COVID-19 and national images: the case of #ResignModi

Muhammad Ittefaq¹ · Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh²

Revised: 11 October 2021 / Accepted: 4 December 2021 / Published online: 13 January 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2021

Abstract

Prior research suggests that a country's national image is dependent on how effectively it keeps informed key stakeholders, and counter misinformation and disinformation being transmitted to both diaspora and foreign audiences during a pandemic. In the light of this argument, this forum article critically analyzed the Indian government's efforts to manage COVID-19 information crisis on social media during the second surge of the pandemic. Consequently, we suggest that despite restricting #ResignModi on social media and eventually curtailing the free flow of information to portray its competent management of the pandemic, such efforts seem to be counterproductive.

Keywords Information crisis · Listening · National image · Pandemic diplomacy · #ResignModi

Background and context

Several studies suggest that a country's national image is affected by how well it handles crisis situations, such as pandemics (Lee and Kim 2020). One of the major challenges faced by many countries is how to keep their stakeholders (both diaspora and foreign) abreast of accurate and trustworthy information during pandemics (Vériter et al. 2020). An additional challenge is countering pandemic related misinformation and disinformation being transmitted to global audiences. In this forum article, we critically analyzed the Indian government's efforts to manage COVID-19 information. We argue that the Indian government tried to limit the free flow of information in order to portray competent management of the pandemic. However, rather than protecting the country's image, we contend that such efforts ultimately backfire.

In public diplomacy, audience plays a central role, and may be divided into two categories- foreign audiences and diasporas. The former may be engaged by a sovereign state through various means including news media and digital platforms (Golan et al. 2019)—for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals. Diasporas are important because they are part of a country's extended family; people who care about, feel connected to, and sometimes still belong to a country they do not live in (Rana 2014). In this forum article, we discuss a special incident from India's digital landscape with respect to a governmental action during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on India's national image among its overseas audiences. Generally, India has a positive image among international audiences, and it has invested significant resources in improving its image abroad (Hall 2012).

Pandemic public diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic has metaphorically been considered a 'common enemy' to humanity because it has uniformly disrupted every aspect of human life across the globe. In these uncertain times, public diplomacy has entered a new era where borders are closed, lockdowns are imposed, and international mobility has been curtailed in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus. As the world is struggling to return to pre-pandemic normalcy, some countries view COVID-19 as a "strategic opportunity to elevate their nation

✉ Muhammad Ittefaq
muhammadiitefaq@ku.edu

Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh
shafiq.ics@pu.edu.pk

¹ William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, Stauffer-Flint Hall, 1435 Jayhawk Boulevard, Lawrence, KS 66045-7515, USA

² Centre for Media, Communication, and Information Research (ZeMKI), Universität Bremen, Linzer Str. 4, 28359 Bremen, Germany

brand in the eyes of the world” (Lee and Kim 2020, p. 1). Unlike other pandemics, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the 2009 H1N1 flu virus, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012, COVID-19 is a far more deadly and highly infectious disease. Therefore, countries that have effectively responded to this health crisis are admired globally, helping them improve their image among diaspora and foreign audiences (Lee and Kim 2020; Snyder and Sindjukov 2020). For instance, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea and Taiwan were successful in building their reputations by mitigating the impact of the coronavirus through a series of public health measures. Conversely, several nations were criticized due to their poor handling of the crisis. India and Brazil are two relevant examples. Indian efforts to contain the spread of the virus have widely been criticized in terms of the country’s poor public health management among other things (Singh and Mozur 2021). Consequently, India’s national image been challenged among international audience including the globally dispersed Indian diaspora.

#ResignModi

During March and April 2021, a large number of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram users used the hashtag #ResignModi demanding the resignation of India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi following his attempts to under-report the spiraling coronavirus crisis in India (Roy 2021). Eventually, the Indian government put pressure on social media companies to block or remove the hashtag from their sites. The hashtag #ResignModi was blocked on Facebook for several hours, but Facebook denied that they had followed the government’s directive and instead termed it ‘an inadvertent error’. However, the Indian shutdown the internet over 100 times during 2020, revealing it to be a governance tactic (Ryan-Mosley 2021). Other reports claimed that local employees of Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp had been threatened with arrest (Horwitz 2021). This untoward situation highlights the fact that social media companies have emerged as important actors in modern public diplomacy practices.

It is important to note that people’s use of social media as a source of news about the pandemic had significantly increased amid lockdowns and social isolation. During the catastrophic second wave of COVID-19, Indians widely criticized the Modi government for its lack of preparedness as people were struggled to find hospital beds, ventilators, oxygen cylinders, and lifesaving medicine (Sankaran 2021). Social media was an important platform for the Indian diaspora to learn about the situation in their home regions and discuss political perspectives on the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. A

temporary blocking of that debate simultaneously represents a reduction of the extended public sphere that binds a country to its diaspora.

