

The Citizen Diplomats and Their Pathway to Diplomatic Power



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1 Introduction

In addressing the new realities of the twenty-first century diplomacy, Stanzel (2018, pp. 62–64) considers four defining dimensions for the shifts in the focus of diplomatic activity: (1) The multiplication of public spheres through social fragmentation, differentiation, and pluralisation (intra- and inter-societally), (2) The dramatic effects of digitisation and the transformation of digital techniques into instruments of diplomacy, (3) The increase in the number of (non-state) actors, either profit- or ideology-oriented, acting in an international context and impacting foreign policy and diplomacy directly, and (4) The critical importance of the personality and profile of future diplomats to the practice of diplomacy as they will “need to represent the fragmentation of their societies, cope socially and linguistically with changing demands, and meet the need for a different approach to publics and to digitization”. While these transformations are worrisome for State diplomacy, they describe the perfect context in which civil society, through individuals, movements, networks and organisations, can engage in diplomatic activity, defining its own public diplomacy as civil society diplomacy.

This chapter uses Yin’s multiple case study designs (2018), Cooper’s criteria for contemporary citizen diplomacy (2007, p. 126)—a sense of purpose, an ability to interact with high-level state officials and a global reach, and Sharp’s taxonomy of citizen diplomats (2001) to select five case studies: George Clooney—a

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“go-between” citizen diplomat, Ashton Kutcher—a representative for sectoral, regional, or local economic interest, Malala Yousafzai—lobbyist or advocate for a particular cause, Greta Thunberg—a subverter or transformer of existing policies and/or political arrangements, domestic and/or international, Bill Gates—an autonomous agent in international relations. We then use Nye’s model of conversion of soft power (2011) to analyse how these citizen diplomats transform their symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) into diplomatic power and whether or not this process has any policy outcomes. In this analysis, we also employ an adapted source-credibility model and discuss the spill of promotional culture into citizen diplomacy. The results and discussion focus on two major takeaways: the symbolic access to diplomatic power and the hybrid and multilevel nature of the citizen diplomat. The Conclusions address the use of symbolic capital in the soft power conversion process, as well as further research directions.

2 Theoretical Framework and Concept Discussion

2.1 *The Vienna Convention Diplomat and the Citizen Diplomat*

A nuanced understanding of the roles and functions of citizen diplomats can be achieved by direct comparison with institutional diplomats. Fulda (2019, p. 199) makes such a comparison by focusing on Preferred mode of operation, Core interest, Qualification, Admission, Remit, Legal status, and Overseas engagement, describing citizen diplomats as operating on a people to people level (sometimes supported by transnational NGOs), pursuing public good, managing their own vision, mission, and values; in addition, according to Fulda, they are generalists or specialists with language competency, they need to be invited, demanded, appreciated or at least tolerated, are self-organised and develop a short- or long-term engagement with the partner country. Fulda’s portrayal is nuanced, but limits the citizen diplomat to be if not an ambassador of a State, at least its promoter, informally working to advance a political, cultural, or economic agenda. In addition, it focuses on a cultural understanding of the citizen diplomat, on personal relationships, not on power or policy impact—it does not see the citizen as a comparable match for the institutional, traditional diplomat, but rather as an autonomous individual caught in the soft power web of the State. In this chapter, we enlarge the definition of the citizen diplomat in order to advance beyond it being merely a satellite of the State and acting in a state-centric diplomatic paradigm, therefore also seeing its potential to be a civil society diplomatic agent (Anton, 2021).

Citizen diplomats are the expression of “the public’s desire to participate in national and international decision-making” (Stanzel, 2018, p. 62). However, the multitude of national interests in traditional diplomacy is mirrored in the case of civil society diplomacy through the diversity of issues emerging from the fragmented