

IMAGINATIVE COMMUNITIES

Admired cities, regions and countries



ROBERT GOVERS

Back flap

Many of us feel uneasy with the lack of recognition that our community, city, region or country receives internationally and with the stereotypes and outdated clichés by which “outsiders” define us. This has probably been the case for as long as man exists, but in today’s world with its global connections and social media, it is becoming more apparent, more relevant and more frustrating; to citizens generally, but in particular to policy makers, public administrators, leaders and representatives in public, private and civil society sectors. Why this is so and what to do about it is the topic of this book. It is the first book to discuss the issue of community reputation in a manner that is accessible to all; free from any use of jargon, management terminology or unnecessary complexity. It argues that for communities to be admired, they need a sense of belonging and purpose in order to do amazing imaginative things befitting their character while captivating others. Imaginative initiatives are recognisably *from somewhere* and hence cut through the clutter in order to create community profile. The book contains examples from Austin, Barcelona, Bhutan, Den Bosch, Dubai, Egypt, Eindhoven, Estonia, Finland, Firenze (Florence), Kazakhstan, Lanzarote, Limburg (Maastricht Region), Oslo, Rome, The Hague, the United States of America and other communities. The book primarily aims to inspire readers and offer them a broad overview of an issue in modern society that is of interest and relevance to all of us: the reputation of our communities.

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Endorsements

'It has been said that countries should measure their gross national imagination, a critical resource for success in the twenty-first century. This important new book shows why this is crucial in an age of fractured identity – and how so many places have forged initiatives that put themselves on the map but also inspire the rest of the world.'

Dr Parag Khanna, Author of *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*

'I am a big believer in the power of purpose: that companies and individuals should have a meaningful purpose that guides their thinking, decisions, and actions. But until I read Robert Govers' *Imaginative Communities*, the thought of applying purpose at the community level never occurred to me. Read this brilliant book and you, too, will see how to bring a sense of belonging and meaningful purpose to your communities, no matter their size.'

B. Joseph Pine II, Co-author, *The Experience Economy*

'Robert Govers has written a terrific book. With miraculous clarity he guides the reader on a world tour of the subject of community reputation and its management. He presents a breathtaking range of places and kinds of actors – cities, regions and nation state – from the Americas to Central Asia and on to the Pacific. His examples are new, thought provoking and illuminated by his personal experience as a researcher and consultant. Best of all, his conclusion underlines the need for citizens to focus not on presenting a better image but on building for a better reality.'

Nicholas J. Cull, Author of *Public Diplomacy: Global Engagement in the Era of Social Media*

'A really important addition to our understanding of people, places and their purpose. Govers' book is a refreshing and highly readable departure from "practitioner" texts that simply apply tired marketing principles to the management and promotion of places. Incisive and genuinely thought provoking, this book deserves a place on the desk of every senior policy-maker in national, regional and city governments worldwide.'

Simon Anholt, Founder of *Good Country*

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Contents

CHAPTER 1 HOW WE APPRECIATE HERE AND THERE	9
Communities with imagination are beacons of hope in a ruthless, competitive and globalised world in which identities seem lost.	10
1.1 Why we got lost	12
1.2 How we can regain control	14
1.3 What imaginative communities?	17
CHAPTER 2 WHO WE ARE: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES	21
Admiration is attained by those communities that have a strong sense of belonging, virtue and achievement.	22
2.1 Our pride	24
2.2 Our shared identity	29
2.3 Our shared values	38
CHAPTER 3 HOW WE FIGHT BOREDOM: COMMUNITY IMAGINATION	43
Imagination is its own form of courage and communities need lots of it in order to stand out.	44
3.1 How we use our imagination	46
3.2 How we use real and virtual	49
3.3 How we match values	51
CHAPTER 4 HOW WE BECOME ADMIRER: IMAGINATIVE COMMUNITIES	57

Admired communities create amazing imaginative stuff that is uniquely befitting, built on collaboration and engagement. 58

4.1 How we construct 60

4.2 How we communicate 65

4.3 How we collaborate 67

CHAPTER 5 WHAT THEY THINK: IMAGINARY COMMUNITIES 75

Admiration is only attained by those communities that are able to break down barriers of awareness, stereotypes and clichés. 76

5.1 How they imagine 78

5.2 How they learn and perceive 81

5.3 How we assess our reputation 85

CHAPTER 6 WHAT THEY CONVEY: IMAGED COMMUNITIES 93

Admiration is attained by those communities that set the news and broadcasting agenda and create content that audiences share in social media. 94

6.1 What they absorb 96

6.2 What they share 98

6.3 How we assess our exposure 101

CHAPTER 7 WHAT THEY EXPERIENCE: COMMUNITY IMAGINEERING 111

Communities can engineer imaginative experiences to appeal to audiences' dreams; the stuff that people talk about. 112

7.1 How they experience 114

7.2 How they enjoy (flow) 116

7.3 How we enchant 119

CHAPTER 8 HOW WE RISE: ENLIGHTENED COMMUNITIES 125

Admired communities operate in the landscape of culture and social engagement, not just economics and power. 126

8.1 How we de-market 128

8.2 How we re-brand 131

8.3 What we are accountable for 134

ENDNOTES 139

INDEX 143

Chapter 1

How we
appreciate
here and
there

Communities with
imagination are beacons of
hope in a ruthless,
competitive and globalised
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seem lost.

