



Editorial

The media and national image

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There are two sorts of companies in the world: those whose primary focus is always on developing a better product that people will want to buy because it is better, and those whose primary focus is always on finding more effective ways of making people buy the product they are selling.

There are usually examples of both in any industry, but the young industry of ‘place branding’ seems to have acquired or inherited an inordinate number of the latter in a very short time; and many of these, rather than offering guidance on how to improve the image or reputation of places, appear at first sight to offer something even more practical and concrete – an opportunity to promote the place directly in print media or television.

Government officials in various countries often tell this author how they have been approached by ‘researchers’ who are ‘looking into the possibility of producing a special feature’ about their country and its unique holiday and/or investment climate, usually for a highly prestigious international newspaper or business magazine. It usually later transpires that the researchers in question are actually sales agents for a public relations, ‘communications’ or media sales firm that has a licence from the prestigious newspaper to produce paid-for advertising supplements in its name.

With the masthead brand of a centuries-old newspaper on their business cards, these salesmen travel the world, tricking inexperienced government officials in the developing and the least-developed

countries into funding, subsidising or supporting such supplements, claiming that this exercise in ‘nation branding’ will raise their country – notwithstanding poverty, crime, civil war, disease, political instability and corruption – to a new level of international respect and esteem, boosting aid, foreign investment and tourism.

Of course, no evidence is ever produced that such results will really occur, nor can it be produced, and in reality, these kinds of advertising supplements, once produced, usually go straight into the bin when the reader opens the newspaper. But even if they do happen to be closely read by some readers, a single appearance in an obviously sponsored supplement can do very little to raise the profile or change the image of a country that that reader might never have heard of before, or that is strongly associated in his or her mind with decades of poverty, instability, corruption or violence.

In fact, the reading patterns of such supplements are probably like those of car brochures; the vast majority of people who read these brochures turn out to be the people who already own such a car and are simply looking for reassurance that they have made the right choice. Similarly, the majority of people who take the trouble to read an advertising supplement about a rather obscure country are probably the people who already have some reason to be interested in that country: either because they come from there, have family there, have recently visited it or are planning to do so.

But most government officials, especially in poorer countries, are inexperienced in the ways of the media. Their training is usually in political science or economics: most will have little direct experience of the private sector, and will know nothing of the arcana of advertising, public relations, media sales and brand management.

Of course, the media salespeople will not miss any opportunity to bandy around the thrilling and mysterious vocabulary of 'nation branding' and 'destination branding', citing the tremendous rise in interest in this important field, showing examples of stunning TV and print campaigns produced by (very rich) developing countries as evidence of this new trend, and stoking up a strong sense of anxiety that no developing country can afford not to enter this new arms race of advertising and promotion.

Many of them even quote this author's work in their sales pitches, carefully avoiding the passages in which he inveighs against the wicked waste of taxpayers' and donors' funds in useless propaganda, citing instead the phrases in which he stresses the importance of a positive national reputation for economic, political and social developments in a globally connected world.

As revenues from display and recruitment advertising decline, and endless, instantly updated news and comment are now freely available on the Internet, traditional printed newspapers and magazines, as well as the traditional broadcast media, are desperately seeking other sources of revenue as they struggle to stave off their inevitable demise. It is not surprising under such circumstances that the traditional 'Chinese Wall' between editorial and advertising has crumbled; not long ago, it was the pride of serious newspapers and TV channels that not even their biggest advertisers could be sure of regular or uncritical editorial coverage in the same titles in which they advertised. Today, the field is wide open for virtually any disguised or even quite blatant form of advertorial, product placement or other forms of endorsement, as long as the

price is right and the newspaper or broadcaster stays within the law (and the law on such matters is, in most countries, a weak form of voluntary self-regulation at best).

In one recent case, officials from a government that this author advises were approached by an advertising supplement salesman, claiming to be a journalist from a leading newspaper that was looking into the possibility of covering their country in yet another high-profile special report. Dangling this possibility, he instructed them to provide him with comprehensive details about the country's economy, including its principal companies and their directors' contact details. He even gave them a deadline for providing this information, stressing that the 'opportunity' of featuring their country would only be available for a limited time.

