Grassroots 2.0: Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age

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GRASSROOTS 2.0:
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: Rapid advancements in communication and transportation technologies in recent history have created new and emerging tools that make it possible for every individual to share information with a global audience. Social networking technologies, especially, have revolutionized the possibilities of person-to--person communication, particularly by making obsolete the geographical boundaries that once divided cultures and nationalities. Diplomacy, an international relations activity traditionally claimed as the domain of the nation-state, has become more accessible to 'ordinary' citizens and advocacy groups and is taking new forms as individuals and groups initiate grassroots public diplomacy activities. This paper presents the case studies of two such initiatives – Turkayfe.org and the Rediscover Rosarito Project – that have successfully implemented new communications technologies and Web 2.0 strategies in their international outreach campaigns.
Key words: Grassroots, Public Diplomacy, Two-way Communication, Web 2.0, Media, Mexico, Turkey.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of web-based technologies and communication tools has drastically and forever changed our lives within the global village. Through Web 2.0 technologies such as *wiki* websites, blogs, social media networking tools, and several other present and emerging platforms, every individual is presented with the opportunity to share information with the world. People no longer need capital or the ownership of mass media companies to share their ideas and knowledge or to shape the news media agenda (Gillmor 2004; Gant 2007). Individuals have greater and greater capabilities and tools for disseminating information in the digital age, and one of the effects of this trend, according to Jönsson and Hall (2003) is that «[traditional] diplomacy has lost its position as the main facilitator of contacts and communication across state boundaries» (p. 207). This paper will explore; 1) how an historic and traditional entity necessary for government, commerce, and civility – in other words, *diplomacy* – has been impacted by Web 2.0; 2) how this vital governmental domain has been forced to shed its past exclusivity; and 3) how individual and grassroots group contributions have redefined and expanded public diplomacy as an emerging tool for interaction, negotiation, conflict resolution, and branding.

Diplomacy, the main subject of this paper, has been traditionally dominated – if not monopolized – by states, official diplomatic corps, and politicians. In the 21st century, more and more 'ordinary' citizens and advocacy groups are taking active roles in international relations. A major impetus for this development is the communication revolution that has provided ordinary citizens the ability to engage in what we call in this article «grassroots» public diplomacy, broadly defined as «furthering understanding through communication» (Payne 2009a, p. 489). Seong-Hun Yun and Elizabeth L. Toth (2009) divide public diplomacy activity into two categories: realism and liberalism. The first category encompasses the idea that the nation state is the primary actor in international relations. Public diplomacy from a realist standpoint is seen as the government-directed activity of «informing, engaging, and influencing foreign publics in support of a country's national interests» (Fitzpatrick, 2007 p. 201).

The concept of liberalism, on the other hand, does not see the state as the most important actor, but rather as one actor among many in an increasingly connected global communication network. In the liberalist view, public

diplomacy can be seen as a «longer term strategy of engagement and dialo-gue» (Hayden 2009, p. 537) by individuals and groups of citizens who may not be directly motivated by national foreign policy objectives. The case studies presented in this paper are examples of this kind of fundamental person-to--person communication that attempts to further mutual understanding and positive public opinion by building international relationships (Hayden 2009, Zaharna 2009).

Relationship-building, according to Martin Buber (1958), is most suc-cessful when participants engage willingly and openly in exchanges in which feelings of control and dominance are minimized and «when they view their interactions as the goal of the relationship» (Cowan&Arsenault, 2008 p. 18--19). The international, person-to-person relationships made possible by Web 2.0 technologies constitute, to a great degree, an increasing and substantial new domain for public diplomacy – a «public diplomacy campaign led by the people, not by the government» (Snow 2009, p. 4). These types of interactions must, of necessity, be distinguished from historical understandings of public diplomacy, even though the spectrum of diplomatic activity allows for much cross-over. Thus, the terms «grassroots» public diplomacy and citizen diplomacy have emerged to encompass the multitude of international enga-gement activities undertaken outside the purview of government-sponsored outreach. The new public diplomacy, therefore, can be defined as internatio-nal relationship-building (Payne 2009b), sometimes for the purpose of asser-ting national images or policies, but alternatively as «an end in itself that contributes to a better international environment» (Zaharna 2009, p. 91). Where in the past diplomatic efforts were confined to the domain of govern-mental officials with advanced degrees and/or governmental experience, the emerging scope of diplomatic activity, augmented by new communication tools and technologies, is less autocratic, more democratic, and provides myriad opportunities for the involvement of the individual citizen.

Globalization, one of the buzzwords of contemporary politics and an increasingly connected world economic web, has drastically changed and expanded diplomacy. Diplomacy in the era of globalization includes and encourages citizen participation, grassroots movements, and people-to-peo-ple communication. Manuel Castells (2008) argues that globalization has shifted public debate from the national domain to what he calls the 'global public sphere', through the development of global communication networks.

Castells suggests that the diplomacy of this global public sphere works out-side of traditional diplomatic power negotiations between nations and rather builds person-to-person relationships based on shared meaning-making (p. 78).

Clearly, two major historical factors have ushered in this new era of con-nectivity: the revolutions in communication and transportation technologies. First, the media revolution has provided a constantly evolving communication tool-chest to engage and reach publics. Oral societies of the past prided themselves on passing the history of one generation to the next via the oral poet. Writing, once reserved for the elite, eventually became commonplace after Guttenberg's invention of the printing press. Yet, the giant leap forward from letters and words to meaningful oral signals occurred with the tele-graph, then the telephone, the radio, television, computer, internet. Now the onslaught of multiple media platforms and their distinct impact has truly created what could be called a «global village» as brilliantly described by the 1960s sage Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964).

