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Public relations message strategies and public diplomacy 2.0: An empirical analysis using Central-Eastern European and Western Embassy Twitter accounts

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ABSTRACT

This study examined 41 embassy Twitter accounts representing Central-Eastern European and Western countries. Western embassies were more likely to have Twitter accounts and demonstrated more average followers, but a CEE account (the Polish embassy in the United States) had the highest influencer score. A content analysis of 482 tweets brought together relevant literature from public diplomacy and public relations scholarship. A significant association was found between the *diplomatic approaches* and *public relations message strategies*, thus identifying a relationship between disciplines that are frequently considered separately. With regard to public diplomacy strategies, Western embassies engaged primarily in advocacy, whereas CEE embassies engaged primarily in cultural diplomacy. Listening was the least likely approach to be taken by both Western and CEE embassy accounts. With regard to public relations strategies, Western and CEE embassy Twitter accounts primarily engaged in message strategies aimed at information sharing (versus facilitative, persuasive, cooperative, etc.). Overall, analyses indicated that embassy Twitter accounts primarily engaged in approaches that may lack strategy, despite their purpose being diplomatic communication. This research provides a basis for predictive, best practices research and recommendations that merge disciplines.

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1. Introduction

Much has been made of the opportunities and challenges for social media as a tool for diplomacy between governments and foreign publics (Kim, 2015; White & Radic, 2014). Yet, researchers argue that: the public diplomacy literature lacks theory (Entman, 2008); empirical research focuses primarily on U.S. public diplomacy, while ignoring other countries (Gilboa, 2008); and the role of social media in meeting diplomacy objectives has failed to be established (White & Radic, 2014; Yepsen, 2012).

Scholars increasingly pose that the merging of the public diplomacy and public relations scholarship could advance theoretical development and practical implications, particularly as the disciplines lack philosophical division (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Gilboa, 2008; L'Etang, 2009; Macnamara, 2012; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; White & Radic, 2014; Yepsen, 2012). Despite this, public relations theory remains largely ignored in traditional public

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diplomacy scholarship. Literature from the fields of international relations and political science is dismissive of theoretical or practical overlaps with public relations (Macnamara, 2012), and thus, limited in its application of significant public relations concepts (e.g., dialogue, relationship management, reputation, messaging strategies, and so on).

Further complicating development, research focuses primarily on U.S. public diplomacy that is aligned specifically to the country's own diplomatic goals and, therefore, strategic messaging. Cull (2013) says that in the United States “the uses of the Web 2.0 technology have been determined not by the inherent nature of the tool or the culture and mores of the wider online community but by the priorities and prejudices of the bureaucracy” (p. 126). White and Radic (2014) have called for the development of comparative theories and frameworks of public diplomacy, as well as an examination of diplomatic communication that uses social media.

This research builds on prior research to address these identified gaps in the literature. This study examines how broad subsets of countries (Central-Eastern European and Western countries) are using embassy Twitter accounts to regularly engage in public diplomacy and public relations communicative activities. Embassies are diplomatic representations of a nation's government in another country. The purpose of the embassy is to transmit messages from the home country to the host country, which allows for a unique opportunity to observe diplomatic communication. The current analysis is informed by the current literature and taxonomies proposed in the public relations (Hazleton & Long, 1988; Hazleton, 1993; Werder, 2006) and public diplomacy (Cull, 2013, 2008) scholarship. This research not only merges taxonomies from across scholarly traditions, but also offers a comparative framework for non-Western countries' use of social media.

2. Conceptualization

Public diplomacy refers to “communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of achieving foreign policy goals and objectives” (Sevin, 2015, p. 563). Cull (2013) poses three key characteristics for public diplomacy in a Digital Age (i.e., public diplomacy 2.0): the ability to develop relationships and communities; dependence on user-generated content and feedback; and “horizontally arranged networks of exchange rather than the vertically arranged networks of distribution down which information cascaded in the 1.0 era” (p. 125). Cull (2008) conceptualized a simple taxonomy of public diplomacy, culminating in a call for the redefinition of the practitioner as “the creator and disseminator of ‘memes’ (ideas capable of being spread from one person to another across a social network) and as a creator and facilitator of networks and relationships” (p. 31). Cull's characterization and redefinition echo central public relations themes, yet his taxonomy is rooted in individual public diplomacy case studies of success and failure. The authors first sought to describe public diplomacy 2.0 using embassy Twitter accounts.

RQ1: What is the modern state of embassy Twitter use in Western and CEE countries (i.e., followers, following, favorites, lists, influence)?

2.1. Digital public diplomacy as public relations

As the importance of social media for government communication has gained traction, so too has a reliance on public relations theory and research for public diplomacy. Governments have realized that they can no longer engage in traditional media relations tactics, non-transparency, and one-way messaging while remaining legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders (Zaharna & Uysal, 2015; Zhong & Lu, 2013). Clear divergences from the traditional public diplomacy scholarship have occurred as a result, realizing an increased focus on dialogue, relationship building, mutual understanding, and publics as actors in the legitimization of nations and governments. In today's digital media environment, strategic communication like the kind practiced in effective public relations has the potential to resolve problems and misconceptions with foreign publics (Kim, 2015).

Zhong and Lu (2013) found a shift in public diplomacy practices for U.S. Embassy communication using Chinese blog and micro-blog sites. They state, “In the new media context, information senders invite and encourage interaction and discussion on topics related to cultural exchange, bilateral relations, national values, etc.” (p. 546). Zaharna and Uysal (2015) suggest that in the recent flood of interest in public diplomacy, public relations scholars have contributed to a redirection away from one-way messaging and media approaches toward relationship management approaches. Despite the scholarly advancement, however, they argue, “In the public diplomacy equation, nations still seem to perceive themselves as having control over the communication dynamic. Relationship management is viewed primarily from the organization's perspective; it is the nation that *manages* the public.”

Similarly, Yepsen (2012) notes that the two-step flow communication model, which suggests that opinion leaders are influenced by mass media and in turn influence the people in their social circle, has long been an influential model among public diplomacy scholars. But when testing the degree to which the U.S. Embassy Twitter account in Venezuela was engaging with the most influential Venezuelan Twitter users, Yepsen found that the embassy followed none of the 30 accounts in her ideal network and just seven influencers followed the embassy account. When comparing the message content from the ideal network with the embassy's Twitter content, Yepsen found little overlap, leading her to conclude the content was of little value to the network. Likewise, Storie (2015) found that young females in the United Arab Emirates were willing to engage with local and Arab leaders on social media, but were not willing to engage with international governments. In particular, participants mentioned the United States, Iran, and North Korea.

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