

## Spreading the Public Journalism Message Globally

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Despite earnest if sometimes misguided efforts, the United States rarely has been successful in establishing American-style democracy in countries in which we have intervened. That history should be cautionary to people who accept invitations to talk about public journalism abroad.

We need to be doing a lot of talking with journalists in other countries, as the appetite to hear our ideas is consistent and widespread, and in the last few years I have been involved in discussions and seminars with professionals in a dozen countries.

Some were more successful than others. In reflecting on my experiences, I’ve developed a checklist of things to think about in advance of such visits. While many of the points will be obvious to some people, others might not be — and certainly were not to me when I first began developing seminars for foreign journalists.

Language, of course, can be a problem, particularly in Arab and Asian countries. It is impossible to form opinions about newspapers that you cannot read, yet you invariably will be asked what you think of their journalism. I first confess my ignorance of the language, then add that even if I could read their papers, I would not be so arrogant as to judge them, nor would I particularly appreciate some newcomer to my city and country judging my journalism.

But the highest barriers are cultural and historic. It’s there that we must begin the study and thinking process well in advance of a trip.

Some considerations:

### **Prevailing Models**

The U.S. model of traditional journalism — non-partisan, striving for professional objectivity — is not the prevailing model in much of the world. Partisanship and multiple, fiercely competing newspapers is the more common model, and the partisanship isn’t confined to the editorial pages.

In Sweden, for instance, the two primary national papers are owned by political parties, and yet a few years ago, the dominant conservative party financially bailed out the liberal newspaper, which was about to go under, in the interest of maintaining multiple voices. In Jordan, where newspapers represent multiple splinter political and ethnic groups, the robust competition among them is much more ideological than news- or advertising-driven, and the bitter schism between East Bankers and West Bankers colors every consideration and underlies every conversation. It is not uncommon in Amman for journalists engaged in a seminar to begin haranguing one another over some real or imagined insult. In Colombia and many Latin countries, journalists must be constantly concerned about personal safety and government intervention.

Little things can cause problems. In Amman a few years ago, I conducted three days of seminars for about 25 journalists from all over the spectrum. The room was set up with a square of tables. My interpreter sat to my left, so I naturally turned my head partly that way as she whispered in my ear, trying to keep up with the rapid-fire conversations going on in Arabic. Midway through the second day, a young man who had been heavily engaged in every discussion became agitated. “Why,” he asked with obvious anger and frustration, “do you always face that side of the room? (West Bankers were on one side, East Bankers on the other, it turned out.) Though I had deliberately spread the conversation all around the table, he read into my listening posture a slight. I shifted the interpreter to my right side for the balance of the seminar and he calmed down.

In most places, the notions of democracy do not include a requirement for bipartisanship or multipartisanship on the part of journalists. Quite the contrary. In that sense, their vision of how democracy works is probably more realistic than ours.

In contrast to most cities in the United States, most substantial foreign cities have several newspapers and very partisan broadcast outlets, thus multiple voices are assured.

If you have an opportunity to meet with media owners as well as working journalists, you’ll understand why the partisanship is so engrained. While some owners, particularly in more advanced democracies, are entrepreneurial, many, perhaps, most, are in it for influence and ideology, not simply as a business proposition.

So the first step for U.S. journalists is to understand as much as possible about the journalistic culture and history unique to each country. The State Department can be helpful, as can academics and U.S. journalists who cover these countries. It’s a matter of doing some aggressive reporting and good listening.

### **The Idea of Freedom**

U.S. journalists don’t worry a lot about going to prison, at least for acts in the line of duty. Journalists in many other countries do, as an almost a daily matter. In Jordan, one of my seminarians was whisked off to prison for publishing the names of members of a political organization that had been banned by the king.

Yet the historic lack of freedom can be very much an advantage for the person leading the seminar. Unlike any living U.S. journalist, the professionals in emerging democracies such as former Soviet Union countries, the Mideast and much of Latin America have been a part of the fight for freedom. They understand, far better and more intimately than many U.S. journalists, the connection between journalism and democracy and appreciate it because they have tried to do their jobs without freedom. However, some of the finer points of public journalism and the unthreatened way we can apply them are naturally lost on people whose journalistic experience includes constantly looking over their shoulders.

Most of the journalists you will encounter yearn for the freedom that U.S. journalists take for granted. They also are aware, however, that you didn’t have to earn it; it was given. Recognizing and appreciating that fact can go a long way toward building rapport with the participants.

### **There To Help, Not Demonstrate or Teach or Critique**

Public journalism as we know it can no more be slapped onto foreign models of journalism than democracy itself can be superimposed immediately on a country long

accustomed to other forms of government. Both take time to grow, and they must, as has happened in the United States, grow along together, reinforcing each other.

So the public journalist headed abroad needs to think of himself or herself not as a teacher or evaluator or a show-and-teller but as a helper. To do this, one needs to know what problems the foreign journalists want you to help with and how you might help. When the program is a seminar of a couple of dozen and you have planning time, it is helpful to communicate with the participants in advance, asking them to let you know individually what areas they want to discuss. If it's a lecture situation with many more participants, you can get a feel for that from local sources, your hosts and the like.

Many of the assumptions under which public journalism operates — such as First Amendment rights, free elections, open criticism of authority, self-determination by citizens — simply don't apply, so there is no universal template. Each session must be planned around the realities that affect the target audience.

### **U.S. Hegemony**

In many countries, particularly in the Mideast and Europe, U.S. hegemony is a constant source of concern and antipathy. Particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall, our status as the lone superpower and the often-ugly sprawl of U.S. culture across the globe is a source of both resentment and fear. We must not act and sound as if this power makes us right in all things and thus able to concoct remedies on the spot or apply formulas that worked in our context. Rather, our objective should be to plant seeds, giving the participants ways to start thinking differently within their specific circumstances. Only they can apply the principles of public journalism to their situation.

### **The Ultimate Consideration**

Finally, the idea that people in other countries want their countries to be like America is a peculiarly American misconception. They want the freedom to determine for themselves what they will be like, and only an effective democracy can provide that. So their interest in public journalism stems not from trying to mimic our experience but from a desire to have a tool to accomplish their goals. To be effective, we must join them in that interest and understand their goals.

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