Secondly, the unparalleled strides in transportation technologies brought on initially by the advent of the automobile and air transportation in the early 20th century have exponentially increased the individual citizen's ability to engage with foreign publics. Prior to these inventions, transportation had remained unchanged for thousands of years. King Tut, Aristotle, Caesar, Michelangelo, Napoleon, and Lincoln would all have a common topic of dis-cussion if they were able to have a conversation today: how long it would take to get from one city to another by horse. Today, with nearly thirty-nine million annual international travelers (ITA 2009) it is not surprising that the United States is beginning to encourage its citizens to view person-to-person inter-national engagement as integral to the obligation of being an American citi-zen (USCCD 2008).

These revolutions in media and transportation have made geographic and physical boundaries between countries virtually obsolete. The result is an ever-emerging, interdependent, and wired world whose social, economic, and political webs «link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa» (Giddens 1990, p. 21). Additionally, the *mass communication* (top down) elucidated by C.Wright Mills (1956) in his classic treatise *The Power Elite* has morphed into what the prescient Mills described as *public communication* (bottom up).

Media development has begun to witness such an upheaval. Democratization of the web was ushered in in the early 1990s via the invention of the Mosaic browser by a University of Illinois professor. A decade later, two students from the University of Illinois pioneered YouTube, further flattening the media hierarchy, and with it the agenda-setting process previously reserved to media moguls. Today, anyone with a computer and access to YouTube and similar sites can effectively be her own television station. The power of such bottom up technologies was witnessed during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, when long shot challenger and first term senator Barack Obama was able to topple the Democratic party's frontrunner, New York Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton, due in part to his campaign's pioneering command of social media technology. According to political consultant Spencer Kimball (2010), «Today's ever evolving social media web has empowered the ordinary citizen with extraordinary abilities to level the political playing field previously controlled by traditional power elites.»

Today's technology allows us to send messages instantaneously within our global village. But sending messages is not synonymous with communicating the meaning of such messages, and it is toward addressing this broad based objective – «furthering understanding through communication» – that many advocates of public diplomacy focus their efforts. Where traditional diplomacy's function is to be an arm of government in realizing foreign policy objectives, idealistic advocates of the new public diplomacy argue their activities are people-to-people oriented rather than policy oriented. A fundamental objective in grassroots public diplomacy efforts is to create a meaningful relationship that invites and establishes the needed personal grounding and connection from which trust – an essential requisite for credibility – emanates.

The impact of such global change via technology and transportation is evident worldwide – from the most democratic to the most autocratic states. Today's ubiquitous media web impacts even the most repressive and resistant regimes. Except in the most remote and disconnected places on earth, citizens of the 21st century are vastly different from their ancestors, and in many cases, from their parents, just one generation removed. Generally speaking, there is a global citizen push for more transparency and accountability from governments in conducting their political affairs. Citizens and advocacy groups demand active roles in decision-making processes. Fur-

thermore, such groups have the ability to engage and wage credible counter-
-campaigns via the communication networks if the status quo is resistant to
their expectations or demands. Publics are no longer content to be passive
elements of political structures. On the contrary, engaged individuals, armed
with the communication tools to do so, take initiative to demonstrate their
presence in local as well as international relations. The result is an ever
changing diplomatic roadmap that frequently shows citizen groups ahead of
governments in strategically addressing issues and problems, and a gradual,
sometimes enthusiastic, sometimes reluctant marriage of traditional and
public diplomacy on the world stage.[1]

The driving force behind the rise of citizen roles in international relations
is the collective information and communication technologies (ICTs) that
usher in distinct techniques and technologies for potential engagement. This
plethora of communication channels provides advocates with an abundance
of strategic choices. Nearly fifty years ago, McLuhan (1964) wrote: «we are
shifting from media scarcity to media abundance» (p.26). The variety of media
platforms, cost effectiveness, ease of use, and increased citizen interest
encourage individual participation in diplomacy. Additionally, ICTs offer a
more egalitarian platform through which to interact with others in the
absence of strictly defined power dynamics.

Former U. S. Vice President Al Gore's term *information superhighway*
highlights the essential role played by ICTs and their impact on our daily
lives. It describes the existence of the networks among computers through
which all users, including corporations, governments, and ordinary citizens
can correspond with each other – horizontally, as it were, rather than as pas-
sive receivers of information coming from corporate media outlets.

ICTs give any individual the opportunity to become the representative of
his or her country with a computer and an internet connection. In this essay
and with this backdrop, the authors seek to explain the changes in the prac-
tice and understanding of traditional diplomacy, and the impacts of ICTs on
individuals' participation in international relations via public diplomacy initia-
tives. Suffice it to say, advocacy of citizen participation in diplomacy, grass-
roots international engagement, or people-to-people communication is not a
novel idea. Throughout history advocates outside the traditional diplomatic

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[1] For example, the Saudi American Exchange was the first grassroots effort in the wake of 9/11. The project was fostered by two citizens—one from Saudi Arabia, one from the U.S.—who sought to stress similarities rather than focus on differences. At times, this agenda was not complimentary to the official foreign policy objectives of the two countries. See Hayden 2009.

corps have long attempted and lobbied to be engaged in the process. Prior to the media revolution and access to such unprecedented communication tools, traditional diplomatic agents had more control of the diplomacy dynamic; they could decide whether citizen efforts and input were beneficial to diplomatic efforts. Today, the landscape has changed. ICTs provide unprecedented tools and unparalleled access for citizen involvement in the global arena.

