

Chapter 15

Evaluating Social Networking in Public Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

While many e-government applications have focused on governments connecting with their citizens, recently social networking tools have begun to transform the practice of public diplomacy by permitting governments to build and maintain direct relationships with citizens of other countries. In this chapter, we describe several such initiatives undertaken by the U.S. Department of State (DOS). Our particular focus is on efforts aimed at South Korea. We present results from interviews with DOS officials responsible for technology-based relationship-focused public diplomacy as well as with U.S. Embassy officials tasked with managing one of these initiatives—Café USA—and South Korean participants in Café USA. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of e-government applications that cross national boundaries for our understanding of citizenship and suggestions for further research aimed at evaluating the effects of e-government applications within public diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Since the development of the modern nation state, diplomacy has been a function largely reserved to national governments and their official representatives. However, the rise of international and transnational groups and organizations has resulted in non-state actors such as the United Nations or groups such as Greenpeace or ICANN playing

roles that might earlier have been the sole purview of national governments. More recently, the availability of increasingly wide-scale and low-cost access to pervasive computing and communications networks has led to citizen involvement in activities traditionally reserved to government representatives (Castells, 2008).

Initially, this direct citizen involvement generally took the form of individuals (or organized groups of individuals) lobbying foreign policy bureaucracies of national governments for policy change. Now,

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though, we are beginning to see both national governments and non-governmental organizations using computer-based social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and web chat rooms to greatly expand both the range of actors in what has been traditionally thought of as the diplomatic process *and* the kinds of interactions between these actors.

Moreover, social networking tools have begun to transform the practice of public diplomacy by permitting governments to build and maintain direct relationships with citizens of *other* countries. The stated goal of these new public diplomacy efforts is often to support understandings of policy decisions as well as (or even opposed to) convincing foreign nationals of the correctness of those decisions. Focusing on developing shared understandings even in the face of sharp policy disagreements helps to distinguish modern public diplomacy initiatives from mere propaganda.

In this chapter we report on social networking initiatives by the U.S. Department of State, with particular emphasis on initiatives in South Korea. South Korea is of special interest since it (i) is of considerable strategic importance to the United States and (ii) has a Confucian tradition that places emphasis on *relationships* as opposed to rigid *contract-based* understandings, and (iii) is one of the most wired countries in the world. Our interest here is two-fold. It is first to provide concrete examples of how a particular national government is beginning to directly engage citizens of other countries thus bypassing traditional filters and gatekeepers, such as the mass media. Second, it is to initiate serious discussion of impacts this changing architecture of diplomacy may have on the practice of foreign policy.

Our primary focus is on Café USA¹, an initiative by the U.S. Embassy in the South Korean capital, Seoul, to reach out to that country's citizens. Café USA is part of the Embassy's efforts to interact with the younger generation in South Korea, a substantial proportion of which are regarded to have anti-U.S. sentiments (Kim

& Lim, 2007). This online community initiative, which will be described more fully below, represents an important example of networked public diplomacy, as it enables two-way communication between U.S. Embassy officials and South Korean citizens through the Internet. For this study, we interviewed U.S. State Department officials who have been in charge of the Embassy's public diplomacy as well as South Korean members of Café USA. Documentation and archival materials were used to corroborate findings from other sources (Yin, 2003).

Scope of Diplomacy Enlarged

A national government's diplomatic initiatives aimed directly at foreign citizens are often termed *public diplomacy*. Though it is increasingly difficult to separate domestic publics from foreign publics in this era of global interconnectedness, public diplomacy is aimed mainly at foreign publics (Nye, 2005; Tuch, 1990; Snow, 2007; USIA, 1987). Therefore, we define public diplomacy as governmental or nongovernmental activities that promote national interest through efforts to inform, engage, and influence foreign audiences. Such activities may, of course, reach the government's or organization's own citizens as well.

Public diplomacy has received growing attention from scholars and practitioners as public opinion in foreign countries has increasingly become recognized as being relevant to a country's diplomatic initiatives (Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2005; Snow, 2007). Interest in public diplomacy has also been reinforced by an increased appreciation of *soft power* or *smart power* as a central element of international relations (Catto, 2001; Nye, 2005; Nye 2008). According to Nye, *soft power* refers to the power to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion. Empirical studies of international marketing show that country image plays an important role in consumer choice behavior (e.g., Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1996; Parameswaran & Pisharodi, 2002). That is, products' country of

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