This request was, of course, impertinent nonsense; he could have found the economic information himself in 5 minutes on Wikipedia, and making them provide contact details for company directors simply saved him the trouble of producing his own hit-list of corporations to which he could sell advertising 'opportunities' within the supplement. By getting their details in this way, he could even claim to the companies that their names had been suggested to him by their government, giving the exercise a quasi-official endorsement and an aura of respectability.

All the classic tricks of the snake-oil salesman were there, suggesting that the salesman is doing the customer a favour by giving him the exclusive opportunity of acquiring the product; pretending that the product may not actually be on sale at all, and that there's only a small chance it might become available; failing to make any mention of cost until the moment of payment; making the purchaser work hard to 'deserve' the product; claiming that the offer is time limited.

The salesman even operated a classic 'pincer movement' on the officials, by writing at the same time to the country's Prime Minister (in considerably more obsequious tones), praising him in rather vague terms for his enlightened

vision for the country, quoting one of his recent speeches, and stating that the supplement was scheduled to coincide with an important international summit due to take place a few months later. In contrast to the correspondence with the officials, there was no suggestion in this letter that the country had to prove itself worthy of such a supplement – the decision to publish was presented as a *fait accompli*.

As it turned out, the salesman was wasting his time, as very few of the companies he approached in the country felt able or willing to ‘invest’ in advertising in the supplement, for the simple reason that almost none of them were exporters and paying a lot of money to promote their goods to foreign audiences was patently absurd. After a frantic last attempt to persuade the government that they were now responsible for subsidising the full cost of the supplement, he departed for his next developing country.

Similar tales are often heard of media sales people representing international TV channels; in this case, they trick the governments of poor countries into spending tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars on tiny numbers of TV commercials, dazzling them with the astronomical numbers of viewers these spots will reach around the world. And because such governments seldom have the experience to commission or the facilities to produce their own commercials, the TV channel will often earn extra fees by cobbling together the film themselves – taking advantage of the fact that few government officials understand the difference between the media sales arm of a TV channel and the creative department of a proper advertising agency.

More importantly, few of them understand the importance of scheduling – a TV spot that appears in off-peak time in the wealthy markets of Europe or North America will not hit many viewers – or the importance of frequency; one or two TV spots over the course of a few weeks are highly unlikely to register in any way at all on the viewer, something that only frequent repeats over many months, costing millions of dollars, can achieve.

It is not just the innocence or inexperience of government officials that makes life easy for these itinerant salespeople; the reality is that it is enormously difficult for any government during its normal term of office to produce any measurable impact on their nation’s international reputation – such things can take generations to shift – and the temptation to spend a lot of money on something as appealing, as tangible, as modern and as uplifting as an international advertising campaign is a strong temptation indeed. Producing and measuring real outcomes is terribly hard, especially in the short term; but producing and measuring outputs is child’s play.

Of course, the greater question behind all this remains one of effectiveness; it is not simply a matter of whether these advertising ‘opportunities’ are being honestly and transparently sold or not, but also whether they actually do what they claim to do. As this author has often stated in this Journal and elsewhere, he has yet to see any proof that mere messaging has any influence whatsoever on people’s pre-existing ideas and prejudices about other countries. One can think of many reasons why they would not, and nobody has yet produced any solid evidence to show that they might.

None of this is helped by the fact that the multilateral institutions, development agencies, rich country governments and NGOs, in their efforts to appear up-to-date and innovative in their approaches to capacity building, poverty reduction and economic competitiveness, will, more and more often, enthusiastically endorse these media-based interpretations of ‘nation branding’ in developing countries. Just like the governments they advise in these countries, they may have little knowledge or understanding of the world of media, still less the difficult and unfamiliar subject of national image management (perhaps it would be more accurate to say the ‘non-existent subject of national image management’), and regularly fall into the same traps as their clients, believing quite innocently and uncritically that the techniques that build big commercial

brands in the rich world must surely be easily adaptable to building big country brands in the poor world.

