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Assessing resource transactions in partnership networks: US 100,000 Strong network of public diplomacy

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A B S T R A C T

Studies on relations and networks in both public diplomacy and public relations have been focusing on the project implementation. Largely ignored is the foundational stage of resource gathering before implementation that also involves relationship management. This paper applies the social network analysis to examine the 100,000 Strong partnership network for study abroad in China that facilitates the transaction of necessary resources to support US public diplomacy implementation. The findings of the research suggest that the 100,000 Strong Foundation, as the network builder, has successfully established channels to mobilize resources through opportunity recognition, information arbitrage, and innovativeness creation. Other network actors also obtained various levels of power from the network structure, which may ultimately contribute to public diplomacy. This study offers a new theoretical and methodological framework to study relations and networks in public diplomacy and public relations, while informing some practical insights.

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1. Introduction

Relations have long been a critical focus in public relations (Broom & Smith, 1979; Heath, 2013). Public diplomacy scholarship is only recently experiencing a relational turn, moving beyond the traditional monologue communication that mainly focuses on information projection to relational and collaborative public diplomacy (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Fisher, 2013; Wang, 2013; Yang, Klyueva, & Taylor, 2012; Zaharna, Fisher, & Arsenault, 2013). The relational and collaborative approaches to public diplomacy recognize the complex networked environment that public diplomacy actors situate in and adopt new ways to analyze these actors managing relationships with multiple networked actors in the globalized world (Fisher, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Yang et al., 2012). They acknowledge not only the role of both state and non-state actors, but also the actions of empowering and engaging these actors through social networks.

Relations have become even more attractive in light of the lack of resources that governments are facing with decline budgets, especially within public diplomacy (United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2014). One approach to ease the burden is building more public–private partnerships in public diplomacy (Ross, 2002; Trent, 2012). Partnership means cooperation for mutual benefit (Osborne, 2002). Partnerships not only bring governments with resources, but also help them build relationships and foster mutual understanding and trust with the target audience, which ultimately serve foreign policy goals or national interest (Fisher, 2013; Henrikson, 2007; Zaharna et al., 2013).

As sister fields, public diplomacy and public relations share the focus on relationship management (Fitzpatrick, 2007; L'Etang, 2009). In both fields, partnerships may offer the promise of increased access to resources, which bodes well for the

likely success of the public diplomacy or public relations project. If we consider the process of a public diplomacy or public relations project to be a life cycle, relationship building and management that directly affects the project's outcomes can be considered to be the prime of life. Yet, the early stage of the project, gathering resources and information, also deserves attention, because the project cannot be successful without proper resources. However, there appears to be a dearth of literature on partnership and specifically the exchange of resources in both fields.

Yang and Taylor (2015) have proposed a network approach to public relations. They argued that a social network perspective not only puts organizational relations into a wider context, but also will benefit theory building in communication. Some studies in public relations have already utilized the social network lens to analyze organizations. Some of them explored the networking effects of social media (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Smith, 2010). Others tended to the social capital created by social networks and relationship management (Ihlen, 2005; Ledingham, 2003; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). While these studies mainly focus on the practice stage, largely ignored is the stage before the actual implementation that also involves social networks and relationship management. There are few studies that analyzed organizations' relationship management with stakeholders in order to gain resources (Hung, 2005; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Wiggill, 2014). More efforts should be made to better explore the resource gathering stage, because it will eventually affect the outcomes.

In order to better understand the stage of resource gathering, this paper looks at the 100,000 Strong partnership network for study abroad in China that facilitates the flow of necessary resources to support public diplomacy implementation. It provides a detailed analysis of how a government leverages private resources through a partnership network. This paper utilizes a two-level network structural model to examine the case of the 100,000 Strong network. The first level analyzes the individual network actors' network-making power and the second level looks at specifically the resource transaction processes.

The first section of this paper outlines the conceptual framework that serves two purposes. First, it addresses the importance of resource transaction through partnership networks in public diplomacy. Second, it lays the foundation of how partnership networks facilitate resource transactions through bridging network structural holes. The second part of the paper introduces case of the 100,000 Strong network and a analytical model of social network analysis. The third section presents the findings of the analysis that reflect the two-level results yielded by the analytical model. The fourth section of the paper reviews the results and provides practical and theoretical implications. The last section contains the conclusion and limitations.

2. Conceptual framework

Since this paper explores governments' partnership networks for channeling resources transaction for public diplomacy implementation, the first and foremost task is to explain why governments form partnerships and what they can receive from the partnerships. This study argues that organizations, including governments, build and manage partnerships to gather resources that support project implementation. Specifically, they mobilize existing resources through bridging network holes to gain more network-making power. In the following sections, I will explain this process from a theoretical point of view.

2.1. Resource transaction and power difference in partnership networks

Partnerships have always been important public diplomacy tools (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). Governmental agencies are involved in "cooperative institutional arrangements" with private organizations in various public diplomacy programs (Cull, 2009). Governments partner with private sector organizations essentially because both parties play different functions and provide different resources to deliver public services (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Osborne, 2002; Rosenau, 2000). One of the most prominent reasons for such partnerships is that government can use private organizations' efficiency to ease the government's financial burden. Besides financial considerations, governments also connect with local civil society in public–private partnerships (Rosenau, 2000). By partnering with local organizations, governments are able to tackle local issues more effectively and efficiently, incorporate local resources and meet local needs (Osborne, 2002). Moreover, partnerships, especially collaborative cooperation with organizations in the target community, also facilitate interactive and long-term relationships, which is a crucial part of public diplomacy (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Fisher, 2013; Trent, 2012).

Multiple partnerships can become networks. Early studies of interorganizational relations suggested that networks facilitate the flow of several types of resources: authority, money, personnel, information, knowledge, and service (Aldrich & Negandhi, 1972; Benson, 1975; Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003). Recent studies have turned to the concept of social capital as a form of network resources. Scholars argue that social capital accessed through interorganizational and partnership networks facilitates exchange and provides various kinds of benefits (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Lin, 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In public relations, scholars have also looked at different kinds of resources and argued that public relations can be used to enhance social and other capitals in different scenarios (Dodd, Brummette, & Hazleton, 2015; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). Within public diplomacy, the study by Taylor and Kent (2013) suggested that social capital brings new opportunities, enhances information sharing, and promotes resource mobilization for public diplomacy. While different theories and studies emphasize different kinds of resources and capitals, this study utilizes the word "resource" to include both social capital and other capitals derive from the network.