Chapter 7
The Civil Internet Diplomacy and China’s Countermeasures

Shumin Su
Beijing Foreign Studies Universities, China

Mark Xu
University of Portsmouth, UK

ABSTRACT

The Internet Civil Diplomacy is a major revolution and an emerging trend witnessed in the information age. It poses a significant impact on foreign affairs and official diplomacy due to its unique characteristics—freedom, equality, individuality, real-time, low-cost, and convenience. This chapter reviews the development of Internet-based civil diplomacy and the practice of China’s Internet-based civil diplomacy, which has been greatly developed in recent years in multiple forms—e.g. Web forums, website signatures, event-driven purpose-build foreign affairs sites. Two types of impact of the civil Internet diplomacy—expansion effect and resonance effect—have been examined in the Chinese context through cases, events, and examples. The chapter also identifies challenges and proposes solutions for future development of the civil Internet diplomacy in China.

INTRODUCTION

Standard diplomacy often refers to the ways in which government leaders communicate with each other at the highest levels. Public diplomacy, by contrast focuses on the ways in which a country (or multi-lateral organization such as the United Nations) communicates with citizens in other societies (public diplomacy). Cyber Diplomacy or Internet Diplomacy is an emerging media-based diplomacy. It refers to a variety of activities related to foreign exchanges, external propaganda, and diplomatic participations that are carried out using a variety of electronic network technology and network platforms. These electronic networks mainly comprise of the Internet, telecommunications network, and radio networks, which are known as “the triple networks.” The Internet Diplomacy has
emerged along the trend of Internet application in both commercial and non-commercial sectors—e.g. e-business, e-government, e-learning, etc.

According to The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the total numbers of Internet users worldwide were over 20 billion by 2010, nearly 1/3 of total world population 66.8 billion. The emergence of such a large-scale users is not only challenging the many organizations and countries within the existing power structure but also leading to revolutionary changes in the diplomatic field, bringing an unprecedented impact on the traditional diplomatic forms. The civil Internet Diplomacy is a great revolution of the information age in the field of foreign affairs. In traditional societies, due to the physical boundaries and restrictions on transportation and communication technology, foreign affairs were limited to diplomatic envoys diplomacy, the league form diplomacy or professional diplomacy, therefore the vast majority of the public between countries could not communicate with each other directly.

This chapter aims to reveal the characteristics of civil Internet diplomacy and use China as a case, to examine the development of civil Internet diplomacy and the challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Types and Characteristics of Civil Internet Diplomacy

The Internet diplomacy can be divided broadly into two categories: the official Internet diplomacy and the civil Internet diplomacy. The official one has two levels of implications with one referring to the Government Internet Diplomacy, e.g. the Foreign Affairs Departments to perform official diplomatic tasks directly by using the networks, the other one refers to the Public Internet Diplomacy, this includes all actors - the media, the professional networking diplomats and the Internet users who are interested in the international affairs. These actors are usually pro-government, or got support from the government and perform online diplomatic activities in line with government guidelines. The target groups are foreign citizens that have access to the Internet.

The Civil Internet Diplomacy refers to unofficial diplomatic activities that have political effectiveness and influence. The activities are usually performed by non-government organizations or individual citizens. The main difference between the official Internet Diplomacy and the civil one is that the actors of the official diplomacy are pro-government or directly controlled by government, whereas the actors of the civil Internet diplomacy are non-governmental organizations or individuals with considerable autonomy and spontaneity. In addition, the objects of the civil Internet diplomacy are either foreign citizens or foreign governments, whereas the objects of official Internet diplomacy are only the foreign citizens. The civil Internet diplomacy exhibits the following distinctive characteristics:

The first is freedom. Individuals can directly express their political views by themselves on the Internet. People of any color, race, and geographic region can exchange in-depth views over the Internet conveniently, which could change people’s view and value related to certain events/issues. The former U.S Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested that “As the information is no longer fully controlled by the governments, this technological progress is a tremendous victory for freedom around the world” (http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/topic/yilangtwitter/200906/0622_7021_1214175.shtml).

The second is Equality. On the Internet, there is virtual equality between people and the effectiveness of information released by people. Bill Gates considered that one of the advantages of the information highway is the “virtual equality” which is easier to achieve than in the real world (www.cddc.vt.edu/tim/tims/Tim687.htm).
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