

Twitter Diplomacy? A Content Analysis of Eight U.S. Embassies' Twitter Feeds

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Abstract

In recent years, the Twitter feeds of U.S. Embassies have sparked controversies, angering American political leaders as well as local leaders and citizens. This study explores how U.S. Embassies use Twitter, to try to assess whether Twitter use might be seen as furthering the mission of the U.S. Department of State or as a “barometer” of local tensions. By examining the tweet output from four embassies on the State Department official “watch list” and four not on the list, this study reveals inconsistencies among embassies in Twitter use and between Twitter content and

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the State Department mission, and suggests the possibility of viewing such Twitter activity as public diplomacy.

In April 2013, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo briefly deactivated its Twitter account after a dispute with Egyptian President Morsi (Chumley, 2013). The U.S. Embassy tweeted a link to the *Daily Show's* Jon Stewart about the Egyptian government's arrest of Stewart's Egyptian doppelganger Bassem Youssef, who was detained and fined for insulting Islam and President Morsi (Rogin, 2013). The official feed of the Egyptian president tweeted it "inappropriate for a diplomatic mission to engage in such negative political propaganda" (Rogin, 2013). Shortly after, the U.S. Embassy Twitter feed was back up and running with the controversial tweet deleted (Calamur, 2013).

Social media, especially Twitter, represent important emerging communication channels (Choo & Park, 2011; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009) and governments around the world have taken notice of their capabilities. Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has become one of the most visited websites on the Internet and government organizations worldwide have created Twitter accounts to promote policy (Choo & Park, 2011).

These organizations report having used Twitter to facilitate efficient information distribution and to foster relationships with citizens and other governments (Choo & Park, 2011). Governments have used Twitter for a variety of purposes ranging from American disaster relief (@FEMA) to Israeli military operations (@IDFSpokesperson). Meanwhile, social media can pro-

mote the interests of government opposition, as seen during the Arab Spring in Egypt when anti-government protestors used social media to disseminate messages contrasting with those of the government and to organize demonstrations (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012).

Clearly, social media can provide governments a “doorway” to new audiences and strengthened relationships with the public; just as clearly, their unrestricted, interactive capabilities create the potential for undesired dialogue (Christensen, 2013). When embassy employees create confrontational dialogue, as in the case of Embassy Cairo on Twitter, the perspective of the posting employee can be misread as official State Department policy, with diplomatic implications. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland admitted that Embassy Cairo “came to the conclusion that the decision to tweet it in the first place didn't accord with post management of the site” (Rogin, 2013), demonstrating the diplomatic consequences—intended or unintended—of Twitter.

Recent research has illustrated the utility of viewing Twitter as a public relations tool and exploring intended and unintended functions of its use through various public relations frameworks, ranging from contingency interactivity to social network analysis (see, for example, Etter & Plotkowiak, 2011; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Hwang, 2012; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrech, 2013; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013).

However, the State Department is not a public corporation, and communication by U.S. embassies overseas is seldom characterized as public relations, even though its goals also include establishing or maintaining relationships with publics using some of the same tools. Instead,

one way of characterizing the emerging role of U.S. Embassy Twitter use is by incorporating the concept of “public diplomacy,” defined simply as “the process by which governments communicate and build relationships with foreign publics in pursuit of political objectives” (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013). Scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy argue that it is distinct from public relations, which they dismiss as “a business marketing function ill-suited to diplomatic endeavors,” despite “conceptual and practical links between public relations and public diplomacy” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013, p. 1).

Using systematic content analysis, this study explores the nature and content of U.S. Embassy Twitter use through a public diplomacy lens. For context, the paper first reviews State Department social media use and policy goals and discussions of public diplomacy frameworks.

Conceptual Framework Governments Using Twitter

“E-government” is generally defined as the use of innovative web-based communication technology by governments to allow for convenient access to government information and support for citizens to participate in democratic processes (Fang, 2002; Howard, 2001). Since the U.S. government introduced an e-government initiative in 1993, the Internet has been widely recognized as a key medium for communication between government and citizens (Choo & Park, 2011).

Research has shown that U.S. government organizations promote their policies by using Twitter, suggesting that Twitter can help organizations share essential information with the public effectively and encourage the pub-

lic to participate by voicing their opinions (Waters & Williams, 2011; Wigand, 2010). Arguably, the current web environment allows the government to provide the public with better feedback for transparent information sharing and policymaking cooperation (Choo & Park, 2011; Howard, 2001).