It is another terrible example of the temptation and the corruption of aid: what could be more appropriate, more fun, more pleasing to the Western donors, or more appropriate to the culture of those donors, than to spend huge piles of Western money on Western-style 'communications'. The literature and the consultants' reports produced by the NGOs, the development agencies, the Western governments and the multilateral institutions are packed with references to 'communications' and the modern importance of 'soft power'. If an African government spends millions of dollars on TV spots uselessly extolling carefully selected segments of its sparkling beaches, happy villages, gleaming hotels, factories, airports and skyscrapers (carefully editing out the slums in the background), is not it simply doing what it is told?

It is truly the blind leading the blind, innocently or ignorantly conspiring together to waste billions of dollars of aid in futile state propaganda – and the only beneficiaries are the media, the public relations and marketing agencies, and the various individuals along the route who pocket the commissions on each mega-deal.

What is abundantly clear is that governments, especially in the developing world, need to understand these matters better, and need to take more control over their relationships with the international media: how they use it and how it uses them. For this reason, this author often recommends that countries set up a national Media Centre with the remit of providing a professional interface between government, business, civil society and the international media. An outline of such a unit is described in this Preface.

The media need not be and should not be the enemy of governments that are interested in enhancing their international reputation – it is, after all, one of the main conduits through which national image usually travels. In some cases, even advertising supplements might be an

appropriate component in the media mix used for promoting tourism or foreign investment – but only if they are a part of a clear strategy, based on a clear definition of the target market, associated with clear criteria for measuring and evaluating success, based on a properly worked-out budget, with proper mechanisms for ensuring that such activities are planned and executed creatively, cost-effectively and professionally.

Armed with such knowledge and preparation, governments would not simply react to the first salesman who calls, but would analyse the various offerings, make their own selection on the basis of clear criteria, take the initiative and approach the best media themselves, and negotiate a proper deal in the interest of their taxpayers.

In the meantime, we can expect to see ethical and professional standards continue to plummet in the world's media, which is why it is all the more important that governments arm themselves with the expertise, experience and confidence to deal decisively and effectively with them.

Recently, this author was shocked to see a prominent item during the main prime-time news programme of one very distinguished international TV channel, announcing the launch of a new product from an American company. The product was described in detail, listing all its features and benefits, the camera pausing respectfully for a full 5 seconds – an eternity in the fast-moving world of 24-hour TV news – over the manufacturer's logo. There was a lengthy interview with a senior executive from the company, extolling the virtues of the product. None of the manufacturer's competitors or their products were mentioned. There was not even an attempt to link the 'news' item to any broader topic of interest. It was, in short, an advertisement. The author saw it repeated 12 times during the following 36 hours.

This is the future of the media – a space for black propaganda where paid-for promotion, objective information and comment become

indistinguishable, where the real sponsors of the message are entirely disguised, and where, in consequence, no message can be taken on trust.

If this is the new editorial environment, it is surely only a matter of time – and the price being right – for paid political messages to find their space alongside the commercial ones. It is surely time to redouble our efforts not just to arm governments against media sales, but also to inoculate our children against believing anything they see on the TV or the Internet, or that they read in a newspaper over the course of their lifetimes.

THE NATIONAL MEDIA CENTRE

Although the emphasis in enhancing the images and reputations of places should be on creating substance rather than communications, it has to be acknowledged that many countries, especially developing economies, are too passive and reactive in their dealings with the international media. Their responses to the media are often highly disconnected between the private and public sectors, and between sectors. The extreme vulnerability of public servants to the blandishments of media sales, as described in the previous section, is equally significant.

The creation of a national, centralised Media Centre is something this author often recommends in these cases. This provides a single point of contact for all foreign media interested in covering the country in any context, and is a great help in harmonising the messages going out to the media from the country.

In cases of negative coverage, the Media Centre should have a sophisticated, multilingual Crisis Management section that could issue accurate and timely rebuttals, consistent and responsible statements from all key players, and ensure that the media deals with the country as consistently and respectfully as possible.

The Media Centre should also be responsible for monitoring the international media for all significant mentions of the country, so that it can identify problems with as much advance warning as possible, and help all the relevant

players to develop a consistent and effective strategy for dealing with the issue.

The Media Centre should be equipped with media monitoring and other forms of polling and research expertise and resources, and should take responsibility for survey instruments that are related to tracking and measuring the country's international image.

