A Strategic Issue Management (SIM) Approach to Social Media Use in Public Diplomacy

Juyan Zhang

Abstract
This research proposed that social media use in public diplomacy should first be a strategic issue management (SIM) process. Using two case studies, the research identified four phases of the SIM process, namely the issue fermenting and going viral phase, the proactive phase, the reactive phase, and the issue receding and new issue fermenting phase. Social media are largely tactical tools in the first and the last phases. But they may become strategic tools in the proactive and reactive phases, in which diplomats may use them to reinforce a favorable viral trend, to build an agenda, and to respond to a conflict. In addition, the SIM approach argues that engagement, the Obama administration’s diplomatic doctrine, should be reassessed in a mixed-motive framework instead of being narrowly equated to dialogue.

Keywords
social media, public diplomacy, strategic issue management, engagement, public relations

Since the U.S. government initiated the concepts of “public diplomacy 2.0” and “digital diplomacy,” use of social media for public diplomacy appears to have become an inevitable trend. The United States has been a leader in tapping the new media for public diplomacy purposes. As early as 2007, the Department of State started its blog and launched a public diplomacy platform that incorporated webcasts, blogs, videos, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Second Life (Dale, 2010). Later, the platform incorporated Diplopedia, LinkedIn, and Communities@State (U.S. Department of

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State). Some even argue that the essence of the Obama administration’s “engagement diplomacy” is to leverage social media and related technologies to persuade skeptical audiences to empathize with U.S. policies (Comor & Bean, 2012). Other countries have followed the trend. India’s Ministry of External Affairs has used social media to reach out to younger, tech-savvy audiences by using YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter (Hall, 2012). The Israel Defense Forces used Facebook and Twitter during its operation in Gaza in 2012 (“Israeli Commentary,” 2012). The Mexican ambassador to the United States was reported as tweeting that “if you aren’t using social media, you aren’t relevant diplomatically” (Zaharna, 2012). A British diplomat stated that “digital” should be at the very center of U.K. diplomacy and foreign policy (Schillemore, 2012).

Thus, as the examples showed, social media have been fully embraced for public diplomacy. However, a number of concerns appear to have seldom been discussed, or at least not been fully explored in the frenzy for the new technologies. First, for public diplomacy, social media not only are opportunities, but also could become problems. This was demonstrated by the serious setbacks to U.S. public diplomacy caused by WikiLeaks (Cull, 2011) and the viral video footage in 2012 that showed U.S. troops urinating on dead Afghan bodies (Bowley, 2012). In this sense, social media should first be regarded as an issue for public diplomacy, which could be either a problem or an opportunity (Ansoff, 1980; Perrott, 2011). Second, the present euphoria for social media has focused on their quality as a new way of communication. But as an external environment for public diplomacy, social media are uncharted waters. As Cull (2011) warned, “The achievements of Public Diplomacy 2.0 are notable and worthy of scrutiny but they must not be mistaken for offering some mechanism for mastery of the new environment” (p. 7). Then, facing an uncertain new environment, is dialogue, which is believed to be the essence of the Obama administration’s “engagement” doctrine (Comor & Bean, 2008), the best way of communication? Or should it go beyond? Last, public diplomacy dictates strategic communication. But what does “strategic” mean for use of social media in public diplomacy? And how does one change them from tactical tools into “strategic” tools?

The three concerns are closely related. The first suggests that social media should be considered as an issue. The second questions whether dialogue is the best strategy to manage the relationships in a social media environment, and the third concerns how to strategically use social media. Together the three lead to the main proposition that this research makes: For public diplomacy, use of social media should first be a strategic issue management (SIM) process, or a “process for being vigilant for threats and opportunities that can affect how the organization achieved its mission and vision” (Heath, 2002, p. 33). Such a proposition has several implications. First, it approaches social media with practical reasoning, which dictates consideration of situational factors in solving a problem, instead of having any a priori assumptions on their use and effects. Second, it suggests a contingent approach to managing relationships instead of unilaterally stressing dialogue and symmetrical communication. Third, it dictates a strategic approach to use of social media instead of merely treating them as tactic tools. The questions that follow the propositions are these: What is the basic process of a SIM approach to social media use in public diplomacy? How would such an approach contribute to our understanding of engagement, the leitmotif of the Obama administration’s diplomatic
doctrine? What makes social media use strategic? And what would the SIM approach reveal to us about the characteristics of social media use in public diplomacy? The current research aims to partially address these questions through two case studies.

