



## **Media Myths and Misguided Policies: The Role of Public Diplomacy in Counter-Piracy**

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### **Introduction**

The dramatic rise of piracy off the coast of Somalia in the past few years has led to a corresponding explosion of media interest. Governments and multinational institutions have, in many cases, found it relatively easy to get their message across to a receptive media, desperate for information on the subject because stories on piracy have proved a big hit with the audience - in short, piracy ‘sells’.

However, both sides feed off the other. It is likely that public diplomacy has contributed to the media myths about piracy due to the selective release of information to journalists by those involved in counter-piracy operations. In turn, the romanticization and distortion of the subject by the media have, in all probability, led to misguided counter-piracy strategies.

Before discussing the role of public diplomacy in counter-piracy, it is important to describe what ‘public diplomacy’ actually means as it is a fuzzy term, with no clear, single definition available.

For the purposes of this discussion, ‘public diplomacy’ can be taken to mean the efforts by governments and multilateral institutions to explain and promote their policies and interests to people around the world, and to influence global opinion. This is primarily done through the international media and through dealings with non-governmental organizations.

This piece will focus on the way governments and other bodies try to spread the ‘counter-piracy’ message, primarily through the media. It will examine the resulting media narrative, which in many ways distorts the reality of piracy, and may well have contributed to misguided policies.



## **The Perfect Media Story**

Somali pirates took the world by surprise in the early years of this century when they set sail in tiny skiffs, hijacking enormous cargo ships and their crews, demanding multi-million dollar ransoms for their release. The shipping industry, governments, international organizations and the media were caught unprepared, and were obliged to hurriedly develop new policies, strategies and narratives on the issue.

While those directly affected by piracy tried to find ways of countering the problem, the media revelled in what was in many ways the perfect ‘story’. Somali pirates were romanticised as ‘heroes’ or ‘villains’, often described in a child-like, storybook fashion or as something akin to the characters in a Hollywood blockbuster. Pirates were rarely portrayed as ‘real’ people.

As piracy was such a seductive subject, governments and other institutions did not have to try particularly hard to get their messages into the public domain. In the early days, when the story was new and exciting, media organizations would feature almost any item on piracy, knowing it would sell newspapers, generate internet hits, and attract viewers and listeners.

As Somali piracy was for most people something far away and ‘exotic’, there was not much pressure from the world’s public for the immediate development of successful counter-piracy policies. Things might have been different if the media had chosen to make the story more relevant to its audience by focusing on how the actions of Somali pirates were leading to increased prices for oil and other goods transported through the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

In the past few years, it is likely that more media column inches and airtime have been devoted to piracy than any other aspect of the ‘Somali problem’. This is in spite of the fact that pirates make up a negligible proportion of the Somali population, and that their activities are fairly insulated from what is happening elsewhere in the country.



Although the media questioned how it was possible for tiny groups of poorly-armed men to successfully hijack huge vessels, it is unlikely that the ‘CNN effect’<sup>1</sup> - whereby the media shames or pressurises governments into taking action on a specific issue - came into play with piracy. This may have been because governments and other bodies reacted relatively fast to the problem; unlike famines, floods or other humanitarian disasters which do not immediately affect the rest of the world, piracy was hurting the pockets of the powerful shipping industry, and threatening a key supply route for oil and other goods.

The fact that the motivation to tackle piracy was economic as well as political helps explain why so many countries came together so quickly to fight the problem. It is interesting that states, such as Iran, the US, China and Russia, have all had ships patrolling pirate-affected areas, communicating and working together in a relatively coordinated and harmonious way that overlooks wider political divergences.

### **Myths and Misconceptions**

The media frenzy surrounding piracy and the intense pressure on journalists to find stories on the subject in some cases led to rushed reporting and the distortion of the reality on the ground. It is likely that the media has contributed towards misguided policies on piracy because of the way it has reported the subject, leading policy makers to believe in myths instead of realities. Public diplomacy has also contributed to these distortions, as governments and other bodies have fed to the media only the information they want to get across.

Some piracy stories have received far more attention than others. The seizing of civilians aboard yachts, such as the British couple, Paul and Rachel Chandler who were captured in October 2009 and held for more than a year, generated huge media interest, especially in the UK. According to those involved in negotiations with the pirates, the media frenzy severely disrupted attempts to get them released.<sup>2</sup>

Another pirate story that received massive international media attention was the attempted capture of the US-flagged Maersk Alabama in 2009, the taking hostage of its captain and his



subsequent rescue by US Special Forces. The heavy media focus on this single hostage was probably due to two main factors: that he was an American and due to the effectiveness of the US public diplomacy machine. This same incident is now inspiring a Hollywood motion picture entitled *Captain Phillips* starring Tom Hanks scheduled for release in March 2013, which coincidentally made cast calls for extras in Dubai.

