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Old Wine, New Bloggers: Public Diplomacy, India and Australia

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ABSTRACT

Public Diplomacy – defined for the purposes of this discussion in terms of the ways in which state and non-state actors structure activities aimed at understanding cultures, attitudes and behaviour; building and managing relationships; and influencing opinions and actions to advance interests and values - is a hot topic, not only for governments adjusting to a world of super-charged communications and staggering fast responses to actions/ideas, but also for academics. Of all the various forms or ‘takes’ on diplomacy, it is public diplomacy that is currently attracting the most attention.

The paper addresses a number of questions including whether history is active in expressions of Public Diplomacy (PD), and whether a historical perspective is helpful in PD. Are ideas about ‘core values’, foundational stories or even master narratives workable for popular consumption? Are they desirable? The paper suggests that these are important questions to ask because in the great nation-branding industry that has sprung up recently reputations are hard-won and also slow to change, an observation which necessarily invites historical sensibility.
Public Diplomacy is a hot topic, not only for governments adjusting to a world of super-charged communications and staggeringly fast responses to actions/ideas, but also for academics. Of all the various forms or ‘takes’ on diplomacy, it is public diplomacy that is currently attracting the most attention. The discursive space that opens up in discussing what public diplomacy is, how it works or doesn’t work, and how it might be better understood and made more effective, is one where academics and practitioners happily exchange views. One of the best recent examples of this was the conference and workshop held in December 2010 in New Delhi on ‘Public Diplomacy in the Information Age’. This was sponsored by the four-year old Public Diplomacy Division of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, and the CMS Academy (Communications and Convergence Studies). It also featured participants from the high profile University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy and a number of others, including Nick Hill from the Australia India Institute. The conference was well-showcased and well-webcast, and it was followed by another one that I organized with Dr Amit Sarwal from Delhi, in April 2011, called ‘Public Diplomacy in Theory and Practice: Culture, Information and Interpretation in Australian-Indian Relations’.

So, having recently plunged into the realm of public diplomacy, my main purpose in this paper is to reflect on some of the claims, theories and conclusions offered by commentators, especially as they relate to Australian and Indian activity. I do this from the perspective of an historian who is interested generally in the presence or absence of historical in policy-making and a student of modern international history, with a recent interest in Australian-Indian relations. The particular question that I want to pursue is whether history is active in expressions of Public Diplomacy (PD) and whether it is helpful in PD – are ideas about ‘core values’, foundational stories or even master narratives workable for popular consumption? Are they desirable? They are logical questions to ask because in the great nation-branding industry that has sprung up recently, leading ‘nation-brander’ Simon Anholt reminds us that reputations are hard-won and also slow to change, an observation which necessarily invites historical sensibility. We might not like it, especially if reputation draws on nation-state dominated and clumsily modernist readings of change, but the call to history seems invited – and at the moment, neither India nor Australia feature much history in their PD.

First, a brief word on definitions. The 2010 Delhi conference booklet stressed that the event was about ‘people to people’ diplomacy. It elaborated thus:

Public diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formulation and execution of foreign policies. A key facet of public diplomacy is that it goes beyond unidirectional communication coming from the government. It is also about listening to a range of actors. As a result, public diplomacy activities often present many differing views as represented by private individuals and organisations in addition to official government views and positions. Successful public diplomacy involves an active engagement with the public in a manner that builds, over a period of time, a relationship of trust and credibility. It requires systems that acknowledge the importance of an increasingly interconnected world where citizens expect responsiveness to their concerns on foreign policy and other issues of national interests. In the new media and communication regime, this form of diplomacy challenges the general understanding and practice of foreign policy issues.

There is enough here for a long definitional exercise in exploring key themes and concepts, but that might be better done elsewhere. In fact, this elaboration is an intriguing and I think enticing blend of planned activity, inspired spontenity and a search for ‘systems’. There is a lot of ongoing debate over what constitutes public diplomacy, and in particular whether non-government initiatives count as PD. I agree with a number of commentators who maintain that governments might not always initiate an act of PD – for example, a theatrical tour company or the work of an NGO might lead the way – but the government must ‘own’ these initiatives as part of an overarching plan for it to be considered PD. We could spend a lot more time on definitions. A 2008 issue of the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science was devoted to the phenomenon of public diplomacy.
diplomacy – in the US context it has both lineage with the Fletcher School in the 1960s, and a distinctly post 9/11 flavour in more recent times. But in the interests of moving on, I would just note that Bruce Gregory’s contribution in that collection offers valuable reminders of the action and agency in public diplomacy – the key verbs at work for state actors, he argues, are understanding cultures, attitudes and behaviour; building and managing relationships; and influencing opinions and actions to advance interests and values.6

