

US Public Diplomacy in Broken Arabic

Evaluating the Shared Values advertising campaign targeting Arab and Muslim worlds

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September 11 stood as an epic period in the history of the United States where the world spontaneously rallied by its side. Yet despite this unprecedented emotional fervor, these attacks uncovered an international sense of uneasiness about what the US is perceived stands for. In response to the Gallup nine-Islamic-nation-poll released in February 2002 in Washington, President George W. Bush concluded that the US has what he termed an "image problem."

It is indeed ironic that both the victims as well as the perpetrators of these attacks turned out to have an image problem. The image problem of the perpetrators promptly added more fuel to an already existing image problem to the Muslim world and the Arab world in specific. Both sides had off-the-shelf justifications as to why there are such cross-misconceptions.

From the US side, hating the American way of life, its freedom and democracy, were perceived to be at the heart of this misconception. If only could the US could convey its perspective across, the Muslim and the Arab populace would appreciate America. And only if the Arab governments and their media would allow the dissemination of US messages to their peoples. From the Muslim and Arab worlds' side it was Samuel Huntington's prophesy of clash of civilizations coming true.

The September 11 attacks on the US demonstrated that the US and the Arab world had more in common than either side was ever ready to recognize. The US, having arguably the world's largest media armada, proved to be as ineffective as a flotilla of twenty-three communication canoes scattered on the shores of the Arabs states. Neither media was even remotely able to get their perspectives across.

The September 11 attacks on the US produced tidal waves that washed the Arab communication canoes further inland and doomed all communication efforts by the Arab League. An average of one regional conference a week in the year subsequent to the attacks, which amassed hundreds of Arab intellectuals and media experts, failed to draft even a blue print for presenting the Arab perspective to the West.

Similarly, the US official communication armada suddenly realized that it was unmanned and its autopilot was out of order. Charlotte Beers, who had earlier convinced Secretary of State Colin Powell to eat Uncle Bens, was brought in to head the State Department's Public Diplomacy team to win the heart and the minds of Arabs and Muslims.

In an attempt to shore up its brand image ratings, the US embarked on a \$15 million TV and print advertising campaign that ran from November to December 2002 in many of the mainstream media of Arab and Muslim countries. This was supposedly part of an integrated public diplomacy campaign that included exhibitions, videos and books.

The advertising campaign was endorsed by The Council of American Muslims for Understanding. The council was launched May 2002 by the Undersecretary of State Charlotte Beers as a non-governmental group for “creating positive dialogue between the US and the Islamic countries”. Malik Hassan, its chairman, defined it as “government-funded, not government founded.”

From a communication perspective, the significance of the campaign has more to do with the evaluation of the potential effectiveness of the US public diplomacy in the Arab world where the US military and political presence promises to be long.

Since it was the first of its kind, the campaign’s effectiveness need not be evaluated within the context of the *noise* of other corresponding messages that were sent by the same messenger. The latter messages had the potential of diluting or even neutralizing its impact especially since it coincided with the military build for the invasion of Iraq four months later.

Hence the need to evaluate this advertising campaign on its own merits, holding the effects of other competing messages constant. And instead of looking at the necessary and sufficient conditions for its success, it is best to look at the necessary condition, which is formulating a coherent message that could stand on its own.

The campaign consisted of a series of four print and TV commercials. The print communication was a series of Ramadan greetings in the name of the “American People.” Each advertisement depicts the life of a Muslim living in the US and consists of a headline, one large visual of the main character(s) and three small visuals. The body of each ranged from 150 to 200 words. The first advertisement depicts the life of Rawia Ismail, a teacher in Toledo, Ohio, who was born in Lebanon and came to the United States in 1984.

I could instantly relate to Rawia’s testimony as a working mother of four children, where the reader is lead to assume that she is the breadwinner of the family as there is no mention of her spouse. My father passed away leaving behind five very young children, where my mother had to work as a full-time dressmaker to rear us through a good part of the civil war in Lebanon. As I read through the text, the story of Rawia--a name which means “a storyteller” in Arabic—became less coherent, inconsistent at and often confusing.

Born in Lebanon and coming to the States in 1984, Rawia is presented as a person with no national identity per se; only as a Muslim living in America who enjoys the freedom of practicing her faith. The essence of America is the concept of the cultural melting pot, where one takes on a new national identity that supersedes every other, even religion. Rawia is not presented as an American, only as a Muslim who lives in the United States.

Missing from the family unit depicted in the advertisement is Rawia’s spouse. For an Arab audience, a family unit consists of a father as well, regardless of his actual role in

the family. Father-mother presence depicts family unity and stability. Rawia's husband appears in many scenes of the corresponding TV commercial nevertheless.

Confusion in what is Rawia's story starts from the headline and persists well into the third paragraph. Evidently, the word "teach" is used in four different versions in the Arabic text, each portraying Rawia in a different role. The headline says "u'otee al durooss", which in Arabic could mean that she "gives lessons", but not as a full-time teacher.

The headline says "I also put 'u'ellem' my children in Islamic school". However, we are told shortly afterwards that she teaches on Saturday in an Islamic center. There, "I (ulaqqen) teach to the students for about one hour of religious teachings". The issue here is why would she need to revert to the most rigid form of religious indoctrination that is, by cramming in, especially in a society that prides itself for tolerance? "Ullaqqen" is a loaded with negative connotations about the way Islam is taught as it brings images of forced religious teachings, which does not blend with the theme of the campaign.

