

Shaping Public Diplomacy through Social Media Networks in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *The practice of public diplomacy is being disrupted as a result of 90% of UN nations having a presence on social media networks, along with the advent of new technologies making communication global and in real time. This article aims to look at the relationship between public diplomacy and the media and identify the challenges and opportunities social media networks pose for public diplomacy in the 21st century from the perspective of both scholars and policymakers.*

Key words: public diplomacy, social media networks, digital diplomacy, engagement.

Introduction

There are 173 countries with a Twitter account for governments and foreign ministries, which represents 90% of all UN nations, according to a study done by Twiplomacy in 2016.¹ 88% of those countries have a presence on Facebook, while 71% on Instagram. The mere existence of these accounts indicates that public diplomacy is adapting to the new channels of communication.

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¹Twiplomacy, *Twiplomacy Study 2016*, 31 May 2016, <http://twiplomacy.com/blog/twiplomacy-study-2016>, (accessed 19 January 2017).

The arrival of the internet and the rapid rise of new technologies has disrupted many fields and public diplomacy makes no exception. If, traditionally, public diplomacy was characterized by neutrality and monologue, the public diplomacy of the 21st century has the opportunity to communicate in real time through the new social media networks, along with the expectation that it should do so. Therefore, for the first time in history, public diplomacy has the potential to foster not only one-on-one dialogue, but also discussion between many more participants or between one entity and the public. Nowadays, the civil society can be reached directly through the social media accounts of the ministry of foreign affairs, embassies or other non-governmental organizations or individuals. Information is spread in real time, it is collaborative and transparent. The internet has also erased the borders between different types of audiences: abroad vs. at home.

The way public diplomacy is being re-shaped has been captured by Judith McHale, President Barack Obama's Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the following statement:

In a world where power and influence truly belongs to the many, we must engage with more people in more places... people all around the world are clamoring to be heard... they are having important conversations rights now... and they aren't waiting for us, as mentioned by Hayden.²

This focus on engagement, which came from the dialogical nature of the social media networks, has a profound impact on the essence of public

² Craig Hayden, *The rhetoric of soft power: Public diplomacy in global contexts*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2012, p. 242

diplomacy. Pamment³ argues that, in the 20th century, public diplomacy was communicated using a broadcasting model. The aim was persuasion of the foreign audiences. In the 21st century, the new center of interest of public diplomacy became dialogue. As the President Barack Obama's Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs highlighted, public diplomacy needs to be part of the global dialogue.

In order to understand the way social media networks shaped public diplomacy in the 21st century, this paper will depart from the definition of public diplomacy, will look at the relationship between public diplomacy and the media and, finally, will analyze the challenges and opportunities social media networks pose to public diplomacy.

Theories of public diplomacy

According to Gilboa⁴, the academic literature has researched public diplomacy from several perspectives: in the field of international relations, in the field of strategic and diplomatic studies or in the field of communications. However, Gilboa⁵ believes that, in order to better understand it, the subject has to be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective.

In international relations, the study of public diplomacy aims to determine the role and the status of a diplomat. In the school of

³ James Pamment, *New public diplomacy in the 21st century: A comparative study of policy and practice*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 3.

⁴ Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a theory of public diplomacy", in: *The annals of the American academy of political and social science*, Vol. 616, No. 1, 2008, p. 64.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

communications and journalism, the focus falls on how the media and new technologies have an impact on the practice of public diplomacy, while in the school of public relations, the researchers are interested in how public diplomacy crafts the image of the state and how it is communicated. Jowett and O'Donnell captured the broad understanding of public diplomacy in the following definition:

*It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation of 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; communications between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications.*⁶

Media and public diplomacy

There are countless studies on the relationship between the media and public diplomacy. The more recent ones capture the complex interactions between public diplomacy and the media in the context of global communication in real time. Archetti⁷ and Gilboa⁸ analyze, for instance, the influence that a live broadcasting of an event has on international relations, phenomenon known as the CNN effect. This was the

⁶ Garath Jowett & Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion* (5th ed.), Thousand Oaks, California, Sage, 2012, p. 287.

⁷ Claudia Archetti, "The impact of new media on diplomatic practice: an evolutionary model of change", in: *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2012, p.187.