One study analyzing the Twitter usage of South Korea's Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MFAFF) determined that Twitter was an effective information channel (Choo & Park, 2011). However, the same study also identified limitations in the ability of the MFAFF's Twitter feed to bring information from the general public to the government (Choo & Park, 2011). Recent research has also analyzed social media use on Weibo (a Chinese micro blogging platform similar to Twitter) by the EU Delegation, and American and Japanese Embassies in Beijing, revealing that such diplomatic social media use is primarily serving the function of one-way information dissemination as opposed to engaging the audience in two-way flows of communication (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). Similarly, Waters and Williams (2011) also found that government organizations primarily used Twitter in one-way communication.

In 2011, the Swedish government created a nation-branding project using Twitter (@Sweden) intended to promote the country. The @Sweden account is "given" to a new Swede every week and, supposedly, these individuals are given free rein to tweet what they like, when they like (Christensen, 2013). The use of Twitter by the Swedish government is considered to be officially funded diplomatic activity and has been proclaimed as a new form of government transparency (Christensen, 2013).

An online, grass-roots campaign, TweetCongress, was created with the goal of promoting government transparency by encouraging Congressional representatives to use Twitter (TweetCongress, 2011). A study revealed that Congresspeople use Twitter largely to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves and to their blog posts, and to report on their day-to-day activities (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). Rather than providing new insights into the legislative process or improving transparency, Twitter was largely used as a vehicle for self-promotion (Golbeck et al., 2010).

Other research has demonstrated that this social media use is impacting traditional diplomacy and changing the way that nations interact.

“Traditional boundaries that demarcate foreign and domestic issues, initiators, and recipients have become increasingly murky. An unintended foreign message might cause domestic policy changes, and domestic social media activities might be covered by foreign news media” (Zhang, 2013, p. 1327).

The State Department has taken notice of the importance of social media, and routinely monitors various social media websites in numerous languages and recommends influential individuals for local envoys to befriend, enabling diplomats to predict and react to events more quickly (“Digital Diplomacy: Virtual Relations,” 2012).

U.S. Embassies

The U.S. State Department operates more than 270 embassies, consulates, and other posts worldwide with locally employed staff and more than 13,700 American For-

ign Service officers (U.S. Department of State, 2012). In each embassy, the Chief of Mission (usually an Ambassador) is responsible for implementing U.S. foreign policy goals as well as coordinating U.S. Government functions in the local country with the ultimate goal of improving relations with the host country (Goldfine, 2009; Rubin, 1985; United States Department of State, 2012; Warwick, 1975).

Since its inception in the late 1700s, the State Department has worked to maintain contact with the general public via changing technologies and communication channels, ranging from radio and letters to email and social media. Twitter has become a key tool used by the State Department as well as governments across the world to communicate with local citizens and foreign nationals.

In addition to monitoring social media use of other organizations, the State Department strives to utilize emerging technologies in order to advance its mission. As part of these efforts, it has utilized social media, including regularly scheduling online discussion forums in up to nine languages on a variety of social media platforms. This includes a 2012 event in which the State Department spokesperson responded to questions received from Twitter, and a State Department Google+ Hangout in Farsi for Persian-language journalists (United States Department of State, 2012).

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called this new form of digital diplomacy a “21st Century Statecraft” (United States Department of State, 2009) and the Department reported that in recent years its social media sites saw “exponential growth across platforms, and online audiences interacted with content tailored to their inter-

ests” on a State Department social media platform, My State Department (United States Department of State, 2012). As of 2015, The Department had more than 300 Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, Google+ and Pinterest sites for its embassies, missions and consulates, many with millions of followers each (United States Department of State, 2015).

While it appears that each embassy has the discretion to determine who posts content, the State Department requests that, when posting, embassy staff “thoughtfully examine the messages conveyed and the extent to which they support policy objectives” (United States Department of State, 2012, p. 154). However, the Department acknowledges that some embassies have set up social media sites “without determining whether they have the time, resources, or appropriately trained staff to maintain fresh, interesting, and up-to-date content on sites” (United States Department of State, 2012, p. 154). The Department has concerns about “duplication, cost-effectiveness, and policy coordination” and, according to the Department, those issues are “not yet fully resolved” (United States Department of State, 2012, p. 155). Another challenge is ensuring that the Department can keep pace with non-state actors’ advanced use of technological innovations, while simultaneously ensuring that new devices and technologies do not pose security risks to the Department (United States Department of State, 2012).

