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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The domestic production of strategic narratives: public diplomacy in culture and technology from the United Kingdom and beyond

J. P. Singh[1]

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Abstract
Strategic narratives are streamlined stories with instrumental priorities that organizations and governments present about themselves. This article shows how strategic narratives emerge in public diplomacy through domestic contestations and collaboration among several agencies. The essay examines two public diplomacy narratives—in the realms of culture and technology—from the United Kingdom, but placed in the context of overlapping narratives from other countries. In both cases, the essay emphasizes text-based methodologies for empirical substantiation, including computational methods. For culture, the essay analyzes the record of fostering cultural relations through the British Council. The second realm, that of artificial intelligence policies in the United Kingdom, might seem to be something other than 'public diplomacy'. Yet, as this essay shows, these policies have an external diplomatic dimension. Strategic narratives are an integral part of how states present their national stories to the world and to their domestic audience, but their cohesiveness rests on long-term contestations informed with historical values.

Keywords Public diplomacy · Strategic communication · Cultural relations · Artificial intelligence · United Kingdom · Soft power

Introduction

Strategic narratives are streamlined stories with instrumental priorities that organizations and governments present about themselves. They are crafted and curated to present an architectural design that appears to be cohesive and consistent over time. The idea of a grand strategy in international relations is one of the boldest enunciations of such a narrative in which all mini foreign policies of a country over time ultimately cater to a grand direction in foreign policy among its progenitors. In practice foreign policy is often a tug-of-war among competing agencies in a government and, therefore, empirically grand strategies are difficult to validate. The same applies to a sub-set of foreign policies, namely public diplomacy, where the strategic narratives, however cohesive they might seem, are often the result of several collaborative and contested processes within a government.

✉ J. P. Singh
jsingh19@gmu.edu

[1] Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, Arlington, USA

This article shows that strategic narratives do exist but emerge over time from a series of contestations and collaborations among government agencies. These contestation and collaboration processes in fact deepen these narratives among agencies, thus lending the narratives legitimacy. My research on strategic narratives has examined the contestations and intersections that produce these stories. In the past, I have examined how several strategic narratives co-exist and intersect each other in the international development space (Singh 2017); how overriding values arise within the cultural relations and diplomacy space (Singh et al. 2021; Singh, Kaptanoğlu and Li 2023); and, the ways in which different states' strategic policy narratives are 'entangled' in each other in the domain of artificial intelligence (Singh et al. 2025).

This essay examines the domestic production of strategic narratives to show that emergent seemingly linear and cohesive policies over time are the result of several agencies that can work in cooperation and contestation with each other.

Having reconciled conflicting stories, the strategic narratives provide 'sense-making' in that they help to weave a story or a strategic direction around desired goals. A public diplomacy strategy that rests on a values-driven foreign

policy, for example, may result from contestations that settled on particular values, which in turn may have historical resonance within the state. Specifically, I call attention to empirical methodologies that illustrate the tensions and overlaps in the narratives. As illustration, and for the purpose of storytelling, the essay examines two public diplomacy narratives from the same country, namely the United Kingdom, but placed in the context of overlapping narratives from other countries. The global context is important even for understanding domestic priorities.

One narrative in this essay falls in the realm of culture and the other in technology. In both cases, the essay emphasizes methodologies for empirical substantiation. For culture, the essay analyzes the record of fostering cultural relations through the British Council. The term 'cultural relations', invented by the British Council to foster relations among societies, has always been challenged from the more state-led strategic goals in the conduct of foreign policy. The empirical substantiation shows in an example how both cultural diplomacy and soft power initiatives played out in the case presented later. The second realm, that of artificial intelligence policies in the United Kingdom, might seem to be something other than 'public diplomacy'. Yet, as this essay shows, these policies have an external dimension. As strategic policy narratives, they not only provide cohesion to domestic policies but are often designed to influ- ence the policies of other states. As former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's AI Safety Summit in November 2023 made clear, the public diplomacy angle of these policies is inextricably part of British diplomacy. In the UK government policy texts, the narrative is carefully chosen to reflect historical values that provide the sense-making even in the case of a protean and futuristic technology such as AI. The 2021 *UK National Strategy for AI*, for example, begins with introductions from the two-coauthoring departments (Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sports), both of whom outline UK's long-standing traditions of entrepreneurship, innovation, global leadership, and research excellence (HM Government, September 2021).