Today people are uprooted and they question the meaning of community. Is the USA still the land of freedom and opportunity? Is Paris still the city of romance? The United Kingdom a global power of significance? The Netherlands the model country for a progressive tolerant world, with Amsterdam as the capital of open-mindedness? Syria and Iraq's Mesopotamia the cradle of civilisation? Rio de Janeiro the party capital of the world? The Himalayas the centre of spirituality?

At the same time, some communities are emerging from the shadows, challenging stereotypes. Dubai as a global hub of post-modernity, contradicting Arab stereotypes. The shimmering capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, and its successful bicycle racing team, versus cliché images of nomads on horses and yurts. Laptop and *Lederhosen* in German Bavaria. The Smart City of Medellín, Colombia, versus images of drug cartels and violence. Disorganised India as the world's computer helpdesk.

Yet, clichéd and stereotypical images of internationally well-known communities are being exploited for commercial gain by resort, entertainment and real estate developers, but also online. Think of the Venetian resorts in Vegas and Macau; Holland Village as one of the nine towns projects in Shanghai; the Chinese replica of Austria's Alpine village of Hallstatt in Guangdong province; or driving through Los Angeles in Grand Theft Auto V. In all the noise in (social) media, exploiting well-known mental associations and consumer trust among global audiences is an easy way to get attention and build reputation. In management terms one might say that some communities face an exploitation of their "brand equity" and an infringement of their "trademark", if it was not for the fact that these "brands" usually remain legally unprotected.

So, increasingly, our understanding of the world is challenged and blurred. A lot of this confusion is, of course, caused by globalisation.

1.1 Why we got lost

Globalisation is caused by increased international flows of money, people, technology and media. The global financial meltdown after 2008 clearly revealed how connected the global financial system is and that money goes where investments generate most profit against acceptable risks. When the subprime mortgage crisis hit the United States in 2008, money flowed into the city of Dubai, where land sales peaked to US\$16 billion, only to drop to US\$6 billion in 2009¹ when it became clear that the resource-rich Arabian Gulf region was not immune to the global financial meltdown. Also, to get an idea of how globalised the financial system has become and where the money went, just look at which countries FIFA has selected as hosts for the football World Cup since 2006 (Germany): South Africa, Brazil, Russia, Qatar. Not exactly the usual suspects, but countries with uncommitted resources at the time.

Meanwhile we have become accustomed to extensive global media coverage with satellite channels such as CNN, NBC, BBC World, but also China Global Television Network (formerly CCTV Int.), RT (formerly Russia Today) or Al Jazeera. It has resulted in people everywhere increasingly seeing themselves as global citizens (see Table 1), massively boosting migration. According to the United Nations, the number of persons living in a country other than where they were born reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, a 41 per cent increase compared to 2000. Twenty million of the 244 million migrants are refugees. Lastly, globalisation can also be observed in the use of technology. In 2000 two-thirds of the online world population was from Europe or North America. In 2010 two-thirds of the online world population was from elsewhere.

This leads to the conclusion that cities, regions and countries no longer compete based on functional characteristics such as accessibility, service levels, access to finance, technological advancement, cost benefits or knowledge. The following examples

clearly illustrate this. The International Air Transport Association has claimed that the Arabian Gulf region has become the worldwide hub for airline and airport innovation with rapid growth, major new infrastructural investment, and carriers such as Qatar Airways, Emirates Airline and Etihad Airways rapidly expanding their networks. These are the players that are setting new service standards, in the same way as Asian hotel brands are moving to Europe and North America. When it comes to material goods, delocalisation of manufacturing and assembly plants towards Asia or Latin America is no longer just a matter of aiming for lower cost, but also of being where the market is, as Western economies continue to slump. And it is not just a matter of low-wage, blue-collar work. In India, each year around eight million students complete higher education. In China this number is twelve million, with Brazil in third place with “only” one million graduates coming out of tertiary education.²

Table 1: Global citizenship and tolerance according to World Values Survey (conducted in 50 countries)³

	Yes
I see myself as a world citizen	74.1%
Important child qualities: Tolerance and respect for other people	68.8%
Would not mind to have as neighbours: People from a different race	81.5%
Would not mind to have as neighbours: People from a different religion	77.5%
Would not mind to have as neighbours: Immigrants/foreign workers	76.0%
Would not mind to have as neighbours: People who speak a different language	83.2%

Hence, the world is increasingly interconnected and globalisation has led to homogenisation, which raises the question: what is the relevance of communities and geographies? Because of globalisation our day-to-day work, private life, political participation or cultural identity have also been uprooted as local functions onto the global stage. Political participation in many countries in 2016 and 2017 (examples include Brexit, Trump, Erdoğan) has shown that

globalisation has led to feelings of insecurity and a sense of loss of solidarity. But it has also confirmed that many of us are still looking for a sense of belonging (identity), authenticity, and stability and safety. Building a community and its reputation – to be held in high esteem internationally – might therefore be more relevant than ever.

