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For someone who has physically been much in motion with transnational teaching and research, I am struck by the extent to which my intellectual interests have been stable. I was and am a historian, specializing in the role of media, communication, and culture in international relations. The short account of my career is that I began as a scholar of propaganda in international history, and as propaganda evolved into public diplomacy so my area of study and self-description changed too. My temporal focus evolved also: World War Two became the Cold War, then post-Cold War, then contemporary policy. I have even written on issues of the future, which I enjoyed. People contradict you much less when you are talking about the future as compared to the past.

Foundations

In the beginning, I was a studious dyslexic kid in state education in 1970s and early '80s Britain. I loved history above all subjects because it had the best stories with the best pictures and they happened to be—mostly—true. The history that I read validated the perspective of an individual. Every one of my Ladybird 'Adventure in History' biographies had a page about the boyhood of the character depicted, making it easy for a child to identify and experience a sense of limitless possibility. My parents, grandparents and older relatives were always talking about their own experience of the twentieth century and I was especially fascinated by the mismatch between their version of events and the authorized version seen in the old films and new documentaries on TV. Questions of propaganda rose naturally to the surface and spread into discussion of the issues of the age: Apartheid, Northern Ireland, and Détente. At the same time, I had powerful experiences of travel within Europe: meeting kids my own age from across Europe in Denmark and thinking all the while about the web of international relations that either brought nations together or set them on a collision course when we all seemed to have so much in common. It didn't seem like a coherent set of interests at the time. I remember my mother interrupting a long afternoon session viewing old war films on BBC2 saying: 'There's a world out there and it's in color—old films are never going to get you a job.' I did not have the wit to suggest 'media historian' as a role at the time but have reminded her of it since.

BA Leeds

I studied for my bachelor's degree at Leeds University in a newly created joint degree called International History and Politics (IHP). Finding Leeds owed more to luck than judgement. My grades weren't good enough for a more prestigious destination in history. Yet Leeds would be a better fit than I knew. I arrived to find that within the IHP program a small group of scholars were studying the history of propaganda in international affairs. The moving force was a Hungarian-born

scholar named Nicholas Pronay; his colleagues in that cause included Philip M. Taylor.¹ My cohort of students included several people destined to be significant scholars in the field of propaganda history. Tony Shaw and Catherine Utting were exact contemporaries; Gary Rawnsley and Susan Carruthers followed a little later.² Phil Taylor actively mentored us, encouraging his students to attend conferences on propaganda that were organized by the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST) even while we were still undergraduates. I had found a niche.

All Leeds historians wrote undergraduate research theses. My topic was the career of Lord Halifax as British Ambassador in the wartime United States and especially his first year when he was obliged to work hard to overcome negative public opinion. It was a perfect case to illuminate what is now called public diplomacy. My choice of an Anglo-American emphasis was pragmatic: I dreaded having to read papers in French. Our program director, the historian of British foreign policy David Dilks,³ encouraged me to supplement archival work with oral history, and I began tracking down and interviewing veterans of the Washington embassy, which meant going to see Sir Isaiah Berlin and Derek Hoyer-Millar (by this stage Lord Inchyra), who could not have been kinder. This early positive reinforcement established mixing archive and oral interviews as my core method; my underlying obsession with audio-visual media ensured I'd also bring film and broadcasting into the picture, and that is essentially the approach I've stuck with ever since.

Ph.D. Leeds

With the thrill of the chase upon me, continuing to a Ph.D. was not merely a nice idea, it was an obsession. The goal of a published book was even more compelling than simply securing the qualification. I did sufficiently well in finals at Leeds to secure a British Academy scholarship, and went straight into Ph.D. research without bothering with a master's degree. I stayed at Leeds and studied under Phil Taylor's supervision. My Ph.D. topic—the British government's propaganda campaign to draw the neutral US into World War Two—grew naturally from my undergraduate thesis, but part of its appeal was the implicit requirement to travel to complete the work. Initially I needed to study at the National Archives in Kew, but beyond that there was the allure of the United States.

Kew was sometimes a test of character. The day-to-day exposure to the wider field of diplomatic historians burst our collective Leeds bubble and those of us working on mid-century propaganda were regularly put 'in our place' by those in step with intellectual fashion working on the Cold War nuclear policy or learning Russian to become Kremlinologists. One senior scholar in British diplomatic history told me that my thesis was impossible as he had considered writing it himself and recommended giving up. My inner Captain Ahab took this as the most ringing endorsement of my whole enterprise, but thirty years on I certainly watch what I say to emerging scholars.