The first section of this paper briefly surveys the literature on the domestic production of foreign policies and connects it with the production of public diplomacy narratives in the realms of culture and technology to show how values in both are contested. In both cases, the empirical methodologies that are geared toward understanding narratives are important. Culture and technology are especially dynamic realms to examine public diplomacy initiatives. Cultures change slowly, therefore, this case offers a long-term look at contestations within cultural diplomacy, often seen to intersect with public diplomacy. Technological change may be taken to be the opposite of cultures in that it is disruptive, especially in our current period with artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, the through line in both cases is that the domestic processes of the production of the British "cultural relations" narrative or the "pro-innovation AI narrative" features several mini-narratives. The overall frames (cultural relations, pro-innovation AI) emerge over time as "best fits" for the many underlying contestations and borrow from UK's historical narratives (e.g. early industrializer). Some of the best fit is, therefore, informed with long-term values in domestic governance and political economy that are then reflected in the United Kingdom's foreign policy.

Domestic production of strategic narratives

Public diplomacy is the act of influencing the public or society in another country with the aim of meeting foreign policy goals (Rana 2011, 77–78). Foreign policies are generally the result of several agencies, bureaucracies, and agendas within a state (Allison 1971; Rosenau 1997; Mearsheimer and Rosato 2023). It follows then that public diplomacy efforts should be no different; they would feature internal wranglings within states. Enter the narrative turn in international relations which has shown that policy initiatives from a government are stories with an overarching arc that reveal the intent and strategic goals of actors (Miskimmon, O'loughlin, and Roselle 2014). Nathan Coombs (2022) likens them to "governance techniques". More broadly, the narrative turn in social sciences and humanities has shown that even the most micro policy, regulatory, or governance interventions may be related to some overall strategic narrative that the state may adopt to shape and enhance its intervention (Schiller 2019; Risse 2000; Lerner and O'Loughlin 2023; Akerlof and Snower 2016). Nevertheless, the grandness of such narrative arcs, that encompass many periods and actors is equally problematic: examples include the critiques of grand strategy in international relations (Gaddis 2002; Porter 2018), or the critique of grand narratives in history from post-structuralists (Rosenau 1991).

Public diplomacy scholars have especially analyzed strategic narratives to outline what Nicholas Cull (2019, 56) describes as an "overarching mechanism for organizing coherent communication around an issue and building shared meanings with audiences." Any storytelling involves the trials and tribulations, and the contradictions of its characters, but story-telling has its arcs: the troubled Anna Kerenina becomes the story of feudal Russia at the precipice of change, and Shakespeare becomes brand Brittania. Strategic narratives serve overarching purposes: public diplomacy practitioners can practice their craft of presenting cohesive stories that transcend any fissures or contradictions, while public diplomacy scholars are drawn to their

creation and content. While social sciences, in general, have undergone 'a narrational turn', public diplomacy scholars have honed in on the strategic cohesive dimensions of these foreign policy endeavors.

The focus on strategic cohesion has meant that organizational and epistemic contestations that lead to the production of a narrative, whether grand or strategic, are less explored in scholarship though there are important precedents (Miskimmon, O'loughlin, and Roselle 2014; Roselle et al. 2014; Levinger and Roselle 2017). At a broad level, even the paradigms in international relations scholarship may be understood as competing and intersecting narratives about world politics (Biersteker 2009; Kahler 1997). My own scholarship has examined these narrative contestations, most recently in forwarding and refining empirical methodologies to examine these contestations. For example, I have shown that computational social science techniques may be best suited for examining the contestations and suppositions within narratives (Singh et al. 2025). The logic of most computational techniques, large language models (LLMs), and auto-generative Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) lies, at a simple level, in 'describing' the way probability distributions of words occurring together make up a text or a narrative.

I now describe two endeavors in which we used traditional content analysis and computational techniques for understanding narratives.

Cultural relations and soft power contestations

Public diplomacy is hard to define, but at a broad level it involves changing or influencing the behavior of foreign allies and adversaries through communications acts. Public diplomacy was traditionally the bailiwick of Ministries of Foreign Affairs or MFAs, specifically public diplomacy officers within embassies and the public diplomacy offices in the home countries.

Public diplomacy efforts have broadened with two parallel developments. The first is soft power, which according to Joseph Nye who coined the term, "is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments... It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies' (Nye 2004, x). A country's culture, values, ideals, and policies cannot be manufactured overnight, therefore soft power has a 'as found' quality about it. Public diplomacy is often seen as the normative instrument with which existing soft power may be spread through communication instruments (Singh and MacDonald 2017). In fact, the connection with soft power increases both the remit and the importance of public diplomacy. The second connection is with parallel moves in diplomacy related to culture. Joseph Nye's definition of soft power includes culture, which offers its own attraction, through a country's cultural assets and values, but can also be intrumentalized through specific cultural diplomacy initiatives. An MFA can work closely with the cultural ministry to craft this diplomacy. Nevertheless, it can also be difficult: external facing cultural organizations in Europe – for example, Goethe-Institut in Germany, British Council in the UK – have also maintained independence as semi-public organizations that have independent charters and sources of revenue outside of the state. Therefore, the contestation between cultural relations, which the British Council has guarded as its historical purpose, intersects with diplomatic moves such as public and cultural diplomacy in interesting ways. Figure 1 that appears in several British Council documents charts these intersections (Fig. 1).

