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Rushing, Josh (2007):
Mission Al-Jazeera: Build a Bridge, Seek the Truth, Change the World
New York; Palgrave, MacMillan
ISBN-13: 9781403979056. 256 pp.

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Despite spending large resources, why United States is only partially effective when it comes to winning hearts and minds in the regions where it has vital stakes? Is it because it heavily invests technology but little on engaging in communication imaginatively? This book is a frank and candid attempt to diagnose that malady and suggest some remedy. Rushing shares his first hand experience of what would have gone wrong and how to put it right with his sharp perceptions, probing observations and a candid expression.

Marine Captain Josh Rushing was selected by Headquarters Marine Corps for duty at U.S. Central Command in Doha, Qatar as a part of the communication team for getting the American perspective across to audiences worldwide. From that vintage point Rushing discovered that what was professed as national ideals was not practice in the field: “In America we like to say we cherish freedom of the press. We justly claim it as one of the blessings of democracy and look down on societies where the governments control the media, but in reality the United States has lost ground on these freedoms. And the U.S. networks have resorted to tiptoeing around some issues for fear that American audiences will not stomach tough questions about foreign policy or the administration during a time of war [p.79].”

Rushing noticed that opinion makers counted too much on technological wizardry, graphic displays but put little thought and effort to get the points across, reach out and win wider audience approval for US policies. “The mass media are filled with bright lights and sizzle, with high production values and lower human values.” [p.80]

Elaborating on the ideals of effective and honest communication, Rushing reminds that scepticism is more than “a bullet point in a journalist’s job description; it’s a requirement

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for a democracy to work. If journalism don't crosscheck and hold the power of administrations accountable, their nations run the risk of fascism where all powers are held in one small office." In fact, the reporters seemed to hungrily swallow the stuff we served them, often without deeper inquiry- and often after abandoning the obligatory scepticism inherent in journalism.

Did Rushing witness any efforts to adjust the public diplomacy initiatives that reflected flexibility, accommodation and adaptation to the ground realities? Examples found in the book point out to poverty of perception and paucity of prescription owing to misplaced priorities. Rushing has witnessed first hand how some reporters face difficulty in getting their more sceptical stories the attention they deserve. While the US administration's assertions were on the front page, Washington Post's Pentagon correspondent noted that things that challenged the administration were on A18 on Sunday or A24 on Monday.

Two characters mentioned in the book offer a stark contrast. One is Jim Wilkinson who was plucked from the ranks of republican operatives to be appointed director of strategic communication for General Tommy Franks. [P.43] Jim had learned from his years as a republican operative that the opinion of the American people was amenable for moulding to back government's priorities. To implement this approach, Wilkinson first envisioned a backdrop: and with the help of a set designer from New York, CentCom constructed a \$200,000 stage just for U.S. generals to give briefing from. "[W]e at the CentCom were out to control information, shape it and overload the waves with it" [p.53].

Rushing observed many communication personnel were not only disallowing foreign journalists to ask tough questions but were also discouraging US correspondents from speaking up? Rushing found that one exception was New York Magazine's Michael Wolff. He looked at the high-tech stage from which uniformed men found new ways to literally say nothing. And asked: What's the value of what we are learning at this million dollar press centre? [p.65]

How much the US Central Command was willing to expand the contours of communication in order to engage, inform and influence foreign publics to facilitate an increased understanding of American policies and initiatives? The book offers interesting comparisons between US journalists and Aljazeera's reporters while the latter shared professional mission united them-the diversity and distinctiveness of their journalistic voices rivalled those in any Western station. Rushing spotted one Aljazeera journalist's curiosity about the U.S. point of view as if he wanted to explain the American side of story to the Arab population. I recommended my seniors to have strategic engagement with such journalists and allow better access to them but it was dismissed without much thought. [p.50]

Such response to his input and recommendations contributed to a sense of disappointment in Rushing as sincerity of his intentions was being misunderstood. He eventually became frustrated by his seniors' unwillingness to communicate with the people in the Middle East in a way they could understand. After he has put 14 years in the military behind and returned to Texas, he was offered a job as a correspondent at the Washington bureau of Aljazeera's English Channel. Given the chance to practice what he preached, Rushing accepts the offer and he picks up his pen for clarifying his position and justifying his choice. The ensuing soul searching and circumspection results in this book of eight chapters, in effect, doubling as a catalogue of how communicating vital messages to crucial audiences remained off the mark and hence ineffective. The book reflects how Rushing advocated



pursuing US public diplomacy to interface imaginatively, interact innovatively and engage effectively.

Rushing made several appearances before an audience of senior officers to identify possible mistakes and courage to recommend possible ways for doing communication effectively. The author recalls one opportunity to address an audience of generals at an Air Force base in Alabama where he offered some recommendations for an effective communication approach. “The military has to stop banging its head against the wall, worrying about getting ‘the good news story’ out. War is *never* a good story. That is not war is about inherently, so the U.S. military should stop try to spin it.” [p.190]

Amidst the growing number of books that chronicle the conduct of conventional warfare in Iraq, there was a need to offer perspective on how the war of ideas fared along. This book addresses that need in an effective and well-articulated manner.

