

# From Propaganda to Reputational Security: An Intellectual Journey around the role of media in international relations

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## Abstract

In this invited essay Nicholas J. Cull considers his career journey exploring the intersection of media and foreign policy, beginning with his first contact with ideas of propaganda and political communication. It continues with exposure to the historical study of propaganda and international relations at the University of Leeds, charting influences and key ideas. His thesis/first book research on Britain's attempt to draw the United States into World War Two before Pearl Harbor emphasized effective approaches to political communication other than the hard sell. Britain's wartime approach prefigured approaches of the United States Information Agency during the Cold War which became Cull's second major research project. Cull discusses the evolution of his work during the expansion of the public diplomacy field in the years following 9/11. Milestones include his articulation of a five-element description of public diplomacy with an emphasis on listening, and a more recent repositioning of Soft Power as Reputational Security, which goes beyond the usual emphasis on accentuating the positives of a nation's culture and values, to call for the active elimination of unattractive realities.

**Keywords:** Public Diplomacy, History, Historiography, Reputational Security, Autobiography

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In 2016, the renowned Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells published a wide-ranging essay which pulled together the diverse stands of his publications across half a century of academic output. He produced a coherent picture of his intellectual journey, focusing on the theme of creating a sociology of power (Castells, 2016). Challenged to attempt a similar exercise by the editor of this journal I accepted despite having achieved nothing like Castells' level of significance. I offer my own journey in the hope that it might help document the dynamics of the field, underline particular insights and that perhaps something in my experience might be of value to an emerging scholar. The process of telling the story has surprised me in some ways. It is only seeing my career-so-far set out in this way that I can see how thematically consistent I have been despite eclectic and multidisciplinary influences. I am also struck by the presence of both journalists and diplomats as mentors and interlocutors and by demand from the government as a pull-factor in setting my scholarly priorities. I hope something here resonates with a reader or that a reference included here sparks further investigation—for that is how fields grow. If so, the ink has not been wasted.

## **Foundations**

My enduring interest in issues of propaganda and its better-behaved cousin public diplomacy was not born in a lecture hall or library but, like so many important things in life, came from home. I was lucky growing up to have many older family members who regularly spoke about politics, their experience of the world and the events of Britain's recent past, most especially the world wars. It soon became clear to me that there was a gap between their perspective and the version of events presented in the press and Hollywood films. Even as I began to realize that the cultural artifacts of mass persuasion were partial and manipulative, I enjoyed their tug on my imagination, preferring to watch old wartime propaganda films on BBC Two to the live sport on BBC One on a Saturday afternoon. More than this, on Sunday mornings, I enjoyed being carried along by the music, ritual and theatrical language of the Church of England.

My sense of the power of the human dimension of international relations was fed by powerful early experiences crossing international boundaries. When visiting Denmark for many of my teenage summers I met young people my own age and found national origin no barrier to friendship. I think the best cultural diplomat I ever met was our host, a Danish farmer's wife named Vibbs Therkelsen describing her country and its ways to guests at her farmhouse holiday business. At school in the early 1980s we had a formal visit from a party of students from the Soviet Union and found them more similar to us than the geopolitical gulf of the era suggested. They were a little startled that we were so keen to discuss politics and so readily critical of our own country. The UN also played a role. My school decided to actively participate in the UN's International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 by organizing a mountain activity holiday for intellectually disabled children staffed by pupils. My participation in this was another example of the power of personal contact to bridge divides, and it became an especially important experience in later years when my second son arrived

with the same difficulties as the kids I'd got to know on that trip and its reiteration the following year (Cull, 2020). I was touched by US public diplomacy only in passing. In 1976, I attended the special bicentennial exhibition mounted by the Royal Maritime Museum Greenwich which was mounted with US government help and I picked up United States Information Agency pamphlets on US history in the process. I included the scene in passing in my history of USIA in the Cold War like a Hitchcock cameo.

Not all early lessons pointed towards harmony. The election of Margaret Thatcher had attendant lessons in political propaganda. Witnessing the first British election campaign to be run with the techniques of commercial advertising and the phenomenon of working people rallying to vote against their class interest and habits of a lifetime made its mark. I was also much affected by the Falklands/Malvinas war of 1982. I saw jingoism run wild in the tabloid press. More subtle messages came from my habit of listening to the radio until deep into the night. I remember listening to *Today in Parliament* on BBC Radio 4 and hearing all sides in the House of Commons bellowing for war with Argentina and then – after the close of domestic programming for the night – listening on to the broadcasts prepared for international audiences on the BBC World Service which used Radio 4's frequency overnight, and hearing a version of the news which emphasized Britain's attempts to achieve a diplomatic solution in the UN. I even tried anti-Thatcher propaganda myself, writing a parody of the witches' cauldron scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where Conservative Party grandees tossed various broken elements of Tory British life into a cauldron to summon the lady herself. It won a prize from the county.

