



Research in Brief

Online newsrooms and public diplomacy



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes a population of online information subsidies issued by the foreign ministries of the U.S., China and Singapore over a 5-year period. It found limited congruence in themes and concepts between and among the three countries, even on human rights, a major diplomatic point of contention. Such an approach to public diplomacy, modeled after a one-way model of communication, reveals fundamental obstacles to engagement, dialogue, collaboration and relationship building.

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1. Introduction

Public diplomacy, with its traditional goals of communicating to inform and influence and its more recent expansion into concepts of engagement, dialogue and relationship building, share many theoretical and historical underpinnings with public relations. By communicating a country's policies, values and culture to the people of another nation, public diplomacy implicitly recognizes the primacy of relationships and notions of co-existence and mutual interdependence.

Our study seeks to understand the online public diplomacy processes of the foreign ministries of three countries—the U.S., China and Singapore—through information subsidies, a public relations concept defined as controlled access to information and materials that come with little effort or cost to the recipient (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Gandy, 1982).

Framing offers a theoretical framework to conceptually connect public relations, information subsidies and public diplomacy. There is a limited body of framing research in public diplomacy, in which studies mostly analyzed public diplomacy framing processes and effects by examining news coverage, consistent with an emphasis on media framing. Information subsidies as a body of text represent a communicative act in an unadulterated form that has not undergone framing and gatekeeping processes through news media. An understanding of the frames offers alternative frameworks for theorizing about the linkages between public relations and public diplomacy in a context of co-existence, understanding, mutual interdependence and relationship building.

Press releases are framed through selection, emphasis and omission of certain attributes of information out of all that is available about an issue or event. Gandy (1982) coined the term information subsidy to describe controlled access to information and materials that come with little effort or cost to the recipient. Berkowitz and Adams (1990) defined information

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subsidy as items provided to the news media to gain time or space. Through press releases, organizations not only provide news media with information but also use them as channels to promote their organizations' perspectives and goals.

2. Method

We used Leximancer, a software text analytics tool, to scientometrically describe and analyze the online public diplomacy texts issued by three countries: the U.S., China and Singapore.

We analyzed 13,714 online public diplomacy information subsidies texts issued by the U.S., China and Singapore over 5 years between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2012. The 13,714 texts were retrieved from the online media centers of the three countries' foreign affairs ministries: *The U.S. Department of State* (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/index.htm>); *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China* (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/>); and *Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room.html).

3. Findings

The population of 13,714 texts from the three countries revealed four main themes are *countries*, *community*, *United States* and *people*. For instance, the most salient theme, *countries*, includes major word-like and name-like concepts such as *countries* (occurring 11,670 times), *cooperation* (3340 times), *economic* (2467 times), *development* (2919 times), *China* (1897 times), *relations* (1794 times), *trade* (1156 times), *bilateral* (1223 times), *regional* (811 times), *Chinese* (398 times), *Russia* (258 times), and *Japan* (191 times).

In our analysis, name-like and word-like concepts are ranked by their frequency of occurrence in the text. Concepts are assessed relative to the tagged folders categorized by countries, which means that *count* is the number of times a concept appears in the U.S., China or Singapore texts to reveal their significance as frames, or the central organizing ideas. Any congruence in the frames, as reflected by the themes and concepts in Leximancer, among the three countries suggests similarities in topics of interest or talking points that can ground dialogue and collaboration. In the U.S. texts, the top 10 concepts are *people* (12,160), *work* (7424), *countries* (7397), *community* (6187), *support* (6004), *world* (5766), *international* (5746), *economic* (5722), *security* (5516), and *government* (4793). In the China texts, the top 10 concepts are *cooperation* (5241), *development* (4855), *countries* (3505), *economic* (3318), *relations* (2634), *community* (1817), *international* (1816), *world* (1712), *bilateral* (1441), and *trade* (1371). In the Singapore texts, the top 10 concepts are *countries* (768), *economic* (629), *cooperation* (563), *community* (481), *international* (465), *world* (444), *relations* (400), *bilateral* (395), *global* (382), and *visit* (355).

In the 13,714 texts, the likelihood of the *human* and *rights* concepts occurring together is .98, which means that 98% of texts reflecting the *human* concept also contain the *rights* concept, revealing a high degree of connectedness. Besides *human* (4849 times), the seven word-like concepts that are most closely related to *rights* (or *human rights*) based on likelihood are *society* (451 times, likelihood of .19), *civil* (482 times, likelihood of .18), *violence* (308 times, likelihood of .15), *women* (581 times, likelihood of .14), *political* (425 times, likelihood of .11), *history* (119 times, likelihood of .10), and *children* (144 times, likelihood of .10). In terms of salience in the human rights texts, *society* is ranked first in the Singapore texts, third in the China texts and fifth in the U.S. texts.

4. Discussion

Our study contributes to the limited research on government-issued information subsidies in public diplomacy. It addresses a gap in the literature that has given scant attention to how governments use information subsidies for public diplomacy, especially through online newsrooms, as most studies in this area of communication focused on media framing or news to understand public diplomacy processes and effects. By analyzing government-issued information subsidies, our study directly examines governments' perspectives and goals in an unadulterated form, unfettered by media framing and gatekeeping influences.

We found limited congruence in themes and concepts between and among the three countries. Even for a topic such as human rights, which is a long drawn and significant point of contention and stumbling block in diplomatic relations, the three countries share little conceptual congruence, thus limiting the potential for meaningful dialogue in public diplomacy. Despite the high level of connectedness between the concepts of *human* and *rights*, the frames show significant divergence, with the U.S. texts emphasizing human rights for *women* and associating human rights with *violence*, two conceptual frames that are visibly missing from the China and Singapore texts; whereas the China and Singapore texts are more likely to discourse and defend human rights within the conceptual frames of *history* and *society*, consistent with notions of approaching human rights to focus on the exigencies of a country's unique "historical" and "developmental" phases, and in particular "Asian values" to interpret human rights.

The disparateness in themes and concepts reveals a limited pool of common talking points to ground engagement, dialogue and collaboration meaningfully in a context of co-existence, understanding, mutual interdependence and relationship building as envisioned by the literature (e.g., Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Nye, 2010; L'etang, 2009). Instead, the weak thematic and conceptual congruence suggests a reliance on an old-school conceptualization of public diplomacy as one-way communication or monologic communication. If the new public diplomacy degenerates into propaganda, public diplomacy

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