Diplomatic Confrontations on Twitter

Allowing each embassy to control its own Twitter feed to advance its individual strategic goals has proven successful thus far (United States Department of State,

2012). However, it has sparked multiple diplomatic disputes between the embassies and local governments, particularly in Egypt and in addition to the *Daily Show* incident. For example, in September 2012, as Egyptians protesting against the anti-Islam film *Innocence of Muslims* gathered around the embassy compound in Cairo, the embassy issued a statement condemning the film (Fisher, 2013). The embassy defended its condemnation of the film throughout the day with a series of tweets, some of which it later deleted amid intense controversy about the role of the film in the protests (Fisher, 2013). The incident became a debate point for the U.S. presidential campaign when Republican candidate Mitt Romney argued that posting tweets condemning the film rather than standing up for free speech rights symbolized “apology diplomacy” by the Obama administration (Fisher, 2013).

Another incident occurred in November 2012 when the U.S. Embassy in Cairo posted a series of tweets suggesting that President Morsi was at risk of becoming a dictator (Dewey, 2012). That differed from the State Department’s official statements and took a much tougher stance than spokeswoman Nuland did in a vague and carefully worded speech at a press briefing in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 27, 2012 (Dewey, 2012; Nuland, 2012).

The U.S. Embassy in Cairo has made a point of replying on Twitter to journalists and confrontational citizens, primarily from within Egypt (Dewey, 2012; Youssef, 2013). As much as these Twitter accounts can be a force for transparency, they also run the risk of communicating personal views of embassy staffers as if they were official positions, creating contradictions in U.S. diplomacy (Dewey, 2012).

Public Relations and Public Diplomacy

Researchers have shown the utility of Twitter as a public relations tool, exploring its use within a number of public relations theoretical frameworks (Etter & Plotkowiak, 2011; Himelboim et al., 2014; Hwang, 2012; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013; Saffer et al., 2013). Given the diplomatic communication capabilities that Twitter presents and the goals of the State Department, embassy use of social media, particularly Twitter, lends itself to consideration from a public diplomacy perspective. Public relations and public diplomacy are closely linked. In fact, some argue for “conceptual convergence” of the two because they have similar objectives (“to affect public opinion for the benefit of their client/organization”), utilize similar tools to achieve those goals (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 130), and require practitioners to have similar knowledge and skills (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013). However, public diplomacy specialists often attempt to distance themselves from public relations, “what many believe to be a business marketing function ill-suited to diplomatic endeavors” (Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, & Kendrick, 2013, p.1).

While a number of conceptualizations of public diplomacy exist, this study embraces a definition developed by Signitzer and Coombs (1992) and hailed by scholars as “innovative” and “important” (Gilboa, 2008, p. 57): “the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government’s foreign policy decisions” (p. 138).

Yun (2006) tested the applicability of the public relations Excellence Study’s (Grunig, 1992; 1993; 1997) con-

ceptual and measurement framework to a public diplomacy context with survey data of public diplomacy practices from 113 embassies in Washington, D.C., finding that the Excellence Study's public relations behavior and excellence dimensions are paralleled by public diplomacy behavior and excellence.

More recently, an integrated model of public diplomacy was introduced (Golan, 2013) which argues for a comprehensive strategic communication approach that fuses public relations practice and methods with the goals of public diplomacy (Snow, 2015). The integrated model is comprised of three elements: mediated public diplomacy, nation branding/country reputation, and relational public diplomacy (Golan, 2013). Nation branding and relational public diplomacy are medium- and long-term strategies that place public relations theories and practitioners in the foreground of effective public diplomacy (Golan, 2013). The third aspect, mediated public diplomacy, is a short-term strategy that "implores governments to engage foreign publics through third party mediators such as global media (global satellite networks, international broadcasting) and international social media influencers" (Snow, 2015, p. 73).

In a survey examining the factors that influence the adoption of social media by foreign diplomats working at embassies in Washington, D.C., Zhang and Fahmy (2015) found that some of the principles identified by the Excellence Theory as determining excellence in public relations are also relevant in their public diplomacy study, leading them to conclude that the "use of social media in public diplomacy is not merely application of a new communication tool. Instead, it could represent a paradigm

shift in the practice of public diplomacy” (p. 326).