⁸ Eytan Gilboa, "Diplomacy in the media age: Three models of uses and effects", in: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, p. 15.

first time when public diplomacy ran out of time or had to respond in real time to events. Nevertheless, the media outlets were still the gatekeepers and governments could, to a certain extent, still frame their arguments. In the 21st century, news became even more transparent with the rise of citizen journalism which was integrated into the live streams of major news outlets or it was broadcasted independently on social media platforms.

To better understand the relationship between media and public diplomacy, Gilboa⁹ identifies three models in which the media communication channels are used as instruments of public diplomacy. The first model, called generically "public diplomacy", refers to the way in which government representatives, NGOs or private citizens use the media to influence public opinion abroad.

The second model refers to "media diplomacy" and involves using media channels to transmit a message on common interests or resolve conflicts between two or more states. A very good example in this case is the press release after a negotiation. The third model, which the researcher calls "media-broker diplomacy", refers to the way in which journalists take that information and are thus intermediaries or brokers in relation to the public. Journalists become temporary mediators in international negotiations. Entman takes this concept further and proclaims the term "mediated diplomacy", which he defines as a cascade of frames: "organized attempts by a president and his foreign policy apparatus to exert as much control as possible over the framing of U.S. policy in foreign media".¹⁰ The

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Robert Entman, "Theorizing mediated public diplomacy", in: *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol.13, No.84, 2008, p. 98.

researcher also argued that the government was dependent on news agencies and influencers in order to send its message across to its public or to receive feedback from them.

In the beginning of the 21st century, however, the definition of public diplomacy shifted from a one-way communication model, as the communication channels diversified and enabled dialogue through social media networks. Pamment captures this shift in what follows:

*The new public diplomacy is dialogical, collaborative and inclusive. It represents a break from 'broadcasting' models and takes advantage of social media to establish two-way engagement with the public.*¹¹

The following chapter aims to understand the new definition, the challenges and the opportunities that scholars and policymakers alike encountered in light of this new change.

Digital diplomacy

Melissen¹² was the one who came up with the term "New Public Diplomacy" or "digital diplomacy", following the appearance of a variety of blogs and web platforms in early 2000. But he was not the only one. Brown & Studemeister¹³ speak of a "virtual diplomacy", Potter¹⁴ about the "cyber-diplomacy", Glassman¹⁵ about "PD 2.0" and Nye¹⁶ about the "soft power".

¹¹ James Pamment, *New public diplomacy in the 21st century: A comparative study of policy and practice*, Routledge, New York, 2012, p. 3.

¹² Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, New York, Springer, 2005, p. 8.

¹³ Sheryl Brown & Margarita Studemeister, "Virtual diplomacy: rethinking foreign policy practice in the information age", in: *Information & Security*, Vol. 7, 2001, p. 42.

Moreover, Glassman¹⁷ indicates that public diplomacy should aim at the most densely populated social fabric because it is there where its communication has the most significant impact. Online, social media networks represent the meeting place for individuals to get informed and discuss current issues. According to the Twidiplomacy research, on average, Facebook is the place where governments and foreign ministries have the highest number of followers. The audience of public diplomacy isn't anonymous any more, but active agents in a diplomatic exchange of views with the diplomatic institutions. Social media networks become thus a catalyst for public diplomacy and an interface for interacting with the national and foreign audiences.

The rise of social media networks led to almost a consensus among scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy, if not for the name, but at least for the phenomenon. The phenomenon consists in the emergence of a "new" public diplomacy that must face a media environment transformed all over the world, characterized by networks of selective audiences and fragmentation of media discourse¹⁸.

¹⁴ Evan Potter, *Cyber-diplomacy: managing foreign policy in the twenty-first century*, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2002, p. 45.

¹⁵ James K. Glassman, 'Public Diplomacy 2.0: A new approach to global engagement', Washington DC, New America Foundation, December 2008, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/us/2008/112605.htm> (accessed 11 February 2017).

¹⁶ Joseph Nye, "Public diplomacy and soft power", in: *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, 2008, p. 94.

¹⁷ James K Glassman, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ James Pamment, "Articulating influence: Toward a research agenda for interpreting the evaluation of soft power, public diplomacy and nation brands", in: *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 40, No.1, 2014, p. 53.

