Chapter 11

E-Government in Public Diplomacy: An Exploratory Analysis on Factors Affecting Interactive Interfaces in Ministry of Foreign Affairs Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to empirically explore the ways in which governments take advantage of interactive interfaces on the Web for public diplomacy purposes, the authors conduct a content analysis on 83 nations’ ministry of foreign affairs Websites. Through a statistical analysis, they found that a nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and level of telecommunication infrastructure are significant factors in accounting for variations in the level of interactivity offered in such E-Government Websites. In addition, the findings indicate a notable disparity between nations in the interactive adoption in several ways. The authors discuss implications and suggestions with respect to success factors for E-Government in public diplomacy.

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INTRODUCTION

In concert with the rapid development and diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), both academic and practical attention to Electronic Government (referred to as ‘E-Government’ hereafter) has been steadily growing over the last couple of decades (Barnes & Vidgen, 2007; Cohen, 2006; Heeks & Bailur, 2007). At the core of conceptual and operational basis for E-Government lies governments’ intensive as well as extensive adoption of ICTs for administrative and communicative purposes (Gil-Garcia & Martinez-Moyano, 2007; Gil-Garcia & Pardo, 2005; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012). In particular, the Internet has provided one of the principal technological foundations for the E-Government initiative and management (Das, DiRienzo, & Burbridge, 2009; Janssen, Kuk, & Wagenaar, 2008). A great number of governments now utilize and depend upon World Wide Web (WWW) not only as communication channels, but as virtual offices (Ebbers, Pieterson, & Noordman, 2008; Wangpipatwong, Chutimaskul, & Papasratorn, 2009). Along this vein, E-Government based on the Internet has evolved from merely rendering government information available and accessible to citizens to communicating, transacting, and consulting with those who are concerned online (Chen & Dimitrova, 2006; Cohen, 2006; Meijer & Thaens, 2009; van Dijk, Peters, & Ebbers, 2008).

The Internet has played an essential role as a virtual forum for interactive government-citizens communication and deliberation, thereby enhancing the level of governmental service quality and citizen satisfaction on many occasions (Anttiroiko, 2010; Cohen, 2006; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010). Public diplomacy through E-Government platforms, in particular, has emerged as one of the staples of nation’s foreign affairs governance (Cull, 2008; Lee, 2006). In fact, E-Government in public diplomacy appears to be of tremendous use—surmounting physical and geographical barriers for service provision, reducing managerial costs by minimizing red tape, and, perhaps most importantly, improving communication quality and citizen satisfaction by facilitating conversation and consultation overseas (Ebbers et al., 2008; Khalil, 2011). As a result, E-Government in public diplomacy has gained its momentum in recent years with regard to not only managerial efficiency but communication potential (Castells, 2008; Cull, 2008). A review of literature, however, revealed that E-Government in public diplomacy has received lukewarm scholarly attention and, thus, has been rather underexplored and understudied, relative to the domestic use of E-Government.

We, accordingly, aimed to address such an issue in this chapter. We conceptualized and operationalized E-Government in public diplomacy specifically from a communication perspective with special attention to the aspect of interactivity. The main reasons are twofold. First, one of the characteristics that differentiate public diplomacy from conventional types of diplomacy is its emphasis on government-citizens interactions rather than government-government interactions. (For further review, see L’Etang, 2009; Payne, 2009; Signitzer & Wamser, 2006). Therefore, it appeared to be important to understand public diplomacy from an E-Government communication perspective. Second, although public diplomacy can be distinguished from other governmental services because of its unique foreign recipients, explicating public diplomacy as E-service seemed to be premature at this point in consideration of the lack of E-Government studies on public diplomacy. As an exploratory attempt to link public diplomacy with the stream of E-Government research, we explicated public diplomacy from a general government-citizens interaction perspective.

We analyzed 83 nations’ ministry of foreign affairs Web sites and measured the degree to which such E-Government platforms offer and deliver interactive interfaces relevant to communication quality. Then, with a dataset collected from the