



Celebrity diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic? The chief state epidemiologist as “the face of the Swedish experiment”

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Introduction

Sweden’s distinctive approach to the pandemic has challenged its public image among domestic and foreign audiences. The Swedish government has primarily based its policy on Public Health Agency recommendations of physical distancing, rather than the adoption of new legislative measures issued by the cabinet and legislature. This approach has been critiqued, since it is based on liberal voluntary recommendations and nudging, as opposed to a strict lockdown of society. The Swedish take on Covid-19 then stands out internationally, not the least in comparison to its Scandinavian neighbors Denmark and Norway, two states that have opted for a more restrictive approach. Sweden’s high Covid-related death toll has been linked to the country’s distinctive non-lockdown approach.

Of importance, here is the Swedish government’s tendency to rely almost exclusively on the knowledge and expertise of the Public Health Agency rather than government-led policy-making. Chief State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has become “the face of the Swedish experiment”, increasingly known to global audiences, having acquired celebrity power, enabling him to influence the image of Sweden abroad. The perception of Tegnell’s influence has even led some of his most vocal critics to accuse him of deception and in so doing damaging the image of Sweden abroad (Pamment 2021). Yet, Tegnell’s acquired celebrity status is of a particular kind, and as such, is not located within the entertainment industry or common understandings of popular culture. Neither is Anders Tegnell a celebrity politician (Pace & Bergman Rosamond 2018, Wheeler 2013)—he is not an internationally recognized world leader nor located within the traditional institution of state-centered diplomacy. The absence of symbolic leadership on the part

of more traditional Swedish political actors, combined with the decision to strictly follow the recommendations of scientists, nonetheless have led to a pronounced focus on Tegnell’s persona in traditional and digital media worldwide. Tegnell’s celebrity status, moreover, has been magnified by the urgency of the global health crisis itself, with Covid-19 being the subject of many debates in the public sphere. In particular commentators have sought to understand the distinctiveness of the Swedish approach to Covid-19 and the absence of thoroughgoing restrictions. In his role as an expert civil servant, Tegnell represents the Public Health Agency’s efforts of “health diplomacy”, but his performance during the pandemic, and the reception thereof, surpasses the anonymous role of an expert advisor.

Thus, Sweden’s Chief State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell embodies traits of a celebrity diplomat by becoming the most visible public face of Sweden’s outlier Covid-19 strategy. Indeed, celebrities come in different shapes and forms, including entertainers, influencers, CEOs of big corporate entities such as Bill Gates, public intellectuals and many others (Bergman Rosamond & Gregoratti 2019). Moreover, celebrity diplomacy and humanitarianism are amplified by the blurriness between celebrity, diplomacy and the digitalization of media (Bergman Rosamond 2016). Below, we first demonstrate how Tegnell could be considered a celebrity diplomat – while challenging some of the prevalent patterns of celebrity in global politics. Second, we discuss how Tegnell’s celebrity diplomacy has shaped the perception of Sweden during the global health crisis. We propose that Tegnell’s public role both aligns with and disrupts narratives of the Swedish political model. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of expert celebrity for the future of public diplomacy practices and scholarly analyses.

Tegnell’s Celebrity Diplomacy

Celebrity is a distinct kind of fame, enabled by mass media and located within everyday expressions of popular

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culture—nowadays almost exclusively articulated digitally (Wright & Bergman Rosamond 2021; Bergman Rosamond 2016). Celebrity can generate political capital employing “spotlight”, attention, visibility and recognition (Wright & Bergman Rosamond 2021), for political purposes (Wheeler 2013). “Celebrity diplomacy” in turn is a practice that links the individual star power of actors or entertainers to collective humanitarian or other political projects, often through formal organizations such as the United Nations (Cooper 2008, 2020; Bergman Rosamond 2016). While the study of celebrity diplomacy initially focused on the political role of entertainers (Cooper 2008), there is increasing interest in the ways celebrity politicians employ entertainment techniques to communicate their messages (Wheeler 2013, Pace & Bergman Rosamond 2018).

