

Exploring Websites of Foreign Embassies as a Dialogue Space for Diplomatic Offices and Foreign Publics: Based on Dialogic Theory of Public Relations

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Abstract

Under the precondition that there is a common conceptual ground between public relations and public diplomacy, this study explores websites as a dialogue space for diplomatic offices and foreign publics. It examines how many embassies utilize social media and applies Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles to the embassies' official homepage and blog to compare how they manage its website as a communication tool to inform and engage the Korean publics.

Keywords: *Dialogic Theory of Public Relations, Public Diplomacy, Social Media*

1. Introduction

It is clear that Dialogue is a highly desired product of public relations communication. And many scholars have used the term Dialogue when discussing effective public relations [1]. The strategy of dialogue in public relation has been changed, along with the revolution of technology which produced various new media channels. Especially, the appearance of Smartphone mobile devices brought a new form of social interaction - social network service.

Television, radio, magazines, and billboards have their inherent weakness of having no feedback or interaction with the viewers, listeners and readers since they use only one-way communication [2]. However, online social media is based on a two-way communication. In other words, whereas the traditional media is a monologue, social media is a dialogue [3], which makes possible interaction between the communicator and the receiver, as well as affection on receiver's behavior. Exerting influence and producing interest with astonishing portability, social media is in use as a new PR tool to create impact on the public.

The usage of social media is not only increasing rapidly in the field of public relations. Embassies and consulates, the nation's front line of contact with publics around the world, are also using social media more than ever before. For instance, the U.S. has been active on social media from its early stages. The U.S. Embassy in Seoul Korea is engaged in more than five social media platforms such as Blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Me2day to better communicate with the Korean publics. Another example is Denmark. As the first European embassy in China, the Danish embassy launched its official WeChat account in 2013, the hottest channel for social marketing in China. Some embassies, such as the Israeli Embassy in Washington, are even employing experts as a digital director who focuses solely on digital communications [4].

As public relations and public diplomacy seek similar objectives and use similar tools, this study starts under the precondition that there is a common conceptual ground between public relations and public diplomacy. By focusing on the internet-based communication of

diplomatic offices, this study investigates the usage of social media of foreign embassies in Korea. By applying the Dialogic Theory of Public Relations offered by Kent and Taylor, this study draws a picture of how many embassies utilize social media and how they manage their website as a dialogue tool to inform and engage the Korean publics.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Public Relations and Public Diplomacy

Public Diplomacy is an opposite concept of secret diplomacy. It is a tool of promoting foreign policy objectives abroad and is performed with full awareness of the public [5]. In the past, Public Diplomacy was often carried out as propaganda to gain ideological support from the public of other countries. However, the thriving of democracy, the creative use of modern information technology, and the implication of globalization all has changed Public Diplomacy. This can be seen in the definition by Crocker Scow Jr:

Public Diplomacy that traditionally represents actions of governments to influence overseas publics within the foreign policy process has expanded today – by accident and design – beyond the realm of government to include the media, multinational corporations, NGO’s and faith-based organizations as active participants in the field [6].

The importance of public diplomacy has emerged since soft power had grown out of foreign policy [7]. In the 21st century, the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes through attractiveness (Soft Power) became more important than the ability to obtain the outcomes through coercion and payment (Hard Power). And, to promote the soft power of a country, it is unavoidable to discuss public relations strategy. As such, it is hard to regard Public Relations and Public Diplomacy as separate concepts.

Specialized literature often uses the definition of Public Relations provided by James E. Grunig and T. Hunt: “the management of communication between the organization and its publics”. Due to the main effects of this science, *i.e.*, establishing mutual understanding and communication in relations between the organization and various public segments, proceeding research and employing strategic communication processes, and using consultation to decide whether to adopt a protection strategy or not. – this definition shows many similarities with Public Diplomacy.

