World Falls for American Media, Even as It Sours on America

By TIM ARANGO

Shortly after the attacks on 9/11, a delegation of high-level media executives, including the heads of every major studio, met several times with White House officials, including at least once with President Bush’s former top strategist, Karl Rove, to discuss ways that the entertainment industry could play a part in improving the image of the United States overseas.

One of the central ideas was using “soft power” by spreading American television and movies to foreign audiences, especially in the Muslim world, to help sway public opinion.

There were few tangible results from the meetings — lesser ways of supporting the war on terrorism like public service announcements and packages of free DVDs sent to American soldiers.

But since then, the media companies have gotten what they wanted, even if the White House has not. In the last eight years, American pop culture, already popular, has boomed around the globe while opinions of America itself have soured.

The television program “CSI” is now more popular in France than in the United States. Hollywood movies routinely sell far more tickets overseas than at home. A Russian remake of the TV show “Married With Children” has been so popular that Sony, the producer of the show, has hired back the original writers to produce new scripts for Russia. Even in the Muslim world, American pop culture has spread.

But so far, cultural popularity has not translated into new friends. The latest data from the Pew Global Attitudes Project, released in June, shows that the image of the United States remained negative in the 24 countries in which Pew conducted surveys (although in 10 of those the favorability rating of the United States edged up slightly).

Joseph S. Nye Jr., the Harvard professor who coined the phrase “soft power” in 1989 to refer to the ways beyond military muscle that America influences the world, said that “what’s interesting about the last eight years is that polls show a decline in American attractiveness.”

He added: “But then you ask the follow-up questions and you see that American culture remains attractive, that American values remain attractive. Which is the opposite of what the president has said — that they hate us for who we are and what we believe in.”

Jeffrey Schlesinger, the head of international television at Warner Brothers, had a simpler explanation for the popularity of American entertainment.

“Batman is Batman, regardless of if Bush is in the White House or not,” he said.
And Batman will still be Batman with Barack Obama in the White House. The issue of America’s image abroad was a campaign platform for the president-elect, who said in a foreign policy speech in April, “We all know that these are not the best of times for America’s reputation in the world.”

With the curtain closing on the Bush presidency, pollsters are left to wonder about the long-term effects on America’s standing. Steven Kull, the director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, said that before the election, his data suggested a slight improvement in America’s image abroad after a long decline. “It’s turned a corner, but it’s not anywhere near positive territory,” he said.

Mr. Kull says he was surprised to find that in pre-election polling, less than half of those polled in 22 foreign countries — 46 percent — said relations between the United States and the world would improve under a President Obama.

“It’s not just about not being Bush, and that there will be a clean slate,” Mr. Kull said. “There were all these underlying issues that were amplified during the Bush era, and they are not simply going to go back in the trunk.”

Bryce Zabel, a television producer who was chairman of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences at the time and a participant in the 2001 meetings with the White House, argued then that the United States needed to regard itself like a consumer brand.

“Products like Coca-Cola are far more effectively branded around the globe than the United States itself,” he wrote in a memo that was circulated around Hollywood. “The American entertainment and communications industry has the technological and creative expertise to improve relations between our country and the rest of the world.”

Hilary Rosen, the former chairwoman of the Recording Industry Association of America, who was also present at the post-9/11 meetings, said that Mr. Rove and other White House officials were looking for the kind of support Hollywood gave the United States during World War II.

“They wanted the music industry, the movie industry, the TV industry to produce propaganda,” she said. “Rove was putting a lot of pressure on us.”

For Hollywood, a much more important development was happening globally, as rising standards of living around the world resulted in more money spent on entertainment. Big, comfortable multiplexes being erected in countries like Russia and Mexico were helping draw moviegoers.

In 2003, the domestic box office brought in $9.2 billion for American studios, and foreign countries generated $10.9 billion, according to the Motion Picture Association of America. In 2007, domestic was $9.6 billion, while international rose to more than $17 billion.

The growth overseas has surprised even some American media executives. “It was something that, two or three years ago, was thought to have gone into a slower growth position,” Jeffrey L. Bewkes, Time Warner’s chief executive, said to a gathering of investors in June about the international appeal of American television. “And then it came roaring back over the last couple of years.”
The foreign interest in American entertainment has been particularly pronounced in television. In many countries, particularly in Europe, American television shows, once relegated to late night, are being shown in prime time.

“Let’s say, at the beginning of the decade, more or less all over Europe you saw on the big channels almost no U.S. series on prime time,” says Gerhard Zeiler, the chief executive of the RTL Group, Europe’s largest television broadcaster. “Now, all over Europe you have a lot of American series in prime time.”

According to the European Audiovisual Observatory, part of the executive branch of the European Union, the number of hours of American programming on major European networks in 2000 was about 214,000. In 2006, the most recent year for which statistics are available, that figure grew by nearly 50,000 hours, to more than 266,000 hours.

“Increasingly a lot of that money is coming from television,” said Barry M. Meyer, chairman and chief executive of Warner Brothers. “The demand for American-produced television shows is stronger than it has ever been.”

American culture is blossoming even in the Middle East, where polls consistently show starkly negative views of the United States. Viacom started MTV Arabia last fall and introduced Nickelodeon Arabia in July on satellite services — endeavors that entail lessons in cultural sensitivity.

Much of America’s programming is beamed to Middle Eastern audiences from two satellite channels, MBC2 and MBC4, owned by the Saudi-financed Middle East Broadcasting Center. In prime time recently on MBC4 was “8 Simple Rules,” the ABC sitcom that starred the late John Ritter, and the gossip shows “The Insider” and “Inside Edition.” Oprah Winfrey’s show is also popular.

Amahl Bishara, an assistant professor of anthropology at Tufts University who recently spent two years in the West Bank studying the media there, said she noticed that MBC2, which carries American movies, was particularly popular.

“There’s an acute understanding of the difference between the U.S. government and the American people,” she said. “And they look at U.S. entertainment as just that, entertainment.”