

**“Living the Brand”:  
Nationality, Globality and the Identity Strategies  
of Nation Branding Consultants<sup>1</sup>**

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Lithuania.com was officially launched on November 5. A high-res banner – DEMOCRACY PAYS HANDSOME DIVIDENDS – unfurled to the accompaniment of 16 joyful bars of the “Dance of the Coachmen and Grooms” in *Petrushka*. Side by side, in a rich blue graphical space below the banner, were a black-and-white **Before** picture (“Socialist Vilnius”) of shell-scarred façades and shattered lindens on the Gedimino Prospektas and a luscious color **After** photograph (“Free-Market Vilnius”) of a honey-lit harborside development of boutiques and bistros. (The development was actually in Denmark.) For a week Chip and Gitanas had stayed up late drinking beer and composing the other pages, which promised investors . . . according to the level of financial commitment,

- Pro rata mineral rights and logging rights to all national parklands!
- Appointment of selected local magistrates and judges!...
- Fifty-percent discount on selected rentals of Lithuanian national troops and armaments on a sign-up basis, except during wartime!...
- Etc., etc.!

~ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, pp. 504-505

As a brutally ironic portrayal of characters and situations at their worst, *The Corrections* is a testament to Franzen’s ability to imagine the idiosyncrasies of modern life in the extreme. The above passage describes a scene in which Chip Lambert, a disgraced academic turned failed screenwriter, and Gitanas Misevicius, a Lithuanian “governmental entrepreneur” (Franzen, 2001, p. 126), create a

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promotional website to lure Western investors to the debtor nation, allowing Lithuania to bypass long waiting lists necessary for assistance from the IMF and the World Bank. By contributing to the "market liberalization" of Lithuania, the website promises, investors will be handsomely rewarded, not only with various stakes in the country's territory and resources, but also with the distinct sense of pride that comes with helping to lift a country out of its backward, pre-market state to become a successful player in the global marketplace.

Raymond Williams has described the "structure of feeling" that literature can reveal: by enacting the conflicts that arise "between the ethic and the experience" (Williams, 1961, p. 65), fiction's protagonists demonstrate the interplay of social relations, moral positions and established institutions that constitute the lived culture of their time. Though Franzen is celebrated for his inventiveness, perhaps the real talent of this novelist was to conjure a cultural phenomenon that is not nearly as far-fetched as he might have intended.<sup>2</sup>

"Nation branding" as a concept and practice has captured the attention – and financial resources – of national governments in countries with established capitalist economies and emerging market economies alike. In the past few years, countries with such diverse political programs as Poland, New Zealand, Taiwan and Botswana have jumped on the "brandwagon," engaging the profit-based marketing techniques of private enterprise to create and communicate a particular version of national identity.

As a communications strategy and a practical initiative, nation branding allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world, and to attract the "right" kinds of investment, tourism, trade, and talent, successfully competing with a growing pool of national contenders for a shrinking set of available resources.<sup>3</sup> Such resources include not only those available in a deregulated global marketplace but also the coveted rewards of the so-called "attention economy." In an environment where "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Herbert Simon, qtd. in Davenport & Beck, 2001, p. 11), attracting positive recognition by "breaking through the clutter" with a distinctive image is a critical dimension of the practice. A comprehensive nation branding strategy is seen by its proponents as a *public good* (Leonard, 2002, p. 9), uniting municipal, regional and national interests in the increasingly competitive quest to attract international legitimacy, foster and maintain domestic loyalty, and reap the financial rewards on offer in the trade-liberalized global marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other excellent examples of "nation branding" in recent works of fiction include the novel *Absurdistan*, by Gary Shteyngart (2006); and the HBO television series, "Flight of the Conchords."

<sup>3</sup> Typically foreign direct investment is desired, for purposes of infrastructural development or resource exploitation; but other forms of capital investment are also encouraged.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard is speaking about public diplomacy, but his understanding of this term is as a form of communication that correlates to – and is in fact constituted by – the nation brand: "Public diplomacy is based on the premise that the image and reputation of a country are public goods which can create either an enabling or a disabling environment for individual transactions. Work on particular issues will feed off the general image of the country and reflect back on to it – in both positive and negative directions" (2002, p. 9).

This situation raises a particular concern. If a public good is by definition an object of democracy, encouraging collective participation from its citizens and procuring just and equitable rewards for the benefit of all, what happens when this *public* good falls under the authority of *private* branding and advertising agents? Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with consultants and researchers from advertising and branding firms, this essay focuses on the discursive assumptions and practical implications of the craft of nation branding. Through this analysis, the article advances a twofold proposition: first, that by employing the symbolic resources and resonance of nationalist discourse which perpetuate the nation-state as a necessary frame of identity, allegiance, and affiliation, nation branding maintains and extends the nation as a legitimate entity in the context of globalized modernity. However, it does not do so without occasioning a distinct transformation. This is the basis of my second proposition: that the ideologies and practices by which nation branding operates alter the cultural context in which national identity is articulated and understood. By transposing authority from elected government officials to advertising and branding professionals, by replacing accountability with facilitation, and by fitting discussions of the nation into categories that privilege a particular kind of collective representation over diverse expression, nation branding affects the moral basis of national citizenship.

### ***National Settings, Global Imperatives***

Though private interests have been involved in projects to market and promote the nation for more than a century, from boosterism campaigns (Ward, 1998; Greenberg, 2005) to tourism initiatives (Urry, 1995; Shaffer, 2001) the emergence of a specific phenomenon called nation branding – with its attendant congeries of self-styled nation branding consultants, quasi-academic journals and conferences, and media attention, both promotional and critical – is linked to structural changes in the political and economic dynamics of the nation as well as changes in the perceived role of the nation in the current geopolitical context.<sup>5</sup>

Nation branding is currently justified among state and corporate actors as a necessary corrective to the waning importance of the nation-state in the context of globalized economic, political and cultural exchange. Nationally imagined identity is compromised by a number of indigenous and exogenous factors: the spectre of cultural homogeneity or, conversely, hyper-hybridity; stronger allegiances at the subnational, supranational or transnational levels (Castells, 1997, ch. 5; Slaughter, 1997) and widening networks of mobility, media and migration (Appadurai, 1996; Morley, 2000). In this context, corporate branding is a demonstrably effective way to assign unique identification by consciously highlighting certain meanings and myths while ignoring others. It is increasingly adopted by governments as a means to promote national identity while encouraging the economic benefits necessary to compete in a modern globalized world. In its ability to assemble diverse motifs of heritage and modernization, domestic and foreign concerns, and economic and moral ideologies in the projection of national identity, nation branding appears to some as a benign way to communicate national interests, one that lacks the "chauvinistic" and "antagonistic" elements of more reactionary nationalisms (Van Ham, 2001). Nation branding is