Bjola and Holmes¹⁹ consider that digital diplomacy refers broadly to the way state actors use information and technology in order to manage international change. They identified three fundamental components in the definition of digital diplomacy: engagement, accessibility or resources, and information monitoring, which will be further discussed from the perspective of both scholars and practitioners in what follows.

Engagement

When it comes to the new form of public diplomacy, Fitzpatrick stresses the importance of engagement in order to project a certain message, as the new channels of communication enable dialogue.

*Recognizing transformational changes in global society, public diplomacy scholars and practitioners and other informed observers have called for a new public diplomacy to meet the demands of a new time... As a result, nations must “engage with” rather than “communicate to” foreign publics in the pursuit of more collaborative relations.*²⁰

Practitioners agree with this approach. The Ambassador of Poland in Romania in 2013, Marek Szczygie, highlighted that digital diplomacy is a very important aspect of the Polish diplomacy because it provides new communication platforms for interacting with the foreign audiences.²¹

¹⁹ Corneliu Bjola & Marcus Holmes, *Digital Diplomacy: theory and practice*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 207.

²⁰ Kathy, Fitzpatrick, *US public diplomacy in a post-9/11 world: From messaging to mutuality*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2011, p. 10.

²¹ DigitalDiplomacy, “Diplomația publică, vedetă pentru o zi în România”, 23 September 2013, available at <http://digitaldiplomacy.ro/diplomatia-publica-vedeta-pentru-o-zi-romania/> (accessed 21 March 2017).

Within the European Forum for public diplomacy, in 2013, the diplomat stated that he believes that digital diplomacy is the future of public diplomacy.²²

At the European Forum of Public Diplomacy of 2013, organized in Bucharest, the president of Romania at that time, Traian Băsescu, pointed out the necessity of a coherent approach in terms of communication, both internally and externally.²³ Six years later, President Klaus Iohannis, returned to this idea and argued for a need of better coordination of institutions, a related strategy and a rapid response during his speech at the Annual Meeting of the Romanian Diplomacy.²⁴ At the same event, Bogdan Aurescu, Chief Foreign Policy Adviser of the President of Romania announced the implementation of the "Ministry of Foreign Affairs strategy for digital diplomacy in Romania", which aimed at better coordination of communication of the diplomatic missions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁵

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ President Administration, "Speech of Mr. Klaus Iohannis, President of Romania to all Romanian diplomats at the Yearly Reunion of Romanian Diplomacy", 31 August 2016, available at https://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/anul_2016/2016_pdf/2016.08.31_discursul_pres_edintelui_romaniei_la_radr.pdf (accessed 23 March 2017).

²⁵ Calea Europeană, "Speech of Mr. Bogdan Aurescu on Romanian foreign policy in crisis situations and regional instability at the Yearly Reunion of Romanian Diplomacy", 2 September 2015, available at <http://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/reuniunea-anuala-a-diplomatiei-romane-bogdan-aurescu-un-discurs-despre-politica-externa-a-romaniei-in-jurul-unor-crize-si-instabilitati-regionale/> (accessed 23 March 2017).

From Q&A on Twitter to live Facebook events, digital diplomacy enables ministries of foreign affairs or diplomats to engage with audiences in countries where they don't even have a physical presence because the political context does not allow it. They can open virtual embassies in order get their message across and start a dialogue.

Furthermore, as the internet makes information accessible for everyone, everywhere, the next question to arise is „who is the target audience that is engaged by the new form of public diplomacy?”. Historically, public diplomacy aimed at persuading foreign publics, using their local media channels and their local language.

On social media networks, however, it is harder to differentiate. For instance, most of the Romanian Embassies in Europe are communicating in Romanian. Are they trying to engage solely with the diaspora? Or maybe they don't have a clear set of best practices, or they have a hidden agenda. Manor²⁶ identifies the same phenomenon in the case of the US State Department and questions whether it is ethical to use the national resources destined for communicating with foreign public in order to campaign for the actions of a certain administration. This leads us to a following challenge for the digital diplomacy, namely the institutionalization of the use of social media networks in the public diplomacy practice.

²⁶ Ilan Manor, “Are we there yet: have MFAs realized the potential of digital diplomacy?”, in: *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* Vol.1, No.2, 2016, p. 1.

