

Two Cheers for Public Diplomacy and Place Branding

Written by Peter van Ham

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PETER VAN HAM, SEP 2 2012

Like all parts of social life, international politics has fads and fashions. Public diplomacy seems to be the latest buzzword, billed as the key to reinvigorating democracy at home and winning “hearts and minds” abroad. This practice overlaps with place branding, which can be considered an effort to manage, if not necessarily wield, the social power of a geographical location by using strategies developed in the commercial sector. It is closely linked to public diplomacy since place branding tries to affect the image and perception of foreign as well as domestic communities regarding territorial entities, be they states, regions, or cities. Both public diplomacy and place branding use social power by uploading (new) norms and values, and occasionally pushing for (new) standards and rules.[1] Today, even International Organizations such as the European Union, the United Nations and NATO are conscious of their brand, as are NGO’s, universities, and media. Place branding is inherently part of the constructivist paradigm, since it builds on the understanding that territorial actors have considerable agency in shaping their place and role in international politics.[2] States *c.s.* use place branding to affect, even modify, their reputation by similar means and processes as commercial brands. Since social power is the ability to set standards and determine what is normal and desirable, the relevance of public diplomacy and place branding as a phenomenon in international politics should be evident.

Public diplomacy

So what is public diplomacy all about? The basic idea is that in order to achieve a wide range of goals—from economics to military—you need to get support of ordinary people. Whether the goal is to convince foreign publics that the rise of China poses no threat to the international system, or to persuade the so-called “Arab street” to shed its anti-Western beliefs, public diplomacy is called upon to work its miracles. It uses both classical tools such as TV and radio broadcasts and student exchanges, as well as the opportunities offered by the new, social media, such as blogs and internet-based communication (Twitter, Facebook, etc).[3]

Much of public diplomacy combines propaganda with smart media-management. Although public diplomacy has been practiced in some shape or form for centuries[4], it has only gained prominence a decade or so ago.[5] Two factors are responsible for public diplomacy’s rise: the belief that it is possible and legitimate to influence foreign audiences and thereby the policies of third countries, as well as the proliferation of new communication tools, which makes it possible to reach these foreign audiences in the first place. The rise of public diplomacy therefore suggests that globalization and democracy can, and even should go hand in hand.

Over the years, public diplomacy has transformed from a traditional process of top-down communication, to a means to facilitate true communication between people, both regionally and across the globe. This so-called “new public diplomacy” goes beyond changing public opinion, but focuses instead on international agenda-setting and changing priorities as well as public discourses.[6] Ultimately, the desired outcome remains unchanged, namely reaching certain economic or political goals. But the methods of the new public diplomacy are much more indirect and subtle than the blunt propaganda of yesteryear.

Public diplomacy is hip, but is also looked upon with some suspicion. Is it not merely propaganda in an updated, new dress? Surely, America’s efforts to affect public opinion in Muslim countries takes several leaves out of old propaganda-books. But the *new* public diplomacy goes way beyond a centralized, hierarchical approach and makes

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serious efforts to engage different publics into an open debate about issues which are considered of great importance. Whether this can still be labeled “diplomacy” may be a topic for discussion. It certainly is a far cry from classical bilateral negotiations among policymaking elites. Instead, today’s public diplomacy assumes that governments may well do better to use NGO’s and celebrities to set the agenda, and use their credibility and star-power. For example, Al Gore’s movie *An Inconvenient Truth* may have done more to raise awareness of the challenges of climate change than the decade-long Kyoto process.

Public diplomacy is therefore not just about governments reaching out to foreign publics. It is also a sign that in our globalized world, where new media are gradually creating the global village that was already foretold in the 1970s, non-state actors play an increasingly active role in areas that used to be the playground of diplomats. In a way, public diplomacy indicates that diplomacy has finally gone public, and that ordinary people are getting more ownership of the murky process of international policymaking. Asking attention for public diplomacy is therefore more than just adding a PR-component to national diplomatic efforts. It asks for a fundamental rethinking of how contemporary diplomacy operates.[7] It also requires the retooling of the diplomatic instruments of both states and International Organizations such as the EU and NATO.

Place branding

From experience, we know that anything can be branded: Perrier branded water; American Express branded credit; and Intel branded computer components. But what exactly is *place* branding, how does it work, and why is it rapidly becoming such a hotly debated, because still controversial, concept, both amongst policymakers and academics? And, more particularly, how does place branding fit into the examination of social power’s role in international politics?[8]

As the link with social power suggests, place branding goes beyond mere slogans or old-fashioned ad-campaigns. It goes beyond placing territory on the map as an attractive tourist destination, and it is certainly not mere gloss or spin. In today’s overcrowded marketplace of ideas, the image and reputation of a state have become essential parts of its strategic equity. All territorial actors already *have* a brand. They may not always realize this, but it is most certainly true. A place brand comprises “the totality of the thoughts, feelings, associations and expectations that come to mind when a prospect or consumer is exposed to an entity’s name, logo, products, services, events, or any design or symbol representing them.”[9] A place brand is (amongst others) determined by its culture, its political ideals, and its policies. In today’s globalized and mediatized commercial marketplace, the corporate brand has become an essential part of business identity which helps consumers to identify with the company, and — lest we forget — encourage them to buy its products and services. In a similar way, branding has become essential to create value in the relationship between territorial entities and individuals. Just as commercial brands invest a major part of their budget to establish and solidify the credibility of their image, today’s territorial actors do the same. For students of international politics, one of the interesting questions is whether place branding entices people to “buy” the “products” of brand states, in other words: do they support a state’s ideas and foreign policies?[10]

