

# The Impact of Citizen-led Facebook Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of Libyans' Views of the US

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## Abstract

Citizen engagement in public diplomacy efforts has been considered important since its earliest conceptualizations in the 1960s. Since 9/11, the US government has put a strong focus on citizen engagement in promoting positive images of the US, its values and culture, suggesting that these activities would improve foreign publics views of US foreign policy. However, much of the public diplomacy scholarship has primarily focused on the state centric messaging form of public diplomacy to the neglect of interactions and relationships. In recent years, scholars have begun calling for an increased focus on nonstate actors, networks, and relational approaches to public diplomacy. Yet, there is still a strong need for empirical studies into how participants in these kinds of activities perceive them and how they affect their views. This article provides a case study of citizen-led public diplomacy between Libyan and American citizens through Facebook friendship groups and uses Facebook focus group interviews with Libyans to understand how these groups shape their views. The study finds that these kinds of activities are useful in promoting understanding and improved images of Americans and its culture. However, these activities do not improve Libyans views of US foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Public diplomacy; citizen diplomacy; Libya; US foreign policy

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## Introduction

Like much of diplomatic practice, public diplomacy (PD) has gone through changes both in definition and practice. This has resulted in increasing discussion of the important role of nonstate actors in public diplomacy. However, there are still very few empirical studies exploring the impact of citizen-led initiatives. The aim of this article is to explore how citizen-led Facebook friendship groups between Libyan and American citizens can impact Libyans' views of American foreign policy. The countries of Libya and the US were chosen because of their history of conflict and because Libya was one of the countries subject to President Donald Trump's travel ban. This is an interesting case study because years of strained relations between the US and Libya and the travel ban have impacted Libyans' views of the US and its foreign policy. This study explores how Facebook citizen-led friendship groups can serve as a kind of public diplomacy when they are designed to facilitate trust, understanding and positive relations. However, this research is particularly interested in how these activities impact Libyans' views of US foreign policy. This research adds to the body of knowledge on citizen-led public diplomacy by exploring these activities through both a messaging and dialogic lens. It serves as a valuable case study because there is very limited research on the perspectives of citizens from Libya, especially regarding public diplomacy. It is also interesting, because it provides useful data on what impact citizen-led public diplomacy efforts have in influencing foreign people's views of a country and its foreign policy. This article starts with an overview of the literature on the evolution of citizen-led public diplomacy and how social media can provide a useful forum for both messaging and dialogue. These activities are useful in promoting trust and understanding between people which is helpful in improving people's image of a country. Having more positive images are important to a state's foreign policy and can be useful to facilitating more peaceful relations. The article then goes on to explore how these kinds of activities shape Libyan citizens' views of US foreign policy. It studies Libyan citizens' perspectives by conducting a Facebook focus group interview with Libyans that participate in two Facebook friendship groups. These groups are called *Libyan American Friendship Association* and *Libyans and Americans United for Friendship and Peace*.

## Theoretical Background

Public diplomacy is a discipline which tends to be interdisciplinary in nature. The diversity of disciplines studying public diplomacy contributes to a lack of consensus on how public diplomacy is to be defined (D'Hooghe, 2015). This has resulted in a move to categorise public diplomacy into different logics, which allows for more studies of human centric and non-state actor approaches (Pamment, Fjallhed, & Smedberg, 2023). Most would agree, the purpose of public diplomacy is to promote a positive and attractive image of the values, culture, and policies of a state. However, it is not about promoting a good image for its own sake, but instead to facilitate positive relations and prevent conflicts. This is consistent with the recognition that the primary purpose of diplomacy is to facilitate peace and security within

the international arena. The purpose of public diplomacy is to improve the image or reputation of the sending country to shape the policy of the receiving country (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.). In the end, effectiveness of public diplomacy is measured by minds changed (Nye, 2019).

Historically, much of public diplomacy activity tends to center around state-led one-directional messaging and traditional media strategies which are very much akin to propaganda. Pigman (2010) suggests that the purpose of both propaganda and public diplomacy is to attempt to influence people's attitudes and opinions. There is a fine line between information and propaganda. However, people tend to be wary of propaganda (Nye, 2004). In 1937, Britain's foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, said "it is perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best of diplomatic policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern conditions impose" (quoted in Nye, 2004, p. 101). Therefore, the ultimate purpose must be to change foreign publics' views. This is the reason that one-directional messaging is less effective than interactions. In interactions, people make judgments on whether they believe the people who are communicating with them are trustworthy. If the hearer perceives the speaker as trustworthy; they are more likely to believe and be influenced by what is said. The key difference between the two is trust (Pigman, 2010, p. 123).