This research is structured as following: a review of literature on public diplomacy and social media, engagement diplomacy, and SIM; an introduction to grounded theory analysis as the methodology; analyses of two cases, mapping of the SIM process, reassessing engagement, and a comparison of the SIM approach with Gilboa’s public diplomacy models; and finally implications of the research.

**Literature Review**

**Public Diplomacy and Social Media**

Public diplomacy has been defined as the soft power of a state (Nye, 2004), marketing and branding of nations (Anholt, 2002), and international public relations by governments (J. E. Grunig, 1993; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). It involves understanding, planning, engagement, and advocacy (Bruce, 2011). In theorizing public diplomacy, Gilboa (2000, 2001, 2008) proposed some of the most insightful models, namely the basic cold war model, the nonstate transnational model, and the domestic PR model (see the description of the models in Table 1). However, these models, as with some other models, failed to take into account social media, simply because they were proposed before social media emerged.

In contrast to industrialized mass media, social media present tremendous opportunities for networking, collaborating, and connecting (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For public diplomacy, however, scholars and practitioners are still struggling with what they mean conceptually and operationally (Bruce, 2011). Hayden (2011) argued that “public diplomacy 2.0” would encourage the free flow of discourse and engagement across boundaries. Bruce (2011) agreed that social media would have an impact on diplomatic actors, but U.S. diplomatic organizations’ culture may limit genuine noncentralized communication on social media. Fisher (2010) argued that network mapping can be used to plan, develop, and evaluate engagement for public diplomacy. Shay (2012) observed that Israel’s “peer-to-peer diplomacy” seeks to empower its citizens by enlisting social media in grassroots public diplomacy efforts. This being said, some studies found the impact of social media in public diplomacy to be at best elusive. Khatib, Dutton, and Thelwall (2011) assessed the effects of the U.S. Department of State’s Digital Outreach Team, which aimed to engage with citizens in the Middle East through social media. They concluded that “technological advances will not automatically realize the vision of public diplomacy 2.0 without creative, strategic thinking” (p. 29). Burns and Eltham (2009) evaluated the effects of Twitter as a public diplomacy tool during Iran’s 2009 election protests. They concluded that social media as public diplomacy tools had very limited effects on Iran’s election. Thus, the literature showed a mixed picture of social media use in public diplomacy. This, to an extent validates, the SIM approach proposed by the current research. Although the studies agree that strategic thinking is important for social media use, few empirically examined how to achieve
Table 1. Comparing the Strategic Issue Management (SIM) Approach to Gilboa’s Public Diplomacy Models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>SIM approach to social media use in public diplomacy</th>
<th>Gilboa’s three models of public diplomacy*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basic cold war model</td>
<td>Nonstate transnational model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiators</td>
<td>Anecdotal event and social media users, diplomats</td>
<td>Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major actors</td>
<td>Social media users, diplomats, government,</td>
<td>Government, state-owned media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>traditional media, opinion leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>To identify opportunities, build agendas, resolve</td>
<td>To create a favorable perception of the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conflicts, facilitate debates, expand public</td>
<td>initiator’s image and policy; to alter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sphere, cultivate national image</td>
<td>the target country’s hostile foreign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of media</td>
<td>Social media, complemented by traditional mass</td>
<td>Government-owned mass media such as the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>media</td>
<td>Voice of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Means and</td>
<td>Viral marketing, issue management, agenda building,</td>
<td>International broadcasting</td>
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<tr>
<td>techniques</td>
<td>conflict resolution</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Easy; data readily available</td>
<td>Hard to measure</td>
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This research seeks to partially address the gap. It also examines how the SIM approach may reveal the characteristics of social media use in public diplomacy.

**Engagement and Public Diplomacy**

This research also seeks to find out how the SIM approach to social media use in public diplomacy contributes to a reassessment of the concept of “engagement,” the leitmotif of the Obama administration’s foreign policy (Diehl, 2010) and “the hallmark of contemporary public diplomacy” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2008, p. 55).