How does this relate to the discipline of history? Historians are wired to favour stories with deep roots when considering which ones might best carry national interests and effectively build reputation. One of the leading authorities at the University of Southern California’s Public Diplomacy Centre is Nick Cull, who is also an historian (principally of the US Information Agency). Cull visited Australia in the wake of violence directed at Indian students and the apparent undermining of Australia’s ‘brand’ overseas, and was surprised that we didn’t make more of some historically-bound traits as part of our image recovery process. First, given the pride we take in voluntarism on a scale that exceeds most others (more than one-third of Australians have recently engaged in voluntary work) he recommended that this be elevated to something that was explicitly part of our brand. There is plenty of colour and light in some grand acts of Australian voluntarism – a narrative builds from the mostly voluntary nature of our soldiers’ participation in wars to volunteer fire fighting, extraordinary mobilisations of women by the Red Cross, the 140,000 guides at the Sydney Olympic Games, and our volunteer surf life-saving. And secondly, he was also struck by the recognition given by speakers at public events to traditional owners of the land on which they were speaking. He wondered if this might be something that Australians could do even more boldly by carrying this habit with them when they traveled ie. paying respect to the traditional owners of the land when they spoke overseas! - a suggestion that was indeed bold, and would test the nerve of many an Australian official in Israel, Cyprus and other places!7

What is interesting is that when the historian Cull went looking for brand power he arrived at two historically rich and reasonably complex examples. They are also examples that can make bold claims look more circumspect. Alongside voluntarism lives boyhood conscription for military training before World War One and compulsory national service in the 1950s and then 1960s, including the Vietnam War period. Even if the practice of acknowledging traditional owners of the land is relatively recent, the act of acknowledgement opens the door to settler-indigenous history, to unfinished debates about native title and sovereignty, and to contemporary black-white relations.

I can’t resist adding to his suggestions. Another example he might have explored is the persistence of Australian acts of engagement with Asia that went against the grain of restrictive immigration underpinned by an ideal of racial homogeneity. There are plenty of them. The Australian government was involved in at least some, especially in the form of the aid, advice, and the provision of scholarships and fellowships under the Colombo Plan,8 and there are some compelling stories of productive collaborations between Australian individuals and groups in Asia. In fact, we blend the theme of voluntarism with that of constructive Asian engagement against the grain if we consider the history of Australian Volunteers Abroad, which saw Herb Feith set sail for the newly independent Indonesia in 1951 and which remains a strong organization today, renamed as Australian Volunteers International.9 But I think Cull’s chosen themes form excellent suggestions and I also think that the explanatory work that may be needed if anyone challenges them is part of their value as conversation builders.

Cull’s bold suggestions have not been taken up – at least not yet. In fact, the Australian landscape of PD is decidedly patchy. In brief, there is a lot happening that can be, and sometimes is, grouped under the heading of PD. Within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) the Images of Australia Branch sponsors programs that generate positive images of Australia, and the ten bilateral
cultural Councils/Institutes\textsuperscript{10} aimed at building networks and exchanges between Australia and other countries have well-established programs. The Australia India Institute is a welcome recent arrival adding to this picture. There are also impressive initiatives undertaken by the ABC, by Tourism Australia, Invest Australia, Australian Education International and probably a few others. What is lacking is a strong sense of commitment and strategy from the government. To suggest that the activities of these individual agencies are part of an orchestrated PD strategy is to flatter DFAT, as a Senate Committee study of 2007 has suggested. The general recommendations from that inquiry were for the Australian government to attach greater importance to public diplomacy, directed both internally and externally, and for PD to be ‘mainstreamed’ as fundamental to DFAT’s mission. There were more specific recommendations among the eighteen suggested, including greater planning around the use of social media, but we are still waiting to see how well these might be taken up.\textsuperscript{11} In the wake of a stronger sense of strategy around Australia’s PD we are left with a mixture of often worthy activities, sometimes spectacular events, such as the representational orgy around Sydney’s hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games and the more recent exhibition in Shanghai, and many smaller scale initiatives that will always be vulnerable to budget cuts, should nervous politicians ever have to start quantifying successes and measuring according to KPIs – one of the problems bedeviling adventures in PD.

