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Table of Contents

RESEARCH ARTICLES

- 1 **Using Twitter in Political Campaigns: The Case of the PRI Candidate in Mexico**
Rodrigo Sandoval-Almazan, Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEM), Toluca, México
- 16 **Twitplomacy: Social Media as a New Platform for Development of Public Diplomacy**
Shumin Su, Department of International Politics, School of Law and Politics, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China
Mark Xu, Portsmouth Business School, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, Hampshire, UK
- 30 **Tweeting Negative: Determinants of Negative Campaigning in the 2011 Gubernatorial Elections**
Marija Anna Bekafigo, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA
Allison Clark Pingley, University of South Carolina, Spartanburg, SC, USA
- 42 **From Street Protests to Facebook Campaigns: Political Cynicism, Efficacy and Online Political Engagement of Sri Lankan Students**
Chamil Rathnayake, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI, USA

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Twitplomacy: Social Media as a New Platform for Development of Public Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Social media, underpinned by mobile devices and smart-technology, is rapidly changing the way how people communicate. In the context of public diplomacy, micro-blogging-based diplomacy, e.g. Twitplomacy is emerging. Twitplomacy has been carried out by not only the central government of a state and relevant organizations, but also millions individuals globally. Twitplomacy has been seen as a new platform expanding the channels of public diplomacy. Its impact on diplomacy policy and international relations tends to be huge but too early to know and difficult to quantify. This paper uses microblogs collected from United States Embassy in China, examined the characteristics and functions of Twitplomacy, the participants and the motivation, as well as the effect of Twitplomacy. The results are insightful to both researchers and practitioners in the community of diplomacy and international relations.

Keywords: E-Politics, Public Diplomacy, Social Media, Twitplomacy, US-China Relations

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media as a new platform for information creation and communication has been increasingly used by not only individuals, but organisations in commercial and public sectors. Driven by the latest information technologies – for example, smart end user devices, cloud computing infrastructure, and big data architecture, social media – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. is changing the traditional way of communication in society. One of the

notable changes has been seen in the domain of e-government. According to Criado, et al (2013) the existence of social media tools in government is changing the landscape of public agencies and bureaucracies around the world. Public administrations have adopted different tools, such as blogs, microblogging, wikis, social networking, multimedia sharing, mashup applications, tagging, virtual worlds, and crowdsourcing. Another dimension of changes is the impact imposed by empowered individual on political systems and government

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policies at both domestic and international level, e.g. diplomacy policies and international relations. Digital technologies make it possible for new players, for example, ordinary citizens, to become involved in political decisions (Dubois & Dutton, 2012).

China followed a similar trend (if not frog-leaped) in adopting social media by its citizens. *Annual Report (Communication University of China 2010)* suggests that micro-blogging has become the third largest public opinion source of China. The major web service providers including Sina, Sohu, Tencent, NetEase, Baidu and Tianya provide micro-blogging platforms. It is estimated that the number of Sina.com Weibo users has already exceeded 400 million and government agencies managed over 176,000 accounts by the end of 2012 (Zheng 2013). Weibo (and the latest WeChat) is the Chinese microblogging standard, which have been used by individual and government and its agencies. On the one hand, Chinese individual uses micro-blogging to express opinion on international matters and relations, on the other hand, governments as well as foreign affairs agencies like embassies in foreign countries have opened micro blogs to interact with the public, with the aim to better convey their diplomatic policies, spread diplomatic knowledge and resolve diplomatic and foreign-related matters. A brand new form of public diplomacy - twiplomacy, has emerged. Understanding how twiplomacy works is vital for formulating appropriate diplomacy policies for the development of international relations.

