Emma Burgers

MA Asian Studies: East Asian

S1552791

S1552791@vuw.leidenuniv.nl

Dr Florian Schneider

f.a.schneider@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Dutch Digital Diplomacy in China

The Use of Weibo and Chinese Social Media by the Dutch Diplomatic Mission

Universiteit Leiden

Thesis MA Asian Studies   Humanities Faculty

Contents

1. Introduction

The rise of the internet, and subsequently the use of social media has affected most aspects of life, including politics, international relations and civil society. The amount of people using the internet is ever-growing, and with the widespread adoption of smartphones, the time people spend online and on social media is as well.[1] People use social networking sites to have discussions on all types of topics, even policy debates and discussions on public discourse can take place online. The extent to which these debates occur on such platforms, and the amount of people able to chime in would have been unthinkable just twenty years ago. It is not unreasonable to argue that at this moment in time, there are no areas of public concern or general topics that stay beyond the reach of online discussion. Depending on the topic, these online discussions can have far reaching consequences such as protests and revolutions; think for example of the Arab Spring. Yet at the same time there are sceptics who argue that that the impact of social media on movements like the Arab Spring, and politics in general is often overstated.[2]

Often when talking about the internet and social media, the attention is focused on the significance these platforms have in providing ways for regular internet users and citizens of a country to express their opinions and share information with one another. It is true that social media can provide a very useful tool for citizens to express their dissatisfaction or approval on all sorts of topics, but they are not the only ones who use these platforms. The emergence of new media also diversified the ways authorities, companies, NGOs and other international organizations are able to directly communicate with people. These organizations can use social media platforms and their own websites to inform, influence, or sell. Social media platforms, especially social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook or Sina Weibo, can also form a useful tool to gauge the opinions of others. Therefore, many political parties, governments, and businesses around the world put in considerable effort to streamline their social media presence and acquire an engaged audience. A strong internet and social media presence can be a powerful tool for those who know how to exert their influence, which makes time and financial investment worth it.[3]

In China this is no different. The growing popularity of social media platforms, in China most notably Weixin[4] and Weibo, has had a huge influence on many aspects of society. Most foreign embassies in Beijing will have both a Weibo and Weixin account to talk directly to the Chinese public. Some have amassed quite a large following over the years, and therefore could potentially exert a certain amount of influence. For example, the embassies of the United States, Canada, and Israel all have over 2 million followers on their respective Weibo

---

[1] "Social Media Fact Sheet", 2021.
[2] Wolfsfeld et al., 2013.
[3] Mickoleit, 2014.
[4] The version of Weixin used outside of China is also known as WeChat.

accounts.[5] Occasionally what is posted on the social media accounts of these diplomatic missions has an unmistakable effect or starts a discussion among followers and other Weibo users. A well-known example of this is when the U.S. embassy started live tweeting the air-quality data from a monitor they had installed on top of the embassy building.[6] By doing so it was revealed that the official readings published by Beijing's municipal government were much lower, suggesting much less pollution than the data the U.S. Embassy were measuring. These tweets found their way to Chinese social media platforms where they triggered a debate, which eventually led to greater transparency regarding the official air-quality data.

This example makes it clear that what foreign diplomatic missions post on their social media accounts can have a real-life impact, because it can start a discussion among the Chinese public. Posts can create awareness around certain topics, start discussions among individual social media users, and sometimes mobilize people into actions. Essentially, social media can be a new platform for strategic public diplomacy. In scholarly articles, this social media-based diplomacy is often researched under the name of digital diplomacy, e-diplomacy, or sometimes, when it focuses specifically on Twitter, twitplomacy. In this thesis I will explore this concept of digital diplomacy as it is applied in China. What role does digital communication play in international relations and what does it mean for diplomats to communicate through social media?

A study like this is relevant because it provides a perspective on the rise of social media and the influence this has had on diplomacy in China. It adds to an important conversation about the digitalization of diplomacy in global politics. As will become clear in the literature review, extensive research has been done on the topics of public diplomacy or western diplomacy in China in general, but research on digital diplomacy is still sparse. There have been research papers focused on the use of Weibo by diplomatic accounts with a larger following, such as Canada and the Unites States. However, in-depth research on the use of Weibo by the Dutch diplomatic mission in China has not been done before. This is why in this thesis, I aim to answer the following research question:

What are the key features of Dutch diplomatic communication on Sina Weibo?

I want to answer this question specifically by analysing the Weibo activity of the Dutch diplomatic mission. Their Weibo account, 荷兰驻华大使馆, "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", currently has a following of over 160.000 people and the account posts frequently.[7] I

---

[5] "US Embassy in China", 2021.
"Canada Embassy in China", 2021.
"Israel Embassy in China", 2021.
[6] DeLisle, et al., 2016.
[7] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2021.
Number of followers as observed at the time of writing, 2021.

will look into the characteristics and goals of Dutch diplomacy in China and look how the diplomatic communication on Weibo fits into these goals and characteristics. The characteristics of Dutch diplomacy and specifically Dutch digital diplomacy will be analysed based on government communication on these topics, such as policy reviews. Then, by looking at the posts on the Dutch Weibo account, the topics that are mentioned, and the reception they get, I aim to discern the key characteristics of the Dutch diplomatic communication.

First though, this thesis will dive deeper into the existing literature to find out how scholars have discussed key concepts such as public diplomacy and digital diplomacy, and what the theoretical and academic debates are behind these concepts. I will look into the literature on public and digital technology and social media and discuss the situation where it comes to internet and social media in China specifically, since this creates unique circumstances and characteristics for diplomatic activity.

The setup of each social media platform is different, and this affects how suitable a platform can be for diplomatic activities. When using Chinese social media platforms, like Weibo or Weixin, diplomats will run into challenges that are unique to those platforms, since these are not by any means carbon copies of other well-known social media platforms. Even though Weibo is often referred to as the 'Chinese Twitter'[8], it has its own typical features designed to fit Chinese user behaviour, like message threading, events, instant messaging and community portals.[9] The links between Sina Weibo and the Chinese state are also especially strong, even when compared to other Chinese social media platforms.[10] Censorship on these social media platforms, as is prevalent on the Chinese Internet, has a further impact. Because of these unique circumstances, digital diplomacy in China will have different characteristics as compared to other countries and the main features of Dutch diplomatic communication on Weibo will be influenced by this. A question that must be asked is, therefore, what it means for diplomats to specifically communicate through Weibo. What does the way the Internet functions in China mean for diplomatic activity? This will be explored in chapter three.

---

[8] Ren, 2018.
[9] Ng, 2013.
[10] Benney, 2014.

2. Studying Digital Diplomacy

Diplomacy in its traditional form has been around for a long time. However, within international relations studies, diplomatic theory was long overlooked as an intellectual concept or as an academic discipline.[11] It was seen as a category of practice instead of a category of analysis, and the most famous classic works on diplomacy were historical in nature or can be described as practical guides and handbooks, like Satow's 'A Guide to Diplomatic Practice' or Kissinger's 'Diplomacy'. Works written from this practical perspective are often more prescriptive and rely on particular experiences, and though these can be significant in their own right, their contribution to the development of diplomatic theory and methodology is limited. Practitioners of diplomacy and theorists or academics still have different perceptions of diplomacy.

Harold Nicholson described traditional diplomacy in 1939 as the 'management of international relations by negotiation, the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys - the business or art of the diplomat.'[12] Ernest Satow stated that diplomacy is an 'application of tact and intelligence to the conduct of official relations between governments of independent states.'[13] In these more traditional definitions of diplomacy - both are interpretations by diplomats - a lot of emphasis is placed on governmental agents. In the last century however, diplomacy has changed a lot. Governments came to the understanding that foreign relations no longer could rely on traditional governmental diplomacy alone.[14] Direct communication with the foreign public could also be beneficial. This is where public diplomacy, and eventually, with the development of new information and communication technologies, digital diplomacy comes into view.

In this literature review, I aim to address the academic debates surrounding digital diplomacy and chronicle how this concept evolved from public diplomacy with the digitalization of global politics. I will give the prevailing definitions of both public and digital diplomacy and I will explain how these differ from foreign public relations and international relations and how they relate to the concept of soft power.

---

[11] Pouliot & Cornut, 2015.
[12] Nicolson, 1939.
[13] Satow, 1917.
[14] Adesina, 2017.

2.1   Public diplomacy

Digital diplomacy is most often conceptualized as a by digitalization evolved form of public diplomacy.[15] It is thus important to first know how to define public diplomacy. This term was first coined in the early 1960s by the U.S. diplomat Edmund Gullion, in order to distance any overseas governmental activity from what was described as 'propaganda', because that term had a negative connotation.[16] It can be argued that these two terms in fact describe the same phenomenon, and some scholars use the terms interchangeably.[17] Others argue that public and digital diplomacy are simply tools in the modern day's diplomat toolkit and that they also require more dialogue and two-way exchange of ideas than propaganda.[18] It is clear that the two concepts are at least strongly related.

Tuch defined public diplomacy in 1990 as "a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies", thus identifying the actor of public diplomacy as the government of a country. [19] Frederick added to the definition with information about specific content to the definition: "activities, directed abroad in the fields of information, education, and culture, whose objective is to influence a foreign government, by influencing its citizens".[20] In this way scholars have kept updating the definition of public diplomacy following developments in international relations and communications.

Some people have likened public diplomacy to public relations because both have comparable aims of influencing the public opinion to benefit an organization or country, and they also employ similar tools to achieve these goals.[21] Public relations is generally defined as a strategic communication process that builds relationships between organizations and their publics, with the goal of influencing the public to the organizations' advantage.[22] This means one could describe public diplomacy as a form of international public relations in the sense that it also includes relationship management and public relations tactics with the aim of effecting change in foreign publics.[23] Signitzer and Coombs included this in their definition of public diplomacy, which they describe as "the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions

---

[15] Ibid.
[16] Cull, 2009.
[17] Mor, 2006.
[18] Snow, 2012.
[19] Tuch, 1990.
[20] Frederick, 1992.
[21] Signitzer & Coombs, 1992.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Zhong & Lu, 2013.

which bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions."[24] This definition recognizes both governmental and nonstate actors, thus abolishing the difference between public diplomacy and PR. It also reflects on the growing interdependence among many different actors, governmental or otherwise. Within this context of public diplomacy, there is the component of digital diplomacy.

