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Zaharna has done a great service to those interested in international communication, more specifically public diplomacy. Students, international researchers, and public diplomacy practitioners can learn from the book’s documentation of the apparently well intended but flawed mistakes made by some experienced American communicators charged with promoting the U.S. image abroad, especially in the Middle East.

In the introduction the author offers a review of the Bush administration’s clumsy and clearly ineffective public diplomacy efforts after 9/11 and then provides a basis for a theoretical framework for post-Cold War public diplomacy. These two topics are of special interest for students and researchers.


All sections of this publication are extremely useful, but I was especially taken with the three chapters in Part I. We all lived through those clumsy post-9/11 efforts to tell America’s story to the world, especially to those in the Middle East. However, Zaharna, with clear and succinct writing, reminds us of the initiatives, Radio Sawa and AlHurra (satellite-delivered TV), and an Arabic-language magazine for youth that the U.S. had trouble giving away, and also explores the cast of State Department communication experts that seemingly understood neither new media realities nor the audience. The writer correctly exposes the Cold War thinking and methods that were not only outdated and inappropriate, but also ultimately ineffective for Middle East audiences. For example, we are reminded of former advertising executive and Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers who instituted many media-rich initiatives apparently without researching whether or not they would be well received by the audience. Among the Beers-inspired media campaigns were a series of mini-documentaries featuring Americans of Arab origin. While this was seemingly a good idea, those in charge of this effort apparently never considered that few television stations, government or private, had any interest in airing the paid commercials. The
book also discusses former Bush White House spokeswoman Karen Hughes, who was appointed Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy with the hope of reinvigorating U.S. public diplomacy. Her disastrous “listening tour” of three Middle East countries was well covered by the American press. There were some successes, especially a program enabling U.S. citizens who were followers of Islam to travel and speak abroad. The Cold War thinking after 9/11 reminds me of the oft-told semi-public confrontation between President Lyndon Johnson and then-Director of the United States Information Agency, Leonard Marks. During a Washington event involving the Vietnam War Johnson is reported to have said to Marks, “(expletive) Leonard, I have given you all that money and the Europeans are not supporting my Vietnam policies. Don’t they understand?” Marks is reported to have replied, “Yes, Mr. President, they understand but they disagree with you.”

All of this is a run-up to what is, at least to academics, the most valuable part of this book. Readers are reminded that as we move on from Cold War decades and tactics, the media- and non-media-worlds have changed. For example, powerful commercial networks such as CNN and public service broadcasters (with the BBC perhaps the best example) are now part of the public diplomacy mix. There are well organized and well funded NGOs with political, social, cultural, economic, and environmental agendas that have been effective in promoting them. These, of course, are outside the control of the U.S. Department of State or the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the U.S. government agency that oversees the U.S. broadcasting and Internet efforts abroad.

Present and future public diplomacy officials could be well served by reading the Zaharna book. It offers a look at the past, where we went so wrong, and the hope for the future of public diplomacy for those who are willing to step outside of traditional Washington, D.C., Cold War, one-way communication thinking.