This article takes the position that public diplomacy is distinct from propaganda because it can be state, or citizen-led and involves a variety of activities. In addition, this article focuses on citizen-led public diplomacy which includes both messaging and interactions. The purpose is to explore in what way interactions and narratives between citizens have an impact on the way citizens view another state's foreign policies. It is common for foreign publics to perceive the actions of governments, especially ones of countries that they have a history of strained relations with, suspiciously. Nye says "postmodern publics are generally sceptical of authority and governments are often mistrusted. Thus, it often behoves governments to keep in the background and to work with private actors. Some NGOs enjoy more trust than governments do. And though they are difficult to control, they can be useful channels of communication" (2004, p. 127). So, states are not always the best communicators of public diplomacy. This is one advantage to engaging nonstate actors in public diplomacy efforts. According to one study, NGOs tend to be viewed more positively than governments (Zatepilina-Monacell, 2012). A multi-case study of American NGOs looked at whether the way they are perceived by states had an impact on the way the US was perceived and attitudes toward foreign relations. The research found that NGOs that are privately funded are seen more positively, especially when they see their role as advancing the interests of the international stakeholders and where they are willing to publicly oppose the US government on matters concerning US interests (Zatepilina-Monacell, 2012). The fact that NGOs and civil society actors are perceived as more trustworthy shows that they may be in a better position to influence foreign publics.

The better view of nonstate actors may account for one reason we are seeing increasing

efforts by governments to engage citizens in their public diplomacy efforts. For example, the US Embassy in Libya facilitates a Facebook page targeting Libyan citizens called US Café, which uses university students to engage as ambassadors of sorts, sharing about the US, its history, culture, etc. with the hope of improving the image of Libyans toward the US. Social media is a social forum and a messaging forum. People go there to find out information and to socialize. As such, it certainly makes more sense to have citizens engaging in the process instead of governmental leaders. However, this idea of using nonstate actors is not a new one. In fact, from its very earliest conceptualizations, public diplomacy was also very much about interactions. During the 1960s, Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy was credited with coining the term public diplomacy to characterise the informational and educational programmes that were instituted by government and non-governmental organisations. People-to-people interactions were central to Gullion's views of public diplomacy. Gullion said, "What is important today is interactions of groups, peoples and cultures beyond national borders to think about foreign affairs" (Gullion quoted in Brown, 2010). The relational side of public diplomacy was reinforced by US State Department Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale when she said:

I think that the more we can have people having direct conversations with each other — and through those conversations and initiatives, through history of cultures we can learn about each other and if we do that, at the people-to-people level, that will provide us with a path to a more peaceful and prosperous future. So, it's a key part of what we're trying to do, to really have people engage with each other, to learn about each other (Brown, 2010).

The US State Department has put a strong focus on engaging citizens in its public diplomacy efforts. They even have a section of their website dedicated to encouraging citizen diplomacy with the label "You are a citizen diplomat." This website defines citizen diplomacy as a political concept of average citizens engaging as representatives of a country or cause, either inadvertently or by design (State Department, n.d.). It is communicated as a responsibility of citizens to help shape foreign relations "one handshake at a time," by engaging with the rest of the world in a meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogue (State Department, n.d.). There has been a lot written about the fact that following the terrorist attack on 9/11 that the US government increased their efforts of public diplomacy, especially leveraging the voices of citizens. Much of the increase in US public diplomacy funding following 9/11 was based on the view that terrorists attacked the US because America had an image problem (Van Ham, 2013; Peterson, 2002). President George W. Bush supported the view that this image problem was related to a perception of differing values between Americans and citizens of Muslim majority countries (Bush, 2001). It also reflected a recognition of the changing nature of international conflicts. The terrorist attack was a wake-up call that international relations is no longer exclusively about state-to-state relations, but instead requires a new approach that addresses the changing nature of conflicts as increasingly conflicts are perpetrated by non-state actors like global terror networks. If

non-state actors are the ones perpetrating the conflicts and citizens are the ones being targeted, then there is a need for more engagement of citizens in public diplomacy efforts. As a result, Bush advocated the expansion of public diplomacy efforts to promote a positive image abroad, especially in the Middle East.