The greatest compensation and validation in the project came from my contact with the veterans of the work themselves. I was passed from veteran to veteran collecting stories of their war service at the Ministry of Information and its outposts in the US. Some witnesses also shared diaries or letters, and a picture of their wartime work took shape. It helped to feel that my project didn't just matter to me but that I was also a guardian of their important and untold story. Doing a Ph.D. is a

¹ Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring, eds. *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

² Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Kate Utting, "Palestine 1945-48: Policy, Propaganda and the Limits of Influence" in Christopher Tuck and Greg Kennedy (eds.), *British Propaganda and Wars of Empire: Influencing Friend and Foe 1900-2010* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Gary Rawnsley, *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956-64* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944-1960*. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996).

³ David Dilks, ed., *Retreat From Power. Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy and the Twentieth Century*. Vols. 1 and 2, (London: Macmillan, 1981).

grueling process and any narrative that can get you out of bed and into the archives for one more day can make a tremendous difference.⁴

Princeton

If finding Leeds and the Pronay/Taylor approach of media history was my first stroke of luck, my second was convincing the Commonwealth Fund of New York to support my interest in researching in the United States with a Harkness Fellowship. Their support came after Fulbright and a number of other programs had declined to help. I shudder to remember that I nearly didn't post the Harkness application as it seemed just too long a shot, and not intended 'for' the state school/red brick university brigade. Today, I can't imagine my life without the transatlantic dimension that followed. I elected to spend my two years at Princeton, largely because of the easy access to archives rather than particular scholars, and landed in the U.S. in the summer of 1988.

Princeton was like a little heaven to me if only because for the first time in my life I was in a place where it was really socially OK to care about and enjoy studying. Neither diplomatic nor media approaches were 'hot' in history at Princeton in those years. It was the golden age of the great cultural historians like Lawrence Stone and Nathalie Zemon Davis whose classes I avoided. But I found a home. I learned much from scholars like Richard Falk in the Wilson School and Arthur Waldron in History/East Asian Studies, and certainly enjoyed learning with and from peers who included David Armitage and Ben Alpers. My greatest influence in the U.S. was not actually on the faculty, but a writer and former war correspondent who I met when auditing Falk's class on reinterpreting Vietnam: Gloria Emerson. Gloria adopted me as something between a good cause and a research assistant. She insisted I work on my writing rather than just my content and served as an antidote to the obsessions of the US ivy-league. She thought all professors absurd and most academic projects ridiculously self-indulgent, but she liked me and thought that my research was worthwhile. Her life was itself an affirmation of my belief that the media and issues of representation were worthy of study. I was also fortunate to be taken on as a research assistant by the great British ex-newspaper editor Harold Evans, who was then writing an illustrated history *The American Century*. I worked on the 1930s and World War Two chapters and have enjoyed in later years being able to fall back on a knowledge of the U.S. general staff in that conflict that was acquired on behalf of that project.⁵ The first cheque from that project paid for my first laptop. Up to that point I had only used a manual typewriter.

The worst year for me starting out was without doubt 1990/91. My Harkness Fellowship ended and I returned to the UK to complete writing up and start looking for a job. The return was especially demanding not least as I had not expected the intensity of reverse culture shock. It became clear that neither diplomatic or media history specialties were especially sought after, and after nine months with the thesis complete I had yet to find even a temporary job. Princeton contacts came to the rescue. I had extended my original tenure by working as a teaching assistant and, with only a limited number of sections available in the annual U.S. diplomatic history survey, had also accepted assignments teaching the East Asian Studies survey and Modern Japanese History. The flexibility was appreciated and when in the fall of 1991 the Religion Department found itself in need of an assistant to help with an unexpectedly massive class in Native American Religion my name was passed to the parties in need. I spent a wonderful semester working with David Carrasco, assisting in Native American religion, and a further semester assisting Cornell West in the African American Studies survey class. That experience certainly stretched me intellectually, adding a cultural studies element to my vita. I benefited from a masterclass in teaching from seeing Carrasco and West at work, but the proven ability to work broadly made me much more marketable back in the UK. In the spring of 1992, I secured a one-year lectureship in American Studies at Birmingham on the understanding that I could originate a class in African American studies. The following year that post became a long-term job.

