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Imaginative communities: Admired cities, regions and countries

Robert Govers

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Contrary to many policymakers who approach place branding from a marketing perspective, *Imaginative Communities* provides a well-written, jargon-free guide to rethink the way places are branded and how they build their reputation. Govers pays particular attention to people and their identities, using the term “communities” to describe places of all sizes. At the same time, the term “imaginative” is used to conceptualize creativity and innovation within the place. Govers uses Benedict Anderson's earlier title, *Imagined Community*, as a springboard; taking the ideas of collaboration, pride and community engagement and applying current and historical cases, he argues for the use of local identity within a community to develop a positive long-term reputation. Thus, “imaginative communities” are linked to places that earn world-wide admiration through socially constructed creative community initiatives in the form of innovative projects, policies, infrastructures and events, popular with both locals and an international audience.

Imaginative Communities is structured carefully. In 8 chapters and 158 pages, the author builds a compelling case for the necessity of creativity, innovation, and collaboration to allow communities to survive in a globalized world which puts their local identity at risk. Communities need to find their “ways of seeing” (p. 61), have direction and “set the news” (p. 94) to create their reputation. They can only do this if they collaborate, cocreate and unleash their imagination. Govers defines imagination as the potential to build “mental vision” and “alternative realities” (p. 45), taking multiple forms throughout the book. Most distinguishable examples relate to how communities position themselves in creative ways. Through sustainable solutions for future generations, Oslo's Future Library raised public curiosity and emphasized the city's “forward-looking mentality” (p. 48). Other places position themselves as tech-savvy by making Internet access a human right with e-residency in Estonia (p. 50) and through the creation of particular emoticons in Finland (p. 66). Community positioning is also discussed in regard to innovative policies which prioritize the well-being of the citizens over material benefits creating a global buzz with Bhutan's gross national happiness index (p. 53) and by reinforcing the local identity through landscape design in Dubai's palm-tree shaped island (p. 63).

These examples are all covered in the first part of the book (Chapters 1–4), creating a rationale for why we need imaginative communities, what their benefits are and how they gained public admiration. This section is followed by a theoretical-based explanation in Chapters 5–8, which assesses how we absorb information and make impressions at a cognitive level. In Govers' view, our perceptions are based not just on experience within the community (“primary images”) but also on what we know about them (“secondary images”). Social media, word-of-mouth, and multisensory experiences all shape community image by affecting both primary

and secondary images. While media influence is explained through “agenda-setting theory” (p. 99), Chapter 7 argues that community experience can transform what we hear and know about a place through “experience environments” via “experience networks” that make community meaningful (p. 119).

Making a community meaningful through creativity and innovation is detached from decades of research on branding literature, which insists paid marketing and advertising is the most reliable way to promote and enhance a place's reputation. In Govers' view, reputation is built through collaboration, pride and public engagement, and can only be developed if the creative initiatives are designed for the community itself rather than for external promotion. If these initiatives resonate with the local community and benefit it or the surrounding environment, people will promote them organically. The author labels this “action communication” (p. 95), an umbrella term for what the place does rather than what it says about itself.

The last chapter combines these ideas to conclude that branding is not only about external appearance, but also, about creating meaning which can be associated with the brand and its image. Govers argues that incorporating “multisensory encounters” (p. 115) and generating favorable buzz can add meaning to a place and could even transform unfavorable place stereotypes; thus, the book offers an exciting perspective on how a place's reputation is forged. The book also offers a starting point for providing solutions on how to change a place's buzz from negative to positive. Govers's key innovation here is intertwining terminology like “imaginative,” “imaginary” (p. 75), “imaged” (p. 93), and “imagineering” communities (p. 111) to present a more definite direction for branding places and building their reputation. This direction is embedded in a socially constructed view of nationalism in which the people are empowered to share their knowledge, cocreate and trust their communities. As opposed to a populist construct of nationalism which is seen today through Brexit and the election of Trump, this book argues that remarkable places are created through sharing and accepting diversity to create place initiatives which strengthen local identity and improve people's welfare.

The general reader will enjoy this book as it is easy to understand for a nonexpert audience. Academics and practitioners who work in place branding and management can use it to rethink the concept of place reputation. *Imaginative Communities* argues for branding approaches which contribute to humanity rather than merely focusing on delivering a place image for an external audience. Rather than rely on a marketing and advertising approach, the book insists on a more inclusive people-orientated approach that strengthens the sense of community identity. As the author suggests, “imaginative communities should not just be thinking about product (infrastructures, projects, icons, stage settings), but just as much about process and how participants co-create the experience” (p. 119).

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