

How are we doing? Tracking country image in the information age (NSF #306803)

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The study proposed here is the result of work conducted under NSF Digital Government Grant #306803, “How are we doing? Tracking country image in the information age.” The goal of the one-year planning grant (awarded May 2003) was to conduct project start-up activities. The objective of the study is to examine the institutional factors that influence the use of IT for knowledge management in public diplomacy. Specifically, we will examine the extent to which a knowledge management system (KMS) can aid U.S. public diplomacy officials by facilitating the public image-tracking process. To that end, we will develop and test a prototype KMS web portal designed to help public diplomacy officials gather, organize, search, and analyze image information. The two-year study will address such research questions as, what are the institutional impediments to the effective use of KMS to support image-tracking activities, and how can government agencies overcome these impediments to effectively use KMS for public diplomacy? We will partner with the U.S. Embassy in Bolivia.

Public Diplomacy and Advances in Information Technology

Public diplomacy is the practice of engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences in order to advance the interests and security of the United States (State Department website, <http://www.state.gov/r/>). Public diplomacy activities include traditional programs such as international exchanges, and new initiatives such as message placement and video campaigns. These activities are designed to both send messages to and receive messages from the rest of the world, and although the focus of U.S. public diplomacy efforts has been more on sending a message than on receiving and interpreting messages being sent to us, this project is motivated by the observation that it is now vital for the U.S. administration to constantly be aware of how the U.S. is perceived by the rest of the world (Sharma 2002). Today, it is just as appropriate for the President to ask, “How are we doing?” in Bolivia as in Boston. And yet the answer to this question in places like Bolivia is more elusive than ever before.

Public diplomacy practitioners use a variety of methods to answer the how we are doing question. Here, we focus on the monitoring of public media outlets. Through media outlets, practitioners assess daily fluctuations in opinions on a variety of topics through an almost constant flow of information. Given the complexity and time-consuming nature of this work, made even tougher in the post-9/11 world, traditional processes may no longer be as efficient as they once were, and they may not be sufficient to provide an accurate real-time picture of foreign opinions, or the effectiveness of public diplomacy activities designed to shape those opinions. Further complicating the environment, advances in IT pose fundamental challenges for the traditional conduct of public diplomacy (Peterson 2002, Potter 2002). “The combination of more global media, less costly technology, and the exponential growth of the Internet means that the degree of global transparency is destined to increase...(Potter 2002, p. 5).” No longer are gatekeepers, be they diplomats, governments or other organizations, able to control the flow of information surrounding international events (Gilboa 2002, Livingston 2002).

Today, citizens in countries around the world can react to a new U.S. policy immediately and can, in turn, communicate their sentiments to others in their own countries and around the world (Roper 2002). Opinions about the U.S. image are fluid and, to be accurate, image-tracking methods must allow for and be able to capture this fluidity. Although no technology-based process can replace the highly skilled Embassy personnel, using information technology to aid in the knowledge management tasks associated with image tracking could potentially increase both the efficiency and the effectiveness of their processes.

Study Framework

The proposed study focuses on understanding the institutional factors that influence the use of IT for knowledge management in public diplomacy. As an instance of IT, we will focus on the use of a web portal as a KMS and will examine how its use can facilitate public diplomacy. We focus solely on the public diplomacy activity of image tracking through public media outlets. The KMS portal will act as an internal support tool designed to assist Embassy public affairs staff. The role of the KMS portal will be to assist in the storage and sharing of explicit knowledge and to support the transfer of tacit knowledge by facilitating the integration of existing and new knowledge. The KMS portal will provide a central internal access point to a variety of important information related to image tracking. The KMS portal will use public media reports (e.g. press) as inputs. Based on our interviews with Embassy staff, we will develop content analysis and classification schemes that will then be automated and run by content analysis software applications through the KMS portal. Once the analyses are conducted, the results will be displayed through the web portal.

Intellectual Merit

The “Digital Diplomacy” project goals are consistent with the developing national agenda for digital government research as identified at the May 2002 National Center for Digital Government Workshop (Fountain 2002), as well the push toward information technology-enabled public diplomacy (Council on Foreign Relations 2002). Digital diplomacy (as the IT-enabled diplomacy process is often called) is seen as the most important innovation of the practice of diplomacy since the fifteenth century (Dizard 2001). Thus, understanding how the institutional environment shapes its use is of critical interest.

Broader Impact

Results of the “Digital Diplomacy” project have the potential to play a significant role in the war against terrorism. Many public diplomacy experts believe that more effective tracking of the U.S. image abroad must be a key component of U.S. foreign policy strategies as we fight the war against terrorism (Council on Foreign Relations 2002). The “Digital Diplomacy” project will aid this effort by giving public diplomacy practitioners the ability to increase data handling efficiency, and to enhance their ability to find patterns in and make stronger inferences about the data. As a result, this project is uniquely poised to further both the intellectual digital government research agenda and the practical goal of enhancing the quality of life for the American people.

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