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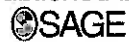
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Abstract

The elections of president Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 provided pivotal moments in U.S. relations with foreign publics. Examining the kind of communication cultivated between public diplomacy practitioners and publics, this article focuses on social media discourse about the 2012 U.S. election posted to U.S. diplomacy efforts on Facebook. We analyze information generated by U.S. embassy sites in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Pakistan to understand the qualities of the communication engendered by these public diplomacy overtures, the nature of public argument via the media platform, and how the election served as a process to further contemporary U.S. public diplomacy. We found that the discussion that took place in response to the announcement of Obama's reelection did not resemble a deliberative forum for debating U.S. foreign policy or regional implications. Rather, much of the messaging on these sites constituted what we term "spreadable epideictic." Implications are charted for research and practice.

Keywords

public diplomacy, epideictic, U.S. presidential election, international relations, Facebook

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U.S. presidential elections are a visible demonstration of the American political process to the outside world, potentially contributing to U.S. public diplomacy's mandate to communicate with and inform foreign audiences about the United States. President Barack Obama's election in 2008 was a pivotal moment in U.S. relations with foreign publics. That election also provided a window of opportunity to revitalize U.S. efforts at public diplomacy (Hayden, 2011a). Unlike 2008, after the 2012 election, the Obama administration found itself less popular among publics crucial to its foreign policy goals, a situation that raises questions about how the presidency itself can serve as a vehicle for public diplomacy practitioners (Golan & Yang, 2013). Specifically, how does the presidency shape or distort the kind of communication cultivated between public diplomacy practitioners and publics—given how the presidency is mediated through social networks and other global media flows and technological platforms?

At the conclusion of the 2012 presidential election, U.S. embassies in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Pakistan all posted information and news about the election on their social media sites. This article examines social media discourse about the 2012 election posted on their Facebook pages. Based on a close reading of the responses to these U.S. sites, we sought to understand the qualities of the communication engendered by these public diplomacy overtures, the nature of public argument via the Facebook platform, and how the election served as a process to further contemporary U.S. public diplomacy. These cases of social media-based public diplomacy are instructive for two reasons. First, they reveal how the presidency as a *de facto* tool of public diplomacy is *mediated* by a particular technological affordance. Second, it provides insight into the kind of discourse engendered through a public diplomacy program based on *facilitating* communication, rather than on the promotional ideal of communication typically associated with the concept of public diplomacy. This article finds that a particular form of communication practice emerged in the online discussion over the presidential election—a derivation of a traditional genre of public argumentation practice that we term “spreadable epideictic.”

The article first introduces the concept of public diplomacy and provides an overview of developments in its U.S. practice during the past decade and in the context of a presidential transition between George W. Bush and Barack Obama. It highlights the rise of public diplomacy practices that emphasize “facilitation” over messaging or public relations campaigns. The article then introduces Facebook communication posted by the U.S. embassies in Dhaka, Cairo, and Islamabad as a form of social media-based public diplomacy marking the reelection of Barack Obama. We then detail methods and findings from a close reading of public discourses posted to these Facebook pages shortly after the election, which illustrate the construct of *spreadable epideictic*. The article concludes with observations about the qualities of public argumentation mediated through both international and technological platforms.

Contemporary U.S. Diplomacy

Public diplomacy represents a range of practices charged with the cultivation of nation-state influence among foreign publics. Nicholas Cull (2009) describes the concept as

the management of “the international environment through engagement with a foreign public”—which, in the U.S. context, has been historically associated with international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchange programs (p. 12). The public diplomacy concept has become an increasingly commonplace aspect of statecraft, given the rise of nonstate actors as pivotal stakeholders in international relations and the ubiquity of information and communication technologies that enable their political power (Kelley, 2010).

Public diplomacy scholar-practitioner Bruce Gregory (2011) defines public diplomacy as “an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values” (p. 353). Gregory’s definition underscores both the capacity of nation-states to engage with foreign publics and, more importantly, the imperative of influence that ultimately warrants the practice of public diplomacy. For the United States and an increasing number of international actors, public diplomacy is perceived as necessary to achieve foreign policy objectives (Hayden, 2011b; Pamment, 2012a).

The recent history of U.S. public diplomacy since the events of 9/11 has, however, been characterized by a persistent stream of criticism (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Gregory, 2011; Lord & Lynch, 2010; Zaharna, 2009). A deluge of reports, white papers, and commentary have noted its lack of institutional resources and support in the wake of the 1999 dismantling of the United States Information Agency. U.S. public diplomacy has also been criticized for its Cold War communication tactics (Zaharna, 2005). From its international broadcasting outlets managed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors to the cultural, educational, and informational programs managed by the State Department, U.S. public diplomacy has been noted as persistently challenged or lacking, despite numerous observations among scholars and analysts about the increasing necessity of public diplomacy as a component of diplomacy (U.S. Department of State & Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, 2013; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009, 2010).