These two stories contrast sharply with the scant international media attention paid to the ongoing hijacking of merchant vessels with crews from less powerful countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh and Ukraine. The often horrific treatment of hostages, and the duration of their captivity, are seldom given significant media coverage, partly because some shipping companies prevent released crew members from speaking to the press, fearing that their horror stories will dissuade employees from taking to the sea in future. It is worth noting that pressure groups representing the rights of seafarers have been set up in order to remind the world of their plight.<sup>3</sup>

Somali pirates also complain that they have been misrepresented by the media and policy makers. As the Somali pirate, Gedow Ali, said: “The rest of the world believes we are bad people. They think we are criminals. But nobody has come to ask us for our side of the story.”<sup>4</sup> This type of attitude reflects at least a small part of Somali public opinion, among which the notion of Somali pirates as “vigilantes” or “coast guards” protecting Somali waters from international interests involved in illegal fishing or dumping of toxic wastes, endures.

Another aspect of piracy that remains under-reported is how well people other than the pirates themselves are doing out of piracy. As I argue in the book *“Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, Hope and War in a Shattered State,”* people “are making money from the substantial industry that has developed around trying to deal with the problem of Somali piracy. New security companies have been set up to help protect ships from the pirates. Anti-piracy equipment is being designed and sold... New breeds of consultants, insurers, lawyers, counsellors, security personnel and ransom negotiators are making a good living from Somali piracy. Insurance premiums for ships sailing off the coast of Somalia increased tenfold following the rise of piracy



in the area.”<sup>5</sup> The public diplomacy of countries such as the UK, which have benefitted from these aspects of piracy, may play down such elements.

An example of how public diplomacy can lead to a distorted reality of piracy can be seen in the widely-reported comments of the US State Department’s Counter Piracy Unit Donna Hopkins: “Somali piracy has grown from being essentially a garden-variety, local, off-the-coast protest against illegal fishing...into a seriously networked and capable, transnational, organized and criminal enterprise.”<sup>6</sup> Although piracy has doubtless become more sophisticated, by all accounts it remains a fairly localized phenomenon; treating it as something different will lead to failed strategies. As the piracy expert, Stig Jarle Hansen, argues: “The myths of piracy in the greater Gulf of Aden are many, but the average pirate group is a clan-based, low-tech group, consisting of former fishermen. Pirates are thus decentralised, and far from the advanced structures suggested by many observers.”<sup>7</sup>

One body that has developed a relatively effective public diplomacy machine is the European Union Naval Force for Somalia or EUNAVFOR, which was established in 2008. It offers well-organized press briefings and media embeds, and has intelligent, well-informed spokesmen who have successfully got EUNAVFOR’s message across.

Of course, EUNAVFOR – like all other official actors around the world – sometimes overlooks (whether intentionally or unintentionally) some facts that should be given to the public. For example, during a press briefing in February 2012, EUNAVFOR spoke proudly of its successful counter-piracy operations in 2011, downplaying the role played by private armed guards on board ships and completely failing to mention that, in 2011, pirates received greater revenue for fewer hijackings because they demanded higher ransoms.

In conclusion, popular stereotypes and widespread media attention to the phenomenon of piracy off the coast of Somalia has in part contributed to unhelpful media myths and stereotypes on the subject, which in turn have led to bad counter-piracy policies. Efforts made by governments to increase public messaging on the topic have not been extensive, and have not succeeded in countering popular misperceptions of the problem. However, public diplomacy has had some



success in persuading shipping companies to adopt best practise measures, such as protecting their ships with barbed wire, establishing citadels or safe havens for crew on board vessels, and, in some cases, hiring private security guards. It has also, to some extent, dissuaded people from taking to the sea in risky areas unless absolutely necessary. But piracy off the coast of Somalia will continue as long as it remains a low-risk, high reward business model, and as long as the situation on land remains lawless, with no effective central government.

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*For more information, see the conference website at [www.counterpiracy.ae](http://www.counterpiracy.ae).*

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<sup>1</sup>Robinson, Piers. "The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?," *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999): 302.

<sup>2</sup> Personal conversations with negotiators for the Chandlers.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Ecoterra International Counter-Piracy Updates.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Harper. *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State*. London: Zed Books, 2012, page 142.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, op cit., page 145.

<sup>6</sup> Press conference, US Embassy, London, February 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, *Piracy in the Greater Gulf of Aden*, NIBR, 2009, 41.