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<sup>5</sup> While this article focuses on the contemporary dimensions of nation branding, there is much about the concept and practice that derives from specific historical forms. For a discussion of precursors and preconditions of the phenomenon of nation branding, see Aronczyk (2007).

characterized by its “soft” power (Metzl, 1999; Nye, 2004; De Grazia, 2005), in contrast to the “hard” power of military or economic assets, a feature which appeals to statecrafters as better suited to the “public” or “popular” diplomacy requirements of nation-states in the contemporary context. The unprecedented expansion and decentralization of information systems means that national interests are broadcast to audiences at large, complicating or overriding the narrowcasting of traditional state-to-state diplomacy (Metzl, 1999; Leonard, 2002; De Gouveia, 2005). Nation branding therefore serves as a form of preemptive management and control, a national discourse for a global context.

In international mediation, nation branding is used for both reactive and proactive purposes, such as greasing the wheels of accession to the European Union, the United Nations or other multilateral organizations; repairing reputations damaged by legacies of hard power; or dodging the spotlight of unfavorable international media attention. Domestically, nation branding is used to manage consensus by encouraging positive perceptions of international decisions. Moreover, since nation branding is a highly visible practice, both through the mainstream media attention it regularly receives and through its visual iconography of logos, slogans and symbols, the branding actually serves as a recursive function – that is, to convince domestic elites, stakeholders and the public that their government is acting in their best interests.<sup>6</sup>

If nation branding transforms the national imaginary, its effect can also be seen at the level of the state. Nation branding is a well-timed expression of what Sklair (2001) has termed “global nationalism” – the conviction by governments that national interests are best served if the country can find a “lucrative role” within a globally integrated economic system (see also Castells & Hall, 1994). This conviction has been put in motion via national policy statements oriented toward principles of competition and innovation as political-economic and cultural priorities. While neither innovation nor competition is a new element of the national preoccupation, what *is* new, as of recent decades, is that these features are expressed as drivers of profit in a global system of free markets, with national cultural specificity as the “competitive edge” over other nations.

Critical cultural policy literature has documented this shift as one from an arts-based model to a “creative industry” or “enterprise culture” model of policymaking (Corner & Harvey, 1991; McGuigan, 1996, 2004; Brighton, 1999; Volkerling, 2001; Florida, 2002), a paradigm informed by a series of related and mutually reinforcing prescriptions. First, the jurisdiction of cultural policy is widened to accommodate more capital- and/or technology-intensive areas of cultural production, such as film, multimedia, design, fashion, advertising, architecture, and other elite managerial-professional categories. Second, supranational economic organizations such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, as well as regional federations such as the European Union, increasingly allocate structural funding to member countries on the basis of the country’s ability to (competitively) demonstrate its culture’s potential to generate wealth, employment, community participation, and other

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Craig Calhoun for this insight.

social and practical effects (Corner & Harvey, 1991; Volkerling, 2001; Sklair, 2001; Yúdice, 2003; see also Allard, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

Third, the use of market logic to underpin state policy has led to the use of market metrics to determine its effectiveness. Sklair, for example, has described the adoption of corporate "benchmarking" systems, competitive rankings and quality standards by state agencies and national development institutions (2001, chap. 5). Recent years have seen the development of a spate of proprietary measurement systems and indices specifically designed to evaluate a nation's "brand," as well as property rights regulation to protect and profit from it.<sup>8</sup>

A fourth facet of the creative industry paradigm is the transfer of decision-making in the area of culture from the political to the corporate sphere. It is not only that policy is increasingly designed to grease the wheels of profit in the corporate sector, as part of the so-called neoliberal turn; it is also that the combined effects of the widening of cultural policy space, the competitive allocation of structural funds, and the use of business-motivated evaluative frameworks have led to the perception that the management of national culture should increasingly be assumed by experts in the field – that is, executives from the realm of private enterprise whose training and expertise is steeped in the logic of competition, the unique selling proposition, and the importance of reputation. McGuigan (1996) observes that this "new managerialist theory and practice" in the public sector has been codified through texts that embody principles such as competition, empowerment, and outcome (62-63).

Similarly, for Yúdice the creative industry frame aptly demonstrates "the expediency of culture" in the contemporary era, where "representation of and claims to cultural difference are expedient insofar as they multiply commodities and empower community" (2003, p. 25). To make intelligible the forces and formations at work in the expediting of culture, Yúdice advocates an approach that accounts for the productive role that culture performs:

*A performative understanding of the expediency of culture . . . focuses on the strategies implied in any invocation of culture, any invention of tradition, in relation to some*

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<sup>7</sup> As Volkerling (2001) points out, the idea that art and culture can have transformative effects on society is hardly a new perspective; in the current context, however, cultural policy is oriented primarily toward fostering cultural production whose transformative powers are rooted in its ability to generate capital.

<sup>8</sup> The World Intellectual Property Organization is a strong advocate of nation branding, as the text in their recent document, *The Intellectual Property-Conscious Nation* (2006), makes explicit. In the chapter, "Cultural Heritage, Creativity, and National Pride," the authors explain that "every country has a culture, a heritage, resources, natural beauty, and internal qualities that can be identified and defined, highlighted and captured, in a nation-branding initiative which is both pleasing and economically effective. Successful nation-branding efforts result from political will, focused national policies and strategies, and the integration of IP consideration into those policies and strategies" (Idris & Arai 2006, pp. 93-96). See also Anholt (2005a).

*purpose or goal. That there is an end is what makes it possible to speak of culture as a resource (2003, p. 38).*

With this perspective in mind, this article offers an account of the strategies involved in the production of culture through the particular phenomenon of nation branding. Through a portrait of the discursive and practical techniques at play in this process, I seek to address the ways in which nation branding promotes a particular organization of power, knowledge and exchange in the articulation of collective identity. This is not merely a tale of the ongoing and thorough commodification of culture, nor of the subsumption of social relations to a series of market interactions. Though both of those effects are undeniably part of the picture, it is problematic both analytically and practically to take those component parts for an instrumental whole. As this account intends to show, culture – as category, discourse, and reproductive practice – continues to matter for the ways in which value, meaning and self-understanding are made.