A conference on PD held in Canberra in June this year conveyed excitement, yet arrived at a frustrated set of conclusions consistent with the findings of the 2007 Senate Committee. There is a real appetite for the phenomenon and potential of PD; we have in fact managed to do it well occasionally, as in the Colombo Plan, but we need to be more committed and better resourced if we are going to be brave and bold in this field.\textsuperscript{12}

Turning to India, there is something special about the way in which Indian authorities blend India’s trajectory in world affairs with India’s embrace of communications technology. Dr Sashi Tharoor, member of the Lok Sabha has said that it is most fitting that India, an IT powerhouse, make maximum use of social media to inform the Indian public of India’s interests and activities in the world. The official web-sites for Indian public diplomacy also emphasize India’s booming technology sector and the country’s largest English-speaking population in the world as jumping points for venturing into this mode of diplomacy and as scene-setting for India’s rising international standing.\textsuperscript{13} More traditional publications such as the annual collection of documents, \textit{India’s Foreign Relations}, build further the feeling of international take-off by detailing India’s spectacular economic growth, its technological and communications successes and its ongoing efforts to address problems of global dimensions, including the developmental needs of other nations, attempts to mitigate climate change and policy around the use of energy resources.\textsuperscript{14}

Amidst what is an admirable air of excitement there is also an elusive quality about the scope of the Ministry’s involvement in PD. In saying that ‘public diplomacy activities often present many differing views as represented by private individuals and organizations in addition to official Government views and positions’\textsuperscript{15} there is a suggestion of partial and sliding-scale agency. In other words, there might be ministerial facilitation of projects that then run independently, but equally, there might be ministerial noting other goings on if and when the department learns of them. There is not much historical content in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs’ (MEA) PD messages, which are arguably directed internally, at Indians, as much as externally, and are set to expand with a new focus on Indian diasporas overseas. This is a very exciting and very logical direction of PD expansion for India, given the size and public prominence of India diasporas in countries such as England, the United States and even Australia. Other nations, including Australia, might build into their own planning for PD the greater use of immigrant populations in broadening knowledge about host nations. In Australia’s case, perhaps even the radical suggestion of refugee blogging might act as a source of information in countries of origin that counters myths and smugglers’ tales about Australia.
In India, alongside the social media, the PD Division of MEA has a robust set of publications, seminars and conferences, distinguished lecture series and visitors program. For historical content, one needs to turn towards the 61-year old Indian Council for Cultural Relations, the mission of which is to help shape India’s external relations, foster mutual understanding between India and other countries, and promote cultural exchanges.\textsuperscript{16} The gap between MEA activity and the Council is a pronounced one, and from the perspective of a historian, an unfortunately big one. MEA is the face of exciting ‘new’ public diplomacy, and the Council’s work has a feeling of venerable ‘older’ forms of Indian projections into the world. In addition to exchanges, the Council sponsors festivals, prizes and other activities, but in look and feel seems to work at some remove from the immediacy attaching to the new wave of PD.

I am under-qualified to comment on the social media phenomenon at length, but it strikes me that the use of blogs, Twitter, YouTube, facebook and the greater capacity offered by Web 2.0 is tremendously exciting, not least for what is yet to come in relation to advances in easy translation between languages and so on. Some of this new wave communications thinking also throws into sharp relief this tension between longer burn and short-term messages. Marshall McLuhan, whose work is being revisited of late, 100 years after his birth, was renowned for his prescience about the likely impact of the postwar communications revolution of the late 20th century on human behavior and modes of thinking. His term ‘the global village’ is well known and even de rigeur; but one of his other truisms, ‘the medium is the message’, inflects some of the claims made for public diplomacy. Without digressing too far in a McLuhan direction, his explanatory remark (in 1964) that it is the ‘medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’ sometimes seems under-recognised in the enthusiasm for tweeting, blogging and other social media – but there will be others who have greater expertise on this score.\textsuperscript{17} Both the diversity and potential growth of PD in social media will logically continue to attract a lot of attention.

At some point we need to return to Bruce Gregory’s key verbs that lie at the heart of public diplomacy - understand, build, manage, influence - while anticipating the expanding role of social media in PD – its edginess and immediacy clearly captures a broad and younger audience; and if not used, it has the potential to work against the promotion of curiosity, messages of pluralism and accurate understandings of government ventures. But the trick is to avoid ending up with something that resembles Tony Blair speak – a lot of fine sounding principles without any strong verbs or senses of agency and responsibility.