1.2 How we can regain control

In a world characterised by homogenisation, Disneyfication and McDonaldization, the counter-movement is to advance the international success of uniquely local creations. Think of the Slow Movement and Cittaslow. There are numerous examples of cultural and culinary produce with local character, which, by definition, appeal to an acquired taste and are relatively costly but are nevertheless internationally renowned and in demand. These elements of identity can also become dominant clichés as part of international stereotypes. French wine and cheese, Mongolian cashmere, British heritage, Chinese fireworks, Belgian chocolate and beer, Dutch tulips and Masters, Colombian coffee, Russian literature, Egyptian pyramids, Swiss watches; the list is endless. Cultural productions that are linked to local identities have also become big business and a source of local pride. Neo-liberal supranational entities such as the European Union have even created the systems that allow communities to protect their traditional produce from the competition (such as in the case of champagne, Rioja wine or feta cheese).

So while globalisation has caused us to feel uprooted, community identity and civic pride seem to provide some stability, as unquestionable *raisons d'être*. But are they? In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, published in 1983, Benedict Anderson argues that even identity and civic pride are imagined and manipulated. Anderson's analysis specifically deals with nationalism as being socially constructed within a community (through the

printed narrative of the nation, shared language, museums and education systems). The nation is something that is imagined as a comradeship by the people who perceive themselves as part of it, even when they do not know most of the other members. It is argued that as religions and empires lost their grip on society, civic leaders needed to construct identities for people to rally behind. When building the nation state, this encouraged nationalism, but the same can be argued for civic pride generally. The question is: what will sustain community self-respect when governments lose authority in a globalising world?

People want to be part of a community that they can be proud of and – in a world with global and social media – that pride is increasingly influenced by how communities are being talked about outside, as opposed to how they are imagined within. In today's interconnected world, communities that gain respect are those that contribute to humanity and the planet at large (examples of which are provided in Chapter 2). Will virtue, as opposed to nationalism, religion or power, therefore become the driving force behind local identity construction and global image projection?

It seems to be counter-intuitive, because in the neo-liberal management-driven world that we live in, everything has to be measured in economic terms, and policy makers and public institutions made accountable, reflecting the principles and ideals of the private sector. While being pushed to be lean and agile, we are supposed to measure our achievements against goals and those goals have to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound). But the question is: how do we deal with soft targets? What if we aim for goals that are not so specific and easy to measure, such as happiness, virtue, civic pride or perception? Too often such objectives are swept aside as too vague, too soppy and too difficult. For many, this is common sense. However, to use a Frank Underwood (*House of Cards*) quote, 'There is only one problem with common sense, it is so... common'. The consequence is that we end up with standardised policies, proven solutions,

copy-paste behaviour and a rat race for the latest, tallest and “smartest” icon that will generate fifteen minutes of fame. Community governance, leadership and engagement generally, have just become so boring in the last few decades. We need to reinvigorate the role of and importance assigned to imagination; to imagine what communities with a strong sense of belonging can accomplish internationally.

To use another Underwood quote, ‘Imagination is its own form of courage’. Imaginative communities have the courage to be bold, the creativity to come up with new ideas, the power to innovate and be different, without disavowing local character, but by exploiting and reinforcing it. This requires leadership, in government, but equally in the private sector and civil society – and hence collaboration. It requires leadership that understands that local interests are best served by aligning them with each other and with global developments, through collaboration. That is the way in which actions lead to improved reputation, admiration and pride in the long term, besides performance improvement or economic gain in the short term.

The idea of imaginative communities therefore aims to advance the idea of the *Imagined Communities* that Anderson wrote about. It is about making the local relevant globally as well as locally. It is possible to do that, because at the end of the day all is imagined anyway. The Sceptic philosophers have known that for centuries. This idea of bridging the gap between reality and perception and how it can be influenced by experience and communication is not new at all: it has long been a major topic of discussion among philosophers. Descartes, as the founder of modern philosophy, could be regarded as the progenitor of the ideas presented in this book, as he lays the foundation for representative realism which contends that our ideas are valid or relevant only when they correspond to the reality of the world around us. Sceptics like Locke, Hume, Bayle or Berkeley, however, argue that there is no proof of the existence of an outside material world: we only have

perceptual knowledge through our senses. Hence they agree with Descartes when he claims that 'to be is to be perceived'. Similarly, idealists such as Kant believe that physical things exist only in the sense that they are perceived. This leads to constructivism, in which knowledge and image are personal constructs and hence perceptions and – as a result – realities are subjective. This is further emphasised by existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Brentano or Heidegger, who believe that all that matters is that humans actively participate in the world; "being there" or *Dasein*. This pursuit of "presence" is what this book is about.