### ***Characterizing the Field***

In the spring of 2007, I traveled to London, England, chosen as a strategic site of analysis for its sheer concentration of nation branding consultancies. Respondents<sup>9</sup> were initially selected on the basis of three criteria: 1) mainstream media coverage (interviews, quotes, or references) positioning the respondent as an authoritative voice in the arena of place-based branding; 2) the maintenance of a professional public website that described their work as place-branding, whether as a sole practice or as one among other branding initiatives (e.g., FMCG branding)<sup>10</sup>; and 3) self-identification as place-branding consultant or reasonable equivalent, e.g., country branding, nation branding, or national brand capital development.<sup>11</sup>

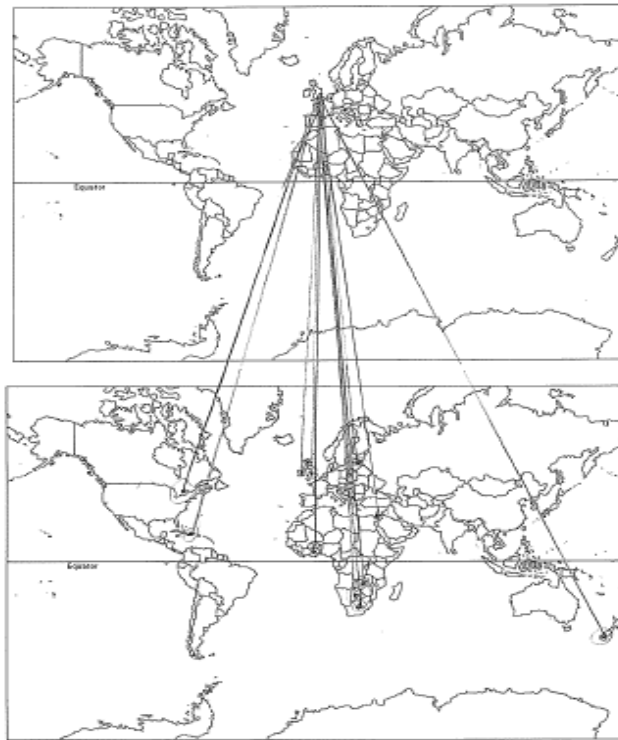
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<sup>9</sup> Ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with place branding consultants or researchers who corresponded to these criteria. To supplement this core data, 20 additional interviews were conducted between spring 2005 and fall 2007 in London, New York and Canada with other branding consultants and individuals whose work forms part of the nation branding system, which I understand to include the notions of corporate marketing and advertising, tourism, public diplomacy and public relations. Additionally, informal interviews and participant observation took place in three distinct sites during the same time period: the *New York Times* Travel Show in New York City; the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada); and the London International Film and TV Tourism Conference at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). Finally, this data is complemented by the ongoing collection, since 2003, of material evidence documenting the visual output of nation branding efforts: advertisements, promotional literature, and marketing campaigns promoting a given country in terms of its travel, trade, policy, immigration and/or investment opportunities, both consumer- and industry-oriented, from all media sources and all geographic sectors.

<sup>10</sup> "Fast moving consumer goods," a common term in the marketing industry.

<sup>11</sup> The term "nation branding" is attributed to one individual, Simon Anholt, who claims to have coined the term. While some consultants and popular portrayals use the term indiscriminately, others use alternative terms to distinguish their practice.

The backgrounds of these respondents vary, though prior experience is limited almost exclusively to business-based fields. Most had training in advertising or graphic design; some had worked in urban, regional or national economic development in the private sector; still others had emerged from academic institutions with MBAs or business/management Ph.D.s. Despite the somewhat limited size of this respondent pool and the circumscribed range of their background experience, however, there did not appear to be limitations to the geographic range and diversity of their clients. Consultants surveyed claimed to have either advised or developed place-branding strategies for national, regional and municipal governments in countries on both sides of the equator and in both hemispheres.<sup>12</sup> Simon Anholt, the "guru" of the nation branding movement and member of the Public Diplomacy Board of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the UK, has traveled at the behest of literally dozens of national governments to present his program on nation branding (see Appendix A). Below is a simple graphic representation of the range of locations of my respondents' clients:



<sup>12</sup> In terms of method, respondents do not perceive a marked difference between branding at the national level and branding at other spatial scales (city, region, federation). Differences are evinced, however, in terms of the current wave of globalization discourse that challenges the nation-state as a significant locus of cultural identity and political-economic centrality. While the production of space (Lefebvre 1991) at all scales is part of the expansion of capitalist forms of organization, the production of space at the national level is seen as necessary to stem the nation's potential transcendence. See also Brenner (1999).

As with much research that takes place among elite respondents in urban centers, there is considerable irony to describing the interview process as “fieldwork.” The “natural” environment of branding and marketing executives is one of private clubs and lounges, corner tables in fine restaurants, or massive office boardrooms flanking ultra-designed reception areas – with ultra-designed receptionists to populate them. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, depending on the goodwill of respondents. Often respondents insisted on paying for lunch or drinks consumed during the interview. At first this caused some discomfort, as I feared it would compromise my relationship with not only my respondents but also my home university’s internal review board. Finally it became clear that this was part of the logic of the field; it was simply how this population did business, and thus a normal state of affairs.

My interviews had a dual purpose. The first goal was to learn more about the terminology, techniques and strategies employed by respondents: How do respondents define their practice; what steps are involved in the creation and communication of a nation brand; and how do they conceive of their role in the process? The second goal was to establish the determinants of success of the practice. What constitutes an effective nation brand? How is this brand maintained over time? And how do consultants account for the instances – if any – of resistance or failure?