Thus, existing scholarship points, at minimum, to similarity between public diplomacy and public relations, due largely to similar objectives, use of similar tools, and similar knowledge requirements. This study explores how U.S. Embassies (including those in global “hot spots”) communicate through Twitter, in an effort to determine the extent to which Twitter feeds are consistent with or align with official State Department policy. To achieve this goal, the study explores how the embassy Twitter feeds addressed 14 different international events that took place in diverse regions and attracted varying levels of media and government attention. These events are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but represent an array of happenings that will allow better understanding of how U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds react to local or international events. The study asks the following research questions:

RQ 1: How are U.S. Embassies using Twitter?

RQ 2: When faced with major world events, how do U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds respond?

RQ 3: How are U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds aligned with the mission of the U.S. Department of State and traditional diplomatic efforts?

Method

The State Department monitors conditions all over the world and places a country on the State Department watch list when “long-term, protracted conditions.... make a country dangerous or unstable” and/or “when the U.S. Government's ability to assist American citizens is constrained due to the closure of an embassy or consulate” (U.S. Department of State, 2013). As of May 2013,

there were 34 countries on the list: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Colombia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Republic of South Sudan, Mali, North Korea, Guinea, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Philippines, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Niger, Kenya, Haiti, Central African Republic, Somalia, Nigeria, Israel, Iran, Mauritania, Eritrea, Chad, Honduras, Mexico, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Cote d'Ivoire.

Using the list of 34 countries listed on the State Department's watch list and the search function in Twitter, authors first identified all countries on the watch list in which the local U.S. Embassy has an official Twitter account—22 out of 34 countries. The authors then selected four of those 22 countries that have had significant political and/or social conflicts in the recent past and that represent four regions of the world. Four countries not on the watch list in which the U.S. Embassy in that country has an official Twitter account were then selected for analysis. These selected countries represent a mix of politically stable and unstable nations as well as varying geographic regions. The Twitter feeds analyzed from U.S. Embassies in countries on the watch list are Afghanistan (@USEmbassyKabul), Libya (@USAEmbassyLibya), Nigeria (@USEmbassyAbuja) and Syria (@USEmbassySyria). The countries being analyzed from outside of the watch list are Egypt (@USEmbassyCairo), South Korea (@usembassyseoul), Venezuela (@usembassyve) and Tanzania (@AmEmbTZ).

The authors then collected publicly available data on each embassy's Twitter usage, including tweet text, date posted, language usage and retweets for each embassy's official Twitter feed during the period June 1, 2012

- May 31, 2013. This timeframe was based on the maximum number of tweets able to be retrieved at the time of the study's execution. The Twitter REST API v1.1 (see https://dev.twitter.com/docs/api/1.1/get/statuses/user_timeline) allows for the most recent 3,200 tweets to be retrieved from any public Twitter feed. If an embassy has not tweeted 3,200 times total, it gathers all of the tweets; otherwise it gathers the 3,200 most recent. For the embassies that tweeted the most frequently, using May 31, 2013, as an end point meant all tweets beginning with June 1, 2012, were captured.

Data were stratified by country, and then analyzed for any spikes in the number of tweets surrounding large world events. Overall, there were no large spikes, so a 25 percent simple random sample was taken from each country within the given timeframe. As Table 1 shows, this process resulted in 10,493 total tweets for the year, from which the final 25 percent sample was taken (N = 2,625 tweets).

Each tweet was coded for several variables: embassy, posting date, language of the tweet, how many times the tweet was retweeted, and whether the tweet directly referenced a person or organization with the @id convention in the tweet. Twitter contains a "direct message" function in which users can privately communicate (much like an e-mail). These direct messages were not included in this study because they were private. Tweets that did contain a direct mention were further coded based on whether each one was an internal or external mention. Internal mentions included tweets discussing another U.S. Embassy or State Department individual/office. External mentions included all other tweets, such as those referenc-

ing American or local citizens or any local government individual/office. Each tweet was also coded for whether it contained a personal message such as a holiday greeting, whether it was information about an embassy activity, whether it contained a link, and if so, what type of link (coders followed each link, and coded according to the type of website linked to), and finally, whether the tweet referenced one of 14 events that took place in different regions and that received varying levels of international attention during the time period analyzed.