As secondary school (a Church of England comprehensive) progressed exposure to political writing became more systematic. George Orwell and the poets of the Great War were influential elements of the curriculum. In wider study I remember being struck by both the achievements and malleability of ordinary people. My history teacher, Angela Doublet (now Mayne) lent me a copy of Richard Grunberger's classic *Social History of the Third Reich* (Grunberger, 1971). Grunberger's chapter on jokes was especially impactful suggesting humor could act as a safety valve in the worst circumstances and subvert the most oppressive regime. I was also much attached to the school library's copy of Walter Laqueur's book *Guerilla: A Historical and Critical Study* (Laqueur, 1977) in which propaganda was presented as an important tool of insurgent warfare.

We had guest speakers at school who suggested that individuals could play an active role in foreign policy. A speaker from the African National Congress – a white exile named Roger – made the case for boycotts and protest to push back against racism in South Africa; a charismatic former soldier named Brigadier Michael Harbottle – a veteran of both World War Two and peacekeeping in Cyprus – outlined the potential for what he termed 'peace building': a process which incorporated what would now be termed Track Two diplomacy. He went on to head Generals for Peace and Disarmament and argued for détente with the Soviet military leadership. Interestingly, Harbottle is today seen by some historians as an agent of Soviet influence, witting or unwitting (Selvage, 2021).

The mechanics of cultural production were opened to us in a variety of ways. We had a visit to the *Guardian* to see how newspapers were made, and a special multi-school session introducing US cultural history through multi-disciplinary methods, which was a kind of license to mix and match. A session during which a speaker analyzed a single scene from the post-war classic *Best Years of our Lives* has stuck with me especially. This might all seem like a foundation class in understanding propaganda but to be honest the biggest lesson in the power of propaganda came through our experience of the hard sell of religion, and the slow awakening to the gap between appearance and reality. It was visible at the time but became dramatic in later years as we learned that the school's deputy head – a priest and teacher – was jailed for child abuse.

## Leeds

My school grades were not stellar, but I did well enough to secure a place at Leeds University where a group of scholars from the pioneering international history program at the London School of Economics, led by David Dilks, had set up a lively undergraduate degree within the history department called International History and Politics (IHP). At a time when many degrees were eclectic, IHP was wonderfully focused, and brought foundational work in history and politics together to develop an in-depth understanding of the working of the international system. The origins of European Imperialism and of the two world wars became subjects of particular fascination, more especially as the history department had also developed a specialization in the history of propaganda. Their key figure was a Hungarian refugee scholar named Nicholas Pronay, who had the distinction of having worked with the father of British documentary film: John Grierson. Though trained as a medievalist, Pronay diversified and developed a terrific class called Communication and Politics in the Twentieth Century which initiated many of the students who came to study the white magic of conventional diplomacy into the dark arts of propaganda.

By the time I joined Leeds, one of the first generation of students mentored by Pronay – Philip M. Taylor – had progressed through bachelor's and PhD work in the school to a faculty position. Phil Taylor's book, *The Projection of Britain*, (Taylor, 1981) was an exemplary work in the historical treatment of propaganda and together with his study co-written with Michael Sanders: *British Propaganda in the First World War* (Sanders and Taylor, 1982) set my own research in motion. While many historians looked at the elements in a culture and sought to determine what might be considered politically manipulative, Phil tackled the 'supply side' and looked at the policy structure behind government outreach to international publics. *The Projection of Britain* included accounts of the origins of the British Council and the BBC's overseas services, institutions which introduced a more democratic approach to the business of international projection and could be considered a foundational moment of public diplomacy.

The historical study of propaganda exemplified at Leeds by Pronay and Taylor was supported more broadly by a wider group of scholars who were part of the International

Association for Media and History (IAMHIST). IAMHIST had been meeting at biennial conferences since the 1970s and operated a terrific journal: the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. In April 1985 I attended a IAMHIST conference at the Imperial War Museum in London. Hearing scholars like David Culbert of Louisiana State University present on US army censorship in World War Two or David W. Ellwood speak on the allied occupation of Italy was one of my ‘kid in a candy store’ moments of feeling there was a whole world of ideas and authors to enjoy.

The degree at Leeds – like most British history degrees of the era – required a piece of personal research. My poor foreign language performance compelled me to focus on an Anglo-American topic, and our international politics tutor Owen Hartley suggested that I look at the career of Lord Halifax as British ambassador to the US during World War Two. Digging around I found that at that time Halifax lacked a modern biographer, had untapped manuscript diaries and there were surviving people from his embassy to interview if I was brave enough to ask. There was also a fascinating story to tell. As a potential rival to Churchill, the Prime Minister had packed Foreign Secretary Halifax off to the Washington embassy to woo the neutral United States towards greater support for the British war effort. The aloof Halifax initially irritated Americans and his rehabilitation into a diplomatic asset required all kinds of careful presentation. As I dug I encountered the public dimension of diplomacy. The research methods were exciting. Archives gave me access to hitherto unseen insights from the past and I found survivors of the period happy to talk. Remarkably, the former head of the Foreign Office – Lord Inchyra – hosted me to tea on his Scottish estate and the great philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin – who had generated political reports for the Halifax embassy – was happy to recount his experience of the era in an interview held at All Souls College, Oxford. I published the thesis some years later (Cull, 2009). I had caught the research bug and was determined to go straight to a PhD and – under Phil Taylor’s supervision – explore the wider story of Britain’s attempts to draw the US into World War Two. I felt it was a great subject for a PhD. Fortunately, the British Academy agreed and provided the necessary funding.