This paper is organized as follows: the next section review relevant literature in social media in government, the concepts of political influence and twiplomacy. The methodology is introduced – a case of Twiplomacy conducted by United States Embassy in China. This is followed by analyzing the characteristics and functions of Twiplomacy, the participants and their motivation, as well as the effect of Twiplomacy. Conclusion is drawn at the end with recommendation for policy makers and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Media for e-Government

Social media for business and government has attracted increasing attention of researchers recently. The reported studies cover a range of issues ranging from government-public relations using social media, to the driver, barriers and challenges of adopting social media as alternative tools to enhance government efficiencies. For example, Hong (2013) questioned whether individuals' experience with government websites and social media do, in fact, influence their perception of the government-public relationship. It is widely accepted that Internet and social media have changed how the government communicates with its citizens, e.g. improve the transparency of the government, soliciting public feedback and encourage citizens to participate in the government's decision-making process (Sadeghi, 2012; Searson & Johnson, 2010). Such efforts can ensure public trust and strengthen democratic values and operational effectiveness and efficiency (Hong, 2013). In another study addressing the two way communication in the government-public relation, Auger (2013) suggests that the rise of social media has affected more than just communication practices – it has provided a substantial new platform for the democratization of interests and ideas by dramatically expanding the opportunity for expression of competing and controversial ideas in society. In doing so it has also expanded and altered the importance of public relations. There are a number of similar studies conducted in China. Gu (2014) examined the role Sina Weibo in contemporary Chinese society, using Chinese high speed train crash case, it revealed that microbloggers overtly expressed public opinions, which impelled the Chinese government to re-evaluate related policies and regulations. Zheng (2013) examined the external drivers and challenges and the internal capabilities of Chinese government agencies in using social media. Similar studies have been

reported by other Chinese scholars that revealed the problems, issues, and factors with regard to Chinese government use of microblogging. For example, some key problems such as the selective listening and response, the “show” effect, the immaturity of internet users, as well as the mismatch between users’ expectations and actual effects have been identified (Li, Zhou, and Yang, 2010; Cui, 2011). Challenges for operating government microblogging tend to be treats to confidentiality, opinion disorder, emotional expressions, verbal aggression and fragmented information (Qu, 2011; Deng, 2011).

These studies tend to focus on domestic government-public relations. Very few studies have been reported on public diplomacy using latest social media. Khan, et al. (2014) classified Twitter usage by Korea’s central government’s Twitter-based networking strategies into government-to-citizen (G2C) and government-to-government (G2G) strategies, there is a lack of research into microblogging in public diplomacy.

2.2. The Concept of Political Influence

The concept of politic influence by Dubois and Gaffney (2014) provides theoretical underpinning to this study. Dubois and Gaffney (2014) argues that the traditional political elite (media outlets, journalists, politicians) as influential, whereas measures considering the quality of messages and interactions provide a different group of political influence. Political influence is derived from: a) The “opinion leader” who uses social support and social pressure to influence his or her personal network (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), and b) the “influential” who uses his or her visible position in a large network to spread messages widely (Rogers, 2010). Dubois and Gaffney suggest that they are important political players because they transmit messages to a wider public who do not choose to access messages directly from the political elite. Four core facets of influence are suggested: *having a following*, *seen as an expert*, *knowledgeable*, *have expertise*, and

in a position within their local community to exert social pressure and social support/*social embeddedness*. The phenomenon examined by this study and the results revealed can be explained by referring to the concept of political influence.

2.3. The Emerging of Twitplomacy

The influence of the Internet on diplomacy has been discussed by a number of researchers, as a result, various definitions of soft diplomacy emerged such as Virtual diplomacy (Martin, 2001), Cyber-Diplomacy (Pahlavi, 2003) and Digital Diplomacy (Westcott, 2008). However, micro-blogging based diplomacy has not been adequately addressed.

Micro-blogging refers to a real-time communication network shared by other netizens through release of short messages based on wired and wireless Internet connected devices. Since micro-blogging is an open information platform, each registered user is able to release his/her own message in real-time. They can also access and view other netizens’ information by adding/inviting users to join. Micro-blogging provides powerful information sharing function that enables users to fully utilize the personal and social network of the users, and hence spread information via the vine of personal social network. According to the report released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2013, the number of micro-blogging users of China reached 331 million. This emerging group of netizens is rapidly changing the landscape of information spreading and sharing. The impact of micro-blogging on public diplomacy cannot be underestimated.

