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Cultural Diplomacy, Branding and the American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20

Mary Erickson

The Global Cultural Initiative (GCI) was a flagship cultural diplomacy effort introduced by the Bush Administration in the mid-2000s; one project of this initiative was the American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20, a program of 19 films from five continents scheduled to tour the United States and abroad. This paper is a historical exploration into how the Bush Administration reconstructed American identity and culture through framing, and how that framing was embedded within cultural diplomacy initiatives like the GCI. This paper contributes to an understanding of how intercultural dialogue is often based on key messages and constructed ideas.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Language; Identity; Culture

Introduction

Former First Lady Laura Bush introduced the Global Cultural Initiative (GCI) on September 25, 2006. This initiative was designed to “coordinate, enhance and expand America’s cultural diplomacy efforts” through exchange and cross-cultural understanding achieved through art (USDOS Office of the Spokesman, 2006). This State Department program, with the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, forged cultural diplomacy partnerships with various public and private arts organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the American Film Institute.

Launched with much fanfare under a name with a “vague propagandistic ring,” the GCI was positioned as a flagship effort of the Bush Administration to connect with international audiences for mutual understanding through cultural exchange (Spector, 2006). One component of the initiative, AFI’s Project: 20/20, celebrated
international exchange by premiering a film program at the AFI Fest in November
2006, one of the most prominent film festivals in the country. The program as a
whole, as well as the individual films featured therein, was carefully framed to
support the Bush Administration’s cultural diplomacy efforts, which emphasized a
particular brand of American identity.

During the years that George W. Bush held the presidential office, there was a
marked shift toward government-directed branding of America and Americanness,
part of an overall effort to mitigate the world’s perception of the country. This paper
is a historical exploration into the ways in which the Bush Administration
reconstructed American identity and culture through framing, and how that framing
was embedded within cultural diplomacy initiatives. I will specifically examine
language used to frame and brand American identity through the AFI’s Project: 20/20
(and more generally through the Global Cultural Initiative). By addressing this key
point, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the Bush Administration’s
stance on cultural diplomacy, national identity, and image control. This paper will
first address the theoretical roots of cultural diplomacy and branding, followed by an
examination of the implicit meanings of framing. It will then specifically focus on the
cultural diplomacy efforts of the Bush Administration, discussing the Shared Values
Initiative to provide a backdrop to the more recent Global Cultural Initiative. The
paper then proceeds to an analysis of language that characterizes the AFI’s Project:
20/20 as a cultural diplomacy effort.

Theorizing the Roots of Cultural Diplomacy and Branding

Lasswell (2004) argues that propaganda is the most effective method of uniting the
masses for a common (often military) cause. Ideas about propaganda expanded
during the era of the Second World War, as it became clear that propaganda served a
similar function to physical weapons; it was theorized as an “instrument of
aggression, a new means for rendering a country defenseless in the face of an invading
“opinion expressed for the purpose of influencing actions of individuals or groups;” it is used to “put something across, good or bad” (pp. 125–126). Governments
around the world have incorporated propaganda into their foreign relations
strategies at various times in order to shape how they are viewed by both their
own citizens and the rest of the world.

Public diplomacy is a generally encompassing term coined in 1967 by Edmund
Gullion to describe the activities of the United States Information Agency (USIA)
and to conceal the cultural activities of the agency that might be construed as
propagandistic. The USIA was established in 1953 to run government-sponsored
information operations, playing a “bellwether role in developing and carrying out a
national strategy for overseas information and cultural operations” (Dizard, 2001,
p. 4). When Gullion reflected upon his choice of terminology to describe the
activities, he admitted, “I would have liked to call it ‘propaganda.’ It seemed the
nearest thing...to what we were doing’’ (Arndt, 2005, p. 480). Fisher writes that public diplomacy is “the cause and effect of public attitudes and opinions which influence the formulation and execution of foreign policies” (as cited in Schiller, 1976, p. 20). Schiller reinterprets this to mean “the utilization of communications research and related interdisciplinary fields for getting a grip on the minds of foreign audiences so that the foreign policies of the U.S. or, for that matter, any nation utilizing such techniques are admired, or at least accepted and tolerated” (Schiller, p. 20). Dizard (2001) has described the concept as “a catchall phrase for a broad range of information and cultural programs aimed at audiences at home and abroad” (p. 5).

Public diplomacy tends to focus on promoting the ideas and values of one society to another through, as Dizard writes, cultural programs and information. The concept of cultural diplomacy is closely, if not inextricably, linked to public diplomacy. Cummings (2003) writes that cultural diplomacy is “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding” (p. 1). To Arndt (2005), a former USIA staffer, “cultural diplomacy takes place when diplomats, i.e., governments, try to shape the flow of cultural relations between two or more countries in the interests of all” (p. 552).

This exchange of ideas is key when we look at Nye (2004) concept of “soft power,” conceptualized as “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” (p. 5). It is a more complex concept than simply influencing people. As Nye points out, threats are useful to influence people to act in ways that align with one’s desires. Soft power, rather, is “attractive power,” inducing an active change in people’s preferences that in turn change their actions (p. 6). As soft power tends to reference political power, we can examine countries as potential exploiters of soft power. They have three key resources that can maximize soft power potential: culture, political values, and foreign policies. In terms of cultural diplomacy, we are concerned with the intersection of all three of these resources.

Here is where marketing principles, and specifically branding, become most relevant in the conversation around cultural diplomacy. Branding is, according to the American Marketing Association, “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition” (as cited in Kotler & Gertner, 2004, p. 249). Gregory (2004) defines corporate brands as “the product of the millions of experiences a company creates – with employees, vendors, investors, reporters, communities, and customers – and the emotional feelings these groups develop as a result” (p. 3). It is at this point that we can most clearly connect branding with soft power and cultural diplomacy. Many (i.e., Gilmore, 2002; Kotler & Gertner, 2004) have argued that this connection makes sense and that governments have much to learn from corporate practices.