2. KEY DEFINITION: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATION

Traditional diplomacy is used to define the relations between nation states and international organizations. Public diplomacy borrows the international understanding of traditional diplomacy and describes the attempts of communication between governments, corporations, civil society organizations, and individuals. Public diplomacy «strives for intensive exchange of information, neutralization of clichés and prejudices about one's nation, popularization of one's foreign policy and social system, strengthening of one's country's positive image» (Plavsak 2002, p.113). Fortner (1994) describes the practice as an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Public diplomacy involves strategic attempts to reach specific foreign publics, and embraces the core programs and means to reach international audiences, such as broadcasting and information activities, cultural affairs, and international exchanges (Rugh, 2008). The primary goal is to deliver messages to target audiences.

2.1. ONE-WAY VS. TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

The old methods of diplomacy and public diplomacy based on mass media channels, such as broadcasting, relied heavily on one-way communication methods (Sevin 2010). In one-way communication, the audience usually plays a static, passive role. Messages are transferred through different media platforms, and the audience is expected to passively acquire information and to accept it, based on the sender's reputation as a credible source, and the plausibility of the message. However, given the possibilities for active engagement that exist in today's media landscape, individuals are less likely to accept this passive, submissive role in the communication project.

Moreover, one-way communication overlooks the importance of the feed-back process. As this type of communication focuses on message transfer, it frequently does not consider the changing needs and expectations of the audience nor does it always make adjustments according to the feedback received. Therefore, the sender frequently does not acquire the necessary information to adjust to the changes in the audience or in the general societal framework.

To the public diplomacy practitioner in today's global village, one-way communication is outdated. If the communication style of a public diplomacy effort does not fit the audience's style and expectations, it is less likely to be persuasive and accepted by the target audience. Today's citizen wants to be heard and wants to take active part in the communication process. Most public diplomacy projects are intended to create two-way communication bridges between societies and to foster meaningful dialogue. Two-way communication not only seeks to transfer messages from the sender to the audience but also sustains the necessary communication methods to listen and monitor the audience's reaction or non-reaction. In other words, unlike one-way communication, the dialogue environment enables, invites, and engages feedback processes. The ultimate aim and objective of public diplomacy advocates is to engage «the other»; to hear and to be heard in the international arena. Through active engagement of the audience, the meanings of the messages are received, negotiated, accepted, rejected, modified, and recalibrated in an ongoing process.

It is important to remember, however, that transmitting information – whether it be instantaneous, or a process that takes weeks and months as with mail a hundred years ago – does not equal communication. Communication requires an active transmission of a specially designed message for a target audience, using symbols (verbal and non-verbal) that are readily understood and accepted by the targeted receivers. Furthermore, the initial act of the receivers (one person or many) accepting and processing the message must be followed by feedback to the original source of the message (Shannon and Weaver, 1963). Ideally, this occurs after the receiver has engaged in critical and deliberative thinking.[1] His/her response to the initial communication act in the form of feedback invites further responses from the sender in what ideally becomes a dialogic process strategically designed,

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[1] See Kloppenberg 2010 for a very good article about deliberative democracy.

if successful, to further what Kenneth Burke (1966) describes as «identification» between the sender and receiver as they achieve consubstantiation. The communication act is hindered by the fact that language and words are only symbols and that the meaning of such symbols differs from one individual to another dependent upon their past experiences.

Given the fact that public diplomacy usually involves individuals or cultures that have experienced an immediate or long-term conflict, or little or no history of past meaningful communication, credibility – Aristotle's concept of «ethos» as described in the classical treatise, *The Rhetoric* – is an essential building block among the parties involved (Cooper 1932[1960]). Furthermore, a fundamental requirement for strategic communication in public diplomacy is to establish trust among the involved parties and publics. This includes knowing the true intentions of each agent, being very careful and considerate of the fact that words are symbols with differing meanings based on experience, and being open to actively listening to and respecting the other's viewpoint. For a relationship to develop and flourish, the involved parties must be adaptive and work to keep the communication process moving forward (Heifetz et al., 2009).

One event or meeting does not accomplish this process-oriented approach. Emerging and sustained growth of ethos and trust among the parties requires that both parties honor and keep their word and live up to agreements. If there is the slightest concern that something is not understood, or that a position or issue is possibly misrepresented, intentionally or unintentionally, by the media or another entity that might not share the collaborative agenda, both parties must agree to adhere to the practice of checking with each other to ensure the relationship remains healthy and on track. What this necessitates is strategic listening, and the ability to understand that one must decode words and, more importantly, non-verbal body language and cultural artifacts with an appreciation of the other's history, religion, politics, and other pertinent demographic factors. This allows a dialogue to continue and provides the opportunity for the nurturing of trust so that any discrepancy or disagreement can be explored openly and honestly. The overall goal is to establish common ground – some shared beliefs and values – thereby establishing a trusting context where areas of conflict and disagreement can be candidly discussed without fear of harming the relationship (Payne 2009b). It is from this communication perspective that effective public

diplomacy can be successful, especially with the evolving channels and means of communication of Web 1.0 and Web. 2.0

2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF WEB 1.0 VS. WEB 2.0

McLuhan (1964) writes that the «channels of communication» are responsible for the cultural changes in communication. In other words, advances in the technology of a medium eventually contribute to a change within the culture of which it is a part. The first generation of web technologies, known as Web 1.0, is that which embodies and facilitates one-way communication strategies. With these types of online tools, users are passive recipients of the information supplied by different sources on the Internet. Websites built in the Web 1.0 style provide users with access to information on various subjects. However, there is one major handicap for public diplomacy advocates: there is little or no possibility for interaction with the audience.

