Episode 73: Al Jazeera statecraft: New media as public diplomacy tools

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VOICEOVER
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JACKIE ANGUS
Hello, and welcome to Up Close. I'm Jackie Angus at the University of Melbourne, Australia. In today's episode of Up Close we look at journalism and globalisation and ask, 'Just what are the media doing in a world obsessed with communication?? That was the central question at a recent conference on journalism in the 21st century between globalisation and national identity that was held at the University of Melbourne, Australia, in July 2009. The keynote address at the conference was delivered by Professor Phillip Seib of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. It was entitled, Transnational Journalism, Middle East Public Diplomacy, and Virtual States.

I started by asking Professor Seib what he meant by public diplomacy.

PHILLIP SEIB
The simplest definition of public diplomacy is that while traditional diplomacy is government to government, public diplomacy is government to people, and so in terms of journalistic use, when you have news organisations such as Voice of America or Australia's National Broadcasting that reaches out to other countries, that in effect performs a public diplomacy function.

JACKY ANGUS
Is it effective in terms of what perhaps the nation states wants to be done?

PHILLIP SEIB
Yes and no. The history of that kind of broadcasting public diplomacy that has been a considerable success in the past, during the Cold War, for example, the US efforts through Voice of America to reach out to Eastern Europe, those efforts were very successful. But nowadays, given that the communication universe is so much more crowded, it’s a tougher task. People in Eastern Europe during the Cold War really wanted to hear alternative voices. They weren’t satisfied just with Radio Moscow, let’s say, or their own communist state-run news organisations. So they hungered for outside voices.

Today, if you take the Middle East as an example, there is not that hunger for outside voices. They are quite satisfied with, they trust, they respect the indigenous news organisations like al Jazeera and al Arabiya.

JACKY ANGUS
In terms of it suiting the state to present its view, or not so much perhaps the state but a certain perspective; I’m thinking of the BBC which seems to go out very effectively and be welcomed, particularly in Africa. Now what you’re saying is that in the Middle East it’s a different ball game. Is that right?

PHILLIP SEIB
Different than it was, say, 20 years ago, or even less than that. Al Jazeera was born in 1996, so it’s really a very new phenomenon, and I should say that public diplomacy is not just broadcasting. It involves cultural diplomacy, exchange programs, science diplomacy. There are all kinds of things that go into public diplomacy and broadcasting/journalism is only one small part of that.

JACKY ANGUS
I guess that makes sense in a globalising world where there is so much trans-cultural and inter-cultural communication.

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, that’s right. Again, to go back to the Cold War, the US had great success when they sent jazz bands, Benny Goodman, to Moscow and that sort of thing. So that still goes on and it’s one of the nice things about globalisation, is that it can be this mutual enrichment. When you set aside the goals of governments, it’s still a chance for peoples to know peoples better throughout the world, and some good can come of that, I think.

JACKY ANGUS
Indeed. I was thinking, though, as a counter to that, I understand that in Russia today there is a big resurgence of trying to present the image of Moscow, that Putin has supported this very much; and in France too, and I think in Germany. They’re all pretty recent attempts to counter that sort of globalisation and diffusion.

PHILLIP SEIB
That’s right. Everybody wants to be a player, and one of the ways that you become a player, it seems, is to have an international television channel. Australia has one, China has one, France has one, Germany, the US, broadcasting in various
languages to different target audiences. It’s almost a kind of political macho. You have to have one of these channels if you’re a real international player. Now, how much audience they gain is very much open to question.

JACKY ANGUS
My point, of course, was in a sense to counter that. Hasn’t there been an attempt by voices like Deutche Welle and France to really say, ?look, this is our way of saying things. The international dimension is fine but this is what we say. This is the French way. This is the German voice. This is the Russian voice.? And they’re quite distinctive, aren’t they?

