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# China's public diplomatic networks on the Ebola issue in West Africa: Issues management in a network society

Di Wu<sup>a</sup>, Aimei Yang<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC 20016, United States

<sup>b</sup> Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, 3502 Watt Way, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Practitioners of public diplomacy often need to deal with complex international issues and they could learn from the issues management perspective. However, little effort has linked issues management with public diplomacy. This paper develops an analytical model that combines the relational concepts of issues management and public diplomacy, and applies that model to the case of the Chinese Ebola public diplomacy campaign in West Africa. The goal is to better understand how China mobilizes a wide range of resources (human resources, material resources, financial resources, etc.) and builds relationships with various actors to manage the Ebola issue. This study applied social network analysis and qualitative content analysis to offer a comprehensive understanding of the function and structure of Chinese Ebola public diplomatic networks. The study demonstrates the broad application value of issues management.

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations and public diplomacy share many commonalities, among which, relationship building and management is a major area of shared interest and research (Fitzpatrick, 2007). In the field of public relations, the emphasis on relationship management has moved the field towards dialogical, co-creational, and networked approaches (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Similarly, the relational turn in public diplomacy has also moved the field beyond traditional one-way communication towards a collaborative and network-oriented approach (Zaharna, Fisher, & Arsenault, 2013).

Issues management could also become another common ground between public diplomacy and public relations. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009), issues management refers to a school of reflective management that “has moved to respond to changing threats and opportunities in the economic and public policy arenas in which they operate” (p. 5). Issues management strategies include communication strategies, problem detection, and activities to influence stakeholders (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Public relations scholars have built holistic theories and models to guide issues management research and practice (Hallahan, 2001; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). In their practice, public diplomacy practitioners often seek to build and manage relationships with foreign publics around specific issues (e.g., health, culture, sports, etc.) without recognizing their

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [aimei.yang@usc.edu](mailto:aimei.yang@usc.edu) (A. Yang).

practices as issues management. As such, the field of public diplomacy could benefit from a formal theoretical framework to guide issue-oriented research and practices.

Recognizing these common grounds and gaps in the literature, this article proposes an analytical model and applies this model to examine China's public diplomatic network on the Ebola issue in Africa. The study aims to understand how China has managed the Ebola issue and has achieved its diplomatic goals in Africa. In the remainder of this article, we first review relevant literature on issues management and public diplomacy that inform our analytic model. Further, we propose an analytical model based on key concepts identified from the literature. China's public diplomatic campaign on the Ebola issue presents an ideal case for the application of the model because this case demonstrates how a government managed a complex issue through issues management and network building. Moreover, we applied mixed methods of network analysis and content analysis to examine the Chinese Ebola public diplomacy network. Results and implications for public diplomacy and public relations research and practice are discussed.

## 2. Managing issues in public diplomacy: planning and communication

In this section, we briefly introduce the main concepts and development of both issues management and public diplomacy, with a focus on relationship and network building.

### 2.1. *Issues management: expansions and evolutions*

Issues management was initially considered as a communication strategy for corporations to deal with threats from activists and to capitalize on opportunities, especially in the public policy domain (Chase, 1984). Over the years, issues management has evolved into a management approach that requires a holistic understanding of business condition and the coordination of multiple organizational functions (Heath & Cousino, 1990). A basic goal of issues management is to create a harmonious environment favorable for an organization's development (Heath, 2013). Moreover, by promoting competing voices and initiating dialogues among communities with different interests and expectations, issues management also contributes to the fostering of a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006a). Issues management embraces many approaches from various disciplines such as public relations, public affairs, lobbying, crisis management, and strategic planning (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Over the years, as noted by Jaques (2009), issues management has evolved "into a broader, more sophisticated discipline exercised not just by corporations but also by government agencies, not-for-profits and NGOs to develop strategies in relation to a wide range of public issues in their social and operating environment" (p. 20). New actors include governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, civil society organizations, activist groups, individuals, and media (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath & Waymer, 2011). The territory of issues management has developed from areas in domestic public policy to the international stage, dealing with problems of global sustainability, climate change, and infectious disease (Barbour, Doshi, & Hernández, 2016; Paleo, 2014). Although studies have clearly showed the applicability of issues management to the public diplomacy context, little research has made the explicit connection between the two fields. When apply issues management to public diplomacy, governments can be conceptualized as organizations in the sense that they both function to support the collective pursuit of specified goals.

Scholars have proposed many issues management models to make sense of this complex process (Botan & Taylor, 2004). For instance, Heath and Palenchar (2009) proposed a model with four components: systematic issue identification, proactive actions, issues monitoring, and dialogic issue communication. This model emphasizes the idea that issues management reflects the mobilization and coordination of organizational resources to meet stakeholder expectations. Additionally, as argued by Botan and Taylor (2004), relationship management is a critical element of issues management. Meanwhile, as our review in the next section demonstrates, public diplomacy has also experienced substantial changes and there is a paradigm shift towards relationship building and network management (Yang & Taylor, 2014; Zaharna et al., 2013).

### 2.2. *A connective mind-shift in public diplomacy*

Public diplomacy is used by nations to communicate with foreign publics, to build and manage relationships, and to influence their perspectives for the purpose of advancing national interests (Gregory, 2011). Public diplomacy and public relations are closely connected as both fields aim to foster a friendly environment for organizations or states to advance their interests (Bowen & Heath, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2007). Moreover, the two fields both emphasize relationships, relationship management, and networks.

In public relations, relationship management refers to "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). Relationship management has been a major area of research and practice for over two decades. In public diplomacy, the attention to relationship is a relatively new phenomenon (Fitzpatrick, 2007). Public diplomacy scholars argue that the relational approach stands for genuine cooperation and collaborations with foreign communities, and it "realizes that empowering and engaging with others is a more efficient path toward sustained change" (Zaharna et al., 2013, p. 2). Melissen (2005) proposed the concept of "New Public Diplomacy" to explain the relational turn in public diplomacy. New public diplomacy has several unique features. First, it transcends the one-way communication and moves towards a dialogic and collaborative engagement approach (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Fisher, 2013). The idea is to

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