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Foreign Correspondents and Public Diplomacy: An Understudied Relationship ^[1]

Although public diplomats and nation branding consultants agree that the media — understood as both communication technologies and content-creating organizations — are central to the practice of soft power, it is striking that they usually describe the media as mere “vehicles” useful to “talk to other governments and publics” as well as to disseminate positive images of cities, regions and nations.

These perspectives were in fact voiced in the last edition of the Global Soft Power Summit in London, which gathered more than five hundred politicians, diplomats, communication strategists, academics and journalists. Several panels focused on how sustainability, sports, commercial brands and even the media can enhance soft power, speakers stressed that international broadcasters such as BBC World were essential in “communicating our values,” and that digital platforms like TikTok or Instagram were powerful tools that could reshape the overseas perception of a nation. That was, for instance, the view of vlogger Nuseir Yassin,

who noted how influencers have been hired by governments around the world in order to attract tourists, investors and highly qualified migrants (see for example the cases of China, Egypt or Saudi Arabia).

A few panellists suggested, however, a more complicated picture. One speaker accused Western news organizations of creating “distorted” images of specific nation-states, while Scottish broadcaster Andrew Neil and Italian Foreign Correspondent Deborah Bonetti stressed that, unlike influencers, journalists should not assist governments in improving the images of nations or cities. According to Neil, doing so would be mere “propaganda.”

At the core of these tensions lies an understudied relationship between public diplomacy and the media, especially news media. That relationship has been a topic of discussion in this blog before, with Simon Anholt and Professor Nick Cull asking in their podcast *People, Places, Power* whether the media were friends or foes of country image.

My answer to that question is that the media can be both. In a recently published article in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, I examined the relationship between soft power initiatives in Brazil and a specific set of media professionals: foreign correspondents. I focused on foreign correspondents because, although international broadcasters are considered a key component of public diplomacy, cases such as Deutsche Welle, Radio France International or Voice of America are the exception rather than the rule. Many countries around the world, including Brazil, actually depend on persuading foreign journalists to receive a (hopefully positive) global news coverage.

The experiences and views of foreign correspondents confirm that public diplomats, branding consultants and academics should move “beyond a conceptualization of media as mere vehicles for message delivery.” Conversely, they should acknowledge — and further theorize — that the media can reject, embrace or filter soft power initiatives.

In my interviews with foreign correspondents, I identified that these journalists have a shifting and ambivalent relationship with public diplomacy and nation branding. I proposed three modes to better understand this relationship: 1) challenging soft power, 2) aligning with soft power, and 3) filtering soft power.

The first mode, *challenging soft power*, refers to the fact that foreign correspondents hold that public diplomacy, nation branding and similar initiatives are — echoing what I heard in the Global Soft Power Summit in London — simply public relations or propaganda. These journalists therefore claimed to antagonize country images on the grounds that these were “government spin” that opposed journalistic independence and objectivity. Other journalists added that the work of public diplomats and branding consultants was ineffective, because it did not provide news. As one foreign correspondent told me, “We were taken on city tours, which were interesting, but I can’t imagine any journalist finding that really valuable in terms of

going on to write something.”

Despite the above claims, journalists can sometimes be “friends” of country images. As the second mode notes, foreign correspondents occasionally *align* with public diplomacy and nation branding. For example, overseas journalists echoed the work of local authorities in using economic performance as the main standard to measure Brazil’s worth, stressing stories about growth and investment. As one reporter told me, Brazil was “primarily an economic story.” Journalists also highlighted “human interest stories,” such as the humble origins of Brazilian President Lula da Silva. The personal story of Lula was also a component of this nation’s soft power efforts, with a feature film indirectly supported by the Brazilian authorities that was unsuccessfully submitted to compete in the 2011 Oscars in the category of Best Foreign Language.

The relationship between foreign correspondents and public diplomacy can however be more ambivalent. As the third and final mode shows, journalists may *filter* elements of country images, choosing those that align with the agendas of news organizations. More concretely, foreign correspondents often “domesticate” news, highlighting or downplaying aspects to fit with the interests of readers and viewers. For instance, a European freelancer told me that he avoided reporting about the São Paulo LGBTQ Pride Parade when working for Muslim news organizations, even though this parade is one of the biggest LGBTQ events in the world. At the same time, he steered clear of stories about crime and violence for East Asian readers, even though these stories have tarnished Brazil’s image for years 📄. Additionally, foreign correspondents tend to look at countries through the prism of global storylines, that is, frames “into which a journalist can place seemingly random events and give them coherence.” Examples of global storylines are the Cold War, the War on Terror or more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. As I found out in the interviews, these storylines may sometimes benefit a country’s image, as when reports about the 2007–2008 financial crisis stressed Brazil’s strong economic performance. Others may however shed light on less positive aspects, such as when Brazil was used to illustrate global waves of middle-class unrest or populism.

The experiences and views of foreign correspondents confirm that public diplomats, branding consultants and academics should move “beyond a conceptualization of media as mere vehicles for message delivery.” Conversely, they should acknowledge — and further theorize — that the media can reject, embrace or filter soft power initiatives. The media are consequently not simply *vehicles* through which positive messages can be disseminated, but ambivalent *actors* capable of communicating their own versions of countries, cities or regions.