In outlining the strategic goals of U.S. foreign policy, the Department of State stated that it aimed to achieve foreign policy goals by “fostering broad, mutually-respectful engagement and mutual understanding between American citizens and institutions, and their counterparts abroad” (U.S. Department of State, 2009, p. 26). It
further stated that it “has committed to renewing America’s engagement with the people of the world by enhancing mutual respect and understanding” (U.S. Department of State, 2012, p. 32). Thus, at least in diplomatic rhetoric, engagement is about dialogue, mutual respect, partnership, and mutual understanding. Comor and Bean (2012) argued that engagement as the core pillar of U.S. public diplomacy policy refers to a “strategic, targeted, and managed ‘dialogue’” (p. 208), and its roots lie in Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model or “Excellence Theory” (p. 206). They also argued that the contemporary U.S. engagement public diplomacy seeks to enlist social media to engage in dialogue with foreign publics directly, which is known as “public diplomacy 2.0” and “digital diplomacy.” Bruce (2011) suggested that as the Obama administration’s foreign policy leitmotif, engagement “conveys an emphasis on dialogue and activities aimed at building relations with nations, institutions and people” (p. 352).

As can be seen, engagement has essentially been equated to dialogue, mutual respect, and mutual understanding. However, there are a number of problems with such an interpretation. First, it failed to recognize that the Obama administration’s definition of engagement as dialogue was itself a public diplomacy rhetoric to improve the image of the United States. By the time Obama was elected president, the U.S. image had suffered serious damage due to the Iraq War (Schneider, 2009). The Government Accountability Office ranked improving the U.S. image abroad as fifth of the 13 top priorities for him (Pincus, 2009). President Obama’s speech in Cairo, where he for the first time defined engagement as “to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground” (Obama, 2009), was one of the efforts to improve the U.S. image in the Muslim world. Second, few noticed that the Department of State claimed in its report that “Secretary Clinton has squarely challenged the Department to increase our capacity to utilize ‘Smart Power’ by intelligently leveraging and coordinating our diplomatic and development tools in order to meet the calling of a ‘New Era of Engagement’” (U.S. Department of State, 2009, p. 47). This is to say that engagement will be achieved by “smart power,” which is the combination of “soft power” and “hard power” (Nye, 2009). It is known that hard power focuses on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanction (Wilson, 2008). However, when engagement enlists hard power as its tool, it simply cannot be regarded as dialogue and mutual respect. Third, in public diplomacy practices involving social media, the U.S. government did not always seek dialogue. In the WikiLeaks case, for example, the U.S. government consistently denounced the website and its founder Julian Assange. Finally, although Comor and Bean (2012) correctly identified Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model as the theoretical root of engagement, they seemed to referred to the earlier version of excellence theory. In fact, the theory has been significantly modified (see the following section). In light of the above criticism, this research seeks to reassess engagement from the SIM approach.

**SIM and Mixed-Motive Model of Public Relations**

As previously stated, the current research proposed that social media should first be regarded as a strategic issue for public diplomacy. A strategic issue is “a condition or event, either internal or external to the organization which, if it continues, will have a significant effect of the functioning or performance of the organization or on its future
interests” (Jacques, 2007, p. 147). Managing strategic issues requires a set of organizational processes (Ansoff, 1980), which are the activities designed to respond to strategic issues (Dutton & Ottensmeyer, 1987). However, there is little consensus as to what the SIM processes should be like. Chase conceptualized a model comprising five steps: issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy options, issue action programming, and evaluation of results (cited from Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995; Harris, 2005). Heath and Palenchar (2009) argued that SIM involved four functions: gathering and monitoring information, analyzing the information and classifying the issue, sorting and prioritizing the issue, and developing an action or implementation plan. Perrott (2011) suggested that SIM consisted of eight steps: capturing and listing issues, sorting and coding, deciding the most important issues, ranking issues, identifying issues for immediate response, preparing action plans, monitoring progress on implementing the action plans, and continuing issue capture.

Besides the process, accountability is another major concern of SIM, which means an organization needs to be able to document how resources have been used and to reconstruct the sequence of actions that produced particular outcomes (Dutton & Ottensmeyer, 1987). Public diplomacy, in particular “new public diplomacy,” has increasingly faced domestic demands for public accountability (Pamment, 2012). Although accountability is not a major research goal, the current study assesses the effects of the public diplomacy campaigns.