Diplomacy in a traditional sense has evolved into a new form of public diplomacy - network public diplomacy. To be specific, the Internet is utilized to shape the image of a state, spread diplomatic information or express emotions and opinions so as to influence the development of diplomacy and foreign affairs. Twitplomacy is a specific type of network diplomacy - refers to using micro-blogging for diplomacy. Twitplomacy can be conducted by

a central government of a state, NGOs (Non-Government Organisations) and individuals, by using micro-blogging as a platform to carry out a series of diplomacy related information release. Twitplomacy is based on the observation of Internet security laws and rules of homeland and foreign countries to promote the interaction between governments and their netizens so as to shape national image and spread values outward, strive for the support of the people for the diplomatic policies. It can also mobilize public opinion inward to influence the diplomatic acts of the government.

Twitplomacy has distinctive characteristics. First of all, the rise of “Twitplomacy” has greatly strengthened the direct information spreading of one country’s government to the people in foreign countries and expanded channels to launch public diplomacy. Since the Internet enables instant, live data communication, the contents of blog can reach specific audiences immediately, thus enhancing the pertinence of public diplomacy. Secondly, the activities of twitplomacy are more convenient and open than traditional official diplomacy, because diversified subjects and topics can be commented by ordinary people and NGOs. For example, nongovernmental micro blogs include micro blogs of unofficial media, leaders of public opinion and the grass roots. Micro blogging diplomacy has established close connections between individuals. Every remark or action taken by the netizens online may develop into a diplomatic matter that triggers attention. Thirdly, micro-blogging has a “nuclear diffusion” effect. Once bloggers release blog articles, a “nuclear diffusion” communication effect will be generated through continuous commenting and forwarding by the connected fans. There is a popular passage in the Internet describing the influence of micro-blogging: when the number of your fans exceeds 100, you are just as an internal newsletter; when it exceeds 1,000, you are just as a bulletin; when it exceeds 10,000, you are as a magazine; when it exceeds 100,000, you are as a city newspaper; when it exceeds 100,000,000, you are as CCTV (China Central

TV). Finally, twitplomacy enables a win-win situation through effective two way communication. The government may use micro-blogging to enable its people to understand and support the diplomatic policies of the state, while the public can take part in debating diplomatic matters. Furthermore, foreign netizens are able to get to know the politics, society and culture of other countries through micro-blogging. During this process, the voices of grass roots are heard, and relevant policies of diplomatic service are supported, thus realizing a win-win situation.

2.4. Types of Twitplomacy

Twitplomacy can be classified into the following types based on the agents opening micro blogs. Type 1 is official micro-blogging opened by diplomatic organization of the government of a state. It is the most fundamental type of Twitplomacy in terms of its influence. Due to its nature of being an official organization, it supports and enhances diplomatic related e-government affairs, communicate with netizens, and publicize policies of the state. The official micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China opened in Sina.com is a typical example.

Type 2 refers to official micro-blogging opened by international governmental organizations, e.g. UN and EU. The primary aim is to have direct interaction with people in other countries and engage in public diplomacy. Examples include official micro-blogging of the United Nations in Sina.com and micro-blogging opened by EU commission representatives in China: EU in China.

Type 3 is micro blogs launched in individual names. Among those, government officials’ micro blogs often receive most attention. This type of twitplomacy not only fulfills the demands of domestic politics but also shoulders the responsibility of public diplomacy. Such micro blogs can be updated either by government officials in person, or by government teams (e.g. Twitter account of US president Obama). Twitter has been the leading platform for this type of blogs. Twitplomacy is augmented by micro

blogs opened by some diplomatic employees or politicians, e.g. personal micro blogs of U.S. Embassy Press Spokesman Richard Buangan.

