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High Stakes: U.S. Nonprofit Organizations And The U.S. Standing Abroad

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Abstract

This research sought to explain the agency of U.S.-based nonprofit nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the U.S. standing abroad, and explore the NGO role in the U.S. public diplomacy. A multiple-case study method was used to look at five 501(c)(3) organizations that receive predominantly private funding and operate globally. The data gathered from in-person interviews and corporate documentation were compared between cases, and synthesized across cases using the theory-building technique. While U.S. standing affects American NGOs' practices and discourses, American NGOs' behavior might have a bearing on the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of international publics about the United States. Both the NGO-owned state identities and American NGOs' reputation for autonomy and freedom of expression enhance the U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

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1. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Those concerned with the U.S. standing acknowledge that the public diplomacy establishment lacks adequate resources for engaging with foreign publics and managing the country's reputation in the world. Non-state initiatives outside the Foggy Bottom's purview are said to surpass state programs in their reach or outcome albeit are seldom accounted for in the overall U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Therefore, the advantages and inevitability of bringing together public and private resources are gaining recognition both within and outside the government.

Notwithstanding one's stance vis-à-vis the extent to which the country reputation could be managed, there appears to be an agreement in the literature that public diplomacy seeks, among other things, to cultivate a favorable country reputation (Cowan and Cull, 2008, Leonard et al., 2002, Snow and Taylor, 2009 and Wang, 2006). Although the nongovernmental outreach to foreign publics is sometimes described in the literature as citizen diplomacy or people-to-people engagement rather than public diplomacy, scholars also seem to be in agreement that public diplomacy should not be an exclusive preserve of the U.S. Government (Cowan and Cull, 2008, Melissen, 2005 and Snow and Taylor, 2009).

It is believed that nonprofit nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in particular might have more credibility than governments and, therefore, might be better positioned to communicate with civil societies of other countries (Leonard et al., 2002, Zaharna, 2010 and Zatepilina, 2009). Nevertheless, more research is needed into how the non-state engagement shapes country reputations (Cowan and Cull, 2008, Snow and Taylor, 2009 and Zaharna, 2010).

From the vantage point of a handful of American nonprofit organizations, I explore and explain the connection between corporate identities and reputations and the U.S. standing abroad. I propose that, to a certain extent, the rationale for the existence of such a connection could be found in (1) the business and communication theories of reputation management (Aula and Mantere, 2008 and Brown et al., 2006); (2) the international relations theories of state identity (Hopf, 2002 and Nau, 2002); and (3) the normative theories of civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992 and Gutmann, 1998).

2. THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

This multiple-case study examines the agency of a non-state actor such as a privately funded nonprofit organization or NGO in the concepts of state identity and state/country reputation. Applying the term country-of-origin identity to the NGO-owned state identity, I posit that it manifests itself in the interactions between that NGO and global actors (both state and non-state). NGO's country-of-origin identity—or its organizational self—vis-à-vis the country from where its

main funds derive and with whose citizens it shares common values—could resemble or differ from the government-owned state identity. U.S.-based NGOs' country-of-origin identities could have little to no impact on the foreign relations between the United States and other states/countries. On the other hand, NGO-owned state identities could possibly have a greater impact on the United States' reputation in those countries/states where those NGOs operate.

Corporate reputation is defined as an outside assessment of the organization by its stakeholders (Aula and Mantere, 2008 and Brown et al., 2006). Corporate identity is described as an internal feature personified through both corporate texts and corporate behavior (Aula and Mantere, 2008 and Brown et al., 2006). Although the organization has more control over its corporate identity than its corporate reputation, it can manage its reputation by living up to its identity, and generating trust among its stakeholders (Aula and Mantere, 2008, Fombrun, 1996 and Yang, 2005).

State identity is viewed as a self-image that the nation-state projects out through the way it treats its domestic non-state actors, and through its relations with both state and non-state actors abroad (Nau, 2002 and Hopf, 2002). Although the literature on state identity is predominantly concerned with how states' identities are portrayed by state actors, it does leave room for the agency of non-state actors: State identity has multiple agents within; and varies from “friend” to “rival” to “enemy” depending on who within the state owns it, and toward whom outside the state it is directed (Klotz and Smith, 2007 and Wendt, 2004).

Extrapolating from both communication and international relations literatures, state/country reputation could then be described as a certain image and a set of attitudes, perceptions, and opinions other states' governments, non-state actors, and citizens hold of a state based on that state's identity and behavior. State reputation could be managed by maintaining consistent identities domestically and internationally, and by cultivating trust among the state's own citizens and citizens of other countries.