Finally, SIM “requires two-way communications” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 256). But what constitutes two-way communication has long been a subject of debate. J. E. Grunig (2001) first conceptualized it as a normative model that “explains how public relations should be practiced” (p. 13). At the heart of the model was ethics. It required mutual understanding between an organization and its publics, which allows public attitudes to shape organizational behavior and vice versa (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22). From its start, the two-way symmetrical model has received much criticism. As a result, the theory has undergone numerous revisions (J. E. Grunig, 2001). The most important modification is perhaps the incorporation of game theory by Murphy (1991), resulting in the mixed-motive model of public relations. The new model suggests that an organization tries to meet its own objectives while at the same time attempting to help others achieve theirs, and it is possible to be both cooperative and competitive in the same campaign. Plowman (1998) identified nine approaches to negotiation on a mixed-motive continuum. Among them, “contention,” “avoidance,” and “principled approaches” are on the one-way extreme in which the organizations win and the publics lose. “Accommodation,” “compromise,” and “mediated communication” fall at the other extreme of the continuum, where the interests of the publics become more important than the organization’s interests. In the middle are “cooperation,” “unconditionally constructive,” and “win-win or no deal” tactics (also see Plowman, Briggs, & Huang, 2001). J. E. Grunig (2001) agreed that the mixed-motive approach could describe symmetry in the way he originally intended. Thus, the mixed-motive model suggests that two-way symmetrical communication is more than dialogue. Instead, it comprises a wide range of stances. This research seeks to find concrete evidence for a reassessment of the concept of engagement that was based on two-way symmetrical communication.
Research Method

Cases and Data Sources

Two recent public diplomacy cases were analyzed. The first case surrounded U.S. ambassador Gary Locke’s trip to Beijing in 2011. The second case involved the U.S. embassy’s measure of air pollution in Beijing. The two cases extensively involved U.S. diplomats, China’s social media users, the Chinese central and local governments, and the traditional news media in China and the United States. News texts and social media posts in Chinese language were retrieved through keyword searches in the Chinese search engine Baidu and Google Chinese. The keywords for the first case included Gary Locke’s Chinese name, “coffee,” “noodle,” and the Chinese translation of Vice President Biden’s name. The keywords for the second case included “U.S. Embassy,” “pollution,” and “PM2.5.” English news stories were retrieved from the LexisNexis database through similar keyword searches. The search generated numerous news stories and social media posts in Chinese.

Analysis of Texts

This research used grounded theory analytic strategies to identify the key actions of the actors, in particular those performed by the U.S. diplomats. The grounded theory method is a comprehensive method of data collection, analysis, and summarization whereby a hypothetical theory can be constructed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The questions that guided text coding were the following: “What have the key actors done?” and “How did they react to other parties’ actions?” The actors included the U.S. ambassador to China, the U.S. diplomats, Chinese social media users, the Chinese government and officials, and the traditional media.

In analyzing the text, contextual materials were first identified. Next, each meaningful unit, in this case every individual action taken by the parties, was identified and recorded (“open coding”). Third, meaningful units were assigned into “category themes” and labeled. The texts were read until the coding reached saturation, when new data and their sorting only confirm existing categories. Based on the coding, the SIM process of social media use in public diplomacy was tentatively mapped.

Findings

The two cases indicated that the SIM process of using social media for public diplomacy includes four phases: (a) issue fermenting and going viral, (b) proactive phase, (c) reactive phase, and (d) issue receding and new issue emerging. In reporting the findings, the SIM process was first mapped. Second, the campaign effects were evaluated. Third, strategic use of social media was discussed. Fourth, engagement was reassessed. Finally, the SIM approach was compared with Gilboa’s models to identify the characteristics of social media use in public diplomacy.
Case Study 1: U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke’s Trip to China

Phase 1: Issue ferments and goes viral

Triggering event draws social media’s attention. On August 12, 2011, Gary Locke, the new U.S. ambassador to China, was seen by some Chinese passengers carrying a backpack at a Starbucks cafe in the Seattle airport en route to China with his family. One Chinese American businessman observed that Ambassador Locke tried using a discount coupon but the barista would not honor it for some reason. Mr. Locke then paid with a credit card. The Chinese American businessman shot some photographs of the ambassador and posted it on Sina Weibo (microblog), a Chinese counterpart to Twitter, and reported what he saw at the airport.