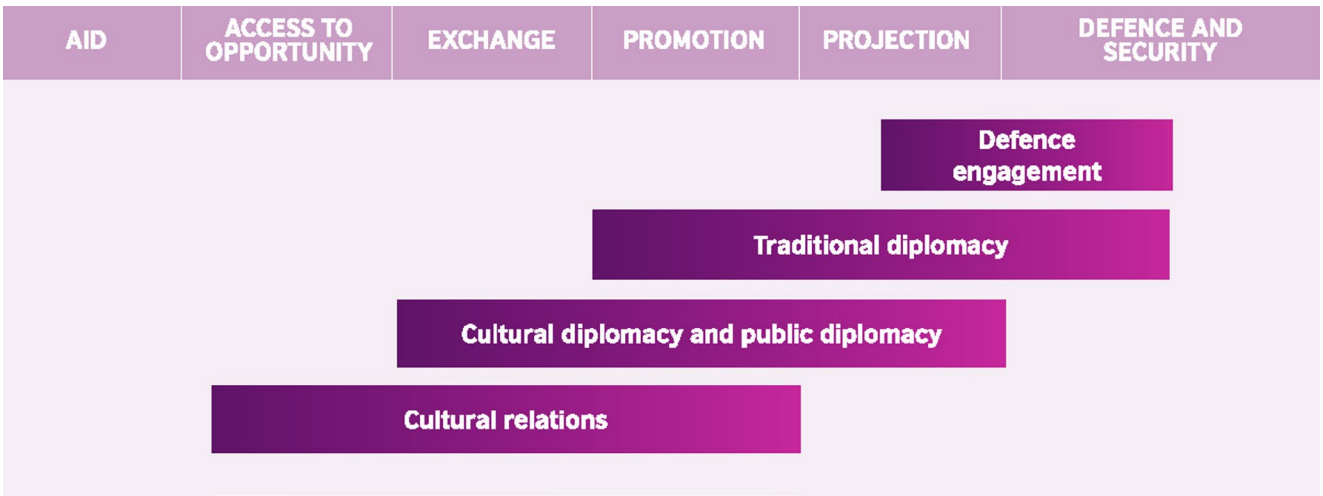

Fig. 1 Cultural Relations and Diplomacy. *Source*: Adapted from British Council, various documents

The British Council was created in 1934 midst the uncertainties of the inter-war period in Europe, with fascism on the rise in Germany, and increasing fights for independence among British colonies. Fostering cultural relations among British society and others would increase trust and understanding. The needs of more interest-driven foreign policy were also present. Lord D'Abernon's mission to South America noted in 1929: "to those who say that this extension (of cultural influence) has no connection with commerce, we reply that they are totally wrong; the reaction of trade to the more deliberate inculcation of our own culture which we advocate is definitely certain and will be swift" (Mitchell 2015 (1986), 19). In practice, The British Council has been acutely aware of fostering cultural relations while catering to foreign policy goals including commerce and security. It has broadly supported British foreign policy goals through intercultural exchanges, building trust and partnerships.

At its 90th anniversary in 2024, The British Council could speak to presence in 200 countries with direct offices in nearly 100, and work that brought together 600 million people and organizations in the UK and the rest of the world. The British Council's £1.05 billion budget comprised of £885 of earned income, mostly from English language teaching and £162.5 million from the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO). The internal revenue generation and the registration as a para-statal charity provide the British Council with some autonomy to pursue its cultural relations work.

There is continual coordination and, at times, some resistance to bring the British Council more in line with the goals of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) that results in both overlaps and distinctions. James Pamment (2016) notes that successive reviews from FCDO have sought to bring British Council in line with broad foreign policy goals, particularly strong after 9/11. These efforts have made diplomacy more 'transactional' rather than one situated in reciprocity and dialogues (p. 8).

