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Engaging the Diaspora: El Salvador and Costa Rica's Use of Social Media to Connect with Their Diaspora Communities in the United States

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Abstract

This study explores the public diplomacy efforts of the Central American nations of El Salvador and Costa Rica to connect and engage with their diaspora communities in the United States using social media and other web-based communications. This qualitative case study revealed two distinct patterns of social media use. Costa Rica is using social media spaces mainly as electronic newsletters, as one-way communication outlets to inform about its foreign policy. El Salvador is using social media to foster dialogue with its migrants and to build long-term relationships with the diaspora. Comparatively speaking, El Salvador's has a more sophisticated or effective social media strategy than Costa Rica for engaging its diaspora community. The analysis reflects on why these two patterns of social media use may have formed and suggests recommendations for ways in which El Salvador and Costa Rica can improve social media engagement with their diaspora communities located in the United States. These two cases suggest that the distinct social media style is linked to the level of development of each country's political system and the perception that each nation state.

Introduction

Technology has changed the way governments can conduct their public diplomacy efforts with the goal of communicating with or engaging non-governmental publics located abroad. One of those publics is a hybrid public in the sense that it is located abroad, and in that regard could be considered a "foreign" public, but it is also national or local, in the sense that it is formed by migrants of the home country that is leading the public diplomacy efforts. This public is a diaspora community.

Diaspora communities are publics formed by migrants of a home country living in one or several host countries (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003a, 2003b; Portes and

Rumbaut, 2006). Diaspora communities are becoming an increasingly important public for public diplomacy efforts, given the economic and sociopolitical impact that many of these migrant communities have in their home country –through remittances, direct investment, and direct political participation in home politics, among other manifestations—although these diaspora communities are not easy to conceptualize or describe.

Diaspora communities are complex “foreign” publics for national governments because they are located abroad, generally dispersed (geographically speaking), and with a full range of legal situations in the host country, (from migrants who became citizens to undocumented workers), but at the same time, these are publics that keep concrete social, economic, and political ties to the home country, even though these communities are not living in the home territory anymore. In the past, these populations were hard to reach given their heterogeneity and their dispersion.

Recently, advancements in communications technology, such as the Internet and specific web-based environments, such as social media, have provided national governments with new opportunities to connect with and engage diaspora communities. Governments such as the ones of El Salvador and Costa Rica have started to use websites and social media –with different levels of sophistication and success—to “win the hearts and minds” of a very particular overseas population: citizens or descendants of these Central American countries who now live in the United States. These populations have demonstrated transnational behaviors and connections, as they still keep in touch with their relatives at home and contribute to the home country’s economic and political life through remittances, direct investment and political involvement at home.

This study looks at two countries with disparate diaspora communities and distinct uses of social media for diasporic public diplomacy to learn from those contrasting cases. To do so, this study explores the public diplomacy efforts conducted through social media and other web-based channels by the states of El Salvador and Costa Rica to engage and connect with their diaspora communities in the United States. Even though both are small, Central American countries, they have contrasting realities when it comes to migration to the United States and the impact of migration in the home government’s economy.

The estimated population of El Salvador’s diaspora dwarfs that of Costa Rica. Officials estimate that there are between 2.5 and 3 million Salvadorans in the United States.(Note 1) The best guesses place the number of Costa Ricans in the United States in the ballpark of 100,000 to 200,000 persons (Asamblea Legislativa, 2007; Céspedes Torres, 2009, 2010, World Bank, 2011b). And while remittances from Salvadorans represent a significant 17 percent of El Salvador’s gross domestic product (Banco Central de Reserva de El Salvador, 2010), remittances from Costa Ricans only account for about 2 percent of Costa Rica’s GDP (Banco Central, 2011).