Issue goes viral on social media. In a few days the posting went viral and was reposted over 40,000 times. Numerous Chinese netizens commented online in disbelief because they are used to seeing their own officials indulge in a privileged lifestyle (“China Debates,” 2011). A search of the Chinese keywords “Gary Locke” and “coffee” generated 1,230,000 results in Google Chinese, and 159,000 in Baidu. A search in Google Trends with the Chinese keyword “Gary Locke” generated a graph that showed three upticks in 2011. The highest spike was in August 2011, which was caused by the coffee-related anecdote at the airport (see Figure 1).
Traditional media cover the issue. Major U.S. news media such as the New York Times (Wong, 2011a), the Wall Street Journal (Chin, 2011), and the Washington Post (Richburg, 2011) reported the story. The anecdote was also widely reported by Chinese news media.

Phase 2: Proactive phase

Organization becomes aware of the viral trends. There was evidence that the U.S. embassy and the U.S. government became aware of the viral trends from the beginning. In fact, it would be unimaginable that a diplomatic organization would not have noticed such a viral trend that concerned the country it represented. Five days after the photo was posted, the New York Times reported the story. It said, “This humble image of American officialdom has no doubt helped pave the way for Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. who landed in China” (Wong, 2011a).

(Possible) research. The news text did not reveal whether and how much the U.S. embassy researched the viral trends. However, it is a known fact that monitoring social media has become routine for U.S. diplomats. For example, the Economist (“Virtual Relations,” 2012) reported that “the State Department monitors social media in five languages and flags, for instance, influential figures in a country whom envoys ought to befriend.” The State Department has more than 100 foreign-language Twitter feeds, and it analyzes the incoming information “to see what the critical themes are for a particular population, such as democracy or jobs, and then we tailor our messages to respond to that” (Ives, 2011). All these showed that the U.S. government attached great importance to researching online trends.

Actions to reinforce the viral trends. The U.S. diplomats performed a series of actions that reinforced the favorable viral trends on social media, some of which were broadcast on the embassy’s social media accounts. In the perspective of the mixed-motive model, the actions were “cooperation,” “unconditionally constructive,” and “win-win” strategies toward the Chinese social media users who identified with U.S. values.

Event 1. When U.S. vice president Joe Biden visited Beijing on August 22, 2011, accompanied by ambassador Gary Locke, they dined at a small restaurant in Beijing and ate a type of noodle with soybean paste; they also interacted with the Chinese diners in the restaurant. The meal cost 79 yuan RMB ($12.36) for five people. Chinese social media users were again amazed by the anecdote, which immediately went viral (“Biden Set,” 2011).

Event 2. On August 22, the same day he accompanied Vice President Biden to Chengdu City, Ambassador Locke was seen flying in economy class by Chinese passengers. He was seen rejecting ground staff’s offer of special VIP treatment and an upgrade to first class. This was posted on Weibo (Microblog) by a fly attendant and reposted 12,000 times by Chinese social media users in a few days.
On September 10, 2011, Ambassador Locke and his family paid a visit to a school for the children of migrant workers in Beijing, right after the city’s authorities shut down nearly 30 such schools. Then, just prior to China’s traditional Mid-Autumn Festival, the ambassador visited a charity art show held by artists in Beijing to support migrant workers’ children, accompanied by his family. The migrant workers’ children gifted their art works to the U.S. ambassador, which were displayed at the U.S. embassy during its September 11 commemoration (“Ambassador Locke Visited,” 2011). All these were broadcast on the embassy’s social media, which spawned viral trends on social media.

**Positioning and crystallizing the agenda**

Buying coffee was an unintended action on the part of Ambassador Locke. However, some of his actions in the subsequent days indicated that the U.S. embassy identified the viral trends on Chinese social media as an opportunity to promote U.S. values. When he was interviewed by a Chinese journalist, for example, Ambassador Locke positioned the theme of the events, thus crystallizing public opinion on social media. He said,

I think I am just an easy-going and carefree person. . . . I only did what an American would do. I hope the openness that I demonstrated would promote the mutual understanding between the Chinese people and the American people, and help overcome the barriers as well as eliminate misunderstandings. (Deng, 2011)

