The role of social media in public diplomacy: Potentials and reality

Introduction

To a huge amount, the internet and especially social media are attributed to be the main driving forces in the empowerment of non-governmental organizations and individuals in international relations changing the structures and processes of traditional diplomacy (e.g. Cull 2011; Schneider 2010; Seo 2009; Nye 2004). It is claimed that the new information and communication technologies connect the countries no longer by diplomats, but by individuals making them agents of public diplomacy (cf. Seo 2009: 2–3). This urged governments to acknowledge the multivocality in international relations. “[l]individuals are inherently more powerful than they have been at any time in history, more especially as they connect across networks. This global and wired public cannot be ignored and communication aimed only at its leaders will necessarily fall short.” (Cull 2011: 6) Consequently, the concept of traditional diplomacy is challenged by a more open and dialogue-oriented external communication and relationship management grasped by the term public diplomacy. At this point, the internet is heralded for its potential to enhance dialogue and two-way symmetrical communication. Accordingly, several reports highly recommend an intensified use of the internet for improving the success of public diplomacy (cf. Epstein/Mages 2005: CRS-9).

While researchers have discussed the possibilities of the internet and social media for public diplomacy actors (e.g. Cull 2011; Morozov 2011; Seib 2011; Schneider 2010) only few empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the relation between the potentials and the actual reality on-site (e.g. van Noort 2011; Seo 2009; Lee 2007). Contrasted to the democratic hopes connected with public diplomacy 2.0, these studies show that the interactive modes of social media are rarely used by public diplomacy actors.

Against this background, the proposed paper fathoms the potential of social media for public diplomacy understood as an aggregation of individual and organizational performances. In a first step, it outlines the possibilities and challenges for online information-, identity- and relationship management on all social levels of public diplomacy (e.g. for micro: one-to-one communication, meso: network management, macro: image building). These theoretical considerations serve as a basis for developing a set of criteria to test whether online public diplomacy practice in Germany can be regarded as interactive and symmetrical. The empirical study is based on an analysis of websites, publicly available documents as well as in-depth interviews with representatives of the most relevant
public diplomacy actors in Germany. The sample comprises 31 organizations representing politics, defense, culture, development cooperation, media, and economy. The findings suggest that public diplomacy actors hesitantly apply Web 2.0 as a means of dialogue. Due to budget restrictions, lack of online strategy and social media competence as well as structural obstacles much of the potentials remain unused. An international comparison (China, Finland, Germany, Sweden, UK, USA) reveals that other countries’ application of social media is ahead.

The interactive aspect of public diplomacy

Brown (2011) describes the recent conceptual development (for a detailed analysis of how different developments in the international arena altered the understanding of the concept over the course of time, see Löffelholz et al. 2011) as a “relational turn with the assumption that public diplomacy should be conceptualized as a matter of dialogue, relationships or networks rather than of the transfer of information or messages” (Brown 2011: 2). He consequently introduces a social network approach to public diplomacy (cf. Brown 2011). Also Riordan (2004) expresses this new orientation in introducing a dialogue-based public diplomacy (Riordan 2004), Zaharna (2009) distinguishes between an informational and relational communication framework, and Melissen accordingly differentiates between public diplomacy and new public diplomacy: “The new public diplomacy moves away from – to put it crudely – peddling information to foreigners and keeping the foreign press at bay, towards engaging with foreign audiences” (Melissen 2005: 13).

Especially, the definitions of public diplomacy following 9/11 express a strong orientation towards mutual understanding which is reflected in terms such as ‘engagement’ or ‘relationship building’ (see exemplary the definition by Leonard et al. 2002: 8). These definitions reflect the different roles the global citizenship is assigned to in the evolvement of the concept: During the Cold War it has been seen as an actor to persuade and a target to be persuaded, at the end of the Cold War it has mainly been a target group whose understanding is sought, and since 9/11 it is – either way – an actor to be understood (cf. Löffelholz et al. 2011: 4–5). More than ever, the value of dialogue and cooperation is praised acknowledging the ever more important role of the individual: “While dialogue between cultures is an admirable goal, it begins with dialogue between individuals, whether they are representatives of governments or private citizens meeting in a hotel conference room or in an online chat room. These dialogic relationships provide the building blocks through which a broader ‘dialogue between civilizations’ can evolve.” (Cowan/Arsenault 2008: 17) This especially applies to the internet and social media. “While the great powers continued (and continue) to broadcast their speeches, press releases and so forth into the ether and across the web, the audience was no longer
as likely to listen. Part of the change was rooted in the sheer number of voices suddenly speaking on-line and the range of choices available.” (Cull 2011: 3)

Public Diplomacy and Social Media

Indeed, the internet and social media offer several potentials for public diplomacy actors when reaching out to their target groups. Besides these chances however, several challenges can also be detected. We want to skip a technological-deterministic view on social media and instead want to enforce a usage-centered perspective: “Technology itself can neither create nor destroy relationships; rather, it is how the technology is used that influences organization-public relationships.” (Kent/Taylor 1998: 324) We assume that social media both can have positive as well as negative effects (see for a critical perspective Cammaerts 2008).