Olin’s (2002) notes that branding and national identity are in fact part of the same set; that the resistance and disgust that often arise when branding is mixed with national identity are rooted in snobbery, ignorance or semantics. “Branding business
and nations do have a lot in common... many brands help create a sense of identity, of belonging, just like the nation” (pp. 247–248). Olins’ argument, however, lacks an understanding of culture and nation. Branding in the corporate world comes from a group of executives who decide how a product should be viewed. National identity, on the other hand, is derived from the collective population. It comes from every direction, not just the top-down operation of corporate branding.

Tiedeman (2005) classifies marketing and advertising principles like press releases and paid advertisements as tools of public diplomacy. These tools are naturally incorporated into the construction of national identity, as governments can more easily control the perception of their countries when they control the messages being disseminated. Tiedeman differentiates among primary, secondary, and tertiary forms of communication through which to disseminate messages. While the above-mentioned tools of press releases and ads are classified as primary, popular culture and cultural diplomacy efforts are classified as tertiary—governments have very little control over the perceptions revealed by these forms. There have been efforts, however, throughout the history of American public and cultural diplomacy, to direct and control culture. The film industry is one example where the U.S. government has become involved in the construction of content in order to control how messages are sent and received.

Film is generally recognized to be a powerful medium, particularly as a propaganda tool, in conveying intended and unintended political effects (Nye, 2004). As McCann (1973) notes, “Film is at its best when it reaches deeper levels of thought and emotion. The persuasion is indirect” (p. 179). Moreover, as a popular medium, film is more effective at reaching the masses and drawing them in (Wagnleitner, 1989). There has been a consistent underlying assumption that the film industry in Hollywood produces certain representations of American life and is thus responsible for perceptions held by foreign populations (Wilson, 2000).

Culture as a propaganda tool can be very powerful, particularly when a government utilizes it to promote a particular agenda or brand. To effectively use culture in this manner, language framing is used to convey certain ideas and perspectives that echo the message contained within the agenda or brand. I turn to a discussion of the implicit meanings of frames next.

The Implicit Meanings of Frames

According to Lakoff (2006), “Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes to create what we take to be reality” (p. 20). Frames are those very basic elements of language that convey ideas and certain moral perspectives, particularly within political rhetoric, shaping how people conceive of issues or problems. Every word contains a conceptual frame that carries meaning. “When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain” (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv). Frames “structure our ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act;”
frames not only define problems and solutions, but “they also hide relevant issues and causes” (Lakoff, 2006, p. 26). They have the potential to shape what we think and how we think.

Lakoff applies principles from cognitive science to better understand the ways that frames function. He notes that we have deep frames that represent our morals and principles, and these frames do not change overnight. Because these frames are embedded in the subconscious, their use is unconscious and automatic. When new frames are introduced, they must be repeated over and over in order to link to our network of existing frames. This has been the strategy of conservatives in the United States for years, to “repeat over and over phrases that evoke their frames and define issues their way. Such repetition makes their language normal, everyday language and their frames normal, everyday ways to think about issues” (Lakoff, 2004, p. 50).

It is within these frames that we can locate propaganda. Conservatives have been able to control the political agenda for years because of their effective framing of issues, while progressives, according to Lakoff, have struggled to find succinct ways of reframing issues in terms of their own values and morals. Conservatives promote their own agenda by linking its goals to the goals of American citizens. Lee and Lee (2004) warn against “omnibus words,” or those words that “carry all sorts of meanings to the various sorts of men...words that make us the easy dupes of propagandists” (p. 127). Omnibus words are vaguely determinable; rather than having exact meanings, they are applied to connect with individual interpretations. Furthermore, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2004) argue, the language in propaganda is turned into “an instrument, a lever, a machine,” with its underlying principles emerging as “conveniently empty phraseology” (pp. 181–182).

Lakoff’s method of taking apart frames to get at their implicit meanings is useful for this study in order to more clearly understand how the Bush Administration approached cultural diplomacy and branding. This study examines press releases, speeches and other documents released by the State Department and GCI partners. These include various news releases, program descriptions and talking points from the State Department (including the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs; various news releases and speeches from the Executive Branch (including the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the White House); and various news releases and synopses from the American Film Institute regarding Project: 20/20.

These documents are the types that Tiedeman (2005) calls primary public diplomacy tools. These documents are particularly useful because, as Tiedeman suggests, these tools offer the highest level of control over language (p. 23). The majority of these documents are written by government officials who carefully craft their messages to be consistent with official policies, in this case, on cultural diplomacy efforts. Some of the documents from the American Film Institute can also be included in this set of primary public diplomacy tools because the language of these documents so closely mirrors that of the government-produced documents. It is likely that the State Department would not have approved of the AFI’s participation in the program had the AFI veered away from official or
supportive language. Although the official film synopses, which appear on the AFI website, were written by senior staff members of the AFI, they primarily speak to the content of the films, which in turn speaks to the reasons why the films would have been selected for Project: 20/20 and why they would have been well-suited to reflect and achieve the goals of the GCI.

Specific emphasis in this study is placed on the AFI program, examining specific word choices used to describe the program in order to draw out how it reflected a constructed notion of American identity according to Bush Administration branding. Following are analyses of some of the themes that emerge from the films’ promotional materials, and specifically the official synopses of the films that were posted on the corresponding GCI and AFI websites. This serves to explore how these films were framed to serve Project: 20/20’s stated objectives and, more broadly, the objectives of Brand America under the Bush Administration.

In order to understand the climate in which the GCI and Project: 20/20 operated, a description of the Shared Values Initiative is useful. This initiative illuminates the cultural diplomatic context into which the GCI emerged.