By enlisting citizen diplomats in the process of promoting understanding about the US, its culture and its values, the belief was that it would also improve foreign publics' views of the country as a whole, its government and even its foreign policy. The belief is that if people have better views of a country, they are less likely to want to attack it, which then contributes to peaceful relations between countries. In this way, these public diplomacy initiatives recognise that citizens' views matter, not just because they are part of a state, but because in modern international affairs, it is citizens that are causing many of the conflicts. In the US, support for citizen involvement in public diplomacy has been welcomed by both Republican and Democratic officials. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "Public diplomacy cannot be an American monologue; it must be a dialogue with people from around the world. The dialogue must be sought out and conducted, not only by people like us in government, but by committed Americans from all walks of life" (quoted in Hughes, 2005; Pigman, 2010). Previous policy statements by the US State Department indicate a support for developing productive people-to-people relationships around the world and acting quickly to counter misinformation about US society and policies (D&CP, n.d., p. 57). Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was also a strong proponent of citizen diplomacy and the need to "leverage civilian power by connecting businesses, philanthropists, and citizens' groups with partner governments to perform tasks that governments alone cannot" (Clinton, 2010). Former President Barack Obama also supported leveraging citizen power in global engagement (Gregory, 2012, p. 118). The strong bipartisan support of US government officials for citizen involvement in public diplomacy indicates that these state officials recognise that public diplomacy is not only a state-centric messaging activity but also involves a variety of activities that bring the American people together with people from other countries. They also recognise that fostering peaceful relations between states is as much a function of citizenship as it is of governance and that a variety of everyday activities conducted by individuals in day-to-day life can serve as a conduit of peaceful relations between states and citizens and states.

With the increasing focus on public diplomacy in recent years has come a shift from what scholars call "old" public diplomacy to "new" public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005). Old public diplomacy was characterised by one-directional messaging, while new public diplomacy involves two-directional dialogue and involves citizens and civil society actors. At the centre of this two-directional dialogical approach are efforts to build relationships between citizens through a variety of cultural, educational, and business exchanges. Relationship centered approaches to public diplomacy are most useful to promoting good relations. Scholars are beginning to conduct more studies into the impact of these relational approaches (Tam, 2019). The relational shift in diplomacy is a result of a "growing interest from public diplomacy theorists in dialogue, transparency, trust and commitment" (Zaharna, 2009, p. 86). For public

diplomacy to be truly relational, it requires a worldview that supports the need to achieve mutual understanding (Fitzpatrick, 2013, p. 30). Listening to what people have to say and what they think is also an important part of public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005). Dialogue is the most effective way to learn what others think and believe. Dialogue refers to situations where ideas are exchanged and communication is multidirectional (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008, p. 18). It is through the process of asking questions and sharing views with one another that individuals influence one another. Dialogues about events, history, culture, and religion all serve as important components of getting to know one another. It is through these relationships that understanding of values happens (Melissen, 2005).

The role of dialogue is central to public diplomacy efforts aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts because it allows citizen actors to promote cross-cultural understanding, build trust and control narratives through dialogue in transnational networks. Zaharna (2009) argues that these networks can help to overcome cultural differences, foster credibility, and control narratives. This argument is consistent with the perspective of this article that transnational social media networks can serve as a forum to bridge the cultural divide. These networks transcend traditional boundaries, both geographically and politically, and include everything from terrorist networks to global financial networks (Hocking, 2005). Zaharna argues that these networks add a level of complexity to information flow and have implications for views of identity, information dominance and soft power (2013, p. 1). Within these networks is a strong public dimension that plays a vital role in fostering communication and trust (Hocking, 2005). Hocking (2005, p.37) defines these global networks as “a set of relatively stable relationships which are of a non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals.” This cooperation often includes collaboration on projects that have concrete goals to benefit the collective good. Zaharna et al. (2013, p. 7) suggest that collaboration in public diplomacy is the equivalent of traditional diplomatic negotiation. NGOs have a moral edge over government and businesses because their brands are forces for good “unencumbered by the trappings of sovereignty and untainted by realpolitik” (Hocking, 2005, p. 39).

Increasingly, these networks are happening online in social media. State and non-state actors alike are leveraging the power of social media in public diplomacy efforts to influence globally, which was not previously possible. However, scholars agree that the emergence of social media has had the greatest impact on the role of non-state actors in public diplomacy. In many ways social media has levelled the playing field between ordinary citizens and elites. This can be evidenced by the ability of ordinary people to “trend” or get significant social exposure around the world, which can even translate into traditional media exposure. Social media has expanded the network approach to online communication and information dissemination. It is no longer possible for traditional media sources to wait for others to come to them; they too must become active in online networks such as Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram. Influence happens within these network loops and using these various social

networks is called “total communication.” (Hall & Bach-Lombardo, 2017). These forums also allow users to build and maintain relationships around similar identities or goals (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, pp. 210-230). Shay (2013, p. 13) refers to this new approach as “peer-to-peer” where civilians by virtue of social media are not only consumers of government information, but also information producers, with the potential to bypass governmental bodies (2013, p. 13). Governments are collaborating with the public, “so that citizens can obtain and produce information themselves.”