#### ***Always Already Brands: Conditions of the Practice***

One finding revealed by these interviews was the highly circumscribed nature of this field of practice. When asked to provide a working definition of what nation branding was, respondents took considerable pains to explain what nation branding was *not*: it is not “destination” (tourism) branding or marketing initiatives; it is not an “image makeover,” nor an advertising campaign or a marketing strategy; and it is most emphatically *not* a mere logo and slogan. Rather, all of these things are part and parcel of the totality of the nation brand; but they are not in themselves constitutive:

- *Nation branding is a very long-term thing and it involves a very comprehensive strategy bringing in all the players’ governments whether it’s city governments, national governments, tourism authorities, inward investment, outward – any force, including private companies, who help to define the way all those billions of people out there, in particular the several millions who really really matter, view your place.*
- *Brand strategies are not like advertising campaigns, like they say on CNN. You don’t put a brand out to the world just for the 20-second, 15-second ad on CNN for 6 months – so that’s XYZ saying come to my country . . . it has to be brought alive through actions that are “on brand.”*

Given the defensive posture these consultants take relative to their work, very few outfits and pretenders are deemed to be actually “doing” nation branding. It is therefore not surprising that among the few who lay claim to the territory, there is a high degree of recognition, a considerable measure of pride, and a certain – albeit grudgingly conferred – mutual respect. When prompted to recommend other



consultants to whom I could speak during the course of my interviews, they referred only to one another; indeed, not a single potential respondent in London was mentioned who was not already on my interview list.<sup>13</sup>

Despite arriving armed with a working knowledge of the practice from secondary sources and prior first-hand experience, my initial question – "How do you create a brand?" – required rethinking in the field, as I was immediately upbraided for my presumption.<sup>14</sup> According to respondents, nations are *already* de facto brands, regularly projecting their assets, attributes and liabilities to a public at large, whether intentionally or not. Indeed "nation branding" is perceived as a rhetorical and functional equivalent to "national identity":

*Interestingly there is nothing particularly novel about the concept of branding the nation. Only the word 'brand' is new. National image, national identity, national reputation are all words traditionally used in this arena and they don't seem to provoke the same visceral hostility as the word 'brand.'* Although the technologies are new and infinitely more powerful and pervasive than ever before, and the word 'brand' is also new, the concepts which it encompasses are as old as the nation itself. (Olins, 2003, p. 152)

Presuming the primordial existence of the nation-state as an "always already" category of kinship and recognition, branders see their work as skillful manipulation rather than creation or invention.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, respondents offer their expertise not as makers or producers of a nation brand, but merely as facilitators who apply the tools and techniques of their trade to help nations meet the requirements of the contemporary context. It is a process of uncovering, not generating, value. Yet this process is seen as a necessary one; for even if nations are already de facto brands, there is still much work to be done by the consultant in league with his or her national client to shape, mold, and orient (or re-orient) the image of the nation for its purpose.

Generally speaking, there are four distinct steps involved in the preparation of a nation brand: **evaluation, training, identification, and implementation/communication** (the latter is considered as a single step for reasons I will discuss shortly). The following sections examine each of these in turn, to evaluate their discursive assumptions and practical implications.

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<sup>13</sup> Every one of my respondents insisted that I speak to the same two so-called "leaders" of the nation branding movement for an accurate portrait of the state of the field. Most respondents either gave me these individuals' contact information or simply contacted them on my behalf, to the point that when I telephoned one of them a few days later, he began the conversation by saying, "You're famous!"

<sup>14</sup> From 1998 to 2003, the author worked in the creative department of an advertising agency.

<sup>15</sup> See Smith (1998, pp. 146-161) for a discussion of the primordialist paradigm of nations.

### 1. ***Evaluation: Public Opinion as Marketing Research***

The first step in a branding process is one of evaluation. What are the current perceptions of the nation by domestic and foreign audiences; and which elements of the extant national identity require particular scrutiny? Here a variety of research methodologies are employed to collect and harness diverse perceptions, the most common being public opinion interviews or surveys.<sup>16</sup> One such survey, called the Nation Brands Index (NBI), polls over 25,000 individuals in more than 35 different countries on a quarterly basis, ranking countries according to respondents' perceptions of the country's tourism, governance, exports, culture, heritage, people, investment, and immigration. Individuals polled are selected from a 5.5 million-member database held by an international marketing firm headquartered in Seattle, Washington. The cost to a country of commissioning the survey ranges from \$50,000 (for an annual custom report and quarterly generic updates providing outsiders' general impressions of the country) to \$150,000 for an annual custom report and quarterly custom updates (specific public opinion findings of the commissioning country by all 35 countries surveyed). Some reports are periodically available for free online, a cherished technique of the savvy marketer; I was able to download the Q4 2006 report, for example, at no charge. This data, described by its inventor as "a unique barometer of global opinion," (Anholt, 2006, p. 2) is now regularly used by governments to gain support for policy, spending and trade decisions.

Using the system of public opinion as an evaluative tool has a long history in the advertising industry. The historian T. J. Lears has described the multiple functions of public opinion research for early 20<sup>th</sup> century advertising agents. Steeped in the "Barnumesque entrepreneurship" (1994, p. 204) of their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, new generations of advertisers were keen to lend their trade a measure of respect. Turning to the seeming rationality and value-neutrality of public opinion allowed them to shift the epistemological basis of advertising from hucksterism to truth-telling (206). The double hermeneutic is clear: by couching the motives of profit in a scientific discourse of rationality, advertisers attempted not only to legitimize their findings but also to validate their craft.

The desire to measure the public opinion of nations by their counterparts has its own historical trajectory, though the reasons for this desire vary according to the conditions of such measurement. One example may prove illustrative. In 1953, Princeton social scientists Hadley Cantril and William Buchanan published the findings of a four-year study under the title, *How Nations See Each Other: A Study in Public Opinion*. Prepared under the auspices of UNESCO, the study surveyed thousands of individuals in Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Mexico, and the U.S. with the aim of identifying "sources of tensions" among nations. In the aftermath of World War II, international perception of national character was deemed a consideration of paramount importance: "The individual's assumptions concerning the nature of the world, of which ideas concerning men and nations and war and peace are fragments, form the intellectual framework within which he considers proposals for change" (60). The study is designed not to elicit "real" reasons for the individual's view of certain nations, the authors

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<sup>16</sup> Other methods include desk research and focus groups, though these are more often than not counted under the general heading of "public opinion research."

explain, but rather "to get at his rationalization and assumptions," in particular those which in wartime supported actions that in other times and places would be unthinkable (60-61).