⁴ Nicholas J. Cull, "The British Campaign against American 'Neutrality,' 1939-1941," Ph.D. History, Leeds, 1991.

⁵ Harold Evans, Gail Buckland and Kevin Baker, *The American Century* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

My time at Princeton also helped get my thesis into print. A fellow student from the History program—Ken Halpern - happened to get talking to Sheldon Myer, the history editor from Oxford University Press's New York office, at a family wedding Myer asked if he knew of any interesting theses and Ken mentioned mine. The book appeared in late 1994 with a 1995 imprint.⁶

Second Book & Side Work

My second book project grew from the first. In writing my first book I had become intrigued by the career of Edward R. Murrow, the CBS journalist whom the Churchill government cultivated as a trusted channel to the neutral U.S. public. Murrow was a great example of a propaganda poacher turned gamekeeper; by the Kennedy era he had transitioned from journalist to director of the United States Information Agency, the agency which looked to assist U.S. foreign policy by 'telling America's story to the world.' I wondered whether the experience as being a customer of British wartime information had shaped his approach and looked for an archive-based treatment of the agency's contribution to U.S. foreign policy. Finding that none existed, I resolved to write one. I secured British Academy support for a sabbatical semester at the U.S. National Archives and presidential libraries and set out in the fall of 1995. My initial plan was for a succinct book on key moments in U.S. public diplomacy: Cuba, the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, and so forth but one of the strongest messages that I got from both the archives and the interviews with veterans of the agency was that the strength of public diplomacy lay not in its crisis capacity but in its day-to-day construction of long term relationships through cultural diplomacy and exchange.

As with my book on British propaganda, the work on U.S. public diplomacy required extensive contact with veterans of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and Voice of America radio. I was working at a time when the future of the agency was in doubt. The Senate was eager secure a peace dividend. It saw public diplomacy as unnecessary in a post-Cold War world. The vulnerability of public diplomacy in the present created an urgency within the veteran community to get the story told and told accurately, which again gave an urgency to the research. While this long-term project took shape I published a number of smaller, shorter pieces based on episodes I'd encountered in the archives or issues of particular interest, such as the use of favorite feature films in teaching. One of my favorite pieces from this era was a piece for IAMHIST's journal—the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* - on the Kennedy administration's reaction to the impersonation of the president by comedian Vaughn Meader.⁷ The piece is still cited. I also wrote on prisoner of war films,⁸ *Doctor Who*,⁹ *The Exorcist*¹⁰, Hollywood adaptations of Kipling,¹¹ Britain's raucous genre parodies the Carry On films and a

⁶ Nicholas J. Cull, *Selling War: British Propaganda and American Neutrality in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁷ 'No Laughing Matter: Vaughn Meader, the Kennedy Administration and Presidential Impersonation on the radio' *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 17:3 (August 1997): 383-400.

⁸ 'Great Escapes: Englishness and the Prisoner of War genre.' *Film/History* 14 (2002): 282-295.

⁹ "Bigger on the Inside: *Doctor Who* as British cultural history," in Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor, eds., *The Historian, Television and Television History* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2001): 95-111.

¹⁰ 'The Exorcist' in David Ellwood, ed., *The Movies as History* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000) 196-205 first published in *History Today* 50:5 (May 2000): 46-51 and in Swedish translation in *Filmbäftet* 113:2 (May 2001): 45-48. Anthologized in Jerad Walters (ed.) *The Exorcist: Studies in Horror Film* (Lakewood: Centipede Press, 2012): 293-304.

¹¹ "America's Raj: Kipling, Masculinity and Empire" in C.E. Gittings (ed.), *Imperialism and Gender: Constructions of Masculinity* (Hebden Bridge: Dangaroo Press, 1996): 85-97.

range of other subjects.¹² My joke at the time was that in terms of the saying ‘a change is as good as a rest,’ I preferred change rather than rest. With a book out and a contract for the USIA study and boundless energy I applied for a post beyond my reach: chair of American Studies at Leicester University with the brief to establish a research center in the field. To my astonishment, I got the job. I enjoyed building up the American Studies program at Leicester and found my research well-supported. I also had the opportunity to support other initiatives on campus such as the creation of a National Space Science Centre. I served on the planning committee as an in house cultural and political historian. My duties included seeking out inspirational figures loosely associated with the field of astronomy from each continent and re-writing the Greek myths associated with various namesake planetary bodies to be more family friendly. All the while my work on public diplomacy continued.