The Shared Values Initiative

Renewed attention to cultural diplomacy had been brewing within the American government since September 2001, when terrorist attacks prompted President Bush to pose a question to the country: “Why do they hate us?” (Ford, 2001). The Pew Global Attitudes Project reported that, throughout much of the world, favorable opinions of the United States were declining, while anti-Americanism increased. Tied to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the War on Terror(ism), negative opinions about the United States intensified first in Muslim nations, particularly in 2002 to 2004, but has spread to other nations more recently (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2006). Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, in an effort to correct this image immediately after 9/11, hired Charlotte Beers, chair of the global advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, to rebrand America. Officially appointed as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Charlotte Beers captured the attention of Colin Powell:

I wanted one of the world’s greatest advertising experts, because what are we doing? We’re selling. We’re selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy. It’s the free enterprise system, the American value system. It’s a product very much in demand. It is our job to be salespersons. (as cited in Tiedeman, p. 37)

Beers’ pièce de résistance, the Shared Values Initiative, has been generally recognized as a “communications disaster,” brought on by the Bush Administration’s failure to recognize the fundamental differences between branding and cultural diplomacy (Kennedy & Lucas, 2005, p. 320). It is this example that sets
the stage for the cultural diplomacy climate in which the Global Cultural Initiative operated.

Intended to “reach the people of the Arab and Muslim world with messages that emphasized the humanity and tolerance of the American people,” the Shared Values Initiative accentuated the United States’ religious tolerance as part of the overall American tolerance—the war on terrorism was not a war on Islam (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2006, pp. 24, 31). The campaign included speeches and town hall-type events in various countries, a 60-page magazine entitled *Muslim Life in America*, newspaper advertisements, and five television advertisements. Domestic and international media sharply criticized the misdirection of Shared Values Initiative, arguing that it failed to understand the roots of criticism against the United States, instead merely attempting to use “a small cloth to polish their image, and that’s it!” (Fullerton & Kendrick, p. 105).

The failure of the Shared Values Initiative was rooted in several flaws; Charlotte Beers approached public and cultural diplomacy with an advertising flair and was thus not respected by policy experts in Washington. She also adopted a one-way message flow, designing and sending messages rather than connecting with audience beliefs. “Her tactics failed to resonate with publics and were seen as nothing more than state-sponsored propaganda” (Tiedeman, 2005, p. 49). Furthermore, it took a State Department report entitled “U.S. image in the Islamic world: ‘Policy’ is the problem” (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2006, p. 107), to validate what much of the world already knew: that in the wake of Guantanamo detentions, new visa restrictions and immigrant deportations, policy was the problem and no amount of branding could counter its effects (Jansen, 2005).

In the aftermath of the Shared Values Initiative, the State Department refocused its cultural diplomacy efforts with increased funding for more direct information mouthpieces, TV Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa, which are two State Department media outlets aimed at reaching Arab audiences. Charlotte Beers resigned in 2003 and her successor, Margaret Tutwiler, resigned after a few months at this complex job. The next Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes, tried a more personalized approach, seeming to back off the very frank promotion of Brand America that resonated negatively with much of the world. Rather, this former Bush Administration strategic communications czar focused on conversations, seeking to find the common ground between herself and, for instance, Saudi women. But when questioned about what she has learned in diplomacy tours, her answers are “part evasion, part bromide,” seeming to “ignore the obvious benefits that emanate from any conversation, one to one or millions to millions, in which each side feels the other is listening, not just talking” (Ozernoy, 2006, p. 33).

However, Hughes’ background as head of President Bush’s strategic communications program informed her every step, and one quickly recognizes that she was as rooted in Brand America as her predecessors. As Kiley (2005) notes, “Hughes is a Bush cheerleader, not a strategist with an independent mind or opinion.”
Furthermore, she simply refused to recognize that she might be constructing a brand of American identity. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, she remarked:

> I view my job as engaging people... This is Karen listening and our government listening and exchanging views. Yes, I want to put my country in the best possible light but my job starts with truth and so I don’t even like the word spin doctor, because that implies you concoct something. I’m communicating the truth. (Hornig & Mascolo, 2006)

This seems to reinforce Lakoff’s (2004) point that “many of the ideas that outrage progressives are what conservatives see as truths – presented from their point of view... They have a frame and they only accept facts that fit the frame” (pp. 17–18).

It is within the climate of the failed Shared Values Initiative and Karen Hughes’ subsequent reframing of public diplomacy that the Global Cultural Initiative and one of its partner programs, Project: 20/20, emerged. The fanfare initially surrounding the program held promise for a new era in cultural diplomacy efforts. The films showcased in the program, as I will discuss, were framed in ways to support these efforts.

**The Global Cultural Initiative**

The Global Cultural Initiative was introduced in September 2006 as a “platform for international engagement and dialogue,” operating within the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the Department of State (USDOS Office of the Spokesman, 2006). It utilized arts and culture to help achieve the United States’ strategic public diplomacy goals, which were three-fold: first, to promote a positive vision of hope and opportunity; second, to foster a sense of common interests and values; and third, to “highlight the differences between most civilized people of all nations and faiths, and the violent extremists we face in the war against terror” (USDOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2006). In its first year, the GCI’s budget stood at $4.5 million, a fraction of the State Department’s public diplomacy budget ($597 million in fiscal year 2005) (US GAO, 2006, p. 10). Karen Hughes reportedly requested an additional $10 million to enable more American artists to travel abroad, but this small amount, which was difficult to even get, signaled the lack of financial commitment to this particular cultural diplomacy initiative (K. Hughes, 2006).

The GCI’s initial objectives, as outlined by its leader, Karen Hughes, were to connect foreign audiences with American art and artists; to share U.S. experience in arts management; and to educate people in the United States and abroad about arts from other cultures. It did so through four partnerships, each intended to engage the participation of American artists to build a cohesive sense of American values, which then could be circulated abroad.

