US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TODAY
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ON TRIAL?

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Is it right to put public diplomacy on trial? After all, most of its advocates are genuine believers in the merits of its practice, whether as a lubricant to foreign policy, as a means of promoting international mutual understanding, as a trust-building exercise or, as I like to describe it, as propaganda for peace. While public diplomacy differs from propaganda – as it is popularly misunderstood\(^1\) – by virtue of its mutuality and its reciprocity of intentions as well as gains, it remains a form of “national self-advertisement” or what some of its supporters now label as “nation branding”\(^2\). Essentially, public diplomacy emphasises all that is best about a society to foreign audiences. Its historians look back to the Cold War and attribute some role to its practice in helping to convince the world, including in central and Eastern Europe, of the merits of democracy over communism as a better way of doing politics.

Unfortunately, democratic politicians were so confident that the promotion of western value systems had played a key role in defeating the “Evil Empire” that, once the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, they no longer felt any priority was needed for public diplomacy activities like international educational exchanges and international broadcasting (or what the KGB called “the voices” as a collective nickname for the Voice of America, the BBC and others). The post-Cold War downsizing of American public diplomacy culminated in the closure of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1999. Public diplomacy may indeed have played some role in helping the west to “win” the Cold War, but its neglect in the decade that followed may equally have

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1. Propaganda is here defined in value-neutral terms as a planned process of communication which utilises available means (media) to promote thought and/or behaviour amongst target audiences that primarily benefits the source, either directly or indirectly. It does not exclude the possibility that the recipient may also benefit as well.

2. In particular, see the work of Simon Anholt, editor of the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, and the founder and author of three major global surveys, the *Anholt Nation Brands Index*, City Brands Index and State Brands Index of the reputations of places.