The 14 world events selected from within the time-frame were:

- June 2012 airplane crash in Lagos, Nigeria
- July 2012 India power outage that left 620 million people without power
- Summer 2012 Olympics in London
- Nov. 2012 re-election of Barack Obama
- Nov. 2012 severe flooding in Venice, Italy
- Sept. 2012 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya
- Sept. 2012 garment factory fires in the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Lahore that killed 315 and injured more than 250
- Oct. 2012 Hurricane Sandy that killed at least 209 people in the Caribbean, Bahamas, United States and Canada
- Nov. 2012 typhoon Bopha in the Philippines that killed at least 1,067 people
- Jan. 2013 French military intervention into the Northern Mali conflict
- Jan. 2013 nightclub fire in Brazil that killed more than 230 people

- March 2013 European Union €10 billion economic bailout of Cyprus
- April 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon in Boston, Massachusetts, United States
- Ongoing Syrian civil war.

Some of these events, such as the power outages in India and flooding in Italy, received relatively little international attention. On the other hand, events such as the Olympics and the Benghazi attack have received higher levels of interest. These interest levels, of course, vary by region, but the selected events represent an array of events that could indicate whether major events of any kind are addressed in U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds.

Not all tweets were posted in English. Tweets not in English were manually translated using Google Translate before being analyzed, as previous scholarship has found that the software offers sufficient levels of translation accuracy for “the vast majority” of languages (Aiken & Balan, 2011, p. 2). Using Krippendorff’s Alpha, intercoder reliability between two trained coders was assessed on a randomly selected, 10 percent sample (n=263) of the 2,625 study tweets: which embassy, 1.0; date, 1.0; language, 1.0; retweets, 1.0; direct mention, 1.0; internal/external mention, .92; personal message, .93; embassy activity, .86; link, 1.0; type of link .82; world event, .93.

Findings

RQ1: How are U.S. Embassies using Twitter?

Functions of U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds vary from one embassy to the next. Some post more than others. As Table 1 shows, embassies in Egypt and South Korea both had more than 2,000 tweets, as opposed to the embassy in

Table 1

Differences in Number of Tweets by Embassy Between June 1, 2012 and May 31, 2013

	Total Tweets	25% Sample
Nigeria	1,072	268
Egypt	2,671	668
Afghanistan	1,439	360
Libya	738	185
South Korea	2,227	557
Syria	175	44
Tanzania	619	155
Venezuela	1,552	388
Total	10,493	2,625

Libya, which had 738, and the embassy in Syria, which had 175. In addition to large differences in the number of tweets posted, these exploratory data reveal other differences between embassies.

For example, the number of times that a tweet was retweeted by embassy followers varied a great deal, ranging from never to the 2,201 retweets for a message from the U.S. Embassy in Egypt that stated, “@ikhwanweb Thanks. By the way, have you checked out your own Arabic feeds? I hope you know we read those too.” The next most frequently retweeted tweet, at 491, was from the U.S. Embassy in South Korea: “Two B-2 bombers flew over South Korea today, demonstrating the US’s ability to con-

duct precision strikes at will <http://t.co/0CxWPCD7z1>.”

There was little between-embassy consistency in retweeting behavior; retweeting depended on the specific tweet. No clear patterns emerged regarding most commonly retweeted content, and retweeting was impacted by the number of followers each embassy had.

Overall, almost half of all tweets analyzed used direction mentions, meaning they specifically referenced another Twitter user. However, this also varied by embassy. For example, Embassy Cairo used direct mentions in 79 percent of tweets and Embassy Damascus never did. Embassies in Nigeria, South Korea, and Tanzania each used direct mentions in 33 percent of tweets, a proportion representative of most of the embassies, with the exceptions of Cairo and Damascus.

Excluding Tanzania, which had almost equal numbers of internal and external mentions, the sampled embassies had more external mentions than internal mentions. For example, Embassy Cairo had 456 external direct mention tweets compared to 52 internal direct mention tweets, Embassy Caracas had 241 and 23, respectively, and Embassy Seoul had 137 compared to 38, meaning that embassy tweets overwhelmingly addressed individuals or organizations outside of the State Department and rarely mentioned their colleagues or other U.S. Embassies. It was rare for any embassy to have both an internal and external mention: only 2.59 percent of all tweets did so.