2.2.   Digitalization of public diplomacy

With the rapid expansion of internet connectivity, and near-instantaneous online communication, public diplomacy has changed dramatically over the years. To reflect and describe this change, scholars conceptualized and defined new theoretical concepts such as digital diplomacy, e-diplomacy, ICT-enabled diplomacy, or cyber diplomacy. Scholars and practitioners alike often use these terms are interchangeably to refer to the same concept and research field, namely the use of digital technologies and social media platforms for diplomatic activity.[25] The DiploFoundation has observed subtle differences in meaning that have started to appear. 'E-diplomacy' being more related to commerce, 'cyber' typically used for security-related topics, and 'digital' for development divides.[26] Research into the use of digital technologies for diplomatic purposes is relatively new and the language surrounding it is still evolving. There are in fact also many academic articles that research the use of social media in diplomacy without referring to digital diplomacy, e-diplomacy, or any of the other terms that are in use. For example, an article by Zhong and Lu, mentions 'public diplomacy in the age of global communication' without giving this concept a specific name. [27] Throughout this thesis, I will use the term digital diplomacy, since this is what has become more prevalent in scholarly articles recently and this is the terminology used by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Within studies on the role of social media in international politics, digital diplomacy is seen as a very promising subfield.[28] However, research on how digital diplomacy works and what degree of success states can have by implementing it is still in its infancy. Both practitioners and researchers of digital diplomacy define and interpret it in different ways, which partly explains why there is no widely accepted definition or reliable conceptional framework yet to assess the effectiveness of social media for public diplomatic purposes.[29]

---

[24] Signitzer & Coombs, 1992.

[25] Holmes, 2015.

[26] Kurbalija, 2015.

[27] Zhong & Lu, 2013.

[28] Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020.

[29] Bjola & Jiang, 2015.

That does not mean there has not been any research on digital diplomacy at all. Already in 1986, Garramone et al. first wrote about how computers-mediated political communication systems could provide a two-way flow of information between elected officials and citizens.[30] Research now also commonly examines how the social media accounts of organizations influence people. When it comes to the use of social media in public diplomacy, often the focus has been on the use of Twitter. There is even a separate term for this, *twitplomacy*, with a dedicated blog covering the topic. That blog reveals that 97% of UN member states have Twitter handles, which confirms Twitter as the most popular digital diplomacy platform.[31]

Manor and Segev define digital diplomacy as 'the growing use of social media platforms by a state in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manage its image and reputation.'[32] According to them, digital diplomacy exists at two levels: the level of ministry of foreign affairs and the level of embassies and consulates located around the world. Because it operates on these two levels, states are able to tailor foreign policy messages to the unique characteristics of local audiences, thus aiming to facilitate the acceptance of their foreign policy and the image they promote. For example, in China most foreign embassies will use Weibo and other Chinese social media in their digital diplomacy efforts.

Others define digital diplomacy in a slightly different way. According to Potter, cyber diplomacy can be seen as those diplomatic practices that are executed through digital and networked technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, and social media channels.[33] In later articles he uses the term digital diplomacy to define this concept.[34] Hanson refers to it as e-diplomacy and defines this simply as the use of the internet and new Information Communications Technologies to help carry out diplomatic objectives.[35]

According to some, diplomacy has not changed that much over time, because the essence of diplomats and leaders meeting with their counterparts to discuss and negotiate has stayed the same. For example, Holmes argues that the core aspects of traditional diplomacy have not changed, but technology has affected the ways in which foreign ministries and departments of state do business. He defines digital diplomacy as a strategy of managing change through digital tools and virtual collaboration.[36] Most scholars would agree that digital diplomacy is not something that can replace or exist without traditional diplomacy. Most of the work Ministries of Foreign Affairs and embassies do is still managed by

---

[30] Garramone et al, 1986.
[31] Lüfkens, 2018.
[32] Manor & Segev, 2015.
[33] Potter, 2002.
[34] Potter, 2018.
[35] Hanson, 2012.
[36] Holmes, 2015.

traditional processes of diplomacy. Negotiations and discussions are mostly kept out of the public eye. But digital diplomacy still is an approach that has transformed the traditional diplomatic process, and especially when it comes to public diplomacy it provides many benefits. Because of social media, diplomats can get in touch with citizens of other countries that otherwise would stay out of reach. It makes direct interaction with the public possible and is low cost compared to other approaches.[37]

Those who practice public and digital diplomacy often have their own interpretation of it as well. This applies to ministries of Foreign Affairs, but also in collaboration with diplomatic networks abroad. This definition and the way digital diplomacy is practiced, is not something static. For example, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands there are still ongoing discussions about the way digitalization influences international affairs.[38] The Dutch state's strategy regarding public and digital diplomacy will be explored further chapter 4.

---

[37] Adesina, 2017.
[38] Zijlstra, 2018.

3. Internet and Social Media in China

When social media research and research into digital diplomacy first emerged, there was a strong focus on the use of American platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The Western-centrism in this field of study could be seen as surprising, considering that some Chinese platforms were among the world's most used websites at the time. The lack of this type of research led to debates about 'de-Westernising' media and communication studies.[39] Research regarding digital diplomacy in China requires more insight into the particularities of the internet and social media platforms in the country. It is important to be aware of the fact that the way embassies and ministries of foreign affairs make use of for example Twitter, is different from the way they would make use of Chinese social media platforms. Even though the social media platforms share similarities, the circumstances and context of the internet in China are different. It is necessary to be aware of this perspective. This chapter will explore the Chinese social media landscape and introduce the biggest Chinese social media platforms. It will also discuss censorship measures and the consequences this has for digital diplomacy.

3.1   Chinese Social Media Landscape

When it comes to digital diplomacy in China, foreign embassies certainly do not make use of Twitter, Facebook, or other popular foreign social media networks, since these platforms are blocked and can only be accessed by using a virtual private network (VPN) to circumvent restrictions. The goal of digital diplomacy is to reach and possibly influence a Chinese audience, and only a small percentage of Chinese people use a VPN to access these Western social media networks. LinkedIn is the only American social networking site that is allowed to operate within China, though it is still subjected to the same censorship as Chinese platforms.[40] It is thus only logical for foreign embassies to use local social media, where they potentially have access to a much larger Chinese audience. With, according to the China Internet Network Information Centre, 854 million internet users in June 2019 who on average spent 27.9 hours online every week, and an internet penetration rate of 61.2%, social media function as a promising tool in digital diplomacy.[41] Comparable to the global trend, social networking and social media sites are extremely popular in China. Current popular social media platforms include Sina Weibo, Tencent's Weixin and QQ, and ByteDance's Douyin. A version of Douyin by the same company is also immensely popular outside of China, under the name TikTok.

---

[39] Sparks, 2013.
[40] Mozur et al., 2021.
[41] CNNIC, 2019.

3.2.   Sina Weibo

Of these social media platforms, Sina Weibo, or often simply called Weibo (the Chinese word for microblog), is most convenient when it comes to shaping public opinion. This is because, unlike Weixin or Tencent QQ, it does not rely on personal contacts or peer relationships. It is also more likely to host serious discussions, whereas Douyin and Tencent Video are more for entertainment purposes.[42] In contrast, microblogs like Weibo open up a wide range of public discussions in society, allowing a virtually unlimited number of people to join discussions simultaneously, hence making it a perfect place for diplomatic efforts to engage the widest possible audience.[43] The research on digital diplomacy in China therefore generally focuses on Weibo.[44] In reality, the conversations on these Chinese social media platforms are of course not completely separated per platform. Posts on one platform could link to those on another, just like happens on Twitter, Reddit, or Facebook.

Sina Weibo was launched in 2009. Outside of China, the platform is often compared to Twitter since the two share a lot of similar features. On their Weibo-accounts users can upload text or multimedia content, which is shared with their followers and other users, who in turn can like, comment, or share it with their own followers. Unlike Twitter, Weibo has branched out in the last couple of years to include more visual attributes, such as live-streams and "Weibo-stories'. The story function allows people to upload short videos that will disappear after 24-hours, similar to Instagram stories. Twitter did the same with the Fleets feature, but a couple years later. There are several other ways to communicate on Weibo besides these stories. Other users can respond to public post, there is a direct message function, and it is possible to join chat groups.[45]

Over the years Weibo has evolved into a multimedia blogging platform, whereas Twitter has stayed mostly the same. Weibo features a game centre, a 'Weibo Fit' to track your health, and a 'Weibo Wallet' payment system, to give some examples. This could explain why Weibo's userbase has grown more rapidly compared to Twitter's. In 2019, Weibo had 374 million monthly active users in China, whereas Twitter had 330 million worldwide.[46] For 2021, Weibo has predicted a further growth of over 40 million monthly users.[47] One thing Weibo and Twitter do have in common is the influence of verified and official accounts on the platforms. Online influencers, sometimes referred to as K.O.Ls (Key Opinion Leaders), use their accounts to amass a following. Well-known people with many followers can have a verified account, on Weibo collectively known as a 'Big V'.[48] Individual people, such as

[42] DeGennaro, 2020.
[43] Gao, 2016.
[44] Jiang, 2016.
[45] Sullivan, 2014.
[46] Clement, 2019.
[47] Thomala, 2019.
[48] Sullivan, 2014.

celebrities, receive an orange V after their usernames, whereas organizations and companies receive a blue V.[49] Because there are not just online influencers are active on Weibo. Multiple actors, including Party and government agencies, traditional media, citizens, and NGOs all have a presence on the platform. Besides foreign embassies, other foreign voices on Weibo also include multinational corporations, global media institutions, and for example dissidents outside of China who keep posting on the platform.

3.3. Censorship

All these different actors can participate in public discussion, express their opinions and views, engage with regular citizens and exercise different levels of influence. However, depending on the content of the post and the reach of the account, among other things, posts can be deleted. Different actors on Weibo have different experiences when it comes to censorship and Internet-regulating authorities. Especially the 'Big Vs' face tighter scrutiny and are often unable to post on sensitive issues.[50]

In some books and articles, the internet in Mainland China is easily written off as a place of surveillance and censorship, especially in comparison to the internet in Europe or America. This conclusion simplifies the complex reality of the internet in both China and elsewhere. However, it is true that many websites are blocked in China due to censorship. Some articles even claim that up to 18000 websites are inaccessible in the country.[51] Besides this use of the Great Firewall, there are also other ways of censorship. As previously mentioned, on social media sites there are extensive lists of words that are immediately removed when posted. Users are also unable to search for these specific terms. Instead of any results, Weibo will display an error message: "根据相关法律法规和政策，[the blocked keyword] 搜索结果未予显示" ("According to relevant laws, regulations and policies, search results for [the blocked keyword] cannot be displayed").[52] This shows that Weibo users can be aware of the censorship on the platform.

The words that get filtered are subject to change, and much research by both scholars and journalists is focused on attempting to verify the unique words and phrases that do get filtered on various social media platforms. When it comes to Weibo, Hong Kong University's Journalism and Media Centre has developed a tool that tracks posts that have been deleted. Based on these posts they have compiled a substantial dataset of words, phrases and other type of content that seem to trigger some type of censorship.[53] With this online tool, called

---

[49] Wei, 2017.
[50] DeLisle et al, 2016.
[51] Yang & Liu, 2014.
[52] Ng, 2013.
[53] "Weibo Censorship Index", 2021.

