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Digital diplomacy in GCC countries: Strategic communication of Western embassies on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon online communication research, this study identifies six effective communication strategies for social media-based diplomacy on Twitter: interactive, personalized, positive, relevant, and transparent communication among a broad network of stakeholders. By using an extensive mix-method design (i.e., combining a manual content and automated network analyses, $N = 4438$ tweets), this research examines to what extent these communication strategies are adopted on Twitter by Western embassies active in countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council. We found that embassies are not utilizing social media to its full potential. Although embassies are transparent, use positive sentiment in their online communication and post relevant information to their stakeholders, they hardly engage in direct interactive and personal communication, and only reach out to a limited group of stakeholders. We recommend embassies to put more emphasis on two-way interactive communication with a vast variety of stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Social media opens windows of opportunities for public diplomacy as it enables engagement with the general public and specific audiences across national borders (cf. Glassman, 2008; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013; Wigand, 2010). Hence, public officials can make use of social media to communicate “directly, continuously and unrestrictedly with the audience” (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van't Haar, 2013, p.708), avoiding financial and bureaucratic obstacles.

Not surprisingly, governments encourage their public affairs practitioners and organizations alike to implement social media within their communication practices (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013; Righton, 2013). Nonetheless, there seems to be a gap between the broad vision to use social media and the actual implementation within governmental institutions (Criado et al., 2013; Meijer & Thaens, 2010). In particular, governmental representatives were found to be reluctant in using social media for interacting with stakeholders (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Graham et al., 2013; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Small, 2011). In an interview study, for example, embassy officers from the Arab League stated that new media represent a challenge to them, but at the same time offer new possibilities for public diplomacy (Khakimova, 2013).

Despite the growing interest in social media-based diplomacy and the increasing scholarly attention in the field, “the study of social media in government is still at its infancy” (Criado et al., 2013, p. 321) and public relations literature has failed to consider the role of social media in digital diplomacy up until recently (for a similar discussion see Waters & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, existing studies are primarily case studies or interview studies, investigating the reasons for publics to interact with foreign governments (Khakimova, 2013, 2015), or the efforts (messages, strategies) governments employ to reach out to publics (Zhong & Lu, 2013); but systematic quantitative empirical research on public diplomacy is lacking (e.g., Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009). In turn, we know little about how digital diplomacy is implemented on Twitter, with whom embassies and ambassadors engage online, or whether the information spread is actually in line with what their stakeholder groups desire.

In contrast, a growing body of communication research in other domains (e.g., political communication or advertising) offers theoretical foundation for investigating social media-based diplomacy. This study suggests that social media are powerful channels for digital diplomacy, but only when advantages and opportunities are seized, such as adopting communication strategies that fit and are tailored to the social medium context. Drawing upon theoretical and empirical insights from online communication research, this study identifies six effective communication strategies for social media-based diplomacy and examines to what degree these strategies are adopted on Twitter by Western diplomacy institutions based in countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). More specifically, this study poses the research question:

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To what extent do GCC-based Western embassies/ambassadors adopt effective communication strategies on Twitter?

To answer this question, we will examine the micro-blogging platform Twitter using an extensive mixed-method design (i.e., combining human content and automated network analyses). Based on previous research, we examine Twitter because of its popularity among politicians and diplomatic actors (i.e., twitplomacy), governmental representatives and public affairs professionals (Waters & Williams, 2011), its quality to facilitate direct (interactive) communication, and its accessibility to analyze communication strategies, as well as networks. As such, this study examines 4,438 tweets from four Western countries (US, UK, Netherlands and Sweden) that communicate on Twitter in GCC countries (i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). By focusing particularly on those countries, this article provides an opportunity to advance our understanding of the implementation of social media by embassies and ambassadors in countries where social media has recently played a crucial role (e.g., Arabic spring, The Green Wave; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). Furthermore, GCC countries belong to the fastest growing economies in the world (IMF, 2012), making engaging with stakeholders even more relevant for diplomacy institutions.

Subsuming, this study serves as an exploratory step in charting how embassies and ambassadors make use of social media for diplomatic purposes. Moreover, we add to the current literature by giving theoretical and empirical insights to the communication strategies used on social media by Western embassies in GCC countries. Although no precise *how-to formula* will emerge from this study, recommendations for improving social media-based diplomacy can be articulated. Eventually, this study offers a valuable baseline for future investigations on social media usage by governmental institutions.