Further, analyzing the language in which tweets were posted suggests inferences about the audiences the embassies target. Tweeting primarily in English indicates that an embassy is primarily communicating with local Americans and English-speakers, people who are often ur-

ban, educated, and elite. For example, embassies in Nigeria and Tanzania tweeted entirely in English. Though English is an official language in both countries, it is largely limited to the urban elite and rarely spoken in rural areas. Alternatively, the language of an embassy's

Table 2

Differences in Direct Mentions of Embassy: Internal, External and Both
% (Number of tweets)

	Int. Mention	Ext. Mention	No Direct Mention	Both Int. and Ext.	Total
Nigeria	13.43 (36)	18.28 (49)	66.04 (177)	2.24 (6)	100 (268)
Egypt	7.78 (52)	68.26 (456)	20.36 (136)	3.59 (24)	100 (668)
Afghani- stan	17.78 (64)	28.61 (103)	51.94 (187)	1.67 (6)	100 (360)
Libya	7.03 (13)	38.92 (72)	50.27 (93)	3.78 (7)	100 (185)
South Korea	6.82 (38)	24.59 (137)	66.25 (369)	2.33 (13)	100 (557)
Syria	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (44)	0 (0)	100 (44)
Tanzania	16.13 (25)	14.19 (22)	66.45 (103)	3.23 (5)	100 (155)
Venezuela	5.93 (23)	62.11 (241)	30.15 (117)	1.8 (7)	100 (388)
Total	9.56 (251)	41.14 (1,080)	46.70 (1,226)	2.59 (68)	100 (2,625)

sampled tweets could also reflect lack of Internet access by large portions of the non-English speaking local populations. As of 2012, approximately 28 percent of the Nigerian population and 12 percent of the Tanzanian population had access to the Internet (Internetworldstats.com), so tweeting in English would reach more people than local languages.

As Table 3 demonstrates, the embassies in Egypt, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria tweeted primarily in English (87 percent, 97 percent, 71 percent and 72 percent, respectively) but included occasional tweets in local languages (Arabic and Persian). Internet access in those countries ranged from approximately 35 percent in Egypt to 5 percent in Afghanistan (Internetworldstats.com). This again suggests audiences of Internet users who are English speakers.

The embassy in South Korea tweeted in English 61 percent of the time, with the remaining 39 percent of tweets in Korean. The embassy in Venezuela was the only embassy to tweet overwhelmingly in the local language, with 98 percent of Tweets in Spanish (the only English tweets were retweets from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Approximately 82 percent of South Koreans and 41 percent of Venezuelans have Internet access (Internetworldstats.com). Given that embassies in both countries notably tweeted in the local language and there exists a vast discrepancy in Internet usage between the two nations, this could indicate that linguistic abilities of embassy staff are the driving force of language selection more than strategic targeting.

Personal messages were extremely rare across all embassies. Moreover, the data actually indicate very few

Table 3

*Differences in Language Use by
Embassy*
% (Number of tweets)

	English	Local Language
Nigeria	100 (268)	0 (0)
Egypt	88.0 (588)	12.0 (80)
Afghanistan	97.2 (350)	2.8 (10)
Libya	71.4 (132)	28.6 (53)
South Korea	61.6 (343)	38.4 (214)
Syria	72.7 (32)	27.3 (12)
Tanzania	100 (155)	0 (0)
Venezuela	1.8 (7)	98.2 (381)
Total	1,874	750

tweets about embassy activities: only 10-20 percent of tweets across all embassies. On the other hand, the data reveal an important role for the use of links in U.S. Embassy tweets—all but two embassies, Egypt and Venezuela, had more tweets with links than without. Even

