Virtual Exchange Programs: Expanding the Public Diplomacy Agenda of the 21st Century

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Abstract

Fueled partially by the emergence of the Internet, an unprecedented amount of power has been placed in the hands of the individual to engage with people abroad, mobilize groups around causes, and thereby set the foreign policy agenda. Consequently, public diplomacy in the United States has seen a recent transition away from government-to-public initiatives and towards engagement strategies conducted at the individual level. This capstone provides an in-depth evaluation of one of these strategies – international exchange programs. First, this study provides a comprehensive look at the evolution of international exchange programs from the Cold War initiatives of the past to the *virtual* exchange programs of the present. Then, this study uses a mixed methods approach to test the effectiveness of virtual exchange programs as a valuable tool of public diplomacy. The study concludes that, given certain technological conditions, virtual exchange programs have the potential to achieve the same outcomes of face-to-face interactions, namely attitude change and the creation of strong interpersonal bonds.

Introduction

The SIS Mandate and The Emergence of the Internet

In 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered a speech at the groundbreaking ceremony for the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. In his remarks, President Eisenhower stated, "just as our political organizations are really a political expression of a deeply-felt religious faith, so much success, I believe, in international relationships around the world represent truth, integrity, and honesty, or they cannot long endure, even if there could be a temporary benefit of expediency" (Eisenhower). With that, an important issue was raised: how could future generations forge international relationships founded on "truth, integrity, and honesty"? Moreover, how could the power to cultivate strong relationships across international borders be effectively placed into the hands of the *individual*?

Only a few decades later, the Internet emerged as a tool that possessed unprecedented opportunities for individual users. Not only has the Internet caused a proliferation of easily accessible information, but it has also facilitated the creation of networks between people both domestically and internationally. Today, world leaders and diplomats alike use Internet media to supplement traditional public diplomacy tools. Even nonstate actors such as individual citizens, non-profit organizations, and universities have begun to utilize the Internet as a means to start dialogues that span international boundaries. The evolution of international exchange programs highlights one instance where the Internet has had a significant impact on public diplomacy. U.S. citizens are no longer interacting with foreign audiences solely through traditional exchange programs such as the Fulbright Program and the International Visitor Leadership Program. Instead, these traditional forms of public diplomacy are now supplemented by computer-mediated-communication (CMC) between domestic and foreign audiences. Virtual exchange

programs are the most salient type of CMC in the realm of public diplomacy. Designed to bring international Internet users together, virtual exchange programs represent one important way that individual citizens use their newfound power to participate in and influence U.S. diplomacy.

Virtual Exchange Programs at American University

American University was one of the first institutions to explore virtual exchange programs as a means of broadening students' perspectives and challenging their attitudes and preconceptions about other cultures.[1] In 2008, in partnership with the Bureau of Public Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, Professor Bram Groen launched a virtual exchange program at American University. Initially designed to put first-year students in touch with Arab Muslim students from the country of Oman, the program was intended to address stereotypes and reduce prejudices in a post-9/11 world. Before the launch of the virtual exchange program, Professor Groen visited the U.S. Embassy in Oman to meet with their faculty, observe the facility, and set up the program. Originally, the Omani participants were required to visit the U.S. Embassy in Oman to use its virtual exchange equipment. The U.S. Department of State hosted the exchange programs for their American counterparts using its own equipment in Washington, D.C.. The Department of State dedicated private channels to the U.S. Embassy in Oman to facilitate this exchange program. Though the program successfully ran for multiple semesters, Omani authorities eventually cancelled it when they became anxious about Omani students being influenced by the "infidel thoughts" of their American partners. Despite this initial setback with Oman, however, the U.S. Department of State gave American University a $15,000 grant to purchase its own virtual exchange equipment one year later. The equipment, initially housed

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[1] The history of virtual exchange programs at American University was given to me in a telephone interview of Bram Groen, professor at American University. See (Groen) in works cited for citation.

within the Intercultural Management Institute (IMI), gave the American University staff and student body the ability to connect with foreign audiences from the comfort of their very own classrooms. Consequently, the grant facilitated the growth of other international exchange programs shortly after it was distributed to American University. Following Oman, for example, Algerian diplomats requested that they establish a similar program with American University students through IMI. Today, Algerian students majoring in English and History must apply to participate in this popular program. After a program was set up with Algeria, Professor Bram Groen worked closely with Professor Alexandra Parrs to establish another virtual exchange program with the Sociology Department of the American University in Cairo. Most recently, the virtual exchange equipment has connected American University students with undergraduate business students attending the University of Bahrain in Manama, Bahrain.

Using data collected from one of these virtual exchange programs, this research will broaden understandings of the effectiveness of *virtual* cross-cultural exchange programs as opposed to face-to-face (FtF) exchanges, with an emphasis on necessary technological conditions for success. Before delving into my research, however, it is first necessary to highlight multiple perspectives that address the purpose of exchange programs as public diplomacy tools and how the emergence of the Internet has facilitated relationship building across borders in a unique way.

Literature Review

Public Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected due to advances in technology and globalization, the role of nonstate actors in the sphere of international relations continues to grow. As a result, diplomacy has begun to expand beyond classic government-to-government relations and it has become increasingly apparent that "public diplomacy is gradually moving

away from the periphery of diplomatic work" (Melissen xx). Before I examine the purpose of public diplomacy, it is first necessary to answer the most basic question: "What is it?" Nicholas Cull provides one succinct definition of public diplomacy as "the process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics" (Cull 31). Paul Sharp provides a similar definition of public diplomacy as "the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented" (Sharp 106). Bruce Gregory expands his definition of "public diplomacy" to include the "ways and means by which states, associations of states, and nonstate actors *understand* cultures, attitudes, and behavior; *build and manage* relationships; and *influence* opinions and actions to advance their interests and values" (Gregory 276). Though there are many definitions, scholars tend to agree that, at its core, public diplomacy occurs when a government body communicates with citizens abroad in an attempt to learn about, influence, or persuade their opinions and behavior.

Beyond the question of "What is public diplomacy?" however, lies a more interesting debate over the question, "Why does public diplomacy exist?" Joseph Nye provides one justification of public diplomacy as a tool that is integral to a nation's successful cultivation of "soft power." The objective of soft power, unlike military conquests or economic sanctions, is to persuade another nation to modify its preferences and to behave in a certain, favorable way without using direct coercion or threats (Nye 95). In addition to persuasion, Nye touches on the simultaneous need to win the "hearts and minds" of foreign nationals by using attraction. Benno H. Signitzer and Timothy Coombs also make a distinction between public diplomacy as a tool of persuasion and as a tool of attraction. They differentiate between the two depictions as the tough-minded line and the tender-minded line of public diplomacy. According to their categorization,

the tough-minded school of thought holds that "the purpose of public diplomacy is to exert an influence on the attitudes of foreign audiences using persuasion and propaganda" (Signitzer and Coombs 140). Meanwhile, the tender-minded focuses on the implementation of information and cultural programs to "create a climate of mutual understanding" (Signitzer and Coombs 140). Nye's justification falls between the two lines; though he acknowledges the goal of public diplomacy is to influence the attitudes of the foreign public, he also argues that effective public diplomacy must go beyond public relations tactics or propaganda and instead focus on "building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies" (Nye 101).

Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas, on the other hand, downplay the need for these long-term relationships and other tenets of the tender-minded school of thought. Instead, they suggest that effective public diplomacy incorporates elements of public relations in order to not only persuade, but to also attract the foreign public. They describe this trend toward attraction over coercion as "the confluence of public relations and public diplomacy" (Kennedy and Lucas 317). According to Kennedy and Lucas, much like companies, governments are now required to brand their nation and advertise it abroad in order to attract "fans" that will support their policies and endeavors around the world. Peter van Ham, a scholar who lauds "place-branding" as an essential constructivist element of international politics, describes how "politicians all over the world have to find a brand niche for their state, engage in competitive marketing, ensure customer satisfaction, and – most of all – create brand loyalty" (Van Ham 129). In addition to creating loyalty or patriotism, Van Ham uses globalization as an explanation for place branding; as nations become increasingly interconnected and as citizens are faced with information overload, people rely on brands to make decisions and form or maintain allegiances (Van Ham 130). Peter G. Peterson, for instance, uses the War on Terrorism and the United State's "image

problem" to demonstrate how a nation's brand can affect the level of public support for certain

foreign policies (Peterson 75). Jan Melissen agrees that "nation-branding and public diplomacy

are sisters under the skin" (Melissen 19). Still, despite the fact that public relations and public

diplomacy both aim to "affect public opinion for the benefit of their client/organization,"

Signitzer and Coombs point out how research on how the two operate in tandem is scarce

(Signitzer and Coombs 139).

While it is clear that international relations scholars hold conflicting beliefs regarding the

nuances of public diplomacy and especially its purpose, most agree that there are numerous tools

that can be used effectively to conduct public diplomacy. Cull, for instance, provides a detailed

taxonomy of public diplomacy by dividing the practice into five specific elements: listening,

advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting (IB) (Cull

32). Gregory also provides a categorization that identifies "four main concepts of public

diplomacy: understanding, planning, engagement, and advocacy" ("Enduring Characteristics"

351). Similarly, Nye explains how "public diplomacy tries to attract by drawing attention to

these potential resources [those elements that attract a foreign audience to a nation] through

broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exchanges, and so forth" (Nye 95). John

Robert Kelley also stresses how "much of what steers the public diplomacy process depends on

the situational aspects surrounding it" (Kelley 72). Specifically, Kelley identifies how certain

communication styles (transparent or propagandistic), timeframes (long-term or short-term), and

posture orientations (reactive or proactive) will elicit different manifestations of public

diplomacy (Kelley 80). It is therefore clear that there are numerous methods by which a

government can engage in public diplomacy. For the scope of this research, I will focus on one

of these tools—international exchanges—as an effective form of public diplomacy.

International Exchanges: A Tool of Public Diplomacy

International exchange programs represent a significant component in the public diplomacy toolbox. Designed to establish communication networks between average citizens from different nations that would otherwise not exist, three justifications for international exchange programs stand out among the literature. Scholars have characterized international exchange programs in the following ways: (1) as a tool that self-interested states use to gauge and manipulate their reputation abroad, (2) as a reciprocal process of information exchange whereby participants attempt to influence or challenge each other's beliefs, and (3) as an apolitical, educational tool simply designed to widen or enrich participants' perspectives.

Nancy Snow describes the first category of international exchange programs when she places the tool of soft power in the context of the fragile Cold War state. In the midst of massive propaganda campaigns initiated by the Soviet Union, Snow explains how international exchange programs developed out of a need to both influence foreign societies while simultaneously gauge the reputation of the United States abroad (Snow 199). The underlying justification of exchange programs was that "the more foreigners understood the specific manners, mores, and relationship patterns of the people from the United States, the more likely calmer waters would prevail in international relations" (Snow 200). This one-track agenda implies that international exchange programs were used during the Cold War as a means to "win over" the Soviet public and, in effect, weaken support for the goals of the Soviet government that threatened the hegemony of the United States. The motivation behind international exchanges during the Cold War period is consistent with the "the one-way transmission of own culture abroad" model of cultural communication created by the German intercultural scholar, Peisert. This type of communication occurs when "there is a central institution, close to foreign policy, which is designed to assure

that the activities fit into the overall strategy. Systemic language policy is a major vehicle in this approach – language is here seen primarily as an instrument of persuasion rather than information exchange" (Signitzer and Coombs 142-143). Specifically, the Cold War exchange programs exemplify this type of cultural communication because the United States was disinterested in the culture of the Soviet Union and attempted to make cultural changes abroad in order to gain international support for its policies (Signitzer and Coombs 143). Kelley also describes this "one-way" type of communication as the information approach to public diplomacy where the foremost objective is "transmitting content into environments perceived as information-poor, and hardly ever to engage target populations in a transnational dialogue" (Kelley 80). This type of government-public interaction falls under the advocacy model he describes as "a uni-directional transmission of information, often geared to meet short-term needs, and sometimes moved to communicate in an influence-driven, propagandistic communication style" (Kelley 81). According to Gregory, "in contrast to engagement's discourse logic, advocacy's focus is on strategic action and non-deliberative elements in politics and diplomacy – agenda-setting, decision-making, persuasion and mobilizing actors" ("Enduring Characteristics" 360). In step with Nye's definition of soft power, Cull provides another definition of international exchange as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas and reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas for a period of study and/or acculturation" (Cull 33). To these scholars, the foremost objective of international exchange programs is to initiate a chain reaction whereby U.S. citizens positively influence local actors abroad who then share their positive perceptions of the United States with their neighbors.

Meanwhile, while there are many scholars who claim international exchange is merely a disguised form of propaganda, Jan Melissen explains how it is no longer possible to simply dismiss public diplomacy as a way to manipulate the attitudes held by foreign audiences (Melissen 11). Instead, Melissen describes how "the new public diplomacy moves away from – to put it crudely – peddling information to foreigners and keeping the foreign press at bay, towards engaging with foreign audiences" (Melissen 13). Kelley defines this transition in public diplomacy as a shift away from the advocacy model of public diplomacy toward an advisory model that includes engagement – a type of communication that is transparent, has a long-term timeframe, and can be either reactive or proactive (Kelley 80). Cull also describes international exchange as a very long-term, reciprocal process in which both participating nations receive and deliver information through their citizens and are subsequently educated and transformed (Cull 35). Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault explore how international exchange programs exemplify a transition from the strict one-way form of communication to a two-way dialogic exchange of ideas. To these scholars, "*dialogue* refers to myriad situations in which ideas and information are exchanged and communication is *reciprocal* and *multidirectional*" (Cowan and Arsenault 18). Though they explain how the goal of these people-to-people dialogues is not necessarily to manipulate attitudes, they highlight research that has found that "individuals are more likely to feel favorably toward those with opposing viewpoints and consider political outcomes as fair, if not correct, if they have the opportunity to engage in discussion and debate" (Cowan and Arsenault 19). Unlike traditional diplomacy, which stresses the importance of monologue, or government messages directed at foreign audiences, Cowan and Arsenault explore how reciprocity is key to any successful dialogue. According to them, "regardless of political orientation or background, when people talk to one another they may learn about and

learn from their different perspectives and experiences, and they are affected by the knowledge (or belief) that their views are being taken into account" (Cowan and Arsenault 12). Unlike scholars like Nye who study exchange programs as a tool of soft power that government bodies use to manipulate attitudes in a specific way, these scholars depict exchange programs as a means of reciprocal exposure. Gregory acutely describes the underlying difference between this type of engagement and the soft power tool that Nye describes. He states, "those who privilege long-term relationships will de-emphasize control, accentuate reciprocity and view political by-products as secondary. Actors who focus on political objectives will emphasize control and use engagement to encourage mind-sets and mobilize action to short-term advantage" ("Enduring Characteristics" 359). Put differently, according to these scholars, the underlying purpose of exchanges is to create a two-way dialogue between diverse groups of international participants in the hopes that the exchange will result in a more fruitful understanding of each group's beliefs and attitudes. Attitude change, while not a set objective of either group, may or may not be an outcome.