The practice of place branding has taken off at a time when the role and power of states (and other territorial actors) is changing. States as well as International Organizations vie for authority, legitimacy, and loyalty in a dense and highly competitive political arena. Just as religious faith no longer has a monopoly in giving purpose to people’s lives, the state can no longer claim the loyalty of “its” citizens. Patriotism, let alone nationalism, can no longer be taken for granted. States have therefore embarked upon a renewed quest for the hearts and minds of people, at home as well as around the world. States have always used the best and newest technologies in their pursuit of legitimacy and power. For example, without the printing-press, today’s modern state would not even have come into existence. It is therefore logical that states now add branding strategies to their arsenal of statecraft. Place branding therefore stands in a long tradition of innovations in statecraft and advances in the application of social power.

Since place branding takes a leaf out of the book of commerce and marketing, it is clearly not only a political phenomenon; it also has an important economic motivation. States as well as regions and cities, realize that they all offer the same product: territory, infrastructure, educated people, and an almost identical system of governance. And like Coke and Pepsi, states *c.s.* realize that they have to do a little extra not just to gain the fleeting attention of

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potential consumers, but engage in a long-term relationship built on trust, amity, and preferably loyalty. Against this historical backdrop it becomes clear that the emerging brand state is not a brand new state, but a political (and economic) player promoting itself more assertively than before (“Now even more efficient/ clean/ democratic/ liberal ...”), using the latest avenues of social power available to them.

Whither diplomacy?

Who has power in international politics? This central question has become increasingly hard to answer due to the growing complexity of national and global policy processes. Often this results in fast and furious statements on the demise of the nation-state and classical diplomacy. Since we don't know who or what is driving change, media headlines about Twitter- and Facebook-revolutions in Moldova, Tunisia and Egypt have caught the public imagination.[11] This also explains why public diplomacy and place branding are considered viable new approaches to study the impact of (foreign) publics to influence decisions, often by using modern technology and social media. Today, utilizing the opportunities offered by public diplomacy and place branding are markers of diplomatic sophistication and cleverness. Why threaten with sanctions and warships if the pressure of the “international community” can be equally effective? Why not use social media to get a message across and influence the policy agendas of influential actors? Everyone – from Al Qaida to the CIA; from Greenpeace to Shell – uses this media-saturated playing-field of international politics to spread their messages and guard their interests.[12]

So what is left of “traditional” diplomacy, a domain that used to be dominated by a rather small and exclusive elite of experienced experts of the Foreign Services establishment? Surely, there is sufficient work for diplomats to keep busy. But they feel the warm breath of new forms of communication, new networks of relationships and higher expectations and visibility in their necks. Most notably, they will have to adjust to the new trend of “economic diplomacy”[13], where diplomats are expected to privilege commercial interests. Increasingly, diplomats have to prove their relevance to a highly critical and alert outside world. As I see it, public diplomacy and place branding are putting traditional diplomacy to the test. But these newer forms of diplomacy should not be considered harbingers of a mediated global democracy. For the moment, therefore, it is still only two cheers for public diplomacy and place branding...

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[1] Peter van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[2] Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[3] Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Philip Seib, *Real-Time Diplomacy. Politics and Power in the Social Media Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).

[4] Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons From the Past* (April 2007), unpublished report.

[5] Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson, *Going Public: Diplomacy For the Information Society* (London: The Foreign Policy Center, 2000).

[6] Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[7] Kathy Fitzpatrick, “Advancing the New Public Diplomacy: A Public Relations Perspective”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2007).

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[8] See Peter van Ham, "Place Branding and Globalization: Media is the Message?", in Lillie Chouliaraki and Mette Morsing (eds), *Media, Organisations and Identity* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009); "Place Branding Within a Security Paradigm – Concepts and Cases", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, vol. 4, no. 3 (August 2008); and "Place Branding: The State of the Art", in Nicholas Cull and Geoffrey Cowan (eds), *Public Diplomacy in a Changing World – The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* (vol. 616, March 2008).

[9] Marsha Lindsay, "The Brand Called Wisconsin™: Can We Make It Relevant and Different For Competitive Advantage?" *Economic Summit White Paper* (October 2000).

[10] Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no. 4 (November 2007).

[11] Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

[12] Shaun Riordan, *The New Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), and Philip Seib (ed), *Toward a New Public Diplomacy. Redirecting U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave, 2009).

[13] Peter A.G. van Bergeijk, Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Jan Melissen (eds), *Economic Diplomacy. Economic and Political Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).