

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 989

22 October 2020

Pawel Surowiec & Philip Long. "Hybridity and Soft Power Statecraft: The 'GREAT' Campaign."

Diplomacy & Statecraft 31:1 (2020): 1-28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2020.1721092>.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR989>

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY BEN O'LOUGHLIN, ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The GREAT campaign has been a long government effort to promote British identity globally. The purpose is to generate income and reputation *and* foster collaboration in the conduct of British foreign policy. Pawel Surowiec and Phillip Long show how leading British actors in culture, business, diplomacy and education have been drawn into partnerships. The state gains the actors' attention-grabbing brand profiles while those non-state actors gain a platform and set of partnerships, events and programmes to increase their own reputation. This is significant not simply because the box 'digital diplomacy' has been put to one side in UK foreign policy. It is significant, the authors argue, because it presents a new model of statecraft. It is soft-power statecraft because it is designed to increase the attractiveness of Britain and anything British to overseas audiences. This has been done to further UK foreign policy interests -- to make money for the state, increase tourist and student numbers, and boost British commercial ventures. What this article offers is a rich description of how media and communication have been brought together within a directed but diverse framework for the realisation of traditional goals in international relations.

The UK as a nation-state is an interesting case because it offers both turmoil and pride. A decade of post-Global Financial Crisis austerity, Brexit, and Covid-19 have each presented severe challenges to those seeking to promote Britain. Fears that these signal generational challenges add to this turmoil. Yet the UK has ranked highly in any soft power index and offered a regular array of spectacular and routine forms of engagement for overseas audiences. The global marketplace of identities and brands is the assumed starting point in many discussions of foreign policy and diplomacy in London because people making policy in London assume they possess a leadership role in the craft of presentation. Learning how the UK is dealing with this may be useful for policymakers, marketers and scholars in other countries –countries that may share some of these tensions.

The value of this article lies in its detailing of how 'hybridisation' of foreign policy and communication works. It would be impossible to study statecraft just by examining state institutions because the state acts through alliances and partnerships. By hybridity Surowiec and Long refer to "the state of flux between a state, governance, society, and media" (4). They study this flux by tracking how networked architectures of governance are formed, how certain sources and resources are chosen and utilised, and how media and cultural forms are woven into nearly all stages of action. The authors conducted interviews with members of GREAT's steering committee in 2013 and carried out discourse analysis of policy documents, website and social media content, and news media in the years that followed. The research questions allow them to detail how GREAT changed statecraft and how its actors adapted to a digital media landscape. Although a discourse analysis is useful because flux is a matter of talk, of description, interpretation, and contestation, the scholars also bring in technical and policy data where necessary.

Their first finding is that GREAT signalled a shift from a development aid-centred form of statecraft to a market-centred one. Leadership still came from No. 10 Downing Street but what unrolled was a wide web of participation. Mechanisms for accountability and measures of return on investment meant that most activity was quantified and could be assigned value.

Cabinet members as well as companies and celebrities all sought to use participation to bring a return on their visibility. One interviewee suggested that the volume of joint programmes brought an unprecedented degree of collaboration. But whether the commodification of cultural influence was entirely positive is beyond this study and urgently needed as COVID-19 means that public spending on matters of culture will be very tightly rationed. Those seeking to extend the influence of GREAT may require more qualitative justifications of how people are influenced and over long periods.

The second finding is that the GREAT campaign sought to use the UK's historical legacy as a source of attraction. Unlike the Cool Britannia branding of the late 1990s, GREAT brought heritage into focus. What counted, for example, was making Shakespeare engaging now through hybrid media programmes. Accommodating this diverse history could allow GREAT to enlist people with a range of perspectives because it appeared apolitical in its choice of historical material to celebrate. Diplomats had to be de-centred. One interviewee said he felt diplomats saw themselves as generalists, not specialists, when in fact they were specialists in being a diplomat and not necessarily much else. Diplomats had to acknowledge they were just one actor within GREAT's vast web of programmes and that they should treat people with other specialisms as equals. The result was a hybridisation of skills as well as of cultural outputs. This is where analysis gets into the detail of statecraft and the basic, personal, and professional dilemmas of all those involved.