Weiboscope, users are able to see on which dates the censorship on Weibo is highest and the most posts get deleted. This can for example be during certain political events. Of course, Weiboscope only takes posts into account that have been posted in the first place. Certain words are blocked in general and posts that include those words or phrases would never get posted. According to the professor that oversees the Weiboscope project, Fu King-Wa, this type of censorship is only the first phase, and what he calls Control 1.0. According to him the second phase, Control 2.0, amounts to manipulating public opinion by having hired or bot accounts post favourable opinions on the actions of the government, or question those posts that are more critical. [54] This way the government tries to sway public opinion in their favour.

It is clear that the Chinese government is dedicated to controlling the speech that takes place on social media platforms. This does not mean online criticism of government and government policies is completely impossible. Many articles argue that as long as the criticism does not lead to collective action or expression, the censorship is less severe. [55] Finally, some authors also argue that although the internet in China should be criticised for far-reaching censorship, it is important to remember that the internet in general is a place of surveillance, also outside of China.[56]

When it comes to digital diplomacy, the censorship on Weibo is something that diplomats need to consider when using the platform. Not everything is possible on the platform and foreign embassies need to carefully decide what they can post without facing consequences. As mentioned in the introduction, the US embassy published their independent monitoring data of air pollution on Weibo. However, this resulted in their account being immediately deleted without explanation.[57] Foreign embassies are not exempt from censorship.

---

[54] "China's AI Approach to Information Control", 2018..
[55] King et al., 2013.
[56] Fuchs, 2015.
[57] Bjola & Jiang, 2015.

4. Methodology

In the previous chapters, I discussed the academic debates concerning public and digital diplomacy, and gave an introduction to the particularities of the internet and social media in China. Now to answer the main research question regarding the key features of Dutch diplomatic communication on Weibo, I will do two things: First I will explore the digital diplomacy and communication strategy of the Dutch government based on a policy analysis. In general, a policy analysis provides a way for understanding and interpreting political-administrative systems, processes and organizations.[58] The analytical focus should be on agenda setting, core strategies, or the actors within the political-administrative system that is being researched, and can done relying on interviews, document analysis, surveys, economic analyses and more.[59]

The analysis in this thesis will be based on the policy reviews regarding digital and public diplomacy the Dutch government has published since these concepts started to play a role in Dutch foreign policy, as well as on information available at the government-run websites rijksoverheid.nl[60], nederlandwereldwijd.nl[61], and socialemediagidsbz.nl.[62] The analysis will specifically focus on (digital) diplomatic activities in China, and thus provide understanding regarding the digital diplomacy approach of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in China.

Next I will explore the practical implementations of that digital diplomacy strategy in China in a case study on the "Embassy of the Netherlands in China" Weibo account. It would have been interesting to compare the diplomatic Weibo accounts of several countries, but due to the time limit and the scope of a master thesis, I chose not to do this and decided to carry out a qualitative research on specifically the Weibo posts of the Dutch diplomatic mission instead. A qualitative content analysis is a research technique that provides a systematic way to make valid inferences from data.[63]

The data for this study will consist of the posts uploaded or reposted by the Dutch Weibo account from January 2020 till the end of May 2020. These five months were chosen because two important events happen within this timeframe in China, both political and non-political: The Spring Festival at the end of January and annual session of the National People's Congress. Originally the NPC was supposed to happen in February, but due to the COVID-19 outbreak it was postponed till the end of May. This time period also includes important Dutch events such as King's Day and Liberation Day. In total there were 151 blog entries within these five months.

---

[58] Knoepfel & Larrue, 2007.

[59] Browne et al., 2018.

[60] "Rijksoverheid", 2021.

[61] "Nederland Wereldwijd", 2021.

[62] Sociale Media Atlas", 2012.

[63] Holsti, 1969.

In the analysis of the Weibo entries, I will first look at the type of information that is offered. What is the core message? In order to do this, all posts are divided into thematic categories. These categories are 'Dutch Art and Culture', 'Dutch Politics and Society', 'Travel and Visa', 'China-Netherlands relations', 'Values', 'Trade and Investment', 'Environment, Technology and Development' and 'Other. These categories were created inductively, following the iterative study of the data collected. Bjola and Jiang used a similar approach in their research on the diplomatic strategies of the EU, US and Japan on Weibo[64], as did Zhong and Lu in their study on the use of microblogs by the US.[65] However, the categories are not entirely the same as in their studies because they are based on different content.

By dividing the posts into these categories, we can see what agenda the Dutch diplomatic mission wants to bring to the attention of a Chinese audience. Digital diplomacy is after all about cultivating support and understanding from public audiences for Dutch points of view. This thematic analysis allows us to see what these points of view are and if they are the same as the values and themes the Dutch MFA says they want to propagate abroad. All of the 151 blog entries are classified within one of the thematic categories. Occasionally this poses difficulty when a post seemingly fits within more than one category, for example both technological development and trade and investment. In these cases, the entries are still placed into one category. It was considered to make a category of 'COVID-19', since this was an underlying topic of many of the posts. However, this is only the underlying topic. For example, a post in April about the 3D printed life-support machine made by Delft University students can also be classified under technology and development. Blog posts that truly only relate to COVID-19 are placed under 'Other'. I will also look at the frequency at which the account posts something, the type of messages sent, whether the account follows a specific content and posting pattern and how the characteristics of the platform influence what is posted on the "Embassy of the Netherlands in China" account.

After the thematic analysis, I will look at the audience engagement that the blog entries generate by noting the amount of people that shared or liked each post, and looking at the comments they receive. This way it is possible to say something about which posts actually land with the audience. What posts do they interact with and what posts are mostly ignored? I will do this is by looking in more detail at the five posts that received the most engagement in terms of likes, shares and comments.

---

[64] Bjola and Jiang, 2015.
[65] Zhong and Lu, 2013.

5. Policy Analysis of Dutch Digital Diplomacy

Since this thesis aims to discern the key features of Dutch diplomatic communication on Weibo, it is necessary to look at the way diplomacy is organized within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This chapter will give a brief breakdown on the Dutch implementation of public diplomacy, as well as their view on digital diplomacy and the use of social media as a tool to achieve policy objectives. It will also give a brief breakdown of the social media presence of the Dutch diplomatic mission in China.

5.1.   Organisation of the Dutch Public Diplomacy Approach

In the Netherlands, like in most countries, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that is responsible for representing Dutch interests abroad. This makes the MFA the institution that is ultimately responsible for Dutch diplomatic activity. The MFA has its headquarters in The Hague, and around the world it has a network of diplomatic missions. In total, there are more than 150 embassies, consulates, consulates general, Netherlands Business Support Offices (NBSOs) and permanent representations at international organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union.[66] All these posts together form the Dutch diplomatic network. In their own words, the MFA sees it as its job to ensure prosperity and fairness in international trade, to promote security and stability in countries affected by conflict and to contribute to a functional international legal order by promoting international agreements.[67]

Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are several departments that are more directly involved with public diplomacy and are thus more relevant for this research.[68] Of course, there are the diplomatic posts that have an executive task when it comes to public diplomacy. These posts are responsible for translating the general policy priorities of the MFA into operational objectives using communication methods focused on their particular target country.[69] After all, the priorities and context of public diplomacy will differ per country and diplomats need to respond to these differences. In China, the diplomatic network consists of the embassy in Beijing, four consulates general in Chongqing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Shanghai, and the NBSOs in Chengdu, Dalian, Jinan, Nanjing, Qingdao and Wuhan.[70] The NBSOs are part of the Dutch economic network in China, and they assist Dutch companies and entrepreneurs in doing business and investing in China. Their activities are more in line with economic diplomacy rather than public diplomacy.

---

[66] "Organogram Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken", 2021.
[67] "Beleidsagenda Buitenlandse Zaken", 2021.
[68] "Organogram Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken", 2021.
[69] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[70] "Buitenlandnetwerk in China", 2021.

At a diplomatic mission, there is generally a communication department or press department that is also responsible for the implementation of public diplomacy. At the diplomatic mission in China, this is the Culture, Communications and Education Department.[71] This department has a team of multiple people at the embassy in Beijing, and one representative at the different Consulates-Generals. However, not only the employees of this department involve themselves with public diplomacy, it is something that requires an integrated approach within the diplomatic mission. For that reason, people working at the different attachés of the embassy or consulates are encouraged to involve public diplomacy in their daily activities, by for example preparing social media posts on what they are working on.[72]

Besides the network of diplomatic missions around the world, there are two departments in The Hague that are most relevant when it comes to public diplomacy. First there is the Communication Department (*Directie Communicatie van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken*, COM), that coordinates the Ministry's media and communication strategy, both at the headquarters in The Hague and at missions elsewhere. Furthermore, it provides information about the Netherlands abroad and promotes the country's international image.[73] This department is responsible for the Netherlands' public diplomacy policy process, including the Netherland's online presence.[74] The missions abroad and the policy theme departments on the other hand are responsible for the substantive implementation of these policies. The COM follows international developments and trends in the field of public and digital diplomacy that are relevant for the Ministry of Foreign affairs and translates these to the Dutch situation. Besides these formal tasks it also gives advice and organises educational training for diplomats and policy officers working at the diplomatic posts on the topic of public and digital diplomacy.[75] A key component of these training activities is that it gives opportunity for the participants to share experiences and best practices with each other. This way diplomats can discover how other diplomatic missions approach the implementation of public and digital diplomacy.

Secondly there is the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (*Directie Internationaal Onderzoek en Beleidsevaluatie*, IOB). This is the independent evaluation office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, that conducts research regarding the results of Dutch foreign policy.[76] By doing this research it holds the ministry personnel accountable for their decisions and actions. Furthermore, the findings of the IOB's research could possibly be useful for future policymaking. The IOB does research on all ventures of the ministry,

---

[71] "Afdeling Cultuur Communicatie en Onderwijs", 2021.
[72] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[73] "Ondersteunende Directies", 2021.
[74] "Terms of Reference – Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[75] Ibid.
[76] "Ondersteunende Directies", 2021.

including foreign affairs and foreign trade, but also on development cooperation, the Netherlands' international cultural policy, or public diplomacy. In 2016 it published a policy review on Dutch public diplomacy from 2010 until 2014[77], and in 2019 they released a policy review on consular services and the propagation of 'Dutch values' abroad.[78] This last policy review also touches upon how the recommendations regarding public diplomacy policy as mentioned in the Policy Review Public Diplomacy 2010-2014 were adhered to and what improvements could be made. Both of these reviews are important in trying to gauge how the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines public diplomacy, what goals it tries to achieve by implementing public diplomacy and how it organises public diplomacy policy.

5.2.   Public according to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The literature review of this thesis mentioned the theoretical debates that occur regarding the definition of public and digital diplomacy. But as said before practitioners and executors of public diplomacy often also have their own interpretation and ideas regarding the topic of public diplomacy, and this is the case for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well. The "Policy Review Public Diplomacy 2010 - 2014" addresses the changing nature of Dutch diplomacy as a result of globalization and digitalization.[79] The number and the influence of non-state actors on the international stage has increased and the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy have faded. Foreign policy and diplomacy of the Netherlands had to adapt to these new developments and because of this, public diplomacy gained more attention. In the policy review, public diplomacy is described as one of the diplomatic instruments the MFA has access to, besides classic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and economic diplomacy.[80] Both classic and economic diplomacy often take place behind closed doors, whereas with public and cultural diplomacy a general audience is targeted, so it is carried out in public.