In the Nation Brands Index, the perception of character is also a consideration of paramount importance, but with a critical distinction: national character matters primarily in terms of its fitness for market exchange. As the 2006 report summarizes:

*The nation brand is a clear and simple measure of a country's 'licence to trade' in the global marketplace, and the acceptability of its people, hospitality, culture, policies, products and services to the rest of the world . . . the only sort of government that can afford to ignore the impact of its national reputation is one which has no interest in participating in the global community, and no desire for its economy, its culture or its citizens to benefit from the rich influences and opportunities that the rest of the world offers them. (13)*

By conflating public opinion research with marketing research, the Nation Brands Index also seeks to elide differences between the individual as citizen and as consumer. One reason for this conflation is contained in a respondent's observation: "One of the reasons I believe the construct of the nation will continue to matter is because consumers want it." A second, more instrumental reason is simply that consultants need to maintain a steady stream of clients. Observing the poor scores of South Korea in the 2005 NBI, Anholt speculates that respondents described the South Korean government as "dangerous," "sinister," "unstable" and "unpredictable" because they had trouble distinguishing between North and South Korea. Rather than seeing this as a point of concern for either the legitimacy of responses or the quality of the survey, Anholt concludes that this represents "a major image problem" for South Korea – one that requires, presumably, the attention of a nation branding consultant (2005b).

## **2. Training: How to Get a Better Pearl**

Once an evaluative portrait has been made, a working party is convened by the branding consultancy from among private and public sector "stakeholders" to assist in the selection, implementation, and stewardship of the brand vision for the nation. Private sector involvement is key: "One of the reasons New Zealand was successful is that it was started by the private sector and was funded by it, right at the beginning." One respondent wanted his client's private sector not only to be involved, but to have full oversight of the nation brand:

*They [national clients] could have gone for a new government department. They could have decided to bring the private sector inside government. But we kept saying to them, 'No. If you curtail those natural commercial instincts and their ability to work with the flexibility that the private sector gives you, then I don't think you'll get the kind of management you're looking for.' And we need to almost put a bit of sand in the oyster to get a better pearl. And that'll be that unit — it will come with private sector values, and it will worry away at the public sector, saying: 'Just why are you doing it in that daft, silly way . . . ?'*

Just as “getting a better pearl” in marine life requires the delicate cultivation of the oyster over a long period of time, so the brand initiative is a protracted process in political life, requiring careful management and control. This explains why branding cannot fall within the purview of government or the public sector alone, according to respondents; election periods in office do not correspond to the long-term horizon of the nation brand. It also explains why respondents advocate “training” or “education” to invest stakeholders with the techniques of national brand stewardship. One respondent calls his work “teaching.” Assembling the chosen brand representatives (“the head of state and/or the head of government . . . the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Culture and Tourism and Education and two or three CEOs of important internationally prominent companies and some sort of representative of civil society – religious leader, famous sporting star, somebody who’s got their finger on the pulse of the population and is respected by them”) the respondent endeavors to

*teach them how to look at the problem and how to resolve it, placing the responsibility to do something about it firmly in their hands. I mean there’s a bit of coaching them through the process of developing the strategy and I’m usually doing the research for them. . .and sometimes I do that thing where you come up with the idea and pretend that they did . . . And the governments I was doing it with said to me, ‘This is such a luxury, being able to do this. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a brand or whatever you want to call it; the fact of the matter is we never get an opportunity, as a cabinet, to sit down with the private sector and civil society in a room and talk strategically and long term.’*

Again, the work here is to facilitate, since the extended temporal horizon (“a 15- to 20-year timeline”) prevents the involvement of the consultant at all stages of the branding process. Indeed, inherent in the professionalization of consultancy is the absence of long-term oversight or accountability, accompanied by the maintenance of “social distance” (Sennett, 2006, pp. 54-62) by consultants from their clients. Consultants expect a considerable degree of loyalty by their clients to the brand project (“You can’t just walk away from it”) since they themselves envision their role in terms of months rather than years. Respondents do not see themselves as responsible for either the maintenance of the brand initiatives or the success of the effort, a feature of nation branding that was directly demonstrated to me when I attempted to regain contact with a respondent to follow up on his work in an African country. Two months after our interview in which he described his extensive involvement with the country’s steering committee and national branding process, the respondent had embarked on a new career (in a related field), and would not return my e-mails.

### **3. Identifying the “Core Idea”: Essential Elements**

The third step in a nation-branding project is to develop a “brand essence,” also called a “core idea,” accompanied by a brand strategy or vision that will animate this idea. “Essence” is a particularly apt term, since the process of brand identity development is one of essentialism – “a reduction of the diversity in a population to some single criterion held to constitute its defining ‘essence’ and most crucial character” (Calhoun, 1997, p. 18; see also Dzenovska, 2005).

Determining the brand essence is perhaps the most complicated element of any branding process, as its effectiveness is determined by its ability to negotiate four spheres of identification: standardization, difference, rationality, and emotionality. As a point of *differentiation*, the brand essence must distinguish its object from its counterparts, to allow it to emerge from a cluttered and competitive environment. Yet the identity cannot be so unique as to be outside the calculus of exchange. If its ultimate aim is to help its object to circulate as a viable commodity in the marketplace, it must remain rooted in a relational context of functional similarity or *standardization*. Moreover, the brand must simultaneously elicit *emotional* attachment, to "humanize the brand" – that is, inspire loyalty from its users – and be justifiable on a *rational* level, as the core of a strategy designed to generate political and economic capital.

If the interplay of these four factors constitutes the effective logic of branding in the corporate world, the politics of identity in the national realm are qualitatively similar in character – if not in execution. The rhetoric of national consciousness is inherently one of integration, seeking unifying and universalizing tropes to join its members in a common framework of a single "public." It is also one of distinction, a rhetoric of boundaries mobilized to establish who belongs and who does not (Calhoun, 1995, p. 242) in relation to its national neighbors. There is also a parallel to be drawn in terms of the mutual benefit of exchange. As Calhoun reminds, the discourse of nations emerged in the context of the rapid expansion of the scale and scope of capitalist markets; national discourse replaced – or rather, enfolded – that of smaller localities to accommodate the geopolitical context of international exchange. Nations that did not fit into the newly established categories – of trade, administrative or military organization, or other institutional structures – could not hope to become viable "players" in the emerging international system (Calhoun, 1997. p. 92).