1.3 What imaginative communities?

Imaginative communities are neighbourhoods, cities, regions and countries – possibly even continents – that reinforce or build local character and civic pride, while at the same time captivating outsiders (external publics). "Community" is defined by the Random House Unabridged Dictionary as 'a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage'; and 'the locality inhabited by such a group'. In simple terms, I use the concept of "community" to refer to a people that feel that they belong together, linked to a locality (including diaspora) and (often) shared government. Hence, "community" potentially refers to nation, country and state at the same time respectively or simultaneously. Yet, neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions are also "communities" in the context of this book.

"Imaginative" refers to members and stakeholders of such a community using their imagination in order to envisage and accomplish creative, unconventional, original, inventive and – most importantly – uniquely local initiatives, projects, events, infrastructures or policies that reinforce the *community* and the way it is perceived by outsiders. Imaginative communities that produce a constant stream of such innate initiatives acquire a unique

positioning in the minds of global audiences, as they affirm distinctive mental associations. These associations can be linked uniquely to the geography, the people or their government (i.e. country, nation, state or other scalar levels) separately or simultaneously, depending on local circumstances.

Examples of imaginative community initiatives covered in this book are:

- Estonia adapting its constitution to include internet access as a human right and allowing e-residency, to emphasise the country's tech-savvy nature compared to other countries in the Baltic region.
- Bhutan, a country where wellbeing has long been prioritised over material gain, inventing and institutionalising the idea of gross national happiness.
- Dubai's man-made islands in the shape of palm trees, which traditionally represent the source of life in the region around the Arabian Gulf.
- The Hague, international city of peace and justice, creating the peace festival and cyber-security delta.
- Austin's South by Southwest (SXSW) Festival as a celebration of the city's musical roots.
- Migrants and refugees building their genuine "land of the free": the United States of America.
- The Dutch city of Den Bosch mobilising everyone in 2016 to commemorate the death of Hieronymus Bosch, one of the most influential Dutch Masters of all time, who died in 1516 in the city that gave him his name.
- The pyramids and the Forum as representations of Egyptian and Roman cultural identity, religion and scientific achievements of their time.
- Oslo's *Future Library*, where a thousand trees have been planted just outside the city to supply paper for a special anthology of books to be printed in one hundred years' time. In the meantime, each year one author contributes a

manuscript, which is held in a trust, unpublished, until 2114, to reflect the city's forward-looking mentality and mantra that the best is yet to come.

- Finland creating its own set of emoticons to express emotional aspects of Finnishness on social media and on mobile devices anywhere in the world, reflecting the tech-savvy and quirky, fun-loving nature of the Finns.
- The House of Medici building the home of the Renaissance in Florence, with the Duomo di Firenze (Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore) as one of the first examples of captivating iconic masterpiece structures built to attract visitors to the city state.
- Gaudí's Barcelona or Manrique's Lanzarote.
- The Dutch province of Limburg – a region that, over the course of its history, has learned to live with nearby and shifting international borders – organising cross-border design, arts and sports projects.
- The Van Gogh-inspired "starry night" cycle path in Eindhoven, the city of lights in the Netherlands. The path is paved with fluorescent stones that light up at night to resemble the painting by Van Gogh, who lived in the area.

What imaginative communities need is:

- a sense of identity, belonging and virtue
- by which to influence international perceptions
- with access to mainstream and social media buzz
- by building unique experiences
- through imagination and leadership
- and community collaboration.

All these cases and requirements are covered in detail in this book.

Endnotes

¹ Land Department (2010). *Annual Transactions. Government of Dubai*. Retrieved on 4 January 2010 from http://www.dubailand.gov.ae/ld_website/English/transactions/Yearly_Transactions.aspx.

² UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. Retrieved on 30 March 2017.

³ WORLD VALUES SURVEY Wave 6 2010–2014 OFFICIAL AGGREGATE v.20140429. World Values Survey Association (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Aggregate File Producer: Asep/JDS, Madrid SPAIN.

Index

f=figure; t=table; **bold**=extended discussion

- Abu Dhabi 64
 - Grand Prix 104–5f, **108f**, 109
 - Radian6 analysis **103–10**
- accountability 15, 45, 46, 114, **134–8**
- action communication 95, 100
- admiration **41–2**, 76, 77, 85–9, 94, 126
 - see also* reputation
- advertising **52**, 65, **83–5**, 97, 100, 127–131
 - ineffectiveness **84–5**, **98**, 101, 130–1
- Africa 54, 91, **92f**, 99
- agenda setting 66, **99–100**
- Al Maktoum family 36, 64, **68–9**
- Almaty 33
- Altemeyer, R.A. 28
- Amsterdam 11, 37, 42, 81, **133**
- Anderson, B. **14–15**, 16, **24**
- Anholt, S. 29, **39**, 89, 90
- Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index™ (CBI) 70, 86, **88**
- Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index™ (NBI) **39–41**, 86, **88–92**,
134–5, **136f**
 - Nation Brand Hexagon **90**, **90t**
- anxiety 116–19
- Arab League summits 104f, 105f, 109
- Arab Spring 106