Therein lies the creative tension. One of Simon Anholt’s strongest contentions - that national reputations are hard-won and often slow to change - frames the same concern.\textsuperscript{18} The tension between increased attentiveness to message and image, and increased speed of communications, on the one hand, and the need to nurture a steadiness of standing or reputation on the other is a potentially productive one. From both viewpoints, the immediacy of one billion smart phones and the longer haul idea of reputation, governments should logically be involved. The confluence of globalised communications with multiple sources of cultural projection means that governments (at least governments in democracies) will never completely control national images, but they vacate this field at their peril. Although as yet the story is a young one of fits and starts, there is a capacity and at least signs of willingness by Australian and Indian governments to be pro-active, to cultivate a sense of popular public voice in diplomats, and to embrace the activities of non-government organizations in a manner that is more relaxed but with appropriate governance (both Australian and Indian governments have used the word ‘system’ to describe how such co-ordination might be better work, but, with the exception of analysis of electronic information, I’m not convinced that system is the right word). Speaking as a historian, I’m hoping that we and colleagues from other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have a role to play in this creative tension. I’m conscious of the efforts of particular groups, including Australian Studies organizations...
overseas that have maintained a base for fruitful exchanges, joint research and cultural diplomacy – and I’ve benefited from being involved in these endeavors myself – but they will probably only play a small role in efforts to represent values at a popular level.

I’m not alone as an historian wrestling with our possible roles in relation to PD. Historian-public diplomacy expert Nick Cull, who offered those observations on what Australians might do, has started to compile historical case studies in public diplomacy, lessons of what worked and what didn’t, and he calls for more, so that we end up with a ‘Public Diplomacy Playbook’ as a next-phase capacity builder.¹⁹ I’m keen to support him in this, and my own work on Australia’s contributions to the Colombo Plan hopefully provides useful additions. In Marshall McLuhan’s terms, the Colombo Plan stories also reinforce the need to include the ‘medium’ as well as the message in the field of inquiry. One of the conclusions we have to draw in relation to the Colombo Plan is that its success, at the time, and its subsequent inscription in the memories of most Australians owed much to the growth of an information bureaucracy born in the Second World War, and transformed in the 1950s and 1960s into one partly preoccupied with the Cold War but also one tasked with generating positive images about immigration as a vital stage of Australia’s postwar development, and images designed to build bridges of cautious engagement with the elites of postcolonial Asia. It wasn’t an innocent medium for messages about Asia, but it was an important one.

In all of this history advocacy there is a risk that I’m naïve. It might be that some of the most successful bridges of understanding that provide for longer term building, managing and influencing work by avoiding history. At the height of the Cold War the Americans opened a remarkable exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art called ‘The Family of Man’, featuring more than 500 photographs taken by professional and amateur photographers from around the world, including the Soviet Union, and celebrating the glorious diversity of human life. Although criticized famously by Roland Barthes in his book Mythologies for its lack of historical context, this was arguably also what made it successful and capable of touring widely, including to Moscow – the avoidance of a nation-centred narrative that would inevitably lead to contest.²⁰ Core values were not so much absent as stripped right back to the implied universal humanism in the stories that lay behind the photographs.

I think there’s a middle path here for historians in PD that enables us a role in case-study playbooks and also in the content of PD. I’d like to resist one conclusion that you might draw from Anholt – that it is old fashioned nation-making narratives that have to most popular pull - not so much because that is what sometimes needs leaving out, as my Cold War photographic exhibition example suggests, but because I think we as a discipline are in a different, boundary-crossing space now, and I think we can cross boundaries and address popular audiences at the same time.

We should be able to tell good stories, whatever our predilections and methods. In fact, Australia’s recently retired Ambassador to China, Geoff Raby put it simply when he said that the Chinese elite would come if we had interesting stories to tell.²¹ He was reflecting on writers’ festivals, and so a broader range of narratives than merely histories, but we should be able to follow his lead and take this also to a level of popular engagement, if our stories are interesting enough.
This paper formed the basis of a Tiffin Talk delivered at the Australia India Institute, Melbourne, 17 August 2011. I'm grateful for listener's feedback.

3 See the Australian Policy and History Network – http://www.aph.org.au


8 David Lowe, Canberra’s Colombo Plan: Public Images of Australia’s Relations with Post-Colonial South and Southeast Asia in the 1950s, South Asia, vol. XXV, no. 2, August 2002, pp. 183-204


12 A Forum on Public and Citizen Diplomacy, Australian National University, Canberra, 6-7 June 2011.


15 http://indidiplomacy.in/AboutUs.aspx, accessed, 10 August 2011


21 Jocelyn Chey, ‘Cultural Diplomacy and Australia-China Relations,’ AIA NSW Branch Charteris Lecture, 20 July 2010, p. 21