In the following, the chances and challenges shall be outlined for online information-, identity- and relationship management on the micro, meso, and macro level. By micro level, we refer to the individual contribution to public diplomacy, by meso level to organizational goals, strategies, and structures, and macro level to social subsystems, organizational co-operations and developments on national and trans-national levels (see Löffelholz et al. 2011).

Relationship building and Citizen diplomacy: The micro level

Relationships break down to relations between individuals. Social media provide the channel for individuals to communicate and through that form relationships globally. These private networks are already part of global political reality. By their behavior and communication content, people not only construct an image of their own person, but also of their country. Thus, the slogan “Public Diplomacy is everyone’s job” (Cull 2009: 17) becomes reality. The foundation of the Coalition for Citizen Diplomacy (see http://uscenterforcitizendiplomacy.org) underscores the relevance of the citizen diplomats. For public diplomacy actors, these networks cannot be ignored. “Other relationships, for instance individual tourist or academic relationships have little impact on the overall relationship although en masse they may do. For instance the relationships between European tourists and Egyptians are individually weak but en mass are actually an important component of the Egyptian economy. These multiple relationships have the capacity to reinforce or undermine each other.” (Brown 2011: 8) Social media provide public diplomacy actors the tool to use these existing networks as social capital. Additionally, the online interactivity tools might help actors to achieve relational outcomes including trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality (cf. Kelleher 2009: 173;
In a public relations study, Kelleher found that people perceiving an organization to communicate relational commitment (such as communicating a desire to build a relationship or stressing commitment) and with a human voice (such as using conversation-style communication or trying to be interesting) correlated positively with those relational outcomes (cf. Kelleher 2009).

The internet and social media as the global communication infrastructure enable people to distribute and have access to information more easily. This however also nurtures distrust and suspiciousness among the citizenship (cf. Leonard et al. 2002: 54; Potter 2002: 5) who becomes less susceptible to influences by either hard or soft power (cf. Wilson 2008: 113) and as a result becomes a more self-determined actor. Consequently, the governments “can no long claim an exclusive right to influence public opinion in other countries” (Seo 2009: 8). Quite the contrary is the case. The traditional communicators lose credibility, one of their main sources. “The essential challenge of the Web 2.0 world is that it enabled the preferred source of ‘someone like me’ to become the principal point of contact for all information.” (Cull 2011: 4)

Taken together, this implies that the organizations’ communicators, the organizations’ employees, have the skills to communicate effectively. “Skills should combine knowledge and expertise in information technology, communication and international relations.” (van Noort 2011: 15) The 24/7 news cycle combined with the free flow of information on the internet lead to the fact that news circulate quickly and secure a continuity of messages. Therefore, there should be "a minimal gap between what is claimed in public and what is practiced in private" (Cull 2011: 2). This both implies that public diplomacy actors know the content of the policies: "To meet this wave of information, a parallel public diplomacy plan must be ready for implementation, which means public diplomats must participate fully in the policy making process." (Seib 2011: 7) So far however, the traditional approach is followed by public diplomacy actors: “Public diplomacy officers and information officers are specialized in communications. However, they are just partly informed about specific policies the Foreign Office is addressing” (van Noort 2011: 17). In addition to that, “public diplomacy requires imagination in devising ways to capture the attention of global publics” (Seib 2011: 8) that no longer want to listen to the authorities (cf. Cull 2011: 3). According to Morozov this means that public diplomacy practitioners should use the social media much more for creating a demand for their messages and ideas: “So far, new media has been deployed to help create supply of American ideas on the Internet, on the assumption that improving global access to unfiltered and carefully crafted American positions would help dispel some of the myths about the country and its policies (i.e. the real assumption is: if only they had the means to learn more about us, they would be on our side). However, I think this approach is wrong-headed simply because it obfuscates the real problem, which is the lack of demand for these ideas in the first place, especially after the Iraq debacle. One of
the goals of Public Diplomacy 2.0 should then be to create and then augment this demand rather than to infinitely grow the supply side of the equation.” (Morozov 2011) Being able to do that, requires that public diplomacy actors also use social media to listen. "The first duty of a public diplomat is to listen and the new media have an amazing ability to make that listening both easier and visible.” (Cull 2011: 5) Cull however criticizes that the US is still caught in its broadcasting mode (cf. Cull 2011: 5). “The State Department has paid lots of attention to how many people were following its postings, but generally forgot to think about following anyone themselves.” (Cull 2011: 5) This includes basing the dialogue on previous messages, which Sundar et al. (2003) refer to as contingency interactivity (cf. Sundar et al. 2003, see below). Just offering interactive tools, which they refer to as functional interactivity, does not automatically result in a dialogue.