## **PhD research**

I began my PhD rather like an alchemist convinced that I might find a way to convert the base metal of unshaped public feeling into the gold of public action. One of the arcs of my career has been my becoming increasingly dubious that publics are so malleable or that attempting such manipulation is a good idea because of the unintended consequences when people reacted against an awareness of their previous manipulation: the boy who cried wolf writ large. Such insights lay ahead. Lesson one was the value of restraint as my PhD turned out to be an ideal vehicle to examine the transformation of crude propaganda into the more nuanced form of public diplomacy. The two foundational facts of Britain’s approach to US public opinion in the war were firstly, that Britain could not hope to win the war without US support and secondly, that an overt propaganda campaign of the kind used to counter US

neutrality in the Great War would be counter-productive. To get round this the British developed a more subtle approach that included the cultivation of American journalists and proxy voices on Britain's behalf, the use of radio and cinematic narratives to build feeling to the British cause, and a program of intense listening to US public opinion through the study of the press (Isaiah Berlin's niche) which created political reports which the US government itself considered required reading. I also found stories of excess as freewheeling British intelligence operatives variously bugged phones, faked anti-Nazi documents and manipulated opinion polls to boost Britain's case. How often the best and worst methods are twinned in a single cause.

Completing my thesis required that I plunge into American archives. After a string of rejections from Fulbright and other funders I was fortunate to be chosen by the Commonwealth Fund of New York, to be a Harkness Fellow. The fellowship had an important track record of building the human infrastructure of Anglo-American relations as a reverse of the Rhodes Scholar experience. Important fellows of previous years included Alistair Cooke, whose weekly *Letter from America* broadcasts had introduced two generations of British radio listeners to US culture and politics. I selected Princeton University as the home for my studies.

## Princeton

Princeton initially seemed like a mixed blessing. I was able to continue my research, and was especially glad to be able to talk to the surviving Murrow Boys – the pioneering US radio journalists who covered the London Blitz – but the graduate history program emphasized early modern social history over recent political history. Individual junior faculty members like Sinologist Arthur Waldron, Balkan expert Mark Mazower or South Africanist Robert Shell filled the gap with informal conversation, and my fellow students, most especially David Armitage and Ben Alpers, were provocative interlocutors. I took a helpful class on interpretations of the Vietnam War taught by the historical opponent of the war, Richard Falk, in the public policy school. One of the most interesting things Falk passed my way to read was a master's thesis by an army officer who had graduated the previous year named David Petraeus. Other authors whose work resonated included Gloria Emerson – author of the award-winning book *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, And Ruins From the Vietnam War* (Emerson, 1976) – who attended the class as a speaker and became a friend. My essay for Falk's class – never, I think, completed – considered US government propaganda around Vietnam. It introduced me to terms like public diplomacy and counter insurgency and names like Barry Zorthian (coordinator of the US government's media effort during the height of the Vietnam conflict). It was the first step towards my book on the history of the United States Information Agency.

Two formative experiences at Princeton which proved unexpectedly helpful was having the opportunity to work as a research assistant and to teach. Both took me inside the creation and delivery of scholarship in a new way. As a researcher I worked for three people each of

whom shaped my work: Harold Evans, a hero of British journalism who had relocated to New York as a publisher and needed materials on US political history for his epic book *The American Century* (Evans, 1998); Fred Inglis a great British scholar of culture and politics whose book *The Cruel Peace* (Inglis, 1991) was one of the first attempts at a treatment of the entire Cold War and for which I helped provide illustrations. I also did a little research for Gloria Emerson but my assistance to her work was minimal compared to her nurturing of mine. When my fellowship ran out she invited me to live at her house rent free. She persuaded one of her former students to work on my writing and help me transform my thesis into a readable book. She taught so many lessons about integrity and questioning received wisdom which had become a reflex for her in her own work. I dedicated my first book – *Selling War: British Propaganda and American Neutrality in World War II* – to her (Cull, 1995).

At this same time I also developed through teaching. First, I was a preceptor (Princeton-speak for teaching assistant) for diplomatic historian Richard D. Challener, whose survey of US foreign policy history included many provocative texts including Michael Hunt's writing on the role of ideology in US foreign policy and John Gaddis's post-revisionist work on the Cold War. In later semesters I moved over to East Asian studies to work with Arthur Waldron and Sheldon Garron, where I survived by reading a week ahead of the students. The teaching work helped me extend my Harkness fellowship. When my fellowship ended, I had nine months on the dole back in Britain, living the reverse culture shock that figures in so many studies of exchange experiences. I used the time to complete my writing up and begin looking for an academic job. After multiple rejections – diplomatic history was not in fashion – I opted to return to the US where a sudden demand for an unusual guest lecturer's course had left the Religion Department in dire need of help. The class was 'Understanding Native American Religion' to be taught by David Carrasco who was visiting from University of Denver. He soon joined the faculty at Princeton fulltime. With a room at Gloria Emerson's house to live in, a return to Princeton became viable. The class was a crash course in thinking about culture and preparing to teach it was rather like a second graduate degree, which opened all kinds of concepts that have helped the cultural aspects my diplomatic studies, most especially the sustained exploration of ideas of gift exchange begun in the work of Marcel Mauss (Mauss, 1954). Reading multiple ethnographies and thick descriptions of cultural practices also helped. David remained a mentor and it was a pleasure to work with him on reissuing a documentary film about the treatment of undocumented Mexican migration (Cull and Carrasco eds, 2004). That project was helpful in directing my attention to informal international exchanges and diasporas.