One of the most persistent critiques involves the nature of U.S. public diplomacy communication. Such critiques address assumptions underscoring public diplomacy practices: What are the expected burdens of persuasion and influence, who are the ideal subjects to public diplomacy, what are the appropriate media, and so on? R. S. Zaharna has questioned the logic of U.S. public diplomacy efforts that neglect the cultural context(s) of engagement, for instance (Zaharna, 2007). She notes how cultural attitudes toward communication become apparent in the kinds of public diplomacy programs developed. Zaharna questions the Western, individual-oriented modes of persuasion and influence that have tended to dominate U.S. practice and strategy. Public diplomacy thus represents a controversial field of influence-oriented communication bearing the burden of considerable scrutiny and reflexivity.

Despite such criticisms, U.S. public diplomacy programs have been noted for their innovation (Hanson, 2012; Paris, 2013). Specifically, the use of social media tools and novel forms of collaborative and dialogical engagement via online platforms represent an emergent shift in practice, away from more propagandistic, “monological” models

of international communication (Comor & Bean, 2012; Hayden, 2013). Programs like the Digital Outreach Team, which put State Department bloggers into conversations with Arabic and Farsi discussion forum participants, represent this kind of communication ethic (Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2011).

Shifting perceptions are also apparent in the rise of “facilitative” public diplomacy initiatives (Gregory, 2011; Wallin, 2012). Messaging and promotional attitudes toward public diplomacy practice have given way to more collaborative and indirect approaches to global engagement, in part because of the difficulties of “broadcasting” methods of outreach and the limitations of using public diplomacy tools as short-term methods of influence (Entman, 2008). Similarly, both former undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs James Glassman and former assistant secretary of state for public affairs P. J. Crowley have noted the limitations of *rational-deliberative* models for communication in public diplomacy programming (Glassman, 2012). The force of the better argument may not be an effective route to shaping popular sentiments in environments like Pakistan, where resentment and distrust toward the United States are prevalent. No carefully construed, targeted message will necessarily overcome the larger effect of controversial drone strikes, for example.

Reflexive thought about the type of communication required in public diplomacy suggests scholars should put more attention on existing modes of outreach to foreign publics. If the movement of opinion over a particular issue or claim is not necessarily the goal of public diplomacy communication, then what is? For example, as former U.S. congressional advisor Paul Foldi has argued, the ideal end of public diplomacy may not be a specific instance of persuasion or the establishment of a particular network of relations. Rather, public diplomacy may ultimately be about the “benefit of the doubt” (Foldi, 2012).

In other words, the kind of communication involved in practices of public diplomacy may operate under requirements that differ from the standards normally associated with persuasion. If the goal of public diplomacy is increasingly about building credibility and complicating preconceived notions (e.g., negative media framing of the United States), then concerns over the scale of attitudinal or behavioral change may be less important. Hypothetically, public diplomacy communication may constitute something more performative or symbolic than deliberative or forensic argumentation.

There are a few key reasons for this changing imperative for public diplomacy, at least in the United States’ case. First, the United States’ ability to use public diplomacy to make persuasive arguments has not diminished the agency of other interlocutors, from publics to foreign governments to extremist organizations, to use media to frame the United States (Corman & Trethewey, 2007; Entman, 2008). Yet, as is often the case, other actors may have greater credibility as communicators. The limited impact of the U.S. Al-Hurra satellite station in the Middle East effectively illustrates this point, as other media outlets have much more audience attention and perceived legitimacy (Kraidy, 2009; Powers & Gilboa, 2007). Second, the idea that influence might be solely sourced to the construction of a message or campaign is a poor strategy for designing a public diplomacy initiative. As Ali Fisher and others have effectively shown, influence is as much a quality of the relational strategies that public diplomacy

cultivates as it is an effect of any message promotion or more overt form of symbolic inducement (Fisher, 2010). Both Fisher and Zaharna have argued that the strategy of public diplomacy needs to account for how influence, in the near and far term, may be more about qualities of relational structures (Zaharna, Fisher, & Arsenault, 2013).

As such, the so-called new public diplomacy perspective advocated by scholars anticipates significant changes in the practice of public diplomacy, as a result of the preponderance of both communication technology and the significance of networks as actors within international relations (Melissen, 2011). A new public diplomacy therefore would require attention to both the tools and the agents or stakeholders of this environment. What remains underspecified in these visions, however, are the communication practices and elements—the symbols, appeals, and discursive moves—that sustain such relations within the networked environs of new public diplomacy (Hocking, Melissen, Riordan, & Sharp, 2012). Put directly, what kind of communication is required, and what sorts of content are crucial to public diplomacy practices (even if “messages” are not as central to public diplomacy programming)?