Even though there is an undeniable intersection between the two concepts, Public Diplomacy has been rarely compared with Public Relations. And, if they were compared, both were lumped together either as crude propaganda or sophisticated persuasion [8]. However, during the past decade, scholars and practitioner like Benno H. Signitzer [9], Timothy Coombs [10], Mark A. Van Dyke and Dejan Vercic [11] questioned the relational parallels between the two concepts, and have explored their conceptual similarities, differences and linkages. In particular, Signitzer and Coombs urged public relations scholars to undertake empirical research on Public Diplomacy, and test if the public relations theories can be transferred to public diplomacy.

2.2. Dialogic Theory of Public Relations

After soft power became the core of 21st century diplomacy, a new struggle has emerged among organizations - striving for building dialogic relationship with its public to win their hearts and minds.

Dialogue is at the root of public relations. It is a form of communication most applicable to building and maintaining relationships [12]. Without it, there is a little chance of the relationship surviving, much like a relationship without trust [13]. As such, scholars such as Pearson, Kent, Taylor, White, Ryan, Holtzhausen and Tindal have taken dialogue into serious consideration in investigating public relations and conducted a variety of research related to organization–public dialogue.

In this process, application of the dialogic approach in public relations research has evolved. Kent and Taylor, in particular, considered the point that dialogic action has broadened its activity from offline to online with the development of technology. Focusing on web users, both scholars explored this new type of interaction which occurred through internet-based communication. As a result, they devised a strategic framework to facilitate dialogic relationship with the publics through World Wide Web, which is based on the study of Pearson who identified six dimensions of dialogic organizational systems [14]

As a guideline to build a mediated and two-way online dialogic relationship with publics, Kent and Taylor offered five dialogic Internet principles: Dialogic Feedback Loops, which allows publics to query organizations and offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions; Useful Information, which suggests that organizations provide useful information of general value to all publics; Generation of Return Visits, which maintains that sites should contain features that make them attractive for repeat visits such as special forums, commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions, and online experts to answer questions for interested visitors; Ease of Interface, which suggests that information should be provided in a logical hierarchical structure; and Conservation of Visitors, which maintains that Web sites should have fast download speeds, offer timely information, and include links to other related sites [15].

During the past decade, those dialogic principles have been applied in diverse countries. In America, a research team at San Francisco University applied the dialogic theory to Facebook of various university health centers [16]. In Switzerland, the use of charitable fundraising nonprofit organizations (NPOs)' website was examined to boost donors [17], while in Korea, the framework was applied to corporation blogs to measure the effects of perceived interactivity and dialogic communication on customer satisfaction and loyalty [18]. The object of study also varies enormously. It includes nonprofit organizations, Fortune 500 companies, Colleges and Universities, congressional Websites, and litigation public relations firms [14]. According to Professor Wirtz's study, which identifies 46 studies that applied Kent and Taylor's dialogic communication framework to organizational websites, there is a consistent emphasis on the role of websites and social media as facilitators of dialogic communication and as useful tools for managing organizational-public relationships. It also found a relatively low degree of consistency across the studies in how dialogic communication was measured [19].

3. Purpose of the Study

To realize an ideal organization–public relationship in diplomacy, many scholars assert that the dialogic strategy has to change from a one-way communication to a two-way communication. Many diplomatic offices around the world have been trying to adapt this advice. To examine the current situation of this new attempt at winning foreign publics' hearts and mind, the purpose of this study is to assess conceptual and practical connections between Public Relations and Public Diplomacy by investigating Public Relation strategy of diplomatic offices in Korea through their online websites.

4. Method and Research Questions

To inspect how they carry out dialogue through the internet with publics of other countries, the following research question is posed:

Research Question ①: How many diplomatic offices in Korea are managing social media applications besides their official homepage as a diplomatic communication tool?

To answer this question, all diplomatic offices listed on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea (www.mofat.go.kr) were taken into consideration. Referring to the research 'General Social Media Usage in South Korea' [20], this study focuses on the official homepage and 7 top social media applications used by Koreans the most: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, me2day, Naver Blog and Daum Blog.