It was only in 2005 that the MFA first started to pay attention and deploy resources towards public diplomacy. At the time the definition of public diplomacy used by the Ministry was "to gain support from non-official target audiences for Dutch policy objectives and to cultivate understanding for Dutch points of view and positions. Public diplomacy, like traditional forms of diplomacy, aims to strengthen or improve the bilateral relation."*[81]* In the policy framework published in 2005 the 'non-official target audiences' were further specified to include media, NGOs, opinion leaders, think tanks, and more.[82] Since then, the perspective

---

[77] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[78] "Diversiteit en Samenhang", 2019.
[79] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[80] "Terms of Reference – Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2015.
[81] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016, p.39.
[82] "Beleidskader Publieksdiplomatie", 2005.

of the MFA on public diplomacy has shifted and evolved. The interest in public diplomacy grew both academically and among government officials. From 2010 onwards, the COM has worked on the development of a structural approach for public diplomacy and the emphasis is placed on those public diplomacy activities that support the long-term goals of the diplomatic missions. Public diplomacy is described as "an integral part of strategic communication and as an essential supporting instrument of the general foreign policy".[83] Public diplomacy was no longer an afterthought in Dutch foreign policy. This current approach resulted in the following two goals of public diplomacy policy as mentioned in the policy review:

1. Creating a positive image of the Netherlands abroad
2. Helping to achieve the foreign policy objectives[84]

These two objectives are of course closely related. When a country has a positive image among the general public and high-level officials, the idea is that it becomes easier to acquire support and backing for its foreign policy objectives. The goal is to ensure that certain target groups have a positive attitude towards those political, societal, economic, and cultural values that the Dutch state holds in high regard, and the idea is that this can be achieved through thoughtful dialogue and the use of strategic public diplomacy instruments and activities. The IOB has displayed the logic of the Dutch public diplomacy approach in the following figure that is included below translated from Dutch into English (figure 1). As can be observed, public diplomacy activities and instruments range from the use of social media, to the organisation of activities in collaboration with cultural institutions, to cultural exchanges.

---

[83] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[84] Ibid.

Figure 1 Logic of Policy Public Diplomacy[85]

Input	Throughput	Output Realization	(Intermediate and) Outcome	Impact
PD Policy	Centralized Instruments and Activities	Exhibitions/expositions Exchange Activities Holland Branding Economic Diplomacy Subsidization of Projects	- Cooperation around policy priorities strengthened - Gained access to new networks - Acquired support for Dutch policy goals - Coalition formation with governments/ (private) institutions - Reinforcement interaction stakeholders with interest and influence - Influencing decision-making on policy themes - Appreciation and understanding for Dutch positions, view and input increased - Support for Dutch policy goals on core themes in (local) decision making	Influencing in favour of the Netherlands
PD Measures (earmarked/not earmarked	Decentralized Instruments and Activities	Friendship years, Anniversaries, celebrations, Commemorations, activities with cultural institutes Trade missions & state visits		Built up a positive Dutch reputation
Commitment Staff The Hague		Collaborative projects Incubators creative industry Thematic meetings Visitor Programmes Research projects, receptions		Increase of mutual understanding and trust
Commitment Employees Posts		Publications and website Use of 'icons' Press- media relations and publications, social media Corporate communication		Reinforced positioning of the Netherlands abroad / Realisation of objectives foreign policy

To make sure public diplomacy policy and its activities are implemented in a structured way, the COM determined both thematic and geographical priorities. Firstly, it assigned a number of countries where the diplomatic posts would have access to additional means and resources in order to execute public diplomacy policy properly and more actively. There are currently 39 of these 'focus countries', and almost 60 percent of the PD budget is spent on public diplomacy activities and research in these countries, as opposed to 16 percent in non-focus countries.[86] China has been one of the focus countries since 2015.[87]

Because the intention is for public diplomacy to support long term foreign policy goals, the COM also attempted to give the public diplomacy approach a thematic focus. The idea was that public diplomacy activities would focus on those topics that are a priority for the Netherlands in some way, for example peace, security, or human rights, and on those issues where the Netherlands sees itself as a frontrunner, for example water management. These are seen as policy issues that deserve international attention. The table below shows the public diplomacy policy themes as they were established in 2014.

[85] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

Table 1: Public Diplomacy Themes[88]

Overarching Themes	Priority Themes
Economy and trade	Peace and justice
Development cooperation	Water, climate and energy
Europe	Culture and creative industries
	Agri-food

The diplomatic missions are free to choose specific themes that are more relevant to the host country. For example, in China the main focus of public diplomacy is on food and water safety on the one hand, and peace and justice on the other.[89] Using the public diplomacy guidelines and frameworks that the COM composed, the missions decide on their own public diplomacy strategy. Because they are more aware of the regional situation, the missions can make sure the public diplomacy activities and social media presence is in line with what works in that particular host country. The public diplomacy policy themes are therefore not quite as fixed as they seem at first glance. In 2019, the IOB recommended making public diplomacy policy a fully-fledged part of missions' multi-year strategy, even if that means not laying focus on the central public diplomacy themes.[90]

5.3. Digital Diplomacy according to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

At the time the "Policy Review Public Diplomacy 2010-2014" was published in November 2016, the idea of digital diplomacy was not yet at the forefront of the Dutch diplomatic approach. In fact, digital diplomacy was not even mentioned as a separate concept. However, the use of social media was already seen as an important tool within the execution of public diplomacy. Most Dutch diplomatic missions and sometimes individual diplomats had social media accounts that were used for the purpose of digital diplomacy. In January 2016, there were more than 275 accounts active on different social media platforms, representing the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[91] Going by the academic interpretations of digital diplomacy as brought up in the literature review, one could argue that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affair was already practicing digital diplomacy, even though it was not explicitly called by that name.

The COM had already set up social media guidelines and a code of conduct, which were followed by the official accounts. These official accounts also all used the recognizable visual

---

[88] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.
[89] "Afdeling Cultuur Communicatie en Onderwijs", 2021.
[90] "Diversiteit en Samenhang", 2019.
[91] "Sociale Media Atlas Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken", 2016.

branding of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the same logo, colour and style in for example their profile picture, banner and handle. This was intended to contribute to the trustworthiness of the social media messages. The COM also already gave courses on Public Diplomacy and (Social) Media.[92] In the "Policy Review Public Diplomacy 2010-2014", there were objectives composed regarding the use of social media as an instrument in public diplomacy. At the time these were to 1) increase the scope of the messages and reach new audiences that can't be reached with traditional diplomatic instruments 2) share information in a fast and effective way 3) gather information by listening and observing via social media what is going on in society.[93]

In January 2018, the MFA organised the 'The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp', a conference that aimed to answer the question whether technology and digitalization matter when it comes to diplomacy.[94] From that moment onward, the digitalization of public diplomacy and the use of social media were discussed. In the 2019 recommendations regarding public diplomacy published by the IOB, it was advised to further develop digital diplomacy both in The Hague and at the posts. In this recommendation, digital diplomacy is defined as the 'proactive use of digital resources by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the goal of reaching the objectives of foreign policy and shaping the image and reputation (of the Netherlands)".[95] The COM took several measures in order to advance digital diplomacy within the Dutch diplomatic approach. Firstly, they started offering 'content' centrally in order to respond more quickly to current events, to lower the burden placed on diplomatic missions, and to be able to steer on central priorities.[96] It remains the responsibility of the local diplomatic posts to translate this in a way for it to make sense for the target audiences. The COM also further promoted the use of (new) social media platforms and continued to be committed to the development of innovative instruments that can be used for digital diplomacy.[97] Examples of this are the MFA project 'digital diplomacy', which was started with the task to research which new digital instruments could be used for digital diplomacy. 'DiploHacks', events where civil servants and tech experts could meet and share experiences, were organised, as were conferences such as the 'The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp'. Lastly, COM continues to try and improve the quality of the Dutch digital diplomacy approach by organizing training days and webinars, publishing guidelines and giving impromptu advice when necessary.[98]

---

[92] "Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie", 2016.

[93] Ibid., p.80.

[94] "The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp", 2018.

[95] "Diversiteit en Samenhang", 2019.

[96] "Diversiteit en Samenhang", 2019.

[97] Ibid.

[98] "DiploHack Tirana", 2016.

The IOB offered a further recommendation to invest more time and resources into the monitoring and evaluation of the Dutch public diplomacy approach. Special attention is given to the evaluation of the social media endeavours of diplomatic posts.[99] Without evaluation it is difficult to say if what the diplomatic posts are doing on social media is actually worthwhile. As an example: a post on Twitter can receive a lot of likes, shares and comments, but only from a Dutch audience. In that case, the goal to reach a foreign audience and share information with them about the Netherlands has failed. By evaluating the use of social media, it becomes clear how effective its use for digital diplomacy is.

The will is there to implement both of these recommendations, but it would require more resources. The fact that only a small team is working on public diplomacy is a limiting factor, especially considering digital developments will only accelerate. At the same time some officials within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggest that the digitization of diplomacy is not always something positive. It has made foreign policy positions more transparent, and governments manage to reach a much broader audience. But the question arises whether meaningful and constructive dialogue between governments has not been eroded and reduced to sensational statements for the public appeal. [100]

5.3   Dutch Online Presence in China

The Dutch diplomatic mission in China uses social media for a variety of reasons, not all related to public diplomacy or influencing the Chinese public, since some social media platforms are for example used to inform Dutch people living abroad. There are several social media accounts run by the Dutch diplomatic mission in China, all with a different target audience and different goals. Depending on the audience that the account tries to serve, the language that is used differs. The embassy, together with the consulates in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chongqing, have active accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Weibo, and even Instagram. Officially the Embassy also has a verified account on Weixin, but it mostly posts the same content as on Weibo.[101] The Facebook account, under the user name @DutchCGShanghai, is used to inform Dutch people living in China, specifically in Shanghai, in their own language about things they might need to know such as voting for elections from abroad or changing Chinese visa requirements.[102] The Twitter account is in English and said to be used for issues related to consular, cultural, economic and public diplomacy.[103] On LinkedIn, which unlike Facebook and Twitter is not completely blocked in

---

[99] "Diversiteit en Samenhang", 2019.
[100] Saif, 2020.
[101] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", WeChat.
[102] "Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai", 2021.
[103] 'NL Embassy Beijing", 2021.

China, the embassy and the different consulates all have their own accounts that generally post in English with a few exceptions in the Dutch language.

It is on Weibo where the diplomatic mission tries to reach a Chinese audience, considering this is one of the biggest social media platforms in China which makes it a useful place to try and reach a Chinese audience in their own language. The Dutch diplomatic mission in China has multiple Weibo accounts, as can be seen in the table below. The account of the embassy is unsurprisingly the most followed and also the most active. The accounts do mutually interact with each other, with the embassy account for example reposting a consulate account. Besides the Weibo and Weixin accounts, the Dutch diplomatic mission also offers information in Chinese on their website www.niyuhelan.nl.