This article sustains two contentions about the contemporary environment for public diplomacy. First, highly visible representatives can serve increasingly important roles in public diplomacy as a kind of *de facto* resource. In this case, the president of the United States is a symbolic figure laden with meaning about the United States, its legitimacy, and its perceived agency as a global power. Examining how foreign publics engaged via public diplomacy talk or make claims about the U.S. president can yield insight into specific contextual and discursive boundaries that work to define and constrain attitudes toward the United States—with an objective to ascertain not the best route to influence but how an asymmetric power like the United States can best engage in and comprehend meaningful conversations with foreign publics. The second contention rests on the assumption that the technological context—the affordance of the social media platform—represents an equally significant focal point for inquiry.

Platforms like Facebook do not yield new “magic bullets” for international persuasion but represent qualitatively distinct fora within which controversial topics are discussed, resolved, and otherwise incorporated into the social and cultural function of social media to sustain ties of identity and community. In other words, a public diplomacy about the U.S. president represents a salient topic; a public diplomacy within social media represents a meaningful locus for communication.

Measurement, Background, and Method

One of the most pressing concerns facing public diplomacy practitioners and planners is the need to demonstrate impact. Given the fiscal pressures on ministries of foreign affairs both within the United States and elsewhere, there is considerable demand for public diplomacy to be justified as something other than simply a long-term endeavor that is difficult to quantify or measure (Banks, 2011; Pamment, 2012b).

Public diplomacy thus involves a range of practices and strategic objectives that do not necessarily mandate *polling* as an indicator of effectiveness. As public diplomacy has moved online to encompass modes of digital engagement through new and social

media, new forms of evaluation are necessary. The evaluation imperative has created an exigency for reconsidering the kinds of interactions/communication that these modes of outreach involve.

Much of the critique leveled against previous U.S. attitudes toward public diplomacy included prescriptive reforms calling for more dialogue and collaborative approaches (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Zaharna et al., 2013). But what does dialogue cultivated by social media public diplomacy efforts look like? The convergence of public diplomacy and presidential exposure to foreign audiences via social media offers a unique vantage point to consider the following: First, it provides a glimpse at the kind of program that specifically invites audience responses. Most public diplomacy scholarship presents normative critiques about an ideal mode of outreach through communication. In this instance, we attend to the actual nature of the communication. Second, it provides a means to consider larger questions about the mediating role of technology to cultivate deliberate, political discourse. Public diplomacy policy-making discourse is freighted with tacit assumptions that a more rational-deliberative approach toward engagement with foreign audiences is necessary to both influence through the force of argument and to convey legitimacy on behalf of the “sender” (e.g., if we just had more engagement, public diplomacy would work; Comor & Bean, 2012; Hayden, 2013). In this case, we find that the nature of social media discourse rarely conforms to any deliberative standard but nevertheless does contain argument claims that can be evaluated.

Third, based on existing studies within cyberculture, public sphere, and political communication studies, we can reasonably propose that the technological *affordances* shape and constrain the nature of the “classical” dimensions of public diplomacy strategy—to inform, influence, and build relationships. In other words, the mediated context of a communication technology platform opens up the possibility to consider alternative practices of public diplomacy outreach that accommodates not only what these platforms can enable but how they are actually used.

There are limits, obviously, to the ways in which a social media platform can be leveraged as a tool for public diplomacy. Indeed, the notion of “affordance” invites speculation into the way a digital media platform is endowed with significance through cultural and social practice as much as technological capacity (Couldry, 2012; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Put another way, a social media platform is likely embedded within a localized “storytelling network” of available communication outlets—a fabric of interpersonal, organizational, and mass-mediated communication that is defined by its role in specific contexts to sustain social ties, shape identity, enable political agency, and so on (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2008). When an asymmetric power like the United States enters into these spaces, its participation as an interlocutor does not necessarily mean it is a part of how social media platforms function as an aspect of community or a public. The United States may just as easily be seen as an interloper that could be manifest in how participants edit or frame their commentaries and conceal the “real” discussions for other venues. Still, these media are increasingly important sites of communication for publics, and the United States has declared its intent to be “present” in spaces where “conversations” are taking place (McHall, 2013).

