Strategic Ambiguity, Communication, and Public Diplomacy in an Uncertain World: Principles and Practices

Bud Goodall

Angela Trethewey

Kelly McDonald

June 21, 2006

Report #0604

Consortium for Strategic Communication

Arizona State University

Strategic Communication and Strategic Ambiguity In the Middle East: Principles and Practices

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is widespread recognition that the U. S. public diplomacy efforts worldwide have failed. In response to this image crisis, the Pentagon, State Department, and other agencies of the federal government are currently seeking new models for message strategy, coordination, and alignment.

There are two major reasons for failures of communication in public diplomacy: (1) reliance on an outdated one-way model of influence, and (2) an inability to prepare for, or respond to the jihadi media and message strategy that has thus far dominated local cultural interpretations of U.S. diplomatic objectives.

These failures can be addressed if the U.S. recognizes the need for a new way of thinking about *ambiguity as strategy* in strategic communication initiatives. Strategic ambiguity recognizes that a powerful vision for change among diverse constituents requires an ability to empower local interpretations of its meaning in order to build relationships to that vision without insisting on a fixed meaning for it or alienating potential allies because of it. Ambiguous but mindful communication practices are required in uncertain times, particularly when dealing with audiences we neither fully understand nor trust.

Five principles to guide strategic communication policy are: (1) practice strategic engagement, not global salesmanship; (2) do not repeat the same message in the same channels with the same spokesperson and expect new or different results; (3) do not seek to control a message's meaning in cultures we do not fully understand; (4) understand that message clarity and perception of meaning is a function of relationships, not strictly a function of word usage; and (5) seek "unified diversity" based on global cooperation instead of "focused wrongness" based on sheer dominance and power.

BACKGROUND

In a report issued on June 13, 2006 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the first paragraph offers a devastating analysis of current world attitudes toward the U.S. It begins:

> *"America's global image has again slipped and support for the war on terrorism has declined even among close U. S. allies . . . The war in Iraq is a continuing drag on opinions of the United States, not only in predominantly Muslim countries but in Europe and Asia as well. And despite growing concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the U. S. presence in Iraq is cited at least as often as Iran—and in many countries much more often—as a danger to world peace" (p. 1).*

During a visit to the Army War College in March, Rumsfeld said, "If I were grading, I would say we probably deserve a D or D plus as a country as to how well we're doing in the battle of ideas that's taking place in the world today. ... We have not found the formula as a country."

If this report is correct in documenting a continuous (since 2002) downturn in favorable attitudes toward the U.S. and its policies in the Middle East—and we believe it is—then the U.S. is losing the war of ideas.

The question is no longer "why?" The Pew report provides evidence that despite considerable expense, U.S. attempts to engage in strategic communication campaigns in the Middle East and around the world have failed, and that those failures have contributed significantly to an overall loss of credibility and prestige throughout the rest of the world. This critical assessment follows a published report about a Department of Defense plan for a comprehensive revision of its approach to public diplomacy ("The Roadmap," *U.S. News & World Report* May 29, 2006) that will guide the work done in its new established Strategic Communication Center in Omaha, Nebraska.

Key to the Pentagon's new approach will be an emphasis on message analysis, coordination, and alignment among the various groups and agencies responsible for issuing statements, press releases, videos, news reports, and for making speeches. This emphasis on alignment is necessary because meanings attributed to messages are—in a global mediated environment—interpreted locally and rebroadcast within those locally-interpreted frameworks to audiences

who neither share our native language or culture, and who are fundamentally dubious about the truth value of our messages.

The quiet admission of the U.S. failure to communicate a coherent and believable message coupled with the Pentagon's investment in a new Strategic Communication Center are laudable steps in what promises to be a longer-term global communication campaign to regain our good standing both in the Muslim-dominated Middle East as well as on the world's multicultural, multiethnic, religiously and politically-diverse mediated stage.

The first step in the rehabilitation process should benefit from an understanding of why the existing communication strategy for public diplomacy in the Middle East failed. This paper addresses that question by (1) providing a synthesis of academic studies that light on the two reasons for communication breakdowns in our "monologic" campaign to win the hearts and minds of Muslims as well as others, and the unlikely success of "dialogic" strategies; (2) offering a new "strategic ambiguity" model for strategic communication campaigns in the Middle East and elsewhere based on a middle-range theory that negotiates the communicative space between monologue and dialogue; and (3) providing five pragmatic principles of strategic ambiguity to guide the formulation of a new strategic communication in public diplomacy policy.

