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## 11 The "Virtual Last Three Feet"

### Understanding Relationship Perspectives in Network-Based Public Diplomacy

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#### INTRODUCTION

Networked digital technologies, including the internet, have significantly altered the ways people create and share information and connect with others. For example, recent reports showed that increasing numbers of people in the United States and other countries are turning to the web to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances.<sup>1</sup>

These new types of transnational and decentralized social networks, fueled by the increasing availability and affordability of digital devices, have influenced the conduct of public diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Governments have begun utilizing social media to interact with international publics as part of their public diplomacy efforts. For example, the U.S. Department of State actively uses Facebook and Twitter to engage citizens around the world, as well as to get out its messages. Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Norway, and Sweden, have expanded their public diplomacy efforts into the digital sphere.<sup>3</sup>

Building and maintaining meaningful connections or relationships with people around the world is at the heart of digital media-based public diplomacy efforts. Former head of U.S. Information Agency Edward R. Murrow once said personal contact at the "last three feet" is crucial to enhance mutual understanding and forge networks with global publics. While face-to-face interactions are ideal, social media may provide opportunities for public diplomacy actors to initiate and facilitate connections with global publics at the "virtual last three feet," especially when security conditions prohibit meaningful offline engagements.

In this chapter, I discuss what types of relationships should be emphasized and how those relationships can be nurtured and enhanced through digital media-based public diplomacy. Understanding the relationship perspectives of international publics that a country aims to engage is one of the first steps to answer the question. I first examine theoretical arguments related to public diplomacy in the networked information age, and then introduce original empirical research on the public's perspectives of relationships in

the context of public diplomacy. Conclusions from this study provide clues to governmental and nongovernmental organizations working in the area of public diplomacy as to what types of networks might be facilitated to maintain and strengthen relationships with global publics.

#### PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE NETWORKED INFORMATION AGE

Social media have become an essential part of public diplomacy. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter help users to maintain or build social relationships around similar identities or goals.<sup>4</sup> For example, under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the U.S. Department of State launched the 21st Century Statecraft initiative, defined as “the complementing of traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverage the networks, technologies, and demographics of our interconnected world.”<sup>5</sup> Under this initiative, the U.S. Department of State has incorporated new digital technologies into its formal training programs and U.S. diplomats are encouraged to use Twitter or Facebook to directly engage publics in their host country.<sup>6</sup> Further, as part of efforts to encourage global dialogue on democracy, in 2009 and 2010, the U.S. Department of State sponsored the Democracy Video Challenge, a worldwide competition of short videos defining democracy. The delivery platform was YouTube, and all updates regarding the competition were posted to Twitter and Facebook. In yet another example, the U.S. embassy in Seoul has maintained an online community called Café USA since 2004 as a means of directly interacting with the younger generation in South Korea, a substantial proportion of which hold anti-U.S. sentiments.<sup>7</sup>

These new public diplomacy programs utilizing digital networks are in contrast to traditional public diplomacy initiatives that focused on elites such as journalists, businessmen, scholars, and artists to distribute information overseas and promote national image abroad. That is, these new initiatives offer an opportunity for a shift from the *informational framework* to the *relational framework* in engaging ordinary citizens in other countries.<sup>8</sup> As R. S. Zaharna has pointed out, public diplomacy in the past focused mainly on information transfer, often with the goals of persuasion and control. In contrast, the relational framework is geared toward building relationships and nurturing “social structures” for advancing objectives. Commitment and mutual trust are important aspects of the relational framework that aim to “find commonalities and mutual interests between publics and then ways to link those publics via some form of direct interpersonal communication.”<sup>9</sup> New digital technologies may facilitate the shift from the informational to relational framework.

Further, as more countries become democratic, the importance of communicating and connecting with mass publics becomes greater, since these

publics can constrain elites. It is not only the development of digital networking and communication but also changing political realities that are pushing for “new” public diplomacy techniques. Both factors are, for now, reinforcing each other.