This study examines type 1 micro blogs for public diplomacy. The methodology adopted to conduct this study is discussed below.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses micro blogs (Weibo) published by the American Embassy in China, as a case for twitplomacy. Since U.S. Embassy in China opened Sina.com micro blogging in May 2010, there are over 700,000 followers and 6,500 micro blogs published as at April 2014. This micro blog is maintained by a team in Press and Culture Section U.S. Embassy. Two sets of micro blogs statistics are obtained from Sina.com – a) blogs from May 2010 to September 2011, and b) a total of 927 micro blogs posted from January to June 2012. A similar approach using Sina Weibo is found in Gu's (2014) study by which representative cases on Sina Weibo within three years has been examined on the role Weibo plays in contemporary Chinese society. The rationale of choosing micro blogging of US Embassy in China is because of the paramount importance of Sino-US relations in the 21st century, and US Embassy in China was the first opened micro blogging for diplomacy (in May 2010). In comparison to other micro blogging accounts, the US Embassy in China micro blogging account attracts most fans, and has been the fastest in updating, also richest in coverage and contents. The data is analysed by using descriptive statistics, and contents analysis to identify trends and critical issues – categorization according to thematic topics. Micro Blogs are measured according to the dynamic ranking method of Sina.com on blogs, i.e. by active level of the micro blog account, disseminate level of the blog and the number of fans followed.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The trend of Twitplomacy of U.S. Embassy in China

U.S. Embassy puts great emphasis on twitplomacy in China. This is evident by quoting U.S. Embassy Press Spokesman (Buangan, 2011) who stated:

The uniqueness of China's micro blogs lies in the degree they have reached. The degree of popularization of China's micro blogs and the importance of such micro blogs as a first-choice platform for Chinese people to discuss opinions and share information have developed rapidly every day. The potential audiences of micro blogs are amazing given more than 420 million Chinese Internet users (excluding those live scattered oversea Chinese communities). It is very important for us to play a role in the conversation all over the world as the commonest language: If we can offer our new understandings of the United States to a Chinese who can share experience with others, our work will already be finished.

The U.S. embassy and consulates in China established their own network media teams and opened micro-blogging, together with other relevant social media to enhance public diplomacy. As shown in Figure 1 that the volume of official micro blog of U.S. Embassy in China has increased month by month since its opening, which attracted great attention by many netizens.

4.2. The Contents of Micro Blogs: Advocacy of American Culture and Values

The contents of micro blogs sent by US Embassy in China are categorized into the following types: 1) Activities and daily business of the embassy, including daily work agenda of the ambassadors, various cultural communication activities organized by the embassy, visits by

Figure 1. Tendency of Sina.com micro blogs sent by U.S. Embassy in China. Note: 1-17 indicates each month from May 2010 to September 2011



important officials, guide of visa policies, etc.; 2) Speeches of important U.S. officials, including full text of speeches delivered by the president, vice president, Secretary of State and ambassador to China as well as live videos or records from time to time; 3) Introduction to domestic policies and administration of the United States, including topics mostly concerned by Chinese netizens, e.g. public budget, education policies, introduction to U.S. governmental agencies, etc. 4) Introduction to U.S. justice system and procedures, relevant law cases, principles and development of U.S. justice and democracy; 5). Introduction to American cultures, including English learning, places of interest, literature, history, science and technology, master minds, education, progress of civil rights and other relevant cultural topics. Table 1 shows an example of different micro blogs posted by the U.S. Embassy in China.

“U.S. Culture and Society” and “Cultural Communication” account for almost half of the contents of micro blogs. Zhong and Lu (2011) quoted an official in charge of micro-blogging in U.S. Embassy in China by saying that:

We want to tell Chinese citizens that we are the official message source of U.S. culture and

values. The public can directly acquire information not filtered here.

Descriptive statistics of the 927 micro blogs posted from January to June 2012 show that the topics concerning “Politics/Society” and “History/Culture” account for approximately 50% of the total blogs; topics concerning “Official Business of the Embassy” took up 19.4%; this is followed by “Technology/Environment” -12.4% and “Bilateral Communication” - 9.5% respectively. However, topics on “Education/Overseas Study” and “Economy/Trade” only account for 3.6% and 2.2% respectively.