I now turn to discussing an example from British Council's work in heritage protection in comparison with three other countries: Norway, Netherlands, and the United States roughly during the period 2015–2020. The findings presented here are drawn from a report produced for the British Council for which I served as the Principal investigator (Singh et al. 2021). The report analyzed cultural heritage work undertaken in other countries with a view toward differentiating whether the projects fostered cultural relations or soft power objectives of foreign policy. Specifically, we text-analyzed official documents and evaluations from these countries dealing with their global cultural heritage projects. Eight reports and materials were collected from the US Ambassadors Fund, Prince Claus Heritage Protection Emergency Fund (Netherlands), Norwegian Support to the Protection of Cultural Heritage, and the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund (granted from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport). There were four reports from the United States, two from the United Kingdom, and one each from Norway and the Netherlands.

We analyzed key words in the documents for the presence of soft power and cultural relations values in the four countries' cultural heritage preservation programs. There were 7,871 unique words in the four countries' reports from which we selected 923 key words because they conformed to either soft power, cultural relations, or presence of both in the countries' cultural preservation policies. Of the 923 selected words, 106 were exclusively soft power, 113 were exclusively cultural relations, and 684 were both. Examples of soft power key words are: diplomatic, embassy, foreign policy, ministry, and political. Cultural relations keywords include: community-based, mutual, reciprocal, local, participant, exchange. Common to both are: development, evaluation, governance, heritage, international, monitor, and support (Table 1).

Beyond the intersection of soft power and cultural relations in a majority of key words, one of the important findings of this study is the difference between overall cultural relations and soft power approaches across the four countries studied here. The cultural relations approaches seem to converge among European countries and are generally similar to each other. However, there is a wide variation in soft power approaches. In particular, the U.S. documents eschew the term soft power in favor of the term public diplomacy in describing the U.S. approach. The correlation coefficients for similarity of cultural relations approaches were higher than those for soft power approaches among the four countries. Further, the coefficients for European countries were closer to each other than that of the United States. In fact, cultural diplomacy and cultural institutes in Europe often coordinate their cultural policies through the European Union, Council of Europe and independent non-profit agencies such as The EU National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC).

The British Council, nearly a century after its foundation, has stayed on course with fostering cultural relations, but has also accommodated other foreign policy goals. In the last 10 years, with the emphasis on soft power at the FCDO, the British Council has accepted its precepts, while

Table 1 Summary of keyword distributions in cultural heritage prgrams. *Source*: Singh. JP. Meng-Hao Li, Neslihan kaptanoglu and Eric Childress. 2021. *Soft Power and Cultural Relations Approaches in International Heritage Protection.* British Council, (George Mason University. P. 42

	ALL	UK	US	NL	NO
Cultural relations only	133	89	48	39	90
Soft power only	106	78	53	39	74
Both cultural relations and soft power	684	525	398	294	488
Total word counts	923	692	499	372	652

making sure that it has a carve out for cultural relations. [1] In practice, cultural relations also means maintaining some distance from traditional diplomatic instruments of the state. "The absence of government is just as important for cultural relations as its presence is for cultural diplomacy" (Rivera 2015, 11).

The content analysis of keywords from cultural heritage programs sponsored from four countries show that while countries practice distinct forms of cultural relations and soft power, there is considerable overlap between the two terms. Further, given the close coordination among European cultural agencies, the correlation on their cultural relations keywords is high, while they all differ significantly in their soft power strategies (Fig. 2). The United States eschews the term soft power in its external cultural relations and prefers the more instrumental term 'public diplomacy'. The cultural relations approach from the British Council has always contested and accommodated priorities from the foreign office, while coordinating and learning from the approaches from its European counterparts.

Artificial intelligence policies and public diplomacy

Since 2016, over 80 countries in the world have formulated national level artificial intelligence policies. Like in the cultural relations example above, a content analysis of the national policy texts reveals them as strategic narratives that provide coherence to often conflicting AI policy goals (for example, balancing precautionary regulatory goals while encouraging AI innovation). This section examines the external facing or the public diplomacy (and soft power) aspects of these AI policy narratives as they both assert a country's distinction in its AI strategy while trying to influence AI policies in other states.

My approach on content analysis of texts leapfrogged as I began to work with computer scientists at my university who employ sophisticated computational methods in machine learning to examine large bodies of texts. Specifically, this subsection provides results employing latent Dirichlet Analysis (LDA) for discovering topics within and across texts. The LDA algorithm discovers a topic as a word cloud or probability distributions of a group of words occurring together in a text. A text can have more than one topic and one country's topic may also occur in another country's text (Figs. 3 & 4).

In the case of technology, national level artificial intelligence policies show their influence and intersections with other countries, Specifically, the computational methodology below locates a Commonwealth/UK influence cluster in AI policies (as also a Spanish-Latin American cluster) that can be traced back to colonial influences. Singh et al (2025) further show that these clusters are not historically path-dependent accidents. AI policies can also be understood as communication texts designed to influence other countries especially when backed with programs funded through ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs). Therefore, this tech-diplomacy intersects with public diplomacy initiatives.