The effect of the internet is however contested. One of the established suggestions is a “re-democratization” of the public sphere, relating the potentials of social media to the deliberating Habermasian public sphere. These “cyber-optimists” (Jensen et al. 2007: 41) are of the opinion that the internet has a positive effect on the engagement of the public and mobilizes also those who are not engaged offline (e.g. Boulianne 2009; Sclove 1995; Rheingold 1993). “Online information seeking and interactive civic messaging – uses of the Web as a resource and a forum – both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media and face-to-face communication.” (Shah et al. 2005: 551) Also, Morozov (2011) suggests that people can be reached through social media that cannot be reached by other public diplomacy instruments, such as exchange programs: “[P]eople who sign up for Al Qaeda and then blow themselves up do not usually come from such privileged backgrounds; most of them are not targeted by the current cultural and educational programs of the US government” (Morozov 2011). Besides, establishing a dialogue with them, Morozov suggests to provide “practical knowledge” to them, e.g. by online courses of elite universities such as Yale or Stanford (cf. Morozov 2011).

Contrasted to that, other researchers find empirical hints that “the Internet currently does little to expand political mobilization to new types of individuals” (Krueger 2006: 772) and that the new technologies just strengthen those structures that already determined political participation offline, which is supported by empirical research on the knowledge gap and digital divide (e.g. Yang/Grabe 2011; Wei/Hindman 2011; Krueger 2006). Instead of reaching the non-engaged publics, the mobilization efforts disproportionally reach those that are already politically engaged and those with a higher socio-economic status. Consequently, the digital divide becomes a participation divide and finally, a democratic divide. “As online content becomes increasingly important in setting social, political and cultural agendas, the existence of such a participation gap will have increasing implications for social inequality.” (Hargittai/Walejko 2008: 253)
Cammaerts (2008) therefore correctly concludes: “Humans design technologies and use them for a variety of purposes, which can be both beneficial as well as detrimental to democracy” (Cammaerts 2008: 372). Rightly then, Schneider points to the fact that social media relations cannot replace the personal ties: “Social media can complement but not substitute for personal ties that build trusting relationships with opinion leaders.” (Schneider 2010: 3) In sum, the social media can only enlarge the effectiveness of public diplomacy (cf. van Noort 2011: 2).

**Decisions on budget and institutionalization: The meso level**

On the meso level, social media provide the tools for an organization to conduct identity management, e.g. by providing information on the organization’s activities and by the behavior of the employees (micro level). “Government’s presence on social media enables better representation, easy access, and visibility for all segments of society.” (van Noort 2011: 31) In terms of information management, the organizations can use the internet to monologically distribute information; Leonard et al. refer to news management here (cf. Leonard et al. 2002). Besides, the organization can use the tools to enhance their relationship management, either of organization to organization or from organization to public. This also implies using the established networks of local organizations: "The Embassy may have similar long-term objectives, as the local organizations do, but the latter are much more tapped into society. Public diplomacy departments should work with these established relations and partnerships." (van Noort 2011: 28)

For the organization, this means to reflect on a social media strategy, social media guidelines, the commitment of resources, and the institutional setting of the public diplomacy function. According to van Noort (2011) there are four possibilities to institutionalize the social media activities of a public diplomacy actor: 1) conduct it centralized in a public diplomacy department, 2) decentralized in different departments, 3) individualized by foreign officers or diplomats, or 4) in a combined approach of those (cf. van Noort 2011: 17–18). Either way, the organization should aim to be transparent and authentic. As the continuity of messages and the sustainability are important aspects, the foreign services should better decide for organization related accounts independent of individual persons. “Recognizing the temporary placement of foreign officers abroad, it is important for the Foreign Service to establish independent accounts in name of the Embassy.” (van Noort 2011: 22)

Resources play a decisive role in social media as the maintenance of ones established relationships takes skills and personnel. On top of that, the successful use of social media includes an evaluation of the organization’s online activities. Here, science and practice still have to find reliable criteria: "[...]
the scale of successes is difficult to gauge. The number of friends on an organization’s Facebook page became the immediate measure of success rather than any consideration of whether real engagement was taking place as a result of the link. Success in the new media environment is about more than numbers.” (Cull 2011: 4)

