Review

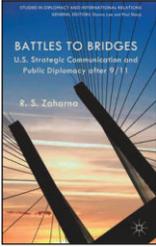**Battles to Bridges: US Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11**. *By R.S. Zaharna.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 233 pp. ISBN 9781137446152 (pbk).

Following media coverage conducted by U.S.-owned or -led media organizations about the 9/11 attack, the first global reactions were sympathy for Americans. It was a predictable precursor to what would be the long-lasting invasions of some Middle Eastern countries that had played no part in the attack. Global sympathy then changed into negative feelings ranging from fear to hatred of the government of the United States. Like many other scholars, in her book *Battles to Bridges* Rhonda Zaharna attributes this loss of sympathy to the United States' aggressive diplomacy in the wake of 9/11. Media outlets cannot transform the nature of diplomatic practices. However, expecting media institutions to initiate geopolitical effects, particularly in the context of adversarial relationships between countries, is neither unprecedented nor unreasonable. *Battles to Bridges* is one of a number of academic attempts to discover the roots of America's strategic failure in communicating its political and cultural message to Middle Eastern countries. This book, which is one of the few explanatory texts on the topic, engages academic debate for the first five chapters, and critiques the array of theories and models that may be brought to bear on the question of American strategic communication and public diplomacy for the final three chapters. Zaharna displays an academic fondness for granular details and historical anecdotes. While this is often a strength, it does, at times, become a weakness in the text.

After reviewing U.S. public diplomacy lessons in their historical context, Zaharna—a professor of public diplomacy and strategic communication—focuses on America's strategic failures in addressing target audiences in (predominantly) Muslim countries and expands on the country's strategic vision of public diplomacy. This aspect of the book is well organized. By presenting detailed descriptions of organizational changes along with communication strategies in the U.S. government in chronological order, it gives readers the big picture. That said, the book does more to establish a brief history of U.S. political communication practice after 9/11 than it does to support the compelling analytical argument that Zaharna may have wanted to pursue.

Zaharna put a great deal of effort into articulating essential components of communications, such as, at the macro-level, culture and identity and, at the micro-level, interactivity and connectivity. She provides an in-depth look at communications, recognizing that deploying the right medium to reach target audiences remains a critical challenge for media professionals**.** For instance, the as Zaharna writes: "In the Arab world observers questioned the focus on the internet as a viable medium for reaching the Arab public. Though these countries … [were] among the lowest growing number

of internet users in the world" (p. 48). Technical questions related to strategic communication, such as how best to reach audiences, are not insignificant in the processes of public diplomacy.

Another key component for strategic communication is the context within which the message is shaped, transferred, and perceived. Zaharna refers to the political environment as a contextual factor but unfortunately does not structurally articulate it. This is a major weakness in a book that aims to address strategic communications through this lens. The discussion of another contextual factor, culture, is not overlooked, however. Zaharna's account of cultural context in media success is at its strongest when she remarks on "aggressive" cultural strategies applied by Western countries against a Middle-Eastern audience and warns about the consequence of this predominance as "double-blinded cultural analysis." The question of cultural context has been a rich resource for communication research on media outlets. Many researchers in this area, such as Geert Hofstede, have noted that acknowledging non-Western societies as different and independent is highly important. They also note that it is significant to address the manner in which cultural frameworks operate against other contextual factors of a system. Referring to a gap in political communication studies, Zaharna references the opposition between individualism-collectivism in this context. She also notes that the role of technology in public diplomacy has transformed the communication marketplace into a network platform that has influenced political communication by transferring message control from the sender (or monitoring and regulating officials) to audiences.

Zaharna analyzes U.S. media practices in Middle Eastern countries through some classic theories and models of communications, such as Lasswell's (1948) and McQuail's (2005), and by network structure, synergy, and strategy. She provides readers with a holistic view of network communication by comparing it to traditional mass-communication models in its goal, channel, message, information flow, and culture. However, ignoring critical technicalities and mechanisms, such as the way network dimensions (such as network centrality and tie strength) influence the audience's message selection (or selective attention), weakens her argument.

To validate her communication arguments, Zaharna presents supportive evidence of past and current projects and procedures. However, the book lacks evidence and data on many issues; the reader, presumably a communication student or researcher, should be able to evaluate the criteria utilized to make an assumption or conclusion, since methodology and measurement have traditionally triggered controversial debate on validating the results of communication studies. In addition, details on methodology enable the logical evaluation of assertions. For example, it is possible to evaluate data such as whether Radio Sawa was the leading media of Middle Eastern countries in 2003 with 31 percent of listeners among the general population. Similarly, statistics presented on Al-Hurra in the Arab market were quite convincing. Al-Hurra is a U.S.-based Arabic-language satellite TV channel that, according to a Zoby International poll, "barely registered as a primary source of news" (p. 39). However, this trend of supporting statements with data did not prevail throughout the book, raising many questions about some of the media outlets discussed and the means of assessing them.

In fact, beyond her logically presented chronology of practices, where methodology lurks in the shadows and fails to ignite her arguments, Zaharna's final suggestions are gleaned from well-known theories and models of communication, but neglects some critical notions and factors that may have strengthened this book for communication researchers. This book is more concerned with public diplomacy and the political aspects of U.S. strategic communication than it is with broader questions of strategic communication itself.

References

Lasswell, Harold D. (1948). The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. In Lyman Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas.* New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.

McQuail, Denis. (2005). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory.* London: Sage.

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