The second generation of online technologies, otherwise known as Web 2.0, is primarily designed to encourage user contribution and interaction. The content is predominantly user-generated, and participation is elicited through opportunities to «comment,» «like,» «forward,» «retweet,» etc. Web logs, more popularly known as blogs, now populate the digital world. Millions of users post their views on sundry issues every day. *Wiki* technology is used to create websites entirely composed of user contributions. In other words, the Web 2.0 model supports two-way communication exchanges, and encourages active user participation.

There is much speculation on Web 3.0. The next generation of web technologies is likely to be based on semantics and personalization, as people use the Internet as their primary information source and personal branding tool.

2.3. ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA

Web 2.0 technologies have paved the way for the rise of online social media. Online social media tools enable users to create content, interact with other users, and establish a community. Popular websites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Vimeo, and Twitter are all examples of online social media tools.

These platforms are invaluable tools for individual public diplomats. The public diplomacy activities discussed above – broadcasting, information acti-

vities, and international exchanges – in the past have required large budgets and investments. Such activities have been mainly carried out by governments in a top-down method, using what C. Wright Mills (1956) described as mass communication. In other words, government officials at the top have crafted the strategy documents to reach out to foreign audiences. However, today, through online social media platforms, any person with an internet connection can launch a public diplomacy initiative.

The new conceptualization of diplomacy – emerging practices of grassroots public diplomacy and nation branding – empower the role of individuals in international relations in two distinct ways. First, it is possible to argue that governments have not been as efficient as individuals in keeping up with and using new communication technologies. Web 2.0 designs based on user--generated content, pose a great challenge for nation states. Ordinary people no longer need official positions nor expensive devices to share their ideas in the global public sphere. Through several online platforms, people can spread their messages. This can be a real advantage to change agents and a very sticky problem for autocratic regimes bent on maintaining top-down control of all communication.

Against this backdrop of the historical development of public diplomacy and social media, two case studies that rely on Web 2.0 technologies will be presented to highlight the dynamics of two grassroots public diplomacy efforts. The authors suggest that we are in the midst of an historic sea change in power and authority, moving away from nation state diplomacy and towards citizen-to-citizen communication. The result is a decisive impact on the future of traditional diplomacy and the rapidly emerging field and practice of grassroots public diplomacy.

2.4. TURKAYFE.ORG: SHARE YOUR TURKSPERIENCE

Turkayfe.org – Turkey's online coffeehouse – is a young project which started with the belief that Turkey has the potential to become widely known by a global audience. In 2010, four young professionals launched a website, www.Turkayfe.org, to help share what Turkey has to offer. The main objective of the project is to create and sustain a Web 2.0-based platform where interested parties can participate in defining what Turkey means in the modern world. «Türkiye'yi Bir de Sen Anlat! / Share your Türksperience!», the bi-lin-

gual motto of the project, aims to inspire collaboration to enhance the image of Turkey.

Turkayfe is the first online platform dedicated to promoting Turkey through the personal experiences of real people. Through Turkayfe.org, any individual or organization interested in Turkey will have access to a variety of information provided by independent individuals. Contributors can share articles, photos, audio clips, videos, presentations, resources and other personal experiences of the country. The main objectives of the project are to demonstrate Turkey's modern and forward thinking aspects as well as to showcase its traditional roots and engage audiences by crafting a timely and interactive story about Turkey.

Turkayfe.org offers seven main topics – Culture, People, Education, Entertainment, Business, Habitat and Global Turkey – .and sixty-eight sub--categories to initiate dialogue. The project uses new communication tools to engage a virtual audience in conversation and networking, both between the project and the users, and among the users themselves. Sharing personal perspective, knowledge, and experience related to Turkey in the aforementioned subjects creates opportunity for two-way communication.

The project also makes use of Web 2.0 strategies to address the current needs and expectations of the political communication arena. New developments in communication technologies oblige nation-branding projects such as Turkayfe.org to be active participants in social networking platforms and to develop more interactive campaigns. Through such interactive communication tools it is possible to increase brand awareness among target audiences. Thus far, official Turkish branding attempts led by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture make use of earlier, static, Web 1.0 technologies. These communication channels are neither user friendly nor functional for interaction.

For the Turkayfe.org project, the team uses the latest communications tactics and tools to enhance the image of Turkey. The project aims to reach three main audiences: a young, internet-savvy Turkish population, foreigners who have experiences related to Turkey, and people who want to learn more about Turkey. The first group is encouraged to create substantial content on the website. The second group is invited both to interact with the existing knowledge and to provide their own points of view about the topics covered in the website. Lastly, a general audience is targeted to share knowledge and

information about the country. Through this comprehensive resource and online opinion-sharing website, media organizations as well as individuals interested in learning more about Turkey will be able to easily find a variety of information on this web portal produced by a collective of individuals.