Arabian Gulf 12–3, 18, 63, 64
Argentina 40f, 41, 48, 90t, 136f
artificial intelligence 45
associations [mental links/connections] 18, **78–83**, 85, 87, 88, 90
 see also awareness
Astana 11, 33, 35t
attitude 39, **80–1**, 85–91
Atwood, M. 48
Auckland 70
Austin **120–1**, 137
Austin: South by Southwest Festival (SXSW) 18, **121**, 130
Austin City Limits 120
Australia 26t, 40f, **78**, 90t, 91f, 92f, 136f
Austria 11, 31, 40f, 135, 136f
Authoritarians (Altemeyer, 2006) 28
automated sentiment analysis **102–10**
awareness 77, 80, 81, 83, 88, 91, 99, 118, 132–3, 135, 137
 measurement **85–7**
 see also beliefs

Bahrain
 Grand Prix 104f, 105f, 106
 protests (2011) 104f, 105f, 106–7, **108f**, 109
 Radian6 analysis **103–10**

Barcelona 19, **121–2**, 130
Bayle, P. 16
BBC 12, 48, 84, 102, 130
Beijing 70, 89f
Belgium 14, **27**, **28t**, 30, 30t, 31, 40f, 85, 135, 136f
beliefs 45, 46, 59, 78, **81–5**, 95
 see also image
belonging 14, 23–4, 29, 59, 119, 133
Berkeley, G. 16
Berlin Wall **49**
Bhutan 18, 39, **52–3**, 130
borders 19, **29–33**, 50, 51, 52, 114, 133

boredom **43–56**, 116–18
Bosch, H. 18, **70–3**
Bosch Research and Conservation Project **71–2**
Boutros Ghali, B. 38
brand equity 11, 131, 133
branding 83, 127
 versus "re-branding" **131–4**
 definition 131
 goals **131**
Brazil 12, 13, 40f, 41, 88–9, 89f, 90t, 91f, 92f, 135, 136f
Brentano, F.C. 17
Brueghel, P. (the Elder) 71
Brunelleschi **47–8**
Brussels **27**, 28t, 31

campaign **83–5**
campanilismo **24–8**
Canada 40f, 85, 90t, 91–2f, 136f
Catalonia **121–2**
child qualities 13t, **46**
China 11, 12, 13, 26t, 40f, 41, 42, 52, **89–90**, 91–2f, 136f
Cittaslow 14
civic pride **14–7**, 137
 see also community pride
civil rights (USA) 38, **54–6**
civil society 16, 56, 59, 68, 71, 101, 119
 clichés 11, 14, 60, 66, **78–9**, 80, 83, 85, 98, 99, 115, 138
 see also stereotypes
CNN 12, 84, 102, 130
collaboration 16, 19, 47, 58, **67–73**, 119
Columbia 11, 14, 26t, 40f
common sense 15
communication 16, 29t, 35t, **65–7**, 129–30
 action c. 95, 100
 strategic c. 66, 95
community

definition 17
community identity 25, **29**, 41-42, 45, 110, 114, 131
elements **29t**
community imagination **43-56**, 119
community imagineering **113-27**
community pride **24-8**, 137
 see also civic pride
competition **12-13**, 134
comprehension **82-83**
construction 60-65, 68
constructivism 17
cosmopolitanism 25, 31, 33, 34, 35t, 38, 80
Country Brand Strength Index (CBSI) 134-5, **136f**
country-of-origin effect 129-30, 135
Cromwell, T. **101-2**
Csikszentmihalyi, M. **116**, 118
culture 13, 14, 29-37, 40, 81, 87, 88, 90, 113, 116, 117, 127, 128
 see also popular culture
Cyber Security Week 70
cycling 11, 19, **123**

Dasein 17
data embassies 51
date palm tree **63-5**
Delft 64
Den Bosch ('s-Hertogenbosch) 18, **70-3**, 136
Denmark 40f, 41, 136f
Descartes, R. **16-17**
design 119, **131-3**
developers
 exploitation of stereotypical images **11**
diplomacy 60, 135
 see also international relations
Doha summit on Libya (2011) 104f, 105f, 109
Donatello 47
Dubai 11, 12, **35-7**, 39, **63-5**, 66, **68-9**, **79-80**, 87

debt crisis (2009) 104f, 105f, 106, **108f**, 109
 Radian6 analysis **103–10**
 Dubai: Date Palm Island 18, **64–5**, 130
 Dubrovnik 98

