

Switching the Strategic Focus of American Public Diplomacy:

Forget Battles, Think Bridges

By R.S. Zaharna | October 22, 2004

Since September 11, 2001, American public diplomacy has been on a communication treadmill trying to find the “right” message that will win the hearts and minds of skeptical foreign publics. America’s message isn’t the problem. America’s strategy is the problem.

In the three years since the terrorist attacks, America has aggressively pursued an information battle strategy left over from the Cold War. The National Security Strategy put the war of ideas second to the military war. The battle for hearts and minds has been the charge, reverberating from the political chambers of Washington to the front pages of hometown papers. The 9/11 Commission echoed that strategy, saying, “Just as we did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideas abroad vigorously.”

Fighting an information battle made sense during the Cold War era. Then, two identifiable government powers dominated the political and communication landscape. “Us versus them” was persuasive. Governments could control information. Foreign and domestic audiences were separated by an ocean that technology struggled to cross. Public diplomacy was a product, made in America and distributed overseas. Achieving information dominance was key to silencing the opponent. In an information battle, the one with the most information wins.

Fighting an information battle is the communication equivalent of conventional warfare. The strategy lacks the agility and effectiveness to effectively navigate today’s dynamic political and communication terrain.

Today’s policy struggles are multi-polar. Culture has replaced nationalism as the prevailing dynamic, filtering and distorting America’s messages. Regional conflicts, once masked by the superpower rivalry, have surfaced with a vengeance. For the publics absorbed in the conflicts, U.S. policy has become the message of American public diplomacy. The publics in America and abroad have become a single 24/7 global audience. Communication is now about exchanging information. In a world of information

overload, disseminating information is “spam,” and networking is strategic.

American public diplomacy needs a new strategy. To win hearts and minds, American public diplomacy needs to bridge the perception gap between Americans and the rest of the world. Disseminating information cannot do this. Building bridges can. Aggressively pursued, this strategy can cross the many political and cultural hurdles and capitalize on advanced technology.

The strategy of building bridges is not new. The Fulbright program and the Peace Corps represent America’s long tradition of building bridges. What is new is its strategic power today.

Building bridges networking underlies the growing influence of non-state actors. A woman in Vermont coordinated the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. She built a network. A man in a cave in Afghanistan had another idea. As the 9/11 Commission so thoroughly detailed, al-Qaida, is also a network.

In yesterday’s information battle, the one with the most information won. Today, the one with the strongest, most extensive network wins.

Achieving this strategic goal requires new tactics and research to identify potential links, create relationships and expand a network. Audience research, particularly opinion polling, has been subservient to creating the message. Instead, America needs to use cutting-edge research tools to identify potential links and measure the quality of relationships. The quality of America’s political relationships profoundly impacts America’s image. Using these new tools will help measure American

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public diplomacy effectiveness more accurately and meaningfully.

It's unlikely that America will be able to turn around its image in the Middle East until there is positive movement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraqi situation. Yet, even if the conflicts were resolved tomorrow, the strategic power of networking would be more, not less important to promoting American goodwill in the region.

The 9/11 Commission prefaces its recommendations with a call for "institutionalizing imagination." American public diplomacy desperately needs that imagination. For American public diplomacy to be as effective in the war on terrorism as it was during the Cold War, America needs to imaginatively explore a new strategic focus. To win hearts and minds abroad, America itself needs a new, more imaginative and strategic mindset: forget battles, think bridges.

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