We investigated three instances of public diplomacy communication via U.S. embassy Facebook postings. Embassies in Dhaka, Cairo, and Islamabad all posted announcements regarding the conclusion of the U.S. presidential election. All the authors conducted a close reading of the entire corpus of “comments” for the Facebook posts. The use of “argument” as opposed to a content analysis of terms, qualifiers, or descriptive language constituted the principal unit for analysis. We sought to understand how Facebook participants make reasonable claims about the United States, in this case, in the context of a presidential election. Critically, a distinction between content analysis and close readings of public argument gets at what the “normative” public diplomacy scholarship repeatedly emphasizes. Much of this scholarship settles on the notion that the message of public diplomacy matters *less* than the form and ethos intrinsic in the practice of communication. Likewise, the “new public diplomacy” literature further emphasizes the role of social structure (e.g., networks) in sustaining or enabling the possibility of influence (Melissen, 2011). Reading public arguments (in this case, the *de facto* claims contained in statements in a social media network) tests some of these assumptions, in the sense that they may illustrate how foreign publics are actually engaging in some sort of articulated reasoning about the United States and its highly visible president.

For this study, we examined comments posted to the U.S. embassy Facebook pages in Dhaka, Cairo, and Islamabad. Specifically, we looked at the comments posted in response to links put on up the embassy page during and immediately after the election (November 5-8, 2012, to account for the time difference with the United States)—in which Cairo yielded 229 comments, Dhaka 576, and Islamabad 1,383.¹ The pages of these three embassies were chosen because they are among the most “liked” Facebook pages maintained by any U.S. embassy.² Furthermore, these locations are significant because they are attached to U.S. diplomatic missions in regions crucial to U.S. foreign policy objectives and interests. Increased resources are being directed toward such online efforts; the International Information Programs bureau of the State Department alone has sponsored or promoted a variety of initiatives to increase usage of these sites, such as the “20/100” program for 20 U.S. embassies around the world to improve their user enrollments by 100% (U.S. Department of State & Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, 2013).

This effort at promotion has not been wholly uncontroversial. Recent institutional review documents have raised questions about the strategy behind the U.S. reliance on recruiting “likes” to its social media presence around the world, for instance (U.S. Department of State & Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, 2013). While some have argued that the U.S. is effectively “buying likes,” there is little argument that the number of individuals who have “liked” the Facebook pages has increased (Hanson, 2013; Hudson, 2013). As of August 2013, the U.S. embassy in Islamabad was the embassy with the highest number of Facebook fans by 1,089,367 “likes.” The U.S. embassy in Cairo and Dhaka are not far behind, with 801,963 and 575,086 followers, respectively.³ While it may be difficult to describe these kinds of connections as meaningful in terms of policy objectives (at least in the short term), these statistics nonetheless reflect a significant number of connections

to foreign publics in countries with strong anti-American sentiments, which might not otherwise exist.

A close reading of these comments focuses on the kind of communication associated with these connections to gauge the qualities enabled by this form of public diplomacy. What emerged was something decidedly different from a deliberative forum for debating U.S. foreign policy, the implications of the presidential election for the region, and so on. Rather, the posts became a platform for sharing convictions, praising the process, and announcing expectations for democracy and identification (and sometimes division) with the United States.

Analysis

A number of Facebook embassy page features will be highlighted from the analysis, but our focus is primarily on the emerging construct of “spreadable epideictic” demonstrated across the postings. Contributing to scholarly understandings of what public diplomacy engagement is or should be, epideictic challenges deliberative visions for transnational public diplomacy, in particular. The study of epideictic discourse goes back to Aristotle, who positioned the genre with ceremonial occasions involving “praise” or “blame” (Aristotle, 2007). Epideictic involves moral critique and performative displays, typically through a process of “communal definition” and “entertainment” (Bostdorff, 2011; Condit, 1985; Poulakos, 1987).

Epideictic focuses on the present, aesthetics, and the cultivation of common values, where often “the act of communication itself is the most important part” (Danisch, 2006, p. 291; Vigsö, 2010). As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) note, epideictic tends to increase the “intensity of adherence to values held in common by the audience of the speaker” (p. 52). Yet recent research also indicates that epideictic is a form that “potentially facilitates communication among people with different views” (Agnew, 2008, p. 147). In fact, epideictic rhetoric can be an important precursor to more deliberative discourse and can also foreground forensic communication (Marunowski, 2008, p. 53; Palczewski, 2005). With direct relevance to our research, a study of President Nixon’s 1972 trip to China even showed that epideictic and diplomatic rhetorics can combine to help bridge differences between nations (Yang, 2011).

For all three of the embassies, we find that Facebook postings about the U.S. president and election can be firmly situated as epideictic communication. More so, the medium appears to foster “spreadable” epideictic, where discourse engaging in praise or blame advances further epideictic invention. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) state that new technologies have created spreadable media, or “an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” than more traditional media forms (p. 1). Similarly, each embassy created online fora as a focal point for the U.S. presidential election—sometimes intervening on the sites in response to citizen questions or comments, but mostly leaving argumentation open-ended for participants to post on each wall.