I make an assumption in this study that the state identity that has most effect on the foreign relations and the country reputation/standing at any given time is mainly owned by those state actors who hold office at that time. However, I also posit that numerous, often conflicting and contested, state identities held by domestic non-state actors such as NGOs—whether similar or dissimilar to the one of the officeholders—must affect (1) the foreign relations—albeit to a lesser degree than the identity of the state actors; and (2) the country reputation/standing abroad—at times, even to a larger degree than the identity of state actors.

I further posit that foreign publics' perceptions and interpretations about those U.S. NGOs that operate internationally are an integral part of what could be described as U.S. country reputation/standing. In other words, U.S. reputation is

manifested not only through its government's identity and deeds/behavior, but also through its NGOs' identities and deeds/behavior.

These propositions could be reinforced by the civil society literature, which explains the role of organizations such as NGOs in both domestic and world affairs. The state of civil society illustrates the extent of freedoms such as free association and free speech, reflects whether or not regimes are tolerant of dissent, and demonstrates the regimes' openness to checks and balances (Cohen and Arato, 1992, Gutmann, 1998, Janoski, 1998 and Rosenblum and Post, 2002).

3. METHOD AND CASE DESCRIPTION

Replication logic was applied to draw the cases from the Charity Navigator (2009) database. Each case (hereinafter referred to as NGOs 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) was expected to predict either similar results (i.e., "literal replication") or contrasting results "for anticipatable reasons" (i.e., "theoretical replication") (Yin, 2009, p. 54). Data about the corporate practices and discourses of these nonprofit organizations were collected from two sources—interviews and documentation—thus reducing the construct validity concerns.

All five NGOs (1) are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code (Internal Revenue Service, 2008 and Internal Revenue Service, 2009); (2) operate internationally; and (3) do not depend on U.S. Government funds as their sole or main source of revenue. The selected NGOs differ in size from small to mid-sized to large and include both advocacy and operational organizations (United Nations, 2003). Each organization specializes in a range of programs, from international relief and development to family planning, and from civil rights advocacy to children's services. Two of the five NGOs are secular; of the three faith-based organizations, only NGO4 is closely affiliated with a specific religious organization (i.e., a Christian church) whereas NGO1 and NGO2 define their connection to faith as a shared Jewish worldview and describe themselves as both faith- and ethnicity-based.

Among the five organizations three generate their revenues from private funds only and two receive both private and government support. Nevertheless, neither of the latter two organizations relies on government funds as a main source of income. The share of government grants and contracts in the total revenue for 2010 amounted to 20% for NGO3 and to mere 4% for NGO4. However, even in the case of NGO3, the share of the U.S. Government within the 20% of revenue derived from government grants or contracts is insignificant. Also, unlike the other four NGOs, NGO3 receives more than half of its revenue from selling contraceptives.

Although all five organizations operate internationally, both the manner and extent of their presence abroad vary. Only NGO1 and NGO3 have their own overseas offices. NGO2 and NGO4 provide grants and technical assistance to indigenous civil society organizations in host countries. NGO5 has a name-only affiliation with indigenous civil society groups, and also uses non-affiliated U.S. civil society groups and individuals to distribute its in-kind donations overseas.

In-depth interviews were conducted in-person or by Skype with the founders (or presidents) and one or two senior executives from each of the five NGOs. In this manuscript, I refer to those 13 individuals as NGO's Top Executive, Executive 1, and Executive 2. To corroborate the interview data, I studied a number of documents from financial reports to corporate websites, and from media coverage to members' posts on social networking sites. By and large, the interviewees' perspectives not only strengthen each organization's presentation of self through its corporate texts, but also provide a more complex picture of organizational identities and perceived reputations.

4. AGENCY IN THE U.S. IDENTITY

The five NGOs assert their ownership in the U.S. identity by representing the values and interests of various segments of the U.S. society in the international arena. The extent of their agency in the state identity varies among the cases. A clear distinction could be drawn between the faith-based and secular cases in the way their members view their connection to the country of origin—i.e., the United States. Also, the advocacy focus of NGO1 and NGO2 seems to dictate these two NGOs' greater involvement in the U.S. foreign affairs compared with the other three cases.

