

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Changing how public institutions practice soft power		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Ben O'Loughlin	Professor of International Relations	2006-date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Her Majesty's Government, the British Council, and the Goethe Institute have changed how they approach the projection of soft power as a direct consequence of O'Loughlin's research. His research has informed how they seek to achieve influence in international affairs conceptually, in policy, and in practice. This is due to (i) O'Loughlin's role as Specialist Advisor on the House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power, through which his research informed a report which changed institutions' thinking, policies and practices; and (ii) O'Loughlin's research and evaluation projects with the British Council changed how the institution engages with overseas publics. O'Loughlin's research, conducted jointly with the Goethe Institute, influenced soft power projection in Germany. O'Loughlin's range of collaborations led to an approach to understanding overseas publics that uses narrative to guide engagement, whether digital or face-to-face, to achieve long-term influence.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Over the last decade O'Loughlin has produced a body of research on how communication influences international relations. This was first advanced in a 2010 working paper, fully articulated in the 2013 book <i>Strategic Narratives</i> [R. 3] and re-visited with an invited series of empirical case studies in the 2017 volume <i>Forging the World: Strategic Narratives in International Relations</i> [R.1]. In the 2000s it was clear from US and UK efforts to win "hearts and minds" in Iraq and Afghanistan that these states, and their public institutions, had difficulties projecting an appealing narrative to overseas societies and listening to the needs and aspirations of those target societies. Additionally, US and UK narratives did not inspire confidence among other allies and soon lost the support of their domestic publics. O'Loughlin's theory of Strategic Narratives offered a model of narrative formation, projection and reception, and methods for analysts to trace how narratives were understood and responded to by different target audiences – enemies, undecideds, allies, and home publics.</p> <p>Two critical moves were, first, to focus on narratives rather than the assertion of static values ("we stand for human rights"). O'Loughlin's previous ESRC-funded research had shown that audiences have a strong sense of where their country and international society are going and that this shapes expectations and preferences. Attention to narrative is more dynamic and allows an understanding of how audiences connect past, present, and possible futures. Second, attention to audience reception had been lost in debates about soft power [R.3]. Foreign policy analysts and International Relations scholars had given priority to analysing soft power projection – the number of museums, sales of British-made movies overseas, and so on. They largely ignored reception. Accordingly, debates about soft power offered very little tangible evidence of persuasion or influence [R.1, R.2, R.3]. The Strategic Narratives model offered a</p>		

less self-centred approach to international influence and offered concepts and methods to both analyse and create more effective engagement with target audiences.

The findings and recommendations of O'Loughlin's research were:

- i. Give resources and attention to the audience reception of narratives as much as states' and organisations' projection of narratives.
- ii. Develop methodologies for identifying audiences' narratives over time. A snapshot of their values at a given moment tells less about the direction they want their country to travel and thus how the UK can help them. [R.1, R.5]
- iii. Accept that persuasion and influence happen incrementally. Moments in which particular narratives alter outcomes in international relations are rare. However, states cannot opt-out of engaging in international influence activities even if the likely outcome is simply to maintain current relations with overseas audiences [R.1, R.2].
- iv. Treat communication as happening in an ecology of multiple media so that efforts to create international influence must trace how narratives and attributions of cultural value circulate over time between elites, media and publics in different countries. Single-medium studies (e.g. of Twitter alone) tell us little in isolation [R.4, R.6].

Strategic Narratives became the theoretical framework for O'Loughlin's subsequent comparative research analysing conflict and perceptions of diplomacy in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine (see grants from the British Council and European Commission in section 3).

O'Loughlin's work on strategic narratives provided concepts and methods for tracing digital influence in politics more broadly too. Previous work on online radicalisation and assisting the BBC World Service's social media operations during the London 2012 Olympics [R.5] led him to develop techniques with practitioners and theorise influence through digital media. He had developed internationally award-winning methods for tracing how users' online behaviours shaped their offline political actions [R.6]. This knowledge of how to research digital communication led him to be elected 2019 Thinker in Residence on 'Disinformation and Democracy' by the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Brussels to publish a report distilling his understanding of this field [E.9].

3. References to the research

On soft power and strategic narrative (and note all research is co-authored equally):

- R.1. Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (eds.) (2017) *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press). QI: Google Scholar 177 citations. Available from HEI on Request.
- R.2. Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A. and O'Loughlin, B. (2014) Strategic Narratives: A New Way to Understand Soft Power. *Media, war and Conflict*. 7(1), 70-84. Google Scholar 312 citations. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>
- R.3. Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (2013) *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge). Winner, International Studies Association (ISA) Best Book Award 2016, International Communication Section. Google scholar 505 citations. Available from HEI on Request.

