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Taking Comedy Seriously in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

What do American comedy shows, such as *South Park*, an animated cartoon sitcom, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a parody of news broadcasts, have to do with public diplomacy? Well, more than you think.

Political humor in contemporary American entertainment media, as exemplified by these two shows, is more than just for laughs; it is often a form of serious social critique and intellectual engagement. And, issues about international relations and perceptions of foreign countries are part of their staples for comedic rendition.

In our paper, titled “The Comic Imagination of China: The Beijing Olympics in American TV Comedy and Implications for Public Diplomacy,” to be published in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, we focus on the image of China in American pop culture as a case in point to discuss the role of humor and satire in the study and practice of public diplomacy. Specifically, we examine how the 2008 Beijing Olympics was represented in *South Park* (“*The China Problem*” episode, season premiere in fall 2008) and on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (one week of special programming on China during the Olympics).

Our study reveals striking coherence in the discourse structure of China being mysterious, authoritarian and threatening. In this regard, the two shows didn’t paint a much different picture of China from what is generally available in other media forms. Their comic take only makes it more vivid and visceral beyond the mere abstractions of polls numbers and political debates.

On the other hand, what also becomes the object of comedy is Americans’ cultural ignorance about China and their paranoia of its rise. The shows invite and even force their viewers to be reflective of their existing notions and perceptions. By mocking “others” ignorance and exaggerated fear, the episodes helped to release through laughter some of the tensions and anxieties on the part of the viewers; thereby instilling common sense into the on-going national debate on China.

Underlying such comedic engagement is an element of self-awareness and self-critique, which one may argue is also a quality of America’s own soft power?there is something attractive and charming when a people do not take themselves too seriously at times.

This study raises an important question of how comic representations of national image should be viewed and analyzed in the context of a country’s “soft power.” It also suggests ways of utilizing comedy and humor, for instance, as an analytical tool for insights into country perception; as an engagement tactic to make a connection and subvert stereotypes; and as a pedagogical device in the training of public diplomacy practitioners.

Furthermore, both shows assume the role of the common man in their storytelling. We argue that programs such as these often do a better job in capturing the public's mood and sentiments. Known for blending the serious and the playful, they also have a strong youth orientation and are highly adaptive to the converging media landscape.

So, what kind of transformative power do they, and pop culture in general, have in shaping and re-shaping country perceptions and attitudes, especially among the younger generation? How do they affect the way countries cultivate and manage their national image and brand? In short, their implications for the discussion and practice of public diplomacy are significant, and should not be overlooked.
