How to Be a Digital Humanist in International Relations: Cultural Tech Diplomacy Challenges Silicon Valley

Clara Blume and Martin Rauchbauer

Abstract Digital humanism is often seen as an antidote to the excesses of Silicon Valley and its underlying cultural values. It is however very short-sighted to label big tech exclusively as a threat to our humanistic values, since it has proven to be an essential ally, particularly in the context of the ongoing digital transformation of the international system and its negative impact on human rights and privacy. The emerging field of cultural tech diplomacy has established a new meeting point in the center of global innovation between diplomats, policy makers, artists, and technologists in order to positively shape the future of technology according to our needs and our full potential as human beings. A new digital humanism empowered by artists can serve as a compass for diplomats and technologists alike to serve their citizens and customers while navigating a world radically transformed by artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

Technology¹ has become the most pressing question of our time. Who creates it, who controls it, who has access to it, and who doesn't are the new parameters that determine emerging power structures around the world. Until recently, most of these decisions were taken unilaterally by a handful of tech entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, and supported through the laws of a free and unregulated market, the obscure inner workings of which regulators around the world neither understood nor wanted to inhibit. Built upon this nurturing humus, Silicon Valley has experienced a long period of economic boom fueled by advances in technology. Globally admired for its ability to attract a seemingly limitless influx of human talent and venture capital, the region has become a symbol for youthful utopian optimism and

¹“Technology” in this article refers to frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, blockchain, biotechnology, and a.o. that are considered main drivers of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and have created a diverse ecosystem of technology companies. Information technology (IT) companies are a subset of these tech companies.

C. Blume · M. Rauchbauer (✉)
Open Austria, San Francisco, CA, USA
e-mail: clara@open-austria.com; martin@open-austria.com

techno-utilitarianism. It has also created a powerful culture that believes in the necessity to disrupt existing and to create new markets, in up-scaling for exponential growth, as well as in the idea that technology can solve any problem in the world without the need of government intervention (O'Mara 2020, pp. 30–32). In many ways, Silicon Valley has become a pop-cultural phenomenon, galvanizing the dreams and aspirations of an entire generation.

However, the euphoria and exuberance of Silicon Valley's tech boom has recently shifted. Across the political and ideological spectrum, big tech companies such as Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon are increasingly viewed with suspicion for their unprecedented influence and size that in many markets amounted to monopoly power. The sum of many troubling incidents constituted the swelling tide that led to a global decline in Silicon Valley's popularity as well as a growing call for governmental intervention and the return of the nation-state. 2018 was a watershed moment for the tech industry, which eroded the industry's self-confidence. It was in that year that Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg first had to testify in front of US Congress and explain to seemingly ill-prepared lawmakers why the company was selling its users personal data and followed a business model that relied on targeted advertising. In the European Union, the admiration for Silicon Valley around the same time gave way to a desire to reign in big tech, particularly in conjunction with its impact on basic rights and privacy. In May of 2018, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) entered into force, a comprehensive legislation that provided European citizens and tech companies with clear guidelines for the protection of their online privacy rights. At around the same time, the world was realizing how social media platforms could have a role in aiding genocide, when the military in Myanmar used Facebook to launch a ruthless misinformation campaign that targeted the country's Rohingya Muslim minority group. Technology had lost its innocence. And governments, particularly in Europe, felt emboldened. The end of the era of self-regulation gave way to a new form of dialogue between tech companies and nation-states, based on a new humility and the possibility of mutual respect and understanding.

But the current crisis around technology has also laid bare how unequipped most regulators, politicians, policy makers, and diplomats are to engage in a conversation with the tech industry on equal footing. In international affairs, even the most digitally literate diplomats and government officials find themselves often ill-suited to navigate all aspects of digitalization and its effects on citizens. New technologies have impacted our world in a much more profound and permanent way than foreign policy institutions often seem to be aware of. Traditional fields of diplomacy such as geopolitics, security policy, international law, multilateralism, human rights, development cooperation, consular affairs, as well as cultural diplomacy could benefit from some of the innovative spirit that laid the groundwork for Silicon Valley's success story in order to keep up with the increasing pace of emerging technologies. If they don't adapt, new forms of cyber warfare and advances in artificial intelligence will increasingly create unprecedented vulnerabilities for entire countries and the international system as a whole.

Communication is key. But it often seems as if technologists and policy makers don't share the same language. Language is coined by cultural context, professional backgrounds, education, mindset, and the complex assembly of layers that constitute each human being shaping our understanding of the world around us. So when a Silicon Valley technologist uses terminology such as "technology," "truth," "freedom," or "humanity," they don't necessarily attribute the same meaning to that same word uttered by a European policy maker. But these nuanced distinctions and conveyed subtexts are crucial and need clarification in order for policy makers to work on the human project in the years to come. We're in dire need to develop a new vocabulary that works as a universal language equipped to address the question of what it means to be human in the digital age. But the main reason for the linguistic and cognitive dissonance between Silicon Valley and the rest of the world is often rooted in its contrasting vision for the future of humankind.

