

Chapter 50

Facebook Communities of African Diasporas and Their U.S. Embassies: A Content Analysis Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the Nigerian, Ethiopian, and Egyptian diasporas in the United States use their Facebook groups to create their imagined communities. It also draws a parallel between their use of Facebook and how the embassies of their countries of origin use the same platform in performing their official duties. Six hundred Facebook posts drawn for the groups and the embassies were content-analyzed for this study. The results show that the three African diaspora groups have more pragmatic uses of their Facebook communities, such as the exchange of services, advice and information on day-to-day living, while their embassies use the platform more for public relations objectives in planning their official communication that emphasizes nation-branding, the promotion of their various countries, and for other diplomatic chores.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the word “diaspora” had long been used to describe dispersion experienced by dislocated religious groups. According to historian Martin Baumann (2001), the term originally dates to the third century B.C. as a technical term used to describe the dispersed condition of the Jews when the Greeks controlled Jerusalem and introduced the ideas of Polis, or city-state. At the time, the large Jewish groups that lived throughout the Hellenistic Kingdoms were living in exile, hence in dispersion, because they

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were not born in the lands where they were inhabiting. The use of “diaspora” to describe non-Judaic groups and trans-nationalists had to wait until the twentieth century. By then, those who were dispersed from their homeland in search of work or a better life in a foreign land were also distinguished as participants in a social diaspora (Safran, 1991; Scheffer, 1986).

Contemporary diasporas are more likely to be both less disconnected from home and less dispersed or isolated from their native ethnic group. Computer-mediated communication has created inexpensive, instant venues of horizontal communication between immigrants, their peers in the diaspora, or their loved ones back home. Online communication technology has also turned vertical communication between governments and their citizens into a standard practice at most levels of governance. State leaders, public officials, embassies, and consulates have turned to social media to manage communication with their target audience and engage with them. This has led to the emergence of new forms of diplomacy, such as public diplomacy and digital diplomacy, wherein the Internet and communication technologies support diplomatic objectives. According to the comprehensive list of Twitter accounts on Twiplomacy, more than 4,100 embassies and ambassadors are now active on Twitter and the list is growing daily (Twiplomacy, 2018). The same source identified 951 Twitter accounts – 372 personal and 579 institutional accounts – belonging to heads of state as well as government and foreign ministers within 187 countries. “Facebook is the second-most popular network among government leaders, and it is where they have the biggest audiences,” as recently as 2018 (Twiplomacy, 2018).

The Facebook Groups feature allows for the creation of smaller communities within digital arenas and allows users to share customized content to niche audiences. As it exists, the Facebook Group feature enables users to launch custom, niche communities, where individuals share visual content, connect with similar members, and participate in a collective agenda that is often defined and protected by Group administrators. The growth of Facebook groups over the past decade is not only indicative of their popularity, but also of their flexibility to meet variable needs and strategies of groups worldwide. In October 2009, “Google indexed over 52 million Facebook groups” (O’Neill, 2010). Three months later, the number “surged to over 620 million groups” (O’Neill, 2010). By 2016, membership in Facebook groups exceeded 1.4 billion users (Holmes, 2018). By utilizing this popular feature on Facebook, like-minded diasporic individuals who may possess weak social ties and face distance barriers can create their own communities and boost their social capital with one tool (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). This resource enables diaspora groups who are isolated, geographically dispersed, and interested to connect with their respective ethnic groups.

This chapter therefore examined how immigrants from the largest African diasporas in the U.S., namely Nigeria, Egypt and Ethiopia, use their Facebook groups to establish social ties, revive their culture, and maintain connection with their homeland. The chapter also explored how the embassies of the three African countries in the United States utilize Facebook to perform their own digital diplomacy. Studying the Facebook content shared in African diasporas and their respective embassies compares the popular constituent agenda to the official diplomatic agenda.

THEORY AND LITERATURE

Social networking sites facilitate interactivity between members who might have never met face-to-face. When users decide to have their own “ethnic” or cultural space online, they forge their own communities that are based on commonalities, and perhaps nationalism. In his theory of “Imagined Communities,”

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