Those all-important visits to the country by journalists covering tourism, foreign investment, culture, exports, politics and other sectors can be planned and coordinated by the Media Centre, ensuring that proper information, hospitality, access and resources are provided. A club house (modelled on the Foreign Press Centres that are to be found in so many rich-country capitals around the world) where foreign journalists can visit, work and find information, help and hospitality, connectivity and contacts is also a very valuable asset.

The Media Centre can also help to coordinate the messaging of the country's major communicators (tourist board, investment promotion agency, main exporters, Ministry of Foreign Affairs etc), and – if acceptable to all parties, even exercise some 'quality control' over their productions – to make sure that no major sector carries out promotional or informational campaigns that are below acceptable international standards.

BAD PRESS

It is a refrain one hears very often as one listens to governments complaining about how badly the international media treats them – that bad news seems to travel faster than good, and that getting a positive story into the media is virtually impossible.

Certainly, public opinion habitually assumes that negative stories in the media are more likely to be truthful than positive ones. Both journalists and readers often believe that if a story is to the disadvantage of the protagonist, then it is more likely that the 'real truth' has been discovered, and we have somehow been privileged to peep through a tear in the curtain of the official version. Any story that clearly benefits the reputation of an individual – or

especially a government – must surely be mistrusted, because you do not get something for nothing in this world.

There is a growing habit of cynicism among the media in many countries, which I am afraid they caught from the British press. The notion that anyone in any position of power, influence or prosperity, anyone who succeeds at anything, anyone who is at all admired, anyone in a prominent or public position – indeed, anyone at all who is not clearly a victim or an underdog – must necessarily be lying about something, and the duty of the reporter is to identify and expose their hypocrisy, and not give up until they have found it (and if they really cannot find it, then they will sometimes invent one, or hint that there is one that nobody has yet discovered). This crusading cynicism sits unhappily alongside the rapidly slipping integrity of their editorial ‘product’, as described in the previous section.

In some cases, a piece of ‘bad press’ can become a long-term or fixed problem, and it is certainly a big problem if it is one of the few things that the world knows about a particular country. Media themes and consequently public opinion can occasionally whip each other up into a frenzy on certain topics – such as, for example, whale or seal hunting – and this kind of ‘bad press’ takes on a life of its own, becoming for as long as it lasts almost as strong as the country’s image; certainly capable of ‘bringing down’ a country’s good name altogether if it persists for long enough and generates enough of a storm.

In such cases, public opinion is not usually very interested in nuances or exceptions or complex debates – and there are two things that countries need to understand they can never do – one is to have an argument with public opinion; the other is to change the subject.

What countries and their governments often do not seem to appreciate is that public opinion, when it is as strong and widespread as this, is a force of nature, like a hurricane or a volcano, and imagining that you can control it, argue with it, predict its behaviour or even

fully understand it is a dangerous delusion. If your village is built on the slopes of a volcano, and lava starts to flow from the crater, what do you do? Some people, of course, will waste precious time complaining about how unfair it is, and how their village has been standing there for generations, and how they have a perfect right to remain where they are. And of course, they are absolutely 100 per cent correct, just as surely as they are absolutely 100 per cent doomed. Others will start moving their possessions somewhere a little safer. There are no prizes for guessing whether pride or common sense saves more lives.

It is worth remembering that negative publicity in the global media works a lot like scandal in society, and as the English novelist Wilkie Collins observed in his 1866 novel *Armadale*,

... the influence exercised by the voice of public scandal is a force which acts in opposition to the ordinary law of mechanics. It is strongest, not by concentration, but by distribution. To the primary sound we may shut our ears; but the reverberation of it in echoes is irresistible.

There is not much that a country can do once it is tainted by such a story in the international media, beyond the basic ‘housekeeping’ of good damage limitation and efficient media relations to ensure that as much truth as possible gets out, and dignified and timely rebuttals are issued against the more egregious rumours or untruths.

Prevention is much more possible than cure, and the best and only prevention for such episodes (aside from ensuring that the bad things that cause the bad story do not happen in the first place) is working to create the biggest, richest, widest and most complex international image possible for the country, through every available channel of public and private diplomacy, educational and cultural exchanges, foreign investment and export promotion, foreign aid, tourism, sport and politics. The bigger, richer and more complex a country’s image becomes, the better people

feel that they know it and its people and institutions, the more resilient it becomes against negative news. The aim, in short, has to be for a country to become far more than a brand.