**Image building and national determinants: The macro level**

On the macro level, it has to be acknowledged that the organizations’ activities have an effect on the image of the whole nation. As such, social media also provide a tool for the identity management of the country. "Ultimately, the great risk of participating on social media is the failure to represent your own country’s interest." (van Noort 2011: 24) A strategy however has to acknowledge the infrastructural context in the targeted regions as outlined by Sriramesh & Verčič (2009) for public relations. They name culture, the infrastructure and the media system as relevant factors to take account of (cf. Sriramesh/Verčič 2009). This results in the fact that public diplomacy practices, either online or offline, should be regionally adapted to be successful. For the use of social media, this exemplary means: "Despite the popularity of Facebook and Twitter internationally, there are other social networks that are expanding worldwide. [...] I would argue for regional research to develop a customized public diplomacy 2.0 strategy for each Embassy." (van Noort 2011: 48) The national context also determines the public diplomacy actors’ web interactivity as Lee (2007) has found out in his study. He found that a nation-state’s political system, the level of social freedom and the economic scale are correlated with its level of web public diplomacy interactivity (cf. Lee 2007: 15–25). “What seems gloomy here is that, at least in part, this correlation between a nation-state’s economic scale and its Web public diplomacy interactivity may explain increasing gap among world countries in terms of public diplomacy capacity.” (Lee 2007: 20) On the macro level, Seib (2011) also hints at the emergence and importance of virtual states for public diplomacy actors. "In addressing all these matters related to virtual states, policy makers must first be willing to break free from the dictates of conventional political geography and recognize the scope of the borderless virtual world. States have become more amorphous as their citizenry moves farther afield without truly separating from the homeland." (Seib 2011: 24)

In sum, we can suggest the social media to offer chances and challenges on a micro, meso, and macro level. In the following, it shall be tested in how far the actors use the chances and are aware of the challenges of social media for public diplomacy.
Methodology

Using the case of Germany, the study analyzes the implementation of social media in public diplomacy strategies and the benefits and risks public diplomacy actors connect to public diplomacy 2.0. It seeks to answer to what extent German public diplomacy organizations use the potentials of the internet and social media to reach their target groups that were outlined in the theoretical considerations:

RQ1: To what extent do German public diplomacy organizations use social media tools to reach their target groups?

A number of scholars (e.g. Brown 2011; Kelleher 2009, see above) suggest that online interactivity tools contribute to establishing trust among the target audiences and benefit relationship building as essential component of public diplomacy. This study seeks to analyze to what extent the organizations use social media in order to build up and maintain relationships:

RQ2: To what extent do German public diplomacy organizations engage in a dialogue with their target groups through social media tools?

Beyond examining the use of social media by German public diplomacy organizations, the study seeks to find out how the organizations analyzed perceive and evaluate potentials and pitfalls of public diplomacy 2.0:

RQ3: What are the benefits of the social media use perceived by these organizations?

RQ4: What are the challenges and problems of social media use perceived by these organizations?

Public diplomacy subsumes communication activities of both governmental and non-governmental, both public and private actors, in order to raise awareness of and increase knowledge about a country as well as shaping and maintaining a positive image of the country abroad by reducing stereotypes and prejudices, evoking understanding and sympathy for ideals, goals and (political) programs as well as establishing long-term partnership (cf. Löffelholz et al. 2011: 1). To identify the most important organizations contributing to public diplomacy in Germany, the research team applied a three-level sampling process.

The organization’s institutionalization abroad serves as the first selection criterion. It is defined by the number of countries an organization is working in, the amount of its activities abroad and the number of its employees working abroad. The more an organization engages in activities in other countries and the more its work is institutionalized abroad, the more relevance is attributed to the respective organization as a public diplomacy actor. The strategic alignment of an organization is the
second key indicator for sampling the population. The sample comprises organizations that either strategically conduct public diplomacy or do not pursue an explicit public diplomacy strategy but whose (communication) activities abroad implicitly contribute to public diplomacy. 31 organizations that match these sampling criteria were selected. The selected public diplomacy actors can be grouped into four different social subsystems: The sample consists of organizations from the dimension politics/military (e.g. The Federal Foreign Office, The German Armed Forces, Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation), the social/cultural (e.g. Goethe-Institute, Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations), economic (e.g. Germany Trade and Invest) and educational/research dimension (e.g. German Academic Exchange Service, German Research Foundation).