It is perhaps for this reason that two of the more common tropes of nation brand strategies are *normalcy* and *peacefulness*, intrinsic elements for national viability:

*Poland is normal. There's a metro in Warsaw that works, there are buildings going up all the time (including one by Norman Foster) and both local and international chain retailers are filling up shopping areas. The bottom line is that while still a work in progress, Poland is becoming more and more normal, practically by the minute. ("A Brand for Poland," 2005, p. 56)*

*We were helping Macedonia prepare its case for joining the EU and so why they need to join – all the things they can take subsidies for. You know, we argued . . . what we can do. And we will be the peacemaker of the Balkans. And we will think about setting up an international peace study centre and we will train diplomats; we'll do all the other economic development things as well, but this is the thing we'll be known for. We'll basically have this as a core component of our identity and now for the brand of Macedonia, in the international world where people come to think of it, they'll think, oh, that's the place that makes peace. For the Balkans. (Respondent)*

In the context of forms of identity that challenge the validity of national boundaries – whether supranational, transnational or subnational – and that mobilize fear, distrust or simply lack of familiarity, the presence of national structures that appear to ensure normalcy or peaceability are given a much heartier welcome.

#### **4. “Living the Brand”: Communication as Implementation**

Regardless of the makeup of stakeholders or the qualities of the core idea, the primary responsibility for the success of the nation brand lies with individuals: the nation’s citizens, members of the diaspora, or even non-citizens in distant locations who may find cause to engage with the nation and therefore wish to have a stake in its success. For national citizens in particular, the key function is to “live the brand” – that is, to perform attitudes and behaviors that are compatible with the brand strategy. By “immers[ing]” themselves in the brand identity, citizens carry “the microbes of the brand” and “infect” those with whom they come into contact. This role is described variously as a “brand ambassador,” “brand champion,” “brand exemplar,” or “brand carrier.” A respondent describes the rationale for living the brand:

*We’ve seen enough product advertising to know that what we actually remember more are human beings, and the service they give us and the stories they have to tell, rather than the pictures of beds in hotels, cars that are made, jewelry, necklaces, landscapes . . . so brand exemplars will be used both within the country and out of sight, to tell the story about the place. We’ll over the years create tens of thousands of these people who’ll exemplify the brand in action, the values of that bit of the brand.*

As respondents continually took pains to convey, the nation brand may be augmented and made visible through its logos, slogans and promotional campaigns, but these are not effective forms of communication without the wholehearted participation of its representatives. Nation branding is, at its core, a concerted and comprehensive strategy by national citizens of all strata of society to assimilate and communicate this new national identity on an ongoing basis. Some respondents noted the similarity of this effort to the strategies of private corporations, which incite their employees to model “on- brand” behavior in the workplace – though with one crucial distinction: “The final thing is to inspire people, and they have to deliver the brand, and you can’t rule a population the way in which you can rule your employees.”

The need to inspire such allegiance and affiliation in the brand identity reveals a critical dimension of the practice: as a form of communication, the media of the message are effectively the citizens themselves. This is embedded in the attendant terminology: the communications and marketing strategies that underpin the brand are often referred to as “hymn sheets” or “song sheets,” which, as the terms imply, are intended to harmonize and unify the communications for the nation brand among the diverse members of the population. Typically hymn sheets are collected in a “brand book” to convey the principles of the brand essence, its core ideas, and its vision or strategy. The brand book is reproduced on a mass scale and distributed among citizens through a variety of channels.

Note that "creation" as an action has re-entered the dialogue. Although consultants do not see their role vis-à-vis the *brand* as one of creation, they do see their work as a necessary creation of *subject positions* relative to the nation brand, since "we've found in our experience that when you're translating a brand into communication, if you allow people to interpret it for themselves, the brand gets completely distorted in people's understanding."

### ***Reflections on National (Brand) Identity***

While a private corporation may inspire its employees to "live the brand" with a standards manual and the promise of a paycheck, it is unclear how a national government could incite those under its purview to do the same. Yet the idea that each individual bears the responsibility of integrating specific attitudes and behaviors that reflect national allegiance is a common trope in the mobilization rhetoric of nationalist strategies. Calhoun (1995, p. 243) has described how,

*as a way of conceptualizing political communities, nationalist rhetoric stresses, among other tropes, an understanding of the individual as directly and immediately related to the nation, so that national identity is experienced and recognized as personally embodied and not the contingent result of membership in intermediate groups. (my emphasis)*

If the rhetoric of nation branding echoes that of nationalist discourse in this regard, it also commits the same fallacy of omission or subjugation. Both perpetuate understandings of the nation as an integral, homogeneous unit, with boundaries not easily permeated by alternative visions of either membership or autonomy. This has implications for the conception and practice of public life, since "where nationalism or any other cultural formation represses difference . . . it intrinsically undermines the capacity of a public sphere to carry forward a rational-critical democratic discourse (Calhoun, 1995, p. 243).

At the outset of this article, I discussed the conception of nation branding by its proponents as a public good, that is, a unification of interests in the pursuit of common capital. But as Calhoun's discussion of nationalism and difference shows, a public good that presumes the existence of a single public ignores the infinite pluralities, conflicts and potentials for resistance that characterize the realities of public life. Conceiving of a single public also ignores the creative and evolving potential of publics in space and in time. While nation branding pays lip service to public participation and the diversity of opinions, its reliance on a "core idea" to represent a national population comes at the cost of recognizing internal differentiation, resistance, or conflict. But indeed, this is the very point. Branding's work is to erase the prominence of those attributes which might compromise the legitimacy of the nation-state in a market democracy. These attributes are called "hygiene factors" in the business: obstacles such as "investment red tape," "poor infrastructure," and "corruption." The effects of the conscious selectivity of the core idea are not lost on the clients who commission and pay for it. Branding appears as a benign form of national consciousness because elements that are not benign are not permissible within a nation-branding framework. Though respondents appeared generally aware of "real" historical, geopolitical and cultural differences among the nations they are called upon to brand (in fact, they displayed considerable historical

and cultural knowledge of the territories with which they worked), these were only taken as points of differentiation if conceived as part of the brand vision, strategy or execution. In other words, for qualitative differences of place to be considered as legitimate values, these differences must be deemed to confer "value added."