My argument here is not that these digital media-based initiatives can replace person-to-person exchange programs, but rather that they offer alternative ways of both deepening and broadening relationships with international publics. Person-to-person exchange programs such as the Fulbright Program and International Visitor Leadership Program have played and will continue to play an important role in public diplomacy by enhancing mutual understanding.<sup>10</sup> In this networked information age, however, an important link in international communication has emerged at the “*virtual last three feet*.”

#### “VIRTUAL LAST THREE FEET”

People in disparate parts of the world collaborate to produce content on wikis and share their opinions with widely distributed internet users through social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. These new types of transnational and decentralized social networks are expected to continue to grow, as suggested by recent global survey reports.<sup>11</sup>

This, in turn, offers important opportunities for countries to build relationships with international publics at the “virtual last three feet.” I argue that to best utilize these opportunities both *online social relations* and *online information use* should be considered, as they often work interdependently rather than independently. I use the term *online social relations* to refer to the degree and intensity of social networks built and maintained online. At an individual level, the nodes of a social network consist of people—friends, families, and others. At a macro level, it includes groups or organizations as well. For example, the U.S. Department of State may not only connect with South Koreans through social networking sites but also facilitate online exchanges and possibly friendships between the U.S. and South Korean college students by providing an online forum for the two sides. Previous research indicated that offline social networks play a significant role in forming one’s attitudes toward other countries.<sup>12</sup> Whether this might hold for online social relations is an important topic to study.

Providing or sharing information is also an important part of building relationships, and thus public diplomacy actors are encouraged to present useful information in an engaging and interactive manner. While traditional mass media continue to influence people’s perceptions of other countries, diverse online communication tools such as social media have also become important channels for obtaining information about various aspects of our personal and social life, including events happening in other countries. Individuals may form perceptions of other countries through simply seeking

information about the countries as well as through their online interactions with people from those countries.

In considering initiatives for strengthening online social relations and information use, public diplomacy actors should understand the level of technology adoption and patterns of technology use of their target international publics. Without proper understandings of where and how those publics spend time online, one cannot come up with effective and relevant strategies.<sup>13</sup> Another important aspect is to understand aspects related to relationship building and management, to which I now turn.

## RELATIONSHIP DIMENSIONS

Scholars have suggested different definitions and dimensions of relationships. For example, Glen Broom, Shawna Casey, and James Richey argued that relationships consist of “patterns of linkages through which the parties in relationships pursue and service their independent needs.”<sup>14</sup> T. Dean Thomson suggested that a relationship is “a set of expectations two parties have for each other’s behavior based on their interaction patterns.”<sup>15</sup> W. Timothy Coombs offers a similar perspective, defining relationships as interdependence between two or more people with long-lasting connections and mutual exchanges.<sup>16</sup>

Important dimensions of relationships include access, assurances, networking, openness, positivity, trust, and commitment.<sup>17</sup> *Access* refers to sharing information and providing opportunities to build and maintain relationships. *Assurances* are demonstrations of commitment to building and maintaining relationships. *Networking* is having common individuals or groups through which all parties can build and maintain connections. *Openness* is a sincere willingness to communicate thoughts, feelings, concerns, and problems as well as parties’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction with each other. *Positivity* means that both sides enjoy their relationships and are happy about them. *Trust* is based upon each party’s belief that the other party has integrity and is dependable. And *commitment* is related to how much parties involved view their relationship as worth maintaining and developing.

As social media have become an integral component of many organizations’ communication with publics, studies have begun to examine how different relationship dimensions are supported in digital media settings. In their study of Fortune 500 websites, Eyun-Jung Ki and Linda C. Hon found that openness and access are the most commonly used relationship cultivation strategies of the organizations’ websites.<sup>18</sup> Tom Kelleher and Barbara M. Miller’s study shows that conversational human voice and communicating relational commitment led to more positive relationship outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

These aspects have important implications for relationship-based public diplomacy and are taken into account in the empirical research introduced later in this chapter. As nongovernmental organizations and private

individuals have direct access to transnational communication links, governments can no longer claim an exclusive ability to influence public opinion in other countries. Therefore, it has become ever more important that governments share information and become more open and transparent. This is what Barry Fulton terms the change from “megaphone diplomacy” to “network diplomacy.”<sup>20</sup> It has become increasingly important to learn to understand and engage alternative views and opinions, rather than speaking over them, as was the case in megaphone diplomacy.

## CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Culture is an important factor to consider in building relationships with international publics. Studies have shown that cultural differences influence relationship formation and development as well as how messages are formed and interpreted.<sup>21</sup> For a successful public diplomacy program, cultural conditions of the country where the program is implemented should be taken into account. This is not an easy task. It is challenging to adapt activities to different cultures while preserving distinct core values. Heath epitomizes this challenge in international communication, saying the most compelling issue is “whether a global organization can meet or exceed the expectations of a Babel of voices and cultures without losing its identity by trying to be everything to all markets and publics.”<sup>22</sup>

Some theoretical frameworks in international and intercultural communication offer guidance. Here I focus mainly on literature on international public relations, as both public relations and public diplomacy emphasize building *mutually beneficial relationships* with its key stakeholders to achieve an environment that helps the country or organization achieve its goals.<sup>23</sup>

Greg Leichty and Ede Warner suggested a *cultural topoi* perspective, which focuses on cultural premises about the social world and human relationships in different societies.<sup>24</sup> A *topos* refers to commonly used lines of argument that can be adjusted to a variety of subjects and audiences. The scholars identify five types of cultural premises: fatalism, egalitarianism, hierarchy, autonomous individualism, and competitive individualism. According to the fatalist cultural bias, both nature and human nature are “capricious and unpredictable,” and everything is decided by fate.<sup>25</sup> Pervasive social distrust and suspicion prevents members of society from welcoming appeals for cooperative social action. In comparison, the egalitarian cultural bias regards human nature as good but argues it is “distorted by social institutions that perpetuate inequality.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, maximizing equality is egalitarians’ main objective. A society with the hierarchical cultural bias puts a significant emphasis on disciplines to cultivate world order and those who challenge hierarchical values are punished. On the opposite side of the hierarchical cultural bias is autonomous individual culture. Autonomous

individualists seek to abstain from all coercive relationships and to promote equality in their efforts to preserve the norm of reciprocity. Lastly, the competitive-individualist cultural bias suggests that human nature is self-seeking but competition can channel it in a positive way.

Other approaches that can help public diplomacy actors to understand cultural conditions of a country include cultural dimensions theory by Geert Hofstede<sup>27</sup> and contextual research.<sup>28</sup> Hofstede's theory explains how a society's culture influences the values of its members and suggests how those values then constrain behavior via four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. The power distance dimension is related to the extent to which individuals accept differences in power. The uncertainty avoidance dimension is about how members of a society react to uncertain or ambiguous events. The individualism-collectivism dimension relates to the extent to which individuals are integrated into groups. The masculinity-femininity describes different degrees of emphasis on achievements versus relationships by men and women. In comparison, the contextual approach recognizes that political, social, economic, cultural, and technological aspects are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to have a balanced understanding of a society without considering the interactions of these multiple aspects.

These cultural considerations may help public diplomacy actors better conceptualize how relationships are understood in a particular society. As an example, let's consider South Korea. Hierarchy and collectivism are still prominent in South Korea as a consequence of Confucianism. Confucianism puts relationships at the center of a person's existence, and a person's identity is constituted by the duties and responsibilities one has to others. Seen from this perspective, an overriding social objective becomes maintaining a harmonious balance based upon each person understanding, accepting, and fulfilling roles in the set of relationships which, taken together, constitute the social order. Public diplomacy actors should consider such aspects when they engage South Korean publics. Culture varies; it is important to bear this in mind and to not rigidly apply a one-size-fits-all public diplomacy perspective. Cultural variability together with different dimensions of relationships are important for understanding the differing perspectives or assumptions international publics may hold. The issue of relationships in public diplomacy has largely been studied from the perspectives of public diplomacy actors. However, it is important to examine how the publics engaged through social media-based public diplomacy programs actually view relationships. The following empirical research was designed to specifically investigate the topic.