O'Loughlin's ESRC-funded research showing how audiences have dynamic understandings of the future and think in terms of narratives:

- R.4. O'Loughlin, B. (2011). Images as weapons of war: representation, mediation and interpretation. *Review of International Studies*. 37(1), 71-91. 71 citations. DOI: [10.1017/S0260210510000811](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000811).

On specifically digital influence through communication in international relations:

- R.5. Gillespie, M. and O'Loughlin, B. (2015) Special issue: Tweeting the Olympics: International broadcasting, soft power and social media. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 12(1), 338-676.
DOI: <https://www.participations.org/Volume%2012/Issue%201/contents.htm>.
- R.6. Vaccari, C., Chadwick, A. and O'Loughlin, B. (2015) Dual Screening the Political: Media Events, Social Media, and Citizen Engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 65, 1041-1061.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12187>. Winner, American Political Science Association (APSA) 2016 Walter Lippmann Award for Best Article published in Political Communication. Google scholar 203 citations.

Grants underpinning the impactful research:

- January-March 2020 British Council, Soft Power and English Language. GBP45,000 to Royal Holloway – Unable to accept due to O'Loughlin suffering severe illness in February 2020.
- January 2017 – June 2018 British Council, Cultural Value in Societies in Transition. GBP150,000 (GBP21,047 to Royal Holloway). Co-PI. Grant Awarded to Marie Gillespie, The Open University. This project evaluated and advised how the British Council and Goethe Institute practice influence in both Egypt and Ukraine.
- January 2016 – June 2017 The cultural value of #ShakespeareLives. PI Marie Gillespie, The Open University. O'Loughlin worked on this gratis for benefits of impact and publications.

Also underpinning the research on narratives in Ukraine:

- September 2015 – August 2018 European Commission, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship, 'Russia's Strategic Narrative of the West: A study of influence in Ukraine'. PI EUR243,934.20 to Royal Holloway.
- September 2015 – August 2018 Jean Monnet Network Grant, 'Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine (C³EU)', Academic Coordinator, EUR222,930 to Natalia Chaban, University of Canterbury. GBP3,000 to Royal Holloway, plus four Royal Holloway staff and one PhD candidate attended workshops around Europe.

4. Details of the impact

Before O'Loughlin's research, the practice of how soft power was used by governments and other cultural institutions had been overlooked and misunderstood. His research changed this in ways reflected both in policy and in practice.

Strategic Narratives fed into national policy debate through the House of Lords Committee. Its report compelled an Her Majesty's Government (HMG) response that demonstrated the influence of O'Loughlin's research, leading directly to policy decisions regarding Chevening Scholarships and diplomatic training. It informed public policy further by transforming how the British Council conceptualised soft power and used that conception to justify its value within government and to create new dialogue with external stakeholders. Between 2016 and 2018 the research led to changes in international policy practice. Co-production of research and evaluation with the British Council and Goethe Institute made it possible to both enact and demonstrate the value of audience research techniques recommended in O'Loughlin's *Strategic Narratives* (2013) [R.3] and *Forging the World* (2017) [R.1] in Ukraine and Egypt as well as through global digital campaigns.

The main findings of *Strategic Narratives* [R.3] informed the 60,000 word report O'Loughlin wrote for the House of Lords Soft Power Committee. This allowed HMG to first learn about, formally acknowledge, and affirm the appropriateness and use of his theory of how strategic narratives shape soft power. Furthermore, they were willing to act upon his findings and recommendations, introducing a number of changes to policy and practice in 2014 following the report [E.2]. *Strategic Narratives'* findings also led the British Council to invite O'Loughlin to work directly with them to enact these findings, notably through a global digital campaign in 2016. His work also informed policies in the Goethe Institute, by exploring new methods to understand target audiences' understandings of the cultural 'value' of engaging with Germany.

Changing HMG's understanding and practice of narrative influence: In the 2013 book *Strategic Narratives* [R.3] strategic narrative was defined as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (p2). This conceptualisation was central to the Soft Power report. HMG's official response [E.2] used this conceptualisation to explain how they practised strategic narrative and why they did not require an additional strategic narrative 'unit' in the Cabinet Office because they thought they were already achieving a coherent narrative across government. HMG asserted 'There is already a mechanism in place' for this (p11). By 2020 there is documented evidence this has become accepted thinking in UK foreign policy. Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee published its 'five strategic narratives through which the UK can make a global contribution' [E.8].