In addition, addressing how diplomatic offices display localized strategy via the internet leads to the next research questions

Research Question ②: How do diplomatic offices in Korea display the use of two-way communication strategies via their official website and Blog? And what are the characteristics of each country's strategy?

To further discuss the intimate communication strategy with the locals, this study focuses only on the official homepage and Blogs. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, me2day are excluded under the following reason. Managing Facebook is based on an internal/external standardized strategy rather than a localized strategy. On the other hand, an official homepage and Blog are specifically crafted for target public and deal with more intangible aspects of a culture, which leads to more intimate communication with the locals.

Research question ② is investigated under the five principles of Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Theory of Public Relations. First, the "Dialogic Feedback Loops" was measured by six elements: the presence of major contact information of the embassy, a free message board for any opinions and questions, an online chatting room for more active communicate between the embassy and the Korean publics, the possibility of posting comments on articles, sending online messages to the embassy, and a function of conducting online surveys. Through those six elements, this study examines whether the embassy's website serves as a two-way communicate tool in real time. To examine "Usefulness of Information", 13 elements were measured: the presence of an overall introduction of the website, provision of new information on the embassy, provision of new information on its own country, provision of new information on any issue which is related to the relationship between Korea and its own country, construction of a special page for the Korean publics, construction of a special page for its nationals residing in Korea, the presence of a brief introduction of its own country, the presence of an introduction page of historical relationship between Korea and its own country, conveyance of the government's priority on maintaining good relationship with Korea, the presence of a press release page, the presence of an archive site, the presence of a members-only page, and the presence of links to other social media sites of the embassy. The "Generation of Return Visits" was measured by six items which are seen as facilitative devices making visitors to return to the embassy's website on a regular basis: provision of updated information, provision of noticeable events, the presence of a web gallery for sharing photos, video, and documents, the construct of an online invitation system, the presence of a Q&A page, provision of contact information of the person in charge of the embassy's website. "Ease of Interface" provided on the Web site was measured by six elements: the presence of a site map, the presence of a search engine box, the full operation of the search engine box, the presence of FAQ or help page, an appropriate proportion of graphic and text. "Features of

Conservation of Visitors” includes three items: fast page loading, links to other Web sites related to the embassy, and links to other Web sites related to its own county.

For reference, to set the elements, a research titled ‘The Effects of Perceived Interactivity and Dialogic Communication on Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty in Corporate Blogs’ [18] was taken into consideration. However, subsection (*i.e.*, the possibility of posting comments on articles, the presence of links to other social media sites of the embassy, the construction of a special page for its nationals residing in Korea, the presence of an introduction page of historical relationship between the two countries, *etc.*) has been modified according to the character of social media.

On the other hand, this study also applies the Dialogic Theory to the mobile version, in order to examine if the embassies websites are also mobile-friendly. A national survey conducted by Korea Internet & Security Agency [21] in 2013 found out that 50.4% of 6,000 mobile internet users are visiting social media applications through mobile devices. This means that a majority of embassies’ websites visitors could be mobile users. As such, two elements - ‘mobile friendly information display’ and ‘mobile friendly web design’ - are added to the investigation of mobile versions. In other words, in the mobile version, the principle ‘Usefulness of Information’ is measured by 14 elements, while the principle ‘Ease of Interface’ is measured by seven elements.

To test the applicability of Dialogic Theory, each website is investigated as followed. To every element of each of the principles, a point of 0 to 2 has been assigned: 2 points for 100% fulfillment, 1 point for partial fulfillment and 0 point for none-fulfillment.

Lastly, for collecting necessary information, interview is done through email and phone based on the results in order to strengthen the analysis.

5. Results

A majority of the 114 foreign embassies and consulates in Korea are managing their own website. However, it has turned out that only a few of them are using social media to better achieve their foreign policy objectives. Only the embassies of the U.S., the UK, Canada, Australia and Israel have actively implemented social media platforms to engage, collaborate and share their information with Koreans in real time.