2. Theory

2.1. Linking social media to public diplomacy: twitplomacy

Public diplomacy is defined as “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). Thus, one responsibility of embassies and consulate staff is to interact with host governments, local businesses and nongovernmental organizations, the media, educational institutions, and private citizens (Rose, 2007) to promote and represent the home country in the host country (e.g., to stimulate export). Furthermore, one of the core activities of embassies is to collaborate with a diverse range of international organizations, such as other embassies, consulates, or public offices, thereby establishing networks and maintaining relationships with and between a diverse range of stakeholders in the country where the embassy is based (Dinnie et al., 2010; Waters & Williams, 2011).

Social networking sites (SNSs) are well suited for these purposes, as SNSs provide ambassadors and embassies with communication opportunities not available in the mainstream media. As such, SNSs can enable direct connectivity and interaction between stakeholders and individuals at low costs and efforts (see Waters & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, citizens do not only use social media to come in contact with each other, but they also engage with businesses and governmental organizations, for example, by asking specific questions or lodge complaints on Twitter. Hence, social media such as Twitter facilitate the core activities of embassies in multiple ways, creating and fostering relationships and networks (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

In fact, a new form of public diplomacy has emerged in recent years, called “twitplomacy” (Su & Xu, 2015). Being engaged in twitplomacy refers to actors such as the government, state, NGOs, or individuals who communicate on Internet platforms (e.g., Twitter). In doing so, the aim is to form their images, releasing diplomatic news and

information, articulating opinions and emotions in order to sustain and develop diplomacy and foreign affairs (Su & Xu, 2015). Su and Xu (2015) distinguish three types of twitplomacy: The first form deals with official micro-blogging hosted by a diplomatic organization of the government of a state (e.g., the UK embassy in Qatar). The second type refers to micro-blogging held by international government organizations (e.g., UN or EU). And the last form of twitplomacy covers micro blogs, which are maintained by government individuals, such as the Twitter account by the Dutch ambassador in Riyadh, Saudi-Arabia. Correspondingly, our study will investigate the first and third type of twitplomacy in GCC countries, Western embassies as institutions and Western ambassadors as individuals active on Twitter.

2.2. Communication strategies in digital diplomacy

Online communication research suggests that social media are powerful channels for digital diplomacy (e.g., Zhang, 2013), and particularly suitable to come in contact with diverse stakeholders (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). However, only if social media is used in an engaging way: using an appealing communication style that suits the media environment.

In the following, we will consult a diverse range of computer-mediated communication theories and empirical findings to identify six effective social media strategies on Twitter, which will guide us in answering the above posed research question. Additionally, subordinated research questions will be formulated to investigate social media usage (on Twitter) in the diplomacy context in more detail. In particular, it is examined to what extent communication by Western embassies on Twitter is interactive, personalized, positive, provides relevant information, is transparent, and represents a dialogue with relevant stakeholder groups.

2.2.1. Interactive communication

The first communication strategy that emerged from the literature review is engaging in interactive communication (reciprocal or two-way communication between online users; Liu & Shrum, 2002). Using an interactive style of communication on Twitter is effective as it helps to get stakeholders engaged. Previous studies found politicians to be more positively evaluated when the politicians use an interactive communication style on an online platform, such as Twitter (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012). In addition, scholars have shown that interactivity on Twitter had a positive effect on the quality of the relationships between organizations and the public (Saffer et al., 2013).

Although politicians and governments have been active on social media for a considerable amount of time, it seems that the public sector still fails to communicate interactively. Baxter and Marcella (2012), for instance, found that politicians only employed little direct or two-way engagement communication on social media during the UK Parliament Election in 2010. The authors identified a “general reluctance” (p. 109) on the side of politicians in responding to challenging questions or critical comments by citizens. Instead, politicians chose to ignore the questions and comments in order to prevent a “faux pas” (p. 120). Similarly, other studies identified that non-profit organizations and politicians mainly use Twitter to mediate one-way messages, focusing on the sharing of information, and retweeting of information that was already known—instead of building a relationship with stakeholders (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Graham et al., 2013; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Contrastingly, Mergel (2012) observes that government agencies are slowly trying to get actively in contact with citizens, asking for feedback, insights or encouraging user-generated content. In fact, some positive examples exist of interactive Twitter communication among a few political candidates (Graham et al., 2013) and some governmental agencies in the U.S. (Waters & Williams, 2011). To

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