

Chapter 5

China's Coronavirus–Oriented Diplomacy in Nigeria: A Content Analysis of the Chinese Embassy's Online Communication

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, new media penetrations have multiplied the determinants of perceptions held in diplomatic sphere. The deployment of digital diplomacy by different countries to manage public perceptions has now opened a new vista in diplomatic and public relations discourse. China's application of digital diplomacy became even more pronounced as a result of the negative narratives--mostly derived from preconceived stereotypes--that heralded the outbreak of coronavirus. Consequently, the country's online communications in Nigeria were designed to launder its image for a more beneficial bilateral relationship with the latter. This chapter, through qualitative content analysis, evaluates the extent China's online coronavirus-oriented communications in Nigeria were deployed in countering negative stereotypes and narratives at the initial-to-peak stage of the virus. Findings show that, despite trickles of counterproductive content, post-coronavirus China's image was significantly laundered through the deployment of various Nigeria-targeted digital communication strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The last quarter of 2019 unraveled a swift shift in the battle of the world super powers to diplomatic war buoyed by the resultant effects of coronavirus outbreak. The virus was deployed as an efficient content to score political points, de-market competitors and win new allies. Unsurprisingly, decade-long rivals, the United State of America and China, switched to their most potent communication diplomacy machinery to make the most of the situation and gain at each other's expense. The Asian giant, however, found itself at the wrong end of the diplomatic war and ensuing propaganda as it was credited with being responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. The then president of the United States, Donald Trump took the Chinese "indictment" further by branding the virus "China Virus". Not wanting to be outdone in the communication and media circle, China activated its own communication strategy which was geared towards micro-managing the information and news coming out of the country, playing down the negative contents and countering the US-propagated narratives on the pandemic. The country, in a seeming effort to effectively implement this strategy, energized its diplomatic missions to deliver and disseminate strategic traditional and new media communication contents geared towards image laundering in some strategic- and most especially, developing- countries of interest around the world. Nigeria, with huge potential for bilateral socio-economic engagements, falls into this category of China's "countries of interest."

Evidence abounds that the White House views China's economic rise and increasing global engagement in countries like Nigeria as a danger to its global economic and political dominance. Suffice it to say that notwithstanding the fact that the idea of an unstoppable Chinese economic, military expansion and a relative loss of power for the United States could be said to be based on fairly tested assumptions and projections, China seems to, genuinely, be the only country with the potential to threaten the status of the United States (Perthes, 2010). It is not, therefore surprising that the US is doing everything to whittle down the former's growing global influence- an influence touted be becoming more pronounced in Africa which is widely considered a huge potential in the scheme of world economy. Underlining the fact that Africa is at the center of US-China rivalry Mulualem (2013) noted that the US and China boast of the first and the second largest economies in the world and, though neither intimate friends nor fierce enemies, have developed foreign policies targeted towards capturing Africa.

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