

Political scientist analyzes the UN's Twitter feed to improve diplomatic relations

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Through research by a political scientist at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), there is potential to see diplomacy between nations improve through the use of Twitter.

UTSA researcher, Matthias Hofferberth, is exploring how the United Nations (UN) uses Twitter as a diplomacy tool, an approach that has been discussed as Twiplomacy.

"I contend that this ensuing Twiplomacy, if committed to the dissemination and exchange of reason and arguments, holds the potential to improve global public deliberation and contribute to a more legitimate form of global governance by the United Nations," said Hofferberth.

The UN was founded in 1945 and is currently made up of 193 Member States. The international organization provides a forum for governments to find areas of agreement on common issues such as security, climate change, human rights, sustainable development, terrorism and health emergencies to solve problems together.

The associate professor, with undergraduate and graduate research assistance from Julia Juarez, Javier Roman, Ben Shirani, Sarah-Madeleine Torres and Veronica Vazquez, embarked on this [research project](#) to understand how the UN uses social media. The organization joined Twitter in March of 2008 and currently has 11 million followers.

Hofferberth presented his paper, "Tweeting to Save Succeeding Generations from the Scourge of War? The UN, Twitter & Communicative Action," at the International Organizations and Digital Diplomacy Workshop at Dalhousie University this Spring.

The paper describes how Hofferberth determined key agencies and individuals within the UN Twittersphere (who is tweeting) and collected tweets during the opening weeks of the 73rd UN Session last year that began on September 18 and ended on October 5, 2018.

The UN main account, UN institutional handles, and those of UN state and non-state actors were analyzed. He also looked at the purpose of the tweets, content of the tweets, who the tweets were directed to, and how the UN was represented in the tweets.

The tweets were collected through an [application programming interface](#) (API). The API allowed Hofferberth to collect and look at tweets in real-time, even if they were deleted by the respective user at a later point in time.

When Hofferberth looked at the purpose of the tweets, he found that tweets from individuals and institutions tied to the UN were strongly self-referential: They introduced the UN, its structure and proceedings instead of engaging the global audience in substantial debate on peace and security, climate change, underdevelopment, disease control, or any other issues the UN is involved in.

He then coded the tweets to decipher whether their implicit focus was on security, economy, human rights, or environment and health. More specific themes were also coded such as war, terrorism, security, world trade, education, and culture and they were coded based on whether the content represented a call for action, a discussion statement, or information dissemination. Overall, the quality of engagement through Twiplomacy, he concludes, remains limited.

"The UN's potential on social media and particularly, Twitter, is not fully explored as information remains generic and communication streamlined. Instead of engaging the audience, the UN is talking down at

the audience. Given the unique nature and accountability of this organization, this is at least counterproductive if not dangerous," said Hofferberth.

Hofferberth said he hopes his paper will help the UN's communication strategy.

"I've met the social media team leader of the UN as well as a few different representatives from UN member states. Both were excited to learn about such research and we hope there is potential to follow up to improve practices of communication based on rigorous research," Hofferberth explained.

Hofferberth has studied the UN for years and believes it is a fascinating organization because nation states come together to discuss global issues and uphold the vision of global union.

"In a basic sense of global democracy, international organizations owe it to their stakeholders to explain what they are doing," he said. "I hope the paper contributes to an empowering of the audience to listen more carefully and challenge the UN's [social media](#) message."

Hofferberth's research expertise is in global governance and world politics. This year, he received the President's Distinguished Achievement Award for Advancing Globalization and serves as faculty advisor for the Model United Nations Society at UTSA and for Sigma Iota Rho.

More information: Tweeting to Save Succeeding Generations from the Scourge of War? The UN, Twitter and Communicative Action: colfa.utsa.edu/polisci-geograp...r_Workshop_Paper.pdf

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

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