The most striking example of this fact is surely the United States, a country whose image repeatedly *does not* collapse in the face of quite extraordinary international opprobrium, a country that sometimes seems almost to be *trying* to destroy its good name, but never really gets anywhere near succeeding. The reason is that whatever negative stories may emerge in the media about its foreign policy, its economy, its popular culture, its society, its values, its people or its products, such stories are never more than a fraction of the size or weight of the total national story that people hold in their imaginations. The ship is too big to be easily sunk, even by a fairly big hole in its hull (although they did say that about the *Titanic*).

Countries that, on the other hand, are really only known for two or three things will of course find that one bad thing will then constitute a third or a quarter of their entire reputation, and will very likely sink the ship.

As mentioned earlier, once a negative story starts running it is impossible to change the subject; but that does not mean that countries should not *try* to change the subject. On the contrary, they must try exactly as if they believe that they will succeed in changing the subject, even though it is most likely that they will fail. Engaging on many fronts in every possible form of exchange with people in other countries, carrying on new ‘conversations’ on every possible topic, *including* the controversial topic at the heart of the problem, but never *dominated* by that topic, is not only prevention against the next episode, but may also help to shorten the life of the current episode.

Sooner or later, the story will die, and then the task of enriching the country’s reputation must continue in earnest, with clear goals, widespread participation across the private and public sectors, substantial investment and even greater energy.

THE QUESTION OF DESERVED REPUTATION

But before one even starts to think about why the media deals with a country in a particular way, it is worth asking whether that infuriating picture they always paint of the country is actually justified. It is remarkable how frequently governments avoid this question.

This author is often contacted by the governments of countries who announce that – apparently – they have an appalling image, and could he do something to fix it? The answer is always another question: ‘Might this be because you are an appalling country?’

The governments in question are often rather unhappy with this response, but of course it has to be the first question one asks. In the majority of cases, the problem is a weak image rather than a negative image, and the ambition of many countries today can be characterised as wishing to move out of the margins and into the mainstream of global opinion.

In addressing this challenge, it is always worth asking why the country is not *already* in the mainstream – or, to put it brutally, ‘if you’re so wonderful, how come you aren’t famous?’ – as if it proves possible to alter some of these conditions, the country might then achieve the kind of recognition that it believes it deserves.

The harsh reality is that, barring their close neighbours, most people in the world really only respect, occasionally think about, claim to know about and generally admire a maximum of 14 or 15 countries apart from their own, and these are all major, industrialised democracies in Western Europe and the English-speaking world, plus Japan and Brazil.

Most of the other countries that are well known are not much admired; they are famous because they are trouble-spots (there are usually about another 15 of these at any given moment, such as Iraq, Zimbabwe and North Korea), or because they once enjoyed a high profile, which people who do not know much about them feel they no longer deserve (like Greece, Turkey or Egypt), or because they are indisputably very

important but not universally loved, trusted or admired (like Russia, China or India).

The remaining 160 countries on the planet largely mind their own business and are consequently ignored by everyone who is not actively planning to emigrate or go on holiday there.

There are six very common reasons for the persistent obscurity of these countries:

1. *They really are marginal:* The majority of the 160 lesser-known countries have a chronic shortage of what marketers call ‘consumer touchpoints’. People simply do not get many chances to come into contact with them, their products, their culture or their populations.

In some cases, this is because the country has not been an independent state for very long; in many cases, it is because its population or economy are small; only a few of them are well-endowed tourist destinations; almost none of them have had significant possessions or interests abroad; very few of them trade significantly ‘above the line’ with other countries – in other words, their trading habits are largely industrial, business-to-business or in raw materials or unfinished goods. Such transactions are well below the radar of most ordinary people and the media.

Most of the 160 countries never feature in most other countries’ history books because they have never produced a world class statesman or stateswoman; their role in history is usually of merely regional significance, their historical moments taking place against a backdrop of ‘big history’ going on elsewhere; their cultural output is seldom of truly world class quality and quantity. Most of them even lack the picturesque assets of monarchy and aristocracy – the mark of a just state, perhaps, but undoubtedly a loss to their tourist industry.