Silicon Valley's tech pioneers today are often unaware of the long-standing roots of their famed mindset. Some characteristics go way back to the frenzy of the historic gold rush, aligned with the American dream of global exceptionalism and the urge to push the Western frontier. The dogma of absolute freedom of information and the aversion against any central authority preached by many internet pioneers can be traced back to the San Francisco-born hippie counterculture of the 1960s. But the tech industry has been shaped similarly by a strong belief in self-reliant entrepreneurship (Markoff 2005). Together with stunning technological and scientific breakthroughs, these diverse attitudes merged into the unique Silicon Valley ideology of transhumanism, inspired by tech evangelists like Raymond Kurzweil (2005) and Hans Peter Moravec (1998). For a transhumanist, death and old age are seen as mere limitations that can be cured through biotechnology and robotics. There are no limits to the human project, when genetic engineering paves the way for self-optimization of one's "flawed" DNA. Even our dying planet can be seen as merely another station along humanity's voyage through the universe. For some of Silicon Valley's elites, to "go west" can mean, quite literally, to reach for the stars. The leading tech pioneers like Elon Musk, Sam Altman, and Jeff Bezos are therefore spearheading a new elite that wants to break this final frontier, but only for a selected few with the financial means to embark on the journey. The mythology of the transhumanists is influencing how technology is being shaped for the rest of humankind. But what is needed now more than ever is a common vision for a digital humanity that is not exclusively determined by a handful of individuals with a ticket to Mars. And while this is attached to a new host of problems, humanity's best way forward is to forge an alliance with tech companies that align around a certain set of humanistic values.

The concept of digital humanism can be seen as a necessary evolution of Silicon Valley's transhumanist vision for humanity: a marriage of transhumanists' excitement about the immense potential of technology and a new humanism that aims to restore our dignity online and offline. A digital humanist understands technology as a tool that can be used for both good and bad, realistic about its potential to elevate us and cause harm though a host of unintended consequences (Nida-Rümelin and Weidenfeld 2018). Equipped with a certain pragmatism that is tilting neither toward delusional techno-utopianism nor fatalistic fear-mongering, tech policy making and

international relations based on a new digital humanism want to create and advocate for global frameworks for technology that preserve our universal human rights.

International diplomacy is practiced through its own language code. In multilateral fora such as the United Nations, where new ethical principles, norms, standards, and even instruments of international law are negotiated, different nations rely on different words to camouflage their underlying agenda and sometimes to embellish reality. Authoritarian states, for instance, rely heavily on the words sovereignty (Applebaum 2020) and non-interference to push back when pressed on recent online human rights violations. It's through these dog whistles that human rights are increasingly under attack, not only in practice but also conceptually. We are also facing an increasingly polarized and fragmented world in danger of creating parallel ideological universes, conceptual frameworks, and a separate digital infrastructure for new technologies (Lee 2018). Against this emerging geopolitical divide, diplomats often struggle to address common concerns that are based on our shared humanity. Digital humanism lends itself to become a universally accepted concept for international diplomacy that can rally countries with different political systems, cultures, and histories around a certain set of values without compromising on universally recognized human rights. As a tech policy compass, it could guide nation-states and tech companies to work together on the digital transformation of our international system. Digital humanism could be the safe space where even ideological adversaries and competitors could find common ground. It is in everyone's interest to develop technologies that are trusted by consumers around the world. Even digital authoritarian countries, which engage in an arms race for global influence and power, have no interest in creating rogue autonomous weapons systems that they themselves may one day lose control over. Tech companies are also in dire need for a compass that values culture over strategy as a necessary environment for innovation and growth. Digital humanism could very well provide the tool kit for a new corporate culture of big and small tech companies and provide orientation in times of global tectonic shifts.

Digital humanism can also serve as a blueprint for nation-states that want to engage with the global tech industry. Since some big players in technology boast annual revenues that easily match the GDP of smaller nation-states, diplomacy needs to rethink what it means to be an international actor in the digital age. One such innovative approach in international relations is the emerging field of tech diplomacy, applied by an increasing number of nation-states and other actors in Silicon Valley. The Danish initiative of "techplomacy" was a milestone for international diplomacy and received global attention. In 2020, Austria followed suit as the second country in the world to appoint a Tech Ambassador to Silicon Valley. To mediate between governments and big tech, tech diplomacy addresses an imbalance in information and competence. Traditionally, tech companies have lobbied for their interests in political centers of influence. Today, governments are sending diplomats to lobby for the interests of their citizens to the technological centers of influence. Of course, tech diplomacy is reciprocal and therefore also attractive for tech companies. They can see their prestige and influence on the international system formerly recognized by being included into a practice traditionally only reserved to sovereign

governments. But tech companies have other incentives as well. They employ their own tech diplomats to show to the world that their long-term interests go beyond the immediate goal of making a profit. One might argue that their business depends on a stable rules-based international system and is strengthened by a shared set of values and their technology being developed through the lens of common ethical principles.