Friendship forums can also serve as a useful place to promote intercultural understanding. It should involve activities that get to the heart of people’s identity and how people think, behave, and communicate, which is socially constructed and impacts narratives (D’Hooghe, 2015, p. 43). Zaharna (2012) appropriately notes that culture is often neglected in public diplomacy initiatives and when public diplomacy initiatives fail, it is because culture has been neglected. Therefore, considering the important role that culture can play in terms of perceived impact of public diplomacy, more attention should be paid to what the targets of the intended public diplomacy find to be helpful and influential to them. This is the reason that friendship groups designed to promote cultural understanding like the groups in this study are important. The use of Facebook friendship groups as a forum for public diplomacy fits under what some scholars refer to as the move toward Public Diplomacy 2.0 (Glassman, 2008; Van Noort, 2011; Cull, 2013; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016). Public diplomacy 2.0 is an approach, not a technology, but it is heavily dependent upon social networking technology and came about, in part, as an attempt to counter the efforts of terrorist groups’ use of social networking to plan and recruit for their attacks (Glassman, 2008). There are three elements of this approach: facilitating the creation of relationships; dependence on user-generated content from blog comments, videos, and pictures; and a focus on horizontally arranged networks of exchanging information (Cull, 2013, p. 125). One significant advantage of social media, which public diplomacy theorists have been calling for, is that it provides a forum for listening to publics and the ability to track how particular words or ideas move across networks online (Cull, 2013, p. 126). Cull suggests this is both a form of advocacy, by presenting the actor’s point of view, and a form of cultural diplomacy, by transmitting culture (Cull, 2013, p. 126). This dual function of actors using the forums to share their perspectives and learn about one another’s culture is consistent with what is happening in the Facebook friendship groups that this study is investigating.

Social media is not just about messaging but is also about relationships. “Building and maintaining meaningful connections or relationships with people around the world is at the heart of digital media-based public diplomacy efforts” (Seo, 2013, p. 157). Social media creates opportunities for virtual exchange where physical exchange is not possible. These “mind-operating opportunities offered through an exchange experience” can contribute to the experience of others as well (Helland, 2017, p. 96). These virtual exchanges allow for the development of mutual understanding and respect and give a voice to those who may not have access to physical exchange programmes (Helland, 2017).

One of the biggest challenges of public diplomacy has been the ability to measure its

effectiveness. As a result, social media has provided a platform to attempt to quantify and gain qualitative data on how public diplomacy messaging is received. For example, researchers look at comments on Facebook posts and likes as some of the main factors. Hayden (2013) argues, though, that it is difficult to draw a connection between Facebook likes and views on foreign policy. For example, in the study done by Hayden it was noted that Pakistan, which was viewed as having an anti-American sentiment, had the largest number of fans on the US Embassy of Pakistan's Facebook page (Hayden, 2013). Attempts were made to look at Embassy pages and note pro-America and pro-Obama words. Although this is not dialogue, Hayden (2013) argues that it does give some insights into deeper political thoughts. Further, the Embassy did try to make its Facebook page more interactive by occasionally posting pictures and answering questions (Hayden, 2013). Ultimately, only asking questions will give insights and understandings into what people really think about a state's foreign policy, its culture, and its people. This is the reason for this study. However, rather than just asking questions about state centric public diplomacy efforts, it focuses on citizen-led public diplomacy efforts and how those activities impact views of foreign policy.

### **Rationale for case study**

The decision was made to study the countries of Libya and the US because of their history of conflict and because a case study of citizen relations between these countries has not been done before. Further, gaining the perspectives of Libyan citizens provides rich in-demand data on non-western perspectives of people in the Global South on international relations issues while empowering the people of Libya by giving voice to their perspectives. Libya is also particularly interesting for studying the role of non-state actors because Libya currently is considered a failed state that is lacking in civil society organizations and bureaucratic institutions that often support and encourage citizen exchanges. Since the Libyan revolution, there have been multiple conflicts with armed militias fighting for power. Following the Libyan revolution, there was a hope that relations between Libya and the US would improve. However, after the revolution there was a disintegration of the security situation in Libya with the country spiralling into more internal conflict. After the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi and escalating violence, the US Embassy moved its location to Tunisia and significantly decreased its engagement in Libya. The security situation in Libya became a foreign policy issue for the US government. In March 2017, Trump signed Executive Order 13780 banning travel into the US from certain Muslim majority countries for 120 days and indefinitely from Syria. This order included individuals from Libya. In September 2017, this so-called "Muslim ban" was downgraded to certain restrictions on countries that the administration perceived as doing too little to protect against terrorists coming into the US. The September 2017 guidance provided restricted entry for Libyan nationals as immigrants and non-immigrants in business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visa classes (White House, 2017). According to the administration, the justification was that the government of Libya faces significant challenges in sharing public safety and terrorism-related information, has significant problems with identity management protocols and has not been fully



cooperative in repatriating Libyan nationals removed from the US (White House, 2017). In September 2017, the government in eastern Libya announced that it would engage in a reciprocal arrangement against Americans, calling the US decision a “dangerous escalation, which puts Libyan citizens in one basket with the terrorists the army fights [and which] will force the Interim Government to adopt only one option—the principle of reciprocity” (Libya Observer, 2017).