The forms of public argumentation (claims-making, expression, engagement with other interlocutors, etc.) on platforms like Facebook portend a critical, undertheorized

aspect about public diplomacy. While public diplomacy scholarship has addressed notions of stakeholderhood from a public relations and strategic communication perspective, there is little attention to the functioning of increasingly mediated *publics* outside of references to new forms of dialogue (Paul, 2011; Vanc, 2012). Public diplomacy requires a more robust understanding of the textures and practices of publics online, if it is to effectively (and ethically) engage in transparent and persuasive international communication (Baym & boyd, 2012; Comor & Bean, 2012).

In one sense, the epideictic postings simply evidence spaces for political voice and agency, with some pockets of deliberation and other kinds of communication developing in a somewhat cascading fashion. On the Cairo Facebook site, for instance, exclamations of “obama...obama...obama,”⁴ “we love American people,”⁵ or “GO GOOBAMA.....congratulation president OBAMA we trust you man,”⁶ appeared to act—often quite rapidly—as bases for further epideictic postings praising the president or the nation. Most of the commentary that was included in the observations for this article was in response to embassies’ posts announcing Obama’s victory after the November 6 elections. As a result, the vast majority of the responses were congratulatory and involved statements that ranged from a single word (“Congratulations” or “Congrats”) to a sentence or two (for example, “Congratulation Mr. President. God bless you, your family and people of United States.”⁷). Among such comments, one could also find celebratory statements like “HiP HiP Hooray..... OBAMAAAAAAA,”⁸ or “Dance Obama, dance world with a song of Candi poo.o candi poo poo.”⁹

The U.S. presidential election provided a synecdochal point for a type of public diplomacy that looked less like dialogue or deliberation than simply fragments fueled by quick expressive emoting and some moral critique. While such discourse might not rise to the level of instrumental political talk, from a public diplomacy viewpoint, it can be seen as serving a pre-rhetorical function of establishing points of identification that offline life or more traditional media may not afford.

While important, such simple expressions act as a foundation for communication that occasionally functions to support deeper political venturings. First, on each site, the occasional intervention of U.S. embassy representatives posting pictures or answering questions about where expatriates can vote, for instance, appears to serve as additional layers for the spreading epideictic form of diplomacy. The embassies *slight* top-down interventions into the sites constitutes a basic participatory form in which the U.S. and foreign publics meet, however imperfectly by rational-deliberative standards. Second, evidence of broadened diplomatic testing and expansion is demonstrated by some citizen comments. On the Cairo site, one Egyptian participant commented that “if I were american I will vote for Obama,”¹⁰ highlighting how a degree of political imagination and role-playing could be fostered by what might seem like insignificant epideictic conditions.

Others launched from the presidential election focus and such comments to hypotheticals like “To all American - congratulations to the election- I wonder can Egypt change too????”¹¹ The epideictic “congratulations” praising the election appears to provide an important basis for segueing to Egypt’s deliberative and political capacities in the latter part of the sentence. In the following comment on the Islamabad post,

“Congrats to US on holding free and fair elections and being a role model of democracy,”¹² we find both epideictic praise and some political flourish—that the U.S. election should be emulated. It is noteworthy that the “facilitative communication” here does not involve the U.S. embassy’s promoting the U.S. election as fair or free; such comments appear to be inductively generated and “spread” via foreign publics. While a cursory glance at the incomplete and fragmented ceremonial language of the forum might appear inconsequential, we thus find that they are actually important arguments serving as prior to or grounds for diplomacy.

A smaller number of congratulatory responses were longer and involved an attempt at a more “in-depth” analysis. Thus, for instance, one commentator complimented Obama for the work he had done to “keep us rising above all of the Bush’s mistakes after all they are the reason our country was where it was”—as well as the entire family for being supportive and “wonderful.”¹³ Another commentator from Dhaka hailed the prospect of Obama’s victory for democratic change in Bangladesh:

Victory of Obama will be more helpful to our country & the peaceful meddle East. Welcome your victory Mr. Obama. I am hopeful you may pl, put a foot step in our country & give us lesson to how the democratic process continue in Bangladesh culture.¹⁴

Importantly, amid such epideictic praise or blame, participants sometimes even called for the United States to support more direct diplomatic action(s). Responding to the Dhaka post, a commenter wrote, “many many thanks 2 u’r people 4 re-select U Mr. Obama! We want a peaceful world! We hope, U protect our religion right from the evil person,”¹⁵ appealing in some sense to another country’s ability to protect traditions within. Simply praising the president or the election itself provided a focal point for aspirations about global peace in other statements, too, like “Hope he will make the world more safer for everyone.”¹⁶