To stimulate debate and increase awareness of Chinese public on sensitive political systems, the micro-blogging of the US Embassy in China focus on “Democratic Institution”, “Law and Human Rights” and “Supervision of Public Power”. Two examples of micro blog sent by U.S. Embassy in China are as below:

President Obama delivered a speech in John F. Kennedy Center in honor of the 50th anniversary of presidency of Kennedy and called upon American people to carry forward the dedication spirit advocated by President Kennedy and establish and strive to realize great goals; - January 25, 2010

Table 1. Overview of topics of official micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China

Date	Important Topics in Micro-Blogging of U.S. Embassy in China	Issues Concerned by Chinese Public
2010.9	Ambassador Jon Huntsman held a dinner party in the official mansions to treat famous bloggers in China; response to the consulting of network celebrity Luo Yufeng for visa application of the United States openly through micro-blogging.	Network celebrity Luo Yufeng obtained U.S. visa successfully, drawing wide attention among netizens.
2011.1	Series video coverage of the visit of President Hu Jintao to the United States; Chinese bloggers conversed and communicated with officials from National Security Council of the United States concerning the visit of President Hu Jintao; house price in the United States	President Hu Jintao visited the United States and China strengthened its regulation of real estate.
2011.3	U.S. offering aid to the earthquake-stricken area of Japan; unlicensed vehicle management in the United States; bus management in the United States; income and expenditures of American families; disclosure of the financial budget of American county governments	Two sessions of China; earthquake and nuclear crisis of Japan
2011.4	Income tax return of Obama; Jon Huntsman received an exclusive interview of <i>Southern Weekend</i> ; what you can buy in the United States with one dollar; average salary of in-service employees of the United States; parking fee in the United States; how the United States manages street booths; American food safety cases	Tainted steamed buns
2011.5	Development of high-speed railways in the United States; safety production of American coal mines; disclosure of personal property of President Obama; third anniversary of Sichuan earthquake; declaration procedures of officials' property in the United States	Commemoration of Sichuan earthquake
2011.6	Corruption case of former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich; introduction to anti-corruption conditions in the United States; how the government uses the money paid by the people	China Red-Cross Guo Meimei Incident
2011.7	Statement concerning collision accident of motor cars occurring in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province; New York State suing charity organizations embezzling donations; introduction to laws governing the donations of charity organizations	7·23 motor car accident
2011.9	Youth startup; safety regulations and measures for middle and primary schools of the United States; return of goods in the United States	School bus accident in Lingshi County, Shanxi Province

Ambassador Gary Locke told the students from Wuhan University School of Law that the United States was viewed as a land of freedom, hope and opportunity. He raised an example of his grandfather who came to the United States despite a long journey cross the ocean. Why is that? Government by law is a foundation for

the founding of the United States. - September 22, 2011

As 2012 was an election year of the United States, hence, the Embassy specifically opened a column of "Introduction to American Presidential Election" in its micro-blogging.

The micro-blogging of the Embassy also highlights the high welfare of American people when publicizing social image, e.g. “the house property tax provides multiple preferential programs for the retired elderly people”. As for environmental protection, it stresses the popularization of people’s environmental awareness. For example,

People and citizen groups may access the Internet at any time to get to know the quality of their drinking water sources.

The micro-blogging of the Embassy also covers issues related to diversification and innovation. For example, “Foundation Layering of National Museum of African American History and Culture” and “Famous inventor Benjamin Franklin was a most outstanding figure revealing the national character of American people as dare to make innovations with endless creativity”. When discussing about “what we want to say” of micro-blogging by Zhong and Lu (2011), an embassy official was quoted as saying that

We hope to share with Chinese people some values and stories creating the unique features of the United States, i.e. freedom, opportunity, equality and innovation.

4.3. Micro Blogs Echo Current Hotspot Issues of China

Another important dimension of the micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China is proactively engaging with current hot issues of China, including for example, copyright, disclosure of officials’ property, electricity price and environmental protection. The Embassy presents their results and findings by comparing the conditions in China with those in the United States. For example, during China’s property hype and the Chinese government issued restrained house purchasing policies in 2011, the Embassy posted a micro blog describing the house price in the United: a single family house covering an area of approximately 2 acres and about 30 minutes