Finally, while most scholars agree that the purpose of international exchange is to positively influence foreign publics, whether it is a mutual action or not, others identify international exchange as a primarily apolitical, educational tool. Snow quotes Senator J. William Fulbright as saying that "his namesake program should never be conducted as propaganda endeavors to improve the image of the United States or any nation in the world; rather the value of such exchanges was in the opportunity for expansion of knowledge, wisdom, and empathy" (Snow 209). Snow also cites Alice Reynolds Pratt as a proponent of international exchanges as a means to increase mutual understanding and cooperation though education. Pratt states that "[community organizations such as the World Affairs Councils or Sister Cities

International] do not believe that person-to-person contact will save the world nor bring about instant peace. They do believe that increased understanding and appreciation of others' values will create a better climate for mutual cooperation" (Snow 209). Signitzer and Coombs provide a categorization of public diplomacy that is consistent with both of these perspectives. Defined as "cultural relations," a type of of cultural communication, Signitzer and Coombs explain how the ultimate goal of cultural relations is not necessarily to exploit international exchanges, but rather to create an international network for the exchange of honest information (Signitzer and Coombs 142). Signitzer and Coombs also use Peisert's model of cultural communication to characterize this type of person-to-person contact as "exchange and cooperation" or "two-way symmetric [communication]" (Signitzer and Coombs 143). According to Peisert, this model of communication "involves a situation where both partners have equal rights…[and where] the ultimate goal is to substitute national for international loyalties" (Signitzer and Coombs 143).

Jan Melissen acknowledges that "in cultural relations as much as in the new public diplomacy, the accent is increasingly on engaging with foreign audiences rather than selling messages, on mutuality and the establishment of stable relationships instead of mere policy-driven campaigns, on the 'long haul' rather than short-term needs, and on winning 'hearts and minds' and building trust" (Melissen 21). International exchange is therefore consistent with the final category of public diplomacy that Kelley identifies: "*Engagement:* building relationships, also over the long tern, to cultivate trust and mutual understanding between peoples (be they groups, organizations, nations, etc.)" (Kelley 73). Though there is a tendency to associate public diplomacy with short-term goals to change attitudes abroad, scholars such as Kelley explain how "exchange programs assume an important place in the arsenal of long-term tactics, emphasizing niche areas such as the arts and sciences, and promoting the cultures of sponsoring cultures"

(Kelley 77). This final categorization of international exchange programs is therefore different in that it emphasizes the creation of long-term relationships as an outcome; exchange programs are not simply short-term tools designed to influence or discuss a foreign audience's attitudes.

In addition to identifying the wide range of purposes of international exchanges, scholars have presented a substantial amount of research on the outcomes of these face-to-face interactions, specifically study abroad programs and government sponsored initiatives. Michael Flack, in particular, identified the impact of study abroad on (1) the individual, (2) the host institution and society, (3) the home society and (4) inter-societal and international relations. Specifically, Flack found that individuals who participated in study abroad programs experienced many benefits, including valuable language skills, impressive U.S. credentials, a unique frame of reference for professional work and academic research, and relationships with citizens belonging to the host-country (Flack 111). In addition, Flack identifies one psycho-social effect of study abroad as "a more sophisticated, differentiated, personalized, and concretized knowledge and perception of the host society, its achievements and problems, its peoples and policies, and of its 'ways of life,' as compared to 'knowledge' and images held before" (Flack 111). Flack thus makes the important point that international exchange programs successfully combat negative stereotypes commonly held by foreign societies.

Flack represents only one scholar out of the many who agree that international exchange programs have had some positive effect on participating individuals and societies. One Congressional Research Service Report found that:

> There is widespread consensus that educational and cultural exchange programs
> supported by the U.S. government are highly effective public diplomacy
> tools…They build an environment of mutual understanding by creating a cadre of

both American and foreign citizens who develop a first-hand knowledge of

another culture, and they create long-term relationships that can be drawn upon to

enhance cooperation and understanding between the United States and foreign

countries. (Nakamura and Weed 48)

Despite this overwhelming support, however, this type of public diplomacy faces serious

obstacles. First, government funding for international exchange programs is severely limited.

One report by the American Academy of Diplomacy found that in order "to have a reasonable

chance of accomplishing its goals, PD [public diplomacy] needs to cover an employment

shortfall, establish additional positions, obtain greater program funding and significantly expand

training" (Adams 14). In addition to remedying these weaknesses, the report recommended that

current academic exchanges increase by 100%, International Visitor grants by 50%, and youth

exchanges by 25% between 2010 and 2014 at a total cost of $409.6 million (Adams 16). The

government's budgetary and employment constraints represent one significant obstacle to face-

to-face international exchange programs.

Obstacles to the success of international exchange programs also exist beyond

government constraints; individual participants face similar challenges. In particular, Cull

identifies a dilemma that international exchange programs face in the 21st century. He agrees,

"the potency of exchanges as a mechanism of public diplomacy is beyond dispute, but their

implementation has been limited by budget and geography and by cultural barriers to

participation of all members of society" (Cull 51). Olsen, Zimmer, and Behr agree that educators

therefore face a serious challenge: how to achieve the positive results of these face-to-face

interactions for students who face major financial and cultural barriers to achieving the authentic

study abroad experience (Olsen, Zimmer and Beher 351).

Fortunately, the emergence of the Internet and rapid technological innovation thereafter offer a promising alternative to traditional face-to-face exchanges. Though some scholars suggest that the outcomes of virtual exchange programs, or exchange programs that are conducted online using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, are entirely different than face-to-face interactions, others have found that the distinction is subtle. Still, it is necessary to highlight the fact that virtual exchange programs are not perfect substitutes for face-to-face exchanges. Therefore, in order to understand the impact virtual exchange programs will have on public diplomacy, it is first necessary to identify these key differences.

The Emergence of the Internet and its Impact on Relationship Formation

At the heart of U.S. public diplomacy and face-to-face international exchange programs is the value of putting U.S. citizens in touch with foreign nationals. It is therefore important to identify the ways in which a transition to virtual exchange programs online will impact the most vital piece of the public diplomacy agenda – relationship formation. Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) "refers to a wide range of technologies that facilitate both human communication and the interactive sharing of information through computer networks, including e-mail, discussion groups, newsgroups, chat, instant messages, and Web pages" (Barnes 4). Though the issue has been disputed since the emergence of the Internet, recent scholars have investigated the differences between relationship formation conducted online and offline and many agree that a well-crafted CMC experience has the potential to be just as fruitful as a face-to-face (FtF) relationship. Despite the potential for a similar outcome, however, scholars acknowledge that the process of forming a relationship over the Internet using CMC is unique. In particular, two fundamental characteristics of CMC influence relationship formation online: anonymity and different rates of communication (asynchronous versus synchronous time).