The Religion Department was sufficiently pleased with my performance to keep me on as an assistant to one of Princeton's stars, Cornell West. His introduction to African American studies helped me take my approach to things American beyond issues of foreign policy and into issues of race. Offering potential employers back in the UK both US foreign policy and African American studies proved a winning combination. I secured a one-year post in American Studies at the University of Birmingham.

## Birmingham

Birmingham proved a wonderful location for me. The outgoing head of school was a remarkable Professor named John Grenville who came to the UK as one of the Kindertransport refugees from Nazi Germany. I learned that it was he who had kick started propaganda studies at Leeds and hired Nicholas Pronay. He had also studied in the US as a Harkness Fellow. He was a living reminder that propaganda had consequences for good or ill. He championed my cause and one Birmingham year became five. Meanwhile my involvement in the International Association for Media and History gathered pace. I took on book reviewing duties for the journal and gained much from their conferences. IAMHIST provided a meeting point between academics and practitioners, extending what had been part of my research into my standard way of operating. Influential IAMIST members included Christine Whittaker and Jerry Kuehl, both of whom had raised the standard of historical documentaries on British television and Michael Nelson, former general manager of Reuters, who was working on his great history of international broadcasting during the Cold War (Nelson, 1997). IAMHIST encouraged international collaborations and in that spirit I found myself editing special issues of journals and eventually the ABC Clio *Historical Encyclopedia of Propaganda and Mass Persuasion* along with IAMHIST stalwarts David Culbert and David Welch (Cull, Culbert and Welch eds, 2003). I also did much work exploring the interplay of audio-visual media and history. My priority was always to consider what a text told you about the time it was made rather than the moment depicted, and I enjoyed writing about films like *Titanic* or *Saving Private Ryan* as evidence for 1997 and 1998 rather than 1912 or 1944. Early in my time at Birmingham my first book appeared: published by Oxford University Press out of New York City (Cull, 1995). It was well received for an academic book, but the nice reviews are never enough to assuage the post-partum depression common to authors who imagine all kinds of fireworks and fanfares in their fantasies of completion. The anti-climax became a spur to the next project.

At Birmingham I began working on my second book: the history of the United States Information Agency. I initially imagined a fairly quick book focused on the role of public diplomacy in the great crises of the Cold War, but once I made contact with the archives and practitioners of the period it became clear that what was really important in public diplomacy was built up over years and could not be evaluated during a few frenzied days around the Cuban Missile Crisis or KAL 007 shootdown. Exchange programs and credible news are essential tools of democratic outreach but require time to build. In fact, I came to understand that one of the enduring flaws of US public diplomacy is that Congress is most interested in funding it during times of crisis. I decided to make my book comprehensive, like a map covering an entire country, so that other scholars could more easily jump in to cover US engagement with a particular region or using a particular tool or around a specific theme. It meant that the whole project took longer but the book was much more useful than just another collection of PD highlights.

As my study got underway, to my horror, with the great crisis of the Cold War being seen



as past, US public diplomacy was downsized and USIA folded into the Department of State. It was a sign of the academic neglect of US public diplomacy that its greatest scholars at that stage were also former *practitioners* working to explain their careers and, in some cases, to settle scores with nay-sayers. I was especially glad to get to know Hans ‘Tom’ Tuch, Alan Heil and Richard Arndt whose books became a collective gateway into public diplomacy studies (Tuch, 1990; Heil, 2004; Arndt, 2006). The public diplomacy alumni network was a rich source of ideas. I remember meeting USIA veteran Mike Schneider in his office at the Department of State and his producing a copy of Joseph Nye’s *Bound to Lead* and explaining that the idea of Soft Power was helping USIA explain its post Cold War role. Multiple briefings from Todd Leventhal initiated me into the world of Cold War disinformation, and I shared his belief that it was too soon for USIA to wind up its capacity to counter such activity. My wider interests in media history meant it was an especial treat to get to know the documentary filmmakers who had worked for USIA, including Bruce Herschensohn and the producer George Stevens Jr. and create case studies (Cull, 1998; Cull, 1999). I was also much influenced by meeting some of the great broadcasters associated with Voice of America like jazz man Willis Conover or the guardian of the VOA charter, their storied news director Bernie Kamenske, who became a close friend. The VOA director at that time – Geoff Cowan – made an impression. His great line when asked by a Senator to explain the point of VOA in the age of CNN was to say: ‘CNN is great if you speak English and live in a hotel. For everyone else there is VOA.’

At the same time – back in Britain – I began working with the British Council as an occasional guest lecturer in its attempt to promote British Studies in post-Communist Eastern Europe as a mechanism of civil society development. It was my own small taste of public diplomacy practice. Most of my lectures dealt with elements of British popular culture such as science fiction television, prisoner of war dramas to consider issues of memory and history. The idea was that teaching methods of media analysis and criticism would transfer into greater media literacy.