Listening on social media and public diplomacy

We argue that the Indian government should have used these platforms as tools for listening and receiving public feedback which could help design effective communication strategies for reducing feelings of panic and anxiety, which the second wave of COVID-19 had caused in many parts of India and abroad. Listening is an important element in public diplomacy practices (Cull 2010). Social media has facilitated this process by enabling the monitoring of public sentiment on any issue of social importance, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that many governments have neglected this critical component of dialogic engagement—listening—in public diplomacy. According to Di Martino (2020), “the desirable and feasible type of listeningis active listening, precisely because it requires the active participation of both diplomatic and non-diplomatic actors” (p. 8). By not taking the opportunity to listen, arguably the Indian government contributed to fear and anxiety among social media users during a time when trustworthy information was most valuable.

Internal criticism and poor international image management

Many scholars suggest that the “image of a nation is crucial in the conduct of international relations” (Hartig 2016, p. 655). National image consists of a person’s knowledge about a country, which is “based on the learning, personal experiences, booklore and knowledge from the media, and societal relations of this person” (Hu 2011, p.22). Managing national image locally and globally is important because it translates into the success or failure of public diplomacy efforts of a country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have propagated their international legitimacy through several means, such as discovering vaccines, controlling the spread of the virus, and efficient management in administering vaccines. For others, such as India, efforts to portray a positive national image to global audiences came at the price of temporarily restricting open debate. The tactic of restricting access to social media during moments of political unrest is one that threatens the image of the world’s largest democracy, particularly among the diaspora who remain plugged in to India’s public sphere.

References

- Cull, N.J. 2010. Public diplomacy: Seven lessons for its future from its past. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6 (1): 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.4>.
- Di Martino, L. 2020. Conceptualising public diplomacy listening on social media. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 16 (2): 131–142. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00135-5>.
- Golan, G.J., I. Manor, and P. Arceneaux. 2019. Mediated public diplomacy redefined: Foreign stakeholder engagement via paid, earned, shared, and owned media. *American Behavioral Scientist* 63 (12): 1665–1683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219835279>.
- Hall, I. 2012. India's new public diplomacy. *Asian Survey* 52 (6): 1089–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.6.1089>.
- Hartig, F. 2016. How China understands public diplomacy: The importance of national image for national interests. *International Studies Review*, 18 (4): 655–680. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw007>.
- Horwitz, J. 2021. Facebook Blocks, Then Restores, Content Calling on Indian Prime Minister Modi to Resign. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-blocks-then-restores-content-calling-on-indian-prime-minister-modi-to-resign-11619652354?mod=e2tw>. Accessed 4 Aug 2021.
- Hu, X. 2011. *Guojia xingxiang [Nation Image]*. Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe.
- Lee, S.T., and H.S. Kim. 2020. Nation branding in the COVID-19 era: South Korea's pandemic public diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00189-w>.
- Rana, K.S. 2014. Diaspora diplomacy and public diplomacy. In *Relational, Networked, and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy*, 84–99. Routledge.
- Roy, A. 2021. #ResignModi: All you need to know about the social media row. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/resignmodi-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-social-media-row-101619689288718.html>. Accessed 4 Aug 2020.
- Ryan-Mosley, T. 2021. Why you should be more concerned about internet shutdowns. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/09/09/1035237/internet-shutdowns-censorship-exponential-jigsaw-google/>. Accessed 12 Sept 2021.
- Sankaran, V. 2021. India Coronavirus: Facebook Temporarily Blocks Hashtag Calling on PM Modi to Resign. *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/facebook-india-modi-hashtag-resign-b1839382.html>. Accessed 7 Aug 2021.
- Singh, K.D., and P. Mozur. 2021. As Outbreak Rages, India Orders Critical Social Media Posts to Be Taken Down. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/25/business/india-covid-19-twitter-facebook.html>. Accessed 15 Sept 2021.
- Snyder, A., and M. Sindukov. 2020. How COVID-19 is changing the soft power game. *Diplomatic Courier*. *The Diplomatic Courier*. <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/how-covid-19-is-changing-the-soft-power-game>. Accessed 10 Oct 2021.
- Vériter, S.L., C. Bjola, and J.A. Koops. 2020. Tackling COVID-19 disinformation: Internal and external challenges for the European Union. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15 (4): 569–582. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-BJA10046>.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Muhammad Ittefaq is a Ph.D. candidate in the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. His research focuses on health communication, misinformation, social media, racial minorities, digital journalism, and Global South. His work has published in various journals including *International Journal of Communication*, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Media International Australia*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Vaccine*, *Psychology & Health*, and *Health, Risk & Society*.

Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh is a Ph.D. candidate in the Centre for Media, Communication, and Information Research (ZeMKI) at the University of Bremen Germany. His research focuses on development communication, environmental communication, environmental justice, and Global South. His work has been published in *Journal of Media Ethics*, *Development Policy Review*, *Psychology & Health*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *American Journal of Health Education*.