The study employs a multi-method design: First, guided interviews are conducted with the selected organizational members (see above) on the basis of a half-standardized questionnaire focusing on the extent to which the organizations integrate social media in their public diplomacy strategies, the way in which social media is used and the functions social media fulfil for the organizations and the perceived benefits and risks of social media as public diplomacy tools\(^1\). A written questionnaire containing fact-based questions on the structural integration of public diplomacy within organizations, the educational/professional background of public diplomacy practitioners as well as the organizations’ target groups and cooperation partners precedes each guided interview.

In a second step, an analysis of the organizations’ websites, related web presences and blogs as well as social networks that the organizations engage in sheds light on the online activities of the German public diplomacy actors. Moreover, a content analysis of publicly available documents (e.g. annual reports or discussion papers) provides additional insights into the organizations’ structure, strategies and activities.

However, there are several limitations that need to be taken into consideration: Not all social subsystems of public diplomacy are represented equally in the study: Organizations from the political sector dominate the sample in contrast to economic organizations that are underrepresented\(^2\). Furthermore, the interviews are limited to 60 minutes which sometimes did not permit the interviewers to discuss every aspect of the questionnaire in detail.

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\(^1\) This analysis is part of a comprehensive study on the understanding and conduct of public diplomacy in Germany. Thus, the guided interviews also go into the organization’s goals, strategies, instruments and cooperations related to public diplomacy.

\(^2\) Most interview rejections go back to actors from the economic dimension. This might be explained by the fact that enterprises do not disclose their actions to the same extent as non-governmental organizations for example which often rely on public funding.
Findings

It goes without saying that each of the organizations studied operates a website that is regularly updated. All of the organizations make information available in English in order to reach target groups abroad. Additionally, a number of organizations, the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, the German Armed Forces or the Federal Foreign Office among them, provide information in more than two languages. The Deutsche Welle is at the forefront of embracing multilingualism, offering their information in 30 languages, thus being able to reach a broad range of audiences globally. The websites can however be considered a mainly one-way information transmission channel.

Social media allows for more dialogue with target groups, but not all organizations seize this opportunity. Almost half of the organizations analyzed maintain a Twitter account (n=13), a Facebook profile (n=14) and/or a YouTube channel (n=17). Few organizations like the German Research Foundation have established their own video channels. Additionally, single organizations like the Heinrich-Boell-Foundation also engage in other networks such as the photo community Flickr. German public diplomacy actors appear reluctant towards integrating blogs in their communication strategies: Up to now, only five organizations (Heinrich-Boell-Foundation, German Academic Exchange Service, Hanns-Seidel-Foundation, Deutsche Welle and Goethe-Institute) keep up weblogs.

With regard to YouTube, the number of videos placed online and the attention they receive varies to a great extent. Whereas 23.654 users subscribed to the YouTube channel of the German Armed Forces, the YouTube channel of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit\(^3\) has only four subscriptions. However, a great number of views and subscriptions does not automatically equal a dialogue with target audiences on YouTube. Out of 17 organizations maintaining a YouTube channel eight actors did not receive any comments at all – the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology even deactivated the option to comment its videos. The videos of the other organizations are commented sporadically – almost all organizations get back to these comments within a few days.

These findings indicate that the technological pre-conditions for initiating a dialogue do not guarantee that a dialogue is really evolving and kept up. The German Armed Forces, whose videos have been viewed 8.783.697 times and numerous commented, are an exception to this observation. Still, Schulz et al. (2012) show that only one fifth of the YouTube channel users (N=649) believe that the Armed Forces are actually interested in and willing to engage in a dialogue with the users, more than 70 percent are of the opinion that the Armed Forces use the YouTube Channel predominantly to disseminate information and generate attention. Nevertheless, more than one

\(^3\) German Society for International Cooperation
third of all respondents admit that the YouTube Channel had a positive influence on their perception of the Armed Forces (cf. Schultz et al. 2012).

The number of fans (ranging from 33,954 fans (Goethe-Institute) to 434 fans (German Research Foundation)) as well as the degree of activity on Facebook varies to a great extent between the organizations. However, the majority of public diplomacy actors only use Facebook in order to represent themselves or to react to the comments of users. It is only the Robert-Bosch- Foundation and the Goethe-Institute who actively stimulate dialogue with their fans, for instance by asking them about their favorite books against the background of the German book fair.