**Phase 3: Reactive phase**

**Conflict arises.** The heated viral trends on social media prompted the Chinese government to make face-saving responses on social media and traditional media. The *Beijing Daily*, a mouthpiece of the Beijing city government, used its microblog to paint Ambassador Locke’s actions as “merely a show.” In a posting titled “Gary Locke, Please Declare Your Assets,” the microblog post commented, “Gary Locke lives in the US embassy which costs billions of US dollars. He commutes in a bullet-proof limousine . . . can this be called modesty? . . . So cut the show of incorruptionibility” (Xu, 2012). The conservative media outlet the *Global Times* echoed this sentiment. It advised the U.S. ambassador “not to misplay his role” in China (“Global Times’ Editorial,” 2011). Chinese journalists were told by the government not to “hype” the U.S. ambassador’s trip (LaFraniere, 2011). The president of China Foreign Affairs University painted the U.S. ambassador’s humble trip as merely saving money out of his relocation package.

**Respond to conflict.** The U.S. embassy quickly responded to such accusations. Its approaches can be summarized as the “principled approach” and “contention.” The embassy posted on its microblog the foreign services salary table issued by the U.S. Department of State, the public records of Gary Locke’s assets, and a detailed explanation of U.S. diplomats’ salaries and benefits (“U.S. State Department Employees,” 2012). The postings became viral again in China’s social media. An anchorman of
China’s official TV station provocatively asked Ambassador Locke, “I hear you flew here coach. Is that a reminder that US owes China money?” Ambassador Locke responded by stressing American values, “As a very easy-going person, I believe I’m a good representative of the way Americans do things. I hope this type of openness will help Chinese and Americans to know more about each other, break down barriers and dispel misunderstandings” (Flanagan, 2011). In March 2012, Ambassador Locke was seen staying in a four-star hotel rather than a five-star one during the 2012 Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan Province. The anecdote again became viral. Some social media users claimed that this was a show. As a response, the U.S. embassy and the U.S. consulate in Shanghai posted on their microblogs “Foreign Per Diem Rates in China (in U.S. Dollars),” which listed in great detail U.S. diplomats’ per diem in 10 Chinese cities (“U.S. Foreign Per Diem Rates,” 2012). It went viral again.

Phase 4: Issue recedes, new issue ferments. The public diplomacy activities involving Ambassador Gary Locke lasted for about 3 months and then ebbed at around the beginning of 2012. However, the U.S. embassy continued to use its social media to communicate to the followers of its social media postings. Meanwhile, signs of new issues were emerging. Chinese social media’s attention was soon grasped by another issue that went viral.

Evaluation of effects. The anecdotes surrounding the U.S. ambassador caused widespread reflections, discussions, and debates on China’s social media. Most of the netizens used Ambassador Locke’s humble gesture to attack corrupt Chinese officials. For example, when the Beijing Daily’s microblog challenged Ambassador Locke to declare his assets, Chinese netizens demanded that Chinese officials first declare their assets, which were not in public records in China. Many praised the U.S. institutions that made such humility possible. The heated debate prompted the official Chinese media and government officials to make face-saving responses, most of which drew responses from social media users.

Case 2: The U.S. Embassy’s PM2.5 measure

Phase 1: Issue ferments and goes viral

Initial signs of issue and decision not to act. On November 21, 2010, the U.S. embassy in Beijing commented on its Twitter account BeijingAir (https://twitter.com/beijingair) that the air quality (or Air Quality Index [AQI]) in China’s capital city was “Crazy bad.” The embassy started to post its own air monitoring results in spring 2008 to inform its staff, their families, and U.S. expatriates in Beijing of the air quality in the city. The comment was soon deleted by the embassy staff, but a small number of Chinese social media users who managed to circumvent China’s firewall that blocked Twitter started to follow the postings on BeijingAir.

Triggering event and viral trends on social media. On October 22, 2011, China’s real estate tycoon Pan Shiyi posted on his microblog an iPhone image of the BeijingAir
posting showing that the air in Beijing was “hazardous” on the day, and the AQI was 439 (when AQI values are greater than 100, air quality is considered to be unhealthy). Pan’s microblog had 7 million followers. His post was immediately reposted 5,000 times. Some netizens noticed that the AQI posted by the Municipal Environment Bureau of Beijing on the same day was only 132, or “slightly polluted.” It turned out that Beijing used the PM10 gauge instead of the PM2.5 measure. The PM2.5 measure is stricter than the PM10 as it measures particles 2.5 microns or smaller in diameter. Soon a discussion of Beijing’s air quality and its measurement raged on China’s social media. A search of the Chinese keywords “U.S. embassy” and “PM2.5” generated 1,970,000 results in Google. The same keywords in the Baidu Index revealed very high attention to the topic by the media (see Figure 2).