The diaspora of both countries is also a very heterogeneous public with regard to their legal status. The range of legal situations in the United States varies from those who became U.S. citizens and who have children who were born in the United States (and then, are Americans by birth), to permanent residents, work-visa holders and undocumented workers. Diaspora communities, then, are “U.S. publics” in the sense that they reside in the United States, and many of them are American citizens or permanent residents, but they also constitute a transnational public that keeps strong social, economic, and political connections with the home country (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003a, 2003b; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006; Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2003; Koslowski, 2005a, 2005b; Menjívar 2000; Céspedes Torres, 2009, 2010; Landolt, Autler & Baires, 2003).

This study analyzes the Costa Rican and Salvadoran public diplomacy efforts conducted in the United States through social media, including Facebook, Twitter and these governments’ websites at their respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Even though the static official websites are not social media spaces per se, they can include social media environments or sections where social interaction among migrants and government officials can happen, such as in chat rooms and forums, or spaces where comments and responses between migrants and government representatives are allowed and encouraged.

Understanding the different styles of social media use for diasporic public diplomacy in the cases of Costa Rica and El Salvador can help researchers and diplomats to compare and contrast with other cases of diasporic public diplomacy around the world. What comes next is a review of the literature about the linkage between international public relations, public diplomacy and social media use, followed by the findings of this study and conclusion.

International Public Relations, Public Diplomacy and Social Media Use

The fields of international public relations and public diplomacy converge in many aspects. Wakefield (1997), for example, defined international public relations as “a multinational program that has certain coordination between headquarters and various countries where offices and/or publics are located, and that carries potential consequences or results in more than one country” (p. 355). Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee (2007) described international public relations as “the planned and organized effort of a company, institution, or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the publics of other nations” (p. 516). Molleda and Connolly-Ahern (2002) stated that international public relations involve three types of publics at various geographical levels: the ones in the home country, the ones in the host country (or countries), and the transnational publics, such as NGOs and activist groups (cited by Molleda & Laskin, 2007). Kunczik (2003) indicated that the main objective of international public relations is “to establish (or maintain existing) positive images of one’s own nation or to appear trustworthy to other actors in the

world system” (p. 413) through “persuasive communicative acts directed at a foreign audience” (p. 400).

The division between international public relations and public diplomacy has been a consequence of the historical development of these disciplines, not of essential differences in the goals of each one. “While the business side treats the planned establishment of relations with publics of other nations under international public relations (and hence the domain of public relations), the management of communicative relationships of nation-states, countries or societies remains largely in the academic home of international relations (as a part of political science)” (Signitzer & Wamser, 2006, p. 436).

While traditional diplomacy has focused on the relationships established between different national governments (Goldstein, 1994, and Deutsch, 1966, as cited by Signitzer & Wamser, 2006, p. 437), the field of public diplomacy is defined as “a country’s efforts, through official and private individuals and institutions, to communicate with publics in other countries and societies” (Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, 2005). Leonard (2002) and Wang (2006) defined this field, in general terms, as the task of communicating with publics located abroad. And Tuch (1990) described the field of public diplomacy as the “government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies” (p. 3).

The field of public diplomacy has evolved, for several decades now, due to changes in communication technology. Electronic spaces such as websites, and social media spaces such as Facebook and Twitter, have allowed governments to engage in public diplomacy efforts in more direct, efficient ways than in the past, reaching non-government audiences in innovative ways and engaging non-traditional publics such as diaspora communities. Given these changes in communication technologies, this study analyzes the public diplomacy efforts of two nation-states aimed at a non-governmental public located abroad: their diaspora communities in the United States.

State-led transnational efforts aimed at diaspora communities have strengthened in the last decades due to the increasing size of these diaspora communities and to the growing impact of diaspora communities’ remittances on the home countries’ economies (Koslowski, 2005a, 2005b; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Diasporas have increased their financial and political impact at home (Kunz, 2008), and this stronger impact in several areas in the home country has transformed diaspora communities in strategic publics for home country governments (Iskander, 2010; Varadarajan 2010).