 E-Residency (Estonia) **50–1**, 52
 East West Nation Brand Perception Indexes **101–2**
 economic performance **136**
 economics 127, 129, 133–138
 Egypt 18, 26t, 40f, 61–2, 90t, 91–2f, 136t
 Eindhoven 19, 123, 130
 Einstein, A. 45
 Embassy of The Hague (volunteer group) **70**
 emojis **66–7**
 enchantment **119–23**
 Austin **120–1**
 Barcelona **121–2**
 Lanzarote **122–3**
 Nuenen **123**
 engagement 16, 50, 51, 52, 60, 66, 98, 100, 113, 117, 118, 120, 127,
 132, 133, 134, 137
 enlightened communities **123–38**
 Erasmus programme 96
 Estonia 18, 26t, 40f, **50–1**, 52
 European Union 14, 25, 32, 71, 96
 events 17, 59, 60, 68, 88–9, 97, 102–10, 113, **119–20**, 137–8
 mega-events **88–9**, **89f**, 115, 119–20, 137
 special e. **119–20**
 experience 45, 49–50, 60–1, 65, 96, 98–101, **111–23**
 "seeing is believing" **96**
 vicarious e. 97
 experience environments 68, 113, **119**
 experience networks 68, **119**
 exports 39, 40, 65, 68, 89, 90t, 129–30, 133–5, 138
 exposure 82–4
 assessment **101–10**

favourability 90–2
familiarity 87–92, 113
Fetscherin, M. 134–5, 136f
Ficino, M. 47
FIFA World Cup 12, 89, 89f, 104f, 105f, 106, **108f**, 109, 116, **120**, 137–8
film 72, **97–8**, 121
Finland 19, 40f, 41, **66–7**
Flanders 27, 28t, 85
 independent 27
Flickr 102
Florence 19, **47–8**, 52
food/culinary produce **14**, 29t, 35t, 96, 115
Foundation Jheronimus Bosch 500 (2010–) **71–3**
France 14, 30, 38, 40f, 90t, 91–2f, 123, 136f

Game of Thrones 98
gaming 49, 97, 113, 115, 116, 117
Garden of Earthly Delights (Bosch) 71
Gaudí, A. 19, **121–2**, 130
genius loci 29, 114
geography 13, 18, 23, 29t, 35t, 61, 138
Germany 11, 12, 26t, **30–2**, 39, 40f, 49, **89–92**,
115–16, **120**, 136f, **137–8**
gestalt 79, 82
Gettysburg Address (1863) **55**
global citizenship 12, **13t**, 51
globalisation 24, 29, 41–2, 46, 56, 84, 114, 133
 cause **12–3**
 loss of identity **9–19**
Go, F.M. 35–6
Good Country Index **39–41**
Google 56, 65, 98, 100
governance 16, 39, 90, 135
Grand Theft Auto 5 11, 49
gross national happiness 18, **52–3**, 130

Hawaii 97–8
 Heidegger, M. 17
 Heijmans (company) 123
 heritage 17, 39, 42, 83
 Hermes Virtual Tour 50
 Hildreth, J. 29
 history 23, 28, 29t, 32, 33, 35t, 36, 38, 49, 50, 56, 61, 114
 Holi spring festival 117
 Hong Kong 102
Huffington Post 48, 102
 Hume, D. 16
 Hungary 40f, 41
 Husserl, E. 17

icons 16, 36, 67, 114, 119, 133
 identity 14–5, 23, 24, 68, 119, 127, 128, 131, 138
 elements **14, 29t, 35t**, 35
 lost in globalised world **9–19**
 image 11, 17, 61, 77, **78–81**, 84, 85, 86, 95, 97
 attitudinal consequences **88**
 "drives performance" (and vice versa) 134–5
 measurement **86–90**
 primary versus secondary 113
 projected (imaged) 15, 61, 93–110, 137
 see also perception
 imageability 61
 imaged (projected image) 15, 61, 93–110, 137
 see also internet
 imaginary 45, 75–92, 113
 imagination **9–19**, 113, 115
 definition **45**
 linking the real with the virtual **49–51**
 "own form of courage" (Underwood) 16, 44
 use **46–9**
 imaginative

- definition 17–18
- imaginative communities
 - definition 17
 - examples 17–19
 - global relevance 42, 60
 - needs 19
 - touchstone 138
 - Underwood 15–16
- imagined communities 21–42
- Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1983) 14–15, 16, 24
- imagineering 60, 65, 68, 111–23
 - definition 113
- India 11, 13, 40f, 52, 90t, 91–2f, 117, 136f
- information 96, 97, 98–9, 101, 113, 118–19
 - filters 82–3, 84
 - "making sense of world" 81–5
- infrastructure 13, 17, 59, 60, 79, 83, 87, 119, 127, 137
 - see also mega-projects
- International Air Transport Association 13
- international relations 135
 - see also diplomacy
- internet 11, 12, 49–50, 77, 79–80, 84, 86, 96–7
 - monitoring tools 101–3
 - see also media
- internet access
 - "human right" (Estonia) 18, 50
- invented traditions 36
- investment 12, 13, 36–7, 39, 59, 60, 65, 68, 83, 84, 88, 90t, 113, 127, 129, 133–8
- Ireland 40f, 41, 135, 136f
- Islam 79, 80, 87
- Italy 24, 40f, 47–8, 79, 90t, 91–2f, 135, 136f