Figures 3 and 4 provide eight topics found across national level AI strategies in 54 countries analyzed in 2023 (these results are adapted from (Singh et al. 2025)). I first describe these results before analyzing them as strategic public diplomacy narratives. Figure 3 shows the clusters of

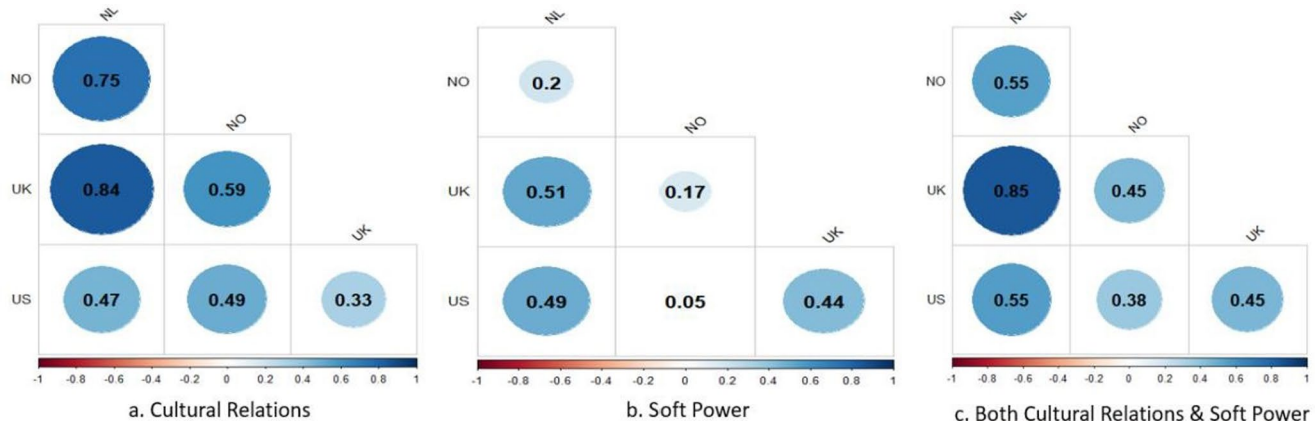

Fig. 2 Correlation Analysis for Soft Power and Cultural Relations in Four Countries—Netherlands, Norway, UK, and USA. *Source*: Author, JP, Meng-Hao Li, Neslihan Kaptanoglu and Eric Childress. 2021. Soft Power and Cultural Relations Approaches in International Heritage Protection. British Council/George Mason University. p. 49

[1] My first commission from the British Council was one of the first quantitative studies of soft power, which demonstrated that the attractiveness of a country's soft power values in culture, politics and human rights brought several economic and political benefits globally such as foreign direct investment and influence at the UN (Singh and MacDonald 2017).