Although some of the cases provide evidence of domestic opposition to the government's monopoly on state identity, they do not necessarily support Nau's (2002) argument that the government ought to shield its state identity from internal contestation. Rather, these cases could be viewed as evidence of a multi-faceted state identity (or identities) rooted in values that transcend nationalism or sovereignty (Klotz & Smith, 2007). Although an NGO-owned state identity might be driven by its mission to protect minority rights (e.g., NGO1, NGO2 and NGO4 in particular), it does not automatically threaten the existence of U.S. Government-owned identity, which might be driven by its responsibility to protect homeland security.

All five NGOs (1) see themselves as American organizations; (2) want to be seen internationally as American organizations—albeit having complex, double or triple, organizational identities; and (3) do not believe they could completely distance themselves from their country of origin. In the cases of NGO1 and NGO2, their country-of-origin identities are reflected in the organizations' names, the values they adhere to, and the roles they want to play in the world affairs. In

all five cases, the underlying principles that guide NGOs' work are said to be inherently American.

NGO1's Top Executive believes that such values as democracy, human dignity, and pluralism are intrinsically American, although those values may not "stop at the U.S. borders." Executive 1 argued that NGO1 is American in its desire and ability to "shape events in the world" and "bolster American leadership in the world." NGO3's executives view their organization's creed—i.e., social marketing—as having distinct American roots. Top Executive explained that NGO5's work abroad is guided by the intrinsically American spirit of philanthropy.

Top executives of NGO1, NGO2 and NGO4 underscored that their organizations are undeniably American because of their strong associations with the U.S. branches of American Judaism and the U.S. Episcopal Church respectively. The informants of both NGO1 and NGO2 argued that their NGOs represent practicing, as well as non-practicing, Jews from around the United States. Executive 2 maintained that, although NGO4 competes with other Episcopal and Anglican charities for recognition, it represents the entire U.S. Episcopal community.

Moreover, the two advocacy NGOs see themselves as voices for some international stakeholder groups as well. For NGO1, those are Jewish minority populations from around the world and Israeli Jews. NGO2 claims to speak for small grassroots human-rights organizations from the world's poorest countries. NGO3 seeks to empower its stakeholders in host countries regardless of their religion.

While interacting with international stakeholders, none of the five organizations disguises its American identity. NGO1's Top Executive said, "Recently, we play up our American identity more often. We do not gain a lot by denying our American identity." However, many informants acknowledged that sometimes their NGOs intentionally downplay their country-of-origin identities. Usually, it happens in the areas where anti-Americanism is prevalent, and being an American NGO might put at risk the organization's staff and stakeholders.

5. PERCEIVED IMPACT ON THE U.S. REPUTATION

Although the impact on a reputation could not truly be assessed but by studying the perceptions, attitudes and opinions at the receiving end, this study sought to explore whether U.S. NGOs' representatives reflect on a possibility of having a bearing on the U.S. standing and, if so, in what ways they imagine this bearing reveals itself. Most informants stressed the reciprocity of the relationship between their corporate reputations and that of the United States. First, NGOs' corporate reputations in host countries add to the overall perceptions about the United States and, in turn, affect the atmosphere vis-à-vis U.S. organizations and

citizens in those countries. Second, the reputation of the United States in host countries either facilitates or impedes NGOs' operations in those countries. Third, U.S. NGOs with explicit country-of-origin identities are said to have an intrinsic interest in improving the U.S. standing.

In the United States and abroad, NGOs practice both symbolic/identity-based and behavioral/relationship-based reputational strategies (Yang, 2005). Interviewees believe that the former allow their organizations to maintain consistent corporate identities, whereas the latter cultivate trust and social capital among their domestic and international stakeholders. Informants also assume that those corporate identities and behaviors might matter for the U.S. reputation in host countries. Moreover, informants regard their organizational identities and behaviors as embodiments of autonomy and pluralism of the U.S. civil society (Cohen and Arato, 1992, Gutmann, 1998, Janoski, 1998 and Rosenblum and Post, 2002). Therefore, NGO representatives feel that, to a certain extent, they share with U.S. state actors the burden of responsibility for the U.S. standing.

However, NGOs' executives estimate that the extent of their impact on the U.S. reputation in the world is insignificant in comparison with that of the U.S. Government's policies and actions. On the other hand, the aggregated interview data from all five cases may be construed as evidence of a greater influence of each organization than it is imagined by individual members. NGOs' role in their country-of-origin reputation manifests itself in particular through their participation in the world affairs and interactions with host governments and civil societies, as well as the U.S. Government.