Given the technological advancements in communications, and given the stronger impact of diasporas in their home countries, this study analyzes the cases of Costa Rica and El Salvador to understand the public diplomacy efforts led by these Central American governments to connect and communicate with their diaspora

communities. This study looks at the process of getting the government's messages out but also the ways of getting the diaspora messages "in". In that regard, the three research questions that guided this study are the following:

- How are the governments of Costa Rica and El Salvador utilizing new media and social media spaces such as websites, Facebook pages and Twitter handles to connect with their migrants living in the United States?
- Are there differences between these two countries in their use of social media and new media for public diplomacy purposes?
- If differences exist in social media use among these two countries, which seem to be the contextual factors that explain these differences?

Methodology

This research was conducted by building a case study; qualitative methodology in which a case is used to study a phenomenon within its real life context (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake 1995, 2005; VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Yin, 2003).

Costa Rica and El Salvador were selected as the countries to study, following the logic of purposeful sampling. Central America was chosen because, as a region it has been under-researched in the fields of communications and political science and Costa Rica and El Salvador were selected because even though these countries are located in the same region of the world, they present contrasting situations in terms of diaspora composition (ECLAC, 2005; Leitón, 2010, Bulmer-Thomas, 2003; McCoy, 2009).

For instance, while El Salvador has about 2.5 to 3 million people living in the United States (about 25% to 33% of the country's population), Costa Rica has just a few dozen of thousands citizens living in the United States (different estimates place that number between 100,000 and 200,000 persons). Also, the reasons why the citizens of each country leave the home country to migrate to the United States are different.

For example, in El Salvador, armed conflicts and the intense poverty level have expelled millions of citizens from this country (Landolt, Autler & Baires, 2003; White, 2009), while Costa Rica has enjoyed a stable democracy and relatively positive economic indicators for decades (McCoy, 2009).

These two cases are similar in geographical location, but greatly differ in diaspora composition and sociopolitical characteristics, a variance that offers a rich opportunity to explore the importance and context of state-diaspora relations established through social media in each case.

For both cases (Costa Rica and El Salvador), this study analyzed transnational communication and public relations efforts to engage the diaspora using social media. For that reason the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles were followed between May 2011 and May 2012 for both countries.

To understand the reasons why each country uses social media the way they do, other sources of information from each country were consulted between May 2011 and May 2012 to collect data: governmental documents, legislation pieces, national and sector development plans, migration reports, socioeconomic indicators, news releases from the respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs and academic publications.

Finally, sources of data collection included 20 in-depth interviews that were conducted during the summer of 2011 with key informants (high-level government officials, politicians, academicians, and journalists from Costa Rica and El Salvador) to supplement the document analysis. The interviews lasted an average of one hour. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher to proceed with the analysis of themes. The researcher stopped conducting in-depth interviews when the point of saturation was reached, meaning the point where minor variations in the responses of each new interviewee were obtained (Creswell 2007; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Findings

The use of social media for public diplomacy purposes shows particular patterns of usage in Costa Rica compared to El Salvador. This section presents profiles of media use first for Costa Rica, then for El Salvador. The analysis speculates on why these patterns of use differ and what implications these findings may have for other countries.

Social Media Use by Costa Rica

Perhaps because the size of the Costa Rican community in the United States is considered "small" as noted by scholars (Asamblea Legislativa, 2007; Céspedes Torres, 2010; Fuster, 2010; World Bank, 2011b) and acknowledged by officials (Note 2) and because the impact of Costa Rican remittances only account for 2 percent of the country's GDP (Banco Central, 2011), the Costa Rican government has not defined the diaspora as a strategic public of its social media public diplomacy efforts (Ministerio de Planificación, 2010; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2012; High-Level Government Official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs #1, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

The findings indicate that Costa Rica's public diplomacy efforts through social media have relied heavily on informing about the participation of Costa Rican officials in international forums and conferences, disseminating general information about Costa Rica's foreign policy, and using social media (Facebook and Twitter,

mainly) to complement the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website's online newsroom, by posting news releases and news stories about the achievements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its government officials.