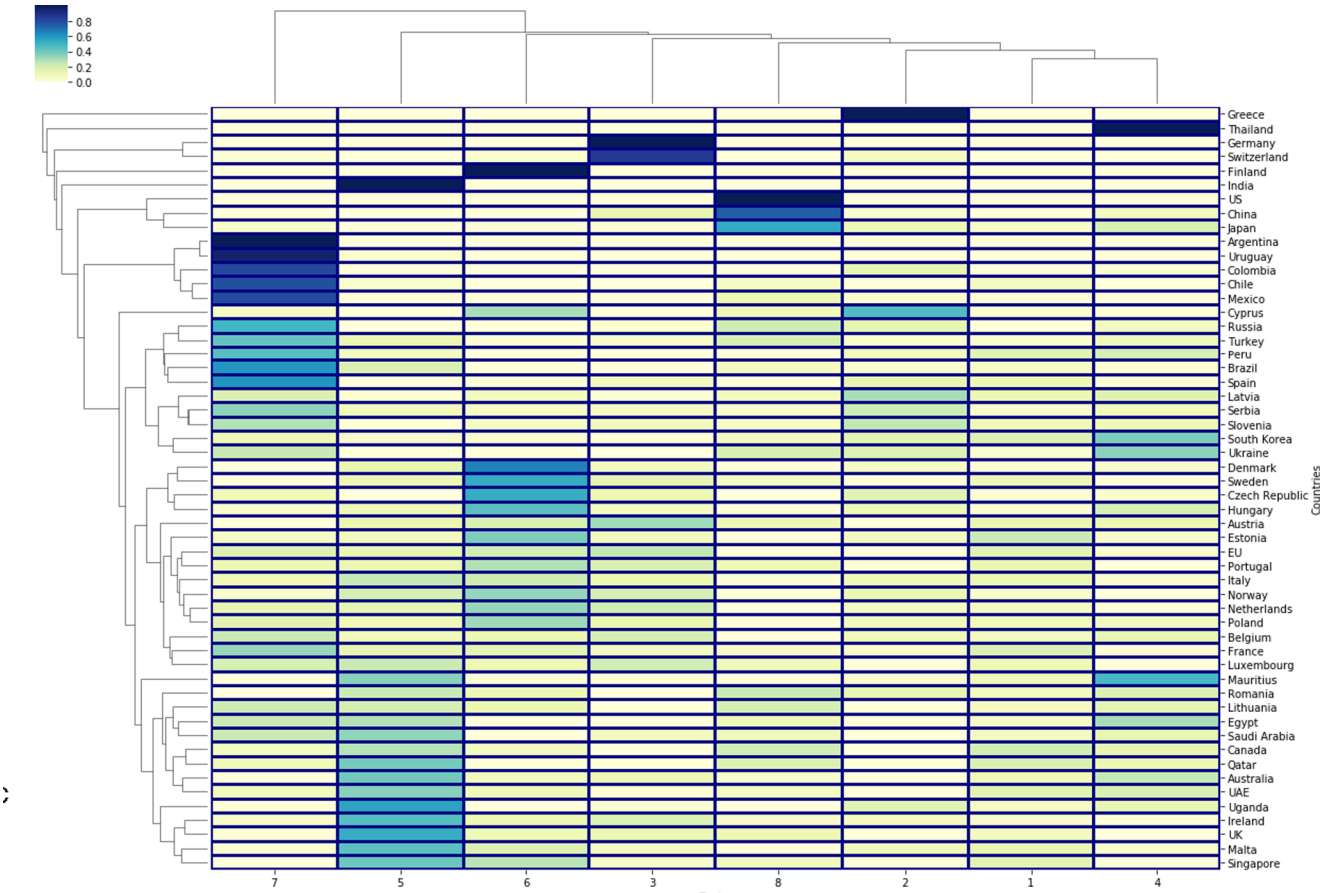

Fig. 3 National AI infrastructures: The heatmap relates. per-document/country topic distributions. A blue-to-yellow color- coding scheme indicates high-to-low topic probabilities. *Source*: adpated from Singh, JP, Amarda Shehu, Manpriya Dua and Caroline Wesson. 2025. "Entangled Narratives: Insights from Social and Computer Sciences on National Artificial Intelligence Infrastructures." *International Studies Quarterly* 69(1):sqaf001. p. 8

countries around any topic while Fig. 4 provides the word cloud on topic 5 that dominates in UK's national level artificial intelligence strategy. For the purposes of simplicity, I have not reproduced the word clouds for all topics in Fig. 3. I particularly want to call attention for the clusters in topic 7 and 5. Topic 7 features several Latin American countries while topic 5 features the UK and countries that have been traditionally aligned with Britain through colonial or other histories. The presence of such clusters in not surprising, but that texts dealing with policies surrounding current technologies such as AI shows the endurance of such historical ties is more than a correlational coincidence. While the word cloud for topic 7 is not reproduced here, it shows a development and infrastructural orientation in the AI policy texts. Topic 5 through the saturated blue (explanation in text below Fig. 3) showcases the centrality of UK in topic 5. It is hard to establish causality from UK (or Spain) to the rest of the countries in the cluster, but both countries formulated their national plans before other countries in the cluster. The pro-innovation keywords in the word cloud for topic 5 provide one of the main commonalities for the countries in topic 5. These keywords include start-up, marketplace, enterprise, solve, marketplace, and leadership and references to firms such as Google. Here a turn to economic history that locates UK among liberal economies that allows for radical innovation is helpful – these values have been located in British economic history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Landes 1969; Hall and Soskice 2001).

A word of caution here. Figure 3 presents LDA results for national level AI strategies, in UK's case the 2021 *National AI Strategy*. I have argued that national AI policies as strategic narratives are often external facing (Singh et al. 2025). However, countries produce several AI policies for specific issues and sectors. Those policies are also strategic narratives but national level policies are most suitable for this essay dealing with foreign policy and public diplomacy. Nevertheless, it bears mentioning that UK's national policy came not from FCDO but the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Policy.