The country of Libya has historically held an important place in US foreign relations. However, years of sanctions against Libya precipitated by Muammar Gaddafi’s involvement in state-sponsored terrorism caused years of strained relations between Libya and the US and impacted the views of Libyan citizens. Following the Libyan revolution, two Facebook friendship groups were started by Libyan and American citizens to promote understanding and friendly relations between Americans and Libyans. These groups, and similar friendship groups between people of other cultures, serve as fora for a kind of virtual public diplomacy. However, what is unique about these groups is that they are not created under the auspices of any governmental organisation. Some things shared in the group, like information about holidays and exchange opportunities, are similar to the kinds of things that the US Embassy posts on their Facebook page as part of their public diplomacy efforts. However, the difference seems to be the dialogic nature of the friendship groups and the lack of any overt governmental political agenda. The purpose of these groups is more about promoting cultural understanding and friendly relations and a sense of solidarity between Libyans and Americans. As such, the question remains whether these messaging and dialogic interactions impact Libyans views of US foreign policy.

## **Methodology**

This study used an interpretivist research design to understand how actors construct meaning together around a given phenomenon. As such, focus group interviews were chosen as the most useful method over other research methods. Since central to this article is understanding the role that dialogue has in friendship groups and how the dialogue impacts Libyans’ views of US foreign policy, it makes the most sense to use a dialogical research method to explore this topic.

“Focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4). Focus groups can be particularly helpful in research that explores everyday narratives in international politics (Stanley, 2016). The fact that Libya is classified as a failed state with an ongoing civil war and unstable security situation made travel to Libya to do face-to-face focus groups prohibitively dangerous. Therefore, an inability to travel to Libya provided an access issue. As such, an alternative way of collecting data was necessary. Facebook focus groups seemed particularly useful since the study deals with people that participate in friendship groups online. This methodological approach meets a need for additional ways to gain empirical insights which scholars have been calling for (Ayhan & Sevin, 2022)

Participants were recruited through a structured snowball sampling approach from the two Facebook friendship groups. After providing informed consent, the participants were invited to a private Facebook group set up to conduct the interview. Thirty-two participants joined the Facebook group and participated in the focus group interview. Of the thirty-two, eight were female and the remainder were male. The rules were posted in the Facebook group, including the expectation of confidentiality and that participants keep what was shared in the group private. The interview took place in an asynchronous format over a two-week period. The interview took place in a bilingual format where the questions were posted in English. Those Libyans who felt sufficiently fluent in English posted answers in English. However, some participants chose to post their answers in Arabic. The answers were immediately translated through Facebook's integrated translation software, which allowed follow-up questions and further dialogue around answers. After the research was complete, the interviews were exported and coded using thematic discourse analysis.<sup>1)</sup>

## **Findings**

The participants in the focus group interviews were asked about their views of the purposes of the friendship groups between American and Libyan citizens. They described them as a kind of citizen diplomacy that can be useful in improving relations between citizens and helping to promote understanding of one another's culture and values. These kinds of activities serve an important purpose of dispelling stereotypes and negative images that people have. They are seen as necessary to improving relations, especially between states that have a history of conflict. However, participants noted that these activities do not change their views of US foreign policy. In this interview, the participants strongly held the view that they separate their views of the American people and the culture, from their views of the US government and its foreign policy.

### ***Cultural exchange promotes understanding***

The respondents maintained that cultural exchange programmes are the most helpful way to improve relations between Americans and Libyans. Strained relations between the US and Libya during Gaddafi's time in power and years of sanctions had left Libyans with very little exposure to American people and culture. However, after relations began to be normalised between the two countries, the US State Department began to implement some limited cultural exchange programmes. Unfortunately, after the assassination of Ambassador Chris Stevens, most of these programmes stopped. FB2 said:

I think that the role of the US Embassy and State Department in promoting good relations between America and Libya is limited. There are no active participation

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1) Readers interested in further details about methodology, including protocols, answer summaries and coding patterns, should see the forthcoming book *Facebook Friendship Groups as a Space for Peace* with Vernon Press.

of citizens and open discussion between America and Libya. Such as these activities are important in promoting good and close relations with the United States. It is very important that discussion also takes place elsewhere.