Table 4

*Differences in Sources Linked to by Embassy
% (Number of tweets)*

	U.S. gov.	Local gov.	Local citi- zen	Out- side citi- zen	News story	Other	No link	Total
Nigeria	48.51 (130)	0 (0)	0.37 (1)	9.70 (26)	2.24 (6)	5.22 (14)	33.95 (91)	100 (268)
Egypt	23.05 (154)	0 (0)	0.59 (4)	3.59 (24)	1.35 (9)	1.50 (10)	69.91 (467)	100 (668)
Afgh.	42.5 (153)	0.56 (2)	5.0 (18)	6.39 (23)	15.28 (55)	0.83 (3)	29.44 (106)	100 (360)
Libya	42.70 (79)	0 (0)	2.16 (4)	4.86 (9)	2.70 (5)	1.62 (3)	45.95 (85)	100 (185)
South Korea	54.94 (306)	0 (0)	5.75 (32)	11.85 (66)	10.23 (57)	5.21 (29)	12.03 (67)	100 (557)
Syria	79.55 (35)	0 (0)	0 (0)	13.64 (6)	2.27 (1)	0 (0)	4.55 (2)	100 (44)
Tanz.	64.52 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	21.93 (34)	0.65 (1)	1.29 (2)	11.61 (18)	100 (155)
Venez.	40.72 (158)	0 (0)	0.26 (1)	0.26 (1)	0.26 (1)	1.03 (4)	57.47 (223)	100 (388)
Total	42.48 (1,115)	0.08 (2)	2.29 (60)	7.2 (189)	5.14 (135)	2.48 (65)	40.34 (1,059)	100 (2,625)

though Egypt and Venezuela had more tweets without a link than with, both had large numbers of tweets with links.

Data in Table 4 indicate that links typically led to American government sites and documents, and very rarely linked to anything from the local government—in fact, only Embassy Kabul linked to the local government,

and only twice. Local citizens, foreign citizens, and news stories were occasionally linked. The embassies in Afghanistan and South Korea both had more than 50 tweets linking to news stories—more than the other embassies combined. Both embassies linked primarily to local news sources, with occasional links to American media outlets.

RQ2: When faced with major world events, how do U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds respond?

Popular media images of embassies “under siege” during crises notwithstanding, embassies seldom discuss current events and often do not serve as a “barometer” of tensions in their region: only 5.2 percent of analyzed tweets mentioned any of the 14 world events. Of course, the events selected were not meant to be representative, nor were they used as keywords to locate tweets; had such searches been done, the results might be far different.

Table 5 demonstrates that of the few events that were mentioned, American events such as the Boston bombing, the re-election of President Obama and the consulate attack in Benghazi were three of the top five most commonly Tweeted, in comparison to events from other countries or regions. The most commonly tweeted event was the re-election, which still received only a small amount of attention with 57 total tweets (2.17 percent of tweets analyzed). There were only two embassies that did not tweet about Obama being re-elected: Libya and Syria.

The only embassy that focused on one of the 14 events (it was decidedly local) was Embassy Damascus, which discussed the ongoing Syrian civil war in 68 percent of tweets, even though the embassy actually tweeted the least among the sampled embassies. Given the severity of

Table 5

*Differences in Events Most Frequently Tweeted about by Embassy**Number of tweets*

	2012 Olym- pics	Obama Re- election	Consu- late Attack	Boston Bomb- ing	Syrian Civil War	No Event	Total
Nigeria	0	10	3	0	0	254	268
Egypt	2	12	1	2	4	647	668
Afghanistan	2	10	3	0	0	345	360
Libya	4	0	3	0	0	177	185
South Korea	9	13	2	2	0	530	557
Syria	0	0	0	0	30	14	44
Tanzania	2	3	1	0	1	149	155
Venezuela	1	9	13	2	0	374	388
Total	20	57	13	6	35	2,490	2,625

Please note: Flooding in Italy, factory fires in Pakistan, typhoon Bopha, the French intervention in Mali, the nightclub fire in Brazil and the EU economic bailout of Cyprus each received no mentions and are therefore not included in the table. Plane crash in Nigeria, blackout in India and hurricane Sandy each received fewer than 5 tweets and are therefore not included in the table.

the situation, Embassy Damascus came closest to the metaphoric “barometer” of local conditions. It also demonstrated efforts to inform the world about the current situation, given that the majority of Embassy Damascus’ tweets were in English.

RQ3: How are U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds aligned with the mission of the U.S. Department of State and traditional diplomatic efforts?

U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds demonstrated little that

could be called explicit evidence of furthering the mission of the U.S. State Department, which is to, “Advance freedom for the benefit of the American people and the international community” and “build and sustain a more democratic, secure, and prosperous world” (United States Department of State, 2012, p. 4).

The dominance of external direct mention tweets suggests that embassies are largely using Twitter to engage with individuals or organizations outside of the State Department, which admittedly lends support to the State Department’s goal of having social media become a core function of the Department’s external communication efforts (United States Department of State, 2012). However, this study does not analyze the reception or reaction to Tweets among the outside individuals/organizations mentioned in the tweets, so additional research would be needed to determine definitively whether those mentions are having a positive impact on external communication objectives.