2. *They produce few really famous people:* The other common characteristic of the 160 lesser-known countries is that they have never produced more than a tiny handful of really

world famous individuals, or a really influential and visible diaspora; most of them, in short, have a shortage of popular ambassadors. The Nation Brands Index suggests that people cannot readily picture the inhabitants of more than those 30 admired or notorious countries, and a population without an image is an overwhelming obstacle to the creation of a powerful and positive *national* image.

It is almost a cliché of media theory that ‘the media prefers a human interest story’; this is simply a reflection of public taste. People are most interested in other people, and one of the big mistakes that countries often make in trying to build their images is that they constantly present inanimate achievements to the world – projects, buildings, historical events, companies, products and services, achievements, statistics, landscapes, policies – everything, in fact, apart from the one thing that people really like to hear about: other people.

And, unfortunately, it is as much about quantity as quality. No country acquires a lasting worldwide reputation for music with one world class composer, or a reputation for architecture from one world class architect, or a reputation for statesmanship from one prominent president, or, indeed, a reputation for technology from one world class brand.

As this author has often remarked, building a national reputation is like filling a bathtub without a plug, and a country can produce a truly towering international figure, but soon fade from the world’s memory if he or she is not quickly succeeded by another remarkable figure from the same nation.

3. *They are cursed as well as blessed by their humility:* It is remarkable how many populations suffer from what this author calls ‘Groucho Marx Syndrome’. The comedian Groucho Marx famously observed that he would never want to join a club that would accept somebody like him as a member, and this appears to be a common characteristic of the human species: some kind of culturally rooted

modesty, a fixation of ineligibility, which prevents all but a very few nations from really shouting about their talents and achievements.

The Americans are naturally inclined to do it, and so are the Swedes and the British and the French, but the majority of other societies have a habit of pulling down people who do too well. Many of them even have special names or proverbs to describe this habit, which they are convinced is unique to their population. The Japanese say that 'the nail which sticks out gets hammered down'; the Australians talk about the 'tall poppies' getting cut down; the 'Law of Jante' is talked about throughout Scandinavia; South Americans refer to the 'chaquetero' – the person who pulls you down by your coat tails – and so it goes on.

It is rather nice to discover that the majority of people in the world are modest, and perhaps it also explains why less than 15 per cent of the world's countries are famous, despite the fact that almost all of them are wonderful.

4. Most are low-profile countries in high-profile regions: While the majority of countries remain largely anonymous, people seem to have quite strong ideas and prejudices about most regions and continents, such as Latin America, South-East Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, 'Old' Europe, Central Asia and so forth.

Many countries are minor players in regions with powerful cultural and geographical identities, and thus have a tendency to be overshadowed by the more powerful and prominent nations within their region, or by the region itself. In most cases, this 'regional image effect' does not work to their advantage. This author has written extensively about how the negative continental 'brand' of Africa is vigorously promoted by the aid industry and celebrities like Bono and Bob Geldof, to the great detriment of individual countries within Africa, which find it extremely hard to emerge from this hugely potent image of permanent catastrophe.

5. They have never done anything about it: Most countries have never addressed these issues of national reputation in any systematic way, and there is usually a notable lack of joined-up behaviour between the ways in which the different sectors, public and private, do their planning, spending, innovation, marketing and messaging. (Developing logos and slogans and running expensive 'nation branding' spots on international TV do not qualify as 'doing something about it'.)

There is usually no explicit national consensus on the 'mission', 'vision' and 'style' of the country. If such notions exist, they tend to be very much an unwritten constitution.

Most of the 160 countries possess few mechanisms for aligning the different sectors of their economy or society, few forums for productive and harmonious cross-fertilisation between them, and no single body with the responsibility for providing a national steer on reputational issues.

In most cases, there is much that could be achieved by tighter, more frequent and better organised collaboration between foreign policy, domestic policy, culture and the arts, sport, the private sector and especially exports, education, tourism, investment promotion, the financial sector, energy and the media.

6. They are boring: A high proportion of these 160 countries are moderately stable, moderately peaceful, moderately unexciting places that have done nothing really extraordinary in living memory to render themselves either admired or disgraced. They have succeeded in establishing almost no relevance to people in other countries; there is simply no reason why most people should grant them any of their precious attention.

