EXPLOITING THE POTENTIAL OF THE WEB-BASED ENVIRONMENT FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES: THE CASE OF U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Giuliana Garzone

In recent times, Web-mediated communication has qualified as a powerful strategic resource in foreign policy, being central to any effort aimed at reaching foreign audiences pervasively, also in areas of the world which – for various reasons – are otherwise difficult to access for Western actors. In the last few years it has played a particularly important role in US public diplomacy, a crucial area of US foreign policy consisting in “government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries” (U.S. Department of State, Dictionary of International Relations Terms, 1987, p. 85) and addressing primarily non-governmental individuals and organizations abroad rather than governments. Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, public diplomacy has been part of an increasing effort to promote the image of the United States with foreign audiences, also in those areas of the world where the war on terrorism and the US engagement in the Middle East have resulted in a surging wave of anti-Americanism.

This paper will look at the use of web-mediated multimodal resources in contemporary US public diplomacy, on the basis of the analysis of a website, America.gov, produced and maintained by the Department of State, which represents the main effort so far by the US government to use web-based resources in this area of activity.

After discussing the scope and relevance of public diplomacy as an instrument in foreign policy, the analysis will look at the discursive practices deployed on the America.gov website, analysing not only the linguistic strategies enacted, but also their role within the semiotic organization of the website, evaluating the effectiveness of communication effected through the WWW in terms of successful exploitation of multimedia and multimodal affordances.

The main questions the analysis will seek to answer concern the strategies enacted to exploit web-mediated communication and its affordances for political purposes, and the functional effectiveness of the layout and the semiotic organization of the Website. Last but not least, the role of language in the wider picture of multimodal web-mediated communication will be explored, looking in particular at the effectiveness of discursive practices in an intercultural perspective. An element that will be given attention in connection with all these different aspects is the process of change that the website has undergone in recent times under the direction of President Obama’s new Administration.

The basic methodological framework of this study is in the area of critical discourse analysis, which provides instruments to identify and highlight the discursive – and often ideological – relevance of linguistic choices at all levels, including the microstructural one. The exploration of the use of hypermedia web-mediated resources will mainly rely on principles put forth in recent
studies applying discourse analysis to multimodality, usually grouped under the denomination “multimodal analysis” (Kress – van Leeuwen 2001, 1996/2006; Iedema 2003; O’Halloran 2004; LeVine – Scollon 2004; Garzone 2007). Some useful tools will also be drawn from the sociological and political literature on public diplomacy (Leonard 2004; Blankey 2008; Gilboa 2008), and on place/nation branding (Anholt / Hildreth 2004; van Ham 2008).

References