Programmes like scholarships for Libyans, student exchanges and even a virtual hub were mentioned as possible ways to foster understanding. FB31 said, “For me internet activities are not really effective the way the real activities are.” The participants favour programmes that involve mutual exchange and learning between countries. They recognise that both Americans and Libyans need to learn about one another. FB7 said, “Joint programs in art, sport, education, etc. show the Americans the real Libyans who hate war and violence, who wants to live in peace and share their culture with the rest of the world.”

The participants noted that cultural exchange and friendship groups are to some extent a kind of citizen diplomacy. They recognised that citizens do play a vital role in building good relations between Americans and Libyans. There were diverse answers. These included FB5 who said, ‘Yes, I think that’. FB30 said, “somewhat.” FB31 said, “Yes, if it is well controlled and does not lose the aim of the group after some time.” While FB1 said, “It depends on each group’s activity: and FB30 indicated that “Trust and alternate benefits” were necessary. FB3 said, “Word of mouth can promote good relationship. The citizens are acting as ambassadors of their countries.” FB31 said:

It depends on the activities promoted by “the other culture” through their embassies and consulates. If they share their activities and get involved in Libyan activities in different ways, this will make their culture reaching a lot more citizens and these citizens of course will attract much more citizens who will be interested to see more of the other culture.

This perspective reflects the fact that cultural exchanges can have a compounding effect because participants in cultural exchanges share experiences with other people. FB1 said, “They play an important role in changing the negative views of same country citizens as well when they participate in activities with different cultural people can understand how they think towards their country and try to convey the true picture of their country.” Similarly, FB2 maintained that “media plays a key role in forming and shaping opinions and deepening already existing cultural misunderstandings between cultures and religions.” These kinds of activities are needed to dispel these negative images. Participants characterize these interactions as a virtual cultural exchange experience. In cultural exchanges, people interact with one another on more superficial levels, but those interactions have a purpose of promoting understanding and improving relations between people and states. This social process is an important first step of getting to know people of other cultures collectively and requires time and intentionality. As Helland (2017) suggests, these virtual exchanges allow for the development of mutual understanding and respect. This is consistent with Zaharna’s (2012) contention that culture plays an important role in relational public diplomacy and in accounting for the reciprocal agency of the targets of public diplomacy.

The participants in this study do not see fostering peaceful relations as merely a state function, but also a societal function. Participating in Facebook friendships serves as a kind of bridge-building activity between citizens, where they can learn about one another's country and facilitate positive relations. The participants in this study recognise that the very act of joining a Facebook friendship group with Americans suggests that the participants are interested in promoting peaceful and positive relations with Americans, but also in combating negative stereotypes that exist about one another.

These citizen-led Facebook forums provide an opportunity for two-directional promotion of positive images, rather than only one-directional messaging which is more typical of state-centric public diplomacy efforts. Nye described effective public diplomacy as "a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking" (2004, p. 111). FB29 said the reason she/he participated in Facebook friendship groups was "to learn about and from others, exchange experiences and ideas and be part of the international community and understand what's going on and try to help my country." This is consistent with the discussion by Melissen (2005) about the shift to dialogic forms of public diplomacy involving non-state actors. Dialogues about events, history, culture, and religion all serve as important components of getting to know one another.

A lack of trust was also seen as a factor in perceptions about the efforts to promote good relations. FB1 said, "I think there is a notable effort. However, what spoils these efforts is mistrust." Biases and lack of transparency are perceived as a contributing factor in mistrust. FB6 said, "Without facilitating trust the future between Libyan and American people will take long time even if the politician come to agreement. I know a trust is a vital factor."

### ***US foreign policy is the problem***

Much of the rationale for the US government's efforts to increase its public diplomacy efforts in Muslim majority countries following 9/11 was related to a perception of differing values between Americans and citizens of Muslim majority countries, in particular Arab countries. As such, since 9/11 many US public diplomacy efforts have been focused on educating foreign publics about American culture, history, and people. Although these projects are helpful, the participants in the Libyan focus groups made it very clear that they see US foreign policy as the reason for conflicts and not the American people or American values. They all noted US foreign policy as the reason for strained relations between the US and Libya. FB9 said, "I found that government have to do with this more than religious and cultural differences."

