


Nov 04, 2016 by **John H. Brown**

# Public Diplomacy Goes 'Pubic' <sup>[1]</sup>

No, the above title doesn't have a typo, a typo that occurs (to the embarrassment of those responsible for it, and to the amusement of those noticing it) when referring to that increasingly widespread international activity, public diplomacy (PD) -- which can be defined, to cite the U.S. State Department homepage, as "engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences." Today an instrument of many governments in their foreign policy, public diplomacy has become global , some forty years after the term was coined by the American diplomat Edmund Gullion during his tenure as dean at the Fletcher School of Diplomacy in Massachusetts.

## **Eros and Rhetoric**

PD, which some consider propaganda (a vile or laudable undertaking, depending on your perspective or definitions), covers a large number of government-supported activities incorporating information, education, and cultural programs. In recent months, governments have added new element to this enterprise: sex. To be sure, the use of eros in the art of persuasion (and PD is, indeed, a subcategory of this art, known since Greek antiquity as rhetoric) has an ancient history that can be traced as far back as the Garden of Eden. And we all know about Cleopatra.

But until recently modern-world governments -- unlike advertising agencies peddling their goods -- were reluctant to sell openly their main product (themselves and the nations they represent) through images of the human flesh exposed at various levels of nudity. Now, however, the body beautiful of their citizens is being openly celebrated by states seeking to foster a more positive image of themselves.

True, twentieth-century totalitarian films and photographs glorified, in their absolutist and absurdist ways, the strength and muscularity of (particularly male) athletes and soldiers, but the intended effect of these images, I would suggest, was not erotic arousal aimed at improving a government's image overseas, but rather domination and intimidation, some would say of a sado-masochistic nature, directed at obtaining total control of society in the homeland. Orwell's Oceania did not welcome the erotic.

## **Israel and the Birth of Pubic Diplomacy**

It would not do violence to history to suggest that this new branch of public diplomacy -- allow me to call it pubic diplomacy, a term I hope will offend no one -- began on Tuesday, May 19, 2007 at 9:00 pm, with a three-hour reception, hosted by Maxim, a men's magazine, and Gal Gadot, Miss Israel 2004 -- together with the Consulate General of Israel in New York -- that took place at the Marquee at 289 Tenth Avenue, NYC.

The purpose of the event was to "celebrate the Maxim Magazine July 2007 feature, 'women of the Israeli Defense Forces.'" The invitation was adorned by a color photograph of the luscious, dark-haired Ms. Gadot herself (a former army fitness instructor) in a bikini and high heels, lying on her back on the ledge of a terrace overlooking Tel Aviv, with the Mediterranean, dimly lit by sunlight, over the horizon. This eye-catching photo was published by the New York Post; and Ms. Gadot, who, according to Wikipedia, is in a relationship with Hebrew rapper Mike Blitz, subsequently appeared on major American television channels, gently and sympathetically interviewed by U.S. newscasters.

Israeli diplomats, representatives of a country that has witnessed extensive debate on how to improve its public diplomacy (the word is now used repeatedly in the Israeli press) in the wake of the Second Lebanon War, justified the photo spread of young Israeli women warriors in Maxim's ("a beer and babes" magazine with 2.5 million readers appealing to young males) amidst accusations back in the Holy Land (but not, significantly, among the American mainstream media) that the pics of the scantily-clad military ladies were pornographic, treated women as objects, and promoted sex tourism. Arye Mekel, Consul-General of Israel in New York, quoted in the Israel News Agency (June 24), retorted that:

the pictures aren't anything you wouldn't see at a pool or a beach. Israel is always mentioned in the context of wars and violence. We want to show there is a normal life. Among the beautiful things [sic] we have are our women. We came there from 120 countries. Anytime you have a mix from any continents, you get very beautiful people. We don't see having beautiful women as a problem.