To be clear, there was not much talk evidenced between the people posting to these sites. A statement like “wish u best of luc,”¹⁷ followed by a similar statement, cannot be characterized under terms of intersubjective argumentation or deliberation. But the simple presence of others engaging in such comment chains does seem to serve a clear diplomatic function of spreading news of the election outcome and situating participants in some relation to the United States, warranting concerns for global citizenship, as in the “make the world safer” comment above. The epideictic language may also bridge, potentially, Bangladeshi citizens living in both Bangladesh and the United States, as a reminder that both countries share some common ground and cause. Transnational links were evidenced in comments such as the following: “I heard it live in chicago, what a pleasant and the happiest day of my life...my faith...dream and trust came true...i m so happy for United states and the whole world,”¹⁸ and “congratulation,,i waited 25 mints today to votel for Barack Obama. at the Backman high School, Irvine California..”¹⁹

Beyond the majority of emotive statements and exclamations within the comment pools, there were also some contributions from “trolls”²⁰ or “spammers.”²¹ Despite the lack of dialogue, there were some notable exceptions. One involved several exchanges in response to two of the posts by the Cairo embassy:

[S]1: Obama will be thrown out of the White House tomorrow. USA belongs to Romney and he will be our savior from Obama gangs

[S]2: Noticed all Muslims here want Obama because he's Muslim. Too bad, most Americans want Romney, good Christian man with value and conviction. I'll vote all the way for Republican, ROMNEY ROMNEY ROMNEY. Eat your heart out Muslims

Response 1: um, what, [S]? muslims aren't american? hahahaha. neither were christians until they killed off the indigenous population and set up camp...

Response 2: @[S] please take your Fox news brainwashed dribble elsewhere. You obviously have never been to Egypt nor do you have any respect for Muslims.²²

In the discussion, both the initial comment and the responses seem to have come from Americans themselves, which appear far from the type of civil-rational discussion that proponents of diplomacy would advocate. In another example, however, embassy moderators themselves responded to an inflammatory comment, demonstrating that the largely epideictic forum could open critical junctures for audiences to view some argumentative public diplomacy:

[Comment 1]: there are no any democracy in usa, you should be one of the 2 political party and has relation with israel and supported from the jew community to success in usa? right this is democracy?

U.S. Embassy Cairo: In the U.S., everyone has the opportunity to vote and we ensure that civil liberties are protected including freedom of expression so, yes, the U.S. is a democracy, but that does not mean that we are perfect. We constantly strive, year after year, to improve our democracy. Thanks for your comment.²³

Even though these kinds of exchanges and discussions are, arguably, the very objective of those Facebook pages and postings, we find that they are undergirded by spreadable epideictic that may posture, inform, or even offend.

While most posts across the threads appeared to praise the presidential victory, not all were celebratory—with many calling U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan into question, in particular. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Islamabad posts, where participants wove objections to Obama, the election, and other features of U.S. foreign policy together. Posts include “bad president,”²⁴ “hate this bastard,”²⁵ “I hate US...,”²⁶ and “Terrorist USA... Hell with Obama.”²⁷ While expressions undergirded by like/dislike or love/hate binaries may seem too simplistic for diplomatic communication, we contend that the very structure of Facebook as a container for such epideictic, expressive discourse at least serves to clarify civic identities and agencies that may not otherwise have been afforded. The relative permanency of postings and social signaling (that the election warrants collective attention) threaded throughout each forum structure pre-argumentative comments that are critical for public diplomacy. Epideictic brings to this picture of global communication a sense for the untidiness of comparative rhetorics clashing in a common online space and a need for open-ended commenting of all kinds within that space.

More important, epideictic comments that blamed or found cause for concern with Obama or the election sometimes developed into substantive critiques. For example, the following comment was made on the Islamabad post:

doesn't matter whoever came Romney or Obama its all a big drama no need to change the President need to change the lobby behind these presidents which is same from both sides so it doesn't effect whoever wins specially for Muslims."²⁸

In such cases, epideictic grounds led to deliberative claims: that larger structural changes are needed in U.S. politics. At times, hybrid forms of epideictic discourse even developed, with participants both praising the election but calling for policy changes. The epideictic point, 'Congrats President Obama!' was followed by the deliberative assertion, "Hope you would end Drone strikes in Pakistan which has taken away hundreds of innocent lives."²⁹ One commenter further urged, "Peaceful solutions are available. Stop War, Start Peace."³⁰ In essence, what starts as epideictic carries the potential to spread outward in ways that go against more formal understandings of argumentation or deliberation.