FB6 said, "US foreign policy is the biggest factor causing conflict between countries." The participants' discussion of US foreign policy went back in time and showed the impact of historical memory on views as well. For example, FB30 viewed America as wanting to colonize Libya and cited US Navy activity off the coast of Libya during the Tripolitan War in 1801-1805. However, for most participants, negative views of US foreign policy were more recent. Several mentioned the American air raid on Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986 and the

blockade for ten years that came about after it was found that Gaddafi had engaged in acts of state-sponsored terrorism. There was also some mention of the terrorist attack on Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland and how the resulting sanctions impacted the country of Libya. This tragedy continues to hang over the heads of Libyan people with many still questioning whether Libya was responsible for that attack, which can even be seen in the way they frame the tragedy. FB8 discussed the resulting effects of the international community's response to the Lockerbie attack on the Libyan people:

The implemented sanctions on Libya after Lockerbie accident. Normal Libyans were suffering and not the leaders. Also, it was not based on sound evidence. There are other suspects like Iran and extreme Palestinian organization. Even if Libya was responsible; they left Gaddafi ruling. Libya continued to export the oil because the west needed it and we were punished twice; by the sanctions and by continued to be ruled by Gaddafi.

Despite some lingering questions of Gaddafi's responsibility for the Lockerbie attack, the participants noted that the Libyan people also suffered deeply at the hands of Gaddafi and do not perceive him as a victim or a saint. Instead, there seems to be a residual recognition that in the end it has been the Libyan people that have suffered the most during the years of sanctions and they have been treated as if they were all terrorists simply because they are from the country of Libya. FB3 said, "The past government used to cause conflicts with America that caused bad reputation to all Libyans." Others recognised that both countries' policies have impacted relations between Libya and America. FB6 said, "The bad policy between Libya and USA is bad politics."

Some of the participants shared that their concerns with US foreign policy were related more to current issues. There were concerns about the US government's infringement on oil and gas companies (FB16). Others saw the US government as crossing the line and intervening in local issues (FB3). In addition, a few of the participants noted that they perceive America as engaging in terrorism around the world and questioned what they perceive as unjust US involvement in wars in Iraq (FB3 and FB16). However, consistently, the US support of Israel was raised as an issue that affects Libyans' views toward the US government.

The US travel ban was described by all participants as a significant factor contributing to their negative views of the US government. Libya was designated as one of the seven countries subject to Trump's travel ban. The participants suggested that Libyans are being unfairly singled out for this ban. "One Libyan makes something wrong, are we all judged?" FB28 described this as "guilty until proven innocent." FB7 said, "Libyan people felt that's unfair to allow countries that export terrorism to travel to the US and ban us who are suffering from terrorism." While FB3 described it as "a new type of racism." FB1 said, "It's undoubtedly unfair and this makes the American policy disgusting and can't gain other cultural people's trust." One participant did not see the impact of the travel ban as being as

strong as the policy back in the '80s and '90s (FB6), which referred to the UN and US sanctions against Libya.

Since the travel ban is seen as a significant issue impacting the Libyan participants' views of American foreign policy, the participants hold the view that doing away with the travel ban is an important step in improving the way the US government is viewed by Libyans. FB3 said, "Lift the travel ban and ease immigration rules." FB3 said, "Treat Libyan with human rights perspective" and FB1 added, "Surely, yes stop the arbitrary policy toward Libyans such as travel ban." While FB28 maintained, "I hope American department gives visa to Libyans to travel there and the reverse for its citizens because this decision has a big impact on our relations."

Despite the participants' clear problems with US foreign policy, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that they separate their views of the American people from American foreign policy. FB1 noted the US policy is unfair and ironhanded, and before meeting Americans thought the people were like their government. This was influenced a great deal by the anti-American rhetoric that they were fed by Gaddafi. However, that is no longer the case. As people learn more, their views change, and they can separate their views. This is especially true because the Libyan people do not see their views as being the same as the views of Gaddafi, so they give the same level of deference to citizens of other countries that they want people to give to them. FB1 said, "Exactly as I think as my American friends did of Ghadafi's policy." FB28 shared a story about going to Malta in 2002 to apply for a US visa and for six days being afraid to go to the US Embassy. This participant noted that she finally got up the courage to go inside and asked to meet with the consul. FB28 indicated that he was very polite when asked about travelling to America on holiday. FB28 shared with him that she was afraid that he would refuse to issue a visa because she was an Arab Muslim wearing a head scarf. FB28 stated that he was nice and reassured her that he would not deny her a visa for that reason and this experience affected her views of the US government. FB28 added, "I think for me as a citizen the past has no effect but what is happening now matters a lot like the travel ban."