HMG's actions to achieve narrative influence: In line with O'Loughlin's finding that audience reception must be understood, HMG 'agrees with the Committee's recommendation to urge all concerned to gain a much deeper understanding of how others see the UK' [E.2]. It presented policies that avoided 'a UK-centric vision' [E.2]. To his finding that instances of observable immediate influence in international affairs are rare, HMG 'agrees with the Committee's recommendation that there should not be an overemphasis on immediate returns on soft power investment, as many of the benefits may be longer term' [E.2]. On that basis – again reflecting O'Loughlin's conceptualisation – HMG committed to increase funding for the Chevening Scholarship Programme from 2015 to 2016 [E.2]. Regarding O'Loughlin's findings on conducting digital engagement and thinking of communication in which media are treated as an ecology, HMG 'agrees with the Committee's [and thus O'Loughlin's] recommendation on the need for diplomats to receive training in ... the power of social media and be competent in its use', and, concretely, 'skills training will also be included in the material offered by the Diplomatic Academy ... which will be open formally in early 2015' [E.2].

The current [text removed for publication] at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office has confirmed that further government spending commitments reflected advice in O'Loughlin's Soft Power report [E.3]. His testimony states, '[text removed for publication]'. This testimony also signalled the report's soft power recommendations still inform policy in 2020, stating '[text removed for publication]' [E.3].

HMG's 2014 response enabled O'Loughlin to **directly guide a UK public sector organisation, the British Council**, in enacting these reforms. HMG's response stated, 'To further enable UK arts and cultural activity overseas to achieve lasting impact and value, the British Council is developing a forward-looking framework to capture and promote major UK cultural and arts seasons and 'years of culture' with key countries all around the world' (p24) [E.5]. O'Loughlin, with Gillespie (The Open University), developed regular relations with the British Council in 2015 to receive funding from the British Council to evaluate their #ShakespeareLives 2016 global campaign of events, competitions and other activities to celebrate 400 years since Shakespeare's death.

The British Council's [text removed for publication] Programme, Policy and External Relations, testified that for her organisation the report was '[text removed for publication]' [E.6]. Internally, she described how they used the report to help prepare their within-government case for funding for cultural relations and to explain to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) how the British Council contributes '[text removed for publication]' in the longer term. The report also helped them '[text removed for publication]'. The effect of this was to start '[text removed for publication]', she writes.

The Cultural Value project involved O'Loughlin and Gillespie implementing qualitative alongside the usual quantitative methods used by the British Council and Goethe Institute to understand their audiences-cum-users. They conducted this research in Ukraine and Egypt. **The research influenced how the British Council and Goethe Institute construct evaluation of their cultural relations programmes** [E.4, E.5, E.6]. The British Council include this framework in

their Arts Evaluation Toolkit [E.7]. This evidences how O’Loughlin’s research with Gillespie altered how the British Council and Goethe Institute conceptualise influence and their willingness to use qualitative methods to identify what audiences understand by cultural ‘value’, in line with O’Loughlin’s research findings. The British Council’s [text removed for publication] adds that this improves performance because they are better able to understand how and why the goals of their stakeholders differ and how then to seek alignment and shared understanding [E.7].

These relationships bring sustained engagement that will generate further impact [E.3]. The British Council is committed to these approaches as of late 2020 [E.7]. The 2019 Thinker in Residence position in Brussels [E.9] has brought ongoing dialogue about an impact-focused event. O’Loughlin will attend COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021 to evaluate the UK’s strategic narrative on climate change for the UK government, with the permission of COP26 CEO Peter Hill and working with the Cabinet Office. These relations in the UK and abroad are institutionalised and will continue.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E.1 (2014) Power and Persuasion in the Modern World. London: HM Stationary. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldsoftpower/150/150.pdf>. This was the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and UK Influence.
- E.2 (2014) UK Government public response to Power and Persuasion in the Modern World, available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/soft-power-uk-influence/Lords-Soft-Power-Government-Response.pdf>. This document responds to the recommendations of the report and addresses which government would implement.
- E.3 Written testimony of the [text removed for publication], Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
- E.4 (2018, February) Cultural Value: Cultural Relations in Societies in Transition: A Literature Review. British Council / Goethe Institute policy paper. I am second named author (p27) and the work cites [3]. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/lit_review_short_working_paper_final_final.pdf
- E.5 (2018, October) Culture in an Age of Uncertainty: The Value of Cultural Relations in Societies in Transition. The second and main report of our findings on the Cultural Value project. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/cultural_relations_in_an_age_of_uncertainty_en.pdf
- E.6 Written testimony from [text removed for publication], The British Council.
- E.7 Written testimony of [text removed for publication], The British Council
- E.8 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2020). A brave new Britain? The future of the UK’s international policy. 13 October. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmcaff/380/38005.htm#_idTextAnchor037
- E.9 O’Loughlin’s work on strategic narrative led to his appointment as 2019 Thinker in Residence of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences and the Arts. He wrote a policy paper on Disinformation and Democracy that investigated the role of foreign narratives influencing domestic politics in the EU. His report was presented to policymakers and social media stakeholders in Brussels in October 2019. The final report was published in February 2020: <https://www.kvab.be/sites/default/rest/blobs/2557/Final%20Report%20Dem%20&%20Desinfo.pdf>