Coverage by traditional media. As in Ambassador Locke’s case, news media in the English world, including the New York Times (Wong, 2011b) and the Wall Street Journal (Spegele, 2012), reported the U.S. embassy’s PM2.5 measure and its impact on Chinese society. Chinese news media also joined the coverage.

Phase 2: Proactive phase

(Possible) research. In the beginning, the U.S. embassy seemed to be cautious when it deleted the “crazy bad” Twitter posting. In addition, it posted the monitoring results

![Figure 2. Chinese social media and traditional media’s attention to the U.S. embassy and PM2.5.](image)

Figure was retrieved from the Baidu Index. The original Chinese labels have been translated into English.
on the Twitter account only in English, and the Twitter account was blocked by China’s firewall and thus was not accessible to the general Chinese public. Such decisions were very likely based on an evaluation of the potential consequences.

Decided to act. As the PM2.5 issue became viral on China’s social media, the U.S. embassy became proactive. It directly broadcast the AQI in Chinese to millions of Chinese netizens on its Sina microblog account. The U.S. consulates in the southern city of Guangzhou and the eastern city Shanghai also launched their online broadcasting of the local AQI (Areddy, 2012). Again, as in the previous case, in the perspective of the mixed-motive model, the actions constituted “cooperation,” “unconditionally constructive,” and “win-win” strategies toward the Chinese, who benefited from the broadcasting.

Phase 3: Reactive phase

Conflict emerges. The PM2.5 issue eventually evolved into a diplomatic dispute. Chinese officials argued that the U.S. data might “confuse” the Chinese public because they were conflicted with China’s own published air quality readings (Chin, 2012). Chinese senior officials demanded that the U.S. embassy stop monitoring the air quality and publishing the results. The officials suggested that such actions were “not in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and Vienna Convention on Consular Relations” (“China Tells,” 2012). The Environmental Bureau of Beijing declared that the embassy’s numbers were not professional because its monitoring station was located by the highway. The bureau chief accused the U.S. embassy of “hyping” the numbers.

Respond to conflict. Facing the conflict, the approaches that the U.S. embassy took can be summarized as “contention” and “compromise.” The U.S. embassy spokesman insisted that the monitoring “is a resource for the health of the consulate community, but is also available through our Twitter feed for American citizens who may find the data useful.” He further said, “We caution, however, that citywide analysis of air quality cannot be done using readings from a single machine” (Bradsher, 2012).

As the dispute continued, the Chinese government changed its attitude. It stressed that it did not oppose the foreign embassies collecting air quality information for their own staff or diplomats. It just did not want the U.S. embassy to release the information to the Chinese public. To this, the U.S. embassy responded that “the monitor is an unofficial resource for the health of the consulate community” (Olesen, 2012). It appeared that the U.S. embassy compromised by stopping publishing the monitoring results in Chinese language. But it continued to release them in English on its home page and its BeijingAir Twitter account.

Evaluation of effects. The U.S. embassy’s PM2.5 measure prompted heated debate on China’s social media. Numerous social media users questioned why China’s environment agencies did not adopt the same measure. The real estate tycoon who first posted the BeijingAir measure launched an online appeal to the government to change its way
of gauging air pollution, which garnered 40,000 votes, 92% of which supported the appeal. As a result of the viral trends, PM2.5, a highly technical term formerly known only by experts, has become a common word in China. Soon after the controversy, China’s State Council promulgated revised air quality standards that included an index for PM2.5. Starting with 27 provincial capitals and three key regions, the new gauge will be implemented nationwide in five years. By January 1, 2016, all urban areas in China must measure PM2.5.