#### U.S. NETWORKED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH KOREA: A CASE STUDY

While more and more scholars have emphasized relationship building and management in public diplomacy, there has been little empirical research

on this topic. In this section, I introduce a research study<sup>29</sup> designed to shed light on several specific aspects of relationships publics emphasize in considering countries other than their own. In doing so, I examine Café USA, run by the U.S. embassy in Seoul.

*Café USA* was launched by the U.S. embassy in Seoul in 2004 to forge interactive communication between the U.S. government and South Koreans and quickly became a leading example of networked public diplomacy. This Café USA online community is part of the embassy's efforts to better relate to South Koreans, especially young South Koreans, by listening to what they have to say, as well as discussing U.S. positions. Engaging South Koreans online is important especially as South Korea is one of the world's most wired countries.<sup>30</sup> In announcing the launch of Café USA, then-U.S. ambassador to South Korea Christopher Hill said:

As we live in a high-tech era, the Embassy must find new ways to reach out to people. I look forward to reading the views of the Korean public by reading the posts on Café USA and sharing my thoughts on Korea-U.S. relations with the Korean people. I know it is important for us to listen to Korean viewpoints, and I hope people will find Café USA a useful forum to express their views on Korean-American relations.<sup>31</sup>

Café USA, hosted on South Korean servers, offers interactive features such as multiple chat groups and a space for South Koreans to ask questions of the ambassador and other embassy staff.<sup>32</sup> Most of the content is provided both in Korean and English. As of August 2012, Café USA had about 11,000 registered online members.

Studying what aspects of relationships Café USA members emphasize will help us better understand public diplomacy in the networked age. This study examined (a) South Koreans' perspectives on their relationships with the United States, and (b) how Café USA members' perspectives on relationships with the United States might differ from South Korean groups who were not members of Café USA. I suspected there might be a difference because there is considerable variety in South Koreans' perspectives on the United States, given both the significance of the United States for many aspects of Korean society and the controversy surrounding Korea-U.S. relations. South Korea and the United States have maintained a robust, if sometimes tumultuous, political and military alliance dating back to the end of World War II. The two countries also maintain strong economic relations and recently signed a bilateral free trade agreement.

It was important to have participants with varied experiences with the United States, so I contacted three specific groups of people for the study: (a) South Korean members of Café USA; (b) South Korean Fulbright scholars; and (c) South Korean journalists covering South Korea's Foreign Ministry. In the end, there were sixty participants total, twenty in each group.

Since the focus of this research is on types of reasoning rather than attributes of individual respondents, I used Q methodology<sup>33</sup> to identify South

Koreans' perspectives on relationships with the United States. I developed a sample of thirty-three statements drawn from materials generated by focus groups of South Koreans and previous studies on relationships. I then asked participants in the three groups to order the statements on a continuum ranging from *most disagree* to *most agree*.

### Perspectives on Relationship

Through my research, I identified three types of relationship perspectives South Koreans have with the United States: *sincerity based*, *outcome based*, and *access based*. Trust and sincerity were considered essential to the sincerity-based group, in terms of their relationships with the United States. People from this group were most likely to agree with such statements as "to make people like me feel respected" and "to treat people like me fairly and justly." This group was less concerned about the United States being successful or providing opportunities. In the open-ended responses, they emphasized the importance of trust and mutual respect for their relationships with the United States, and Café USA members were the most prominent group loaded on this factor.

The outcome-based group emphasized results and providing opportunities as important aspects for their relationships with the United States. The highly ranked statements for this group include "to provide various opportunities to people like me," "to be successful at the things it tries to do," and "to have the ability to accomplish what it says it will do." In their open-ended responses, those belonging to this group emphasized as important that the United States be efficient in dealing with issues related to South Koreans. Fulbright scholars were the most prominent group associated with this perspective.

The access-based group emphasized information sharing. The statements that represent their views include "to keep people like me informed of U.S. policies on a regular basis" and "to share enough information with people like me about its governance." Not surprisingly, journalists tended to fall into this group.