As Table 1 below shows, Facebook is one of the most popular means of communication among social media applications. In comparison to managing a Blog, managing Facebook is more based on an internal/external standardization strategy. Therefore, it can be interpreted that a few embassies are still using a localized social media strategy to ensure a two-way dialogue with the local audiences.

Table 1. The Present Situation of Foreign Embassies in Korea using Social Media

	USA	UK	Canada	Australia	Israel	South Africa	China	Germany	Netherland	France	Iran
Homepage	o							o			
Mobile Homepage	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	x
Embassy’s Blog	o		o	o	o	o	o				o

Ambassador's Blog		o	o							
Twitter	o	o	o							
Facebook	o	o	o	o	o			o	o	
YouTube	o	o		o						
me2day	o									
Flickr		o								

To answer the second research question, countries that developed both official homepage and Blog for the Korean publics have been identified. However, it has been verified that the Blog of the United Kingdom is actually a Blog of the British Ambassador to Korea. For this reason, the embassy of the United Kingdom is omitted of the study, even though it operates several social media channels. The embassy of Israel has also been removed, being insufficient for a comparative analysis. Israel has launched its Blog in Korea just a few months ago and has less than 10 blog posts on its blog listing page. Thus, in order to answer the second research question and to draw a conclusion from the data, this study focuses on the United States along with Canada and Australia.

The result of applying the public relations theory of dialogue to public diplomacy revealed three major findings. First, social media as a public diplomacy tool is closely related to practical issues. The strategy of the national foreign policy and the budget of the embassy are the typical issues in point. Second, all three embassies are considering their national residents in Korea as public diplomacy targets, besides Korean publics. In constructing the websites, they adopt approaches to constructing special pages for their nationals residing in Korea and the provision of new information in both Korean language and its native language. Third, Blogs meet the overall satisfaction of dialogic elements better than the official homepage, as can be seen in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Dialogic Communication of Foreign Embassies in Korea using Social Media (Desktop Version)

Principles		Desktop Version			
		Official homepage		Blog	
		Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)	Score Rate (Score)	Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)	Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)
Dialogic Feedback Loops (6 elements / 12 scores in total)	US.	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	83.3% (5)	75.0% (9)
	Canada	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (4)
	Australia	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)

Useful Information (13 elements / 26 scores in total)	US.	76.9% (10)	80.8% (21)	61.5% (8)	61.5% (16)
	Canada	38.5% (5)	34.6% (9)	69.2% (9)	65.4% (17)
	Australia	38.5% (5)	30.8% (8)	69.2% (9)	69.2% (18)
Generation of Return Visits (5 elements / 10 scores in total)	US.	40.0% (2)	40.0% (4)	80.0% (4)	70.0% (7)
	Canada	20.0% (1)	20.0% (2)	80.0% (4)	80.0% (8)
	Australia	20.0% (1)	20.0% (2)	60.0% (3)	60.0% (6)
Ease of Interface (6 elements / 12 scores in total)	US.	100% (6)	100.0% (12)	100.0% (6)	100.0% (12)
	Canada	66.7% (4)	58.3% (7)	83.3% (5)	83.3% (10)
	Australia	33.3% (2)	33.3% (4)	83.3% (5)	83.3% (10)
Conservation of Visitors (3 elements / 6 scores in total)	US.	66.7% (2)	66.7% (4)	66.7% (2)	66.7% (4)
	Canada	33.3% (1)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (2)
	Australia	33.3% (1)	16.7% (1)	100.0% (3)	100.0% (6)
Sum Total (33 elements / 66 scores in total)	US.	63.6% (21)	65.2% (43)	75.8% (25)	72.7% (48)
	Canada	36.4% (12)	33.3% (22)	63.6% (21)	62.1% (41)
	Australia	30.3% (10)	25.8% (17)	63.6% (21)	63.6% (42)