The analysis of the Twitter accounts suggests that there are two groups of organizations: A first, small group concentrates on informing target audiences without following the information of other, international actors: The Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation for instance, predominantly follows organizations that are closely related to it through common projects or even providing the political foundation with funding. The German Armed Forces, on the contrary, does not follow anyone at all. The second, larger group also follows private persons and organizations that go beyond its own network and show a bigger interest in the activities of other actors. With regard to the German Embassies, we can also distinguish these two groups: A first group, including the German Embassy in Dublin, remains hesitant to “listening” (cf. Cull 2011: 5) what other organizations have to tweet. A second group, including the German Embassy in Washington, applies Twitter in a more interactive way, for instance by re-tweeting messages by other, not necessarily related organizations (cf. Altenberg et al. 2012: 36ff.).

German public diplomacy actors emphasize dialogue and network building as crucial goals of their work. This quest for dialogue is also reflected in the fundamental conceptions of German foreign cultural and educational politics (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2000; Auswärtiges Amt 2009). Many interviewees recognize the value of Web 2.0 applications for establishing dialogues and follow-up contacts (cf. IP 2, 474-488; IP 4, 507-511; IP 14, 345-354; IP 20, 213-216, 406-408, 435-436; IP 19, 342-347 IP 25, 279-287, IP 28, 457-481), but only very few organizations engage in a social media dialogue with foreign audiences. Among these organizations, the German Academic Exchange Service has established a weblog (http://www.daad.de/blog) on which exchange students share their experiences in Germany (cf. IP15, 263-269). The Heinrich-Boell-Foundation also maintains several blogs – however, it is not the organization’s target audience setting the agenda for discussion, but the employees themselves who stimulate dialogue by blogging about politically and ecologically relevant issues such as climate change (cf. Heinrich Böll Stiftung o.J.f). Both the international broadcaster Deutsche Welle as well as the Goethe-Institute dedicate a lot of resources to relationship management online: Particularly, the Goethe-Institute uses a lot of the potential offered
by social media, for instance by interactive language learning courses in Second Life (cf. Goethe-Institut o.J.n).

However, the content analysis highlights social media as a platform for identity- and information management. These findings are confirmed by the guided interviews (cf. IP1: 384-389; IP5: 697-703; IP8: 426-437; IP14: 339-361; IP13: 534; IP24: 381-388; IP22: 321-336; IP32: 480-491), on which the organizations illustrate their organizational intent, their activities and structure as well as their partners. A number of organizations emphasize the importance of a digital corporate identity in order to ensure a high recognition value (cf. IP17: 316-328). Moreover, German public diplomacy actors use the internet as a channel for both external and internal information management. The organizations inform online by providing information on their activities and projects or making dossiers, speeches or brochures available. This information is targeted at both multipliers such as journalists and the broad public. Online communication is also facilitating internal business procedures and work flows in areas ranging from recruitment and accounting to knowledge management (cf. IP26, 311-328; IP27, 457-481; IP31, 428-433, 451-470; IP16, 301-302). In a nutshell, most public diplomacy organizations hardly apply social media in order to build up and maintain relationships as well as networks. This might be traced back to the fact that some respondents prefer slow media such as exchange programs or exhibitions to establish a dialogue: “[…] [W]e can communicate, we can exchange ideas, we can plan meetings, we can prepare meetings, everything. But NOTHING, nothing in the world replaces […] the meeting of people and dialogue between them” (cf. IP24, 367-373). On the contrary, the results suggest that those organizations that generally focus on exchanges and relationship management in their work – especially the German Academic Exchange Service and the Goethe-Institute – are also more active in establishing and keeping up relationships and networks online.

As stated in the theoretical considerations (see above), resources play a decisive role in online information-, identity- and relationship management. Subsequently, a lack of finances and personnel largely accounts for the organizations’ hesitation to embrace social media as public diplomacy instruments (cf. IP1, 465-470; IP5, 685-686; IP4, 419-426; IP18, 274-280; IP28, 426-430). Joint online projects such as „Alumniportal Germany“ give the organizations an opportunity of profiting from the potential of social media despite budget restrictions. The project that is coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation as well as financed by several public organizations provides a platform for people from other countries who used to work in Germany, “so they can get back into touch with Germany if they lost touch or it is also the new opportunity to get back in touch and to exchange ideas” (IP25, 415-418).
But budget restrictions do not remain the only reason for the perceived reluctance towards social media: The study discloses a lack of social media competence as well. Even though the Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation actively uses Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as online communication channels, the analysis of the guided interviews show that the interviewee of this organization was completely unaware of the Ministry’s involvement in Web 2.0. Furthermore, the interviews reveal that a number of organizations do not know what the term Web 2.0 stands for (cf. IP7, 797-802; IP11, 353-360; IP17, 303-305; IP23, 514-515; IP21, 264-282). Furthermore, most public diplomacy practitioners are not the ones to decide on the implementation of social media. Public diplomacy has not been institutionalized as an organizational function in Germany yet. In most cases, departments below the executive level that are already concerned with communication activities take over public diplomacy-related tasks. Thus, public diplomacy practitioners refer directly to the top management as analysts and advisors, but mostly do not possess any final decision-making power.