PHILLIP SEIB
That’s right, but they are targeting audiences on their own. The whole reason for the creation of France 24, for example, was that the French Government felt that there was this overall western view that the world was seeing, that was being presented basically by American and British media, and the French said, ?Wait a minute, we don’t agree with all that. That does not reflect the position of France in a number of cultural and political respects, so we’re going to start our own channel.? And these channels are the ways that these respective countries present their viewpoints on politics, on culture, on all kinds of issues, to the rest of the world.

JACKY ANGUS
So it’s a sort of a national identity thing as well, isn’t it?

PHILLIP SEIB
Right, right.

JACKY ANGUS
In terms of that, for example in the Middle East, al Jazeera has a function which is really drawing together the Arab identity into some kind of, well, kind of Pan-Arabism as it used to be. Does that mean that sometimes that doesn’t really suit individual nations, so they still want their line? I’m thinking, for example, of Cairo, and of course there’s no longer Nasser’s Voice of the Arabs, but there is still an attempt to represent the national image of Egypt as somehow distinctive, even within the Arab world.

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, certainly the Egyptians have that outlook. The Saudis have it, the Syrians have it. Every country is playing its own game there. So Pan-Arabism, as Nasser found out back in the 1950s, is very elusive, if that’s what you’re trying to achieve. What something like al Jazeera can do, because it can reach the entire Arab-speaking audience, particularly during times of crisis such as the late 2008/early 2009 conflict in Gaza, they can put their line out, ?their? meaning al Jazeera’s line, and al Jazeera is almost like a nation state unto itself; forge a kind of common sentiment among Arabs, and that was manifest on the streets where, in countries like the United Arab Emirates and Syria and Qatar, places that don’t often see street demonstrations, there were demonstrations in support of the Palestinians during the
Gaza conflict, and very critical of governments such as Egypt that were not seen, according to the al Jazeera coverage, as being properly supportive of the Palestinians.

JACKY ANGUS
Obviously within the region, then, there are these tensions and these cross-sections, because I understand that al Jazeera in some of the Middle East, in some of those states it has actually been banned from time to time because it is regarded as just a bit too out there.

PHILLIP SEIB
That?s right. It?s a bit too free. It?s very difficult to restrain the governments. So the Saudis can complain to the government of Qatar, the Emir of Qatar about it, but if the Emir of Qatar chooses not to reign in al Jazeera, well, the Saudis respond by kicking out their correspondents or banning advertisers in Saudi Arabia from buying time on al Jazeera. So it?s a very lively, to put it mildly, political environment in which al Jazeera operates.

JACKY ANGUS
I suppose after a while they want them back in, because after all it is in a sense now the voice of the Arabs, isn?t it?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, that?s right, and it?s interesting what?s happened. There is something called Nile TV which is the state-run television in Egypt, and it?s always been just terrible; deadly dull, low production values; and they?ve had to upgrade considerably just to keep any audience because they?re now competing with al Jazeera and al Arabiya and some of the other new channels that have high production values, that are very lively, and so the tide is lifting all the boats in the sense that the quality of television throughout the region, television news, is getting much better.

JACKY ANGUS
Now, I understand that there?s also another channel, Alhurra. Can you tell us about that? That?s the American equivalent of coming into the same debate, right?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, right. Alhurra is...

JACKY ANGUS
It means freedom, of course.

PHILLIP SEIB
? is the free one, yes. It is an American government financed Arabic language news channel based in the exotic Middle Eastern city of Springfield Virginia, and it soaks up a tremendous amount of money every year, but it has had negligible impact in terms of delivering the American message in the Middle East, and the problem is when we talk about that Cold War model of having an audience during the Cold War...
that really wanted to hear the news and was eager to hear the US message, that doesn?t exist any more. Why should an Arab want to hear Arabic-speaking people from just outside Washington DC describe what?s going on in their region when they can turn to locally based broadcaster, whether it?s Jazeera or Arabiya or something that?s even more local; why would they care what?s coming out of an American channel? They don?t want it the way the Eastern Europeans wanted the voice of America during the Cold War.