of drive away from Washington downtown was sold at a price of USD 400,000. This micro blog was forwarded by Chinese netizens for 6,922 times, and 2,265 comments were generated within the following 2 months ranging from compliments, criticism to reflections of the Chinese housing market and government policy. Another example is the Kitchen Debate between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon on food safety - during April 2011 after exposure of tainted steam buns, the Embassy began to exhibit cases and legal provisions of American food safety in its micro-blogging. The intention is to stimulate netizens’s discussion and gauge the opinion of the public on food safety. Similar method is used for the China Red-Cross Corruption Incident caused by Guo Meimei who claimed to be an employee of China Red Cross. Soon after the incident was uncovered in media, the Embassy promptly introduced the charity regulations of the United States with an intensive case of corruption (former governor of Illinois Rod Blagojevich embezzled donations) through micro-blogging, which highly praises the anti-corruption measures adopted by the United States; Other topics like declaration of officials’ property, bus management, safety of coal mines and youth startup are all hotspot social issues in China. Topics such as individual tax, unlicensed vehicles, street vendor management and parking fee, as well as freedom, equality and justice by means of showcases, affect many ordinary Chinese netizens. These micro blogs timely follow the hotspot issues concerned by Chinese people and trigger a series comparison and discussion, thus stimulating the sense of political influence and social inclusion. In particular, the micro blogs not only exhibit the American democratic value but also indirectly expressed the attitudes of the United States towards these issues, which is a subtle force to influence official diplomacy.

The impact of the micro blogs has been escalated when the contents of micro blogs sent by U.S. Embassy in China were published in Chinese domestic media, for example *Southern Metropolis Daily*. By doing so, the influence

extends to ordinary citizens. The result is what the diplomats would hope to achieve, as evident below:

Our mission is to provide Chinese people with a unique window to understand American politics, culture, history and values, bilateral relations and current events. We hope to strengthen our mutual understanding and communication with Chinese people through application of social media, which has formed a cornerstone of public diplomacy of the United States in China. U.S. Embassy Press Spokesman Richard Buangan

4.4. Operational Methods of Micro-Blogging

4.4.1. Real-time spreading

When Ambassador Gary Locke visited the Chinese Internet searching engine company - Baidu, Inc. on March 30, 2012, U.S. Embassy in China initially released an advance notice through micro-blogging at 11:08. The Embassy released 17 micro blogs (from 13:14 to 14:23) to broadcast the interaction and communication of Gary Locke with Baidu employees online. The interval of sending micro blogs is less than 10 minutes on average. In August 2011, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited U.S. Embassy in China, the embassy posted a micro blog through its official micro-blogging on August 18, "At the noon of August 18, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden snatched a little leisure from his busy schedule and tasted local snacks like Beijing bean sauce noodles in a snack bar with the accompanying of Gary Locke. Vice President Biden even warmly said hello to other customers and took a group photo with them". The series micro blogging not only showcased Biden's easy-going personality but also presented an unconstrained and approachable working style of American leaders. This results in positive, improved recognition towards American politicians by Chinese people.

4.4.2 Frequent Interaction

Strengthening interaction is a key factor for the cultivation of users' loyalty. All 927 micro blogs sent by U.S. Embassy in China were "forwarded" and "commented". The Embassy also held online and offline communication many times, to actively promote conversations between the senders and the recipients.

4.5 Constitution of Micro Blog Followers and Motivation

4.5.1. Young "Fans" Taking the Lead

Netizens paying attention to twitplomacy tend to be interested in politics and diplomacy or they proactively seek specific information and views on the issues they are concerned with. It is found that media professional, scholars, government officials/clerks and businessmen are the main follower groups. According to a statistics of *Southern Weekend* (see Figure 2), students are the largest group (exceeding 20%) among "fans" of micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China. This is in line with the research report released by Sina.com Weibo Data Center, that most of 324 million Weibo users in China fall into two age groups, i.e. 18-24 (44.1%) and 25-34 (36.3%). This suggests that micro-blogging audiences are mainly students and young white collar workers. It is not difficult to comprehend that most young audiences think actively, adopt and apply network /smart technologies earlier than others, and keen to share experience in their social network.