To achieve the goals of shifting the focus toward Turkey and sparking conversation with the target market, Turkayfe.org tries to make Turkey relevant to foreign audiences. Target audiences are exposed to the images of modern and traditional Turkish people. The main reasoning beyond such an action is to demonstrate the achivements of the country, as well as its contributions to global culture.

With advancements in global communication methods and online social media, it is now possible to create a sense of community virtually. The Turkayfe website addresses different interest groups to reflect Turkey's rich culture through the aforementioned topics and sub-categories. Community members can engage in all topics of conversation.

The Turkayfe.org project is likely to have two outcomes: 1) the creation of an encyclopedic database of information about Turkey and 2) the organization of a virtual community. User contributions will be published and stored on the website, allowing any person to learn more about a given subject they are interested in. And, by encouraging a dialogue among the organization and all participants, Turkayfe.org aspires to create a community, thus fulfilling its promise to be Turkey's international coffeehouse. As such, the project founders believe that building user-generated content by real people is crucial in strengthening a favorable image of Turkey in the global communications sphere.

In short, by creating dialogue with international internet users, the Turkayfe.org project is an example of a grassroots public diplomacy effort initiated by four Turkish individuals with the aim of bringing the Turkish experience to a global audience.

2.5. REDISCOVER ROSARITO

Rediscover Rosarito is a cross-cultural initiative started by faculty and graduate students of Emerson College in February 2008 to assist the town of Rosarito Beach in Baja, Mexico in revitalizing their tourist economy after a string of negative events tainted American public opinion about travel to Mexico. Devastated by a drastic drop in visitors as a result of media reporting on the results of Mexican President Felipe Calderón's «war on drugs,» Rosa-

rito was in need of a communication strategy to combat the perception that Mexico was a dangerous place to visit. After a dialogue between Rosarito Mayor Hugo Torres and several American visitors about sensationalized media accounts of Mexico in the U.S. press and the need to present a more balanced narrative that might influence public opinion, the campaign «Rediscover Rosarito» was launched.

Twenty-eight graduate students with diverse backgrounds and nationalities, enrolled in a class taught by Dr. Gregory Payne of the Communication Studies Department at Emerson College in Boston, developed a public affairs campaign in collaboration with elected governmental leaders, public officials, citizens, and American expatriates living in Rosarito Beach. Working together, they are using grassroots public diplomacy as a major strategy to combat the crisis Rosarito has been experiencing and to help restore the image of this heavily tourism-dependent beach community.

The once-thriving tourist market, drawn primarily from the 25 million Americans within driving distance from the Baja peninsula in southern California, abruptly stopped in the wake of violence by Mexican drug cartels as a result of the Mexican government's assault on drugs. These violent crimes were taking place primarily in the city of Juarez and Sinaloa state – places over six hundred miles from Rosarito. Additionally, in 2009, the swine flu epidemic added another serious challenge to the effort to persuade tourists to visit Rosarito and the Baja. Warnings were issued by various governmental agencies to delay or postpone non-essential trips to Mexico during the flu crisis. Yet Rosarito, located on the Baja peninsula, did not experience a single case of swine flu. The closest case was in San Diego in the United States. Evidence suggested that the same over-generalizations that permeated media coverage of drug cartel violence were evident in the media's hype regarding the H1N1 flu virus. In both instances, the challenge for the Rediscover Rosarito team was to separate the facts from the fiction and mediated reality, which are often at odds.

The perception of drug violence and health risk created a crisis for Rosarito that was magnified and exploited in media coverage on both sides of the border, and throughout the world. A major contributing factor to the problem is the often sensational and biased media coverage regarding the crisis, motivated in part by traditional media's need to survive and gain audience share by disseminating information with shock-value in a competitive media

environment. Such reporting reflects the frequent proclivity of the media to hype stories in the effort to gain audience share (Jackson&Jamieson, 2007, pp. 22-23). This tendency is exacerbated by the centuries-old tendency of Western media to focus on stories of crime, corruption, and violence in Latin America, a bias coined as the «Black Legend» (Hanning 2010).

The goals of the Rediscover Rosarito project were established in 2008 in several conversations between Gregory Payne, his students, and govern-mental leaders and citizens from the Rosarito community. Given Payne's success in constructing the first bridge among the peoples of Saudi Arabia and the United States after 9/11 with the development of the Saudi American Exchange, there was a strong belief that such grassroots, people-to-people efforts could help begin the process of defining the crisis and developing cre-dible and consistent voices to influence the mainstream media narrative. The goal was not to be a public relations or propaganda machine, as that would damage the one essential component of the public diplomacy communication process: credibility of the source. Instead, the goal of the Rediscover Rosarito coalition was to establish a dialogue with parties on both sides of the border, and to attempt to build a reputation among interested publics as being a trustworthy source for information and facts. In this way, reporters could contact those involved in the Rediscover Rosarito project, knowing they would have a source that could verify or check the veracity of stories related to the on-going violence in other parts of Mexico. Communication with electronic and print media in the U.S. and Mexico revealed that economic cutbacks had seriously hindered the ability of media outlets to send reporters into the field – especially Americans going into Mexico – to check their facts through the established norms of investigative reporting. The result was that stories were not always adequately fact-checked for accuracy, with the result that rumor about violence in parts of Mexico evolved into fact about Mexico as a whole.