This cannot have been easy. Greatness raises the threat of nostalgia and of opening up often difficult political history. As I write in June 2020, the UK is divided about whether certain statues should be torn down or venerated. Surowiec and Long show that GREAT tried to push much UK political history into the background and yet make a claim about the scale of British cultural and economic influence. This scale was used to convey a history of opportunities for overseas audiences. Yet overseas publics suffering from drought and famine might also receive food parcels with a GREAT label on, and those publics might not think their situation is great or that a great label treats them with respect. The politics of such campaigns does not disappear.

The final finding is that GREAT was about more than branding a nation. Since it involved increasing any kind of relationship with the UK, whether creating a trade deal, staging a local theatre performance, or learning English online, GREAT could be linked to all UK economic growth and all perceptions of the nation by audiences overseas. Surowiec and Long argue that "the campaign superceded the practice of public diplomacy, cultural relations, and destination and investment marketing, amplifying narratives of 'Britishness'" (13). GREAT provided a framework for any government department to articulate national identity. This framework offered a set of pillars that any local activity around the world could be tied to in order to justify the spending. What started as an advertising campaign became a far richer effort to project a national narrative.

The hybridisation model is useful here because it shows how older and newer media were used together and that this enabled all kinds of relationships. An online news report about GREAT might have links to GREAT programmes or celebrities involved, drawing the news consumer into a plethora of ways of engaging with 'Britain.' Social media could be used for a monologue broadcast of information, but also for dialogue and even new collaborations. This did not always happen. My own research has shown that certain public bodies staged dialogue on social media but it was only between their own accounts. Surowiec and Long find evidence that some GREAT programmes were used to create awareness of the campaign rather than dialogue with citizens, companies or diplomats abroad. These forms of engagement also varied by sector. This shows a snapshot then of statecraft in transition. Hybridisation meant that experimentation was possible but traditional goals of numbers of digital hits and visitors still counted.

This article opens up two immediate research tasks. We first need a comparative study of how other countries are adapting their statecraft to communicate in ways that affect the behaviour of overseas audiences. Surowiec and Long write that their "theorisation enables researchers to overcome the risk of standardisation" in models of statecraft and soft power (22). However, simply detailing how France or Mexico is adapting to a hybrid media system and hybridisation of skillsets through collaboration is not the same as building an explanation of why they adapt as they do. A degree of standardisation is needed for any comparative insight. The seeds of a new model are present in this article. Surowiec and Long examine the sources drawn into GREAT, the resources used or spent, the attitudes of those on the steering committee, and how collaboration is

described and staged. More conventional International Relations scholarship might insist on different factors. The point is that this dialogue needs to happen so a comparative study can be done.

The second next step is to explain how and why audiences respond the way they do. To assess power, or influence, or statecraft, means a focus on those whose behaviour is targeted. This article examines the projection of soft power statecraft but not the formation or the reception and interpretation. In fact this is an ongoing circuit of communication. On formation, why did the Conservative government since 2010 think it worthwhile to use UK history to advertise UK identity when the previous government did not? What programmes were cut so that spending could go to GREAT? On reception, Surowiec and Long note that the UK government did not evaluate how a user might respond to a programme differently on different social media platforms. There is also no information on why people engaged at all. Did a young woman join a British Council English language course to learn English or to meet friends or because of a hope to make a connection that might lead to a visit to the UK one day? How does trust and credibility operate in different cities or regions and how is GREAT compared to whatever the U.S. or Germany or Japan is doing to reach out?

These are urgent tasks but ones that can stabilise the study of public diplomacy and soft power by anchoring them in the question of statecraft. To move to a comparative understanding of similarities and differences in how states adapt their practices will allow a theory of change to emerge. To track the formation, projection, and reception of a national narrative will finally allow an explanation of why people overseas choose to engage or not. The orchestra conductor in No. 10 Downing Street might choose a certain tune, but whether anybody overseas wants to listen to it, and why, is vital for understanding how statecraft would function.

This is an exciting agenda because it means that research on media and communication can help explain how states perform an identity in the global competition for attention, prestige, and warm relations. Surowiec and Long have shown how the UK has tried to do this. This lens now needs to be widened.

Ben O'Loughlin (DPhil Oxon) is Professor of International Relations and Director of the New Political Communication Unit at Royal Holloway, University of London. His publications include *Strategic Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives in International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017). He won the Walter Lippmann award for Political Communication at the American Political Science Association in 2016. He is currently finishing a book on Iran's narrative politics and a book on visions of impunity in world politics.