Tech diplomacy is only one way that governments and tech companies interact with each other. CEOs of big platforms often meet and consult with government leaders directly. But the impact of these encounters seldomly trickle down to the institutional level of government, lack continuity, and often a clear agenda. Tech diplomacy, on the other hand, institutionalizes the relationship between the tech industry and governments by creating long-lasting relations and mechanisms that can be activated in times of crisis and need. To be clear, tech companies are not states. However, in some areas, their growing power challenges traditional realms of government (Wichowski 2020). Sovereign countries may control their territories, but big tech platforms control the “digital territories” of their online communities and can define the rules which have a spillover effect on public life in general. Tech diplomats need to function as advocates of their citizens and make tech companies accountable. However, tech diplomacy is also about seeking alliances and common ground where interests and values align. In this context, a new digital humanism in diplomacy can also lead democratic governments and tech companies who share a set of principles and beliefs to collaborate in the fight of digital authoritarianism globally.

In addition, foreign policy actors need to take into account that there is an inherent difference between human beings and their digital avatars. The consequences of merging the real and online world, while we gradually turn into digital humans, aren't clear yet. In order to understand the many layers that constitute a digital human policy makers, tech companies and technologists need to break out of their respective silos and start working together to assure that basic rights are met regardless of these differences. The novel interdisciplinary concept of cultural tech diplomacy was first pioneered by Open Austria, the official Austrian government representation in Silicon Valley. Traditional cultural diplomacy uses art and culture as a soft power tool (Nye 1990, pp. 153–171) to influence other nation-states and their citizens by means of attraction rather than coercion. Think about the successes of Hollywood, Rock ‘n’ Roll, and David Hasselhoff inspiring young Germans to “look for freedom” that helped to end the Cold War. By combining the immense potential of cultural soft power with tech diplomacy, the Austrian diplomatic mission in Silicon Valley creates a safe space for dialogue with tech partners that is rooted in artistic experimentation. Art lends itself to explore topics that in other arenas would be prone to conflict and trigger political controversies and partisan agendas. To be the “fool” who is able to speak the truth has a lot of merit, especially in the delicate inner workings of the international system.

A recent study commissioned by art + tech network The Grid led by Open Austria, highlights the asymmetry of power between artists and tech companies who are limiting the access to their technologies. But this asymmetry “obscures the foundational role that the region’s counterculture has played in the emergence of

big tech – and the values of techno-utopianism, flattened hierarchies, flexibility, and so on that have guided the industry,” as the report’s author Vanessa Chang (2020) points out. Artists have historically contributed greatly to Silicon Valley’s world-conquering success formula. It’s not only fair, it’s imperative that artists should yet again be included in the creative process that constitutes the development of new tech. It is essential to reassign value to artistic practices inside the technology sphere. Complementary to the top-down regulatory approach that reacts to existing technology, cultural tech diplomacy wants to proactively shape technology bottom-up during the conception, research, and development of new tech products and services. For this model to be successfully implemented, tech companies need to make themselves vulnerable to the arts by opening up their R&D labs to artists and philosophers that can provide a whole new perspective to an old set of problems. Artists as digital humanists are uniquely equipped to explore the potential and pitfalls of frontier technologies in an unconventional and experimental way that has the additional benefit of not only educating technologists but also the broader population about what it means to be a digital human in the age of artificial intelligence.

At a time of shifting core values, an acceleration of digitalization, and a changing international system, diplomats today need to be agile and transform into digital humanists in order to successfully navigate the challenges of their trade. Cultural tech diplomacy could be a winning proposition that paves the way for the future of international relations in the digital age.

References

- Applebaum, Anne (2020), *How China outsmarted the Trump administration. While the U.S. is distracted, China is rewriting the rules of the global order*, Washington DC: The Atlantic, Nov 2020
- Chang, Vanessa (2020) *The Grid: Art + Tech Report 2020*, San Francisco : EUNIC Silicon Valley, December 2020
- Kurzweil, Ray (2005), *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, New York: Penguin
- Lee, Kai-Fu (2018), *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the new world order*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- Markoff, John (2005), *What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry*, New York: Viking Press
- Moravec, Hans (1998), *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, Oxford University Press.
- Nida-Rümelin, Julian, Weidenfeld, Nathalie (2018), *Digitaler Humanismus - Eine Ethik für das Zeitalter der Künstlichen Intelligenz*, München: Piper Verlag GmbH.
- Nye, Joseph S. Jr (1990) *Soft Power*, Foreign Policy, Nr. 80, Twentieth Anniversary, Autumn 1990
- O’Mara, Margaret, (2020), *Silicon Politics*, Communications of the ACM, December 2020, Vol. 63 No. 12
- Wichowski, Alexis (2020) *The information trade: how big tech conquers countries, challenges our rights, and transforms our world*, New York: HarperCollins

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.