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, one of the nation’s busiest and most visible performing arts venues, would provide arts management, training, and education to arts organizations abroad. It would also collaborate with VSA Arts, an international organization of disabled artists, to promote a key message of
inclusiveness as an important American value. The National Endowment for the Arts would focus primarily on literacy through International Literary Exchanges, which would include literary translations projects and publications between the United States and countries like Pakistan, Mexico, Russia, and Austria. The National Endowment for the Humanities started the Landmarks of American History and Culture Summer Institutes program; high school and community college teachers, as well as international teachers and representatives of cultural organizations, across the country were invited to participate in weeklong workshops that took place at historic sites. These workshops were intended to “promote a deeper understanding of the United States and American democratic principles” (USDOS Office of the Spokesman, 2006).

The fourth partnership was with the American Film Institute, a non-profit organization that houses a conservatory of American films, recognizes excellence in filmmaking, and runs an annual film festival in Los Angeles; it also administers educational and professional development programs. Its GCI-sponsored program was AFI Project: 20/20, a program of 19 films by American and international directors that traveled across the United States and abroad. These films were intended to “encourage understanding and appreciation of values such as freedom of expression, tolerance and rights in intellectual property” (AFI, 2006a). Further discussion of this fourth component of the GCI is warranted to demonstrate the ways in which the Bush Administration sought to enlist the private sector to assist in the promotion of certain values that reflected the overall strategic public diplomacy goals as defined by the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

**AFI’s Project: 20/20**

The Bush Administration and the State Department leaned toward private sector involvement in public diplomacy in order to capitalize on the reach that American-based transnational companies and organizations have around the world. In January 2007, the State Department held a Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy, co-sponsored by the Public Relations Coalition, bringing together public relations experts and business leaders who were, according to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “really attuned to trends that are changing our world in ways that perhaps those of us on the diplomatic side are not” (USDOS, 2007). The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), which “helps incorporate the humanities and the arts into White House objectives,” organized a Symposium on Film, Television, Digital Media and Popular Culture in Los Angeles in May 2006 (PCAH, 2006a). The symposium broached the subject of enlisting members of the film and television industry to assist in cultural diplomacy efforts. It was, after all, “the perfect place . . . to explore an international PCAH initiative,” although the PCAH’s Director of Program Initiatives Kimber Craine described the symposium as an opportunity for “AFI, State [Department] and members of the film and television industry [to come]
together to discuss current issues and trends in the industry” (Craine, 2007; PCAH, 2006b).

Project: 20/20 grew out of this symposium and, according to Craine (2007), it was a “natural fit” with the Global Cultural Initiative. It developed simultaneously to the annual AFI Fest, and the various GCI partners, including the NEH, NEA, and the State Department itself, selected films for Project: 20/20 from a pool of films accepted into the AFI Fest. Launched at the AFI Fest in November 2006, this program included 19 films from five continents (Chart 1), although almost half of the films (nine) were produced or co-produced in the United States. There were 13 narrative feature films and six documentaries. Countries of origin for these films included, among others, Venezuela, Rwanda, Iran, Japan, South Africa, and Egypt. The filmmakers involved in Project: 20/20 toured the United States shortly after their appearance at the AFI Fest, visiting a handful of cities and, later, various countries such as Kuwait, South Africa, Burkina Faso, China and elsewhere.

It is not surprising that the State Department looked to the American film industry to assist in its cultural diplomacy efforts, as there have long been connections between government and the film industry. These connections have primarily taken the form of documentary film production, from Department of Agriculture films

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<tr>
<th>Chart 1 Films included in AFI’s Project: 20/20 in its inaugural program in 2006.</th>
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<tr>
<td>After…, David Cunningham (USA)</td>
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<td>Back Home, J.B. Rutagarama (Rwanda/USA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beautiful Ohio, Chad Lowe (USA)</td>
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<td>Big Dreams, Little Tokyo, David Boyle (USA)</td>
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<td>Blindsight, Lucy Walker (UK/Tibet)</td>
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<td>Disappearances, Jay Craven (USA)</td>
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<td>Frozen Days, Danny Lerner (Israel)</td>
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<td>Homecoming, Norman Maake (South Africa)</td>
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<td>The Journey, Goutam Ghosh (India)</td>
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<td>Life after Tomorrow, Julie Stevens &amp; Gil Cates (USA)</td>
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<td>Memories of Tomorrow, Yukihiko Tsutsumi (Japan)</td>
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<td>No Sweat, Amie Williams (USA)</td>
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<td>Offside, Jafar Panahi (Iran)</td>
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<td>The Road, Zhang Jiarei (China)</td>
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<td>Shame, Mohammed Naqvi (Pakistan/USA)</td>
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<td>Shoot the Messenger, Ngozi Onwurah (UK)</td>
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<td>Stephanie Daley, Hilary Brougher (USA)</td>
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<td>To Play and To Fight, Alberto Arvelo (Venezuela)</td>
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<td>The Yacoubian Building, Marwan Hamed (Egypt)</td>
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produced as early as the 1910s to Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series during World War Two to films made under the auspices of the USIA in order to “set the stage, the background, for the actions we take in world politics” (McCann, 1973, p. 177). It is generally recognized that film is a powerful medium; such is reflected in the U.S. government’s War Information Program in the 1940s, as it circulated memos within Hollywood to ensure that, among other points, films would “help win the war” (Wilson, 2000, p. 87). We continue to see the overlap of Washington and Hollywood today. Former White House political advisor Karl Rove met with MPAA chief Jack Valenti in November 2001 in order to “coordinate American foreign policy, dominated by the ‘war against terrorism’, with Hollywood productions” (Valentin, 2005, p. 90).