Table 2: The Netherlands Embassy's social media accounts in China

Account Name	Platform	Launch Date	Current Followers [104]
荷兰驻华大使馆 Embassy of the Netherlands in China	Sina Weibo	30 December 2011	166891
荷兰驻广州总领事馆 Consulate General of the Netherlands in Guangzhou	Sina Weibo	27 April 2011	9647
荷兰驻沪总领事 Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai	Sina Weibo	4 January 2012	25577
荷兰外商投资局 Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency	Sina Weibo	17 May 2011	12750
荷兰驻华使馆 Embassy of the Netherlands in China	Weixin	12 June 2014	-
荷兰贸易促进委员会 NBSO Netherlands Economic Network in China	Weixin	20 May 2015	-

---

[104] Followers as observed on the 31st of May 2021.

5. Analysis of Dutch Weibo Posts

For the content analysis case study, I focused strictly activities on the "Embassy of the Netherlands in China" account. In Appendix 1, all the blog entries are included, as well as the amount of likes, comments and shares they received. A closer look at the blog entries on this Weibo account reveals certain patterns and recurrences. The account posts frequently, sometimes multiple times a day. The exception here is the month of February, when the Embassy only posted 8 times.[105] However, this can be explained by the start of the COVID-19 epidemic in China. Posting on social media most likely was not a priority. In April and May, the account is back up to speed with around 50 posts spread out evenly throughout the month. This shows that posting on Weibo is important for the Dutch diplomatic mission in China, what is confirmed by the fact that there is a dedicated staff in charge of this.[106]

All the posts during the five-month period of this research were in Chinese, though occasionally a post would link to an article or visual explanation in either Dutch or English. Once or twice a post would even link to a Dutch newspaper article. From the posts it becomes clear that the design of the Weibo feed is also well thought through. The account offers a combination of informative texts, videos, visual explainers, pictures of art and touristic destinations, and links to more in-depth policy articles. Very rarely a post will only consist of text. In general, the embassy tries to inform in an entertaining and interesting way, whilst maintaining an authoritative and official stance. This is a balancing act, especially when it concerns serious topics.

Besides their own posts, the account also reposts messages from different accounts, most notably the accounts from the Shanghai and Guangzhou consulates. In this way the main Weibo account of the Dutch diplomatic mission also showcases what it is doing in other parts of China, and to more people as well. The accounts of the consulates in their turn also repost the embassy account. Out of the 151, there were 39 reposts, including from the European Union in China account (@欧盟在中国) and from the accounts of other EU member states. This way the Dutch diplomatic network in China shows a closer connection and a shared point of view with EU countries.

5.1. Thematic Analysis

All posts were divided based on their core message into the following categories: Dutch politics and society, Dutch art and culture, travel and visa, China-Netherlands relations, values, trade and investment, environment, technology, innovation and other. Most of these categories speak for themselves, but there are a few that require as short explanation. Under

---

[105] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", Weibo, 2020.
[106] "Afdeling Cultuur, Communicatie en Onderwijs", 2021.

'values' the policy goal of the MFA to protect and promote human rights all over the world is summarized.[107] Post within this category are about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, equal rights for women, equal rights for LGBTQI people, and the promotion of an international legal order, to give some examples. When it came to values surrounding human rights, the focus was on individualist understandings of human rights, so mostly the rights of women and minorities. The Dutch politics and society category consists of posts about the way Dutch society functions, whereas the arts and culture category highlights Dutch film, photography, visual art, music and such.

The Weibo account does not follow a specific content pattern where it offers daily or weekly information on certain topics. There are however weeks where a certain topic takes over. This was for example the case in May 2020, when the embassy for a week posted about LGBT rights to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia.[108] In general, the embassy will make use of annual international days like International Woman's Day, Earth Day or International Museum Day to post something related. In these cases, posts were uploaded related to human rights, environmental issues and climate change, or Dutch culture. Of course, both Dutch and Chinese holidays and special occasions are also generally mentioned.

---

[107] "Mensenrechten Wereldwijd", 2021.
[108] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", Weibo, 2020.

Figure 2 Weibo entries of the Dutch embassy: core messages
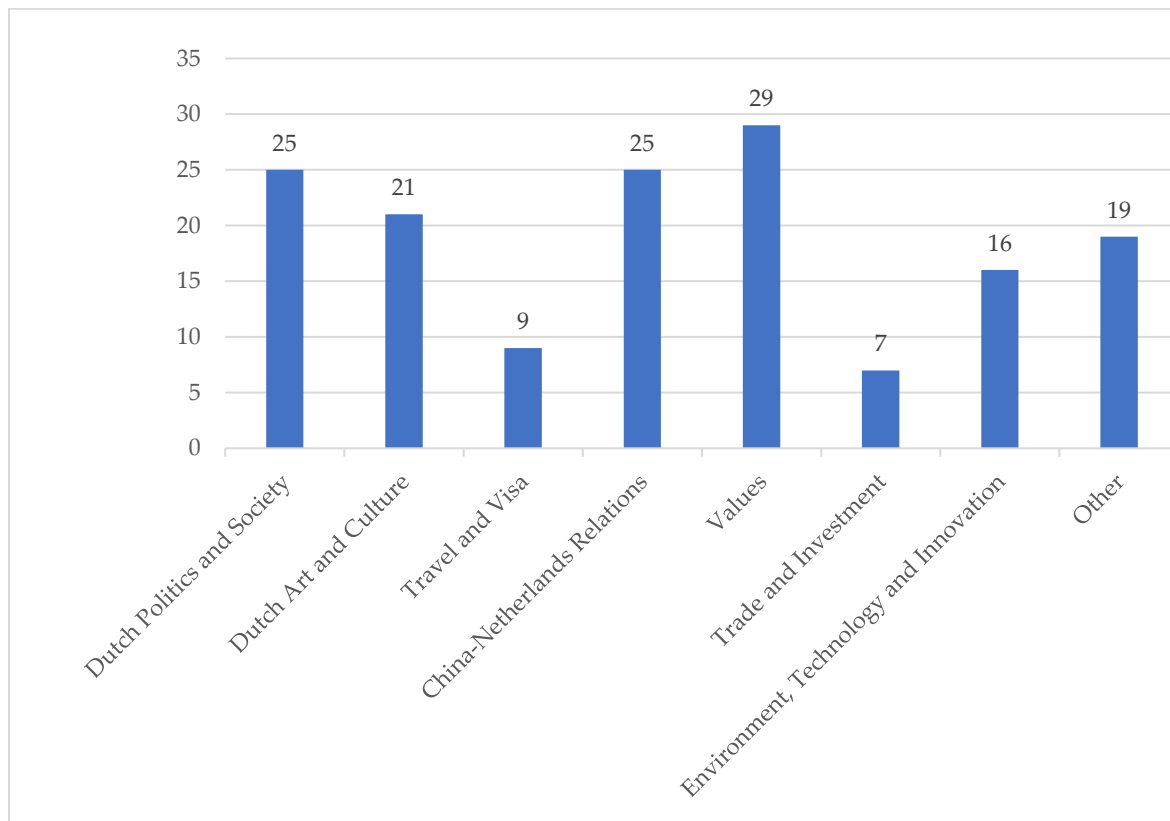
In order to clearly signal the overarching theme of a post to the followers, the account will often use hashtags. Frequently used hashtags are for example #拥抱多元# (Embrace Diversity) to talk about LGBT rights, #荷兰战病# (Netherlands Fights Illness) to highlight the Dutch efforts in curbing the coronavirus, and #荷兰农业# (Dutch Agriculture). As can be seen in figure 2, there is quite an even spread on the account when it comes to topics of discussion. There is not one theme that has the clear focus. During the five-month period I tracked the Weibo posts of the embassy, relatively little attention was given to trade and investment. This could be explained by the pandemic; however, it could also be because the @荷兰外商投资局 (Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency) is there specifically for this purpose.

Overall, a considerable amount of attention did go into showcasing and promoting abroad those values that the Dutch government considers important. This is after all one of the main objectives of public diplomacy of the Netherlands.[109] It is only logical that this is reflected in the social media output. The account also works on China-Netherlands relations through Weibo posts. Soft political messages like '武汉加油，中国加油!' (Wuhan stay strong, China stay strong) on the 12th of February were well received.

---

[109] "Afdeling Cultuur, Communicatie en Onderwijs", 2021.

In general, the Weibo posts of the Dutch diplomatic mission stay away from controversial topics or direct criticism. Partially this could be explained because a threat of censorship by Chinese authorities does exist. Even social media accounts of diplomatic posts have been suspended before.[110] However, there are other factors besides digital censorship on Weibo and the Chinese internet at large that play a role here. It is much more likely that the Dutch diplomatic mission in China as instructed by the Dutch MFA does not want to risk damaging the diplomatic relationship with China. At the same time, as mentioned in chapter 3, censorship on Weibo is not always as severe as people presume it to be. Some amount of subtle criticism is possible. I will give an example of this with one of the posts that will be highlighted in the following chapter.

In short, the Dutch diplomatic mission in China mostly uses the 'Embassy of the Netherlands in China' Weibo account to set an agenda and highlight those topics they consider the most important. Values, Dutch culture and society and Netherlands-China relations seem to be of particular interest. The goal of digital diplomacy is to shape the image and reputation of the Netherlands and for this Weibo provides a potential tool.

5.2.   Audience Engagement

In general, the posts on the Dutch Weibo account do not generate much in terms of engagement. During the five months I analysed the posts on the account, on average posts got around 530 likes, 47 comments and were reposted 30 times.[111] However, the average is skewed by one blog entry that went viral and gathered a lot more than that so in reality engagement is even lower. Research on the interactivity and engagement of diplomatic Weibo accounts shows that this is not out of the ordinary, posts on the UK, Cuban or Canadian accounts receive a similar number of comments and likes.[112] To see what blog entries speak to a Chinese audience, I will analyse the five posts that during the months I followed the account received the most engagement. These are the posts that either were reposted more than 50 times, were liked more than 500 times, or received more than 150 comments. I looked at the content of the posts, the visual aspects, as well as the top comments they received. The posts are discussed here below in chronological order.

---

[110] Hu & Mozur, 2012.
[111] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", Weibo, 2020.
[112] Jiang, 2016.

