities. That, more than any number of advertisements about American values, is what will bring light to the darkness from which terrorism has come.

David Hoffman is President of Internews Network.