There has also been political attention to the film industry because of a perceived glut of anti-American sentiment originating with American popular culture. Concern arose because of films like *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2006). A veteran publicist had at one time warned that this film might be regarded by international audiences as “George Bush and Americans whining about their plight” (Block, 2007). Muslim audiences, writes D’Souza (2007), are often offended by the “degeneracy and debauchery of the American way of life” as represented by, for example, the *Howard Stern Show*, or the stereotypical representation of Muslims in television programs like *24*. The Pew Research Center reported that favorable opinions toward the United States waned continually after 2001; the Bush Administration, in figuring out why, looked to popular culture as one possible culprit. Concerns over how the rest of the world responds to Hollywood products were, however, nothing new. What stood in the way of the goal of “making other peoples favorably disposed toward us” during World War II was “the negative image of America that peoples elsewhere in the world had derived from watching all those horrible gangster movies, celebrations of exploitation, greed, crudity, and violence that had typified the films exported abroad” before the war (Wilson, 2000, p. 84).

In part as a response to Hollywood cinema and what some may consider often-deplorable content, the PCAH and its partners, through Project: 20/20, sought to “nurture and preserve the rich legacy of American films for both posterity and as a medium for fostering international collaboration and understanding” (PCAH, 2006a). Furthermore, the program was used as a vehicle to promote certain associations of American identity and brand. We can look at various press materials in order to deconstruct the ways in which the AFI’s Project: 20/20 was used to do so. Press releases, speeches and other official announcements from both the State Department and the AFI are useful in determining framing because, as Tiedeman (2005) suggests, these primary public diplomacy tools are used to maintain a strict adherence to key messages.

One can distill key words and phrases repeatedly used in these materials into one brand of Americanness that the State Department conveyed: America is the model of ideal democracy, in which all voices from diverse backgrounds and perspectives are respected and included. Despite any differences, Americans all share common values and are all part of the same humanity. Americans enjoy all freedoms, particularly that
of expression, and the best way to get to know each other is through personal contact and personal stories. Simply put, the three major themes are: mutual understanding; common values; and freedom of expression, with a light overlay of democratic values like civic participation and individualism.

These central themes are reiterated throughout the documents in a consistent and almost forceful manner. As Lakoff (2006) notes, “repetition can embed frames in the brain” (p. 27). Press releases and other documents released by various partners of the GCI, including the State Department, the PCAH (housed in the executive branch), and the American Film Institute, are saturated with phrases like “mutual understanding” and “common values.” A single PCAH press release about the AFI project used some form of “understanding” no fewer than six times (these include “mutual understanding” three times, “cross-cultural understanding,” “collaboration and understanding,” and “understanding and appreciation”) (PCAH, 2006a). Likewise, the AFI Project: 20/20 Talking Points document referenced “mutual understanding” three times, and an AFI Fest Daily News article highlighted “understanding” of the “mutual” and “cross-cultural” varieties (AFI, 2006b; K. Hughes, 2006).

Similarly, “common” or “shared” values flood these documents, often referred to as “universal,” bringing together a “diversity of artistic and political views” “across the spectrum of race, religion and gender.” Despite “diverse backgrounds in experience, countries and cultures,” the films featured in Project: 20/20 will “express the shared values of different nations” and will, accordingly, “reveal our common humanity.”

The phrase, “freedom of expression,” emerged over and over, and was most often placed as a subset of shared values: Project: 20/20 would “foster shared values, such as freedom of expression, tolerance and intellectual property rights.” This exact phrase was used at least once in almost every piece of press material examined in this study, despite the variety of sources producing material (from the State Department to the PCAH to the AFI). There are a few variations on the phrasing: filmmakers participating in the program “underscore the importance of free expression” that is the “lifeblood of our arts.” Project: 20/20 encouraged “American values inherent in the system of American filmmaking such as freedom of expression and tolerance.” On the whole, however, the same themes emerge time and again in the language produced to promote Project: 20/20, reinforcing Lakoff’s (2004) theories that phrases, when repeated, underpin and strengthen frames, define issues and naturalize language (p. 50).

Tied to freedom of expression is the theme of individualism and the personalization of experience, which makes a brief appearance in the official literature. The program “allows filmmakers to know one another on a personal basis,” since “there is no better way for people to know one another than by sharing their personal stories.” There are also a couple of almost-misplaced references to civic participation; the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a joint partner of the GCI, linked “civic participation” to “the production of multi-cultural films.” Karen Hughes cited “citizen participation in government” as one of the GCI’s goals.
But when one examines the primary public diplomacy tools to uncover what these themes mean, one comes up rather short. These materials are rife with the same phrasing, words used in different combinations to project the same ideas: that America is the model of ideal democracy, sharing common values despite differences, and freedom is paramount. But there is little indication of what these phrases actually mean. Their constant repetition is, as Sidney Blumenthal suggests of American public diplomacy in general, much like that of Mark Twain’s characters in *Innocents Abroad*. As Twain wrote, “We bore down on them with America’s greatness until we crushed them” (as cited in Blumenthal, 2005).

Cultural diplomacy, in its purest form, advocates for the exchange of ideas and culture. Cummings (2003) writes that it “fosters mutual understanding” among nations and their citizens. He goes on to note that cultural diplomacy “can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or ‘telling its story’ to the rest of the world” (p. 1). Cummings’ definition of cultural diplomacy appears in the State Department Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy’s recommendations on how to tackle the negative reputation of the United States around the world. One gets the sense that the State Department officials closely read this document; thus, phrases like “mutual understanding” appeared repeatedly, as that is the definition of cultural diplomacy. However, it seems that cultural diplomacy was conflated with branding, a one-way flow of persuasion, as the State Department disseminated constructions of American identity, packaging them in such a way as to prevent resistance. Under this definition, cultural diplomacy works miraculously well with branding.

