The Geocultural Dimension of Public Diplomacy

By Tom Edwards

I recall a story from my years as a geopolitical strategist at a large software firm where I was presented with what would seem to be a rather simple decision. The new general manager of a freshly opened subsidiary office in Nigeria had learned of a specific piece of content that, when added to a spreadsheet software product, would essentially win over the Nigerian market. Which piece of content you may wonder? Well, it was simply the unique symbol for the Nigerian currency, the *naira*: ₦. At the time, this symbol was not included in the product and the general manager knew that this addition would be a huge gain in public perception of the company. He knew that this one simple act would demonstrate to the local market that this multinational firm really cared and took local issues seriously. Yet, despite his pleas to headquarters and my fervent support to make the change, the simple fix was turned down by the product team. (It should be noted that it was added in a later version, but the early opportunity had been lost.)

A large part of my support for this basic content change was built upon one of the most common pieces of advice I would pass along to various product developers and managers over the years: as much as the company maintains subsidiary staff, spends millions on PR and image control, and strives to have a personal connection with the end-user, the reality is that the company's *products* (and the content contained therein) are its chief ambassadors and that the multinational corporate-consumer relationship is one of the broadest forms of public diplomacy. Global product distribution and end-user exposure to a company's product will always far surpass the ability of an organization to shape and influence a customer's perception. First impressions still mean a great deal in today's business environment, and if a customer in a particular market is culturally offended right out of the box or their geopolitical worldview is challenged by a product, then the company will find the task of regaining their trust to be extremely challenging. Thus companies need to realize that the corporate-consumer relationship is actually built upon an implicit form of public diplomacy wherein the geopolitical and geocultural values, assumptions and convictions of both sender and recipient will be open for interpretation.

In his book *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Ballantine Books, 1996, p.74), Benjamin Barber so appropriately pointed out that "even the form information takes – video-textual, digital, programmed, time-shifted, technology-dependent – will inevitably impact culture and politics and the attitudes that constitute them." This notion has proven itself time after time in the context of geocultural issues, where the content, as well as the delivery mechanism are so integral to the end-user perception of the intended message. Likewise, content providers often make assumptions about a local market's preferences on the basis of scant market research or even on the basis of perpetuating stereotypes about a specific culture. This is a very delicate interaction, as both sides stand to gain from the relationship, but the onus is truly
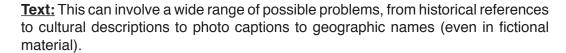
on the content/service provider to navigate the potential sensitivities of a new locale. Multinational corporations may think they are doing the local market a favor by providing their products and services. Rather, the local market is allowing the company the *privilege* of offering their goods within their geocultural context. This privilege can be (and often is) revoked if the goods provided go beyond what they are supposed to be, for example, when mobile phones come cluttered with irrelevant applications.

One austere reality of global business is learning how much governments really do care about protecting the perception of their local geographies. Sadly, the most common path to understanding this fact and learning the local boundaries of sensitivity, is through an arduous trial and error process where U.S. companies enter a market, make a critical mistake of some variety and then quickly try to make amends with the offended customers. This often includes the local government as well as displaced or ex-pat customers in other markets who represent that particular culture. This oft-repeated process isn't intended as a requirement for being considered a globalized business – i.e., it is not a military-style practice of earning one's 'global stripes' (yet, given the prevalence of errors made over the years by well-resourced, well-distributed firms, one may be inclined to think so). In addition to this vicious cycle, there are factors which also influence the dynamic, such as pre-existing local consumer and government perceptions of U.S. businesses, openness to non-local goods and services, past experiences with foreign powers, non-U.S. businesses and so forth.

Given the geopolitical environment in which business is conducted and the increasingly information and service-oriented economies in existing and emerging global markets, one may wonder exactly what political and cultural content challenges exist. Surprisingly, the challenges at present are, at their fundamental level, no different from those that have been present for centuries. They can be summarized very simply as: issues resulting from the conflict of two or more opposing viewpoints on a fact of geography, history, religion, language, and a myriad of other themes. To some 21st Century, digitally-connected "global thinkers", the existence of such fundamental differences is an amazing incongruence for our Age of Information where the emphasis on territory and cultural differences are supposedly diminished (at least perceptually). Yet those differences can be emphasized even more so by the extension of local perspectives and sovereignties onto a global stage via the empowerment of information technology. Thus the Internet, information products and content rich services become overt arenas for competing viewpoints into which transnational corporations often step unaware. This could result in a company anxiously, and/or ignorantly, adopting one local viewpoint at the complete exclusion of another, based on a short-term decision to gain market share in one locale while unwittingly risking business in an adjacent locale (a dynamic which I once labeled as "information geopolitics").

So to what am I specifically referring in terms of "geocultural challenges" and how might they impact the nature of content-based public diplomacy? I think it would help to further set the context by providing a few general categories of content and associated examples, as follows:

Text: This can involve a wide range of possible problems, from historical references to cultural descriptions to photo captions to geographic names (even in fictional material).