## **Leicester**

Birmingham built my confidence and in 1997 I successfully applied for the job of director of the new Center for American Studies at the University of Leicester which came with the rank of full professor. It was the idea of my friend, John W. Young, who had arrived as a junior faculty member at the tail of my time at Leeds and had himself been prompted early to a chair at Leicester. The university leadership apparently believed younger scholars brought more energy to an administrative task and have more to prove. My ‘to do’ list already included developing a master’s degree in cultural diplomacy as an off-shoot of my contact with the British Council, but more immediate tasks like the government teaching quality assessment put that on the back burner. Leicester coincided with a flurry of publications reflecting my USIA research. I initially focused on the Kennedy era. My inaugural lecture discussed the USIA’s work in the aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination. Wider interest in

public diplomacy began to grow. One engine was the election of Tony Blair in 1997 with his interest in rethinking Britain's place in the world. My key British Council contact Nick Wadham-Smith moved over from the British Studies initiative to an internal Council think tank called Counterpoint directed by the distinguished cultural diplomat Martin Rose. I became a regular collaborator with Counterpoint. Around 2000, Martin and Nick invited me to address the British Council's advisory board on the foundations of Public Diplomacy. It was for this meeting that I first presented a four faced model of public diplomacy based on advocacy, culture, exchange, and broadcasting.

Martin and Nick also brought me down to a remarkable summer school in the early summer of 2001 on the emerging field of nation branding where I first encountered Simon Anholt who was in the process of coming to terms with having unleashed the term nation brand on the world. The essential idea that images of some nations resonated with audiences as profoundly as commercial brands made sense. The assumption of commercial practitioners that both products and places must therefore be marketable in the same way was less convincing. Then came the terrorist attacks of 9/11. For the US and its allies, the attacks were a powerful reminder of the importance of public opinion in international relations. 9/11 served as a crisis to energize both investment in and the academic study of public diplomacy, just as the Cold War had fifty years earlier. At the same time, the changes flowing from the new technology of the internet made publics ever more a part of foreign affairs. Scholars attempted to draw the new ideas and situation into a coherent form. Pioneers included Jan Melissen who had recently relocated from Leicester to the Clingendael institute in The Hague. I attended Jan's conference on the New Public Diplomacy which generated the important collection of the same name (Melissen ed, 2005). I was marginal to proceedings at that seminal academic event and even questioned the idea that public diplomacy was sufficiently different from propaganda to be considered its own thing. I have since changed my view, of course. The publication of the year was Joe Nye's *Soft Power* which moved his idea forward from its initial articulation in the post-Cold War to a version more suited to the Global War on Terror (Nye, 2004).

The revived interest in public diplomacy led the now former head of Voice of America turned dean at USC Annenberg Geoff Cowan to propose establishing a major center on public diplomacy at USC. The PD veterans that I had got to know a decade earlier asked me to help with issues of bibliography and history during the initial proposal phase, and when Geoff decided that it might also be a good idea for the new center to include a master's degree in public diplomacy I was encouraged to apply for the job. In early 2005 the deal was done and in the summer of 2005 my family and I relocated from Leicester to Southern California.

## **USC Annenberg**

My arrival at USC allowed me to focus fully on public diplomacy in both my research and teaching. In the UK I had always been required to cover the full breadth of modern US history including classes on the Frontier, on race and on the war in Vietnam. My book on

USIA turned out to be two books as Cambridge University Press refused the 600 page 1945-2001 first draft. A Cold War volume published by Cambridge in 2008 (Cull, 2008a) and a shorter volume from Palgrave on USIA's post-Cold War career from 1989 to 2001 which appeared in 2012 (Cull, 2012). No less important was the spike in demand for writing about Public Diplomacy. I wrote a number of shorter policy-oriented papers which have subsequently gained currency. The key paper was a summary of public diplomacy's historical lessons created for the Foreign Office in London in 2007 as a way to orient private sector advisors to the specifics of public diplomacy. In the end it was used to orientate the incoming Minister of State. That paper developed the five-part model of public diplomacy with listening set in its priority position ahead of advocacy, culture, exchange and international broadcasting. Insisting on including listening was my idea but it was Jolyon Welch of the Foreign Office who urged me to move it up to priority position to underline my conviction of its supreme importance (Cull, 2008b). That schema also figured in my essay for my own co-edited anthology with Geoff Cowan – *Public Diplomacy in a Changing World* – a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* in 2008 (Cowan and Cull, 2008). Around the same time, I also agreed to assist Simon Anholt in co-editing the *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, which had just expanded from its initial identity as simply *Place Branding*. Influential work for me at this point included Eytan Gilboa's essay on the quest for a theory of public diplomacy and Geoff Cowan's work with Amelia Arsenault calling for a three-stage evolution of public diplomacy from monologue through dialogue to collaboration. Nancy Snow and Rhonda Zaharna both produced books that documented the missteps of the US public diplomacy response to 9/11 (Snow, 2003; Zaharna, 2010). Nancy and Phil Taylor pulled together thinking as of 2006 or so to create the first edition of the *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (Snow and Taylor eds, 2008). In retrospect that volume seems dominated by both the US and its challenge of war in Iraq. As Matthew Armstrong memorably observed, in the Iraq war era US public diplomacy wore combat boots. My contribution was an essay on the pre-history of the term public diplomacy before its official coining by Edmund Gullion in the mid-1960s (Cull, 2008c).

