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Applying “Negative Watch” To Measure Soft Power Loss ^[1]

Recently, a friend used a beautiful metaphor to describe a key discursive challenge for nations when engaging in public diplomacy: “It’s like when they stand on the prow of a ship, oblivious of the leaking holes in the ship’s hull, and say, ‘Look! Look at that beautiful island, straight ahead!’”

The metaphor is relevant, given contemporary challenges to the field. In the post-Cold War era, public diplomacy has emphasised epistemology and frameworks examining the acquisition of credible, attractive, and national reputations, epitomised by Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power. Nation branding, affiliated with marketing, focuses on enhancing a nation’s competitive identity. Metaphorically speaking, both emphasize the pursuit of blue skies and beautiful islands.

But as Nicholas Cull notes, a nation’s reputational security requires examining not only its reputational strengths but also its weaknesses. To return to our metaphor, the ship will never make landfall if we do not identify all the leaks in time.

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As a field, public diplomacy largely lacks frameworks for measuring soft power loss. Inducing soft power loss is a key tactic in contemporary adversarial playbooks, with a constellation of misinformation, disinformation, and influence operations – an evolving set of conceptual vocabularies in and of itself – contributing to accelerated soft power loss. It is vital, therefore, to develop a complementary vocabulary for understanding how states lose soft power, and what happens when they do.

Perhaps, investment terminology can be useful. “Negative watch” is a status assigned by credit rating agencies to companies when lowering their credit ratings. Yes, a nation is different from a company—there is no one visible or invisible hand that can unilaterally raise or lower a country’s reputational security rating—but the central principles of curtailed credibility and agency apply.

In the first of a series of publications setting forward a conceptual vocabulary for measuring soft power loss, I argue that by consistently losing credibility, and therefore, soft power, a nation can earn a place on a reputational “negative watch.”

Applying the term, a country on “negative watch” could be perceived as politically unstable, economically weak, often ruled by an unfriendly autocrat, intolerant of dissent. The hypothetical country does little to protect the rights of children, women, and minorities. Its

people are represented in stereotypical roles, seen as engaging in stereotypical activities, often with associations of violence. People lionized within international media narratives about the country, considered as “valuable bodies,” are likely to be dissidents, an implicit, unfavourable judgement of the nation’s governance systems.

Four factors mediate the process: *the watcher, the watched, the platform, and the audience*. In contrast to the post-Cold War world, now, there are many watchers, many platforms, competing for audiences over the right strategic narrative about a “watched” entity. Persuading allies and adversaries of the superiority of one’s culture, values, and policies, is much more complicated.

Russia, China, Iran might be seen as the usual suspects on negative watch. But it’s not that straightforward anymore. Political and economic instability is on the rise globally. Furthermore, the West is no longer the dominant “watcher.” Can traditional soft power giants afford to assume they are shielded indefinitely from being on negative watch?

We cannot protect ourselves against what we cannot see clearly. And we cannot clearly see what have not named and defined. It is, therefore, imperative, that public diplomacy scholars continue to expand on an epistemology of soft power loss.