TWO REASONS FOR COMMUNICATION FAILURE

There are two major reasons for a failure of communication in public diplomacy: 1) reliance on an outdated one-way model of influence, and (2) an inability to prepare for, or respond to the jihadi media and message strategy that has thus far dominated local cultural interpretations of U.S. diplomatic objectives.

RELIANCE ON A ONE-WAY MODEL OF INFLUENCE

For the past fifty years, the dominant U. S. approach to communicating with people living in regions of the world where we have strategic and economic interests has been

informed by what communication theorists refer to as the "one-way model" (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Goodall, 2006a).

This one-way model, derived from an early engineering study of telephone communication by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in the late 1940s (and refined slightly by public relations practitioners in the 1950s), posits that:

- *Messages* (verbal and nonverbal) move from a sender (or source), through a *channel* (e.g. airwaves, lightwaves), to a *receiver*;
- Meanings are contained in the words chosen by the sender and are *passively interpreted* by receivers (assuming the sender and receiver share the same language code and culture); and
- *Repetition* of the same message, sent through the same channels to the same receivers over time reduces outside interference with the intended message (i.e., noise) and improves the likelihood of achieving the intended interpretation and outcome (Goodall & Goodall, 2006).

No audience member is truly "passive" in her or his interpretation of a message.

The limitations of this model begin with the understanding that no audience member is truly "passive" in her or his interpretation of a message. The human mind *actively* engages words and actions within a particular context; places them into *pre-existing* historical, cultural, and political frameworks; and evaluates the meanings of the message based on *perceptions* of a source's credibility, intention, trustworthiness, and caring (Corman, Hess, and Justus, 2006; Peters, 1999; Hayakawa, 1978).

It is also true that meanings are *not* solely contained in the words chosen to convey a message. Human beings aren't dictionaries, but cultural interpreters of meanings. As the famous David Berlo dictum has it: "Meanings are in people, not in words" (Berlo, 1960). Berlo went on to say:

- People can have similar meanings only to the extent that they have had, or can anticipate having, similar experiences;

- Meanings are never fixed; as experience changes, so meanings change;

- No two people can have exactly the same meaning for anything.

These long established principles of meaning-making underscore the idea that a one-way transmission model has limited utility to organize public opinion in the realm of public diplomacy. If the U.S. government's strategic goal is to win the hearts and minds of diverse others, the most effective form of communication is *dialogue*, not monologue.

There is a wealth of theorizing and research about communication as dialogue (see, for example, Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Buber, 1958; Habermas, 1979, 1984, 1987; Johannesen, 1971; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). In general, dialogue is defined by an open and honest exchange of ideas between or among actors who agree to suspend judgment, speak honestly, and remain profoundly open to change (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2006). Despite the utopian nature of this definition, experience has taught us that dialogues do not occur in a vacuum. Actors bring to even the most open and honest dialogic events a context made of their own historical, cultural, religious, and political sense-making *schema*. In other words, actors interpret the meanings of their message exchanges through an emerging, flexible framework constituted in language through an ongoing process of retrospective sense-making (Pearce & Pearce, 2000a; Weick, 1995), current analyses of meanings (Spano, 2000; Kellett & Dalton, 1999), and future projections of goals, plans, self-interest, ego, and needs (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Pearce & Pearce, 2000b; Eisenberg, 1984). Because of the complex and uncertain nature of dialogic encounters, adopting the idea of dialogue for strategic communication purposes in the Middle East is probably unwise.