Anders Tegnell assumed his office as Sweden’s Chief Epidemiologist in 2013. Despite having had a key role in the response to the 2009 swine flu pandemic, he first entered the spotlight during the Covid-19 pandemic. By the end of March 2021, Tegnell had become a household name in Sweden and increasingly beyond borders – he figured at daily prime time televised press conferences where he was routinely framed as the authoritative voice in Sweden’s efforts to manage the health crisis, a father figure of sorts, supposedly knowing what is best for his country. Thus, his leadership was located within tropes of masculine protection, not unlike male entertainers and actors wedded to humanitarian action (Bergman Rosamond 2015). The visibility of the daily press conferences and Tegnell’s recognition as the male leader of Sweden’s distinct Covid approach set the country apart from other nations. Tegnell’s celebrity status was accelerated by his

unorthodox recommendations which differed from those of other international experts, not least the World Health Organization (WHO), which generated online attention. Most notably, Tegnell has repeatedly questioned the efficiency of lockdowns and face masks in combatting the pandemic. Second, his sense of perfect aplomb and authority has fascinated spectators in Sweden and abroad. Tegnell does not come across as a media trained and sassy communicator, he does not dress in business attire and he does little to impress his audience through refined rhetorical skills. Rather, he has the air of a scientist who does not abide by the rules of the spotlight. While participating in a media spectacle, Tegnell remains the anti-figure of charisma and glamor, resisting the cultural codes of celebrity leadership. Nonetheless, Tegnell has remained in the spotlight, seemingly always willing to repeat his message of non-lockdown on every occasion. Indeed, Anders Tegnell is by now a widely recognized individual, domestically and internationally, with images of his face being reproduced in global and national media and memes portraying him in heroic ways being posted by his fans on Facebook, as shown below.

Tegnell’s time in the spotlight has also resulted in a personal cult surrounding his persona, a fanbase of sorts. He is a frequent subject of memes and hashtags online – also figuring in contexts unrelated to the pandemic itself, emphasizing his confidence, authority and fatherly characteristics. T-shirts, posters and pins picturing Tegnell in classic pop art representations are widely available in Sweden. Outside of Sweden, Tegnell’s face has been used to argue for the dangers of the Swedish experiment and as a way of opposing strict lockdowns.

Caption on the left image reads “Hope” (analogy to Barack Obama’s presidential campaign 2008) “that you will wash your hands”. Caption on the right image reads “flatten the curve baby” (in the style of old collectable celebrity cards) Source: Anders Tegnell fan club, public group on Facebook 2020



Tegnell’s public role during the pandemic has called the leadership of the Swedish government into question (Lindström 2021). While in many other states government representatives have been the figureheads of crisis management, stressing the advisory role of their public health organizations, the Swedish government has emphasized its trust in science and expertise, adding force to Tegnell’s celebrity status. By comparison former US President Donald Trump routinely dismissed the advice offered by Dr A. C. Fauci, the leading infectious disease expert of the USA. Rather Sweden’s Covid 19 approach broadly aligns with the Swedish political model, which is based on the independence of expert authorities and high public trust in institutions, science and politicians (Nygren and Olofsson 2021). At the same time, the individual and personalized focus on Tegnell rather than the institutional role of the Public Health Agency disrupts longstanding narratives of Sweden’s political exceptionalism and by extension its status as a ‘good state’ (Lawler 2013).

Final remarks

It is too early to determine whether Sweden’s divergent approach to Covid-19 and Tegnell’s role within that process will have a long-lasting impact on the country’s global image as a humanitarian good state. However, there is some evidence to suggest that Sweden’s outlier position has tarnished its reputation in the short term (Swedish Institute 2021). The fact that more than 14,700 Swedes have lost their lives during the pandemic is telling in itself – a fact that has been reported on in global media outlets. Those who object to Tegnell and his expert advice hold him, at least in part, responsible for the lives lost, while others celebrate his leadership and refusal to align his country with the lockdown policy of other nations. Our intervention illustrates the ways in which celebrity, expertise, politics and digital and traditional media intersect and how a person hitherto unknown can obtain celebrity status and capture the attention of global audiences and diplomatic actors, despite lacking an apparent celebrity persona or a priori experience in public diplomacy practice. With so many global crises looming we would suggest that more scholarly emphasis needs to be placed on expert celebrity, and individual expert engagement in public diplomacy. A broader conceptualization of celebrity diplomacy is therefore needed to approach the ways in which popular leadership now appear in different forms and “faces” that may reshape state images. This involves investigating the very notion of a celebrity diplomat itself and who might be included in that category, and our intervention is a first step in this venture.

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