荷兰驻华大使馆
2020-01-01 13:20 微博 weibo.com

荷兰#2020新年愿望#之一就是，世界各国能够无条件执行世界人权宣言。

今天，我们重申《世界人权宣言》第十八条：人人有思想、良心和宗教自由的权利；此项权利包括改变他的宗教或信仰的自由，以及单独或集体、公开或秘密地以教义、实践、礼拜和戒律表示他的宗教或信仰的自由。

See Translation

"One of the Netherlands #2020 New Year's Wishes is that countries around the world can unconditionally implement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today, we reaffirm Article 18 of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights": Everyone has the right to freedom thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." [113] Translation

Figure 3: Weibo Post 2020-01-01

The first of these blog entries that did particularly well in terms of engagement was posted on the 1st of January 2020, as can be seen in figure 2. It is a clear example of a social media post by a diplomatic mission that faced backlash from the Chinese public.[114] The Dutch diplomatic mission posted a New Year's wish on Weibo and included a screenshot of the court ruling on Wang Yi, a pastor who was sentenced to nine years in prison for inciting subversion of state power and illegal business operations (Figure 3). The post stated that one of the Dutch New Year wishes for 2020 was that countries around the world can unconditionally implement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[115] It also included Article 18 of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights, which states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion…".[116] The post was met with some annoyance by Chinese Weibo users, who accused the embassy of the Netherlands of interfering in another country's domestic matters. This was frequently expressed in the over 2000 comments, but on the other hand the post received nearly 60000 likes, which could be interpreted as approval.

Even though there were many negative comments, from the Dutch perspective the post could be seen as a success because it has been viewed by more than one million Weibo users, and has ostensibly helped raise awareness in China about the importance of freedom of religion.[117] This is at least how the post was explained and defended by the Ministry of

---

[113] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[114] Zhang, 2020.
[115] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[116] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights", 1948.
[117] "Beantwoording Kamervragen", 2020.

Foreign Affairs when they were questioned about it by the House of Representatives. The amount of likes also shows that the post was not just met with negativity.

What becomes clear from this post is that a bigger audience is not necessarily reached by the most diplomatic and tactful blog entries, a certain amount of indignation or even outrage among the followers can make a post go viral as well. It is a question for the Dutch diplomats whether this bigger reach of a post is worth the consequences. Especially if the account would post similar things more often, it could hurt the Netherlands reputation in China. In the five months after this post, nothing as politically sensitive as this was posted again.

"#Dutch Culture# The Rijksakademie van de beeldende kunsten (Dutch Royal Academy of Fine Arts) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands is accepting applications for the international artist residency program for a period of one to two years. The application deadline is February 1, 2020. There are approximately 22 places for the project. We are currently recruiting resident project participants from January to December 2021 or one-year extension. Read the article below to learn more. #Dutch Art#"[118] Translation.

Figure 4 Weibo Post 2020-01-02

The next day, on January 2, the Embassy posted about the residency program of the Dutch Royal Academy of Fine Arts (figure 4). As can be observed in Appendix 1, similar posts on Dutch Art and Culture generally do not get the same response, especially not considering it was mostly administrative with a call for application. This can be explained by the fact that it was posted shortly after the viral post discussed previously. In the comments it is also apparent that the followers are still riled up talking about the previous topic. For example the comment by @月映壁, "I hope you can achieve religious freedom and accept people no matter what their religion is, but if it (the religion accepted) is an evil cult, the better"[119] clearly discusses freedom of religion, not the Dutch Royal Academy of Fine Arts. After a

---

[118] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[119] In translation, the original is: "希望你们实现宗教自由，接纳任何宗教的人，如果是邪教就更好了", posted on 2020-1-3, 09:09.

viral post, it takes a while for the comments and likes to go back to normal. Even though there are many comments, the embassy has not responded to any of them. The amount of repost has, with only seven on this post, already gone back to the usual.
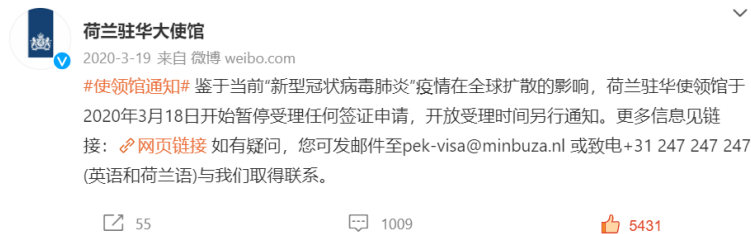
荷兰驻华大使馆
2020-3-19 来自 微博 weibo.com
#使领馆通知# 鉴于当前"新型冠状病毒肺炎"疫情在全球扩散的影响，荷兰驻华使领馆于2020年3月18日开始暂停受理任何签证申请，开放受理时间另行通知。更多信息见链接：🔗网页链接 如有疑问，您可发邮件至pek-visa@minbuza.nl 或致电+31 247 247 247（英语和荷兰语）与我们取得联系。

↗ 55   💬 1009   👍 5431

Figure 5: Weibo Post 2020-03-19

"#Embassy and consulates notification# In light of the impact of the global spread of the "new coronavirus pneumonia" epidemic, the Dutch embassy and consulates in China will suspend the acceptance of any visa applications from March 18, 2020. The opening times will be announced separately. For more information, please visit the link. If you have any questions, you can send an email to pek-visa@minbuza.nl *or call +31 247 247 247 (English and Dutch) to get in touch with us."*[120] Translation.

The next post, in figure 5, was placed in the Travel and Visa category. Posted on the 19th of March, it received over 5000 likes and over a thousand comments. This makes it the second most liked and commented on post during the first five months of 2020. It is not the first post on the account that mentions the COVID-19 pandemic, but previous posts generally expressed sympathy for the Chinese people (12 February), wished good luck to Wuhan (12 February), or mentioned the emergency funds that the Netherlands provided in support of China (14 February).[121] With the spread of the COVID-19 to the Netherlands, this is the first mention of Chinese travellers being denied visa, which of course raises questions and concerns. The post is also one of the only ones without any pictures, gifs, videos or articles included. This happens very rarely on the Dutch Weibo account, there are almost always visual additions to the information that is offered. In general, the goal is to make posts eye-catching and thus visually appealing. This was not necessary with this blog entry. Lastly, the #使领馆通知# is not used at any other time, which shows that the though there are hashtags that the Weibo account uses consistently, like #荷兰文化 (Dutch Culture), sometimes random hashtags are thrown in.

---

[120] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[121] Ibid.

Figure 6: Weibo Post 2020-03-21

"Today is #World Down Syndrome Day", and this year's theme is "We Decide". That is, all Down syndrome patients should fully participate in the decision-making related to or affecting their lives. In the Netherlands, the goal to never abandon or isolate Down syndrome patients, but to help them develop their potential and integrate into society from birth, so that they can live as normal lives as possible. Let's see how the Netherlands helps patients with Down syndrome! @TheNetherlandsOnlineChinese Network."[122] Translation.

On the 21st of March, World Down Syndrome Day, the embassy posted on Weibo to raise awareness for the issues patients with Down face and showcase the way people with this genetic disorder are treated in the Netherlands (figure 5). This is an example of how the embassy will use annual international or national days as an opportunity to bring up a certain topic. The post includes a link to a longer article with background information on Down syndrome and the help people with Down get in the Netherlands. The ability to link to longer articles still on the same platform and account is a Weibo feature the Dutch diplomatic mission uses quite often. The "Embassy of the Netherlands in China" account will post links to more in-depth articles, with diverse topics from the ban on smoking cigarettes to water management in the Netherlands.[123] As can be seen in the appendix, during those months of 2020 they already linked in posts to 14 longer articles. Users can find all the articles easily under the 文章 (article) header on the account.[124] In this particular article it is also mentioned that people with Down syndrome are protected by the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities".[125] This did not start a storm of comments like the post on the right to freedom of religion did. The top comments of this

---

[122] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Yue, 2020.

seem to be mostly about the facemasks and COVID-19 protection materials that China gifted to the Netherlands.[126]

Figure 7: Weibo Post 2020-4-4

"The Dutch people walk side by side with the Chinese people. On the occasion of the #National Mourning# held today, we express our deep condolences and sympathies to the Chinese people. Our hearts are with all the people in the world who have lost their loved ones due to COVID-19. #Jointly fight the epidemic#".[127] Translation.

The last post I want to highlight here is from the April 4th, 2020. On this day, China held a national day of mourning for people who died from COVID-19.[128] With the post seen in figure 6, the Dutch diplomatic mission expressed condolences to the Chinese people. It includes two pictures of both the Dutch and European flag at half-mast. A similar post where ambassador Wim Geerts expressed his sympathy to the residents of Wuhan in February also did well in terms of engagement. Based on the amount of comments, likes and shares it seems the followers of the account appreciate the online gesture. Unlike the previous discussed posts, here the top comments are more positive as well, expressing gratitude and a call to fight the epidemic together. [129]

By looking at these specific Weibo entries, it becomes clear that the account is mostly used for information dissemination. Social media also opens up the opportunity to directly engage with the foreign public in a two-way dialogue, however this is at the moment not what the account is used for. Very rarely will the embassy engage with the comments. Still the interactive features of Weibo, such as comments and likes, can be useful since it gives the opportunity to gage the opinions of the followers and the diplomatic mission can readjust its strategy in accordance.

---

[126] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[127] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020.
[128] Luu & Wang, 2020.
[129] "Embassy of the Netherlands in China", 2020-04-04.

6. Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis was to analyse the key features of Dutch digital diplomacy in China. The Dutch diplomatic mission in China is out of all the social media platforms most active on Weibo, something that could be explained by the large Chinese audience that is within possible reach there and the particularities of the platform itself making it suitable for shaping public opinion. This resulted in the following main research question: What are the key features of Dutch diplomatic communication on Weibo? By both looking into the digital diplomacy and communication strategy of the Dutch government and analysing the entries on the "Embassy of the Netherlands in China" Weibo account I have attempted to answer this question.

On Weibo the Dutch diplomatic mission tries to present the Netherlands to a Chinese audience in a positive way, providing them with a better insight into Dutch expertise and sectors of importance, but also highlighting those views and values the Dutch government holds in high regard. By doing this on Weibo, a new audience can be reached that would otherwise not receive this message. This is why digital diplomacy is of high importance to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Each social media platform poses its own challenges and opportunities when it comes to digital diplomacy, and for Weibo this is no different. Weibo as a social media platform offers its users many ways to communicate and engage with each other's posts, more than for example on Twitter. However, since the Weibo account of the Dutch embassy is mostly used to send information, not to engage in a dialogue, these advantages of the platform are not utilized. The Dutch diplomatic network does not use Weibo to actually engage in two-way discussions with its audience on the platform. It does make use of the Weibo feature to share longer articles within the platform.

Something the Dutch diplomatic mission also has to consider when posting on Weibo is the censorship of the internet in China. The characteristics of social media and the internet in China mean that the Dutch diplomatic mission has to consider the sensitivity of certain topics even more than for diplomatic communication in other countries. It is after all not impossible for posts on the accounts of foreign embassies to be deleted.

Looking at the posts that were made in the first half of 2020, it is clear that much effort goes into promoting to a Chinese audience certain values that the Dutch government finds important, as well as displaying the Chinese-Dutch relations. Not wanting to damage this relation could be seen as an important reason why the account generally refrains from posting on more sensitive topics. Censorship is not the only reason that should be considered here. The New Year's post on freedom of religion shows even that some subtle criticism is possible, though it does result in much critique in the comments.