The fact that the most commonly tweeted about events were American events could signal limited efforts by the embassies to familiarize local citizens with what is happening in the U.S. and/or build relationships through demonstrating common successes and struggles.

Discussion and Conclusion

As with any study, this research has limitations. It focused on the communication flowing from embassies to the public and is limited to only eight embassies. Future research could expand the list of countries analyzed both from the State Department watch list and outside of the list, as well as the embassies of countries other than the

United States. Another limitation is potential mistranslation from Google Translate.

Perhaps more important, the most confrontational tweets posted were likely deleted by embassies and therefore not included in our sample. And of course there is also history to consider. On June 28, 2013, the State Department added Egypt to the official warning list: political tensions were rising and would lead to a coup removing President Morsi. While Egypt was soon re-assigned to the State Department's watch list, this study's data had already been gathered. An ideal "natural experiment" might compare content from Embassy Cairo's Twitter feed before and after the change in status.

These limitations and the research opportunities they suggest demonstrate the importance of social media given the fluidity of local conditions.

Despite those limitations, this study contributes to understanding the emerging role that Twitter may play in public diplomacy. This study offers a descriptive profile of how U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds function alongside or as part of State Department missions and U.S. diplomatic goals. By shedding light on Twitter use by U.S. Embassies, this analysis underscores the importance and complexities of social media use in international diplomacy.

It is noteworthy that the countries with the smallest number of tweets, Syria and Libya, were two countries experiencing intense internal turmoil during the time period analyzed, which could indicate that diplomatic priorities were not focused on social media. Comparatively limited use of Twitter by embassies could also be interpreted in terms of the extent to which each embassy views Twitter as a useful communication tool. Embassies with more

tweets, like Egypt, South Korea, and Venezuela, may envision greater value for social media or may simply have more resources within the embassy to manage social media sites. Future research could reveal what kinds of resources are allocated for managing such sites.

Embassies' use of Twitter largely for mentioning external individuals/organizations (versus internal State Department personnel) might reflect embassies' efforts to use Twitter to promote, and, in turn, create a positive relationship with citizens and outside organizations, consistent with the State Department mission of improving international relationships. It also suggests the potential for Twitter to enable a two-way flow of communication from the embassies to outside citizens and vice versa, though future research would need to be done to confirm that such two-way communication exchanges do indeed come to pass.

Data also suggest that embassies do not use Twitter as a means of promoting embassy events or updating the public on the day-to-day activities of the ambassador or other staff members; rather, a primary function of U.S. Embassy Twitter feeds is simply to link to U.S. government websites and documents, to provide short-cut access.

Most of the studied embassies tweet primarily in English, indicating that they are largely targeting Americans or local English-speaking elites. On the other hand, reliance on English may indicate a lack of local language proficiency among embassy personnel.

As a whole, embassies typically do not tweet about global events and cannot be thought of as a barometer of tensions in different regions of the world. The most commonly mentioned events were American events, and even though those were rarely mentioned, they could be viewed

as aligning with the State Department's goal of promoting America. However, the U.S. Embassy in Syria is an exception, tweeting regularly about the ongoing Syrian civil war. Dire circumstances may affect routine social media employment, as in the case of local conflict, though Embassy Kabul did not provide a similar local focus on the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

This study provides some descriptive support for Zhang and Fahmy's (2015) claims that social media represent a new paradigm in public diplomacy. At minimum, the descriptive findings suggest that public relations and public diplomacy frameworks may both be useful frameworks for examining U.S. embassies' Twitter use. However, given the lack of formal control or management of Twitter by each embassy, and without knowing specific goals of each embassy, it may be premature to view such communication as public diplomacy.

This study represents a "baseline" contribution to understanding of social media and how embassies do or might use Twitter in a public diplomacy sense, but generally they demonstrate a lack of consistency among the embassies with regard to formally furthering the State Department mission. Do these inconsistencies pose a threat to U.S. diplomatic efforts? Does the State Department need to formalize social media use guidelines and implement procedures to ensure use across all embassies is consistent with U.S. diplomatic goals? Regardless whether such guidelines for the use of social media by Department personnel evolve, results from this study invite further reflection and research on how social media use can contribute to theoretical understandings of public relations, agenda setting or building, and public diplomacy.

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