4.5.2. "Fans" Paying Intensive Attention to Hot Topics

Micro-blogging has "Forward" and "Comment" functionalities that enable the recipient to comment and spread the message further. Among the 927 micro blogs, 189 are "forwarded", also "commented" for more than 100 times, of which 53 micro blogs are "forwarded" for more than 500 times. "Fans" of micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China pay most attention to topics

covering American “Politics and Society”, “History and Culture” and “Education and Overseas Study”. Table 2 shows the top 10 ranking of micro blogs being forwarded:

The data indicates that topics towards the top of the table are either directly related to domestic issues concerned by Chinese netizens (e.g. college entrance examination, English learning, learning of open classes, etc.) or information of Americans’ systems that can be compared with.

4.5.3. Extreme Attitudes of “Fans”

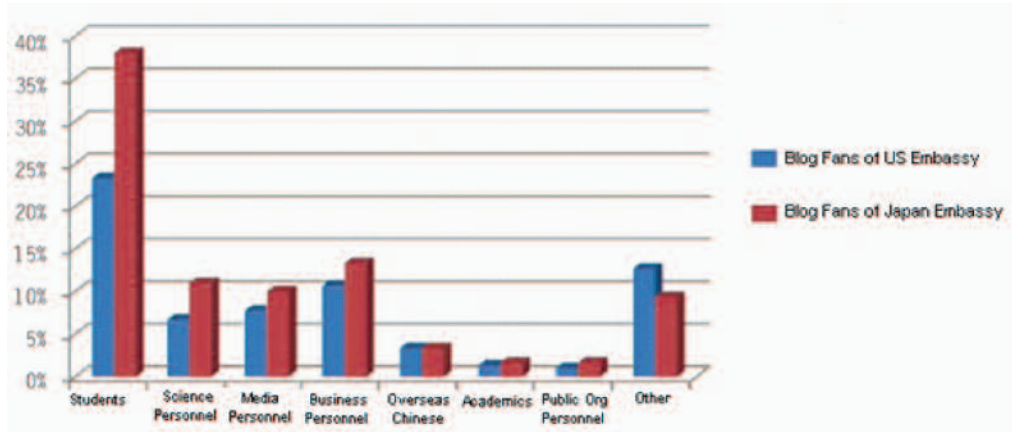
After studying the comments and opinions on hot topics, it is evident that the attitudes of “fans” towards the topics present a very obvious polarized trend. For example, U.S. Embassy in China released a micro blog aiming at popularizing knowledge on PM2.5 of city pollution. Very quickly, nearly 1,000 comments were posted. Previously, the result of PM2.5 of Beijing

released by Consulate General of the United States in Shanghai triggered a great attention and debate. This micro blog claimed to be a “pure popularization of science” caused numerous speculations. Many “fans” used words with strong emotional coloring in their comments like “ulterior motive” and “put one’s finger in another’s pie” to express their discontent and antipathy. However, quite a number of “fans” expressed their support in their comments, e.g. “people have the right to know air quality” “It dares to speak the truth”. Some “fans” even declared that they would trust the air quality report only released by U.S. Embassy in China. The two different attitudes of Chinese netizens towards the United States reflect positive or negative perceptions of national image of the United States. Although the national image of the United States in China becomes positive gradually, negative labeling such as “Hege-

Table 2. Top 10 ranking of micro blogs being forwarded

Rank	Topics	Blogs	Number of Forwards/Comments
1	Politics/Society	American taxpayers can check where the taxes they paid are used online	Forward: 8,959; Comment: 1,569
2	History/Culture	Commemoration of 236 th anniversary of signing of <i>Declaration of Independence</i>	Forward: 7,511; Comment: 2,503
3	Education/Overseas Study	Provide online resources for English learning	Forward: 4,237; Comment: 540
4	Politics/Society	Stick stamps and mail to children	Forward: 3,087; Comment: 555)
5	Official Businesses of the Embassy	Blessings from Ambassadress for Chinese students taking part in college entrance examination	Forward: 2,343; Comment: 896
6	Education/Overseas Study	Graduates from which majors in American universities get high salaries	Forward: 2,220; Comment: 382
7	History/Culture	A former NBA players join Chinese basketball club	Forward: 1,577; Comment: 13
8	Politics/Society	Obama declared June Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month	Forward: 1,539; Comment: 576
9	Education/Overseas Study	Introduction to entrance requirements of West Point	Forward: 1,504; Comment: 402
10	Education/Overseas Study	Launch of “Open Courseware of MIT”	Forward: 1,382; Comment: 203)

Figure 2. Constitution of fans of micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China. Source: Southern Weekend, March 31, 2012



mony” and “Anti-China” has not completely eliminated.