The relationship that developed between Rosarito Mayor Hugo Torres, his governmental team, and the American and international participants was due to a shared belief: The mediated reality presented by the U.S. media did not accurately reflect the facts and real-life experiences of people living in Rosa-rito. An immediate objective was to explore strategies in crisis communica-tion, crisis management, public relations, and public affairs that could be applied to the rapidly deteriorating situation.

The crisis of perception facing Rosarito was compounded by the fact that Mexico had little tradition of crisis communication nor appreciation of the

need in such situations to actively engage the media. As a complementary approach to grassroots communication, Mayor Torres began to engage in fundamental crisis communication steps. He reached out to the media and offered his expertise and assistance in getting a fair, accurate story out to the public. In doing so, Torres began the first step needed in establishing himself as an available and proactive source that would provide information to interested publics. Such a practice had not been adopted in the past. Past behavior by many Mexican governmental officials at all levels to negative publicity and news reports was to ignore them, pretend no one was reading the papers or watching the broadcasts, or that the issue would go away on its own. The usual response, if there was one, was to provide a promotional message that failed to address the underlying concerns of potential visitors. For example, the government would promote the fact that «the lobster is good and cheap.» Given the increasing concern over apparent safety issues, most Americans were not venturing south of the border regardless of how good the lobster might taste. Tourists are not interested in a cheap meal if they fear it's their last supper.

In addition to engaging the media, Mayor Torres also took steps on the local level to demonstrate his commitment to building trust. This included meetings with local business leaders and mayors from Mexico and the U.S. to identify steps they could take in a collaborative effort to address the problem. Given the perception and facts that supported the claim of corruption in many Mexican police departments, Mayor Torres required all Rosarito police to take a lie detector test which resulted in dismissals from the force, after subsequent investigation, for those who were not exemplary. Rosarito also hired a new special tourist police force trained to work with American tourists.

Complementing this effort was the formation of advocacy groups to provide spokespeople for Rosarito. This included the city's large expatriate community as well as regular visitors who had a long history of coming to Rosarito without incident. These advocates engaged the American media in response to inaccurate stories, produced public service announcements aired on the internet and local southern California television, and also continued to dialogue among themselves and with visitors and interested parties about means and strategies to address the crisis. It is within this context that the first Emerson student exchange to Rosarito Beach occurred.

3. GETTING INVOLVED AT THE GRASSROOTS: THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN

A group of eight students made their first fact-finding mission to Rosarito Beach on March 1, 2008 (Rediscover Rosarito, 2008b). The team interviewed members of the local community (including government officials, residents, business people and expatriates) to gain a better picture of how the city and the public had been impacted. Members also met with several journalists from San Diego, including Emerson alumni/ae in the media industry, to gain diverse perspectives about the complex problem. A strategic communication plan produced by the class was presented to Mayor Torres, his public affairs counsel, Ron Raposa, and other members of the municipality (Rosarito en la Noticia, 2008). The initial focus of the multi-faceted strategic plan was the founding of a website, www.rediscoverosarito.org, in Spring 2008 to serve as the flagship communication platform for the Emerson College Communication Management public affairs team (Rediscover Rosarito, 2008). The website was conceived as an outreach platform to both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Americans, as well as to Mexicans in general. The team's first hand observational research was also translated into blogs, vlogs and podcasts featured on the website.

Offline publicity efforts in this multi-level online-offline campaign included the development of press kits about the Rediscover Rosarito initiative. The group began to engage news outlets from across the U.S. to focus on the project and its objective: spreading the word that Rosarito was a safe tourist destination. Included in this pitch was the fact that the crime rate for Rosarito was lower than that in Boston, St. Louis, and many other American cities (Greenburg 2009). One of the common mistakes of perception on the part of Americans was to not understand the geography of the situation. When a crime was reported in Juarez, Mexico, on the Texas border, six hundred miles from Baja and Southern California, the media implied that all of Mexico was dangerous. Given this tendency, part of the campaign was to emphasize that Rosarito and Tijuana were two distinct cities, and that Mexico is a large country sharing a common border of over 2000 miles with the United States. The take-home lesson: Be careful in sweeping generalizations about events in one part of the country implying that all of Mexico is not safe.

4. SPECIAL EVENTS IN A SAFE, SERENE, AND SECURE ROSARITO: THE ROSARITO STUDENT FILM FESTIVAL

The first major special event to further the mission of the Rediscover Rosarito public diplomacy project was a collaborative effort that focused and engaged the youth of the beachside community and provided media training that would give participants the necessary skills to tell their own stories after they completed the project. The two-week Rosarito Film Project of 2008 included Campus Movie Fest (CMF), the world's largest student film festival, the LA Program, an internship program for students around the globe to spend six weeks in Los Angeles, and the city of Rosarito, thanks to Mayor Torres (Baja Times 2008). Twelve local students from the greater Rosarito area, ranging from 18 to 32 years of age, were selected in a citywide competition as the inaugural participants in this two-week program. An announcement and press conference was held at the Rosarito City Hall in July 2008 with participants in attendance as well as members of the Emerson College public affairs team, and film and media professionals from Los Angeles.

During the 14-day summer program, the Mexican student participants made 5-8 minute documentaries to tell stories about their hometown. The subject matter and storyline were chosen and developed solely and independently by the students from Rosarito. During the film project, the participants had the unique opportunity of attending workshops and lectures by special guests from the film industry in Los Angeles and New York, who also provided commentary on the student projects. Spanish, Portuguese, and American college students from the LA Program (an inter-culturally oriented internship initiative) also dialogued with the film students during this intensive workshop.