Limitations of social media as perceived by the interviewees are the difficulty to reach all relevant target groups online since internet access and literacy cannot be presumed in every region and the mode of online communication that does not allow the organization to transport important non-verbal features of communication such as gestures, smell or appearance. Especially, the Federal Foreign office and the German embassies express concern about the loss of control over the content that is posted online and might be distributed by third parties in a different context (cf. IP1, 469-470; Altenberg et al. 2012: 45). Moreover, single actors point to bureaucratic obstacles and the fact that organizational change does not happen over night: “We have huge discussions between people who think we need more Web2.0, but it’s in a huge organization sometimes difficult to implement those issues. [...] These institutions take time to move”. (IP11: 274-280) This implies that bureaucracy also plays a decisive part in using social media which supports the assumption that the national context determines the degree of the organizations’ online interactivity (cf. Lee 2007, see above).

The majority of German public diplomacy actors plans to further develop their digital public diplomacy tools in the future, they particularly seek to include more multimedia features and intensify dialogue-oriented online communication (cf. IP1, 472-488; IP5, 679-681; IP4, 419-420; IP11, 339-342; IP12, 329-345; IP18, 274-280; IP20, 212-216; IP19, 342-347; IP13, 560-574; IP22, 321-347; IP30, 480-482). Still, the organizations interviewed emphasize that social media is just one instrument of a varied public diplomacy toolbox that has to be implemented according to specific tasks and projects, the region the organization is operating in and its target groups (cf. IP1, 308-309, 334; IP 14, 433; IP15, 339-351; IP18, 223; IP13, 520-524; IP23, 538-544, 524-526): „[D]ifferentiation is the key to reach them“ (IP18, 223). The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations define the internet as „a
working tool and it’s service tool with respect to news out of diplomatic and cultural world” (IP24: 357-359), but whole-heartedly deny that social media applications can “replace media dialogues or anything like that” (IP24, 355-357).

Contextualization of findings

This study discloses a digital divide between single German public diplomacy actors that almost exhaust the potential of social media and organizations that only apply social media hesitantly or do not apply it at all. In contrast, almost every U.S. public diplomacy actor is familiar with Web 2.0 applications as public diplomacy tools. Frequent social media use - ranging from online language courses (cf. British Council n.y., thisisFINLAND n.y.) to setting up virtual embassies in Second Life (cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives 2006; Pamment 2011) - is a vital part of Chinese, British, Finnish, Swedish and even Maldivian public diplomacy strategies. The Second House of Sweden exemplifies the application of second life as a public diplomacy tool: It serves as an official information and events centre for the promotion of Swedish interests (cf. Pamment 2011: 244). The reception of Sweden’s embassy in second life is, however, mixed: Pamment (2011) argues that much of the content offered in second life corresponds to the website of the Swedish Institute. Moreover, the Second House of Sweden repeatedly faced online security problems such as attacks by online terrorists. These attacks illustrate the risk of losing control over communication in social media that are particularly emphasized by the Federal Foreign Office and the German Embassies (cf. IP1, 469-470; Altenberg et al. 2012: 45). Pamment refers to second life as “an intriguing experiment in international cultural communication and the new diplomacy” (Pamment 2011: 243) that has only been explored by the Goethe-Institute in Germany so far. The case of Sweden proves that “[t]he Second House is a valuable experiment in brand association and promotion, but its role as a serious location for public engagement is probably the least convincing aspect” (Pamment 2011: 248). Even though Sweden belongs to the pioneers of public diplomacy 2.0, its social media strategy also reveals a tendency towards asymmetrical communication.

The findings suggest that there are a number of organizations that predominantly maintain Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to inform, rather than to be informed about the messages and concerns of their fans and followers. This approach to social media use denies listening to target audiences which is considered a key component and pre-requisite of public diplomacy in both traditional and new media (cf. Cull 2011; see above). Cull (2011: 6) points to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi as a positive example of listening on Twitter. To many German public diplomacy organizations, social networking sites such as Facebook remain tools of identity- and information management
rather than relationship building. The Goethe-Institute stands out by generating a dialogue with its fans on Facebook, but also stimulating conversations between these Facebook users. The U.S. Embassy in Indonesia, that pursues an interactive social media strategy, serves as another positive example of relationship building and maintenance on Facebook (cf. Ciolek 2010). Additionally, awarding and rewarding citizens for their active participation in discussions has proven to be a successful tool of gaining trust and building long-lasting relationships (see also Kelleher 2009). The U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has launched a number of competitions for user generated films including a contest for the best short film on the theme of ‘Democracy is’ (cf. Cull 2011), the Deutsche Welle annually awards the best international blogs that contribute to an open discourse on the internet (www.thebobs.com). These instruments can contribute to strengthening trust in public diplomacy organizations in the long run, as an empirical study by Kelleher (2009) indicates.