Rawia finds that teaching religion and Arabic and praying the "only means of living 'waseelat al aysh' for my family and myself". This could not be at the case, unless she is living on handouts from the Islamic center, which is not all the case here. Praying is more likely to a 'way of living' rather than a 'means of living'.

The text mixes up between the Arabic translation of "neighbours" and "neighbouring": jeeran and jiwār, both of which have different connotations regardless of the language. Rawia tells us that they "were not subjected to any harm or injury after September 11," a statement which could be construed as having been exposed to injury before that date. "Our neighbors provided us with the required support," she adds. The type of support presented in such a context correlates more physical rather than emotional support.

Rawia prides herself for wearing the hijab (headscarf) in the classroom. The hijab prompts students to ask her about "this topic...". "They like this given that they and their parents get to know a new and a different civilization", she adds.

It should worry Muslims if the hijab were to become the symbol of Islam, especially since tens of millions of Muslim women in the US and across the world do not wear this headscarf. The text makes the hijab as the "topic" of discussion, rather than the tenets of the Islamic faith. It introduces them to a "new and different civilization". Different, indeed; but, new! No, it is not.

In the last paragraph, Rawia says that she motivates students to "work on the points of similarities between us more than working on the points of departure." I had to read the advertisement several times in order to convince myself that what I am reading could not possibly be stated by a school teacher. But having spontaneously related to Rawia's testimony initially, I was not ready to make a final judgment on what is reported in advertisement on her behalf. Giving her the benefit of the doubt meant having to go to the English version of her text in www.opendialogue.com (not .org), as suggested in the

advertisement.

The English text gives an instant mental and psychological relief. It restores the respect Rawia deserves, which she was denied of in the Arabic text. Out of twelve sentences, only four of them are translated correctly into Arabic.

Rawia does not mince words about what she does at the public school or the Islamic center: she teaches and there is no cramming of religious teachings. What she does at the Islamic school is “the *only way of life* for me and my family”; not “the only *means of living*”, as mentioned in the Arabic text.

“Being a Muslim means *everything* to me”. This is as opposed to Arabic text, which that “being a Muslim *means a lot* to me”. Throughout, Rawia talks about her neighbors, not those in the neighboring areas. She is grateful for them for being “supportive, truly”, not because they provided her with “required support”.

Indeed, she wears the hijab in the classroom. Students ask her “a lot of questions”. But the hijab is not the “topic” of discussion as stated in the Arabic text. The English version refers to students and their parents being “introduced to a different culture.” There is no mention of a “new civilization,” as stated in the Arabic text.

Rawia ends her narration by motivating her students “to work on our similarities *rather* than our differences”. In the Arabic translation, the word “rather” becomes “more than”, resulting in a total dilution to the most meaningful part of Rawia’s message.

Bilingual communication experts are all too well familiar with the difficulties of translation from one language to another, especially when the text is too technical, which is not at all the case in this message. There can be no justification as to why only one-quarter of the message is translated properly.

With such quality of translation in mind, it becomes virtually impossible to determine how to gauge reaction to it: the Arabic version or the English version. The reaction in the Arab media has been negative; however, not because of the contents, but rather as an outright rejection of the brand America and the product itself.

Indeed the ad campaign applied many of the basic guidelines in advertising that are outlining some of the basic features of the brand. But it seemed to have missed on those that are relevant to the target audience.

The core values of brand America are many. They range from the its past and current regional policies, its culture, lifestyle, economic might, sharing resources with less fortunate countries, educational system, democratic political system, technical know-how, religious tolerance, economic opportunities, to mention a few.

The communication did not illustrate the *benefits* of brand America the target audiences can derive from ‘consuming’ this brand outside the US. Arabs or Muslims outside the US

are not worried about the well being of fellow Arabs or Muslims living in the US, or whether they are able to practice their faith freely.

Whoever migrated to the States did so looking for better opportunities where religious tolerance is taken for granted. Arabs and Muslims in the Arab and world are more worried about their own economic, educational, social, cultural and political future. Equally important for them is how the current US policies will affect their being.

It is very unlikely that the US public diplomacy will succeed in the short run in demonstrating the more humane face of brand America. Public reaction to its regional policies has yet to prove otherwise. More alienation towards brand America is brewing.

Neither Americans nor the Arabs can afford the detrimental consequences of such alienation. Civic diplomacy or interaction needs to replace public diplomacy in the salvaging of the brand equity of America. Public diplomacy has become notoriously associated with the official government policies. It has turned into a liability rather than an asset to brand America.

America has succeeded because of the private initiatives of its individuals and its civic institutions. Now American civic institutions ought to take the lead and start re-building bridges with Arab world at the civic levels.

The focus must be on capitalizing on America's brand attributes that are appreciated in the Arab world. More importantly those that are needed by the average Arabs and can improve their quality of live--as opposed to those enjoyed by their fellow Arabs or Muslims in the US.

Civic institutions must realize their historic role in salvaging the essence of brand America that seems to have been hijacked by political and military America. Reach out civic America and touch our lives in Arab world.

Equally important since winning the hearts and minds of Arabs has been the catch phrase in the US media that the time is ripe now to pause and assess how this battle is to be won. Those of us in the Arab world who welcome US messages on interaction and coexistence amongst cultures and religions need not be put in a situation where we have to visualize two boxes to tick one off right after each Arabic sentence in the messages: correct or incorrect translation.