Further research could be done on how the Weibo posts on the account are received by the audience. In this thesis, I did that by looking at the top comments of the posts with the

highest engagement, but a structured quantitative research into the comments could reveal more about the reception of the posts on the "Embassy of the Netherlands" Weibo account.

Both the policy reviews on digital diplomacy published by the Dutch MFA, and the entries on the Weibo account show that Dutch digital diplomacy is still developing and attitudes towards the best use of social media for diplomatic communication are still changing as well. New developments regarding social media in China follow each other in quick succession, and this is something diplomats must consider when it comes to digital diplomacy. The digitalization of global politics has not stopped yet. Considering the still growing importance of the digital and social media in today's world, digital diplomacy will only become more important for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In China that currently still includes posting and promoting the Netherlands on Weibo.

List of References

Adesina, Olubukola S. "Foreign Policy in an Era of Digital Diplomacy." *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2017.

"Afdeling Cultuur, Communicatie en Onderwijs." *Nederland Wereldwijd.* 23 June 2021. https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/landen/china/over-ons/buitenlandnetwerk-in-china---wie-zijn-wij/afdeling-pers-en-culturele-zaken (accessed January 15, 2021).

Bamman, David, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah Smith. "Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media." *First Monday*, 2012.

Barnett, George A., et al. "Measuring International Relations in Social Media Conversations." *Government Information Quarterly*, 2017: 37 - 44.

Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie 2010-2014. 413, Den Haag : IOB, 2016.

Benney, Jonathan. "The Aesthetics of Chinese Microblogging: State and Market Control of Weibo." *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, no. Vol. 1 (2014): 169 - 200.

Bjola, Corneliu, and Lu Jiang. "Social Meida and Public Diplomacy: a comparative analysis of the digital diplomatic strategies of the EU, US, and Japan in China." In *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, by Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, 71 - 88. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Bjola, Corneliu, and Ruben Zaiotti. "Going Digital." In *Digital Diplomacy and International Organisations: Autonomy, Legitimacy and Contestation*, by Corneliu；Zaiotti, Ruben Bjola, 1 - 18. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Browne, Jennifer, Brian Coffey, Kay Cook, Sarah Meiklejohn, and Claire Palermo. "A guide to policy analysis as a research method." *Health Promotion International*, 2018: 1 - 13.

"Buitenlandnetwerk in China - Wie Zijn Wij." *Nederland Wereldwijd.* 23 June 2021. https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/landen/china/over-ons (accessed June 23, 2021).

Clement, J. "Number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide from 1st quarter 2010 to 1st quarter 2019." *Statista.* 14 August 2019. https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/ (accessed May 5, 2020).

"Consulate General of the Netherlands in Shanghai." *Facebook.* 23 June 2021. https://www.facebook.com/DutchCGShanghai (accessed June 23, 2021).

Cull, Nicholas J. "Public Diplomacy Before Gullion." In *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, by Philip M. Taylor and Nancy Snow, 19 - 23. Routledge, 2009.

DeGennaro, Tony. "10 Most Popular Social Media Sites in China." *Dragon Social.* 30 June 2020. https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/social-media-in-china/ (accessed June 23, 2021).

deLisle, Jacques, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang. *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

"DiploHack Tirana." *Nederland Wereldwijd.* 2 February 2016. https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2017/12/22/diplohack-tirana-wat-er-gebeurt-als-je-een-activist-een-diplomaat-en-een-programmeur-bij-elkaar-brengt (accessed May 20, 2021).

Diversiteit en samenhang: Beleidsdoorlichting 'Consulaire dienstverlening en uitdragen Nederlandse waarden'. 435, Den Haag: IOB, 2019.

"Embassy of the Netherlands in China." *Weixin.* 21 June 2021. (accessed June 21, 2021).

Fitzpatrick, Kathy R. *The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy: An Uncertain Fate.* Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Frederick, H. Howard. *Global Communication and International Relations.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992.

Fuchs, Christian. "Baidu, Weibo and Renren: the Global Political Economy of Social Media in China." *Asian Journal of Communication*, 2015: 14 - 41.

Gao, Fangfang. "Social Media as a Communication Strategy: Content Analysis of Top Nonprofit Foundations' Micro-blogs in China." *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 2016: 255 - 271.

Garramone, Gina M., Allen C. Harris, and Gary Pizante. "Predictors of Motivation to Use Computer-Mediated Political Communication Systems." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1986: 445 - 457.

Gilboa, Eytan. "Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2008: 55 - 77.

Glassman, James K. "Public Diplomacy 2.0: A New Approach to Global Engagement." *U.S. Department of State Archive.* 1 December 2008. https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/us/2008/112605.htm (accessed April 26, 2020).

Hanson, Fergus. "Baked In and Wired: eDiplomacy@State." *Brookings .* 25 October 2012. https://www.brookings.edu/research/baked-in-and-wired-ediplomacy-state/ (accessed April 22, 2020).

HKU Journalism & Media Studies Centre. "Weibo Censorship Index." *Weiboscope.* 23 June 2021. https://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/wsr/ (accessed June 23, 2021).

Holmes, Marcus. "Digital Diplomacy and International Change Management." In *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, by Marcus Holmes and Corneliu Bjola, 13 - 32. London: Routledge, 2015.

Holsti, Ole R. *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities.* Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1969.

Hong Kong University. "China's AI Approach to Information Control." *Hong Kong University Bulletin.* November 2018. https://www4.hku.hk/pubunit/Bulletin/2018_Nov_Vol.20_No.1/research/page1.html (accessed June 22, 2020).

Hong Kong University Journalism and Media Studies Centre. *Weibo Censorship Index.* 6 June 2020. https://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/wsr/.

Hu, Sandra, and Paul Mozur. "No Freeze For U.S. Consulate as Weibo Account Axed." *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 2012.

Jiang, Ying. "The Use of Chinese Social Media by Foreign Embassies: How 'Generative Technologies' are offering opportunities for modern diplomacy." In *Making Publics, Making Places*, by Mary Griffiths and Kim Barbour, 145 -161. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2016.

King, Gary, Jennifer Jie Pan, and Margaret Roberts. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review*, 2013: 326 - 343.

Knoepfel, Peter, and Corinne Larrue. *Public Policy Analysis.* Bristol: Policy Press, 2007.

Kurbalija, Jovan. "Different prefixes, same meaning: cyber, digital, net, online, virtual, e-." *Diplo.* 17 April 2015. https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/different-prefixes-same-meaning-cyber-digital-net-online-virtual-e (accessed February 21, 2021).

Lüfkens, Matthias. "Twitplomacy Study 2018." *Twitplomacy.* 10 July 2018. https://twiplomacy.com/blog/twiplomacy-study-2018/.

Luu, Chieu, and Wallis Wang. "Coronavirus: China's National Day of Mourning for COVID-19 Victims." *South China Mourning Post*, 4 April 2020.

Malone, Gifford. "Managing Public Diplomacy." *The Washington Quarterly*, 1985: 199 - 213.

Manor, Ilan, and Elad Segev. "America's Selfie: How the US portrays Itself on its Social Media Accounts." In *Digital DIplomacy: Theory and Practice*, by Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, 89 - 108. London: Routledge, 2015.

Martin, Aaron., and René. van Bavel. *Assessing the Benefits of Social Networks for Organizations.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2013.

Melissen, J. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations.* Palgrave
   Macmillan UK, 2005.

"Mensenrechten Wereldwijd." *Rijksoverheid.* 23 June 2021.
   https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/mensenrechten/mensenrechten-
   wereldwijd (accessed June 23, 2021).

Mickoleit, A. "Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends,
   Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers." *OECD Working Papers on
   Public Governance*, 2014: 1 - 72.

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken. "Beantwoording vragen over de veroordeling van de
   Chinese voorganger Wang Yi." *Rijksoverheid.* 4 February 2020.
   https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/02/04/beantwoording-
   vragen-over-de-veroordeling-van-de-chinese-voorganger-wang-yi (accessed March
   20, 2020).

—. "Beleidskader Publieksdiplomatie." Den Haag, 2005.

Mor, Ben D. "Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, no. Vol 2. (2006):
   157 - 176.

Mozur, P., R. Zhong, and S. Lohr. "China Punishes Microsoft's LinkedIn Over Lax
   Censorship." *The New York Times*, 18 March 2021.

Ng, Jason Q. *Blocked on Weibo.* New York: The New Press, 2013.

Nicolson, Harold. *Diplomacy.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. , 1939.

"NL Embassy Beijing." *Twitter.* 23 June 2021. https://twitter.com/NLinChina (accessed June
   23, 2021).

"Ondersteunende Directies." *Rijksoverheid.* n.d.
   https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/ministerie-van-buitenlandse-
   zaken/organisatie/organogram/ondersteunende-directies (accessed January 23, 2021).

"Organogram Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken." *Rijksoverheid.* 8 August 2019.
   https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/ministeries/ministerie-van-buitenlandse-
   zaken/documenten/brochures/2019/08/08/organogram-ministerie-van-buitenlandse-
   zaken-juni-2019 (accessed June 23, 2021).

Potter, Evan. *Cyber Diplomacy: Managing Foreign in the Twenty-First Century.* London: McGill-
   Queen's University Press, 2002.

—. "Canada and the New Public Diplomacy." *International Journal (Toronto)*, 1 March 2003: 43
   - 64.

Potter, Evan. "The Evolving Complementarity of Nation-Branding and Public Diplomacy: Projecting the Canada Brand through "Weibo Diplomacy" in China." *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 2018: 223 - 237.

Pouliot, Vincent, and Jérémie Cornut. "Practice Theory and the Study of Diplomacy: A Research Agenda." *Cooperation and Conflict*, no. Vol. 50 (2015): 297 - 315.

Ren, Yuan. "Know Your Chinese Social Media." *The New York Times*, 19 November 2018.

Saif, Omar. "The rise of digital economic diplomacy." *Nederland Wereldwijd.* 15 July 2020. https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/07/15/the-rise-of-digital-economic-diplomacy (accessed June 23, 2021).

Satow, Ernest. *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice: Volume 1.* 1917.

Signitzer, B.H., and T. Coombs. "Public Relations and Public Diplomacy: Conceptual Convergence." *Public Relations Review*, 1992: 137 - 147.

Snow, Nancy. "Public Diplomacy and Propaganda: Rethinking Diplomacy in the Age of Persuasion." *E-International Relations.* 4 December 2012. https://www.e-ir.info/2012/12/04/public-diplomacy-and-propaganda-rethinking-diplomacy-in-the-age-of-persuasion/ (accessed June 21, 2021).

"Social Media Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center.* 7 April 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/ (accessed June 23, 2021).

"Sociale Media Atlas Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken." *Webarchive.* 09 November 2016. https://web.archive.org/web/20160109164930/http://socialemediagidsbz.nl/ (accessed June 1, 2021).

Sparks, C. "Global Media Studies: Its development and dilemmas." *Media, Culture & Society*, February 2013: 121 - 131.