Greek graduate student Konstantina Georgaki served as the coordinator of the Rosarito Film Project. Film expertise was provided by Michael McManus, Emerson alumnus in political communication and LA filmmaker, who coached students in transforming their raw materials into well-told stories. McManus also had ties with CMF as he was the recipient of the Campus Movie Festival's Outstanding Actor Award in 2008 for his award winning documentary, «Staying the Course.» Another Emersonian, award-winning producer Jerome Lewis from Trinidad & Tobago, and manager of several radio and TV stations, provided daily insights on film-making. Other current Emerson students assisted in the day to day operations. All worked pro-bono.

The product included eight original documentaries and short films offering a different perspective of the community from the students' perspectives. The films helped bridge the gap and offered contrast to the mediated reality of the spiraling violence presented in mainstream media stories. The films were initially shown in early August 2008, at a special VIP Sneak Peek Premiere of the Rosarito Student Film Project, for friends and family held at Foxploration Studios, where major motion pictures like *Titanic* and *Master and Commander* were filmed.

In 2009, another graduate public affairs class continued work on the collaborative Rediscover Rosarito project. New projects included a revamping of the Rediscover Rosarito website, integrating it with more Web 2.0, multimedia, social marketing, and interactive components.

5. ROSARITO MEDIA WATCH

The Rosarito Media Watch module was launched in the spring of 2009 to identify and highlight examples of sensationalism and biased reporting, as well as to champion factual accounts about Rosarito and Baja California. One of the objectives of the Media Watch team was to explore new strategies to 'export' Media Watch content to other areas on the Web where conversations about Rosarito are on-going, including the creative application of social media platforms and viral marketing.

The Rosarito Media Watch is not an effort to sanitize negative news coverage, but to ensure that the facts, whatever they may be, are made evident and presented to the public in a timely fashion. This includes presenting specific details of events and producing credible sources to substantiate claims of the media narrative. Too often, the Media Watch analysis indicated that the media tended to sensationalize stories for ratings, often at the expense of accuracy. A typical example occurred on CNN in April, 2009, where reporter Randi Kaye filed a two-year-old story about the robbery of the Hall family in Mexico as if it had just occurred (Kaye 2009; Cearley and Center, 2007). The Media Watch provides interested publics and journalists with a platform for fact checking against the claims made in such stories (Rediscover Rosarito 2009).

Another media project designed to attract tourists from San Diego utilized the vlog component of the Rediscover Rosarito website by developing

several short awareness-generating documentaries for the beach community. The objective is to attract tourists, primarily those from California, back to Rosarito, located less that 30 miles south of San Diego.

6. OTHER GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES WITHIN THE REDISCOVER ROSARITO PROJECT

6.1. ART RESONATES PEACE

The Art Resonates Peace initiative spearheaded by Nada Farhat with secondary students in Rosarito and the Baja aimed at capturing the artistic products that focus on the Baja communities. These projects will be showcased in Boston, New York, and Washington in 2011 and presented at academic conferences such as the National Communication Association, International Communication Association, among others (Farhat 2009).

6.2. ROSARITO AMBASSADORS

Rosarito Ambassadors focuses on locating grassroots advocates in Rosarito and the Baja, representing various professional, socio-economic, and demographic groups. Such ambassadors serve as email/social network/ /skype/phone contacts for interested individuals who want first-hand conversations about life and events in Rosarito. The goal is to develop and encourage relationships, to engage in webinars, to participate in virtual communities and in other means of connection and engagement.

6.3. ROSARITO JUVENILE DIABETES PREVENTION PROGRAM

A product of Health Communication students at Emerson College and Tufts University in Boston, the Rosarito Juvenile Diabetes Prevention Program involves teachers and students in Rosarito in educating the youth about the dangers of this disease, which is number one among this target group in Mexico. Various strategies and techniques in preventive healthcare are employed including games, comic books, and other creative communication encounters.

6.4. «EL RANCHO DEL NINO» DOCUMENTARY AND WEB PAGE

«El Rancho del Nino,» a documentary and website by Jennan Al Hamdouni, focuses on the everyday lives of young boys who live in an orphanage

in Rosarito and the challenges they and the orphanage face in such dire economic times. This short film premiered in Rosarito and has aired in San Diego, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Las Vegas, and Barcelona, Spain. A successful fundraiser for this orphanage was planned by graduate students in Boston teaming up with a local Mexican restaurant, Fajitas and Ritas, which collaborated in the effort by donating a percentage of their revenue that evening for the cause. The event also included a silent auction advertised on the internet.

6.5. BAJA BURITOS AND BASEBALL EVENT

The «Baja, Burritos, and Baseball» event for Rosarito youths took place in July 2009 when twenty-three students and young people from Rosarito attended a San Diego Padre baseball game. The Padre organization provided gift packs for the Rosarito guests and the exchange was highlighted in the Padre as well as Major League Baseball media.

6.6. ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITS

Students from Spain, Portugal, New York and Ohio have participated in several arts and crafts exhibits with Rosarito students during the past three summers in events coordinated by the Emerson public affairs and crisis communication classes.