The report “U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight” by the United States Government Accountability Office (2009) states that the U.S. public diplomacy actors “should place a greater reliance on dialogue and collaboration, enabled by emerging social networks, in addition to the traditional model of public diplomacy” (United States Government Accountability Office 2009: 35). These new initiatives include press conferences only held for bloggers and the implementation of the Digital Outreach Teams (United States Government Accountability Office 2009: 35). The Digital Outreach Teams aim at “engag[ing] directly with citizens in the Middle East through posting messages about US foreign policy on popular Arabic, Urdu, and Persian language internet forums” (Khatib et al. 2011: 4). Khatib et al. (2011) have conducted a study on the work of the U.S. digital outreach team in the case if Barack Obama’s Cairo speech held on June 4th, 2009. The study shows that the posts by members of the digital outreach team generate negative responses that can be counterproductive to the relationship with Middle Eastern countries, but also encourage debates. Criticism of these online engagement teams have been raised by several authors (cf. Cull 2011; Morozov 2011). Morozov points out that “you don’t win a war of ideas by growing the number of new media staff who sit by their computers and, much like robots, respond to every online thread that mentions US foreign policy with an official position of the State Department” (Morozov 2011).

The success of public diplomacy 2.0 is largely dependent on the offline actions of an organization (meso level) or an entire country (macro level) (cf. van Noort 2011: 32). Van Noort (2011) shows that much of the success online of the U.S. Embassy in Indonesia was generated by a visit of U.S. President Barack Obama. Similarly, a case study on the communication on Twitter accompanying the

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4 Even though Kelleher (2009) studies this subject from a public relations point of view, the results can also be applied to public diplomacy.
visit of Barack Obama to Brazil in January (cf. Fisher/Montez 2011) reveals a close connection between the President’s visit to Brazil and the reception of the Twitter account #ObamainBrazil. The authors point out that the visit of Obama has produced a short-lived interest in the online profile of the U.S. Embassy in Brazil that could not be transferred into a sustained interaction with the embassy (cf. Fisher/Montez 2011: 6). Involving public diplomacy practitioners in strategic, foreign political decisions does not only facilitate the coordination of foreign policy and public diplomacy initiatives, but does also contribute to more sustainable public diplomacy effects.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the extent to which German organizations use social media for public diplomacy purposes. The empirical study revealed that a gap exists between the potentials connected with public diplomacy 2.0 and the actual use of the interactive modes of social media by public diplomacy actors. We argued that social media provide public diplomacy actors with potentials for online information-, identity- and relationship management on the micro (one-to-one communication, citizen diplomacy), meso (network management, identity management), and macro level (image building). The potentials are however faced with the challenges ranging from the skills of the employees using social media to communicate the organization’s messages, the institutional embedding of public diplomacy practitioners, to the recognition of national determinants of social media use. The empirical study has shown that German public diplomacy actors mainly face these challenges without yet knowing how to handle them. Although highlighting dialogue as a main means of communication and relationship management, they only hesitantly use social media. If they use social media, they mostly use them for identity- and information management purposes. In line with previous studies (cf. van Noort 2011; Seo 2009; Lee 2007), the results show that a real dialogue with the target audience is rarely sought. This can be traced back to the lack of skills and personnel. It however leads to the conclusion that public diplomacy 2.0 is still much more fiction than reality, and that social media are still more used for marketing purposes than relationship building.

Despite its added value to public diplomacy, social media remains one instrument of a varied public diplomacy toolbox that has to implemented according to specific tasks and projects, the region the organization is operating in and its target groups. It “can complement but not substitute for personal ties that build trusting relationships with opinion leaders” (Schneider 2010: 3).
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Appendix: Guided interviews

IP 2: Auswärtiges Amt (2008), Interview on June, 18th, 2008.
IP 5: Bundesministerium der Verteidigung (2009), Interview on June, 12th, 2009.
IP 7: Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Technologie (2009), Interview on May, 12th, 2009.
IP 14: Deutsche Welle (2009), Interview on May, 15th, 2009.
IP 19: Germany Trade and Invest (2009), Interview on June, 23rd, 2009.
IP 20: Goethe-Institut (2009), Interview on May, 11th, 2009.