5.1. Involvement in the world affairs

Members of NGO1, NGO2 and NGO4 feel that their connections to specific segments of both American and international societies entitle them to participate in the U.S. domestic and foreign affairs. Therefore, these NGOs do not hesitate to interact with the U.S. Government on behalf of their domestic and international stakeholders. For example, NGO1 tries to influence politicians and public servants on the Capitol Hill, in the White House, and at Foggy Bottom in favor of strengthening the U.S. alliance with Israel. NGO1's informants also explained that, depending on the degree of personal connections the NGO's members might have with a specific Administration, the NGO perceives itself as having more or less influence over the U.S. Government's foreign policies.

When the two advocacy NGOs take the cause of their stakeholders before foreign governments and international organizations, they claim to personify not only the U.S. civil society, but also certain elements of the U.S. power structure. When advocating before the United Nations to end the Darfur crisis, NGO2 represented the interests of both the displaced people in Sudan and Chad and the American society including its state and non-state actors.

5.2. Relationships with host governments and civil societies

The interviewed executives provided numerous examples of NGOs' interactions with host governments, media and civil societies. NGO1's connections to power go beyond the United States and include leaders of several foreign countries and international institutions. By sponsoring events and exchange programs that feature U.S. and foreign political elites, the NGO gains a reputation of an influential global player. In addition, high profile connections allow NGO1 to act as mediator between foreign and U.S. Governments.

Typically, NGO3's expatriate executives interact with host governments to ensure that their offices comply with local regulations for incorporation. However, in countries with stricter family planning laws and traditions, NGO3 commonly finds itself in negotiations with local authorities over the legitimacy of its products and services. In the latter interactions, NGO3's country of origin comes up rather frequently.

The accounts about NGOs' relationships with host country media display a pattern worth mentioning as well. When NGOs or their associates become subjects of controversial coverage, it seems almost inevitable that local media focus on the NGO's country of origin rather than the NGO itself. Often the NGO in question is presented not by its name, but simply as an American organization. The story in a local Indian newspaper emphasized that it was an American national—not an NGO2's volunteer—who had allegedly made offensive comments about Indian women. Sudanese government-controlled media have repeatedly depicted NGO2's advocacy efforts to end the crisis in Darfur as a plot by American Jews. NGO3's ambition to make contraceptives available everywhere in Indonesia was portrayed in a national newspaper as an American organization's intent to sell condoms to children.

5.3. Relations with the U.S. Government

Regardless of whether the organization receives government funds or relies entirely on private funding, the five NGOs claim to function and believe to be perceived by others—both domestically and internationally—as independent from the U.S. Government. Interviewees think that NGOs contribute to shaping the perceptions and opinions about the United States by highlighting their organizational autonomy and the pluralism of U.S. society.

The ways these five NGOs express their disagreement with the government and share it with stakeholders vary. NGO1's executives said that advocacy groups are by definition government watchdogs. Depending on specific issues and circumstances, NGO1 handles its relations with U.S. authorities either publicly or privately. Typically, NGO1 finds allies within one branch of government or one

aisle of the Congress and uses those alliances to influence the decision-making process in favor of the causes it supports and the stakeholders it represents. Nonetheless, executives explained, their organization is ultimately guided by the interest of the United States—as NGO1 understands it.

NGO3's executives see their role abroad in voicing dissent with the government. When NGO3's organizational position on a foreign policy issue differs from that of the U.S. Government, its executives make that disagreement known among its stakeholders—in particular, the international donor community and host governments. On occasion, NGO3 files a suit against U.S. Government in order to bring the issue of discord to the U.S. political agenda:

We are not afraid of getting sued and we are not afraid about ruffling feathers of the government, or the church, or anybody else... We feel there is a role for an organization like ours to come out and talk about those issues that are real and are controversial sometimes.

NGO4's Top Executive said, “We certainly do not hesitate to criticize or call on the Government for various things that we feel are the right thing to do. We do not feel impaired for criticizing them just because we take money from them.”

Executives from NGO2, NGO3, and NGO4 were adamant about the inadequacies of the U.S. foreign aid system. Informants find the USAID requirements burdensome and, at times, serving U.S. political interests rather than the interests of those in need. NGO2 shows its dissent by conducting an advocacy campaign to reform foreign assistance and by not seeking U.S. Government funds at all. NGO3's Top Executive dissociated from what he referred to as “the Beltway bandits,” i.e., those NGOs that heavily rely on government grants and contracts and tailor their international agendas to the State Department's and USAID's Requests for Proposals. NGO3's Top Executive also argued that some U.S. Government-funded relief programs arrive with an expectation of gratitude from their recipients.