- Japan 26t, 40f, 90t, 91–2f, 135, 136f
- Jefferson, T. 54–5
- Jigme Singye Wangchuck 52–3

Jordan **25**, 26t
Jumeirah island 65

Kant, I. 17
Kazakhstan 11, 26t, 39, 40f, 80, 85
 cultural identity **33–4**
 identity (elements) **35t**

Keen, A. 101
Kennedy, J.F. **55–6**
Kierkegaard, S.A. 17
Kolmer, C. 101
Konstan, J. 96–7

landscape **61**, 79, 87
language 13t, 15, 24, 29t, 31, 32, 34, 35t, 102, 103, 114–5
Lanzarote 19, **122–3**
leadership 16, 19, 28, **46–7**, 114
learning 81–2, 113
Lehner, M. 61
Libya 26t, 104f, 105f, 109
Limburg 19, **29–33**
Lincoln, A. **55**
LinkedIn Open Groups 102
Locke, J. 16
logos **132–3**
London 37, 39, 89, 89f
Lord of Rings (film trilogy) 97
Los Angeles 11, 49
Luxembourg 30, 40f, 51

majlis 36

Manrique, C. 19, **121–3**
marketing 127, 133, 134, 135
 versus "de-marketing" **128–31**
media 12, 59, 65–6, 69, 72, 77, 97–110, 120, 136, 137–8
 see also news media

media framing **99**, 101, 138
media monitoring
 content analysis **101–10**
Media Tenor **101**
Mediterranean **61–3**
mega-events **88–9**, **89f**, 115, 119–20, 137
mega-projects/structures 37, 61, 63
 see also infrastructure
memory 45, 78, 82, 83, 115
mentality 23, 29, 35t
Michelangelo 47
Middle East 36, 63, 64, 87, **90–1**, 91f
migrants **12**, 18, 90t, 55–6, 60, 118, 127, 129, 135–6
Morocco 25, 26t
motor-racing (Formula One) 104f, 105f, 106, **108f**, 109
multiple identities **24–8**
music 18, **120–1**, 122

Nakheel (company) 65
national identity 24–5, 122
nationalism **24–8**, 55, 122
 socially constructed (Anderson) **14–15**
Nelson, W. 120
neo-liberalism 14, 15
Netherlands 18, 19, 26t, **29–33**, **37–8**, 40f, 40–1, 69–73, 123, 138,
 136f
Netherlands: Ministry of Foreign Affairs 69
New York City 39, 70, **133**
New York Times 48, 102
New Zealand 40f, 97
news media 65, 67, 97, **102–9**, 132
 see also social media
Nicholas II 38
Nokia 67
Nova Scotia 85
Nuenen (Netherlands) **123**

Olympics 89, 89f, 115

Oslo: Future Library **18–9**, **48–9**, 52, 130

Paine, T. **54**

Pamplona Bull Run **116–18**

Paterson, K. 48

perception 15, **16–17**, 19, 39, 40, 45, 46, 61–1, 65, **79–85**, 87, 90, 96,
97, 102, 115, 116, 131, 135, 138

see also reputation

pharaohs **62**

policies 17, 59, 60, 113, 127, 130, 134

policy makers 15, 46, 114

popular culture 29t, 35t, 60, 89, 97, 114, 132

positioning 18, 31, 46, 48, 51, 69–70, 85, 101, **127–134**

Potato Eaters (Van Gogh) 123

“presence” 17, 132, 134

private sector 15, 16, 56, 68, 69, 71

psychology 78–81

public opinion 99, 109, 135, 136

public relations 53, 65–6, 129, 130

public sector (government) 16, 17, 18, 59, 68, 71, 101, 119, 132–3

purpose 28, 59, **132–4**

pyramids 14, 18, **61–2**

Qatar 12, 27t, 40f

FIFA World Cup draw (2010) 104–5f, 106, **108f**, 109

Radian6 analysis **103–10**

qualitative research 87, 88, 102

Queensland **100–1**

Radian6 **102–10**

recognition 80, **81**, 87, 131–2

regaining control **14–17**

religion 13t, 15, 24, 31, 34, 36, 47, 81, 133

Rembrandt 71, 81

reputation 11, 23, **39–42**, 60, 65, 68, 69, 83, 84, 95, 100, 109, 110,
113, 115, 120, 129, 130, 131, **133–4**, 135, 137
assessment **85–92**
damage (long-term versus short-term) **114**
versus "image" **81**
"much more than communications challenge" 110
stability **88–9**, 89f
see also associations
research 79, **86–8**, 101–2, 109, 115, 129–30, 135
syndicated **86**
Riedl, J. 96–7
Rome 18, 49–50, **62–3**
Roosegaard, D. 123
Rotterdam 37, 64, 70
Russian Federation 12, 14, 25, 27t, 38, 40f, 41, 90t, 90, 91–2f, 136f