One unique attribute of text-based CMC is anonymity for users. Depending on the type of CMC technology that a person chooses to use, he or she may be able to keep their identity private. Text-based CMC, for instance, allows users to substitute screen names and online profiles for their actual names and identities. In text-based communication environments, users also have the ability to keep certain social context cues, such as nonverbal expressions, undisclosed. Communication scholars agree that this crucial detail sets CMC apart from face-to-face interaction because these cues are fundamental to interpersonal relationship formation. In particular, nonverbal behaviors "define the nature of the social situation and actors' identities and relative status" (Walther 383). Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. McGuire identify how "in traditional forms of communication, head nods, smiles, eye contact, distance, tone of voice, and other nonverbal behavior give speakers and listeners information they can use to regulate, modify, and control exchanges" (Kiesler, et al. 1125). There are two major schools of thought on how the absence of nonverbal cues in text-based communication impacts the development of interpersonal relationships: the "cues-filtered-out" theory and the social information processing (SIP) theory of interpersonal communication.

By transferring the steps of impression development online, scholars that belong to the "cues-filtered-out" school of thought believe that the subtle pieces of information gained from the observation of nonverbal cues are lost. Specifically, "cues-filtered-out" theorists believe that "CMC has low social presence because it removes prominent social cues found in face-to-face exchanges" (Barnes 18). Joseph Walther identifies one claim made by "cues-filtered-out" theorists that "with lower social context information, communicators are said to become more self-absorbed versus other-oriented in CMC. The absence of social context cues should result in more impersonal behavior and polarization of attitudes, hence, more negative perceptions of

group members" (Walther 383). Kiesler et al. identifies another consequence of the loss of nonverbal cues as the creation of hyper-sensitized situations where "messages are depersonalized, inviting stronger or more uninhibited text and more assertiveness in return" (Kiesler, et al. 1125). Kiesler et al. also suggest that group dynamics and decision-making processes are effected by use of certain types of communication since their research found that "computer-mediated groups took longer to reach consensus [in decision-making] than did face-to-face groups, and they exchanged fewer remarks in the time allowed to them" (Kiesler et al. 1128). While this is not an obvious measure of the "success" of team cohesion, the findings of Kiesler et al. suggest that the temporal differences between FtF and CMC interactions impact relationships, as well.

Still, while "cues-filtered-out" theorists argue that CMC detracts from the possibility of a strong, interpersonal relationship, others argue that Internet users make up for the loss of nonverbal cues in other ways. Most notably, the social information processing (SIP) theory of interpersonal communication, developed by Joseph Walther, points out how "the cues-filtered-out authors have neglected the notion that linguistically-borne cues are highly capable of conveying personality and attitude characteristics" (Walther 386). He explains how "CMC users formed increasingly developed impressions over time, presumably from the decoding of text-based cues" (Walther 393). Walther therefore explains how Internet communicators make up for the loss of nonverbal cues by paying closer attention to the exchange of text-based codes.

Another way scholars have argued online communicators compensate for the loss of nonverbal cues is through greater use of uncertainty reduction strategies, such as self-disclosure and question asking. Self-disclosure, or the amount of information that a person is willing to reveal about their beliefs, personal history or opinions, is a fundamental element in relationship

formation. Interestingly, Lisa Collins Tildwell and Joseph B. Walther conducted a research project that addressed the claim that "self-disclosures may be effective in CMC settings and operate in patterns similar to FtF: They not only provide impression-bearing information, but the process of disclosing creates a demand, so that the recipient feels obligated to respond in kind, typically generating return disclosures from the target individual" (Tildwell and Walther 323). The results of their research validated their claim and found that CMC interactants employed uncertainty reduction tools more often than the FtF group members did; specifically, CMC communicators asked more questions of their peers and disclosed more of themselves to each other (Tildwell and Walther 331). Schiffrin, et al. explains the value of mutual self-disclosure in forming close interpersonal bonds and thus the value of Tildwell and Walther's research: "social penetration theory suggests that relationships develop through a process of reciprocal self-disclosure resulting in intimacy and a close interpersonal bond" (Schiffrin, et al. 299). Schiffrin, et al. goes on to explain how "the high level of self-disclosure observed on the Internet indicates that it may be a viable medium for developing intimate relationships and increasing well-being" (Schiffrin 300). Barnes suggests that one reason people choose to disclose more over the Internet using CMC is because "many people find it easier to reveal their innermost feelings in text-only correspondence" (Barnes 128). Some scholars go so far as to suggest that CMC may even hold certain advantages over face-to-face communication. According to Barnes, for example, CMC may be considered a better option for "socially reticent individuals to develop interpersonal skills because it removes the social pressure of immediate face-to-face reactions from others" (Barnes 147). Based on the evidence that social information processing theorists present, it is apparent that Internet users who communicate online also have the potential to foster meaningful relationships online.

Walther addresses the impact of the second unique characterization of CMC – differences in response times – on impression development and relationship formation in Internet versus face-to-face settings. He explains how in face-to-face interactions, "partners develop initial impressions rapidly based on nonverbal characteristics such as physical appearance and vocal qualities" (Walther 386). In CMC relationships, however, impression-formation is simply slower; Walther hypothesizes that "the effect of message frequency on impression formation is mediated by the communication channel such that (a) impressions are more developed in early FtF communication than in early CMC; (b) the level of impression development becomes similar and greater after many exchanges in either medium" (Walther 387). Put simply, "the *rate* of impression processing may be more likely to be affected by differences between communication media, rather than fixed differences in impression development due to different media themselves" (Walther 394). Thus, Walther identifies one difference between CMC and FtF exchanges: though they eventually reach the same level as FtF, impressions are formed less quickly in CMC settings.

In addition to affecting impression development, some argue that the delay in response times over the Internet also gives users the opportunity present an idealized or self-constructed version of themselves to their peers. This is due to the fact that in an asynchronous Internet setting, users can choose when to respond to their peers. Consequently, they have time to alter their responses in a way that coincides with the projection that they are trying to make for themselves. While some may consider this a hindrance to the creation of genuine relationships, there are instances where this delay is actually beneficial in relationship-formation. Specifically, Walther explains how "asynchronous communication may allow users to be more cognitively mindful and deliberative in their message construction, disclosing aspects of their personalities

and adopting communication behaviors which are more stereotypically desirable, and creating more positive impressions" (Walther 394). Also, when language barriers exist between users, this time laps allows participants to construct their points and better understand what the other is trying to convey. It is reasonable to assume that increased understanding greatly aids in the formation of relationships.

Virtual Exchange and Citizen Diplomacy

Though relationships form differently online, the Internet and CMC technologies will continue to grow as valuable instruments in the public diplomacy toolbox of the 21st century. This is due in large part to the fact that the Internet has greatly enhanced the power of the individual. Jan Melissen describes how "the ordinary individual is increasingly visible in the practice of diplomacy, particularly in the areas of public diplomacy and consular relations" (Melissen 23). Specifically, Melissen describes how "the democratization of access to information has turned citizens into independent observers as well as assertive participants in international politics, and the new agenda of diplomacy has only added to the leverage of loosely organized groups of individuals" (Melissen 24). As Gregory puts it:

> Technologies are transforming diplomatic communication. Transparency, speed, volume, and sharply declining transport costs generate greater diversity and competition from third parties including the media. Paper and written messages matter less; electronically mediated images and sounds, body language, and backdrops matter more. (Gregory 284-285)

Cowan and Arsenault agree, "the Internet and other new communication technologies also offer unprecedented opportunities for promoting cross-national collaborations as well as dialogue and monologic communications" (Cowan and Arsenault 26). These scholars agree that it is apparent

that the Internet holds enormous potential in the field of public diplomacy, especially because it is a tool that is accessible to billions of individuals. Still, while scholars have introduced the role of the Internet as a facilitator of virtual international exchanges, there is still an opportunity for the subject to be explored even further. The following research will examine the effectiveness of virtual exchange programs and the role of the Internet as a new tool in public diplomacy.