For example, one form of communication of the Costa Rican government with the Costa Rican diaspora in the United States is the Embassy of Costa Rica's website, at www.costarica-embassy.org. In this website there is a description of the services offered by the eight Costa Rican consulates in the United States and by the embassy (located in Washington, D.C.). On the site user can also find general information about consular and legal services, such as passport renewals or birth certificate expeditions, but the only distinctive section for Costa Ricans living in the United States (besides the web page describing the different consular services) is a link to an online form that allows the Costa Ricans to register their personal information. The form is available at <http://www.costarica-embassy.org> (Embajada de Costa Rica en Washington DC).

While helpful in terms of providing general information about consular services, there is no special section on the Embassy's website devoted to the diaspora. Noteworthy, although through a search on Facebook one can find Facebook pages for some Costa Rican consulates located in places such as Mexico, Argentina, the Netherlands, and Sao Paulo (Brazil). At the time of writing no Costa Rican consulate in the United States had a Facebook page or a Twitter account.

The Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also has a website (www.rree.go.cr), which is also information rich. On the official MFA site users can find ample information about the ministry's services, the list of embassies and consulates around the world, news releases, institutional memories, the institutional magazine, relevant links to government institutions, photo galleries, information about bilateral relations and multilateral relations of the nation state, and main dispositions of the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (the National Plan of Development) regarding foreign affairs (outdated, as it is the plan of the 2006-2010 term). The official site also has links to the Ministry's Facebook page (at <http://www.facebook.com/RelacionesExteriores>) and Twitter account (at <https://twitter.com/#!/cancilleriacrc>).

Nonetheless, all this is general information about the ministry, its functions and its leaders. There is no section or webpage dedicated to the diaspora (besides the list of consular services), nor a Facebook page or Twitter account targeting specifically the diaspora. In that regard, the website, the Facebook page and the Twitter account are useful informational tools but they have shown, until the time of writing, low potential for relationship building, and for two-way, symmetrical communication, with the diaspora.

One exception was the way in which the Ministry's Facebook page functioned after the Japan earthquake of March 11, 2011. A high level official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the following:

When the earthquake in Japan happened, in about 72 hours we were able to contact, directly, the 300 Costa Ricans who were living in Japan. We contacted 300 out of 300. We were able to know that everyone was all right, thanks to the social networks, the phone and the e-mail. I think social networks will be increasingly important in our communication tactics (High-Level Government Official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs #1, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Nonetheless, so far, both the website and the social media spaces have been utilized basically as one-way communication spaces, not as interactive environments to engage the diaspora. Engagement has happened with other publics, but not with the diaspora as a general rule.

For example, during 2011 for several months, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – including the head of the Ministry himself—posted dozens of comments about several issues and attempted engagement. These postings included topics such as the border issues that Costa Rica was facing with Nicaragua, the lawsuit that Costa Rica was pursuing at the international court of The Hague concerning this dispute, and the steps that Costa Rica was following to protect what the country considered a legal right over the San Juan river (the North borderline of Costa Rica).

In those postings, the Ministry asked users for support, and even asked them to send pictures of the San Juan River and documents about the legal rights the country had on the river, if available. Over months, dozens of Costa Ricans showed their support to the Ministry's cause and a conversation was established between Ministry's officials and some users of the Ministry's Facebook page. Nonetheless, again, the use of social media was limited. The Facebook page was restricted to primarily issues management and to obtain expressions of support from the general audience but not to engage the diaspora as a specific objective of this social medium.

Finally, the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a Flickr page (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/51462798@N03/>); however, it was underutilized and not targeted specially to the diaspora. During 2011, the Ministry posted 16 pictures on this Flickr page. As of May of 2012 it had not posted any additional picture during 2012. And of the 16 pictures of 2011, none received any comments from users. These pictures depicted the head of the Ministry and other government officials in their tours at different parts of the world. There was no content targeted to the diaspora community.

Besides using its own website and its own Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr pages, the Ministry has distributed information in the United States through its consulates by taking advantage of a free information service that Univision Network provides to the different consulates of Latin America in the United States. A Costa Rican high-level consular official in New York explained:

To inform about our mobile consulates, we use a Univision's free service called Univision 41 A Tu Lado (By Your Side). . . Univision has been very useful, because it has radio stations, TV stations and Internet sites, so it distributes our information, and the information from the other Latin American consulates, in those three types of media (Consular Official in New York, personal communication, June 7, 2011).