While nation branding appears to some as an exclusively external or surface strategy – a means to project a competitive image at large to attract international favor, whether in terms of cultural or economic capital – the exhortation to "live the brand" reveals something vital about the practice. This, in turn, reveals a critical dimension of the constitution of national identity. Identity is never only *externally* (internationally) determined – whether through international opinion, supranational policy or mediated representation – or *internally* (domestically) generated – whether through social engineering by elites or the collective will of citizens. Rather than setting these up as antagonistic or incommensurable entities, we might more productively view these as dialectically related, as mutually constitutive parts of a whole. National identity is contingent and relational, mobilized to center the collective self in relationship to an ever shifting other; but there is also a crucial dimension of self-determination, whereby individuals may establish shared horizons of significance within a collectivity. As Charles Taylor has argued, there is a "fundamentally *dialogical* character" (Taylor, 1991, p. 33) to self-determination. Our own ideas of who we are derive from our capacity for mutual exchange in order to arrive at common understandings, or at least, a common understanding of differences as they are produced and reproduced in modern societies. To properly understand what nation branding – or any other attempt to create and communicate issues of identity – achieves, we must take into account both the external motivations of identity projection and the claims made for internal, collective self-identification.

This is not an apologia for nation branding as a form of national identity. Nation branding may well function as a "public good" in an instrumentalist and economic sense, where nonrivalrous and nonexclusionary use of the good by its citizens requires the regulatory arm of government to coordinate the provision of that good in the marketplace (Baker, 2002). But this position does not map well onto ideas of the collective good in terms of our moral and ethical responsibilities and relationships to our territorial allegiances. Taylor makes this distinction in his discussion of the conflicts of modernity in terms of identity, arguing that such instrumental visions of the public good enable an "atomist outlook" which erodes citizens' relationships with their public and political institutions:

*Atomism has so befogged our awareness of the connection between the act and consequence in society that the same people who by their mobile and growth-oriented way of life have greatly increased the tasks of the public sector are the loudest to protest paying their share of the costs of fulfilling them. The hegemony of this outlook in our politics, further entrenched by irresponsible bureaucracy, also represents a standing threat to our ecological well-being. (1989, pp. 505-506)*

The form of recognition that nation branding offers may promote "wealth" in finance capital- and attention- or knowledge- or experience-intensive economies; but this awareness must be accompanied by an understanding of what other forms of collective wealth – self-realization, noninstrumental forms of community, mutual respect – may be lost in the process.



***Conclusion: The Ethic and the Experience***

Even with the identification of a brand identity and the codification of a brand strategy, there remains a gap, to echo Williams, between the ethic and the experience. The field of nation branding is still in its infancy. Very few nation-states are deemed to have successfully implemented a coherent and functional brand and recorded measurable results for branding initiatives. When probed about the sometimes lengthy lists of client locations featured on their websites or in publications, respondents explained that they may have "done work" or "advised" in these locations, but that the work had not culminated in the successful implementation of a nation brand on their terms. In some cases, respondents had completed an initial stage of nation brand research for their client, but the brand implementation had not gone forward, either for lack of client funds or, in some cases, because of the unstable political climate of the region. As one respondent noted, "Lebanon has blanket negative coverage right now." Said another:

*. . . the nation [of Israel] is behind this defensive wall, and they've got to come out of that and think long-term – and long-term planning in Israel is about two years. So they've got to come to terms with these issues, but I think if they can, national brand strategy could offer them a way of thinking about what's Israel's future offer to the world.*

The legitimacy of these justifications notwithstanding, I think it is possible to identify some underlying reasons for the lack of fit between the brand identity and national identity "on the ground." Ironically, these insights became clear to me when I came across an industry document describing a consultancy's branding work in the Oresund region, a narrow passageway between Denmark and Sweden. Describing the critical difference between branding a product and branding a place, the authors observe that "you don't have to ask the beans in the can how they feel about the label" (Oresund, 2002, p. 2). This sentence contains the moral dilemma at stake in the branding process; unlike the work of mapping a branded image onto a product, the mapping of a nation brand onto its recipients is obviously subject to a range of responses. Two examples drawn from fieldwork data exemplify the variation.

In Poland, the core idea that met with the greatest favor among the Polish constituency was "creative tension." Here is an excerpt explaining how the branding consultancy arrived at this brand essence:

*[Poland's] dramatic history, together with its physical location – part of the West but adjacent to the East – helps to explain why Poland is a country of paradoxes. In Poland passion and practicality, tumult and achievement, patience and restlessness are all intriguingly entangled . . . Polish people are idealistic and also pragmatic and resourceful; the Polish character is ambitious and also realistic. Poles are calm and they are also volatile . . . Poland is a country driven by these kinds of creative tensions. ("A Brand for Poland," 2005)*

The "creative tension" platform was developed in 2004. Three years later, during our interview, a consultant involved in the project expressed his frustration at the lack of uptake of the brand identity:

*How far have we got? Well, we're arguing with the bloody government and there's nothing . . . they agree with the principle of doing it, but since they can't agree with themselves to do anything other than argue, we haven't yet moved to the second stage where we make the stuff visible.*

The consultancy appears to have successfully identified a core attribute of the Polish population: "creative tension." But then it couldn't understand how this character might prevent it from moving forward to a form of collective representation.

The second anecdote emerged when I asked a respondent which places in the world might *not* make good brands. Would Britain, his home territory, be a candidate?

*No. It's got too much baggage, historically. If it could just wipe the slate clean now, maybe that would be different, but it can't . . . it is complex stuff and a big economy, does all sorts of different things, a lot of which are not very, not very innovative, traditional clothes and hunting and fishing and stuff. It's a nightmare for anyone trying to reinvent the country.*

What is revealed in this thinking is the recognition of what branding cannot do: that is, branding cannot account for the plurality of voices, legacies and competing visions of the nation-state. It also reveals a distinct, historically imperialistic tendency among British respondents to presume that their clients in Eastern European, African and North American locales have cleaner slates and less baggage to carry. That we now call this form of authority "soft power" instead of the methods of "hard power" that marked earlier forms of domination does not diminish its hegemonic intent.

Examples like these, I suggest, are less interesting as demonstrations of the success or failure of nation branding strategies than as an indication that the nation continues to matter as a framework for claims to legitimacy, recognition and rights in the contemporary context. Yet it also serves to underscore how branding consultants and their clients miss crucial ways in which national consciousness is produced and conveyed. The considerable gap between the representation of social life and the lived experience of those represented is central to an analysis of culture. Yet nation branding does do "real" work, as evidenced by the shifts this practice has effected on national policy and fund allocation. Rather than dismiss branding as merely gold-plating or profit-centered – though it is incontrovertibly both of these – we might consider the ubiquity of this discourse as a form of distinction, its expansion into realms where the politics of identity loom large, and the ongoing effects the practice can have on our person and on our cultural consciousness.