4.6. The Effect of Twiplomacy

First of all, twiplomacy enables the United States to bypass Chinese government and official media and directly reached Chinese netizens through official micro-blogging of its embassy, consulates and media in China. By doing so, it has spread political, social and cultural information of the United States to Chinese netizens, and obviously imposed political influence of its values on them at almost zero cost.

Secondly, the micro-blogging of U.S. Embassy in China has changed the interaction and communication between the US Embassy and Chinese citizens, thus strengthening the humanistic orientation of public diplomacy. The Embassy uses language suitable for micro-blog spreading to release messages and express views, presenting an active and publicity-oriented official discourse to a great extent. Furthermore, the Embassy identifies points of interest of the public in the target country and then planning topics and relevant information to stimulate citizens’ consideration and comparison, thus narrowing the psychological distance between the people in two countries.

Thirdly, as far as the bilateral diplomacy of China and the United States is concerned, twiplomacy, as an important channel for the United States to launch public diplomacy in China, has successfully promoted cultural communication between the two countries and strengthened Chinese people’s understandings of the United States. This is confirmed by the report *Blue Book of the United States 2011* that the ratio of interviewees with a good impression of the United States increased notably and reached 36.1%, this is significantly higher than the results of the previous two opinion surveys.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Micro-blogging (Weibo) and the latest emerging WeChat have become the most popular social network platform in China. It has become a powerful force that shapes the landscape of government and diplomacy. Twiplomacy, with distinctive characteristics, has emerged as a new way of public diplomacy, as evident from the case of micro blogging of the US Embassy in China. The political influence created by twiplomacy tends to be subtle, yet, powerful, as it enables direct communication between government and public cross countries, stimu-

lates open and transparent discussion by public, facilitates informal expression of government/official views, and ultimately enhancing understanding of different values and systems, as well as building social pressure that may force policy changes.

Based on the findings of this study, there are implications for theory and practice. The subtle influence of netizens on diplomacy agenda can be an addition to the concept of political influence suggested by Dubois and Gaffney (2014), i.e. the scope of political influence may be derived from new social media followers, as well as the official or quasi-government agencies, because micro blogging generates two way communications that either increase understanding or social pressure leading to changes of political agenda.

Due to the possible impact imposed by twitplomacy, China's foreign-related organizations need to proactively explore "Twitplomacy" paths that support China's national desire and interests. The practice of US Embassy Twitplomacy in China offers the following suggestions: Firstly, China's foreign-related organizations need to consider proactive "out-reaching" approach, i.e. fully utilize social media of the target countries to launch public diplomacy and use latest communication infrastructure and devices to present China to the world including culture, systems, process and political intentions, etc. More specifically, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and overseas Chinese embassies and consulates may consider opening accounts in leading social media site like Twitter and Facebook to launch "Twitplomacy". Secondly following the rule "do in Rome as Rome does" when launching public diplomacy. China's foreign-related organizations and the influential leaders need to develop awareness as to the current interest and concerns of people in target countries, adopt micro blogging to enrich understanding of China's diplomatic policies and social values, and cultivate a favorable national impression and trust of people in target countries, so as to establish a positive national image.

This study is one of the very few researches into twitplomacy, the findings add fresh insight

of using latest social media for government and society. Limitations of the study need to be noted, as the sample case and limited micro blogs are selected for a short period in China and some of the examples used as evidence are collected from public domain. Nevertheless, the study sets a stepping stone for further research that can be conducted, for example, to quantify the impact of social media on diplomacy, to examine the relationship between using social media and the level of social pressure and political influence.

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