What runs through these press materials is the assumption that American identity and American values were precisely those that the rest of the world either possessed or wanted to possess. We can have different political backgrounds, as evidenced by the participation of Iranian, Venezuelan, and Chinese filmmakers in the program, but we all believe in freedom of expression and respect; we all want to understand and value each other.

I turn now to a discussion of the films presented in Project: 20/20. I will explore how the films were framed through publicity materials, offering reasons why the State Department and GCI partners may have chosen these films for inclusion in the program. I base my conclusions on the official synopses of the films as listed on the AFI website and how they work with the overall goals of Project: 20/20 as described in the program’s primary public diplomacy tools. These official synopses, written by AFI senior festival programmers, describe the content of the films, which speaks to the reasons why they may have been chosen as participants in the program. Furthermore, they are useful in determining how the State Department and GCI partners interpreted the value of the films as tools in their overall cultural diplomatic effort.
The Films of Project: 20/20

Nineteen films were selected for Project: 20/20 to celebrate the ideals of the Global Cultural Initiative. They seemed to each reflect certain thematic elements that represent facets of Brand America. These themes included, among others, overcoming hardships, contrasting traditional and modern societies, and rights of women and minorities. I will first discuss how many of the Project: 20/20 films were framed in publicity materials in ways that address these themes. Then, I will specifically focus on a handful of the films in order to offer a more in-depth analysis of why certain films were particularly well-suited to the goals of the Global Cultural Initiative and the Bush Administration’s cultural branding efforts.

Perhaps one of the most resounding themes of many of these films is the contrast between traditional and modern societies. One of the biggest threats to the American way of life (and the propagation thereof across the globe) is the persistence of “traditional” cultures that struggle to adapt to the modern global community (and accompanying political, economic and cultural values). Promotional descriptions for a number of the Project: 20/20 films emphasized the challenges of shifting from a traditional (undesirable) world to a modern one (ideal), as well as the inevitability of such a shift. *The Yacoubian Building* (dir. Marwan Hamed), an Egyptian film, “unveils the underbelly of traditional society as it copes with the mire of modernization.” In the Iranian comedy, *Offside* (dir. Jafar Panahi, Iran), “modern life and cultural prohibitions bump up against each other” as a group of girls tries to gain entrance into a World Cup qualifying match held in Tehran. The main character in *The Road* (dir. Zhang Juarui, China) “builds a new life for herself in 21st century China,” after being “exposed to the consequences and sacrifices of life in Communist China.” *Homecoming* (dir. Norman Maake, South Africa) focuses on three veterans of the African National Congress who return home to South Africa after the end of apartheid and “are surprised to discover that ‘home’ is not the same.” Even the American film, *Beautiful Ohio* (dir. Chad Lowe), focuses on challenges inherent in integrating modern cultural and social sensibilities; this narrative film illustrates the “changing social attitudes of the early seventies” as two young men grow up in Ohio. We can see a link between the theme of traditional versus modern societies and one of the State Department’s primary strategic public diplomacy goals, which is to “highlight the differences between most civilized people of all nations and faiths, and the violent extremists we face in the war against terror” (USDOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2006). We share values and experiences with civilized people in modern societies, but we have more difficulty finding common ground with extremist societies rooted in archaic traditions.

Instilling the recognition that people around the globe have common experiences was one of the key objectives of Project: 20/20 and the Global Cultural Initiative more broadly; as publicity materials stated, these would “reveal our common humanity.” Dealing with and overcoming hardships are some of the core experiences that bind people together into that common humanity, and themes of many of the Project: 20/20 films focus on how people handle hardships in a variety of circumstances.
Blindsight (dir. Lucy Walker, UK-Tibet) is a documentary that features “children [who] are often stigmatized and ostracized for being blind by their own communities.” The film follows a group of these blind teenagers who climb one of Mt. Everest’s peaks, accomplishing what is, for many, “a life long goal.” The main character in the film Memories of Tomorrow (dir. Yukihiko Tsutsumi, Japan) is “diagnosed with an early onset of Alzheimer’s disease,” whose “only constant is the unconditional love of the family from which he is slowly slipping away.” The children in To Play and To Fight (dir. Alberto Arvelo, Venezuela) live in “a place of relative poverty” but manage to “overcome their hardship through music.” The children are further empowered because, despite “so many social programs that do little more than offer a handout,” the model in To Play and To Fight “offers an alternative vision” to achieve success.

Another key message embedded in the Global Cultural Initiative and the selections for Project: 20/20 is the protection of the rights of women and minorities. The girl soccer fans in Offside are not allowed to watch a high-profile soccer match at a public arena, but they dress up as boys and try to sneak in; however, they are quickly caught. In this “free-flowing, whimsical look at women (and men) in 21st century Iran,” the girls assert themselves throughout the film, “match[ing] wits with their reluctant soldier captors.” According to the film’s promotional materials, the film’s director “avoids overt political statements, relying simply on characters to explore larger issues.” Another film challenges typical expectations about minorities in contemporary Britain. Shoot the Messenger is directed by Nigerian-British filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah, and is “a highly provocative comedy about a young black man’s feelings on what it’s like to be a person of color.” The film “satirizes conceptions of racial identity and cultural norms.” No Sweat (dir. Amie Williams, U.S.) documents the garment industry in Los Angeles, operated in large part by “mostly undocumented workers.” The film shows “the bowels of the Los Angeles garment industry” to uncover “what’s really behind the label.” Although the documentary shows the “bigger issues” in this industry, it also shows an industry in which undocumented workers “are offered better wages, benefits, even a shot at worker-ownership.”

Two films were particularly well-suited to align with the goals of the Global Cultural Initiative and reflected some of the most interesting films presented in the inaugural year of Project: 20/20. Shame (dir. Mohammed Naqvi) is a co-produced U.S.-Pakistan documentary about a Pakistani woman who overcame her tribal custom of “honor” killings to seek justice. Back Home (dir. J.B. Rutagarama) is a U.S.-Rwanda documentary co-production about a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who returns to his homeland.

