There is a memorable moment in the Australian comedy film *The Dish* (2000) in which a small New South Wales town with a big role to play as a relay point for Apollo moon shot transmissions welcomes the U.S. ambassador. The mayor announces the national anthem of the United States and the ambassador and his wife stand proudly with hands on their hearts. But the town band strikes up not the Star Spangled Banner but the brassy chords of the theme from the TV show *Hawaii Five O*. The scene plays with the confusion of America’s political and cultural presence in the world, and especially the reach of American film and television. As many historians have noted, the worlds of Hollywood and diplomacy were never hermetically sealed and have at some points worked together for mutual benefit. The State Department labored to facilitate the export of films; the White House, Office of War Information and even the CIA pressed for particular themes and attitudes in feature films for export. This paper engages one—neglected—section of that story, the career of the U.S. government as a film maker in its own right, and specifically the work of the United States Information Agency as a creator and distributor of documentary films. The body of this chapter will present a narrative of the development of film at USIA, but it will conclude with an analysis of the wider role and limits of film first as a mechanism of public diplomacy and finally as a source for its

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historical study. But before that narrative begins it is helpful to locate film within the wider taxonomy of public diplomacy activity.

As I have argued elsewhere, public diplomacy—which I define simply as an international actor’s attempt to conduct foreign policy by engaging with a foreign public—is an umbrella term covering five distinct activities. These activities are listening (systematically gathering, analyzing and feeding back information from and about a foreign public into the foreign policy process), advocacy (the presentation of a policy or information to a foreign public), cultural diplomacy (the facilitated export of an aspect of the actor’s culture for a foreign policy end), exchange (the exchange of persons with the target foreign public) and international news broadcasting (the facilitated transmission of news gathered according to the norm of journalistic practice). These activities are so distinct that in some countries they are conducted by separate entities. The United States has historically attempted to house all elements of public diplomacy together and, indeed, a desire to play to that logic led USIA to seek out an umbrella term for these activities in the first place. While this taxonomy fits most public diplomacy work easily, film does not sit easily within these divisions. As will be seen, USIA film was usually intended as a form of advocacy work, speaking in support of specific information goals, but some films sought to support the cultural side of public diplomacy, and yet others were so infused with the form and purpose of news as to resemble a form of international broadcasting. Listening in film public diplomacy would be monitoring the filmic output of others in the target market, and this too was part of USIA’s work in the Cold War. There are even—in the days before USIA—examples of collaborative film projects, suggestive of the ethics and approaches of international exchange. Film therefore is more than just a mechanism of advocacy, and herein, as will be seen, lay part of its problem.


2 Germany has separate organs for advocacy, culture, academic exchange and international broadcasting. Britain has an additional organ to facilitate off-the-record debate and exchange within its public diplomacy apparatus: a Foreign Office conference center called Wilton Park.