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Public Diplomacy and Branding: A Clarification [1]

I'd like to respond to Simon Anholt's remarks on my previous post about "branding" as a defining discourse for public diplomacy. Anholt seizes on what I feel is a very real and lingering confusion surrounding the term and its relevance for public diplomacy. He reminds us that we should not confuse branding campaigns with the "nation-brand." To be clear, it was not my intention to suggest that Anholt advocated commercial-style promotional campaigns as public diplomacy. I brought up Anholt's work because it was instrumental in bringing the term "brand" into contemporary rethinking of public diplomacy. The "brand" is an alternative way to orient thinking around how a nation is perceived.

I argue that corporate-driven branding strategies may be a mixed bag at best. Anholt also points out that branding is not a ready prescription for public diplomacy. Essentially, no contrived marketing-style intervention can compete with the inertia of a nation-brand that has built up over time, reflecting perceptions of policies and culture that have incubated for many years. Nevertheless, why is "branding" so compelling a term for foreign policy?

To set the record straight, I'd like to clarify my understanding the term "brand" in current public diplomacy debates. I offer here a tentative list of definitions:

1. The Brand as research construct. The term "brand" stands in for a measure of national representation or perception of views about a nation. It reflects observations about how the United States is viewed, packaged into the "brand" as a dependent variable.

2. Branding as a set of policies. This usage suggests the United States actively "sell" its image and reputation in a persuasive message campaign. The term suggests methods similar to commercial marketing techniques to shore up the image or views of U.S. policy. As some have argued, if international relations is increasingly a "market" for identification, then branding strategies are the logical evolution for U.S. foreign policy.

3. Branding as a representational metaphor. Branding in this usage describes what functions as public diplomacy -- both in policy and in the flow of cultural communication. Branding captures how the United States is communicated -- both in its cultural exports and in the de facto rhetoric of its foreign policies. The term is useful because it expands the domain of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy as branding assigns roles to communicators and audiences, while providing a policy objective (like "brand" identification).

I am sure there are other ways the term is used. More generally, I think the term "branding" has achieved some currency in public diplomacy circles for two basic reasons. First, current programs are not proving to be very effective. Second, policy-makers seek compelling terminologies less charged than "propaganda," but that invite an expectation of something

that will work. When one uses the term "branding" in conjunction with public diplomacy, it conveys a competence well established in effective business practice. Branding-talk represents a break with the past, that builds upon successful business enterprise. It is no wonder that such terminology was rampant in the wake of the dot-com boom in 2001.

Of course when layered onto discussions of actual public diplomacy policy -- branding does not offer ready policy answers. The history of American public diplomacy is littered with examples where commercial-style interventions failed to impact the pressing needs of U.S. foreign policy. Government coordination of messages coming from the U.S. in a brand management-style effort ultimately smacks of propaganda.

If anything, the re-introduction of "branding" into discussions of how to reinvent U.S. public diplomacy can be useful if such talk provokes serious debate about how communication is central to the success of foreign policy. Thinking about branding shakes up conceptions of how to communicate, and what actors or actions communicate for the United States. I think this view contrasts somewhat with Anholt's observations:

> [M]y belief and my experience are that national image is formed over the very long term by national behaviour, not by communications, and it can only be changed over the very long term by changed national behaviour

Yes. Actions (like the U.S. invasion of Iraq or its avoidance of the Israel/Palestine issue) do communicate and bear long-term rhetorical consequences. They convey the motivations and designs that in turn shape how the U.S. is perceived. But policies are not the sole communicants for U.S. public diplomacy. In the absence of foreign policy change, should the U.S. abandon other modes of communication altogether?

Global communication flows, the spread of cultural products, diasporic media, and obviously the internet complicate public diplomacy's playing field. The globalization of media technologies means that the U.S. "message" is increasingly difficult to manage, let alone track. Despite this, social movements and even terrorist groups have capitalized on new communication forms to galvanize opinion change quickly. This communications environment merits new debate on who or what communicates for the U.S. and how certain communication modes are persuasive.

If the subject of branding opens up debate on existing conceptions of international broadcasting and cultural diplomacy, then it has served a good purpose. Public diplomacy requires a vigorous round of new policy imagination. If branding-talk brings text and video blogging, virtual worlds, and innovative business initiatives up for consideration, it is a helpful trend. My lingering concern is that branding as a commercial set of activities cannot define public diplomacy. Nor should the ethics of branding practice guide the norms of foreign policy in general. Not only will such branding not work, it denigrates whatever we call the "brand" itself.