Shame is rife with themes that are likely to appeal to American officials trying to shape a brand of Americanness. It reinforces the image of a society in fundamental opposition to the United States and democracy, and the potential of that society’s citizens to fight for democratic principles. According to the AFI website, Mai is the “courageous woman who fought back” against the traditional (backwards) societal practice of “honor killing,” who “set out to seek justice” and who ended up shaking
up the “very core of Pakistan’s decaying judicial system,” thereby helping to modernize this traditional society. Mai’s “astonishing resilience and belief in herself” are admirable qualities of the ideal American identity in which the individual’s needs are given primacy over those of the collective. Moreover, in a State Department press release, Mai is called a “hero” and she and her family members consider this film as an “opportunity to finally have their voices heard” (Ali, 2006).

Similarly, Back Home contains themes that are highly compatible with Project: 20/20 and Brand America. This film, made by an “actual survivor” of the genocide in Rwanda who had “moved to the West,” is an “inspiring” yet “devastating” journey back to director J.B. Rutagarama’s “troubled homeland.” It signifies not only Rutagarama’s personal story of returning to his country, but it also “becomes the story of all Rwandans.” Themes of survival, overcoming hardships, and hope were threaded throughout descriptions of the film.

Both Shame and Back Home present interesting cases when we examine more deeply why they might have been chosen for Project: 20/20. There seems to be something almost distasteful when we realize that the main characters and their experiences are being exploited for the purposes of American cultural diplomacy and branding. These deeply painful and personal stories are overlaid with American values and cultural norms; rather than Shame’s Mai turning to a local cleric for help in order to survive, she is “seeking justice” and “challenging the status quo.” Rutagarama, unable to help himself in the uncontrollable situation in Rwanda, was “given a new life” when “the two reporters who adopted him sent him to film school in England.”

The selection of Back Home for Project: 20/20, I would also argue, seems to assuage American guilt over failing to intervene in Rwanda until it was too late. We are now honoring the people killed with this “deeply personal” story of an individual who managed to escape the genocide, a story that “offers a universal lesson in healing, hope, renewal, family, forgiveness – and finding your own peace.” American audiences have seen similar stories explored in Hotel Rwanda (dir. Terry George, 2004) and Sometimes in April (dir. Raoul Peck, 2005), two films that also explore the Rwandan genocide. It also seems to substitute for attention toward the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, in the 2000s, and the inexcusably late entrance of the United States into the humanitarian aid effort in that region. By giving attention to this film, the United States is portrayed as compassionate and caring. Despite differences in backgrounds, we are all part of the same humanity.

A third film, Offside, would have been another ideal addition to the program, if it had not run into problems along the way. This film, as discussed briefly above, is an Iranian comedy that follows a group of teenage girls who disguise themselves as boys in order to get into a soccer game. This film was originally scheduled to play in two American cities (Silver Spring, Maryland, and Seattle, Washington) on the program’s domestic tour. It was quietly removed from the screenings with no apparent reason given for the change (at least publicly). The only indication that Offside was an initial selection turns up on the original film tour schedule. It seems probable that the film was removed from the schedule because its Iranian director, Jafar Panahi, was unable
to secure a visa to enter the United States, and thus his invitation to visit Silver Spring and Seattle was revoked. He also did not attend the program’s launch at the AFI Fest in Los Angeles in early November 2006.

Panahi had previously experienced similar problems with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. In 2001, he was detained at JFK Airport in New York, where he was merely changing planes while traveling from the Hong Kong Film Festival to festivals in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Ironically, his film, Circle, had opened in New York on the same weekend in 2001 that he was charged as being an “inadmissible alien” (Lattig, 2001). After being literally chained up overnight, he was released and sent back to Hong Kong. Panahi wrote a letter of protest to the U.S. National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, a nonprofit film organization dedicated to supporting domestic and international film. He remarked, “I certainly do detach the acts of American police and politicians from the cultural institutions and figures as well as the great people of USA,” reiterating sentiments that seem to continue to surface around the world (Panahi, 2001).

Offside seemed to be a natural choice for Project: 20/20. Its themes of women’s rights, individualism, the representation of males in Iran as outdated and chauvinist, and Panahi’s own circumvention of official Iranian script approval seemed well-suited to reinforce the American brand as projected by Project: 20/20. Perhaps the inclusion in Project: 20/20 was an attempt at apology to Panahi for his unpleasant ordeal (which took place pre-9/11), particularly as Panahi had very publicly stated, “[I]n a country whose symbol is liberty, how can there be such oppression?” (Lattig, 2001).

However, one is still led to believe that Panahi had trouble obtaining a visa to enter the United States for Project: 20/20 screenings, and therefore was eliminated from the program. While Project: 20/20 organizers could perhaps quietly cancel Panahi’s screenings, its theatrical release in New York stirred up controversy and debate. The opening of his film at the Museum of the Moving Image in March 2007 was delayed because Panahi could not personally attend. Rumors floated around that he “experienced a bit of a problem with our nation’s thoughtful Washington bureaucracy and has now had his visa rescinded” (Vanairsdale, 2007). Sony Pictures Classics, his film’s distributor, was quick to reply that Panahi had simply not received his visa yet, thus delaying his visit to the United States. The Museum ended up screening his film, “with no personal appearance,” several days later, perhaps resigned that Panahi would be unable to secure a visa.²

Conclusion

This article is a historical exploration into the inner-workings of the Bush Administration’s cultural diplomacy in its nascent stage.³ We can trace various experiences in the revival of American cultural diplomatic efforts in the years immediately following September 11, 2001, as the Administration struggled to understand its relationship to the rest of the world. The Shared Values Initiative’s
now-infamous failure, guided primarily by corporate advertising executives, gained little respect from policy experts or international groups, and served mostly to underscore the United States’ misunderstanding of how to conduct cultural diplomacy.