Most of the 160 countries suffer from none of the headline-grabbing flaws or catastrophic troubles that might excite major international pity or sympathy; they rarely stick their noses into other countries' business; in politics, most of them are either modest but invisible international team players or do not feature at all in international circles.

Of course, in reality, a great many of them have a truly fascinating history, culture, literature, society, language, traditions and landscape – but, in the end, these assets are seldom of a sort to excite more than momentary envy, admiration or curiosity among other populations, who are usually far more interested in what goes on at home.

And it is possible for 1 of the 160 invisible countries, once in a while, to emerge into the sunny uplands of the 30 visible countries; but it is a task that cannot be overestimated. It is probably the most difficult thing that a country can ever do.

PICKING YOUR BATTLES

The world's media can be divided into two types: the vast majority whose aim, or habit, is to reflect people's existing views, and the tiny minority whose aim, or habit, is to challenge these. Clearly, any country that is trying to emerge from the 'anonymous 160' into the mainstream should focus its media strategy on the latter type, although it should be emphasised that a mere media strategy cannot possibly achieve this titanic task on its own.

There is an interesting circular relationship between the media and the 'brand images' of places. In one sense, those images are created or at least amplified and perpetuated by the media, but in another sense they create the media. Take a look at how almost any story featuring more than one place is treated in the media, and it becomes clear that the main elements in the story are the *idées reçues* or stereotypes about those places: much international journalism is simply a process of rehearsing, playing with, sometimes examining and very occasionally challenging those national brand images. A lot of journalism is basically a matter of endlessly redeploying such clichés.

When a country has a clear, simple, well-defined national stereotype, the media will be more comfortable covering that country, and this means that it will feature more regularly in the media, even if the basic journalistic formula is often little more than measuring up the

stereotype against the news event and seeing how closely they fit. Countries without strong images may find that they get less coverage generally, because a good story needs strong characters, and a weakly defined nation will often be left out.

This is part of the reason why Mexico, for example, gets more coverage in the international media than Chile, even though just as many good and interesting things go on in Chile. The fact is that Mexico has a very clearly defined 'brand image', which makes an easy and resonant instrument for a journalist to play on. Chile, without a strong image, is a trickier and less noisy instrument to play; and many foreign journalists will pass over the challenge.

At the start of this Preface, it was observed that some companies are more interested in finding ways of making people buy their product than in developing a product that more people might want to buy. It is important that governments, in the effort to enhance their international standing, do not fall into the same trap as these companies, and end up focusing on the medium rather than the message. Too much so-called 'nation branding' is really only public relations – the attempt to persuade the media to cover your country as positively and frequently as possible.

Good countries, like good companies, should be product-obsessed, not story-obsessed. The media is simply the carrier, not the focus of one's efforts to earn a better reputation. This is absolutely a matter of integrity, and integrity is all-important. Countries that 'play to the gallery' are soon found out, and public opinion is sensitive to attention-seekers, and generally quite adept at distinguishing them from the places with real integrity, a real sense of purpose and a real sense of identity.

The good news is that journalists are, always and forever, short of good content, and will act as a highly effective (and highly cost-effective) conduit for reputation if only one can provide them with the quantity, consistent quality and professionalism that they require. The fate of

the media is as much our responsibility as theirs.

The media is not, of course, the only means by which national reputations are forged and communicated; direct experience combined with word-of-mouth is equally significant (when, for example, large numbers of people visit a country as tourists or immigrants or investors or students, and pass on their impressions to others); products and services, when their country of origin is explicit, can be tremendously powerful vectors of national standing (consider how the images of Japan and Germany developed between the end of the Second World War and today, largely through the effect of the consumer brands they exported around the world); diplomacy, trade negotiations, international development

assistance and the other official channels through which elites communicate can be a critical factor in shaping perceptions of countries; famous people, acts of war, acts of charity, education, history, films, books, works of art, pictures, sporting and cultural events all play their part.

But it is remarkable how many of these phenomena ultimately reach the world's attention through the editorial content of newspapers, magazines, TV and the Internet. If one does not understand how that vector operates, then one cannot begin to think about influencing the image of place.

Simon Anholt
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