Even if it were possible, in the spirit of the Camp David Accords,[1] to bring together U.S. and Muslim political leaders for the purpose of dialogue, the prospect has been seriously compromised by recent public diplomacy and credibility failures (see Goodall, et. al., 2006b). By seeking political influence over cultural and religious understanding, by relying on a one-way model to inform

[1] See the framework for this historic dialogue at: http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/campdavid/accords.phtml.

communication campaigns, and by our perceived misuses of military might to accomplish strategic objectives without exhausting diplomatic possibilities, we may have forfeited any real opportunity for dialogue with the Muslim world at the highest levels of government.[2]

According to Jurgen Habermas in his theory of communicative action (1979), dialogues are *symmetrical interactions* characterized by "reciprocal expectations regarding the truth, appropriateness, and sincerity of statements" as well as an "openness to being persuaded through the process of communication" (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 104). *Where these conditions for symmetry cannot be met, there can be no dialogue*. Until the U.S. rebuilds its credibility, reestablishes *trust* with other nations and leaders, and recommits itself to *truth* as well as effectiveness as our standard metrics for strategic communication efforts, those interested in improving our image must look to less grand ideas *in the middle ground of communicative practices between monologue and dialogue* that have a better likelihood of success.

Inability to prepare for, or respond to, the Global Jihadi Media Strategy

The second major reason for U.S. public diplomacy failures in the Middle East is the rise of Internet influence on Muslim (and particularly jihadi) public opinion (Brachman, in press; Combating Terrorism Center, 2006; Hunt, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2004; Hoffman, 2004). Studies have documented the U.S. government's inability to prepare for, or respond to, the sophisticated jihadi media strategies that have successfully captured the imaginations of many people—and particularly the youth—in the Middle East (see Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006; Hunt, 2006; Nisbet, at. al., 2004; Rumsfeld, 2006).

[2] This fact should in no way diminish current and future dialogue projects sponsored by the Department of State, USAID, or private consortiums dedicated to improving understanding and facilitating productive change through dialogue. One excellent model for how dialogue can be used to bring together diverse groups is the Consortium for Public Dialogue, which sponsors a wide variety of these events annually (see their website: http://www.publicdialogue.org/projects/index.html).

Corman & Schiefelbein (2006) provide an analysis of the three core communication strategies embodied in jihadi websites and media: the *legitimation* of the global jihadi movement within existing social and religious frameworks commonly understood in the region; the *propagation* of that message to sympathetic audiences in regions where the movement seeks recruits and political expansion opportunities; and the use of *intimidation* to cower opponents as well as those within the Muslim world who may turn against them.

The new media made possible by access to the Internet and traditional media outlets require a more pragmatic, middle-ground effort known as "strategic ambiguity"

What is needed to counter the coordinated media campaign of jihadi groups is a coordinated strategic communication plan organized, understood, and deployed consistently by the U.S. and its allies. Moreover, this plan should combine "a long-term strategy for improving our credibility with Muslim audiences" (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006, p. 2) with an active engagement of issues pertinent to local audiences both within the Muslim community at home and abroad. Until the U.S. sufficiently organizes its own Muslim resources to combat the advances made by jihadi groups, there is little likelihood of global success.

Here again, the communication principles driving these counter-blogging, counter-media campaigns cannot be derived from an outdated, ineffective monologic approach, nor can it credibly rely on dialogic models. The new media made possible by access to the Internet and traditional media outlets require a more pragmatic, middle-ground effort known as "strategic ambiguity" (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2006).

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY AS A MODEL FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic ambiguity is a mid-range theory that is easily adapted to the purposes of improving the communication process necessary for rebuilding the U.S. image abroad and furthering our diplomatic objectives on a global mediated stage. Strategic ambiguity theory is drawn from research

about building resilient organizations in turbulent environments under conditions of uncertainty. [3]

"Message control" as an organizing metaphor should be replaced by something that allows for rapid dissemination of information and flexibility in response to the diverse needs of a global workforce and marketplace.

The idea of strategic ambiguity as a communication strategy emerged in the mid-1980s. At that time, flattened business hierarchies made possible by new information technologies coupled with the need to be faster and more responsive to global markets challenged existing top-down models of information sharing and communication in organizations (Eisenberg, 1984). The old organizing model—much like the monologic model for communication—was informed by a "control" metaphor that itself was firmly rooted in the assumption of a shared organizational culture that respected hierarchies of power, strict divisions of labor, and the power of the higher authorities in the company to direct work activities as well as their meanings.