So the Alhurra model, I think, is broken and I?m not sure it can be fixed. I think it probably needs to be blown up and set aside. If the US wants to deliver a news product that actually gets some viewers in the Middle East, my suggestion is they take something like one of the network newscasts, like say NBC News, put Arabic subtitles on it, and just feed that over. That will at least get some audience because people will realise, presumably, that it is not government controlled and this is what Americans in their homes watch every night, and so it might do some good in delivering to the people in the region what America is more or less like.

JACKY ANGUS
Presumably in the Middle East people are wanting to know what Americans might now think?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, I think this is a time of tremendous opportunity for the United States. Certainly President Obama?s speech in Cairo in June 2009 was a great public diplomacy triumph in the sense that people at least listened to him. If George W. Bush had gone to Cairo to give a speech, people would have just demonstrated against him and really not paid much attention to him, but people did listen to Obama. Now, the trick is that you can?t have public diplomacy just be one person, even if it is the President of the United States. There has to be a systemic foundation for that and so far the US State Department has really not put that into place, at least not at the level that it must be.

JACKY ANGUS
So what you?re implying too, that it?s more a collaborative business now. The whole aspect of the media, of journalism, of transnationalism ? for want of a better word, of trans-culturism even; there has to be more than one player. So now what does that say about the impact of, say, very new social media, new media as they?re called, as mobilising tools to pull together groups in support of social movements?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, clearly as we?ve seen in Iran and elsewhere, the use of social media such as Twitter, for example, and putting material up on YouTube, adds a whole new dimension of empowerment for the individual citizen in those states. Even in a country that certainly cannot be considered free, such as Iran, the use of these social media allow more people to have a true participatory voice in what?s going on. Now, they?re not going to prevail, at least not in the short run. That?s quite apparent. But people know they can now connect to others, and that changes the political dynamics in the country profoundly.
JACKY ANGUS
You’re listening to Up Close coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I’m Jacky Angus, and I’m talking to Professor Phillip Seib. Professor Seib, what about the question of states containing; authoritarian states aren’t going to want to let this thing get out of hand, and I’m just wondering to what extent you see in the future of global journalism, and globalism as it expands, I guess, to what extent this is actually going to affect the authority of authoritarian regimes?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, authoritarian regimes are not going to vanish overnight. There is not going to be the Twitter revolutionary state taking over anywhere. But to try to hold back these new media, as the Chinese have done, for instance, is really like trying to hold back the tide. The technology is such that you can disable things for a while, you can censor things, you can monitor things, but there are people always one step ahead of you, and so the idea of a democratic media environment I think is inevitable, and how that transforms larger political institutions. Media do not change things. Institutions change things. And so you have to make that connection between media and institutions. You have to use the media to empower people to change the institutions, and that’s going to be a long process.

I think we are in an age now where, no matter how diligent a government is, again to use the Chinese as an example, they won’t be able to stop things. The few exceptions would be countries such as North Korea and Burma which don’t care anything about the rest of the world. They’re happy to isolate themselves and make themselves technologically backward. But those are rare exceptions. Any country such as Iran or China that wants to be a major world player cannot cut itself off from the technological connections of international economics and international politics. So that bodes well, I think, for the pervasive effects of these new media.

