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Social Listening: A Tool for Public Diplomacy Organizations ^[1]

The Swedish Institute—a public diplomacy organization working under the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)—has worked with digital media tools that monitor social media and other digital conversations about Sweden since 2016. The purpose of what is more commonly referred to as *social listening* is for organizations to stay updated on relevant discussions, articles and other digital posts that are relevant to, in our case, Sweden.

Social listening tools garner data from the stream of open-source platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, forums such as Reddit, news sites and other platforms.

There are at least three reasons for public diplomacy organizations to incorporate social listening in their work:

1. Perceive long-term trends in the digital discussions concerning a specific country;

2. Track conversations in real time in order to stay updated on current discussions, articles and posts; and
3. Identify communicative opportunities.

1. Perceive long-term trends

Social listening is a good tool for analyzing trends and volumes related to a specific country over long periods of time.

Since the start of the Swedish Institute's work with social listening, we have followed discussions about Sweden in four languages: English, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. The amount of posts in English about Sweden is about ten times more than Spanish- and Russian-speaking platforms and about 20 times more than Arabic-speaking platforms. Compared to 2017, the volume of discussions about Sweden increased on Spanish- as well as on Arabic-speaking platforms in 2018, but there is a downward trend on English- and Russian- speaking platforms.

The use of social listening as a tool to follow digital discussions about a country is of importance for public diplomacy organizations to truly turn toward more proactive forms of digital diplomacy.

In order to reveal shifts in the discussion, however, it is more rewarding to conduct more fine-tuned analyses of specific discussions that surround Sweden. The Swedish Institute follows a number of issues that are of relevance to our public diplomacy work.

Not only do we follow everything that is published about Sweden, but also everything that is published about, for instance, sustainability, innovation, gender equality and migration *in relation to* discussions about Sweden. If someone posts something about “climate change” or “green energy” and Sweden is mentioned in that same post, our digital tool registers this as being part of a larger discussion about sustainability and Sweden. It is important to keep in mind that individual posts do not necessarily matter—but when larger chunks of data are collected, it is possible to register patterns and trends for a specific topic.

2. Tracking conversations in real time

Social listening tools give the user an overview of current trends and discussions about specific events. Without this tool, it might be difficult to know how individual news articles or single tweets concerning Sweden, for instance, fit into the overall discussions about the country.

In our recently published report on the image of Sweden abroad, we show the volume of discussions about Sweden from 2015–2018. The report reveals that the discussions concerning Sweden are somewhat volatile, meaning that specific events trigger high discussion volumes (e.g., Trump’s remarks in 2017 on what became known as “Last Night in Sweden,” the Swedish election, and the passing of Swedish musician Avicii).

To understand what is being talked about during some of these peaks is important. Social listening tools place the high discussion volumes in perspective as the tool reveals for the user a timeline of all of posts concerning Sweden.

Social listening is thus a good tool for capturing how much people and publishers post about a country. However, it is less agile at sorting through the millions of posts and reveal underlying themes about the country. Social listening tools try to overcome this by including analysis tools such as word clouds or cluster functions, but they are fairly blunt instruments.

There are a number of ways to get an overview of what thousands or millions of posts concern:

- Social listening tools give insights into the top articles that are shared and rank them in order of engagement level (the amount of shares on social media platforms).
- Most social listening tools also provide some form of *sentiment analysis*, which is an AI-developed tool that analyzes the tonality of discussions. It can show, for instance, whether the posts are positive, negative or neutral in tone based on what words and sentences are used in the post.
- The Swedish Institute conducts manual analysis, in which we cluster posts in order to convey the underlying themes that are discussed.
- It is also possible to perceive where the posts are stemming from: Are the discussions on social media and blogs only, or did news outlets publish stories on the topic as well?

3. Identify communicative opportunities

Through social listening tools, the Swedish Institute receives weekly reports on what is published about Sweden on all four languages that it follows. These reports are valuable for assessing what the Institute can use in our own digital channels. They contain the most shared articles on Sweden, relevant issues that the Institute is interested in, where the discussions take place, and the weekly volume pertaining to these discussions.

To distill from the vast amount of data which issues are salient in discussions about Sweden, it also points to what social media users, publishers or bloggers find interesting about the country. Through social listening, we have tracked how certain subjects related to Sweden keep reappearing—something that indicates interest.

In some cases, the Swedish Institute has used these findings to create digital communication projects of our own. We have also conducted target group analysis that explores our target groups’ interests and digital activities. It is also possible to install alarm functions that notify you via email when the volumes of discussions are on the rise.

To conclude, the use of social listening as a tool to follow digital discussions about a country is of importance for public diplomacy organizations to truly turn toward more proactive forms of digital diplomacy. Considering the rate at which the media landscape and social media

platforms are evolving, to stay updated on the possibilities (as well as threats) that the digital environment enables for countries cannot be ignored. Social listening can bring some control in a digitally volatile world.