Research Questions and Study Outcomes

Introduction of Research

An overview of the literature suggests that virtual exchange programs hold potential to influence the growth and success of citizen diplomacy in the 21st century. While it is evident that virtual exchange programs and face-to-face interactions are not perfect substitutes, it is clear that fruitful relationships have still developed out of virtual exchange programs. With that assumption in place, the purpose of this research is to address two questions. First, can semester-long virtual exchange programs successfully improve attitudes towards international peers? Second, which technological conditions must be met in order to influence the richness of these international, virtual relationships?

Research Methodology

In order to answer these questions and expand the scope of research on international exchange programs, this study will use a mixed methods approach. First, I began with a quantitative analysis of survey data collected by Professor Bram Groen. Over the course of six years of virtual exchange programs conducted at American University, Professor Groen has collected data from pre- and post-exchange survey questionnaires that have been distributed to all participants of his virtual exchange programs. The survey is composed of demographic questions (i.e. age, gender, country of origin, etc.), cultural background questions (i.e. "what are

your home country's values?"), and intercultural interaction and perception questions (i.e. "what are your partner country's values?"). The questionnaire contained a mix of open-ended and closed questions. The full survey is attached in Appendix 1. I will use the results of these surveys to address my first research question: Can a semester-long virtual exchange program successfully improve attitudes towards international peers?

My second research objective is to measure how attitudes toward foreign partners change over time given certain *technological* conditions such as the type of technology used and the frequency of successful connections. In order to address this second research objective, I used case studies as a qualitative method. Specifically, these case studies were the results of four different international, virtual exchange programs, each designed as part of Professor Groen's Cross Cultural Communications course held in Spring 2013. I used an analysis of the outcomes of these four teams to draw conclusions about the impact of specific technology on relationship formation and cohesion in virtual teams.

Operation Definitions

I will be using Professor Groen and Professor Parr's definition of "cross-cultural virtual teams" for the remainder of my research. Their definition states:

> Distinct from distance learning – which entails a separation of the learner from the teacher with students working individually or in teams through a variety of communication tools – cross-cultural virtual teams are comprised of team members who are, in part, collocated or geographically distributed, but who work together via ICTs [information communication technologies] to learn by completing interdependent tasks. (Groen and Parrs 3)

Case Study Participants

The participants in the following case studies were all undergraduate students who were enrolled in university courses in the United States, Algeria, Egypt or Bahrain. All American students in my case studies were enrolled in an introductory course entitled Cross Cultural Communications at American University in Washington, D.C. The average age of American participants was 19. The majority of students were female (78.5% female and 21.5% male). 85.7% of the American participants were majoring in International Relations. The average age of the Algerian group was 22. Half of the Algerian students were male (half were female). The majority of Algerian participants were studying English and all of them were undergraduate students at Batna University in Batna, Algeria. The average age of the Bahraini group of students was 19. Of the Bahraini participants, 60% were female (40% were male). All Bahraini participants were business students at the University of Bahrain, located in their capital city, Manama. The average age of the Egyptian team was 20. All Egyptian participants were female (none were male). The Egyptian participants were business or psychology students at the American University in Cairo.

As part of the course, the class was split into teams of three or four American students and three to five international students. The experiences of four teams will be explored as case studies in this research paper. The first team (Team 1) was composed of three American students and three Algerian students. The second team (Team 2) was composed of three American students and four Egyptian students. The third team (Team 3) was composed of three American students and four Bahraini students. The final team (Team 4) was composed of three American students and had between three and five Algerian students in each virtual exchange session.

Procedure

As part of his Cross Cultural Communications course, Professor Bram Groen assigned first-year undergraduate students from American University a project to conduct a joint virtual exchange program with teams from Egypt, Algeria, and Bahrain. He outlines the goals of the project as to:

> a) connect students from vastly different cultures by introducing them to the complexities of communicating and collaborating virtually in preparation for their career realities; and b) enhance "grassroots" communication between American and Middle Eastern students; all this, while applying what they learn about intercultural differences in the classroom. (Groen and Parrs 3)

In order to complete these goals, the instructions for the project were relatively open-ended. Students were required to utilize any media option they chose in order to connect with their international partners over the course of the six months of the semester. Their media options included blogs, emails, Facebook, MySpace, Blackboard Collaborate, Skype and videoconferencing technology provided by the U.S. Department of State grant. As part of the project, students were instructed to conduct at least six, one-hour videoconferencing sessions with their team members abroad. By the end of the semester, the joint teams were also required to collaborate on and produce a ten-page paper on a specific subject that would then be submitted to their respective professors for a final grade.

Team 1 chose to explore cultural differences between Algeria and the United States by comparing wedding practices and marriage norms in each country. Team 2 discussed different gender roles in Egypt and compared them to gender roles in the United States. Unlike Team 1, Team 2 chose from an option of two topics, both provided by Professor Groen. The other, unselected topic choice was "Mutual U.S.-Egypt stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings."

Team 3 was assigned the topic of female entrepreneurship in Bahraini and American culture by Professor Groen. Finally, Team 4 voted amongst its group members to compare e-books versus hardcopy books for their final project.

In their own words, Professor Bram Groen and Professor Alexandra Parrs provide a description of the intent behind their virtual exchange programs:

> We apply this method [of cross-cultural virtual teams] by forming teams of three or four AU [American University] students and a similar number of ME [Middle Eastern] students and asking them to engage in an agreed-upon study project requiring a joint class paper, while separately reporting on what they observe and learn cross-culturally from the practicum. (Groen and Parrs 3)

The following results section will use the outcomes of four case studies, combined with general pre-project survey data analysis, to evaluate the success of the virtual exchange programs at American University based on these goals. Particular attention will be given to the type of technology used and total number of successful interactions held between team members.

Results

The results section of this research paper will be split two ways. First, I will examine the results of the survey data collected by Professor Groen. While he reserves the right to make conclusive observations, I will highlight some key results. I will pay particular attention to the pre-project questionnaire distributed to the members of the most recent virtual exchange program held in Spring 2013. Following a presentation of my data findings, I will explore the specific experiences of four, individual teams. The first two teams were composed of students from Professor Groen's Spring 2013 Cross Cultural Communications course; the last two were

students from the Honors section of a separate Cross Cultural Communications course taught by Professor Groen.

Survey Data

According to a pre-exchange survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) distributed at the start of the semester, the number one reason that the majority of American students listed for their participation in this virtual exchange program was tied between "to learn about another culture" and "to make friends." The data also revealed that the American participants assumed the rest of the world was generally familiar with their country. When asked, "How familiar do you think other people around the world are with your country," the average score was a 1.85 on a scale from 1=very familiar to 5=very unfamiliar. For the Egyptian sample of students, the most commonly selected reason for participation was "to make friends." The Egyptian participants gave the rest of the world a 3 for their familiarity with Egypt. In Bahrain the top choice, "to learn about another culture," was followed closely by participants' second choice, "to teach others about my culture." Here, the Bahraini students assumed that the rest of the world was generally unfamiliar with their culture – the familiarity score was a 3.4. In Algeria, 100% of participants agreed that their number one reason for participation was "to learn about another culture" and that their second reason was "to teach others about my culture." Data from the Algerian participants reveals that they believed the world knew least about their country (familiarity score=3.67). Still, the results indicate that all participants in the cross-cultural virtual teams valued *reciprocal* cultural learning going into this project. Both the Americans and the Egyptian participants went so far as to anticipate the development of new friendships out of this experience. Interestingly, participants from countries that believed the world was generally

unfamiliar with their country also ranked "to teach others about my culture" as motivation behind their involvement in the virtual exchange project.