**Mapping the SIM Process of Social Media Use in Public Diplomacy**

*Mapping the SIM Process*

The two case analyses indicated that the SIM process of social media use in public diplomacy may be divided into four phases: First, the issue ferments and goes viral. In this phase, signs of an issue emerge on social media, diplomats decide to act or not, a triggering event may make the issue go viral, and traditional news media may jump on the bandwagon. Second is the proactive phase. In this phase, diplomats might conduct research on the viral trends, stage events and take actions to reinforce the favorable trends, and use social media and traditional media to position the agenda and crystallize the public opinion. Third is the reactive phase. In this phase, the actions by the diplomats may cause backlashes and conflicts may emerge on social media, and diplomats may resort to different negotiation approaches, which may not be limited to dialogue, to respond to the conflict. Finally, the issue recedes and a new issue ferments. In this phase, the issue gradually recedes. But the organization may continue to communicate with its key publics through social media to build long-term relationships. At the same time, new issues may be fermenting on social media (see Figure 3).

*Strategic Use of Social Media*

As can be seen in the four phases, social media may become strategic tools in the proactive and reactive phases when they are used to drive the viral trends, to communicate staged events and actions, to stress the key values, and to resolve conflicts, all of which are essential in achieving long-term policy goals and organizational missions. In the issue fermenting and issue receding phases, however, social media may be tactical tools because they are mostly related to daily, routine, small-scale actions.

*Reassessment of Engagement*

As the cases showed, the strategies that the U.S. diplomats took to reinforce the positive viral trends included “cooperation,” “unconditionally constructive,” and “win-win,” while those adopted to respond to conflicts included “contention,” “principled approach,” and “compromise,” two of which were one-way, asymmetrical advocacy.
This corroborates the argument that the engagement doctrine should not be narrowly equated to dialogue. Social media may pose opportunities, problems, and even conflicts. Their users may represent very diverse publics. As a result, diplomats have to resort to myriad negotiation strategies, ranging from advocacy to accommodation, to achieve success. Thus, the mixed-motive model of public relations may serve as a better framework to interpret engagement.

**Comparing the SIM Approach to Gilboa’s Models**

The SIM approach to social media use in public diplomacy has shown some characteristics that are not described by earlier public diplomacy models, such as the ones developed by Gilboa (2008). First, in the SIM approach, an issue that has the potential to become a public diplomacy campaign may be unwittingly started by an individual social media user, and it requires wisdom to grasp the opportunity and turn the anecdote into a campaign. Second, viral dissemination on social media has become the key channel of communication. But it still needs the corroboration of traditional news media. Third, the main effects of such public diplomacy campaigns are on the target society’s public sphere. Foreign policy and national image are lesser concerns. Last, the entire public diplomacy process is “on the record” of the social media, which makes it possible to easily and accurately measure the effects. All these indicate that the SIM approach may be further developed into a model of public diplomacy in the era of social media. See the comparison in Table 1.
Discussions and Conclusion

Based on two case studies, this research tentatively mapped the SIM process of social media use in public diplomacy. Apart from its implications for a reassessment of the engagement doctrine as discussed above, the research has a number of other implications.

First, as was shown by the two cases, growth of the public sphere represented by expansion of social media should become a key goal of public diplomacy. The ongoing globalization has spawned a transnational public sphere, which has become increasingly interconnected with local public spheres (Guidry, Kennedy, & Zald, 2000). The United States and its democratic allies need to focus more resources on building local public spheres in target societies through effective use of social media. On the other hand, this means greater challenges for issue monitoring and tracking public diplomacy. Mega databases and application software designed for such purposes are needed.

Second, public diplomacy messages in the social media era should have very high proximity to the target society instead of being explicitly self-serving. As the cases showed, Chinese social media users were more concerned with problems within their own society, such as corruption and pollution, rather than with the positive images of the United States and its relations with China, which have been the major concerns of conventional public diplomacy.

Third, the study indicated that traditional boundaries that demarcate foreign and domestic issues, initiators, and recipients have become increasingly murky. An unintended foreign message might cause domestic policy changes, and domestic social media activities might be covered by foreign news media. In this sense, formal and informal firewalls, such as the stipulation in the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (the Smith–Mundt Act) that the Voice of America not target the U.S. domestic audience, or the physical firewalls built by the Chinese government, will become less meaningful in the social media era. All these will pose greater challenges for monitoring issues and formulating strategies in public diplomacy practices.

Finally, as every individual social media user can become an investigative journalist and a critical participant in the sphere of public opinion, it has become increasingly imperative that public diplomacy be practiced in a candid, honest, and truthful manner. Misinformation will become less effective; pretension and hyperbole can meet strong resistance from social media users who now have whole sets of tools of communication to express their points of view.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
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