Public Diplomacy

Ironically, given the U.S. government’s retreat from public diplomacy, the British government of the era was eager to explore what was now widely known as ‘soft power.’ The UK government saw an opportunity to develop its relationship with Eastern Europe especially by linking the teaching of English to wider issues of media literacy and cultural studies. A British Council official happened to sit in on my Kipling talk in Birmingham and roped me into the British Studies plan as a regular guest lecturer. I had a blast doing guest talks on *Doctor Who* in Turkey and Finland, the Black Atlantic in the Czech Republic, and on *The Great Escape* at Warwick. The link with the British Council grew. My British Council contact was promoted into an internal thinktank and suddenly my work on the underlying history of public and cultural diplomacy became valuable. 9/11 settled the deal. As the West collectively woke up to the need to communicate with global publics, the history of public diplomacy was suddenly of widespread interest. I was invited to brief the advisory board to the whole British Council. The presentation which I developed for that talk became the first draft of an essay on the theory of public diplomacy and, just last year, a book-length monograph: *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age*.¹³

USC Annenberg

In the United States an academic initiative to rebuild public diplomacy took shape. The Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California took the lead, under the leadership of Dean Geoff Cowan, who had directed Voice of America in the first Clinton administration. His first task was to create a Centre on Public Diplomacy; his second to develop a master’s degree program. The veterans in D.C. who were my sources were also advising Geoff on his enterprise, and with this happy state of mutual awareness I was invited to apply to direct the degree and serve as professor of Public Diplomacy. I got the job and in 2005 relocated to Southern California and set about a range of activities designed to develop the field of public diplomacy studies.

The move to California was a challenge. I had gotten married and started a family, and at the very moment that we were first talking about moving to California my second son—Magnus -- was born with Down Syndrome. The task at hand seemed suddenly overwhelming. I remember saying to my dear friend, historian, Prof John Young of Nottingham that I wasn’t sure that I could be both a professor and Dad to a boy with Down Syndrome. He told me that General Charles de Gaulle was father to a girl with Down Syndrome and it didn’t stop him from saving France. In the end, the provisions for kids with special needs in California turned out to be good and provided a way into a way into community of parents like us.

¹² For one example see “Infamy! Infamy! They’ve all got it in for me!” *Carry on Cleo* and British Camp Comedies of Ancient Rome,” in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire (eds) *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Arethusa Books and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001): 162-190.

¹³ Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

One of the treats at USC was that for the first time in my academic career I could finally actually teach entire classes based on my research. Up until that point I had been doing the usual load of a junior scholar—survey classes in which only a single lecture even relates to one’s thesis and a single paragraph encapsulates one’s thesis. At Birmingham I had been able to build an evidence seminar around the problem of U.S. interwar isolationism and at Leicester I had worked on a film as a source class dedicated to World War Two, but even these were tangential compared to the on-the-money joy of teaching classes like my history of public diplomacy survey or a specialized class in Cultural Diplomacy. Adapting to a vocational program required creating a new class of global issues, which I co-taught as a series of simulations with a diplomat in residence provided by the State Department. The transition slowed completion of my USIA research but my treatment of the agency in the Cold War appeared in 2008¹⁴ and a follow up volume taking the story to 9/11/2001 came out in 2012.¹⁵ I was also pleased to be able to develop writing on film as evidence in two books that were co-written with my IAMHIST colleague James Chapman, the first dealing with representations of Empire in popular cinema; the second with representations of the future.¹⁶

When my second volume on USIA appeared, I had the opportunity to develop research in a new direction. Looking at the field I felt that the initial task of opening archive-based public diplomacy/cultural diplomacy studies had largely been accomplished –with excellent work by historians including Laura Belmonte, Ken Osgood, Giles Scott-Smith, Jessica Gienow-Hecht and others with books in the pipeline it was no longer true that this was terra incognita.¹⁷ The gap in the historical literature lay in the over-emphasis on Cold War America and on the nation state as an actor. For my next project I resolved to look at more a complex case of public diplomacy: the international campaign to resist Apartheid in South Africa. I began that work in 2012 and found it logistically demanding to access the necessary archival materials given that I needed multiple visits to South Africa, to the UN archive in New York, and the massive anti-Apartheid collection held at Oxford. As before I supplemented my archive work with interviews. I didn’t get to speak to ex-president Nelson Mandela but I did have a long interview with the former foreign minister for the Apartheid government—Pik Botha—which was rather like interviewing King Lear. My South Africa work was interspersed with other projects related to contemporary public diplomacy, but when COVID struck in 2020 I found I had sufficient materials on hand to begin writing.