Joel Leyden of the Israel News Agency (June 24) quotes David Saranga, Israel's Consul For Media And Public Affairs at its New York Consulate, as saying that "[w]e found that Israel's image among men aged 18-38 is lacking ... so we thought we'd approach them with an image they'd find appealing." Leydeen adds that, according to Saranga, "the beautiful models in Israel were a 'Trojan horse' to present Israel as a modern country with nice beaches and pretty women. 'Many Americans don't even know we have beaches,' he said."

### **Skin Rags, Policy, Propaganda**

The idea that showing attractive women in a men's magazine could really have an impact on how the world perceives Israel was met with secular skepticism (rather than the moral outrage of some religious fundamentalists and Knesset members) by some Jewish commentators. Jonathan Tobin, writing in the Jerusalem Post (June 30), notes that

So long as the lies about Israel's supposed cruelty and responsibility for not only the continuation of the conflict with the Palestinians but the mess in the middle east in general are being given a serious hearing, all efforts to change the topic to how clever Israelis are or how cute their women might be will be a waste of time....

The bad press their country gets is based on unchallenged pro-Arab propaganda and a lack of advocacy for the rights of Jews, not foreign skin rags getting access to its prettiest women.

And al-Jazeera.com (not to be confused with the Web site of Al-Jazeera television, as did an earlier version of this article) in its "Half-naked soldiers: Israel's latest propaganda campaign" (June 23) had this to say about the Jewish state's pubic diplomacy:

One interesting fact is that all the outrage in Israel is focused on the idea of using women as sex objects to promote tourism. But what's more shocking is that sex here is not just being used to "improve" Israel's image, but also to promote Zionism and gloss over the bitter realities of Israel's occupation and apartheid.

## **Europe gets into the controversial act**

A second important event in the birth of public diplomacy in our century of terror was the European Commission's decision to show, on its recently established EUtube channel, a 44-second montage of clips from European movies containing 18 erotic scenes -- heterosexual, homosexual, in "toilettes," kitchens (one also sees an egg being cooked on top of two pieces of bread, if my memory serves me right), bedrooms -- among them from Pedro Almodovar's "Bad Education," Wolfgang Becker's "Goodbye Lenin!", Jean-Pierre Jeunet's "Amélie," and Lars Von Trier's "Breaking The Waves."

Titled "Film Lovers Will Love This!", the fast-moving video (how else to keep an audience interested in sex but to keep it moving along, as rapidly as possible, on the screen?) ends with the slogan, "Let's Come Together," further noting that: "Europe Supports European Films."

While the clip remains thus far the most popular on the EUtube channel -- among the "non-hits" is an eight-minute survey about the European Union's "partnership" with the United States -- some European reactions to the video, especially in the no-sex-please-we're-British UK, were by no means universally positive:

--Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Chris Heaton-Harris (quoted in the Guardian, July 4): "[T]hey [the EC] do have an image problem, but I think cobbling together 44 seconds of soft porn on the Internet is not a brilliant way of solving it."

--Geoffrey Bloom, another British MEP (married, according to his homepage, "to one of the UK's leading equine physiotherapists") stated with a certain lack of English reserve: "I suppose this film is appropriate. The EU has been screwing Britain for the past 30 years" ( Variety, July 6). Bloom compared the clips to "watching an elderly relative trying to be cool -- very embarrassing" ( New York Times, July 3).

--Xan Brooks, writing in The Guardian (July 5): "Quite frankly I didn't really understand it."

--Maciej Giertych of Poland, from the Conservative League of Polish Families: the EC used "immoral methods" of promotion ( Associated Press, July 3).

## **The EC Reacts**

Meanwhile, EC officials, like Israeli diplomats regarding the Maxim photo spread, defended the decision to show the controversial film segments for the sake of good public diplomacy, a topic of concern to an organization that has not won the sympathy of all Europeans:

--The EC's representative in London, Reijo Kemppinen: "the compilations were meant to convey emotion and they certainly seem to have got a reaction. In spite of attempts to whip up a scandal because of the sexy nature of one of the clips, hundreds of thousands of British

people are learning more about the EU's media program and almost all are reacting maturely and positively" (International Herald Tribune, July 6).