5.4. Engagement in the U.S. public diplomacy

Consistent with the literature on NGOs' role in public diplomacy (Leonard et al., 2002, Zaharna, 2010 and Zatepilina, 2009), most interviewees believe that both state and non-state actors have a role to play in building a positive reputation for the United States abroad, albeit public diplomacy might not necessarily be NGOs' goal or obligation. Informants' accounts also support the argument that certain U.S. NGOs might have more credibility than U.S. Government among foreign civil societies (Zaharna, 2010 and Zatepilina, 2009).

The data suggest that NGOs see their niche in representing U.S. civil society—rather than the state—before stakeholders and the general public abroad.

Informants from the three faith-based NGOs agreed that their organizations are implicit ambassadors of their religious communities and the U.S. people in general. Referring to their organization as unofficial ambassador of the United States, NGO1's executives argued that they represent U.S. establishment as well.

Some informants feel that the First Amendment empowers U.S. NGOs to represent the diversity of U.S. public opinion in the international arena. NGO1's executive argued that U.S. NGOs have more freedom than NGOs from other countries to express their dissent with own and other governments, and to advocate for both U.S. and non-U.S. interests.

Most informants do not think that a certain type of U.S. NGOs is better fitted for public ambassadorship than others. NGO3's Top Executive suggested that the U.S. Government-funded NGOs might feel more compelled to represent the United States than those NGOs that rely on other sources of funding. In contrast, NGO3's expatriate executives argued that U.S. NGOs may wear a U.S. ambassador's hat regardless of their source of funding. Interviewees believe that their international stakeholders make a distinction between U.S. Governmental and nongovernmental institutions—in particular, those that do not rely on government funding. Although U.S. NGOs might occasionally be perceived as agents of U.S. Government, informants suggested that international stakeholders are likely to view their organizations as more balanced than U.S. state actors.

According to interviewees from NGO1, NGO2, and NGO3, international stakeholders turn to U.S. NGOs for explanations of U.S. foreign policies. NGO2's volunteers are said to shape perceptions about the American people because some of them might be the only U.S. citizens that a small rural community in a poor country would ever meet in person. Although NGO1's and NGO3's interactions may not be changing attitudes about the United States, their informants believe that U.S. NGOs help foreign publics understand what the United State is and is not, and what Americans are and are not.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY SCHOLARSHIP

This multiple-case study built on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to develop and test conceptual propositions on country identity and reputation. The theory-building technique and replication logic were applied to substantiate the relevance of American-based NGOs for the U.S. standing and U.S. public diplomacy.

The data support the assumption that multiple, at times conflicting, country-of-origin identities held by domestic NGOs might be similar or dissimilar to the state identity held by the government. NGOs' country-of-origin identities convey that NGOs share core American values, represent specific segments of U.S. society,

and have connections to the U.S. power. The findings also suggest that American NGOs take upon themselves the responsibility for the U.S. identity and want to be recognized both domestically and internationally as agents of the U.S. identity.

In addition, U.S. NGO-owned state identities appear to have some effect on the U.S. foreign relations and, possibly, even greater effect on the U.S. reputation. Although the data reflect only NGOs' own views on their corporate reputations, the impact of these NGOs on the U.S. standing seem to be most apparent in their relationships with global stakeholders and the U.S. Government.

Unlike those U.S. Governmental institutions that are tasked with cultivating a favorable U.S. standing overseas (e.g., U.S. Department of State), NGOs do not engage in strategic reputation management on behalf of the United States. However, NGOs recognize that the outcomes of their corporate reputation management go beyond their corporate interests. Therefore, NGOs are ready to share responsibility for the U.S. reputation.

Nevertheless, U.S. NGOs have no intention to expand the U.S. public diplomacy establishment. NGOs see themselves contributing to the public diplomacy process by (1) representing their U.S. stakeholders in the world; (2) advancing the interests of their international stakeholders; (3) highlighting the autonomy and pluralism of U.S. civil society; and (4) utilizing their freedom of expression to publicly oppose the U.S. Government on matters concerning U.S. interests.

Notwithstanding the plausibility of generalizing these findings to such theoretical propositions as the correlations between corporate and country-of-origin identities, or between corporate and country reputations, these five cases are not generalizable in conventional, statistical sense. Future studies could include larger samples to establish whether these five nonprofits are representative of the entire population of U.S.-based NGOs. Also, the connection between corporate and country reputations could not be directly observed by looking at the NGOs' perspectives only. Future research could measure the strength of the relationship between NGOs' reputations and the U.S. standing by surveying stakeholders in host countries and by content-analyzing foreign media.

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