

COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA ERA

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Communicating across cultures has been done by individuals, governments, and other institutions for many centuries. The results have been decidedly mixed. When done effectively, cross-cultural communication can contribute to stability because when people understand each other, the tensions that can lead to conflict are less likely to arise. There must be a willingness on the part of the nations involved to take extra steps to understand each other. The relationship that has been constructed between Germany and Poland is an example of this.

But the reverse is also true. Poorly conceived cross-cultural communication can turn a problem into a crisis, building walls rather than bridges. This field requires delicate diplomatic skill. Relationship-building is a fragile process, as can be seen in Asia with Japan's mixed results in overcoming hostility that has endured for more than seventy years.

The political aspects of cross-cultural communication are endless, but today I would like to focus on process: how the rise of digital media has transformed not only the technology of cultural communication but also the ways that global publics have become participants rather than merely audiences.

Let's go back in time a bit; we need not go very far back, just a little more than ten years ago to the beginning of the social media era. Given how much a part of our lives social media

have become, it may be hard to believe that little more than a decade ago no one had heard of Facebook, Twitter, Sina Weibo, or other such venues. They did not exist.

But when they arrived, they changed the way we live. Now, when messages are sent to us, we can respond to the sender and spread the message ourselves, if we want to do so. We are no longer a passive audience, simply receiving information; rather, we can answer in numerous ways. Further, because of mobile technologies, we can do so wherever we are and whenever we choose. The most powerful communication tool on the planet is the mobile phone most of you have in your pockets.

Before I go on, let me provide some basic statistics about the scope of change brought about by social media.

- Facebook, born in 2004 (and so the oldest of the social media giants), has more than one billion users. If it was a state, it would contend with China for being the most populous.
- YouTube, created in 2005, also has more than a billion users, and they upload more than 300 hours of video every minute.
- Twitter, which came onto the scene in 2006, sees 500 million Tweets every day, 80 percent of which come from mobile devices. As of March 2015, the Twitter user with the most followers was singer Katy Perry, with 67 million. She was closely followed by another singer, Justin Bieber, with 61 million, and not so closely followed by President Barack Obama, who had 56 million followers.
- Instagram began in 2010, hosting 70 million photos each day and sharing a total of more than 30 billion photographs.

- Sina Weibo, a Chinese service that combines attributes of Facebook and Twitter, was created in 2009, and has 600 million users, 70 percent of whom access the service through their mobile devices. Sina Weibo's most popular user as of early 2015 was actor Chen Kun, who had 73 million followers.

There are, of course, many more social media tools available, each with its own special attributes, and each struggling to achieve financial viability in an intensely competitive environment.

These are the tools that have transformed communicating across cultures. Consider the way it was done in the past: publish a magazine about your country; deliver musical programming on the radio; use satellite television channels to send your TV programs and movies around the world. All these had one thing in common: their audiences were largely passive recipients. They could read the magazine, listen to the music, or watch the movie, but they could not communicate with the sources of the material or redistribute it themselves.

Today, however, people are empowered by the media tools I have mentioned, and many others. If they read or hear or see something they consider interesting, they can post a link on Twitter, and then it can be retweeted, reaching a potentially massive audience. Or, they can produce their own material and put it on YouTube, where much of the world can see it.

For individuals and organizations engaged in communication across cultures, this is a wonderful time to be making and strengthening connections. Conversation is the best way to add value to cross-cultural communication, and these new media allow conversation to supersede

one-way publishing or broadcasting. Those who are engaged in these conversations must remember that part of their job is to listen.

The challenge now is to determine how to optimize use of these tools.

Let's begin with an easy one: film festivals on YouTube. If I am a cultural diplomat working for the Indian foreign ministry, I would embrace YouTube as a way both to familiarize people around the world with Indian culture and to promote India's film industry.

Another topic: a country's commitment to certain political values. Singapore, for example, has made water conservation not just a political priority but also an element of Singaporean culture. Facebook is an excellent venue for showcasing Singapore's water-related projects.

Yet another example: the Vietnamese economy continues to grow stronger, as has been observed in numerous news reports. Using Twitter, Vietnam can deliver links to this coverage to the rest of the world and define its economic culture while doing so.

In all such instances, the great advantages of using social media are the breadth and speed of disseminating information. Because of the ways that networks work, a multiplier effect can take hold that increases the number of information recipients exponentially.

This all might sound perfect to anyone interested in communicating across cultures, but this new media universe has expanded to such a degree that competition is fierce. There is never a shortage of content, but there is a shortage of attention. Grabbing and keeping attention are increasingly difficult.

This means that you should not believe that you can post anything and that the people you want to reach will be certain to see it. Information is a product and members of the public are consumers. That relationship must be kept in mind.

Compare this situation to television. In the Arab world before the 1990s, boring state-controlled news programs with low production values took their audiences for granted because the public had few other options. These channels quickly lost their audiences when the likes of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya appeared on the scene. These new channels won the battle for audience because they were lively and had high production values. Similarly, consider television advertisements. Most of them – the successful ones – are exceptionally well (and very expensively) produced, designed to get our attention and present a convincing message in thirty seconds. If an ad's message and appearance are insufficiently creative, viewers' eyes will not even "see" them.

For cross-cultural communication to be effective, it must conform to the demands of whatever medium is being used. Everyone who frequents Facebook or Sina Weibo knows that some postings attract and retain attention more readily than do others. During the coming years, as we see the maturing of a generation that has known nothing but online communication, the competition for attention will increase.

I know you will be discussing the content of communication across cultures throughout this conference, but I would like to offer three brief observations about the kinds of messaging likely to have the most positive effect.

First, cross-cultural communication is not solely about the sender. When creating messaging it is essential to respect various social sensitivities – such as those related to religion –

of the recipient. Further, remember that any message is likely to be passed along through recipients' networks, and the people in those networks may have diverse views about cultural matters.

Second, cross-cultural digital communication should not be relied upon in isolation. It should be supported by programming, especially exchange programs that allow face-to-face contact (and not just via Skype or other electronic means). The new technologies can be extremely helpful, but they will not ensure improved cultural relationships unless they are backed up by other forms of contact.

Third, remember that the speed of messaging and the number of people a message reaches will magnify the bad as well as the good. Make an error and you will not be able to call it back. It will reach lots of people and will do so quickly. Then you will find yourself spending your time in damage control.

Communicating across cultures in the digital era involves unprecedented challenges as well as opportunities. I think the opportunities far outweigh the challenges. Taking advantage of those opportunities will require careful creativity and thorough understanding of the media tools that will be employed in delivering cross-cultural content.

Those of you at this conference will be addressing a broad range of important media-related topics: democratization; gender issues; media freedom; environmental concerns; media literacy; and many more. All these matters are affected by cultural differences and the ability to cross cultural boundaries. Thoughtful, carefully constructed communication is the bridge across those boundaries.

***About the author:**



Dr. Philip Seib is Vice Dean of the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and a Professor of Journalism, Public Diplomacy, and International Relations at the USC.

He is author or editor of numerous books such as: *Headline Diplomacy*, *The Global Journalist*, *Beyond the Front Lines*, *Broadcasts from the Blitz*, *New Media and the New Middle East*, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, *Global Terrorism and New Media*, *Al Jazeera English*, and *Real-Time Diplomacy*.

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