--Martin Selmayr, a Commission spokesman, hinting that the Old World is far more sophisticated than the one so far to the west of true civilization: "the European union is not the bible belt. These clips come from award-winning films and they show the EU's rich cinematic heritage, which we can all be proud of" (International Herald Tribune, July 6).

The commentator Allen Riding, suggesting in the International Herald Tribune (July 6) that the audience for the clips was European rather than worldwide, noted that:

The idea of using EUtube to celebrate European cinema seems rational. ...

Whether this makes Europeans warm to the European Union is a different matter. In fact, as the European Union has expanded to 27 countries since the end of the cold war, more and more Europeans feel European. Yet the benefits of membership have not translated into affection for the union and its executive branch, the commission.

Would the commission be better served by forgetting about being loved and concentrating instead on promoting Europeanness through art, music and literature -- through the Rembrandts, Beethovens and Shakespeares who have traditionally united Europe?"

One American, Steve Bryant, writing in NewTeeVee (July 3), had this to say:

"Congrats EU, you've found the Internet's g spot....

For my part, I'm always happy to see officially-sanctioned sex."

## **Second Life**

Finally, we have the intriguing virtual world of Second Life, a three-dimensional universe on the Internet where anyone, from any part of our small planet, can log in and become an avatar, a individuality ("person") of his/her own choosing, roaming in a carbon-free (care-free?) environment where flying (not just walking) is possible from one theme-based island/area to another.

"Whatever brings you to SL," writes Destiny Welles in the Register (January 9), "you'll soon find that sex is everywhere." True, some go to SL for non-sexual instruction and enlightenment, including students and their universities. But life there is "highly sexualized," as Michael Gerson noted in the Washington Post (July 6). Just take a look at how the avatars expose their cyber flesh in this brave new world with no real people in it.

I've visited SL, trying to keep up with the goings-on of the Internet frontier. Once, by accident (or secret intent, a Freudian slip on the Second Life virtual terrain?), I ended up on an island where two avatars were copulating on a beach. Sexual organs were depicted with strange authenticity. Like an adolescent, I watched, perhaps for too long, instead of reading whatever

book I was supposed to read.

## **Perfect Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century?**

It was The Maldives -- and why not? -- that won the race to have the first diplomatic representation in Second Life ([News.com.au](http://News.com.au), May 23):

The Maldives thus pip Sweden to the post; the Scandinavian country had hoped to be first off the block when it opens its own virtual embassy on May 30.

The embassy will be located in the "Diplomatic Quarter" of Second Life, and visitors will be able to talk to a virtual diplomat about visas, trade and other issues.

An official from the Maldives mission in Geneva will actually create their own "avatar", or computer-generated character, to deal with visitors "face-to-face".

"Just like a video game, it will be very interactive," Marc Limon of the Maldives mission said.

Second Life, created by San Francisco technology company Linden Lab, has attracted several real-world companies, including car manufacturers and sports clothing makers, which created 3-D stores.

Officials from the Indian Ocean archipelago said a presence on Second Life could boost the Maldives' international profile.

Second Life opens up "new avenues for diplomatic representation and negotiation, especially for small and developing countries that have limited diplomatic outreach in the 'real' world," the Maldives mission said in a statement.

Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid said the virtual embassy "offers another channel for us to provide information on the country, to offer our viewpoint on issues of international concern, and to interact with our partners in the international community."

The U.S. State Department is considering a greater presence on Second Life. Perhaps George W. Bush's avatar will do wonders for the image of the United abroad. But I strongly advise, in the interest of good taste and America's prestige, that his cyberspace alter-ego (and that of his Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes) remain fully clothed -- not to speak of ever, ever, revealing their true identities.

---