Costa Rican Academic Diaspora: Ticotal network

The area where Costa Rica has been able to establish a more permanent connection with the diaspora using the Internet is in the academic domain, where there is one relationship-building effort being made to engage the Costa Rican scientists who live abroad: the Ticotal network, at www.ticotal.cr. This is a linkage network between Costa Rican scientists in the home country and in host countries.

The idea to create this network started in 2008 and has been developed since then by the Costa Rican Academy of Sciences (Gabriel Macaya, director of the Costa Rican Academy of Sciences, personal communication, May 12, 2011; Maria Santos, consultant for the Costa Rican Academy of Sciences, personal communication, May 12, 2011). Although it has faced obstacles and challenges, such as a limited budget to grow, the network officially started in October of 2010.

Since then and until May of 2012, it had identified, contacted and successfully registered more than 90 Costa Rican scientists all around the world in the network and developed a website (www.ticotal.cr) where these persons are listed, so that other Costa Rican scientists can network with them and where a discussion forum exists (Ticotal, 2012).

Contrary to networks in other countries that try to attract scientists back to the home country, Ticotal network's purpose is slightly different, as Gabriel Macaya, director of the Costa Rican Academy of Sciences, explained:

The goal is to utilize the Costa Rican talent abroad, out of Costa Rica, or eventually attracting it back, but the purpose is not repatriation itself but to put that talent abroad to work for the development of our country. That is the main idea. In this first stage, the highest-level purpose is to make those Costa Ricans conscious that they can become an asset to the national development (Gabriel Macaya, personal communication, May 12, 2011).

In that regard, the academic community in Costa Rica is not trying to stop the "brain drain," but trying to establish a transnational collaboration between the "Costa Rican brains" at home and abroad.

This objective is clearly present in the Strategic Plan of the Costa Rican Academy of Sciences, but it is not mentioned in the strategic plan of the Executive Power or

in the strategic plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even though the Ticotal program indicates on its website, that it has support both of the Ministry of Science and Technology and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This seems to indicate that, so far reaching the academic diaspora is a priority for the academic sector in Costa Rica, but not a state policy clearly established in the strategic plans of the central government or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Costa Rican Future Social Media Use

Starting in 2014, Costa Ricans living in the United States (U.S. residents or not) will have the legal right to absentee vote in the Costa Rican elections for president. Even though the communication efforts about this new political right had not started at the time of writing, Hugo Picado, director of the Instituto de Formación y Estudios en Democracia (Formation and Studies in Democracy Institute) of Costa Rica's Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (Electoral Supreme Court), said that when the time approaches the Electoral Supreme Court (TSE, Spanish acronym in Spanish) plans to use the Internet and social networks to communicate with Costa Ricans in the United States to inform them about how can they vote in the Costa Rican elections while being in the United States. Picado explained:

All those social media are going to be used, of course, but we will encounter many difficulties to contact the Costa Ricans living abroad, because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a detailed registry of them. At some point after 2012, I will say that there will be concrete actions with the consulates in terms of training the consular officials, in terms of collecting and distributing information among the Costa Rican population living abroad, to motivate them to register and to vote. It is not going to be easy. Or cheap (H. Picado, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Social Media Use by El Salvador

El Salvador uses extensively its Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, as well as different Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, to stay connected with its diaspora community, not just as electronic newsletters but as two-way communication environments.

Both for media relations and for community relations, for example, besides the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (<http://www.rree.gob.sv/>), the Salvadoran embassies and consulates have either a Facebook page, a separate website for each consulate (for instance, www.elsalvador.org, for El Salvador's embassy in the United States, or www.elsalvadorla.org/portal/, for El Salvador's consulate in Los Angeles, California), or both a website and a Facebook page. (Note 3)

El Salvador utilizes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website (<http://www.rree.gob.sv/>) as the central hub of its web-based communications, including social media. This

central website has general information about foreign policy and international relations achievements, but , more than that, it also includes targeted information directed to the diaspora community, especially to engage the millions of Salvadorans who live in the United States (legally, documented and undocumented). The website also offers news releases, videos, podcasts, live broadcasts and a section titled Noticias para Nuestros Ciudadanos (News for Our Citizens).