One of the major questions I had to resolve for myself was the issue of the boundary of public diplomacy and whether the nation state had a monopoly on the activity. I initially believed that public diplomacy had to be conducted by the state but revised this to take the position that any actor on the international stage could conduct public diplomacy. The thought experiment that convinced me was to ask the same question about the difference between violence and war. War might legally be a monopoly of the nation state but we know that mass political violence can erupt within a polity or between a nation and a non-state actor and still call that war. I felt the same process of common sense could be applied to the engagement of foreign publics. It also helped when I hit on a definition of public diplomacy that emphasized the actual work: 'public diplomacy is the way in which an international actor advances their foreign policy through engagement with a foreign public.' It made sense to me. I came to believe that subnational actors had not just a right but a duty to be involved in public diplomacy. This view was especially popular with the Catalan public diplomacy agency Diplocat. They invited me to keynote their relaunch conference in 2019 and were especially

keen that I should underline that subnational right/duty point when cameras were rolling.

USC Annenberg in those days maintained a hectic schedule of conferences and hosting of experts from other institutions, sparking new ideas with the core scholars on campus. Our USC home team at that point included Geoffrey Wiseman who combined intellectual rigor with experience as an Australian diplomat. It was also good that our team included a public diplomat in residence on loan from the Department of State. These experienced officials rotating through each year provided an essential reality check on the way USC approached public diplomacy. One of our State Department visiting professors – Robert Banks – stayed on to become first a colleague and then director of the whole program. The program attracted first class guests. I learned much from Monroe Price. I also was influenced by Benjamin Barber and was drawn into his series of Interdependence Day meetings to promote the concept of interdependence between peoples. My niche was cultural interdependence. We saw Joe Nye from time to time. He and Manuel Castells both contributed to the special issue of *Annals*. Another figure I met and admired at a CPD conference who became a colleague was Phil Seib (who devised the notion of an Al Jazeera effect). My favorite early-days CPD conference was one I hosted on the role of public diplomacy and the track two processes in building peace in Northern Ireland. I was delighted that with the help of then-student Joe Popiolkowski the conference could be preserved in a proceedings volume (Popiolkowski and Cull eds, 2009). In this generative period of starting public diplomacy studies at Annenberg it helped to have regular contact with other colleagues in the field like Giles Scott-Smith, Ali Fisher and Tony Shaw, who was a fellow product of the Leeds program.

In many ways the war on terror was a frustrating time to study public diplomacy, for while the US government plainly hoped that the renewed attention to the tools of public diplomacy would magically decrease anti-American feeling in the Middle East especially, it also neglected key dimensions of its application, most especially a link back to policy. The pressure group Business for Diplomatic Action led by advertising guru Keith Reinhardt regularly made this point. I started to get a sense of a conceptual failing within the US approach to Soft Power, which emphasizes the question ‘what can I show you to prove I am wonderful’ rather than ‘what can I change to actually be wonderful.’ A seed had been planted. There was scholarship prefiguring this dynamic, the most important being Mary Dudziak’s book from 2000: *Cold War Civil Rights*, (Dudziak, 2000) which provided full details of how Soviet propaganda about US racism had forced Eisenhower and Kennedy not only to tell the world about the positive sides of American life but to make the reduction of negatives a priority. The example became a key element of my case for Reputational Security in later years.

While working on public diplomacy topics I remained engaged with my IAMHIST colleagues. Just before moving to California, I had become president of IAMHIST and important projects included a series of master classes to develop younger scholars. My friend, the prolific British film and TV historian James Chapman, and I created two volumes of popular film case studies focusing on representations of the future and on the cinema of imperialism. Although both books were in some ways a break from public diplomacy all

kinds of PD related points shone through, especially in the imperialism book which included stories about the CIA revising Hollywood scripts to ensure their cultural sensitivity. I was also struck that both books had an unexpected religious dimension. God seems to be an essential component of the imperial worldview as the point of the pyramid above the imperialist and science fiction seems to have inherited the emphasis on awe and higher power once monopolized by the religious epic (Chapman and Cull, 2009; Chapman and Cull, 2013).

The imminent publication of the second USIA volume raised the question of what I might take on for a third research major project. I decided to look at one of the political issues that had loomed large for me as a teen: the communication battle over Apartheid in South Africa that had brought the ANC activist ‘Roger’ to my high school all those years ago. I was keen to help diversify the geographical and thematic cases available to PD scholars which tended to emphasize World War Two and the Cold War. The idea that writing about Apartheid might provide a break from the Cold War now seems laughable, given the extent to which I soon learned that the whole issue became a proxy struggle for the great powers and arguably one of the great successes of East Bloc public diplomacy. The South Africa book was logistically complicated with my sources chiefly located on the other side of the world. While working on the book as a long-term project I also took on work to codify my thinking on public diplomacy. I wrote an overview of the subject for Polity press which eventually appeared in 2019 under the title *‘Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age’* (Cull, 2019). That book was designed to be a final form for presentations that I had developed for the Center on Public Diplomacy’s summer institute, for occasional lectures to the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute, and the annual guest classes I had taught at the Rome-based Cultural Diplomacy program of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano at the invitation of the program’s founder and director Federica Olivares.