- Using controversial technical terms such as "master/slave" (for a computer hard drive or server device) can be viewed as being quite insensitive.
- The use of "Republic of China" as the geographic name of Taiwan is a serious problem for a product targeted for release in China and potentially Hong Kong as well, as this name is forbidden from use in China.

Icons & Graphics: Simple graphics to aid in navigation and other user interface guidance are very necessary, yet many times the U.S. conventions and meanings are deployed seemingly without thought towards their potential non-U.S. meaning.

- Hand gestures are one of the most culturally varying expressions, thus using the open palm hand gesture for "Stop" or "Alert" or using the thumbs-up hand gesture for "Okay" are inappropriate in many cultures. These two common hand icons are commonly misused, as each can be interpreted as the equivalent of the middle finger gesture in the U.S.
- Liberal borrowing of religious symbols for indicating holidays or other cultural occasions can be an issue, depending on how the symbols are displayed as well as which ones are included (the issue of inclusion/exclusion is a huge factor in geocultural concerns).

Maps & Geography: As they are very visual devices, maps can be a flashpoint for consumers who will readily identify any errors. Maps of countries and/or regions often have the propensity to inflame deep-seated nationalism if the boundaries or full extent of local sovereignty isn't clearly recognized. Relying upon the United Nations and other sources can be helpful, but ultimately each company must make cartographic decisions based on their specific needs and market strategies but without appearing to have made such decisions arbitrarily.

- Showing the disputed Jammu and Kashmir territory as wholly a part of India works great for the India market (and is actually required) – but the same map version will be severely problematic in Pakistan.
- Maps of Argentina intended for use in that country – even if basic clip art in nature – are expected to show the disputed Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) as part of Argentinian territory.
- Showing the Basque Country as an independent political entity, or even the suggestion of such can yield backlash within Spain.

Flags: Similar to maps, flags can also act as an obvious reaction mechanism for consumers and are even more overt signs of nationalism. User interfaces, particularly for websites, seem to really favor using flags for their colorful qualities, but this can often increase the potential for negative feedback if handled incorrectly.

- Appropriate usage of the flag of Saudi Arabia is critical as it contains sacred text from the Islamic Qur'an.
- Displaying the flag of Taiwan within China or showing a Kurdish flag in Turkey can have political ramifications.
- The use of national flags to represent language choice is common but not usually a prudent option. For geographically insular languages such as Japanese or Icelandic that are mostly coincidental with their geographic distribution, this approach may make sense. However, for more widespread languages this presents a challenge; e.g., what is the correct flag for "English", or "Spanish" or "French"? Unless the choices are delineated very specifically (French-France, French-Canada, and so on), it can yet again become a sensitive issue of inclusion/exclusion.

Creative Content: In the more creative content types such as games and entertainment, a liberal use of actual or derived cultural themes is prevalent and can be a source of strong backlash if not used appropriately for the intended context.

- Overt cultural stereotyping evident in many video games has drawn much attention from both gamers and the government – the former for compelling realism and the latter for potential regulation. Realism has a place in creative content but the balance between "real" and "offensive" – while maintaining the overall sense of "fun" - is a difficult boundary to navigate.
- Fantasy movies and games which develop belief systems or cultures very similar to 'real world' examples tread very carefully by not sufficiently suspending the obvious real world connections, which can then imply a form of commentary (either positive or negative depending on context).

In terms of consequences for geocultural content error, the outcome will depend on several factors, some of which are as follows:

- The general standing of a company's diplomatic relationship with the local government and/or consumers; e.g., Disney initially faced significant challenges when introducing its theme park to France (the presence of Disney early on was labeled as an impending "cultural Chernobyl") but over time the company has done well to maintain good government relations and localize its product to become one of the most popular European tourist destinations.
- The degree to which the local government controls information and/or regulates international business within its boundaries; e.g., China is well-known to have laws and regulations which apply more control over content available to its citizens and the government expends great energy to control how it is perceived beyond its borders.
- The severity of the cultural issue that was present in the content (i.e., how deep was the offense); e.g., in 2002, the Cadbury chocolate company, based in the UK, released a marketing campaign in India
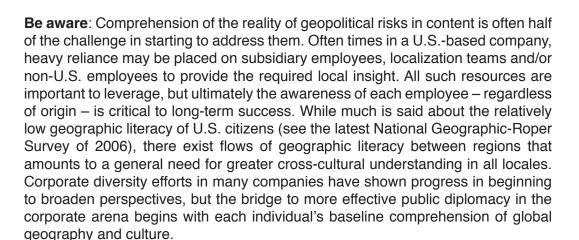
for a chocolate bar called "Temptations." In the advertisements for the product, a colorful map of northern India was shown and the entire Jammu and Kashmir region was colored bright red and contained the phrase "Too good to share", in an attempt to draw a parallel between their irresistible candy and the fiercely disputed region. As you can imagine, this inflamed sensitivities over the issue and caused a lot of backlash (and it certainly didn't help that it was a British company making the faux pas!).

