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Coexist, complement, converge and innovate: Public diplomacy of US–China Internet Industry Forum

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ABSTRACT

Culture and value are new dimensions for international relations after the term "soft power" was coined, and public diplomacy became an important initiative to gain soft power. As a successful case in US–China public diplomacy, the US–China Internet Industry Forum (UCIIF) proves that, in noopolitik there exists a rule from coexistence, complementation to convergence and innovation, which has a close relationship with its diplomatic operations. This case also provides important inspiration for the future US–China relations.
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1. Introduction

The concept "soft power" was first introduced by Joseph Ney in 1990 (Ney, 1990). Afterwards, culture and value have become new dimensions for international relations. Soft power exercise influence indirectly by creating a certain climate: on some particular policies, the public opinions will have an influence over diplomatic decisions, which are usually decided by political elites (Nye, 2004). Nye (2008, p. 95) argues that, public diplomacy is an important tool in the arsenal of soft power. In a certain sense, soft power can only be achieved by public diplomacy.

The term "public diplomacy" was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a distinguished retired Foreign Service officer. His concept was summarized in an early Murrow Center brochure:

> "Public diplomacy... deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications." (Cull, 2009a, p. 19)

This concept has been developed since then, but it is universally acknowledged that public diplomacy is targeted at the foreign public that bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions, performed by both government and private individuals and groups, through influencing directly and indirectly those public attitudes and opinions, and its ultimate purpose is to promote the national interest.

At present, the public diplomacy tools adopted by China and the US are varied. The US prefers educational and cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, visits of private practitioners, and, etc. (Tang and Wang, 2003, pp. 22–27). While

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China often uses student exchanges, cultural or sport events, media and other methods (Tang, 2006). However, there are two disadvantages: the first is these tools are trying to win foreign public's appreciation, but not open to disputes; the second is that most tools' policy effects are difficult to be controlled or evaluated.

The communication mechanism set up by UCIIF provides us a valuable diplomatic model that can solve the problems mentioned above.

2. The UCIIF communication mechanism

2.1. UCIIF's basic information

The US–China Internet Industry Forum (UCIIF), an annual forum co-organized by Internet Society of China and Microsoft Corporation, seeks to build ongoing relationships between the US and Chinese Internet communities and governments. The two countries take it in turns. The first forum was held in Seattle in November 2007, and the three subsequent ones took place in Shanghai, San Francisco and Beijing, respectively. Since all the delegates are invitation-only, the UCIIF is small. Therefore, it could focus on direct, candid discussion about Internet policy issues most concerned.

I was invited to the forum for 4 years and made three keynote speeches. I witnessed the entire process and experienced the happenings in the past 4 years. All the topics are key issues for the US–China Internet industry development. The theme of UCIIF 2007 is "Development and Opportunities of Internet Technology", mainly focused on issues aroused little disputes, and the forum itself was almost closed to media. In 2008 is "Development and Cooperation", and the breakout sessions are about technology trends, information communication, security and governance. So the theme is mostly around cooperation between the two countries, based on their common cognition of the Internet. In 2009 the forum turns into "Meeting Challenges through Exchanges and Cooperation". This forum is held in the background of financial crisis, so the topics discussed included the Internet's role in economic recovery, child online safety protection, online IPR protection, innovative technology and governance. Like the UCIIF 2008, 2009s forum is also half close and half open, to broaden its influence while keep sufficient spaces. And last year's forum is called "For a More Useful and Reliable Internet", mainly concentrating on cloud computing, crime and privacy, online intellectual property, and governance. Under the mutual trust set-up in the past few years, the forum could be completely open to the public.

The attendees includes CEOs from some of US and China's most successful Internet companies, academics and officials from the universities and governments, such as Microsoft, Google, Tencent, Intel, Baidu, SCIO (China), MIIT (China), DHS (US), DOC (US), and some other key-related organizations. That is to say, the Internet elites and governors are the target audiences of the forum, the interactions between whom could deepen their mutual understandings, help them to find mutual interests, and finally reach ideational consensus.

The forum scale is restricted since the invitation-only routine. According to the official statistics, there are some 130 attendees in the Los Angeles Forum, and about 180 people attending the Beijing Forum. The past four meetings were widely welcomed and highly praised. Besides, it has become a significant platform to advance US and Chinese Internet industry communication and cooperation, and positively promoted the US–China relations (The Forth UCIIF, 2010).

2.2. UCIIF's evolution

During the past four meetings, technology – the least controversial topic between US and China – was chosen as a starting point. To seek the mutual benefits, understandings are gradually increased in communications and discussions are gradually deepened in disputes. Till the forth meeting, they have agreed on building "a more useful and reliable Internet", and started to moving on practical operations.

Meanwhile, the meeting format was changing in the past 4 years. The plenary session in the first three forums were open to media, but the breakout sessions following were private and off the record. Breakouts observed the Chatham House Rule,[1] by which a close environment was created and different opinions were sufficiently expressed. With increasingly understanding and tolerant to each other, all sessions were open to media, and hence expanded its influence to general public.

Accompanying the media involvement, the general public pays more attention to the forum issues, and it even became a hot topic for students who were preparing the National College Entrance Examination. The opinion leaders' effect should not be ignored considering it has a great effect on the public. At the initial stage, the main responsibility was to coordinate the views of elites, however, when the time is coming they would guide the public.

3. A successful public diplomacy example: coexist, complement, and converge

Four meetings in 4 years, from the evolution above, we could find that US and China's cognition to Internet policies goes through several stages that are: coexisting, complementing, converging and innovating. In the presence of contradictory views, they tried to complement each other in differences, to converge together in development, and to evolve into a pretty

[1] When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

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