The Rediscover Rosarito grassroots public diplomacy campaign has continued with new and on-going activities in 2010. These include the Third Annual Rosarito Student Film Festival in collaboration with Campus Movie Fest, the LA Program and the City of Rosarito and the staff of the Rosarito Beach Hotel. Two awards – the David P. Twomey III Creativity Award and the Pedro Salazar Public Diplomacy Award, named in memory of a former Emerson and a Lisbon student who coordinated the film program – were given in 2009 and 2010. The festival has received coverage in Boston and is prominently featured on the Campus Movie Fest website (www.campusmoviefest.com). Films from all three years will be shown at an all day festival in Rosarito in spring, 2011 and at conferences in New Orleans, Boston, New York, San Diego, and Santiago, Chile in the 2010-2011 calendar year.

7. ACADEMIC/COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES ON THE REDISCOVER ROSARITO CAMPAIGN

Presentations, speeches, papers, news stories, blogs, podcasts and other reports on the status and activities of the campaign have been ongoing since its inception in January 2008. These include academic conferences: National Communication Association (San Diego), International Academy of Business Disciplines (St. Louis) and Las Vegas IV and V Congreso International de Investigacion y Relaciones Publicas (Barcelona), International Academy of Management and Business Economies (Sevilla), Northwest Communication Association (Idaho), the 2015 United Nations Millennium Initiative (Lisbon). It also is the focus of a thesis by a MA candidate from Lisbon, Portugal.

8. SUMMARY

Despite the crisis created for places like Rosarito Beach by media attention to violence in other areas of Mexico, there are positive signs that opportunities have evolved from such crises. The recent focus by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton on the fact that the drug issue, and thus the cause of the violence, is a challenge that both the U.S. and Mexico must face together is a major step forward (AFP 2009). This theme is a building block in advancing the two-year message of cooperation and dialogue of the Emerson public affairs and public diplomacy project. The historic meetings of the U.S. President and the Secretary of State with President Calderon will certainly help to draw attention to the need for more grassroots efforts in communicating and furthering understanding among the peoples of our countries.

The goal of the Rediscover Rosarito project is to continue this dialogue and campaign dedicated to rediscovering the beauty and serenity of Rosarito by urging the public to «Come See for Yourself.» The central thread that runs through the diverse programs that make up Rediscover Rosarito is the understanding that public diplomacy and community engagement are no longer only the domain of government-led initiatives at the international, national, and state levels. The Rediscover Rosarito campaign is proof that impact and change can come one day at a time from the grassroots among individual people from all walks of life who are committed to making a difference in international relations. Technology is a vital component of this on-going grassroots effort that will enable community leaders to achieve goals as well as to further relationships and understanding among the people of both countries.

9. CONCLUSION

The emerging importance and symbiotic relationships possible through grassroots public diplomacy and new technologies are major themes of this essay. By exploring the diverse perspectives and definitions of public diplomacy, as well as the impact of the social media tool chest, the two case studies presented above offer current and evolving examples of the individual citizen's opportunity to engage in grassroots diplomacy.

The efforts outlined in the multifaceted activities of the Rediscover Rosarito campaign, as well as the virtual community of Turkayfe.org, demonstrate the ability of ordinary citizens to take the initiative, rather than depend on the traditional diplomatic corps, in furthering understanding among disparate publics. The web-based project Turkayfe.org is spearheaded by young entrepreneurs with an aim to create an online platform where people interested in Turkey can come together to create a community. Turkish people who are compelled to help to boost Turkey's image online can participate and contribute to a common cause. Individuals who have traveled to Turkey, are interested in Turkish culture, or have trade relations with Turkey, can also contribute by sharing their experiences and perspectives.

The project taps the resources, enthusiasm and brainpower of the global Turkish and Turk-friendly community to present both a constantly evolving and updated database of information about Turkey, and a virtual community where new relationships and channels of communication can be forged. By encouraging a dialogue among participants, as well as between the project and the participants, Turkayfe.org represents the best practices of two-way communication and grassroots public diplomacy as it co-creates Turkey's international coffeehouse with users from around the world.

As another example of such grassroots public diplomacy initiatives, the Rediscover Rosarito project is a multi-pronged campaign whose success demands not only boots-on-the-ground activities such as the Rosarito Student Film Festival, crisis communication seminars for local residents, and academic papers and presentations by students and faculty involved, but an ever-changing virtual presence that can help frame, define, and set the agenda for the crisis that Rosarito, the Baja, and Mexico are experiencing. The project also works to define the «new normal» that will emerge after such challenges have been resolved.

The Rediscover Rosarito campaign reflects the sticky nature of defining the new public diplomacy. While it is a grassroots, citizen-based effort, a crucial and essential partner has been the municipal government of Rosarito under the leadership of Mayor Hugo Torres and his public relations advisor, Ron Raposa. Though the project includes local government in Rosarito, its roots began with a person-to-person dialogue. This conversation spawned the campaign which has continued for over three years, adjusting and addressing new needs as perceived by those involved. It is evident to participants from around the globe that a lasting and meaningful manifestation of this effort has been the establishment and nurturing of human relationships and friendships initiated due to this crisis, proving once again that crisis is both an abrupt change in the status quo, but also an opportunity.

Communication technologies and the emerging global networks made possible by them have created new forms, venues, and motivations for public diplomacy initiatives. These opportunities to engage on the person-to-person level, building meaningful international relationships, provide the engaged and adaptive leader the ability like never before to be an active agent at the community and global level in encouraging civic engagement. It is the hope of the authors that others will be inspired to add to the growing evidence that through such grassroots public diplomacy each of us can make a difference.

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