**APPENDIX A**

Simon Anholt, regarded by many as the "guru" of the nation branding movement, lists on his website "a small selection from his many appearances during the last two years":

Feb '05	Bucharest, Romania	Romania Investment Summit	Keynote Speaker
Mar '05	Geneva, Switzerland	World Association of Investment Promotion Agencies (WAIPA) Annual Summit	Panel Moderator
Apr '05	Cairo, Egypt	WIPO/AEPPi Egyptian Intellectual Property Seminar	Keynote Speaker
Apr '05	Como, Italy	Konrad Adenauer Foundation / Baltic Development Forum	Speaker
Apr '05	Almaty, Kazakhstan	Eurasian Media Forum	Keynote Speaker
May '05	London, UK	British Brands Group	The British Brands Lecture
May '05	Geneva, Switzerland	WIPO/UNCTAD/WHO/UNIDO/WTO Int'l IP & Development Seminar	Speaker
May '05	Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania	WIPO/Government of Tanzania Workshop on Nation Branding	Keynote Speaker
Jun '05	Berlin, Germany	IJP Conference: "The Power of the Media and Foreign Policy"	Speaker
Jun '05	Stockholm, Sweden	Swedish Institute Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy Conference	Keynote Speaker
Jun '05	Rotterdam, Netherlands	European Institute for Brand Management Symposium	Keynote Speaker
Jun '05	Berlin, Germany	Auswärtiges Amt Public Diplomacy Conference	Keynote Speaker
Jul '05	La Baule, France	2005 World Investment Conference	Panel Moderator, Speaker
Jul '05	Gaborone, Botswana	WIPO Nation Branding Workshop	Keynote Speaker

Jul '05	Washington, D.C.	Washington Post Seminar on Nation Branding	Keynote Speaker
Aug '05	Bern, Switzerland	Swiss Government Public Diplomacy Seminar	Keynote Speaker
Sep '05	Kingston, Jamaica	WIPO Nation Branding Seminar	Leader
Sep '05	Dubai, U. Arab Emirates	The Economist Middle East Round Table	Speaker
Oct '05	Montreux, Switzerland	UNCTAD/ITC Executive Forum	Speaker and Research Group Moderator
Oct '05	Bern, Switzerland	Swiss Government Public Diplomacy Seminar	Keynote Speaker
Oct '05	Stockholm, Sweden	Baltic Development Forum Annual Conference	Speaker
Oct '05	Stockholm, Sweden	Tendensdagen 2005	Keynote Speaker
Nov '05	Beijing, China	WIPO Inter-Regional Symposium	Keynote Speaker
Nov '05	Hong Kong, China	Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum 2005 (ACCF2005)	Keynote Speaker
Nov '05	Thimphu, Bhutan	WIPO Nation Branding Workshop	Keynote Speaker
Nov '05	Istanbul, Turkey	MARKA 2005	Keynote Speaker
Dec '05	Stockholm	SNS Young Leaders Symposium	Keynote Speaker
Dec '05	Dalarna, Sweden	Dalarna Regional Branding Conference	Keynote Speaker
Feb '06	London, UK	The Best Story Wins Summit	Speaker
Feb '06	London, UK	Marketing Cities, Regions and Towns	Conference Chair
Mar '06	Montreal, Canada	McGill University The 2006 Meredith Lecture	Conf. Keynote speaker
Mar '06	Sofia, Bulgaria	The Economist Government Round Table	Keynote speaker
Mar '06	London, UK	Location Branding '06	Keynote speaker
Apr '06	Cairo, Egypt	The Economist Government Round Table	Keynote speaker

Apr '06	Toronto, Canada	Canadian Tourism Commission CEO Summit	Keynote speaker
Apr '06	Toronto, Canada	Canadian Tourism Commission RVC Canada	Keynote speaker
Apr '06	Brussels, Belgium	AIM MEP's event	Keynote speaker: Branding Europe
May '06	Warsaw, Poland	Warsaw School of Economics – <i>Brand New Justice</i> book launch	Keynote speaker
May '06	St Gallen, Switzerland	St Gallen Symposium	Panel leader
May '06	Seoul, Korea	Korea Image Development Committee "Nation Brands in the Global Market"	Keynote speaker
May '06	Cape Town, South Africa	World Economic Forum Africa Summit	Keynote speaker
Jun '06	La Baule, France	2006 World Investment Forum	Panel Moderator
Jun '06	Valencia, Spain	Red Hot Locations Investment Conference	Keynote speaker
Jun '06	Bucharest, Romania	ITC/WIPO Innovations in Export Strategy	Keynote speaker
Jun '06	Madrid, Spain	ICEX Exporta 2006	Keynote speaker
Sep '06	Istanbul, Turkey	Centre for European Reform Bosphorus Summit	Speaker
Oct '06	Madrid, Spain	International Communications Forum	Keynote speaker
Oct '06	Helsinki, Finland	Baltic Development Forum Summit	Keynote speaker
Nov '06	Brussels, Belgium	European Parliament Baltic Sea Conference	Keynote speaker
Nov '06	London, England	2006 Nation Branding Masterclass	Masterclass Leader
Nov '06	London, England	CMO Summit 2006	Keynote speaker
Dec '06	Bucharest, Romania	Romania Branding Conference	Keynote speaker
Feb '07	Reykjavik, Iceland	Vioskiptaping Vioskiptaráos Íslands	Keynote speaker

Feb '07	Stockholm, Sweden	Stockholm School of Economics Nation Branding Conference	Keynote speaker
Feb '07	London, England	Enhancing Britain's Global Reputation Conference	Keynote speaker
Mar '07	Belgrade, Serbia	Brand Fair 2007	Keynote speaker
Mar '07	Riga, Latvia	Nation Branding Conference	Keynote speaker
Mar '07	Bratislava, Slovakia	2007 Central Europe Nation Branding Masterclass	Masterclass leader
Apr '07	Warsaw, Poland	Festival of Polish Cities	Keynote speaker
TBC	Middle East TBC	2007 Middle East Nation Branding Masterclass	Masterclass leader
TBC	Asia-Pacific TBC	2007 Asia-Pacific Nation Branding Masterclass	Masterclass leader

Source: [http://www.earthsspeak.com/Public\\_speaking.htm](http://www.earthsspeak.com/Public_speaking.htm) Accessed 9 April 2007.

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