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Public diplomacy meets social media: A study of the U.S. Embassy's blogs and micro-blogs[☆]

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ABSTRACT

With the evolution of communication technologies, traditional public diplomacy is transforming. This study examines the practice of the U.S. Embassy's public diplomatic communication via social media, namely Chinese mainstream blogging and micro-blogging, sites using Tencent for a case study. This study analyzes the embassy's blog and micro-blog entries and an interview with the embassy's public diplomacy officer. Based on the content analysis and interview, this study discerns the key features of the U.S. Embassy's public diplomatic communication using social media and further suggests that the common values and interests related to the global public as well as experience-sharing and relationship-building might become the focus of new public diplomacy research.

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1. Introduction

As an extension of traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy endeavors to engage foreign populations to cultivate favorable international relations and manage the international environment. The evolution of communication technology encompasses the transformation from old public diplomacy to new public diplomacy, which is characterized by two-way relationship-building communication. In China, with the increase in social media represented by blogging and micro-blogging, traditional public diplomatic communication has been changing, especially for the foreign embassies in China. According to the most recent report issued by Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China, by the end of June 2012, 165 foreign governmental organizations had launched authenticated micro-blogging accounts on four major Chinese micro-blogging platforms: Sina, Tencent, Netease and Sohu. The micro-blogging site managed by the U.S. Embassy in China was the most influential (People's Daily online, 2012). This study analyzes the public diplomatic communication of the U.S. Embassy in China via social media and identifies the embassy's new strategies.

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2. Literature review

2.1. *Public diplomacy as a form of international public relations*

Public diplomacy generally refers to “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies” (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). Traditionally, public diplomacy has been understood in terms of the relation between one nation-state and its foreign publics, that nation’s main objective being to cultivate a favorable image of itself on the world stage. However, a young and multidisciplinary area, public diplomacy is often criticized for a paucity of theoretical grounding and the tools necessary to attract and persuade foreign publics.

Signitzer and Coombs (1992) identify conceptual conversion between public diplomacy and public relations because public diplomacy and public relations have similar aims of affecting public opinion to benefit their client or organization. Public relations is often studied and practiced as relationship management (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000). Public diplomacy, described as “the actual communication activity by a political entity” (Zaharna, 2010, p. 79), may be perceived as a form of international public relations insofar as it also involves relationship management and public relations tactics intended to effect change in foreign publics.

2.2. *Public diplomacy meets social media*

New information technologies have accentuated, accelerated and expanded the global inter-relations among countries, corporations, organizations and individual citizens (Wang, 2006). In such an interdependent world, national governments have come to realize the importance of the Internet and other new media tools in promoting their public diplomacy efforts.

Zaharna (2010) notes that “connectivity and interactivity have become the defining features of the new media, as well as the defining communication activity of their users” (p. 87); according to Kitchen and Panopoulos (2010), social media has “enabled a shift from the Web as passive information highway to a dynamic platform for the exchange of real communication and experience, since self-expression, participation, dialog and creation and maintenance of relationships within virtual communities is now possible” (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009, p. 222). In this new environment, public diplomacy activities become more personalized. Social networking, blogging, micro-blogging and other new media tools have given individual citizens the opportunity to communicate with agents of public diplomacy (Graffy, 2009), who are perceived as being “someone like me” (Cull, 2011) rather than impersonal nation-states. Furthermore, what used to be one-way communication has given way to sharing information and experience through virtual connection and interaction.

2.3. *U.S. public diplomacy efforts since 9/11*

The 9/11 attacks caused the U.S. government to reconsider the importance of public diplomacy. Before that, America’s position as the only superpower left after the end of the Cold War had led policymakers to believe that the enemy was defeated and that there was no need to waste money on public diplomacy. The United States Information Agency (USIA), the primary agent of public diplomacy during the Cold War, had been merged into the U.S. Department of State in 1999; and Voice of America (VOA), a public diplomacy instrument ostensibly helping the U.S. to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics, became subordinate to the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). After 9/11, however, the question, “Why do they hate us?” arose as a type of mantra, and related public diplomacy measures ensued.

These included, during the George W. Bush administration, a “Shared Values Campaign” in 2001 and “Middle East Listening Tour” in 2005, which targeted the Muslim world with the purpose of repairing the U.S. image in the Middle East. However, such one-way campaigns did not succeed in the context of social media. Among the media that have narrowed distances and helped equalize communication opportunities, Al Jazeera is especially noteworthy; and its English channel, one of the three largest 24-h English news channels in the world, can now directly reach American audiences on virtual platforms. Moreover, both state and non-state parties in the Middle East have launched websites for distributing pan-Arabic or pan-Islamic information (Seib, 2009).

New approaches emerging as the Obama administration took office are encapsulated in the term “Public Diplomacy 2.0,” coined at the end of 2008 by U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy James Glassman. This label signals U.S. efforts to incorporate social media technologies into its public diplomacy strategy or what Graffy (2009) describes as a move by “a new-look State Department where policy and public diplomacy are merged and the use of new technology second nature.”

2.4. *U.S.–China relations and social media development in China*

In response to 9/11, then-President Bush stated that all the world’s “great powers” would become “united by common dangers” and “also increasingly united by common values” and surmised that Russia and China in particular would help “defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants” (Bush, 2002). Once Obama took office in 2009, the U.S. government began “an ambitious program of working with China on global warming, on cleaning up the financial mess, and on a lot of other issues;” and Obama was eager to “make the relationship even better” according to the Council on Foreign Relations (2011). U.S.–China bilateral trade has continued to grow in volume, and the U.S. remains a major export market for China

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