"Statistical Report on Internet Development in China." *China Internet Network Information Center.* June 2019. cnnic.com.cn.

Strauß, Nadine, Sanne Kruikemeier, Heleen van der Meulen, and Guda van Noort. "Digital Diplomacy in GCC Countries: Strategic Communication of Western Embassies on Twitter." *Government Information Quarterly*, 2015: 369 - 379.

Sullivan, Jonathan. "China's Weibo: Is Faster Different?" *New Media and Society*, no. Vol. 16 (2014): 24 - 27.

Terms of Reference Beleidsdoorlichting Publieksdiplomatie. 27121, Den Haag: IOB, 2015.

"The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp." *Clingendael.* 2 February 2018. https://www.clingendael.org/event/hague-digital-diplomacy-camp (accessed May 20, 2021).

Thomala, L.L. "Number of Sina Weibo users in China from 2017 to 2021." *Statista.* 8 November 2019. https://www.statista.com/statistics/941456/china-number-of-sina-weibo-users/ (accessed May 05, 2020).

Tuch, Hans N. *Communicating with the World: U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990.

Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. "Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaat van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (V) voor het jaar 2021." *Rijksbegroting.* 15 September 2020. https://www.rijksbegroting.nl/2021/voorbereiding/begroting,kst282776_5.html (accessed June 23, 2021).

United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *un.org.* 1948. https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.

University of Southern California. *Defining Public Diplomacy.* n.d. https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd.

Wan, Vanessa. "Dragon Social." *The Ultimate Guide to Sina Weibo.* 9 April 2020. https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/ (accessed January 30, 2021).

Waters, R.D., and J.M. Williams. "Squawking, Tweeting, Cooing and Hooting: Analyzing the Communication Patterns of Governmetn Agencies on Twitter." *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2011: 353 - 363.

Wei, Lulu. "Gatekeeping Practices in the Chinese Social Media and the Legitimacy Challenge." In *The Net and the Nation State*, by Uta Kohl, 69 - 80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer. "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2013: 115 - 137.

Yang, Qinghua, and Yu Liu. "What's on the Other Side of the Great Firewall? Chinese Web Users' Motivations for Bypassing the Internet Censorship." *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2014: 249 - 257.

Yue, Tao. "如何抛弃隐形歧视，帮助唐氏综合征患者过上想要的生活？." *Weibo.* 3 March 2020. https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404484856645026328 (accessed June 24, 2021).

Zhang, Hui. "Observers, netizens slam Netherlands interfering in China's judiciary after pastor conviction." *Global Times.* 2 January 2020. https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1175486.shtml (accessed March 22, 2020).

Zhong, X., and J. Lu. "Public Diplomacy meets Social Media: A Study of the U.S. Embassy's Blogs and Micro-Blogs." *Public Relations Review*, 2013: 542 - 548.

Zhou, Huiquan, and Quanxiao Pan. "Information, Community, and Action on Sina-Weibo: How Chinese Philanthropic NGOs Use Social Media." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 2016: 2434 - 2454.

Zijlstra, Halbe. "Speech Minister Zijlstra on Digital Diplomacy." *Government of the Netherlands.* 2 February 2018. https://www.government.nl/documents/speeches/2018/02/02/speech-on-minister-zijlstra-about-digital-diplomacy (accessed 26 April, 2020).

"以色列驻华使馆 ." *Weibo.* n.d. https://weibo.com/israelembassy?is_all=1 (accessed January 15, 2021).

"加拿大大使馆官方微博." *Weibo.* n.d. https://www.weibo.com/canadaweibo (accessed January 15, 2021).

"美国驻华大使馆." *Weibo.* n.d. https://weibo.com/usembassy?is_all=1 (accessed January 15, 2021).

"荷兰驻华大使馆." *Weibo.* 1 January 2020. http://weibointl.api.weibo.com/share/189810599.html?weibo_id=4456019096703806 (accessed January 15, 2021).

Appendix

Date	Design	Theme	Reposts	Comments	Likes
1/1	Picture	Values	2906	2042	58866
2/1	Link	Dutch Art and Culture	7	165	929
3/1	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	7	45	300
6/1	Repost	Dutch Art and Culture	3	20	50
7/1	Picture	China-Netherlands Relations	2	17	32
8/1	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	1	13	19
9/1	Repost	Dutch Art and Culture	1	6	17
10/1	Link	Other	23	58	129
13/1	Picture	Dutch Art and Culture	24	64	39
14/1	Quiz	Dutch Politics and Society	10	15	18
15/1	Quiz	Dutch Politics and Society	10	15	18
16/1	Quiz	Travel and Visa	8	24	15
17/1	Quiz	Travel and Visa	8	11	15
20/1	Quiz	Dutch Politics and Society	1	5	10
20/1	Quiz	Dutch Art and Culture	-	4	12
21/1	Link	Other	2	9	26
22/1	Article	Dutch Art and Culture	9	10	34
23/1	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	5	11	23
24/1	Picture	China-Netherlands Relations	16	28	70
28/1	Repost	Other	4	16	24
30/1	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	7	13	22
31/1	-	Other	20	43	61
7/2	Repost	Other	12	58	145
12/2	Picture	China-Netherlands Relations	8	18	77
12/2	Video	China-Netherlands Relations	88	121	834
14/2	Picture	China-Netherlands Relations	20	36	79
16/2	Repost	Other	5	22	11
21/2	Repost	Values	3	5	19
21/2	Link	Visa and Travel	6	29	26
27/2	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	10	18	27
2/3	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	5	24	52
4/3	Link	Visa and Travel	10	30	34
6/3	Article	Dutch Art and Culture	8	9	30
8/3	Picture	Values	9	6	33

9/3	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	2	14	35
9/3	Picture	Dutch Politics and Society	10	28	63
12/3	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	7	15	28
13/3	Repost	Values	10	128	214
19/3	-	Visa and Travel	55	1009	5430
19/3	Picture	Dutch Politics and Society	39	68	88
20/3	Article	Dutch Art and Culture	6	100	550
21/3	Article	Values	8	264	1415
23/3	Repost	Travel and Visa	1	6	12
23/3	Picture	China-Netherlands Relations	16	56	141
23/3	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	11	37	80
23/3	Repost	Dutch Society and Politics	3	9	38
24/4	Link	Dutch Politics and Society	6	16	27
25/3	Video	Visa and Travel	42	22	60
25/3	Repost	Other	10	34	91
26/3	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	14	110	420
1/4	Repost	Trade and Investment	5	72	98
2/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	11	148	358
4/4	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	61	273	1707
4/4	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	28	155	450
6/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	1	7	37
6/4	Picture	Other	8	57	135
6/4	Link	Other	12	18	36
7/4	Video	Dutch Art and Culture	20	23	93
7/4	Visual explainer	Dutch Politics and Society	18	28	57
8/4	Link	Other	-	11	25
8/4	Pictures	Other	9	10	33
8/4	Pictures	Trade and Investment	6	19	49
9/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	6	14	42
9/4	Link	Travel and Visa	4	42	43
9/4	Link	Values	2	10	33
9/4	Pictures	China-Netherlands relations	4	15	38
9/4	Pictures	Dutch Art and Culture	7	4	25
10/4	Pictures	Other	2	6	24
10/4	Link	Values	3	14	20
10/4	Link	Dutch Art and Culture	43	24	118
12/4	Repost	Other	6	14	31
14/4	Link	Trade and Investment	8	8	31
14/4	Pictures	Dutch Politics and Society	3	12	34

15/4	Repost	Trade and Investment	2	6	26
15/4	Link	China-Netherlands Relations	2	6	26
15/4	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	19	29	72
16/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	1	5	30
16/4	Link	Values	1	10	17
16/4	Pictures	Environment, Technology, Development	7	13	28
17/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	2	8	28
17/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	2	5	29
17/4	Link	Values	16	19	46
21/4	Repost	Values	4	3	23
21/4	Link	Environment, Technology, Development	5	7	23
22/4	Repost	Environment, Technology, Development	-	4	11
22/4	Link	Dutch Art and Culture	10	7	35
22/4	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	3	13	25
22/4	Visual Explainer	Environment, Technology, Development	7	6	20
23/4	Pictures	Other	2	8	16
23/4	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	1	2	11
23/4	Link	Values	8	6	28
24/4	Link	Values	5	9	20
24/4	Link	Trade and Investment	2	9	22
24/4	Pictures	Values	7	25	47
27/4	Pictures	Dutch Society and Politics	7	74	206
28/4	Link	Visa and Travel	16	84	112
28/4	Repost	Dutch Art and Culture	3	31	75
29/4	Link	Other	-	22	26
30/4	Link	Values	6	20	23
3/5	Link	Values	11	12	40
3/5	Link	Values	5	12	51
3/5	Repost	Values	17	20	49
4/5	Pictures	Dutch Politics and Society	9	5	43
4/5	Pictures	Dutch Politics and Society	6	2	27
4/5	Pictures	Trade and Investment	9	14	51
5/5	Pictures	Dutch Society and Politics	29	39	140
6/5	Repost	Environment, Technology and Development	2	5	15
6/5	Pictures	Values	4	2	20
6/5	Repost	China-Netherlands Relations	-	6	30
6/5	Repost	Other	1	1	13

7/5	Repost	Dutch Politics and Society	2	5	14
7/5	Link	Values	3	5	22
7/5	Link	Dutch Politics and Society	17	18	38
9/5	Repost	Dutch Politics and Society	4	2	15
11/5	Repost	Dutch Politics and Society	1	-	8
11/5	Visual Explainer	Dutch Politics and Society	9	9	25
12/5	Pictures	Other	3	2	16
12/5	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	6	4	45
13/5	Article	Dutch Politics and Society	3	6	13
14/5	Pictures	Dutch Politics and Society	8	10	42
15/5	Video	Values	25	21	213
15/5	Repost	Values	5	5	31
15/5	Repost	Values	3	14	46
16/5	Pictures	Values	44	49	251
16/5	Video	Dutch Art and Culture	-	3	12
16/5	Video	Dutch Art and Culture	6	9	27
16/5	Link	Visa and Travel	15	49	48
17/5	Video	Values	13	20	61
18/5	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	2	6	16
18/5	Repost	Dutch Art and Culture	8	4	12
18/5	Pictures	Values	4	12	47
18/5	Links	Dutch Art and Culture	5	5	19
19/5	Repost	Values	4	6	20
20/5	Repost	Values	16	7	47
20/5	Article	Values	5	9	21
20/5	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	10	2	14
21/5	Repost	Values	5	3	14
21/5	Pictures	Values	6	11	61
21/5	Pictures	China-Netherlands Relations	8	18	50
22/5	Pictures	Values	13	17	60
26/5	Video	China-Netherlands Relations	9	5	25
27/5	Pictures	Environment, Technology, Development	3	5	23
27/5	Link	Other	3	8	24
28/5	Article	Environment, Technology, Development	41	4	76
29/5	Article	Dutch Politics and Society	10	13	29
31/5	Article	Values	10	13	28