The public diplomacy aspects of national AI strategies are not hard to find. The FCDO runs several programs by

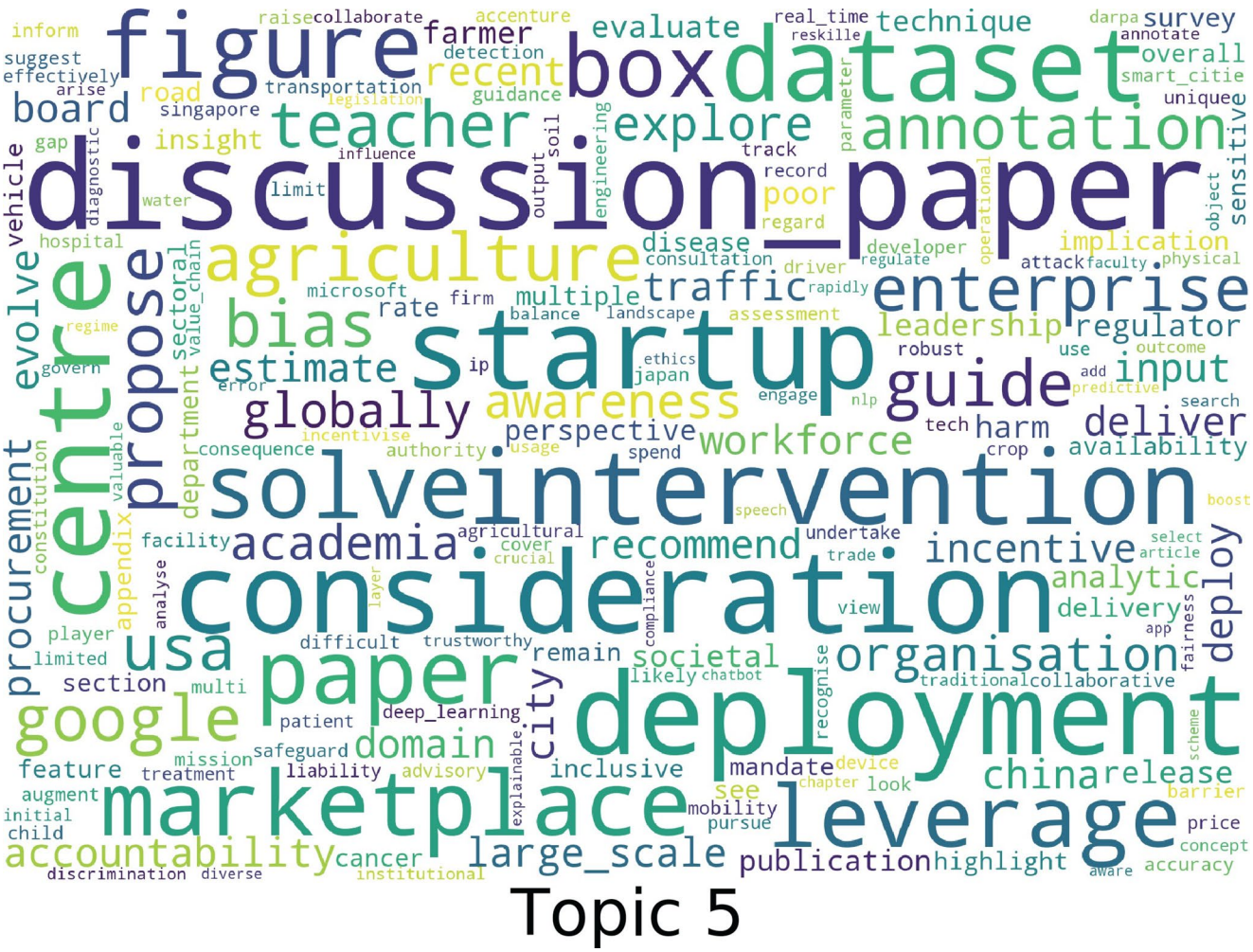

Fig. 4 Topic 5 includes the UK, Mauritius, Egypt, Qatar, Canada, Australia, UAE, Uganda, Ireland, Malta, Singapore. *Source*: adapted from Singh, JP, Amarda Shehu, Manpriya Dua and Caroline Wesson. 2025. "Entangled Narratives: Insights from Social and Computer Sciences on National Artificial Intelligence Infrastructures." *International Studies Quarterly* 69(1):sqaf001. p. 10

itself or in conjunction with other organizations and governments such as Canada. These programs include the AI for Development (AI4D) initiative and several others aimed at finding development solutions in specific sectors (health, education, start-ups, regulatory guidance). The geographic focus on Asia and Africa in the initiatives also speaks to the location of countries from these continents in topic 5. High level summitry can also be regarded as a public diplomacy strategy. Here, former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's November 2023 AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes, stands out. The Blethchley Declaration from 28 countries and prominent businesses at the summit called for global cooperation to ensure AI safety and security. Equally, it placed UK as a central player in these diplomatic initiatives with the establishment of the AI Security Institute (AISI).

