



# Hashtag diplomacy: twitter as a tool for engaging in public diplomacy and promoting US foreign policy

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## Abstract

While national governments increasingly deploy digital diplomacy communication strategies to harness the power of social media, political scientists have paid sparse attention to certain aspects of this development. Our study endeavors to address this lacuna by employing content analysis and data-analytic methodologies to examine U.S. Twitter diplomacy. We leverage a robust dataset of tweets posted by leading foreign policy officials in the Obama administration to determine whether Twitter diplomacy exhibited a coherent communication strategy (per the rational actor model of foreign policy), or a more ad-hoc and disjointed practice (per the pluralist and bureaucratic politics models). Furthermore, this study assesses several variables relating to the efficacy of Twitter statecraft, including the formatting of tweets, and the resonance and geographic reach of tweets. We find that Twitter diplomacy under the Obama administration was largely rational; that is, it reflected the rational actor model, as the topic focus of tweets was proportional to stated U.S. foreign policy priorities.

**Keywords** Public diplomacy · Digital diplomacy · Twitter · Foreign policy · Rational actor

In an era when global communications are instantaneous, robust, and borderless, the capacity of ideas to influence global events is greater than ever. Public diplomacy has, therefore, emerged as one of the most vital tools of statecraft, and especially so for leading global powers such as the United States. The nation's ability to safeguard its security and promote its interests lies profoundly in its power to influence the global discourse on a wide range of issues. Traditional tools for doing so—embassies, media appearances, cultural exchanges—remain important to this task. Digital diplomacy, however, is an ascendant approach to public diplomacy, one which has evolved from a marginal activity to a central practice of state diplomacy. As expressed in Burson-Marsteller's (2017) *Twiplomacy* study, digital diplomacy “has gone from being an afterthought to being the very

first thought of world leaders and governments across the globe, as audiences flock to their Twitter newsfeeds for the latest news and statements.”

It is true that, increasingly, national government actors are developing and deploying communication strategies which harness the power of social networking sites (SNS) (Leight et al. 2011; Harris 2013; Cull 2013; Hocking and Melissen 2015; Kampf et al. 2015). Digital diplomacy leverages leading technological platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—which have become ubiquitous features of modern life—in order to amplify the government's policy priorities and perspective on world events and, in doing so, influence the global narrative on contemporary issues. The U.S. diplomatic community, in particular, understands that digital technologies serve as useful vehicles for viral messaging of “official content”, and also enable opportunities for two-way dialog between the United States and public audiences abroad (Strauß et al. 2015; Manor 2016; Metz 2001; Slaughter 2009; Zhang 2013; Khatib et al. 2012).

As such, there is a growing body of research which explores how Twitter, in particular, may or may not serve as an effective tool in this emerging era of digital diplomacy. Studies typically focus on whether efforts advance public engagement and dialog insofar as diplomats are able to effectively exploit the most innovative aspects of Twitter

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