The Global Cultural Initiative adjusted many of the problems of the Shared Values Initiative, as former Bush strategic communications officer Karen Hughes directed a carefully framed campaign in her new role as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The GCI emphasized “international engagement and dialogue” through messages of mutual understanding and common interests and values. Along with various other cultural programs, Project: 20/20 was framed to serve public diplomacy goals as laid out by Karen Hughes and the State Department, and films were selected to demonstrate those goals. The promotional materials for several films emphasized the desirability of modern societies that observe tolerance, human rights (especially for women and minorities), and respect for others. Other promotional materials framed common experiences and prevailing over hardships as desirable qualities. Overall, the films contributed to the GCI’s messages of mutual understanding and cross-cultural dialogue by accentuating the ways—through these themes of tolerance, human rights and commonality—in which the United States empathizes with diverse cultures, simultaneously having respect for difference and recognizing the universality of the human condition. These values were consistent with the Bush Administration’s strategic public diplomacy goals of promoting hope and opportunity, fostering a sense of common values, and highlighting the differences between “most civilized people” and “the violent extremists we face in the war against terror” (USDOS Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2006).

Furthermore, promotional documents for Project: 20/20 and the Global Cultural Initiative were steeped in language that emphasized strict adherence to consistent messaging over, in at least one case, actually practicing the message. As the case of the Iranian film *Offside* demonstrated, the realities of American diplomacy and treatment of non-citizens caused problems for the carefully framed Global Cultural Initiative. Because of film director Jafar Panahi’s issues in obtaining a visa to visit the United States, the film was quietly removed from Project: 20/20 to minimize visibility of the relative inflexibility of the American bureaucracy. Again, the focus remained on consistent messaging of a particular brand and its accompanying cultural values.

This study builds upon previous accounts of the ways in which the Bush Administration addressed public and cultural diplomacy in the wake of September 11, 2001 (i.e., Jansen, 2005; Tiedeman, 2005). It accomplishes this by further interrogating how the American government used principles of branding and framing in an attempt to achieve an improved image abroad. This study also contributes to intercultural and cross-cultural communication literature in that it expounds on the ways that specific programs and tools are used (in this case, a program of films and the promotional documents to accompany it), through language framing, to endorse a particular agenda or brand.

It must be noted that this study carries some limitations. It only examines promotional and public relations documents from official agencies and GCI partners
(e.g., the State Department and the AFI), rather than news stories, critical reviews, or the films themselves as texts for analysis. The study also overlooks how the filmmakers themselves felt about their inclusion in the overall cultural diplomatic effort of Project: 20/20. Neither does the study examine how the films were received by audiences around the world. We must recognize that audiences might interpret films in very different ways than the ways in which the films are framed for promotional purposes. Messages contained in primary public diplomacy tools are easily controlled, and press releases that announced the Global Cultural Initiative and Project: 20/20 used certain phrases in various combinations to convey a cohesive sense of American brand identity; the collateral materials of the program reinforced this brand. But, as Tiedeman (2005) reminds us, tertiary public diplomacy tools like films—cultural goods that often defy categorization—can offer little to no control over the kinds of messages they convey. Unlike a press release, there is no single interpretation of a film. They mean different things for different people, and when we consider the context in which a film operates, those interpretations become doubly loaded with meaning.

For the purposes of the Global Cultural Initiative during the waning years of the Bush Administration, Project: 20/20 as a whole, along with its films, served as a vehicle to promote a particular brand of American identity based on key values, enacted by key programs, and framed by key phrases.

Notes

[1] After... is an adventure-thriller film that was initially included in the Project: 20/20 roster but was inexplicably removed after playing in only one city. The film takes place in Russia, and this international location may have been an attractive element in terms of its selection for the program (the characters travel to two underground Moscow landmarks, Stalin’s secret metro and Ivan the Terrible’s torture chamber). However, all mention of After... was inexplicably removed from the AFI Project: 20/20 website, although its description continued to appear on a Project: 20/20 website hosted through Without a Box, a film festival clearinghouse website, for some months after its removal from the program. Again, one can only speculate as to the reasons for such an action. Perhaps it was the negative reviews that the film received; this “insult to your intelligence and cinematic tastes,” full of “needless whatsit puzzles,” is sent in “hopelessly loopy directions” (Koehler, 2006; Thom, 2006). Perhaps it was because it used too many elements, like “guilt, kidnapping, pedophilia, pregnancy, extreme sports, Stalin, torture chambers, atomic radiations, ghosts and techno,” and then “throws them in your face like some cheap drink” (Thom, 2006). Regardless of the reason, the film only played in one city and was removed entirely from Project: 20/20.

[2] Visa issues had caused one of the key problems for film festivals in the United States in the 2000s. Filmmakers from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq had been unable to secure visas in order to make personal appearances at festivals like the New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival. Oftentimes, the films themselves did not arrive in the country to screen at festivals; some shipping services refused to pick up the films from their point of departure (Waxman, 2007).

[3] Project: 20/20 continued into its fourth season in 2009–2010, with a touring program of nine films from the United States, France, Canada, Romania and Russia (AFI, 2009). The program ceased affiliation with the American Film Institute in 2010 and a new program,
Film Forward: Advancing Cultural Dialogue, continued the film-based cultural diplomatic efforts. Film Forward is a partnership between the Sundance Institute, a nonprofit film organization, and federal divisions, including the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Sundance Institute, 2010). Documenting the changes in language framing used in the Global Cultural Initiative and Project: 20/20’s materials from the Bush Administration to the Obama Administration, including its new iteration within the Film Forward program, would be a worthy area of study.

References