Table 1 shows the results of the question, "Which aspects of this project do you think will be difficult or challenging? (1=very easy; 2=somewhat easy; 3=no opinion/don't know; 4=somewhat challenging; 5=extremely challenging). According to the results, the American participants expected technological difficulties to be the most challenging obstacle, but worried least about "respecting team members' opinions." The Algerian students also expected technological difficulties to be the most challenging aspect of this project. The Bahraini students had the fewest concerns going into the project, but some believed "time-related issues" could become an obstacle. Finally, the Egyptian participants ranked "project leadership" and "respecting team members' opinions" as the most challenging aspects of the virtual exchange project. Another interesting observation from the data is that few participants believed "trust" would be a challenging aspect of this project (only 28.6% of the American group believed establishing trust could be an issue and 0% of the Algerians, Bahrainis or Egyptians considered it as a challenge). Similarly, only 14.3% of the American teams believed "respecting team members' opinions" would be an issue. This differed significantly from the Egyptian team where 60% of Egyptian respondents ranked "respecting team members' opinions" as a challenging aspect of the assignment. Finally, despite the fact that these sessions would be held in English, only the American participants expected "language differences" to be a challenge.

Table 1: Most challenging aspects of the project (Percentage of participants who ranked the aspect as either "somewhat challenging" or "extremely challenging," by country				
	United States	**Algeria**	**Bahrain**	**Egypt**
Technology Issues and Capabilities	42.9%	33.3%	0%	20%
Language differences	50%	0%	0%	0%
Trust (i.e. trusting team members from another culture)	28.6%	0%	0%	0%
Time-related issues (i.e. working across time zones and meeting project deadlines)	57.1%	16.7%	20%	0%
Project leadership	28.6%	20%	0%	60%
Respecting team members' opinions	14.3%	0%	0%	60%
Motivating team members	21.4%	16.7%	0%	0%
Freedom to Express Yourself	21.4%	16.7%	0%	20%

The survey data also revealed some interesting information about the values of both the participants' home countries and their partners'. A majority of the Algerian respondents ranked "Honesty" (83.3%) as the number one value of their home countries. Only 50% of the Algerian participants, however, ranked honesty as their personal top value. The other 50% cited values such as "Work hard" and "Education." 60% of the Bahraini participants also cited "Honesty" as the number one value of their home country. The other 30% cited "Word Hard" as their top value. A majority of the Egyptian participants (66.7%) labeled "Honor your elders" as the number one value of Egypt. Interestingly, though, 100% of the Egyptian participants named "Honesty" as their number one personal value. For the American students, a majority cited "Work Hard" as their country's number one value. 50% of the U.S. participants, however, chose "Honesty" as their personal number one value.

When asked about the United States' top value, both the Algerian participants and the Bahraini participants split between "Work Hard" and "Honesty." 80% of the Egyptian participants named "Work Hard" as the top American value. When asked about their perceptions

of their partner countries in the Middle East, 50% of the U.S. students ranked "Honesty" as their partner country's number one value.

The survey data revealed that prior to the virtual exchange project, the Bahraini students had had the least amount of contact with Americans (3 out of 5 on a scale of 1=very much interaction and 5=very little interaction). The Egyptian students were close behind with an average score of 2.8 out of 5. The Algerian students leaned toward "very much interaction" with a score of 1.83 out of 5.

Finally, the survey data provided information regarding the participants' pre-project beliefs and expectations. Table 2 illustrates the results of this section of the survey. One interesting detail is that participants from the Middle East believed the their Western counterparts enjoyed more freedoms than they did in the Middle East. Surprisingly, participants from the West did not agree with that statement to the same extent that their Arab peers did. One statement that nearly all participants agreed on was that the media contributed to stereotypes of each other's cultures. Finally, all participants were generally optimistic about the outcomes of this virtual exchange project. Over half of all the international students expected their views of American and the United States to change after this project. The U.S. participants were slightly more skeptical.

Table 2: Pre-Project Beliefs and Expectations (Percentage of participants who either "definitely agree" or "somewhat agree", by each country; "No Opinion/I don't know" comments were not counted as agree statements)				
	United States	**Algeria**	**Bahrain**	**Egypt**
The media in both the Western and Arab worlds contribute to the stereotyping of each other's culture.	100%	83.3%	100%	100%
People in the West enjoy freedoms that people in other countries do not.	71.4%	83.3%	80%	100%
Western countries help other countries when they have problems.	35.7%	16.7%	80%	60%
Western countries interfere in other countries' domestic problems.	78.6%	50%	100%	100%
The Western and Arab worlds will reconcile their differences in the next ten years.	7.1%	83.3%	40%	0%
Our world leaders are working to bring us together.	35.7%	50%	60%	0%
Our world leaders are incapable of bringing us closer together.	42.9%	60%	80%	50%
After this project, I expect to have a different view of Americans.	21.4%	100%	80%	80%
After this project, I expect to have a different view of the United States.	42.9%	100%	80%	60%

Case Study Analysis

Team 1

Team 1, an Algerian-American team, utilized the U.S. Department of State funded

equipment that was housed in a university classroom in order to conduct their virtual exchange

programs throughout the semester. At the onset the project, the American students explained

how they knew very little about Algerian culture and feared that they would say something

offensive or "wrong" to their Algerian counterparts. In anticipation of interaction with a more

"conservative" and "sensitive" group, the Americans prepared for the first meeting in a specific

way. Before the first meeting, one American participant explains how she "ran back to her room

to get a jacket to cover her shoulders because I didn't want to offend the Algerian group." One

participant described how it was "almost embarrassing" how little the American participants

knew about the culture of their Algerian partners, especially because it was clear that the Algerian group members were more familiar with American life.

After their first meeting, however, each of the American participants explained how he or she felt more confident about the trajectory of their project. This was due partly to the fact that within the fist meeting, an Algerian participant named Amel Dhikra, had assumed the position of "leader" in the group. According to the American participants, Amel brought an agenda to the first meeting, was very organized, and had many questions. Amel also distributed a poll to all the cross-cultural virtual team participants after the first meeting to vote on a discussion topic. She had selected the options to choose from: weddings, tourism, art or history. Though the start and end times of their meetings were never completely set (one participant attributed this to Algeria's polychromic culture), they described their Algerian counterparts as "organized," "curious," "warm," and "welcoming."

While the American participants of Team 1 overwhelmingly agreed they would participate in another virtual exchange program if given the opportunity, they cited a few challenges they faced throughout the process. First, time zone differences made rearranging meeting times "near impossible." Also, the U.S. participants described how they missed one session because they failed to realize that Algeria does not participate in Daylight Savings Time. The U.S. students also cited language barriers as a small obstacle to communication; still, they were usually able to decipher the English of their Algerian partners. Finally, it became apparent early on in the project that the expected learning outcomes for each side of the team were different. The American students were assigned a formal assignment at the onset of the exchange programs, but the Algerian students just wanted to "talk and learn."