Since all three Facebook pages are maintained by embassies located in majority-Muslim countries, it is worth finally noting how the presidential election also fueled a common theme of conspiracy and anti-Israeli/Jewish sentiment and a perceived attack on all Muslims in some of the posts. One participant argued,

Both r enemies of muslim world and they destroyed Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Syria, divided Sudan into 2 parts, now they want to cut Balochistan from Pakistan also. It is Quran decesion that christian and jews can never be our friends.³¹

Similar attitudes were reflected in comments like the following:

Well Obama won ok. But as far as PAK is concerned they wl still be attacking with drones. USA has always been against the muslims. It attacked Afghanistan n Iraq just because its a Muslim country. It supports Israel n arms them with latest weapons. Their foreign policies r always stupid n against he Muslims. Just because its a superpower it does not mean that it should attack the weak states.³²

Others raised the issue of Palestine³³ and the role of the (pro-)Israel lobby in U.S. politics.³⁴ Although such comments may challenge U.S. foreign policy or generate anti-American sentiment, they are embedded within a host of other epideictic assertions that can, in some sense, be seen as greater than the sum of their parts in allowing all kinds of talk to develop that might "spread" into other forms of argument, as the policy claim, "does not mean that it should attack the weak states," appended onto the end of the last comment demonstrates. Moreover, that the embassies would permit these comments without taking them off each page may also serve to establish some credibility between the United States and some foreign publics.

Discussion/Conclusion

While it is possible to assess these posts along varying degrees of emotional investment (anger, happiness, etc.), what stood out most was the persistence of certain kinds of claims and judgments without reliance on the types of evidentiary standards one might expect in a serious critique of U.S. policies or the presidency. We find two basic reasons for this. First, participatory forums, like Facebook, cultivate communities of identity performance that reaffirm more than question (Baym & boyd, 2012). In other words, we would expect to find the *affordance* of the medium to yield certain kinds of claims-making that serve a social function to sustain or cultivate community. In this study, we find that the Facebook posts—in all three cases—most commonly exhibited expressions of support for the United States, its character, and legitimacy. The second reason to expect this kind of usage is selection bias. Content “trolls” or provocateurs aside, we would expect to find a more positive nature to the kinds of posts left in the comments sections in the pre- and postelection days.

We conclude, however, that the compositional nature of these claims offers insight into the nature of “engagement” via social media that seems to underscore contemporary public diplomacy online and, potentially, reflect larger connections between the affordances of a technological platform and the social function of claims-making associated with such platforms (Brooke, 2009; Warnick & Heineman, 2012). Specifically, we noted that the kinds of argument claims posted online could be best categorized within what Aristotle termed the “epideictic” genre of argument. Epideictic was initially described by Aristotle as a ceremonial form of argument associated with celebrations and memorialization. In contrast, deliberative argumentation is typically concerned with the future and embodied in legislative and policy forums. Forensic argumentation is oriented toward understanding and recapitulating the past, such as in the context of the courtroom (Aristotle, 2007).

In the present analysis, the category of spreadable epideictic emerged inductively from the close reading of the posts, as it was clear that the commentators were not engaged in some sort of “debate” in the ideal-typical sense described in Habermas’s treatments of deliberative argument (see Goodnight, 2003). Rather, they were largely engaged in the “praise and blame” of the U.S. president and political institutions. Contrary to our expectations, we found the space of commentary and interaction to be more defined by performance than the crafting of evidence-based argumentation but in a way that, at times, easily spread outward to more substantive deliberative claims.

Rhetorical scholars have noted the persistence of the epideictic genre outside of ceremonial occasions to serve the social function of upholding communal values, supporting the status quo, and importantly, providing a platform to judge the speaker (rather than the content of the message; Danisch, 2006; Palczewski, 2005). While attention to epideictic is often located in studies of public address, the capacity of epideictic as a genre of making arguments may be uniquely suited to the performative contexts of social media discussion fora. As Chaim Perelman’s (1979) writings indicate, epideictic’s importance is in the kind of disposition it cultivates, a sense of

communion that elicits identification between the speaker and the audience or, in our case, between two countries in diplomatic efforts (Burke, 1969; see also Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969).

The context of this study aside, the notion of spreadable epideictic represents a potentially instructive concept for further investigation of public argumentation across the range of social media outlets that encourage or enable conversation, in particular among transnational or international fora for discussion. Spreadable epideictic carries implications not just for public diplomacy but also for the kinds of publics that manifest within and across particular mediated environments, and it invites further cultural and pragmatic attention to how online public spaces for political discussion are constructed and defined in ways that build on existing approaches that emphasize the deliberative practices associated with the medium of communication (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Carpini, 2012; Powers & Youmans, 2012; Warnick & Heineman, 2012).