Table 3. Dialogic Communication of Foreign Embassies in Korea using Social Media (Mobile Version)

Principles	Mobile Version				
	Official homepage		Blog		
	Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)	Score Rate (Score)	Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)	Fulfillment Rate in Elements (Number of Fulfillment)	
Dialogic Feedback Loops (6 elements / 12 scores in total)	US.	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	83.3% (5)	75.0% (9)
	Canada	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (4)
	Australia	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)	16.7% (1)	16.7% (2)
Useful Information	US.	78.6% (11)	82.8% (23)	64.3% (9)	64.3% (18)

(14 elements / 28 scores in total)	Canada	35.7% (5)	32.1% (9)	71.4% (10)	67.9% (19)
	Australia	35.7% (5)	28.6% (8)	64.3% (9)	64.3% (18)
Generation of Return Visits (5 elements / 10 scores in total)	US.	40.0% (2)	40.0% (4)	80.0% (4)	70.0% (7)
	Canada	20.0% (1)	20.0% (2)	80.0% (4)	80.0% (8)
	Australia	20.0% (1)	20.0% (2)	60.0% (3)	60.0% (6)
Ease of Interface (7 elements / 14 scores in total)	US.	100% (7)	100.0% (14)	100.0% (7)	100.0% (14)
	Canada	42.9% (3)	35.7% (5)	85.7% (6)	85.7% (12)
	Australia	14.3% (1)	35.7% (2)	85.7% (6)	85.7% (12)
Conservation of Visitors (3 elements / 6 scores in total)	US.	66.7% (2)	66.7% (4)	66.7% (2)	66.7% (4)
	Canada	33.3% (1)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (1)	33.3% (2)
	Australia	33.3% (1)	16.7% (1)	100.0% (3)	100.0% (6)
Sum Total (35 elements / 70 scores in total)	US.	62.9% (22)	67.1% (47)	77.1% (27)	74.3% (52)
	Canada	31.4% (11)	28.6% (20)	65.7% (23)	64.3% (45)
	Australia	25.7% (9)	22.9% (15)	62.9% (22)	62.9% (44)

In case of the United States, the Blog satisfaction of the Dialogic Theory's principles is overall higher than the official homepage. This can be seen as a result of following Obama administration's foreign policy which emphasizes smart power and two-way dialogue as a key. Also, the U.S. State Department's 21st Century Statecraft, launched by Hilary Clinton and encourages diplomats to the operating methods of international diplomacy, is contributing to digital diplomacy. Interestingly, while the Blog scores high in 'Conservation of Visitors' and scores low in 'Useful Information', the official homepage scored just the opposite. This provides us a glimpse of the strategy of the United States embassy: notification and information conveyance via the official homepage (one-way communication) and direct intimate communication with the Korean publics via Blog (two-way dialogue). It is also remarkable that only the U.S. recognized the rapidly growing mobile audience. By constructing mobile versions of each of its websites, the U.S. Embassy enables visitors from their Smartphone to access, view and share information on the U.S. Embassy precisely when they need them. This reflects the fact that the U.S. is still a pioneer in media diplomacy. As a matter of fact, as Table 1 shows, the U.S. manages a majority of social networking sites in comparison to other countries. Another distinctive feature is that the embassy conveys its message in a smart way via the internet while keeping itself relatively free from budget pressure, which seems to be closely related to the national power and the government's fundamental foreign policy.