Resources

Governments and foreign ministries from over 90% of all UN nations have a presence on some type of social media network. Although the numbers are high, there are no clear sets of best practices on how to use these platforms. Some countries offer recommendations or general guidance for their diplomats, however, at the moment, the practice relies mostly on individuals who use them according to their best knowledge. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), for instance, recognizes the need for a permanent body of digital professionals.²⁷

The new digital environment comes with a series of new challenges that the practitioners need to face. Manor²⁸ identified five fundamental threats: (1) the work routine and ethic of the internet (being able to adapt offline to online communication), (2) information resources (being able to create content relevant for social media networks), (3) plurality of channels (being able to adapt to a multitude of social media networks: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram Youtube or any country specific social network), (4) best practices and training (the need for trained human resources), (5) ministries of foreign affair risk adverse culture, (6) diplomacy's need for time. In the 21st century, information flows in real time and the audience is used to consuming it as such. However, this is not the process through which public diplomacy works. Public diplomacy needs time to gather all

²⁷ Tom Fletcher, 'Former UK Ambassador to Lebanon in the Future FCO Report', available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/521916/Future_FCO_Report.pdf (accessed on 27 March 2017).

²⁸ Ilan Manor, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

the information, needs time to understand the situation and to be able to make recommendations. The social media networks put a lot of pressure on its practitioners to respond in real time.

Monitoring

Traditionally, public diplomacy was built around information gathering and dissemination. On the one hand, the diplomat needs to gather information on how foreign audiences perceives the actions of a certain government. They need to make an assessment of the nature of the relationship between the two states and to identify opportunities or threats for collaboration. In this context, the social media networks provide an excellent tool for monitoring opinion and beliefs of the foreign public.

On the other hand, the diplomat has to address key issues in a bilateral agenda, reinforce its stance and engage foreign audience in a sustained dialogue regarding the objectives of its government. Social media networks offer thus the perfect platform for engagement.

Nevertheless, if public diplomacy was traditionally good at gathering and disseminating information for its key audience, with the appearance of new technological tools and platforms, the question that arises is how efficient these new channels are and how efficient are the professionals in using them.

Ambassadors and diplomats need to think of technology not merely as tweeting feel-good photos, but as an essential tool for accomplishing their core mission in a technology-driven era,

stated Ambassador Kurt Volker, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and Executive Director of the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University.²⁹

There are academic studies which tried to measure the efficiency of digital diplomacy on social networks and provide models of assessment of different strategies of engagement in social networks. Bjola et al³⁰ propose a model which assesses engagement over the following components: agenda setting, presence expansion and conversation generating. Nevertheless, the study is done on the Chinese micro-blogging website Sina Weibo. As every social network has its own particularity, its own algorithm for engagement, and its own specific audience, the study might not be relevant in other parts of the world or on other networks. Generally speaking, the majority of research is focused on the United States of America, but the phenomenon itself is global. Thus, measuring efficacy remains a problem to be further researched.

Conclusions

Both scholars and practitioners agree that the internet, information and communication technologies have shaped the definition and practice of public diplomacy. The social media networks which are continually

²⁹ Lauren DeLisa Coleman, “Diplomacy Must Embrace Digiculture”, 13 June 2014, available at <http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/diplomacy-must-embrace-digiculture/> (accessed on 27 March 2017).

³⁰ Corneliu Bjola, Lu Jiang, Marcus Holmes, “Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of the Digital Diplomatic Strategies of the EU, US and Japan in China”, in: *Digital Diplomacy Theory and Practice*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 74.

changing are impacting public diplomacy in ways in which the literature tries to analyze, understand and describe, but doesn't always manage to keep up the pace. The challenges and opportunities the social media networks bring along are fundamentally disrupting the practice of public diplomacy.

Media has always played a mediating role for public diplomacy, framing the message and offering feedback and information. In the 21st century, the role of social media networks is even more salient, as diplomats have direct access to their audiences, can enter in a sustained dialogue with them and engage in real time. The governments are not relying on foreign media anymore to convey their interpretations of events but they can now discuss them on their own social media accounts. But the question is: do they have the right resources and training to do that? Furthermore, are their actions efficient and coherent? Do they use the social media networks in order to accomplish their objectives or does their message gets lost in the increasing buzz of the internet?

Public diplomacy is undergoing a process of transformation, while social media networks are themselves evolving. Thus, scholars and policymakers will have to further investigate the relationship between public diplomacy and social media networks.

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