This admittedly small snapshot of the international communication at stake within public diplomacy overtures opens up the prospect of a more nuanced assessment of communication practice, connecting public diplomacy as a term of foreign policy to the grounded realities of its context—as opposed to whether or not public diplomacy conforms to some idealized construct of policy makers. As mentioned at this essay's outset, public diplomacy discourse is predicated on an underdeveloped conceptualization of influence (Fisher, 2010). Specifically, the strategic ambitions of persuasion, relation building, and informing are rarely coupled with language that warrants how public diplomacy achieves these goals through communication. This study, however, is illustrative of a technologically mediated context through which public diplomacy outreach takes place and the kind of socially situated practices these contexts enable.

Despite the lack of deliberative-argumentative discussions that public diplomacy usually strives to encourage, the examples analyzed here best demonstrate the facilitative aspects of public diplomacy provided by new technologies and platforms such as Facebook. Spreadable epideictic was possible due to the normative and cultural communities already present in that online forum (and within their respective physical locations), where U.S. embassies interjected to pursue their public diplomacy objectives. However, beyond merely feeding information, the embassy pages also invited—and, thus, encouraged—the epideictic that followed, serving as facilitators of a discussion that, although pre-argumentative and emotive, provided an opportunity to further consolidate the existing communities, now centering their attention on the United States and its presidential election. If nothing else, it provides an accepted presence for the United States within these online fora. It demonstrates that the United States is willing to tolerate some of the most hateful comments by allowing people to express their excitement and grievances about the country and its president as a pre-argumentative foundation for public diplomacy engagement.

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Notes

1. The Cairo embassy had four posts within the time period under consideration: (a) <https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/286255348159563>, (b) <https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/298955960204781>, (c) <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10152242871340158.920831.285699990157&type=1>, and (d) <https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/127162920770610>. The embassy in Dhaka had one post: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1>, as did the one in Islamabad: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1>.
2. At the moment, the embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, has 593,405 followers; however, most of the comments—as well as the posts themselves—are in Indonesian, making it impossible for these authors to carry out a close analysis of the content.
3. The numbers are as of August 12, 2013.
4. See https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/286255348159563?comment_id=1286386&offset=0&total_comments=51 (Cairo).
5. See https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/127162920770610?comment_id=191493&offset=0&total_comments=97 (Cairo).
6. The comment, now deleted, was originally made in response to the following post by the embassy: https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/298955960204781?comment_id=1407105&offset=0&total_comments=50 (Cairo).
7. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731464&offset=1350&total_comments=1379 (Islamabad).
8. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731766&offset=1150&total_comments=1382 (Islamabad).
9. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8288623&offset=550&total_comments=576 (Dhaka).
10. See https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/286255348159563?comment_id=1286073&offset=0&total_comments=51 (Cairo).
11. See https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/298955960204781?comment_id=1405115&offset=0&total_comments=50 (Cairo).
12. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731704&offset=1200&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
13. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8288544&offset=550&total_comments=576 (Dhaka).
14. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8295034&offset=100&total_comments=576.
15. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8288702&offset=550&total_comments=578 (Dhaka).

16. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8289755&offset=400&total_comments=578 (Dhaka).
17. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8290432&offset=350&total_comments=578 (Dhaka).
18. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8290816&offset=300&total_comments=578 (Dhaka).
19. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731506&offset=1350&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
20. For examples, see https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731531&offset=1300&total_comments=1382 (Islamabad), https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7733832&offset=550&total_comments=1385 (Islamabad), and https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8288985&offset=500&total_comments=576 (Dhaka).
21. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731530&offset=1300&total_comments=1379 (Islamabad) or https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/298955960204781?comment_id=1404632&offset=0&total_comments=49 (Cairo).
22. See the exchange here: https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/28625348159563?comment_id=1287870&offset=0&total_comments=49.
23. See https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyCairo/posts/127162920770610?comment_id=185253&offset=50&total_comments=96.
24. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731472&offset=1350&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
25. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731723&offset=1200&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
26. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7739688&offset=200&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
27. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7732384&offset=950&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
28. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731733&offset=1200&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
29. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7732310&offset=950&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).
30. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7732004&offset=1100&total_comments=1400 (Islamabad).

31. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731628&offset=1250&total_comments=1382 (Islamabad).
32. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7733193&offset=700&total_comments=1385 (Islamabad).
33. See https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151151091904807&set=a.114158334806.98967.103157219806&type=1&comment_id=8289632&offset=450&total_comments=576 (Dhaka).
34. For examples, see https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731674&offset=1200&total_comments=1382 or https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151163393828621&set=a.177646208620.124211.160073033620&type=1&comment_id=7731733&offset=1200&total_comments=1382 (Islamabad).

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