By contrast, organizational theorists and enlightened business leaders posited that "message control" as an organizing metaphor should be replaced by something that allows for *rapid dissemination of information* and *flexibility* in response to the diverse needs of a global workforce and marketplace. An alternative organizing schema and message strategy rooted in "strategic ambiguity" rather than message control enabled a much wider sharing of information necessary for employees and customers to make better decisions as well as allowed for "local empowerment" of meanings associated with the implementation of vision, mission, values, and goals (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2006).

Strategic ambiguity as a communication strategy occupies a theoretical middle ground between monologic control and dialogic empowerment models. Strategic ambiguity values the symbolic and dialogic nature of language and the multicultural bases for interpretations of meanings. It also values what Eric Eisenberg terms "unified diversity" so necessary to the creation of resilient organizations operating in highly uncertain environments (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Yet this model does not operate without guiding principles capable of informing a coordinated

[3] In some diplomatic conversations, the term "strategic ambiguity" has been used as a derogatory term to refer to the administration's unwillingness to stake a fixed and unambiguous policy regarding the independence of Taiwan from China. Our use of the term is not in any way related to that limited characterization or issue.

management of meaning across diverse audiences (Pearce and Pearce, 2000; Pearce, 1989). In the final section of this white paper, we articulate those principles.

FIVE PRAGMATIC PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE POLICY

Strategic ambiguity operates between monologue and dialogue in the public sphere. Given the failures of the monologic model and the unlikelihood of dialogue between or among disparate leaders operating at the highest levels of diverse governments, strategic ambiguity is a viable and appropriate model for engaging public diplomacy in an uncertain world.

The goal of strategically ambiguous communication should not be "shared meaning" but instead "organized action." Five principles to guide a new communication policy are:

1. **Practice strategic engagement not global salesmanship:** *Strategic engagement is the application of strategic ambiguity to public diplomacy goals.* Demonstrate a willingness to engage the messages of other leaders and spokespersons without seeking immediate closure or insisting on the inherent "rightness" of our messages. Consider communication a two-way interaction and meanings to be emergent over time.[4]

2. **Do not repeat the same message in the same channels with the same spokespersons and expect new or different results:** *Repetition breeds contempt.* Using a monologic model to inform public diplomacy doesn't work because it encourages spokespersons to repeat the same basic ideas and messages without accounting for the meaning-making practices of

[4] See excellent overview in Banks, Ge, & Baker (1991). For example, the U.S. failed a major political opportunity in U. S. - Egyptian relations when LBJ was offended at what he thought were bellicose comments by President Nasser. Nasser later explained his comments were only aimed at audiences at home while he wanted to work in diplomatic backchannel with the U. S. Understanding sedimented cultural norms and values and their impact on communication patterns requires an engaged posture, not a "our way or no way" posture. A more recent example may be found in Goodall, et. al., (2006b) in the U.S. mishandling of diplomacy involved in responding officially to the letter written by Iranian President Ahmadinejad to President George W. Bush.

intended audiences. Replace repetition with strategic engagement as a guiding principle of communication with diverse audiences.

3. **Do not seek to control a message's meaning in cultures we do not fully understand:** *Control over preferred interpretations is a false goal in a diverse mediated communication environment.* There is an inverse relationship between control over a message's meanings and our understanding of the cultures wherein it will be interpreted. The less we know about cultures, languages, and religions, the less control we can fairly exert on the likely meanings attributed to public diplomacy messages.

The goal of strategically ambiguous communication should not be "shared meaning" but instead "organized action."

4. **Understand that message clarity and perception of meaning is a function of relationships, not strictly a function of word usage**: *Focus diplomatic efforts on building trust and credibility based on a longer term and deeper understanding of cultures, languages, and religions.* It is in the context of building ongoing relationships and being responsive to the interpretations of others that we are able to craft productive messages that have legitimate value and that resonate among diverse audiences.

5. **Seek "unified diversity" based on global cooperation instead of "focused wrongness" based on sheer dominance and power:** *Recognize that shared meaning isn't the only goal, but shared principles and goals are singularly meaningful.* Learn to expect and cultivate multiple meanings in local cultures and communities that support broader agreements of U.S. principles or goals and expect that those audiences will adapt and internalize those messages according to their own needs and resources. Building coalitions of engaged communication should actively and publicly augment coalitions of military force and be coordinated with them.

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