Writing the book for Polity overlapped with a major shift in the world of public diplomacy and soft power. At one level digital technologies and especially social media made issues of public engagement ever more significant. On the other hand, the emphasis on Soft Power became so general as to be diluted as a concept. How could the same terminology to apply to the US attempts to export its freedom and the increasingly transactional approach of China to world opinion seen with its Belt and Road Initiative? It also seemed odd that Soft Power was generally detectable only among the most successful countries. Portland in London published a Soft Power 30. Did this mean that there were a no-power 170 countries for whom the concept had no relevance other than to explain their own preferences in travel and trade? Then came Ukraine.

The Ukraine Crisis of 2014 provided yet another wakeup call as it revealed the extent to which publics could be misled by malign media. The rediscovery of disinformation as a topic prompted a flood of interest. I was invited to assist the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office in assessing its present support for media in the countries around Russia and then to lead an inquiry into opportunities to extend support in the area of media to the Western Balkans. These inquiries and my own travel at this time built a distinct impression of a world in deepening crisis. When interlocutors in government in places like Kosovo and Kazakhstan

described their worries, they certainly included issues of reputation, but it was not described in the usual manner of Soft Power as something to add a bonus to an essentially successful place. Instead, they saw reputation as an essential commodity that if sufficiently developed could save a vulnerable place in a time of crisis.

My breakthrough moment came in the summer of 2017 when discussing the position of Kazakhstan with the head of their diplomatic academy – Anuar Ayazbekov – in a Starbucks in downtown Astana (as it then was). Anuar described his fears and I put it to him that his country was conducting cultural work and hosting exhibitions to obtain some vague ‘Soft Power’ advantage but was seeking something more fundamental. Kazakhstan wanted a reputation to enhance its security. The country understood that part of the problem for Ukraine in 2014 had been that Europe knew so little about the country’s post-Soviet life, and feared that Kazakhstan could likewise lose a province or two to a rapacious neighbor with the world caring unless it acted to make the country known and relevant. Listening to this I suggested: ‘what you are describing is not ‘Soft Power’ but ‘Reputational Security’ and the concept was born.

USC’s location in Los Angeles can sometimes seem like a disadvantage for public diplomacy studies as so much of the discussion is focused on Washington DC. My experience has been that the distance from DC can also be an asset. It has placed USC close to two important discussions: the conversation over technology and with regional neighbors including Latin America and the Pacific Rim. Technological changes brought an increased demand for work on digital issues. At the invitation of J. P. Singh of George Mason University, I wrote an essay about the tortuous process by which US public diplomacy came to embrace digital technology and so-called Public Diplomacy 2.0 (Cull, 2013). Around the same time, Fadi Chehadi, the CEO of the Internet Corporation on Assigned Names and Numbers, who was unexpectedly on his part thrust into a public diplomacy role asked me to advise him. He assures me I taught him a lot about how diplomacy works. I know I learned a lot about where the internet came from and how it works from time with Fadi.

My key regional relationships developed – unsurprisingly – with Mexico and Canada. The Canadian partnership was based on a Fulbright chair which was included with the original establishment of the center on Public Diplomacy. Each year a Canadian professor joins our program for a semester. This – cumulatively – gave a wonderful bench of experts with connections to USC. In 2016, I convened a conference of the entire group and their different approaches to Canada’s public diplomacy became a terrific anthology co-edited with the head of Fulbright Canada, Michael Hawes (Cull and Hawes, 2021). With Mexico, the key was the personal interest of Cesar Villanueva Rivas of Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Through reciprocal symposium invitations we were able to explore our contrasting approaches, most especially to the cultural dimension of public diplomacy. A Canadian project – the North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative – connected the Canadian and Mexican links into a single network, which led to three excellent conferences, all of which also generated provocative reports. The emphasis of the discussion was on moving beyond a narrow State-focused idea of cultural diplomacy, and opening the field to indigenous and

other formerly excluded groups and voices. I also worked with Nancy Snow to reconfigure the *Routledge Handbook on Public Diplomacy* into a broader 2<sup>nd</sup> edition more reflective of the diversity of practice and less stuck on the worries of the US. Our mutual friend and mentor Phil Taylor had died aged 56 in 2010 and we saw revising the book as a tribute to him too. I was delighted with the result, which included work by some of the scholars whose emergence as major voices I had most enjoyed over the preceding years including James Pamment and Ilan Manor (Snow and Cull eds, 2020).

For the next couple of years I road-tested Reputational Security in classes, guest talks and conversations with officials. I found that for the first time that I had a concept which made sense for the smaller actors. I wrote the concept into the conclusion of my book for Polity arguing that establishing Reputational Security was one of key goals for public diplomacy along with countering disinformation and overcoming victim narratives. The book did well enough to be picked up for translation and appeared in Italian, Mandarin, Korean, Spanish for Latin America and – in an unauthorized edition – Farsi for Iran. The idea was now out there. Then the COVID 19 pandemic hit.

