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Public Diplomacy and Twitter: Syria then and now ^[1]

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Can a multilateral solution to a violent conflict take place without taking social media into account? Philip Seib argues, “The days of stately diplomatic process are long gone, and a public diplomacy initiative that lags too far behind the media flow may be ineffective. Transparency, long considered annoying and even dangerous by many diplomats, is increasingly expected by information consumers and can be driven by YouTube, Twitter, and other social media.” (Seib, 2011 ) Looking at online discussions about Syria since the beginning of 2012, Seib’s theory appears to bear true, as conversations that began in the realm of the official evolved into conversations laden with public opinions.

The Veto As Turning Point

In February, the standoff between the Syrian people and the regime of Bashar al-Assad was descending into even more violence. The international community was taking notice. With the lasting effects of last year’s Arab Spring still rippling through the Middle East, commentators and the international diplomatic community took aim at Syria. The Syria question took center stage as the United Nations Security Council drafted a resolution to decide whether to intervene in Syria.

At that time, Nexalogy showed the growing prevalence of conversations on social media, and in particular Twitter, regarding the situation in Syria. Nexalogy’s social media analysis technology identifies top concepts, actors, and shared content taking place in large-scale social media conversations, in this case concerning Syria on Twitter.

The discussion peaked with conversation about the UN Security Council vote. As we now know, that resolution died after Russia and China invoked their right to veto. That moment marked a turning point in the conversation on social media, with public diplomacy being carried out by major figures on Twitter. As the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Susan Rice, posted, “The courageous people of #Syria can now clearly see who supports them, and who does not.” Though Rice takes a position on the side of the Syrian people, this post still fits within the dominant discourse of the international impasse over the UN resolution.

essential component of public diplomacy.