The MFA official website includes links to connect with the Ministry's Facebook page (at <https://www.facebook.com/ministerio.exteriores.sv>), the Ministry's Twitter account, and the Ministry's YouTube channel. The MFA also includes social media links for three environments that were specifically created to serve the needs of the Salvadorans living abroad, especially in the United States (discussed below).

The Ministry's Facebook page is quite active, posting almost every week (sometimes several times a week), and it includes general news and general announcements, but also posts directed specifically to the diaspora (for instance, instructions for Salvadorans in the United States to renew their TPS- Temporary Protection Status, or announcements to try to locate Salvadorans in the United States with whom their relatives have lost contact). There are also links to the news show Nexos, which is produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Ministry also has a Twitter page, at <https://twitter.com/#!/cancilleriasv>, but this social media tool does not seem to be relevant. In 2011, it only posted six "tweets," and as of May of 2012 there were no "tweets" at all. The Ministry also has a YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/cancilleria1>, with the videos of the news show Nexos, plus videos of press conferences held by the Ministry's officials.

More relevant than the general website, the general Facebook page and the general Twitter account is the fact that the Ministry has a separate website, Facebook page and Twitter handle for Salvadorans abroad. The website is located at www.salvadorenosenel exterior.gob.sv ("salvadoreños en el exterior" means Salvadorans abroad) and its information is completely targeted to the Salvadoran diaspora.

The Facebook page for Salvadorans abroad has existed since June 2011 and can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Salvadoreños-en-el-exterior/127953440620049>. This Facebook page is very active, with posts every month and, more frequently than not, with several posts every week.

The targeted Twitter handle is <https://twitter.com/#!/salexfisd>. For some reason this Twitter handle is not relevant either, and as of mid 2011 had posted only 115 "tweets" and only had eight followers as of May 14, 2012, which is a failure for a Twitter handle that, at the time of writing, had been active for more than a year.

The communications initiated by El Salvador's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both online and offline, are coordinated by the Secretariat of Communications. For media relations all the consulates have at least one person responsible of this task, although not all of these persons are public relations or communication practitioners (Ana del Carmen Valenzuela, general consul of El Salvador in San Francisco, pers. Comm., June 22, 2011).

Even with the different levels of success of El Salvador's social media environments, this country is using these spaces for public diplomacy efforts with the diaspora much more aggressively, and effectively, than Costa Rica. The only case where Costa Rica seems to lead El Salvador in its online communication with citizens abroad is in the case of the academic diaspora, because while Costa Rica has the Ticotral network, the communication of El Salvador with its academic diaspora happens, if at all, through sporadic electronic mails.

To be able to strengthen El Salvador's contact with the professional Salvadorans living abroad, "we need to identify more Salvadoran academics abroad, organize them in a network and establish a fund to pay consultancies" (Doris Salinas, personal communication, May 31, 2011). (Note 4)

Conclusion

As indicated in a previous section, diaspora communities are complex "foreign-based," transnational publics for national governments, but these communities of migrants are publics that home governments are increasingly interested in reaching and engaging, because of the size of the community, the impact of remittances and diaspora investments on the home economy and the increased political participation of these communities in home politics, among other factors.

Technology has allowed national governments to interact more closely with their diaspora communities than in the past, but different levels of sophistication exist in the ways different governments use social media public diplomacy to connect with this increasingly influential public.

Whereas in Costa Rica the social media spaces utilized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been used to communicate the general foreign policy goals of the Costa Rican government and the successes the country has had at international forums and at international non-government organizations (INGOs), El Salvador has used those spaces not only to publicize its foreign policy and its achievements in international relations but also to connect with and engage its migrants living in the United States.