The internal and external contestations in topic 5 that can be interpreted as pro-innovation can now be discussed. While there are key words in topic five that speak to innovation, there is also a focus on AI safety and regulation. This might seem obvious until compared with other countries. As noted before, topic 7 is mostly an infrastructural provision and not innovation. The strategic narrative in topic 2, in which both China and United States show up almost exclusively, is mostly about dominance and strategic global leadership in AI through R&D and other instruments. The presence of risk and safety concerns in UK's topic 5 reveals the work of several agencies that are involved in AI policy formulation.

Conclusion

Strategic narratives are an integral part of how states present their national stories to the world and to their domestic audiences, be it in culture or in technology policy as this essay

showed. Stories are complex as are strategic narratives even when presented with instrumental goals.

Three things are important in understanding soft power and public diplomacy strategic narratives. First, they are shaped historically with the contestation and cooperation of a variety of internal agencies. For example, in this essay, the role of the foreign office and the British Council were important for understanding the intersections and contestations among cultural relations, soft power and public diplomacy. Second, we need empirical methodologies that capture the complexity of these narratives. As narratives, content analyses are most suitable for analyzing them. Especially now, computational methods are particularly well-suited for not only capturing the complexities but also bringing probabilistic and inferential analyses toward understanding these complexities. When current LLMs are asked to present a story, they draw upon probability distributions of particular sets of words occurring together to narrate a love story or a sonnet like we ask them to do. The probabilistic word cloud for AI policies from the UK and Commonwealth countries showed the pro-innovation stance of these countries but equally it showed the presence of regulation, accountability, and societal concerns. In strategic narratives the presence of multiple mini-narratives are not contradictions; rather they are complexities. Finally, narratives are understood through rich and deep interpretation. After quantitative analyses are complete – be it through traditional content analyses or current computational techniques – the researcher needs historical and context-specific knowledge to understand the narratives. Techniques such as ChatGPT can generate these rich contexts; with advancements in Auto-Generative Intelligence (AGI) such tasks may become even easier.

With the rise of populism and retreat of democracy in many parts of the world, it seems that we may return to a hard power world in which questions of soft power and public diplomacy are secondary. This essay shows that, in fact, the remit of public diplomacy and soft power broadens when seen in the context of multiple agencies within and outside of government that produce these narratives. The UK *National AI Strategy* from 2021 analyzed in this essay involved the work of government departments such as the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Department of Culture, Media and Support. Later, the external facing efforts were often coordinated through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. There is always a danger that AI is being increasingly seen as a strategic security asset and, with the entry of MFAs, these technologies become increasingly 'securitized'. Our computational analyses demonstrate that such 'grand narratives' are not borne out in policy where despite overall narrative arcs (from MFAs or other actors) the 'entanglements' of security, economics, ethics, human rights, and regulations inform the granularity of national and cross-national AI policies (Singh et al. 2025; Singh 2024). The MFAs can re-work a few narratives for foreign policy and public diplomacy purposes, and re-present them as strategic narratives, but that does not mean that the underlying mini-narratives go away: British Council is unlikely to stop doing 'cultural relations' and the complex global AI narratives will not be even marginally subsumed in the MFA story-telling.

With an issue as important as AI in our current times, a shift to thinking that we are back in the world of hard power would not only misunderstand how soft power and public diplomacy work in the age of AI, but also mischaracterize hard power, which has rested on several cultural and technological foundations. As Nye (2021) made clear, hard power and soft power do not replace but complement each other. Befitting the age of AI, Nye argued that soft and hard power can be combined to yield 'smart power'. One way to understand AI policies as strategic narratives is to view them through the lens of 'smart power'.

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Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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J. P. Singh is Distinguished University Professor at George Mason University (USA), and Richard von Weizäcker Fellow with the Robert Bosch Academy, Berlin. He is the Co-Editor of the journal *Global Perspectives*, published from University of California Press, and Editor of Stanford's book series "Emerging Frontiers of the Global Economy". Singh has published 10 books and over 110 articles. He has consulted for international organizations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and the WTO, and played a leadership role in several professional organizations. Recent awards include nearly $3 million in competitive grants, a Fulbright-Nehru Professional Excellence award, the Outstanding Scholar Award from Schar School, and being named the distinguished scholar in international communication from the International Studies Association. Previously he has taught at the University of Edinburgh, Georgetown University, American University, and the University of Mississippi.