

# The Return of Cultural Diplomacy

**America should aim to export more serious forms of entertainment as well as 'Dark Knight' and 'Baywatch.'**

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NEWSWEEK

Hollywood screenwriters get paid to come up with clever lines, so it's not surprising that when their organization, the Writers Guild West, held a panel discussion on American culture 15 months after 9/11, it gave it a catchy title: "We Hate You But Keep Sending Us 'Baywatch': The Impact of American Entertainment on the World." After a brief discussion, the panel concluded that apart from stereotyped portrayals of Muslims as terrorists, Hollywood was not to blame for America's plummeting global reputation.

One panelist, radio entrepreneur Norman Pattiz, cited global opinion surveys conducted in 2002 that showed disapproval of U.S. policies but approval of U.S. popular culture. Encouraged by such findings, Pattiz, a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (which oversees all U.S.-funded broadcasting), created Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language channel aimed at Arab youth that combines Western and Arabic pop music with U.S.-style news bulletins. The channel has become popular, but at the price of supplanting the more serious Voice of America Arabic service.

Radio Sawa is hardly the first government-funded use of popular culture to burnish America's image. During the cold war, Voice of America radio beamed jazz into the Soviet bloc. For more than a century, Washington has toiled to open foreign markets to Hollywood films and other forms of entertainment, on the assumption, articulated by President Woodrow Wilson, that popular culture "speaks a universal language [that] lends itself importantly to the presentation of America's plans and purposes." In other words, Americans have long believed that exporting movies, pop music, TV shows and other entertainment is both good business and good diplomacy. Is this belief still justified?

Regarding business, the answer is yes. The Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that between 1986 and 2005, foreign sales of U.S. motion-picture and video products rose from \$1.91 billion to \$10.4 billion (in 2005 dollars)—an increase of 444 percent. As Dan Glickman, president of the Motion Picture Association says, "Among all the sectors of the U.S. economy, our industry is the only one that generates a positive balance of trade in every country in which it does business." The same is true for the TV and music industries, and the reach is far greater when piracy is figured in.

Diplomatically speaking, however, the picture is mixed. To be sure, police dramas like "Law & Order" and "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" can expose those who live under authoritarian regimes to the rights and protections guaranteed by democracy. But when people with no other source of information about America take vulgar, violent, vitriolic examples of popular culture—the film "The Dark Knight," say, or the TV show "Desperate Housewives"—as an accurate reflection of reality, the impact can be negative and far-reaching. "People who watch U.S. television shows, attend Hollywood movies and listen to pop music can't help but believe that we are a nation in which we have sex with strangers regularly, where we wander the streets well armed and prepared to shoot our neighbors at any provocation, and where the lifestyle to which we aspire is one of rich, cocaine-snorting, decadent sybarites," writes Jerrold Keilson, the author of a State Department study of international visitors. Indeed, a 2007 report from the 47-nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey found consistently that "individuals who have traveled to the U.S. have more favorable views of the country than those who have not."

The same Pew survey also found that popular culture may no longer be America's best ambassador. "Majorities in several predominantly Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, say they dislike American music, movies and television," the report said. "Indians and Russians also express negative views of U.S. cultural exports." Pew also uncovered a startling rise in the number of respondents agreeing with the statement "It's bad that American ideas and customs are spreading here." Since 2002, the percentage expressing disapproval grew by 17 points in Britain, 14 points in Germany and 13 points in Canada.

President-elect Obama's sheer charisma has already refreshed America's image. But it will take more than a new occupant in the White House to turn the entertainment industry around.

Interestingly, Obama was the only candidate who confronted Hollywood directly, telling an audience of show-business luminaries in Los Angeles, "It is important for those in the industry to show some thought about who they are marketing [to] ... I'm concerned about sex, but I'm also concerned about some of the violent, slasher, horror films that come out; you see a trailer, and I'm thinking, 'I don't want my 6-year-old or 9-year-old seeing that trailer while she's watching "American Idol" '."

Yet the solution is not to restrict popular entertainment exports. For one thing, America is faced with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and every bit of revenue helps. Besides, plenty of countries regulate their own entertainment industries. When I asked a young actor in Mumbai whether gruesome American films such as the "Saw" series had many fans in India, he replied, "Of course not. They'd never get past the board." India's Central Board of Film Certification must approve all films released in that country. When I asked him whether India would be better off without censorship, the young actor's answer surprised me: "No. Filtering is needed."

Americans reject both government censorship and, in recent years, self-regulation by the entertainment industry. In any case, such limits are ineffectual; any attempt to censor would be quickly subverted by mass piracy and the Internet. But beyond these practical reasons, there is an important principle at stake. To censor American exports would be politically imprudent in a world of rising authoritarian powers (China, Russia, the Gulf states) that proudly dispense with American-style free speech. To defend their freedoms, Americans need to show that they are self-correcting—that the country possesses not only liberty but also a civilization worthy of liberty.

*Civilization? What civilization?* I can already hear readers scoffing. America's rich artistic and literary heritage is increasingly unknown to the rest of the world—even to its friends. In Poland, I met a professor of American literature who confided in me that when she tells other Poles what she does for a living, they laugh and say, "That's impossible, there's no such thing!"

This anecdote is borne out by Simon Anholt, a member of the British Foreign Office Public Diplomacy Board who researches the global reputation of nations and cities. Together with the opinion research firm GfK Roper, Anholt conducts an annual survey of 1,000 online respondents in 20 countries who are asked to rank 50 nations according to such criteria as "governance," "people" and "investments." The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index for 2008 ranks the United States 33rd for "culture." Notably, a previous survey that separated "popular culture" from "culture and heritage" ranked America dead last in the latter category. "The old idea that the U.S. is only good for popular culture and commerce has now hardened into a very negative perception," says Anholt.

During the cold war, Washington strove to share America's cultural heritage through scholarly and professional exchanges, artist and writer tours, libraries, translations and culturally oriented international broadcasting. Any new investment in American "smart power" should include a substantial cultural component. But it won't be easy: ever since Sen. Jesse Helms attacked the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1980s for supporting works such as Robert Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic photographs, American artists have expressed hostility toward their government, often through their art. Can the government be blamed for not wanting to export such work?

Still, plenty of artists do not trade in politicized shock. The way to reconcile democracy and civilization is to exercise good taste in ways that are open and communicable to all. One example: a 2004 production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" mounted by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, performed in colloquial Arabic by some of Egypt's leading actors—a highly regarded and universally accessible bicultural treatment of home, community and the swift passage of time that showed just as the Abu Ghraib prison-abuse scandal was breaking.

In the same vein, U.S. radio broadcasters could take a cue from Radio Sawa. If pop music succeeds using the "together" approach, why not other forms of music? Why not fund a series of regional channels devoted to making Western and non-Western classics comprehensible to all listeners?

It is an American knack to present high culture not in a stuffy academic way but in a way that is both respectful and down to earth. To quote a favorite saying of Cole Porter's, "Democracy is not a leveling down, but a leveling up." The American cultural ideal has always been to recognize art on its merits, regardless of where the artist hails from, and to make the finest fruits of civilization available to all. This ideal has never been fully realized. But that is no reason to abandon it, especially now when the country's ideals in general are in need of refurbishing.

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