Overall, it was apparent that this exchange program was a success. One American participant described her experience in the following way: "I gained a lot of trust throughout the presentation process which is important because I feel like I can ask them [her Algerian partners] anything." Another American participant acknowledged how she has "never been able to speak so openly with someone from another culture." The third American student described how she "felt like [her team] had conversations friends would have." The Algerian team had a positive experience, as well. Yura Oude, another Algerian participant, for example, asked her American teammates permission to call them "friends" at the end of the semester. When asked by Professor Groen if they felt as though they had made new friends because of this program, all three American participants responded affirmatively.

Team 2

Team 2 started their project using Blackboard Collaborate, an Internet software program designed to put users in touch using videoconferences and discussion threads. Team 2 participants, however, were generally frustrated with the Blackboard Collaborate program because of frequent technical difficulties; the video stream would frequently cut out and the narrow web camera lens only allowed one user from each team to be visible at a time. After three weeks of using the Blackboard Collaborate software, Team 2 migrated their project to the university equipment and Skype. They supplemented their virtual exchanges with Google Chat, a type of text-based communication conducted through Google. One participant explained how this project was "so much more effective when you see someone [on the other side]." While the university equipment worked well, the American participants enjoyed using Google Chat as a supplemental tool because it enabled them to stay in the comfort of their own room.

The U.S. participants discussed gender roles in the United States compared to Egypt with four upper-class women with varying degrees of religious adherence. The American participants were surprised by the answers their international peers gave when they asked the question: "What is the stereotype of the American woman in Egypt?" According to the Egyptian participants, American women "have a lot more fun" and are "more independent." The Egyptian participants acknowledged how many of their preconceptions came from "the movies," but they believed that, in general, Egyptians are much more serious and take education much more seriously. After the exchange program however, the Egyptian participants disclosed to their American partners how they now realize the many responsibilities of American students that they had not considered. When the Egyptian participants asked their American partners, "What is the stereotype of the Egyptian woman in America?" they also received interesting answers. The U.S. participants went into the exchange program using words such as "family-oriented' and "reserved" to describe Egyptian women. After the exchange, however, one U.S. participant bluntly told the Egyptian team, "You guys have more freedom than I expected."

Like Team 1, both the American and Egyptian participants of Team 2 had an overwhelmingly positive and eye-opening experience with the virtual exchange program. One Egyptian participant enthusiastically invited the American team to visit Egypt and stay with her in her apartment. Another American participant explained how the experience actually gave her perspective on her *own* everyday life while learning about a culture that was unfamiliar to her. When asked by Professor Groen if they considered their cross-cultural virtual exchange group to be "one team or two teams," all three American participants enthusiastically responded that by the end of the project, they felt as though their team was functioning as one unit.

Team 3

Team 3 utilized Google Hangout and also supplemented their virtual exchange programs with Google Chat sessions. After the first virtual exchange, the American students explained how the "got the sense that the Bahraini students were skeptical going into the project" because they believed they had Americans "pegged down." Conversely, the American participants felt as though their Bahraini partners assumed that they knew very little about the Middle East and especially about Bahrain. During the first exchange programs, one Bahraini student frankly stated, "we don't just ride camels; we have iPhones, too." Though these assumptions were challenged later in the exchange program, the U.S. students explained how they felt that the work on the final project took a little longer because the Bahraini students come from a very high context society. Before the American students could initiate any conversation about the team's assignments or divide tasks concerning those assignments, the Bahraini students insisted on making small talk about light subjects such as television shows and movies. However, once trust was established between the two groups of students, the U.S. participants explained how their acquaintances developed into friends. In an example meeting, one Bahraini participant named Abdulla Almedfaa explained how he was "very glad to have met such individuals who are ready to start a conversation about their culture and about wanting to learn more about Bahraini culture." He also explained how although he comes from a conservative Bahraini culture, he was surprised to find that he had many similarities with the American students. Another Bahraini student nicknamed DeeDee explained how she learned that television shows greatly exaggerate certain elements of American life. She also mentioned how she felt as though her cross-cultural virtual team had "come a long way from the beginning to the end" and had successfully eliminated certain stereotypes about Americans and about Bahraini people.

The American group of students continuously repeated the importance of establishing trust in their virtual exchange program. Early on in the project, U.S. students described their Bahraini partners as "standoffish." However, once trust was established (and rebuilt after the American team accidentally skipped a session), the objectives of the virtual exchange program changed. The U.S. participants explained how it was only once all the participants were comfortable with each other that the Bahraini students opened up about themselves and disregarded the logistics of the team paper for a moment.

Team 3 included technological difficulties among the list of challenges they encountered during the virtual exchange program. Occasionally, the video would cut out and the team would resort to text-based communication using Google Chat. Interestingly, however, one U.S. participant suggested that Google Chat was a more important tool than the virtual exchange equipment for participants like DeeDee who were very shy and rarely chose to show her face in the videoconferences. Each U.S. participant explained how DeeDee preferred to communicate one-on-one using text-based communication on Google Chat. When asked how they would of felt had this exchange occurred in a face-to-face setting, the U.S. participants agreed that they would have felt more nervous and worried about the possibility of offending their teammates. They explained how in a face-to-face context, it is easier to make a mistake because "you don't have as much time to think."

At the end of their project, Team 3 stated that they could confidently claim that they were "one team and not two" and would call themselves "friends' with their Bahraini partners. They explained how they intend to remain in touch with their new friends with social media and Google Chat.

Team 4

Finally, Team 4 utilized the university equipment and supplemented their virtual exchanges with text-based communication through Facebook. After their first meeting, Team 4 shared a Google Document with their Algerian counterparts. The U.S. participants explained how they hoped that by having a shared, editable document, they could work with their Algerian counterparts to mutually agree upon a subject for their team paper. The American participants explained how they quickly realized that this text-based exchange of ideas was insufficient; their Algerian teammates were unfamiliar with Google's document sharing capabilities and even once they had access, the Algerian participants added their ideas in a very different way than what was anticipated by the U.S. team. Instead of bullet pointing their ideas like the American group had assumed the Algerians would do, one Algerian member simply took charge of the document and pasted external links and summaries about one topic that was important to him. The American users added their ideas to the bottom of the document in an effort to respect his work, but the Google Document was never referred to again after the first meeting.

In additional to these technical challenges, Team 4 struggled with making a group-decision regarding the topic of their project. The U.S. participants quickly realized that the Algerian students had very different learning objectives for this assignment. While the U.S. students were interested in discussing more academic topics such as labor reform, the Algerian students gently suggested "fluffy subjects" such as ebooks and education, but never outright said they were not interested in the suggestions of their American counterparts. Instead, the Algerian team held a meeting outside of the virtual exchange program and thereby excluded their American partners. During this independent meeting, the Algerian team decided on the topic of "e-books versus books." When they reported back to the American group during their next

virtual exchange session, the American participants stated that they "caved in and did 'e-books versus books' even though they didn't really want to." The U.S. participants admitted that they were frustrated early on with the Algerian group and felt as though their Algerian partners were frequently "passive-aggressive."

This group identified many other challenges that they faced over the course of the semester-long exchange program. First, technical challenges greatly inhibited successful exchanges with the Algerian team. The U.S. students only had access to the university's equipment once a week for only one hour early in the morning. This meant that even fruitful exchange sessions had to be cut short in order to stay within the time allotment for the video equipment. Secondly, the U.S. participants explained how the microphone on the video equipment never worked. In order to compensate for this technical malfunction, they were forced to yell their responses to their Algerian partners. The U.S. group explained how this was very off-putting to the Algerian team. In addition, the poor sound quality of the equipment only magnified the language barrier between the groups. The U.S. group explained how these technical difficulties, combined with a language barrier, resulted in many miscommunications with their Algerian partners (i.e. where to meet, what do or bring, parameters of the assignment, etc.).