JACKY ANGUS
In terms of political change, that obviously bodes well. Does it bode well for the quality of journalism? If we can look at journalism now, and I know a lot of people say, well, you know, journalism is dead as we know it. It’s all churnalism. Not going as far as that, can we look at the question of whether or not journalism is actually going to be able to sustain itself as a profession, as distinct from, I guess churnalism; as distinct from opinion making on blogs. Can you address that issue for us?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, I think people are always going to want information, and although the new media, such as the ability to do a Google search for example, open up doors for individuals on their own to get lots of information, there is so much out there that they are going to want some discrimination, some gate keeping, and that’s what journalists can do. So I’m fairly optimistic about the future of journalism. I think it’s just going to change shape. I think the future of the newspaper as ink on paper, that future is probably not very long. But the future of a newspaper organisation, whether it be the New York Times, or The Age of Melbourne or any other newspaper, I think
those news organisations are going to be around and their product is going to be
delivered in different ways. Rather than ink on paper they will be delivered
electronically in one form or another.
The larger question, I think, is with all these new media out there, in terms of
journalism how do you maintain the integrity of journalism. You can say, well, the
internet informs people faster and better than any other medium we?ve had. Well, sometimes that?s true, but sometimes the internet is like an open sewer. It just has
rumour and unverified information that can gain great credence just because it?s out
there. And I think over time people need to learn to discriminate. One of the things
we?ve been talking about in universities in the United States is the importance of
teaching media literacy to people, beginning at about the first grade or even
kindergarten, because as we know the next generation of children will be growing up
with the internet as we grew up with the telephone or television.
So they need to be taught how you corroborate information, how you decide on the
worthiness of sources, how you should not just go to one random source on the
internet and say, well, this must be true because it?s on the internet.

JACKY ANGUS
So there?s a difference between credibility and accuracy?

PHILLIP SEIB
Well, that?s right, and you want those to merge. You want the news consumer to
have some understanding that to be credible the source should be accurate.

JACKY ANGUS
World of Conflict, a very interesting book published in 2002, you explore the issue of
journalism as a moral enterprise. Well, is it possible to really have a moral enterprise
in a world where moral relativism is more or less the order of the day?

PHILLIP SEIB
Oh, I think so, and I think that?s one of the great missions of journalism, is to be able
to shine the spotlight on situations such as in Darfur or in Congo or various other
places where there are great injustices being done to millions of people, that
otherwise would remain out of the sight of a larger public that might be able to do
something to help. Now, that help is not always forthcoming. I mean, Darfur has
dragged along for years and there are millions who have died in Congo; the
attention that some of these new media particularly have focussed on that really
hasn?t seemed to have done a whole lot of good, but that?s what journalism remains
about, and giving voice to the voiceless and serving as a sentinel of conscience. I
would hope that journalism in whatever form continues to do that, and I think frankly
a lot of the start-ups that are using new media to practise journalism are motivated
by that.

JACKY ANGUS
And it?s possible to be a good journalist without necessarily being a partisan?
PHILLIP SEIB
Oh, I think so. I think you find the facts and set them out. That’s not necessarily partisan. You go to Darfur and show what’s going on there. You don’t have to say, this is bad. You could just show it, and if the public doesn’t realise it’s bad, then there’s no hope anyway.

JACKY ANGUS
Okay. So journalism has got a role to play in terms of social debate, social mobilisation, identity fixing, affirming, all those kind of things. What about in terms of professional journalism, the role of ethics and setting up some kind of a standard which journalists will perhaps set for themselves? Does that work? I know it’s often tried that you have code of ethics and so on. Are they observed, do you think, or do people know about them? Even on, for example, on YouTube, there is in fact a code of ethics, but I gather from some recent research that a lot of people just didn’t know it existed.

PHILLIP SEIB
Right, and even on the New York Times there is a code of ethics that some of their journalists have fairly routinely ignored, so it’s always a tough road when you’re trying to bring ethics to any profession really. I think as these new media develop you would hope? and this is going to be a long and often painful process? that the ethical norms will develop as the technology develops and as the practitioners become more adroit at what they do. If you look at something like the Huffington Post, for example. That has gone from being just sort of a patchwork array of stories to being a fairly sophisticated newspaper, if you would. It doesn’t appear on paper. It appears online. But they have editors and it’s not just a hotchpotch of stuff that gets thrown onto the internet, and I think that’s what we’re going to have to see more of: some internal discipline by the online news community, and I think the public that uses that information is going to have to demand such standards.

JACKY ANGUS
Professor Seib, it’s been delightful talking to you. Thank you very much.

PHILLIP SEIB
Thank you.

JACKY ANGUS
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