▪ The discoverability of the cultural issue in your product or service (i.e., how easy it was to find); e.g., in 2003, the video game *Kakuto Chojin* contained an audio track with chanted lyrics from the Islamic Qur'an, which was considered highly sensitive. The lyrics were not completely obvious within the game's content, but ad adherent of Islam and/or an Arabic speaker would have easily discerned the content. This audio was fixed, but unfortunately not before the issue became widely known within the Middle East.

Most typically, all of these factors combine into an overall assessment of the potential risk (if viewed proactively) or potential backlash (if viewed reactively). Because every locale is different, and the formation of successful corporate public diplomacy depends upon so many factors, there really isn't an easy formula that will determine the outcome of making a geocultural error. Thus many companies learn through painful experiences, working through both small and large-scale backlash events before finally and hopefully attaining a level of actionable understanding. And more importantly, developing a critical diplomatic relationship with both local government and consumers. Here's a look at some of the more likely outcomes from geocultural content issues:

▪ Local Consumer Reactions: If the issue isn't overt, this could manifest as slow or non-existent sales for no apparent reason. In more overt cases, consumers can choose to complain loudly, boycott and escalate their concerns to their government for action.

▪ Local Government Sanctions: A local government may choose to impose restrictions on a business, perhaps restrict sales of the offending product permanently or temporarily or shut down the offending company entirely from conducting local business.

▪ PR and Image Backlash: Negative exposure in the local press is almost a guarantee in the majority of cases, with exposure determined often by the degree of offense. As with consumers, the local press may act as an agent of government escalation or as a force to simply denigrate the transnational business.

Given the nature of geocultural content and the challenge it poses to effective public diplomacy in the business realm, some readers may feel daunted at the task of navigating this sensitive minefield. However, it's important to note that steps can be taken to improve one's chances in dealing proactively and prudently with such issues:

Be aware: Comprehension of the reality of geopolitical risks in content is often half of the challenge in starting to address them. Often times in a U.S.-based company, heavy reliance may be placed on subsidiary employees, localization teams and/or non-U.S. employees to provide the required local insight. All such resources are important to leverage, but ultimately the awareness of each employee – regardless of origin – is critical to long-term success. While much is said about the relatively low geographic literacy of U.S. citizens (see the latest National Geographic-Roper Survey of 2006), there exist flows of geographic literacy between regions that amounts to a general need for greater cross-cultural understanding in all locales. Corporate diversity efforts in many companies have shown progress in beginning to broaden perspectives, but the bridge to more effective public diplomacy in the corporate arena begins with each individual's baseline comprehension of global geography and culture.

Be proactive: Time and again experience has shown that finding and resolving such issues as early as possible during content creation and production will directly affect the time and costs expended to fix the problem later in the process; i.e., the earlier issues are identified, the cheaper the resolution costs. Any exposure of unintended sensitive content to the end consumer will exponentially increase the cost for achieving a resolution. As many in the localization industry who must respond too late to any content changes are well aware, it's never too early to start considering the impact of the geopolitical dimension on content.

Be committed: The key to long-term success in developing a company's successful approach to geocultural diplomacy is to make the commitment to invest in resources, training and processes that are necessary to stay aware and proactive. Business- and market-specific experience with such issues will demonstrate the need for specific resources, tools and more efficient processes to effectively manage geopolitical content. The forms and combinations of resources and subject-matter expertise will greatly depend on your specific company, specific products/services, target markets, and such variables.

In closing, I'd like to mention what I believe is perhaps the most critical aspect of public diplomacy in geocultural issues, and that is the issue of intent. Even if you take all the proactive steps to become aware, to create proactive and responsive diplomatic structures within your organizational process, there remains the powerful force of local market perception – a fact that's common across all transnational businesses from the petroleum industry to IT to entertainment. In my experience, 99 percent of geocultural errors are the result of completely unintentional circumstances (note unintentional – *not* excusable), and yet in 99 percent of those cases the local market perceived the errors to be completely intentional on the part of the content developer. Customers often raise questions such as "Why did your company do this to us?", "How could a huge multinational corporation possibly get this wrong?," and so forth. Taking these comments in the context of the age-old differences between viewpoints, it's a natural reaction. However, while functioning in today's interconnected world, the affected company can't fall back on the age-old excuse of a lack of information (it might have worked in the Age of Exploration, but it's not very credible in the Age of Information). Intent is always a key issue

to remember with geocultural content issues. Ultimately responding to the local market's perception of the company's intent is the pathway for developing a truly diplomatic approach to such risks.

By proactively considering the dynamic geopolitical landscape and how it affects your specific product or service it is entirely possible to more safely navigate the content issues and prepare for the uncertainties. With diligent planning and appropriate resources to develop the geopolitical rationale, content developers can achieve a strategy of informed defensibility for their content choices and begin to view geopolitical content risks as positive opportunities to better serve the local customer.

■ ■ ■

Tom Edwards is a geographer and the principal consultant of Englobe, a Seattle-based consultancy for geocultural intelligence and content strategy. Previously, Tom spent over 13 years at Microsoft as a geographer and its senior geopolitical strategist. Tom serves on the Senior Advisory Council of Business for Diplomatic Action. He can be reached at tomedw@englobe. com.