Cultural contexts may help understand the findings. The sincerity group may represent a more traditional Korean Confucian ontology that puts relationships at the center of a person's existence. From Confucian perspectives, maintaining the harmony of the society is paramount, and it is, therefore, important that individuals understand, accept, and fulfill their roles as defined by their relationships with others.<sup>34</sup> The sincerity group's concern with relations is exemplified by their interpretation of several defining moments of U.S.-South Korea alliance. For example, people belonging to this group often expressed dissatisfaction with how the United States handled the death of two teenage South Korean girls hit and killed by a U.S. armored vehicle in 2002. At that time, many Koreans called for sincere apology from the U.S. government and felt the United States failed to

provide one. The U.S. position at that time was that they were handling the situation based on the existing Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and other bilateral agreements.

In contrast, the outcome-based group may represent Aristotelian ontology.<sup>35</sup> This group stresses formal processes and regulations and is less concerned with sincerity. This group is likely to take *quid pro quo* approaches and remain satisfied with the United States, as long as it is efficient and transparent in dealing with issues related to them—evidenced, for example, by speedy issuance of visas. Indeed, being efficient and successful were the aspects emphasized by those who belong to the outcome-based group in their relationships with the United States.

### Relational Commitment and Networked Public Diplomacy

The most important finding here is that, compared with the other groups, the sincerity-based group representing Café USA members put more emphasis on U.S. commitment to relations with South Koreans. This is significant, in that previous research showed communicating relational commitment is important for an organization to forge positive relationships with its publics engaged online.<sup>36</sup> The main objective of the U.S. embassy in Seoul in operating Café USA is to enhance mutual understanding and build trust.<sup>37</sup> The embassy's continued efforts of engaging them through this relationship-based online community may help the two sides improve mutual understanding, without necessarily ensuring policy agreement.

While the purpose of this research was not to generalize the findings, I believe the results of this research have implications beyond the United States and South Korea. Most of all, public diplomacy officials hoping to engage global publics through social media-based programs will need to understand ways of effectively communicating their commitment to relationships with those publics. In laying out online strategies, they should consider country- and culture-specific factors that may affect how they view relationships. There still exists the misconception that all public diplomacy is propaganda. Careful considerations of those factors may help convey the message that online engagement efforts are aimed at sincere, two-way dialogue with global publics rather than one-sided dissemination of positive ideas and opinions of the country.

The trends outlined in this article suggest several areas for future research. First, comparative studies are needed that explore how citizens in different countries and in different cultures respond to and engage with public diplomacy social media campaigns. Second, research is needed into how the characteristics of the country that initiates PD programs via social media influence outcomes. Finally, researchers should also consider exploring how these trends operate in countries at differing levels of internet and mobile penetration.

## CONCLUSION

The ubiquity of interactive networked communication technologies has provided public diplomacy actors with important tools with which to build and maintain relationships with global publics. In this chapter, I discussed how social media-based public diplomacy initiatives provide alternative ways of facilitating and strengthening relationships with ordinary citizens in other countries.

Publics vary regarding how they understand relationships, and this variability has significant implications for the ways in which public diplomacy campaigns build and maintain relationships with those publics. For example, my empirical research suggests that communicating sincere commitment to relationships is more important to publics engaged through social media-based public diplomacy programs than those who are not. Effective use of social media enables relationships to be at the core of network-based public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy actors should understand how information production and dissemination has become decentralized and how this has affected publics' expectations in online social relations and information use. Most of all, these understandings must be augmented with a contextual and cultural awareness of target publics' relationship perspectives with regard to countries other than their own.

Incorporating these factors is not an easy task. I believe that is why we need a closer collaboration between public diplomacy practitioners and scholars. With more increased and institutional discussions and exchanges, the two sides will benefit from each other in addressing real challenges facing public diplomacy in the networked information age.

As Slaughter put it,<sup>35</sup> "connectedness" has become "the measure of power" in international affairs, and, thus, it is essential to understand how different types of connections are initiated, developed, maintained, and strengthened in this networked information age. Public diplomacy initiatives should include strategies designed to build relationships with global publics, rather than simply delivering information to them. In doing so, public diplomacy practitioners must understand that people are differentiated not only based on demographics but also on their understandings of relationships.

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