El Salvador has realized that its diaspora community is a strategic public for its public diplomacy effort and has launched, especially in the last 10 to 15 years, different efforts to keep the migrants' identities connected to the home country and

the money from remittances flowing to El Salvador. Communication efforts are key in maintaining that diasporic identity and that financial support, and El Salvador has placed efforts, online and offline, to maintain those connections. Online, this country has been especially aggressive through the governments' websites (the Ministry's website and the government-run Salvadorans Abroad website), and through dedicated Facebook pages to communicate with the diaspora.

Costa Rica on the other hand, has used its governments' websites and Facebook pages to disseminate general policies about foreign policy, to publicize diplomatic achievements, and to inform about actions taken in the realm of international relations. In that regard, social media, which are formed by two-way communication, is being used in traditional ways: as one-way communication tools to provide information. The diaspora has not been designated as a strategic public of its public diplomacy efforts, to the point that neither the National Strategic Plan of the central government nor the sectorial strategic plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mention the diaspora members at all in these documents.

In part, there is the perception that the diaspora community is small and weak, as it is estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000 persons living in the United States. Nonetheless Costa Rica maybe underestimating the force that the diaspora community could have if this population in the United States organized itself and decided to support a specific political party at home. This support could change the outcome of the Costa Rican national elections (for example, in the national elections of 2006, winner candidate Oscar Arias became President with only 20,000 votes difference above the runner-up Otton Solis) (Rojas Bolaños, n.d.). This is an important aspect to consider, especially given that starting in 2014, Costa Ricans in the United States will have the right to absentee vote.

Central American governments are using social media to fulfill public diplomacy goals, however the sophistication and intensity of the social media use varies in degree and quality, at least in the two cases analyzed in this study. Costa Rica is using social media mainly as electronic newsletters, as one-way communication outlets, while El Salvador is using social media to foster dialogue with the migrants and to build long-term relationships with this public. There is much room for improvement in both cases, especially in terms of promoting dialogue and two-way communication between the home government and the diaspora community, but El Salvador is ahead than Costa Rica in the road to social media engagement with diaspora communities located in the United States.

Given the political instability that El Salvador has faced for years, especially after the bloody civil war of the 1970s, and given the transitional character of its current democratic system, it is possible to speculate that the stronger connection that El Salvador has established with its diaspora community using social media responds to the need to build strong alliances with its citizens, both in its territory and abroad.

Costa Rica on the other hand, with a stable democracy since 1948 and the best economic indicators of the region, seems to have less of a need to establish alliances or look for legitimacy outside its borders. El Salvador apparently, has a more urgent need to “win the hearts and minds” of its far-away brothers and sisters than Costa Rica does and both the central government and the different political parties in El Salvador have made the diaspora a priority public in their public diplomacy efforts. Costa Rica has mainly ignored the needs of its citizens abroad, except for the provision of basic consular services and of some political rights, such as the absentee vote, which was granted not as a conscious effort to recognize the contributions of the diaspora community to the home country, but as a specific effort of an electoral supreme court interested in keeping up with international trends.

Notes

1. Estimates offered by Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de El Salvador, 2011; Tirso Sermeño, general consul of El Salvador in Las Vegas, personal communication, June 13; Ricardo Valencia, political counselor at El Salvador Embassy in Washington D.C., personal communication, June 28, 2011).

2. High-Level Costa Rican Government Official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs #1, pers. comm., May 11, 2011; Consular Official in New York, personal communication, June 7, 2011.

3. Tirso Sermeño, general consul of El Salvador in Las Vegas, personal communication, June 13, 2011; José Joaquín Chacón, general consul of El Salvador in Tucson, Arizona, personal communication, June 14, 2011; Ana del Carmen Valenzuela, general consul of El Salvador in San Francisco, personal communication, June 22, 2011.

4. Doris Salinas, coordinator of the Centro de Información Tecnológica -- Center of Technology Information, CIT Spanish acronym-- at the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología in El Salvador --National Council of Science and Technology, CONACYT Spanish acronym--, personal communication, May 31, 2011.

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