Programmes designed to improve Libyans' views of the American people and culture have almost no impact on the Libyan participants' views toward the American government. FB3 said, "The American people are naïve, innocent, very nice and you can use all other kind words. We know them very well. But American politics is something different." FB20 posted a picture of a man wearing a shirt that said, 'Saying all Muslims are terrorists is like saying all Americans are like Trump'. FB3 added, "When someone do a mistake, we should not generalise and say all Americans are same as Trump." As such, the travel ban does not impact the Libyans' views of the American people, only their views of American foreign policy. FB22 said, "It doesn't affect. I think both nations share the same human values regardless of political issues." However, FB16 said, "Difference between government and people. But American people are often in the hands of the government."

Views of the US government have also been influenced in part by the lack of US

involvement in helping to rebuild Libya after the revolution. FB2 said, “Libyan people were hoping that the US government will continue its support to Libya and help rebuild the country after the revolution, but the negativity of the White House disappointed the Libyans when they were looking highly at US government.”

Generally, the participants held very favourable views of the American people. FB8 said, “I differentiate between American people and American policy. Firstly, I cannot judge a whole population. I have dear American friends who helped us, listened and were very friendly. I am against American’s government in other countries all over the world.”

In the end, the Libyan participants see the history of conflict between the US and Libya as being a government problem and not a problem between citizens. FB32 said, “I think as a Libyan citizen that the friendship between the two peoples existed from the fifties during the reign of King Senusi. After the Qadhafi coup, the relationship took on another direction because of Qadhafi’s policies and because of the US government in general.” FB32 added that he blames the US government for messing up relations. This is based on his perception of US interference in domestic affairs of countries in the Middle East. This participant urged the American people to press their government to change its policy in the Middle East, especially on the Palestinian issue and stop its support of the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the participants shared that they want to foster a long-term positive relationship between the US and Libya and desire for a return to the positive kinds of relations that existed between the US and Libya before Gaddafi came to power.

## **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that citizen-led Facebook friendships between Libyans and Americans serve as a kind of citizen-led public diplomacy that are necessary to dispelling stereotypes and promoting understanding between people. These activities are helpful to promoting better images of one another and fostering more peaceful relations between Libya and the US after years of strained relations. However, despite seeing these interactions as a form of diplomacy, even describing themselves as ambassadors of sort, the participants also recognize that there are limits to what these kinds of activities can accomplish. These initiatives are important to learning, promoting goodwill, and humanizing one another on a collective level. Therefore, these virtual interactions are an important first step in building relations on a superficial level. However, they see in person activities as having much more impact and desire to see more of these kinds of cultural exchange activities between the US and Libya. Further, they prefer to see activities facilitated by civil society actors as they are seen as altruistic and more trustworthy than government. In particular, the participants noted that they separate their views of the American people from the American government. As such, values-based initiatives that have dominated the US public diplomacy priorities do not have an impact on the Libyan citizens’ views of US foreign policy. In fact, the participants did not see things like culture, religion or values as being a barrier between countries. Instead, the respondents overwhelmingly shared negative views and distrust of the US government,

because of the years of sanctions and from the more recent travel ban which they characterised as unfair and unjust. Therefore, the US government needs to do more to rebuild trust with Libyans and that does not happen through superficial citizen interactions. Instead, they are looking for more long-term engagement and capacity building programs to show the US commitment to helping Libya rebuild. In the end, they overwhelmingly shared that if the US government wants to improve the way it is viewed by the Libyan people, it needs to be more aware of how its foreign policy impacts the people. When a government declares all the citizens of a country as enemies and ban them from traveling to that country, no amount of discussion of culture or friendly dialogue between citizens is going to change their views. If the US government wants to improve its image, it needs to start with changing its foreign policy.

This study has provided very useful insights about public diplomacy efforts between the US and Libya which should impact further diplomatic efforts and inform further research. Moreover, this study has shown that historical relationship matters to the kinds of activities that are useful and one size fits all is not the best approach, especially when it comes to relational forms of public diplomacy. However, it also provides some helpful insights about public diplomacy efforts in general. The study has shown that if researchers or states ask foreign citizens what kinds of activities are useful in improving relations, they will tell them. In this study, the participants shared useful ideas of the kinds of activities that are valuable and those that are less valuable. The study also showed that citizens value a two-directional dialogue over one directional messages. The citizens participate in activities because they want to promote positive images about themselves and their countries as much as learning about another country. This is often overlooked as a consideration in studies on public diplomacy. Trust is essential to improving images and building trust takes time and intentionality, especially when trust has been broken. As such, more research into two-directional approaches is needed in public diplomacy, especially relational approaches. In addition, more comparative case studies would be valuable to learn the kinds of activities different populations find most useful in building trust and whether those result in improved images of a state and its foreign policy.

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