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Nov 04, 2016 by [Ilán Manor](#)

## **America's Selfie: One Year Later** <sup>[1]</sup>

In December of 2013, Dr. Elad Segev and I attempted to analyze the manner in which the U.S. portrays itself on its social media accounts. Given that nation branding represents an attempt by a nation to create a self-portrait, and as self-portraits in the age of social media are known as Selfies, we referred to the use of social media in nation branding activities as Selfie Diplomacy

. Our analysis of America's Selfie revealed four prevalent themes: 1) America's moral leadership, 2) soft power, 3) economic leadership, and 4) commitment to mending its relations with the Muslim world. We concluded that the U.S. was re-branding itself as a conscientious economic superpower that is committed to resolving crises through diplomacy rather than force.

More than a year later, I decided to return to America's Selfie and analyze its current components. My main objective was to examine consistent themes in the image America portrays to the world. Studies have suggested that nations' images operate as stereotypes through which people make sense of the world around them. Thus, altering peoples' perception of a given nation requires consistent portrayal of specific national attributes. In order to characterize America's current Selfie, I analyzed all tweets published by the State Department over the month of June, 2015. Using content analysis, I was able to group the majority of these tweets into four overarching themes:

1) **America's moral leadership.** As was the case in 2013, America is still attempting to regain its position as the world's moral compass. This is not surprising given the fact that during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, brand America suffered from several moral blemishes, namely, the invasion of Iraq, the suspected torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, and the refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol.

Tweets that comprise this theme dealt primarily with the U.S.'s attempt to address the issue of climate change. This included a commitment to combat wildlife trafficking, joint efforts with the Chinese government to #ActOnClimate, endorsing Pope Francis' encyclical urging the world to address the threat of climate change, raising private sector support for the struggle to aid the environment, and the publication of post-2020 targets for reducing carbon emissions by all G-7 countries. Additional elements of America's moral leadership were its call for gender equality and the promotion of LGBT rights. Finally, America's moral leadership was exhibited through its USAID projects, including assistance in combating HIV and communicable diseases and humanitarian aid to those living in conflict zones.

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2) **The “diplomacy first” theme.** In 2013, we found that America was attempting to mend its relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds while solving conflicts through dialogue rather than military force. Similarly, in 2015 the U.S. still appears to be committed to a diplomacy first doctrine, but in a different region of the world. While the Middle East was the focus of diplomatic efforts in 2013, Asia seems to be the current focus of U.S. diplomatic efforts, as it was the most frequently mentioned region on the State Department's Twitter feed.

The diplomacy first theme is comprised of tweets published during diplomatic negotiations between China and the U.S., dealing with issues from people-to-people exchange programs to strategic and economic matters. As Secretary Kerry tweeted, "There are few global challenges we could not better address through closer US #China coordination." Other tweets

in this theme dealt with the re-establishment of ties with Cuba and negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program.

Interestingly, the Ukrainian conflict was also visible during the month of June. However, here again the U.S. relied on strong rhetoric and the threat of additional economic sanctions against Russia rather than threat of military force. U.S. military might was visible in only one tweet, which featured a U.S. naval ship, while NATO was mentioned in only two tweets.

3) **The global terror theme.** 14 years after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the specter of 9/11 has yet to dissipate from American diplomacy. This theme included tweets condemning terror attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria, a commitment to continue the offensive against ISIS, pledging support to the Iraqi army, condemnation of a Taliban attack on Afghanistan's parliament, and a revision of U.S. hostage policy ordered by President Obama.

4) The final theme was that of the **U.S. as part of the international community**. As opposed to President George W. Bush's dichotomy of "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," America now seems to be branding itself as an integral part of the international community, and not an island unto itself. This theme was comprised of tweets detailing U.S. commitment to global challenges such as ending hunger, its support of UN peacekeeping activities, its participation in UN global activities (e.g. World Refugee Day), as well as U.S.-led global initiatives such as the promotion of healthy nutrition and girls' education. Notably, the UN was the most frequently mentioned bilateral organization on the State Department's Twitter feed, while the U.S. ambassador to the UN was the most visible U.S. official.

In summary, it appears that America's current Selfie is that of a conscious superpower dedicated to solving crises through diplomacy, while serving as a leading member of the international community. These elements, which were also present in 2013, indicate a certain consistency in the image America portrays to the world via social media. However, the U.S. has yet to mend its relations with the Muslim world and finds itself yet again in the midst of a global "war on terror." Finally, while the elements of the U.S. Selfie have remained constant, its regional focus has shifted from the Middle East to Asia. Further analysis is warranted in order to ascertain whether this shift was limited to the month of June or is emblematic of the larger foreign policy shift referred to as the "Asian pivot."

### **Recommended Reading:**

Manor, I., & Segev, E. (2015). AMERICA'S SELFIE. *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 89.

Kotler, P., & Gertner, D. (2004). Country as brand, product and beyond: a place marketing and brand management perspective. *Destination branding: Creating the unique destination proposition*, 2, 40-56.

Papadopoulos, N., & Heslop, L. (2002). Country equity and country branding: Problems and prospects. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 294-314.

Quelch, J. A., & Jocz, K. E. (2009). Can Brand Obama Rescue Brand America. *Brown J. World Aff.*, 16, 163.

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