Saudi Arabia 40f, 64, 80
Schatz, R. 101
schema/schemata **78–81**, 82, 87, 115
Second Life 50
sensory impressions 49, 81–2, **114–15**, 117
sentiment analysis **102–10**
Shanghai 11, 70
shared identity **29–38**, 134
Dubai **35–7**
Kazakhstan **33–5**
Limburg **29–33**
The Hague **37–8**
shared values **38–42**
see also value-matching
skills 45, 47, 61, **116–9**
Skype 50
Slow Movement 14
SMART goals **15**
social engagement 126, 127

social media 15, 19, 48, 59, 65, 66, 67, **96–109**, 113, 119, 120, 123, 131, 132, 137
 events (differential coverage) **109–10**
 see also internet

South Africa 12, 40f, 88, 89f, 90t, 91–2f, 136f

South Korea 27t, 40f, 56, 90t, 91–2f, 136f

sports 19, 60, 70, 89, 109, 113, 135

stakeholders 17, 46–7, 59, 68, 99, 101, 132–3, 137, 138

Starry Night (Van Gogh) 19, 123, 130

"states of flow" (Csikszentmihalyi) **116–8**

stealth vehicles **97–8**

steppe 33, 35t, 85

stereotypes 11, 14, 60, 66, 76, 79, 80, 83, 85, 95, 98, 99, 115, 116, 138
 definition 78
 see also clichés

strategic communication 66, 95

students 13, 83, 96, 118, 129, 130, 134, 135

survey methods **86–8**

Sweden 25, 27t, 40f, 54, 90–2, 136f

Switzerland 14, 40f, 40, 135, 136f

television 12, **82**, 84, 97, 98, 120

The Hague 18, **37–8**, 39, 55, **69–70**, 130, 137

The Hague: Security Delta **70**

tourism 36–7, 39, 49, 53, 60, 65, 72, 80, 83, 84, 85, 90t, 97, 103, 120, 123, 127, **128–9**, 134–6, 138

Tourism Queensland: Best Job in World campaign **100–1**

trademarks 11, 131, 132

tradition 24, 29t, 35t, **36–7**

Trajan **63**

Troy (Brad Pitt film) 97

Trump, D. 13, 56, 99

Turkey 27t, 40f, 90t, 90, 91–2f, 97, 136f

Twitter 97, 102, 103

Underwood, F. **15–16**

uniqueness 14, 17–18, 19, 28–31, 33, 56, 61, 63, 64, 66, 72, 79, 87,
113, 114, 116, 119, 120, 122, 123, 128, 130, 134
United Arab Emirates 36, 40f, 63, 66, 103
United Kingdom 11, 39, 40f, 85, **89–91**, 91–2f, 100, 136f
United Nations 12, 38, 40, 69, 70, 102
United States 11, 12, 27t, 39, 40f, 41, 89, 90t, 91–2f, 99, 120, 136f
 "land of free" 18, **53–6**
utilitarian functions **114**
Uzbekistan 25, 27t, 80, 104–5f

value-matching **51–6**, 68, **119–20**
 see also World Values Survey
Van Beringen, S. **31–2**
Van Gogh, V.W. 19, 71, 81, **123**, 130
Van Gogh Cycle Route **123**, 130
Van Oord consortium **64–5**
Van Veldeke, H. 32
Vimeo 102
Vinci, L. da 47
virtual reality **49–51**, 97, 113
virtue 15, 19, 22, 23, 38, 41, 42, 53, 56
Visions of Genius (exhibition, 2016) **72–3**
visual identity **131–2**

Wales **85**
women 36, 79–80, 83, 87
word of mouth/word of mouse 65, **96–7**, 98, 100
World Values Survey **13t**, **26t**, **46**
 see also shared values

YouTube 50, 102

About the author

Since 2009 Robert Govers has co-edited and authored four books on the topic of community reputation with Palgrave Macmillan publishers. *Imaginative Communities* is his first book published under his own imprint. He has also co-authored over 50 journal articles, book chapters and conference papers and has delivered numerous public speeches and business publications. In addition, he is co-editor of the quarterly journal, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

Robert Govers is an independent international adviser, scholar, speaker and author on the reputation of cities, regions and countries. He is chairman of the International Place Branding Association and the managing research partner of www.good.country. He has also been an adjunct or visiting scholar at Tsinghua University, Beijing; the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad; the University of Leuven, Belgium; Rotterdam School of Management, the Netherlands; Loughborough University London Campus; IULM University Milano, Italy; and several institutes in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. He also teaches place branding on the UNESCO World Heritage at Work Master's programme in Torino, Italy.

Robert typically advises in areas such as place identity, image, reputation, economic competitiveness, tourism policy and strategy, educational policy, tourism and investment promotion, and major international events. This is approached from a strategic reputation management perspective referred to as competitive identity, which is based on the premise that places build reputation through substance and symbolic actions, as opposed to marketing gimmicks.

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Marketing Blurb

This book is written for readers who want to understand why some communities, cities, regions and countries are admired and others are not; for anyone who feels that the way in which their community is perceived is too negative, clichéd or stereotypical; and for those people who want to find out what can be done about it.