One of the most striking things about the pandemic of 2020 was the tendency of commentators to see its early weeks especially as complete confirmation of their already existing ideas. I certainly saw lots of confirmation of my notion of Reputational Security. The idea fitted perfectly with the spectacle of countries trying to build up their own stories with accounts of their own medical heroism while simultaneously pointing a finger at another place as responsible for the global tragedy (Cull and Manfredi, 2022). I hoped that others would see the optimal reputational strategy as cooperating for mutual wellbeing. A key aspect of Reputational Security is not merely to accentuate the positive aspects of a nation's values and culture, but to eliminate the negatives and be genuinely worthy of admiration. A more developed version of Reputational Security appeared at a chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Diplomacy and Statecraft* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cull, 2022).

The pandemic lockdown provided a period of time to get to grips with the process of actually writing my history of the role of public diplomacy in the struggle over Apartheid. I was also able to prepare shorter chapters on the aspects of the struggle for colleagues creating multi-perspective anthologies. I was pleased that the anti-Apartheid story with its emphasis on race issues and Africa could now be included in anthologies on international radio, human rights promotion, propaganda techniques, city diplomacy, anti-neutrality communication and the role of commercial public relations firms advocating for the white minority government (Cull, 2016; Cull, 2021a; Cull, 2021b; Cull, 2023a; Cull, 2023b; Cull, 2024a). At the same I also began to record a podcast called *People, Places, Power*, with my longstanding interlocutor Simon Anholt as a way to reach a different audience with the exploration of the interface between policy and international image. While the audience remained small, I enjoyed meeting the people who enjoyed it.

It often seems that the US public (or is it the US media) is unable to think about two things at the same time. So it seemed with the COVID pandemic. In the public sphere the

pandemic came to an end the moment that Russia initiated its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The invasion brought a renewed demand for my original area of interest: propaganda. I found myself explaining the approach behind Vladimir Putin's latest speech or Ukraine's remarkable communication counter-offensive. Britain's campaign for external support during World War Two provided an excellent model for President Volodymyr Zelensky's approach, while the wider media battles around the war evoked aspects of the Great War. The immediate growth of interest in issues of public opinion and persuasion prompted Polity to ask me to write a sequel to my public diplomacy study, fortunately I had a set of essays underway that could be variously expanded, updated, and otherwise pulled together to explore Reputational Security as a successor concept to Soft Power, more suited to an era of renewed competition. South Africa took a back seat while I transformed and supplemented the work I had into a new book. Russia's war in Ukraine confirmed my sense of the existence of Reputational Security. In 2014, Ukraine lacked this and lost provinces. By 2022, through a combination of self-presentation and skilled diplomacy it was known and now well enough regarded to garner support from the NATO countries and aid of a kind impossible eight years earlier. It also seems clear that Ukraine faces a challenge of Russian Reputational Security, which is to say the enduring admiration for Russia in the global south, which Ukraine had neglected in its charm offensive, speaks to the enduring nature of public feeling towards places. Soviet sponsorship of liberation movements has not been forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

While I am unsure of the value of creating a narrative of my trajectory and the development of my ideas, I am glad of the opportunity to recall colleagues who have shared and shaped that journey. It also helps to be reminded of the many times when good luck helped progress. The days when luck stayed away are forgotten in a piece like this, but coping with setbacks is also part of the process.

At time of writing, I have a study in press which I hope will establish my own terminological contribution to the field in our collective vocabulary (Cull, 2024b). My hope is that through its reframing of Public Diplomacy as a dimension of security (a core function of the state) rather than some kind of optional extra, Reputational Security might actually unlock better funded and more connected Public Diplomacy policies, which I see as good for the world. The dynamic of listening and talking on which PD rests must be better than the alternative of violence in our international system. In a similar vein, Reputational Security calls for an emphasis on better realities rather than empty image making, which directs attention back to aspects on international life like respect for human rights. I am close to completing my third decade-long research project on the struggle over Apartheid. I hope that there will be lessons in that analogue history that will help digital communicators address the great issues of our own time. I also hope there may be lessons about where both sides went wrong and missed opportunities for compromise.

It is fascinating to me – as I look over this attempt to pull my experiences and



development into a narrative – how each so many experiences which held limited promise at the time have generated important and helpful insights. I feel that very little time was wasted in this journey and hope that a reader might be encouraged by this to steer into opportunities and embrace the unexpected. There is a circularity here. One of my favorite elements of research these days is working on Expos, and it is clear that the experience offered by the best pavilions draws on all the same elements of architecture, music, touch and even ritual I felt in church as a child. The act of attending could even be compared to a pilgrimage.

As of this writing I have no firm plan for what to write next. There is a logic in writing a third volume on US public diplomacy, but trilogies need a happy ending and to be honest I feel we are a long way from a happy ending for US public diplomacy. In the meantime, there is great pleasure in seeing the overall map of US public diplomacy which I like to think I drew in the first two USIA books so wonderfully filled in by a new generation of public diplomacy historians and other scholars. This journal is part of that process.

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