Push versus Pull

Looking back on my career to date I am struck that projects came to me both as a result of a push and a pull, which is to say, some I chose, and some chose me. Both types of project have proved valuable in building an overall profile though the later centrality of things I came to by chance is especially humbling and even scary. I suspect it is in my nature to become a champion of every group or issue that I study, though I must say that it seems that the prejudice of the past is reproduced in attitudes to scholarship in the present. The units that I have studied like USIA, British Information Services or the UN’s Unit on Apartheid typically were not highly valued in their own time and historical attention has followed in the same rut. Public Diplomacy has not received the attention that it deserves and its equivalent practice in the present remains neglected

¹⁴ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency: American public diplomacy 1989-2001* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).

¹⁶ James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Tomorrow: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

¹⁷ Laura Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2010); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006); Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: The US State Department’s Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France and Britain 1950-1970*. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), and Jessica Gienow-Hecht, *Transmission Impossible: American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Post-war Germany, 1945-55* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1999).

when compared to the parallel realms of military, intelligence, economic or diplomatic affairs. Potential scholar be aware! I am also struck by the role of luck in my particular trajectory: with the good luck coming from being in the right place at the right time with acceptable qualifications, a willingness to be involved and a flexible idea of what a win might look like. At Princeton and Birmingham I was the grateful recipient of a job or project which pickier colleagues had passed over.

Some of the inherited tasks took longer than I expected. Sometime in the late 1990s Phil Taylor asked me to take over editing an encyclopedia of propaganda since 1500. I imagined that I could run the project like Tom Sawyer painting the fence. It turned out to be one of the most demanding things I have worked on. I ended up writing half of the entries in the book myself and sending them to colleagues for feedback rather than recruiting scholars to create the entries from scratch. Salvation came when the late David H. Culbert of Louisiana State and David Welch of University of Kent agreed to come on board as co-editors. The final volume is one of the most widely read things I've done as it is sometimes held by school libraries.¹⁸

From undergraduate days onwards I've lived between academic homes. I am aware that this interdisciplinary path has had its costs as well as its benefits. None of my institutions have been as supportive of cross-disciplinary work in practice as they were/are in rhetoric and I retain a sense of being a little too hybrid for mainstream taste. Many academics think of cross disciplinary work as an excellent thing to affirm once the core of their discipline is taken care of. The worst part of this is watching the difficulties which younger colleagues in the field with similar approaches have had on the tenure treadmill. I would urge a younger scholar to pay dues both as a single subject and hybrid scholar so that they can respond as flexibly as possible to institutional need. I've tried to be part of and develop institutions for others with the same mix of interests as myself, and hence was both president of the International Association for Media and History and co-editor of the *Journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, though it was a bit of a stretch to do both jobs at the same time.

I think that it is important not to take either compliments or criticism too much to heart and certainly not to read too much into a run of good or bad luck. This is easier to write than to live. I have experienced both. I have enjoyed opportunities to work with public history including work with a number of documentary film makers, the most recent being a terrific film about the making of *Alien*.¹⁹ I have also been glad to have been able to work with officials in the UK, the U.S., and elsewhere and to play a role in bringing academic voices and ideas into policy circles. I am sure that my scholarship is better than it would otherwise have been given my understanding more about the realities of the foreign policy practice. I hope that there are some corners of public diplomacy practice which are better for my having helped. Thinking of the whole sweep, it has certainly been fun and I appreciate the opportunity to have been able to do something that I love. After all, if it isn't a love story, why bother.

Nicholas J. Cull is Professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. He is a historian of the role of the media and communication in international relations. His books include *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019) and two books on US public diplomacy: *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency, 1989-2001* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). He is co-editor (with Nancy Snow) of *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2nd edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2020) and with Michael Hawes of *Canada's Public Diplomacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He is a past president of the International Association for Media and History and a current board

¹⁸ David Culbert Cull and David Welch, eds., *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500-present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2003).

¹⁹ Alexandre O. Phillippe (dir.), *Memory: The Origins of Alien*, 2019.

member of the Public Diplomacy Council. He is currently working on a study of the role of public diplomacy in the end of Apartheid in South Africa. He is married with three school-age sons and lives in Redondo Beach, CA.