
Book Reviews

Jami Fullerton and Alice Kendrick (2006) *Advertising's War on Terrorism: The Story of the U.S. State Department's Shared Values Initiative*, Spokane, WA: Marquette Books. ISBN 0-922993-44-0.

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Advertising, war and terrorism – what more could a book title offer to attract attention in today's global political environment? Indeed, Jami Fullerton and Alice Kendrick's book promises to bring light to the controversial efforts of the United States to improve its tarnished image in the Muslim world through the use of advertising.

The book focuses on a communication initiative titled 'Shared Values', developed by the State Department during the tenure of former advertising executive Charlotte Beers as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Beers was appointed to this post by then Secretary of State Colin Powell in October 2001, less than a month after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Powell justified her appointment in a much-quoted and derided statement, according to which Beers had managed to sell him Uncle Ben's rice and was therefore perfectly capable of selling America to the rest of the world. Thus, from the very beginning of her 17-month service, the implied parallel between Uncle Ben and Uncle Sam kept Beers in the harsh spotlight of media criticism.

Despite Beers' high profile in the media, however, the communication programs she initiated and executed before her resignation in March 2003 are little known to the American public and have received scarce scholarly scrutiny. In this respect, Fullerton and Kendrick have undoubtedly selected a topic that is overdue for critical examination. Regrettably, in this reviewer's opinion, critical examination is the last thing a reader should expect to get from this book.

The authors begin with a summary of the Shared Values Initiative (SVI) – the most controversial program Beers developed, which involved running television, radio and newspaper ads in predominantly Muslim countries during the holy month of Ramadan, beginning in October 2002. The campaign’s strategic focus was to communicate to Muslims abroad that America was a society of religious tolerance. Five commercials, shot in a personal testimonial style, showcased American Muslims living happily and practicing Islam freely in the US. The multi-media campaign cost American taxpayers \$15 million and was discontinued in December 2002 with contradictory reports on the reasons why. As Fullerton and Kendrick point out, the widely popularised explanation was that the campaign had simply failed to produce results.

Taking their cue from this claim, the authors of *Advertising’s War on Terrorism* have written the whole book as an effort to demonstrate that the SVI campaign may have worked after all. Perhaps their position should not come as a surprise, considering that both are professors of advertising and claim a certain expertise of how advertising works, which ordinary people may not have (p. 138). Fullerton and Kendrick are clear that their goal is to defend the SVI, rather than to raise critical questions about it or about the role of advertising in influencing international public opinion. As Fullerton puts it in her introduction to the volume, ‘We needed to let people know that the idea of using advertising and advertising-based communication and other modern marketing techniques might be an appropriate and effective strategy in the war on terrorism after all’ (p.14).

Thus, the fundamental assumptions of the authors are revealed early in the book. First, something called ‘the war on terrorism’ is taken as a fact. Second, this war is presumed to be fueled by misperceptions of the US, which can be addressed through modern advertising and marketing. Finally, it is implied that advertising experts, such as Beers and the authors themselves, can contribute to the war on terrorism but their job is not to question the war itself. Indeed, the authors include a quote from Beers made during a public appearance, in which she explains that her job ‘is simply to communicate the policy in the most favorable light possible’ (p. 12). Fullerton makes her own position on the matter clear when she follows Beers’ quote with a confession that this reminded her of the role of ad executives, who ‘don’t make the product; they simply sell it’ (p. 13).

In short, Fullerton and Kendrick see no need to debate the war on terrorism or the role of advertising in it. They remain faithful to this position throughout the book and frame their entire argument as an answer to the question, ‘Did the SVI work?’ This question leads them to conduct and report on four experiments with international students in which they attempt to test the effectiveness of the SVI commercials in accomplishing the campaign objective of raising ‘awareness of

American values and religious tolerance' (p. 154). The main finding, Fullerton and Kendrick argue, is that, after viewing the commercials, participants in all four experiments tended to have more positive attitudes towards the US and were more likely to agree that American Muslims are treated fairly.

A number of questions can be raised about the validity of the experiments that involved international college students in London (two experiments), Singapore and Egypt. The two London samples included 5.8% and 17% Muslims respectively, and the Singapore sample 13% Muslims. Muslims were the largest group (82%) in the Egyptian sample but the total number of participants in that case was only 39, potentially compromising the validity of the findings. Aside from methodological objections, however, there may be a greater problem with Fullerton and Kendrick's approach. As one critic puts it, 'the whole issue of the effectiveness of the commercials is actually beside the point' (Pintak, 2004). Anti-Americanism, Pintak claims, stems from the huge gap between the values America lives by at home and the values it projects in the rest of the world.

This discrepancy remains unexplored in *Advertising's War on Terrorism*, along with other questions about the relationship between power, politics and persuasion in a globalized world. In this sense, *Advertising's War on Terrorism* is a classic example of 'administrative research', which eschews social critique as one of its purposes. The authors conclude with a series of recommendations on how to use public diplomacy more effectively (Chapter 7). Some of those appear commonsensical, such as the suggestion to 'hire information officers with knowledge in the field of communication' (p. 211). Others are outright disturbing, such as the proposition that 'perhaps public diplomacy aimed at regular citizens in other countries need not include issues directly related to US foreign policy' (p. 212).

The most useful aspect of this book is that, for the first time, it describes in detail the wide range of the State Department's Muslim-oriented communication efforts in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (Chapters 1 and 3). It also makes an attempt to put these activities in historical perspective by offering an overview of US public diplomacy since World War I (Chapter 2). At the very least, the book has documentary value and will, in the best case, encourage other scholars to dig a little deeper beneath the surface of the complex and important problems of public diplomacy and international public opinion.

References

Pintak, Lawrence (2004) 'Dangerous Delusions: Advertising Nonsense about Advertising America', *Public Diplomacy Website*, available at <http://ww.publicdiplomacy.org/32.htm> (accessed 23 September 2006).