Though the U.S. participants in Team 4 admitted that they had expected technical issues and language barriers to serve as obstacles to this exchange program, they failed to consider the possibility of a few other challenges. Most significantly, the U.S. team never knew how many Algerian participants would attend the virtual exchange program on any given day. It was therefore difficult to create any strong relationships within the cross-cultural virtual team because of this lack of sustained contact. Instead, the U.S. participants found that the strongest

relationships formed over Facebook using one-on-one text-based exchanges. Selma, one Algerian participant, communicated almost exclusively used Facebook to communicate with her American teammates. One U.S. participant assumed that Selma preferred Facebook because it removed the language barrier. By using Facebook, Selma had more time to formulate her ideas in a language that was not her native tongue. Facebook also eliminated the presence of peer influence. Furthermore, the presence of a teacher's assistant (TA) on the other side of the virtual exchange program in Algeria greatly influenced group dynamics. With the TA monitoring the exchange program, the U.S. participants explained how they felt as though they had to censor their dialogue. In general, the U.S. participants described the virtual exchange program as "artificial" and "forced cross-cultural communication."

When asked how this interaction would have been different in a face-to-face setting, the U.S. participants explained how they would have felt more comfortable and less self-conscious meeting their Algerian partners. Additionally, the U.S. group explained how FtF communication would have eliminated the technological issues that inhibited relationship formation and friendship.

Discussion

The objective of this research project was to explore two questions. First, can semester-long virtual exchange programs successfully improve attitudes towards international peers? Second, which technological conditions must be met in order to influence the richness of these international, virtual relationships? An observation of the pre-project survey data, combined with the results of four extensive case studies, suggest that virtual exchanges projects should be considered a valuable tool in public diplomacy toolkit of the 21st century. Though the survey data revealed that the vast majority of the participants went into the project with an open mind, the

case studies demonstrate how their attitudes were changed in ways that they had not necessarily expected. Furthermore, a comparison of the pre-project data and the case study observations reveal that both U.S. participants and international participants attained a better understanding of the values of each other's home countries. It appears that the most valuable part of virtual exchange programs is that they enable cross-cultural dialogue simply by putting people in touch. Additionally, in three out of the four case studies, U.S. participants were invited by their international peers to visit team abroad. The majority of participants used words and phrases such as "friendship" and "one team" to describe their virtual exchange experience.

One case study, however, revealed that there are certain technological hindrances that have the potential to inhibit meaningful relationship formation online. According to the survey results, technological difficulties were expected to be a challenge by many participants prior to the launch of the virtual sessions. Based on the observations of Professor Groen's Cross Cultural Communications course, it seems that there are certain fundamental characteristics of technology that must exist in order for a successful relationship to form during a virtual exchange. I have identified at least three requirements for virtual exchange technology: (1) it is easily accessible by all participants; (2) sound and picture quality is outstanding; and (3) it is complimented by another form of informal communication either through a social network or email system.

Conclusion

An in-depth examination of the value of public diplomacy and its evolution over time has revealed that there is a fundamental shift in diplomacy away from one-way, government-public communication and toward engagement in the international arena. International exchange programs represent one important type of cross-cultural engagement. Though numerous scholars have explored international exchange programs as a valuable public diplomacy tool, certain

budgetary, geographical and cultural constraints have inhibited the growth of face-to-face programs abroad. The purpose of this research paper was to consider *virtual* exchange programs as a valuable alternative. While communications and interpersonal relations scholars admit that relationship formation online does not necessarily occur in the same way that relationship formation does in face-to-face settings, most agree that fruitful relationships can still undoubtedly be formed online, as well.

Using survey data and case study observations, I examined virtual exchange programs as a valuable public diplomacy tool for the 21st Century. Though this research was done on a relatively small-scale, the results suggest that virtual exchange programs hold great potential as new engagement strategies. This research revealed how virtual exchange programs successfully altered the attitudes of all participants in a positive way. A major challenge that some teams faced, however, was technological. A cross case study comparison reveals how the most successful groups had easy access to capable exchange equipment and complimented their virtual exchange sessions with another type of communication, usually some form of social media network. This research has unveiled a need for state actors and nonstate actors to invest in and implement virtual exchange programs worldwide. While they may not serve as perfect substitutes for face-to-face communication, the positive outcomes of successful virtual exchange programs achieve many of the goals on the public diplomacy agenda.

Appendix 1

Pre-project Survey Questionnaire – Spring 2013

Question 1: Please indicate your top three (3) reasons for participating in this Virtual Cross-Cultural Exchange project.
- To learn about another culture
- To teach others about my culture
- To gain experience using video conferencing technology
- To discuss our differences/similarities
- To make friends
- Curiosity
- To practice Arabic
- To practice English

Question 2: Which aspects of this project do you think will be difficult or challenging? (1=very easy; 2=somewhat easy; 3=no opinion/don't know; 4=somewhat challenging; 5=extremely challenging)
- Technology issues and capabilities
- Language differences
- Trust (i.e. trusting team members from another culture)
- Time-related issues (i.e. working across time zones and meeting project deadlines)
- Project leadership
- Respecting team members' opinions
- Motivating team members
- Freedom to express yourself

Question 3: What are your home country's top 5 cultural values?

Question 4: What are your partner country's top 5 cultural values?

Question 5: What are your top 5 personal values?

Question 6: Of those people familiar with your county, how do you think they generally feel about your country? (1=very unfavorable, 2=somewhat unfavorable, 3=no opinion/don't know, 4=somewhat favorable, 5=very favorable)

Question 7: How familiar do you think other people around the world are with your country? (1=very familiar, 2=somewhat familiar, 3=I don't know, 4=somewhat unfamiliar, 5=very unfamiliar)

Question 8: Please characterize the type of interaction you have had with Americans previously.
- Friends
- Family
- Business

- University
- Other

Question 9: How familiar are you with the United States? (1=very familiar, 2=somewhat familiar, 3=I don't know, 4=somewhat unfamiliar, 5=very unfamiliar)

Question 10: When speaking with people from a different culture, are the following subjects taboo (i.e. a topic that you should not talk about or do not feel comfortable talking about)? Please rank each item using the scale: very inappropriate, somewhat inappropriate, no opinion/I don't know, somewhat appropriate, or very appropriate.
- Culture
- Religion
- Marriage
- Women's Rights
- Politics
- Sex
- Terrorism

Question 11: How much interaction have you had with Americans prior to this project? (1=very much interaction, 2=some interaction, 3=no opinion, 4=not very much interaction, 5=no interaction)

Question 12: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please rank each statement using the scale: definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, no opinion/I don't know, somewhat agree, definitely agree.
- The media in both the Western and Arab worlds contribute to the stereotyping of each other's culture.
- People in the West enjoy freedoms that people in other countries do not.
- Western countries help other countries when they have problems.
- Western countries interfere in other countries' domestic problems.
- The Western and Arab worlds will reconcile their differences in the next ten years.
- Our world leaders are working to bring us together.
- Our world leaders are incapable of bringing us closer together.
- After this project, I expect to have a different view of Americans.
- After this project, I expect to have a different view of the United States.

Question 13: Country in which you currently study or live:

Question 14: Country of origin:

Question 15: Age:

Question 16: Gender:

Question 17: Please indicate your field(s) of study:

Question 18: Please list your language ability and level of proficiency:

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