In case of Canada, the Blog satisfaction of the Dialogic Theory's principles is higher than the official homepage except in the 'Conservation of Visitors'. Even though it gets higher score in 'Dialogic Feedback Loops' and 'Ease of Interface' than Australia, Canada still has a long way to go to realize true two-way communication, because its websites restrict visitors from posting any text. Feedback is the essence of two-way communication. However, the shortage of manpower and budget restrains the capability of the Canadian Embassy to review and provide feedbacks to the postings on time. As a sort of solution, the embassy recruits 'Volunteer Blog E-reporters' in Korea who are sharing all kinds of Korea-Canada related stories through the embassy blog. The fact that the blog score of "Useful Information" is higher than that of the U.S. and that the blog score of 'Generation of Return Visits' shows the same degree to that of the U.S., reflects that the Canadian Embassy works out its strategy by keeping its blog useful and attractive to the Korean public. It is also worth noting that the Canadian Embassy is trying its best to take actions in managing its website. The Canadian Embassy started its first blog via Daum, the first web portal community in Korea. However, since the emergence of Naver Blog and its subsequent dominance of the market, it reconstructed its Blog in Naver. Also, links to other social media sites of the embassy were added on the first page of the official homepage, which was not present at the beginning of the study. In several places, efforts are continuously in progress to improve its service to the Korean publics.

In case of Australia, 'Dialogic Feedback Loops' and 'Generation of Return Visits' scored the lowest among the dialogic elements. But it has turned out that the websites of Australia satisfied all elements of 'Conservation of Visitors', which is a distinguishable feature compared to other embassies. It can be interpreted that Australia carries out its strategy providing sufficient information about Australia during one visit, while Canada encourages visitors to revisit its website. On the other hand, the Australian Embassy constructed its official blog in 2010, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Korea-Australia diplomatic relation under the financial support of the Australian Government. But, after the official event had been finished, the embassy has started to struggle with budget and manpower problem in managing the Blog since 2011. Instead of closing its Blog post, the embassy benchmarked the system 'Volunteer Blog E-reporter' of the Canadian embassy; yet, they developed the system by also recruiting Korean residents in Australia as E-reporters. Through this, Koreans are receiving a vivid description of Australia through eyes of Koreans. The embassy also has been fine-tuning its blogging services by using the function "Open Cast." This function offers the content in a customized section that is easy to view and convenient to manage. Even though Australia is lagging far behind the U.S. in digital diplomacy and its website prohibits visitors from posting any data, we can get a sense of its constant efforts to find an alternative way to communicate more friendly with the Korean publics.

4. Conclusion

Among various media tools, the internet has become the center of communication during the past several years. The widespread use of computers has made people stay connected even though they are not actively engaged with each other. Internet became a powerful force in public relations and various organizations including businesses, non-profit organizations, and governments, and even national governmental institutions such as the European Commission [22] are using the internet to mask its identity, generate interest, communicate the facts, create awareness about its aims and discuss options.

Under the precondition that there is a common conceptual ground between public relations and public diplomacy, this study explored websites as a dialogue space for diplomatic offices and foreign publics. Examination of the embassies in Korea showed that only a few create a

place of communication in cyberspace to engage in dialogue with the Korean publics. And embassies that are managing social media as a diplomatic tool had their own strategy for utilization and management. Among all countries, the U.S. was definitely a pioneer in the world of digital public diplomacy. It shows positive attitude toward social media and manages its official homepage and Blog upon differentiated strategies. Following the U.S., the UK is seen to be the most active in managing social media, and Canada, together with Australia, is diligently following the social media trends. Other countries were more passive in using the social media. Even though the embassies recognize the power of the internet and admit it to be an ideal two-way communication tool, it has been revealed that translating this idea into reality is met with many problems such as manpower shortage and financial constraints. As such, most embassies cannot readily carry forward the implementation of a localized strategy and manage a Blog together with its official homepage.

5. Limitation

The results from the current investigation have been driven out only from the official website and Blog. However, a bigger picture of diplomatic office - foreign public dialogue can be drawn, when other social media applications are investigated together. Examining the usage of Facebook and Twitter, in addition, can provide a broader understanding of social media managed by foreign embassies.

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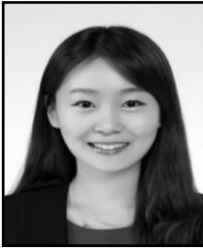


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