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Fieldnotes from the Bay: Why are there diplomatic offices in Silicon Valley? ^[1]

In a three-story building on 299 California Avenue, Palo Alto next to a Barre Studio, a Raw Smoke Shop and in walking distance to Stanford University, the state of Denmark runs a small diplomatic office they call "Tech Embassy." Staffed with five diplomats and two interns, the office covers technology, cyber and political affairs, and is headed by a designated "Tech Ambassador," who splits her time between Silicon Valley and Copenhagen. Entrance to the space is restricted, and one gets in with a government ID card or with an invitation, which is how I walked in one sunny afternoon this spring. In the waiting room, small Danish flags stand next to EU and American flags. On the wall, there is a framed photograph of Queen Margrethe II, who headed the country until January 2024. A photo of her son, Denmark's new King, has not been installed yet.

Forty miles north, in a thirty-eight story glass and steel skyscraper on 1 Post Street, San Francisco, the European Commission is renting out a corner of the Irish Consulate. Located on the same block as The Ritz-Carlton Club and the Wikimedia Foundation, real estate is expensive here, I am told, so it is great that they can split the bill. "What is the European Commission?" James, the Uber driver, asked when he dropped me outside. The welcome on the twenty-third floor was warm and friendly. For an hour and a half, we talked about the office's mission to explain European regulatory packages like the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act to American stakeholders. Rather than driving down to Palo Alto and the headquarters of Big Tech, the EU office staff spend their time traveling up to Sacramento to speak to members of the California State Senate who work on parallel digital regulations, including one on Artificial Intelligence. After taking some photos in front of EU flags, I left the tower with a tote bag full of EU-paraphernalia: a glass water bottle, an ink pen, two lapel pins, and a royal blue baseball cap – all made in China.

Denmark and the European Commission are two of the handful of European and close to forty international parties who have specifically opened or designated part of their consular affairs on the American West Coast to focus on the technology sector. Denmark's rhetoric of appointing a "Tech Ambassador" is the most pronounced, whereas most other countries, for example Austria and Brazil, designate engagement with the technology sector as an area of particular focus for their General Consuls. The presence of the EU in the Bay Area, moreover, is a unique arrangement both in terms of a multilateral institution engaging with sub-state level politics, and in terms of its staffing, as the key seconded staff are not employed by the European External Action Service as is the case in the 139 other EU Representations abroad, but directly send by the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT). The presence of multilateral and bilateral diplomatic offices in the Bay Area remains little explored by academic observers, and it has primarily been think tanks and diplomatic training institutes that have written about the rise of 'techplomacy'  in Silicon Valley.

This is to say that a fascinating new research field is opening up for scholars of diplomacy. In

particular scholars of public diplomacy have long argued that international political relations are not limited to formal government-to-government interactions but may be just as well found among representatives of civil society, non-governmental organizations, and industries. Understood in this way, diplomacy can be found and conducted on athletic fields, in museums, in public parks, in business lobbies, and in conference rooms. Silicon Valley, for one, offers a fascinating place in which global concerns of digitalization, such as data privacy or democratic norms online, come in contact with the private sector actors who develop the tools and services that global connectivity and communication are based on. It offers, therefore, a fascinating locale to study how two worlds, the world of diplomacy and the world of (big) tech, meet.

As Silicon Valley and other ‘Tech Embassy’ villages appear on the map of international politics, new networks and relations form around the nexus of diplomacy and technology.

My fieldwork in the Bay Area provided some insight into what this meeting entails, how it may develop, and what it may mean for the evolution of diplomacy. In Palo Alto, I learned that Denmark established its office in 2017 by moving diplomatic staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into the office of the Danish Chamber of Commerce. When I asked the diplomats what they were doing here, they told me about knocking on the doors of local politicians, opening channels of communication with tech companies, and meeting with other international diplomats to work out joint visions for how to handle the future of tech. A turning point for them had been Mark Zuckerberg’s first appearance in front of American Congress in 2018 and the following realization that the tech industry is not immune to reputational risk and questions of political responsibility. What private companies do in California, in other words, impacts politics worldwide. The representatives of the EU Commission told similar stories and further highlighted the role of California legislators. There are many key bills on digital regulation worked on in Sacramento that have federal reach. So, exchanging with relevant Senators, such as Scott Wiener and Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, was seen as one of the priorities of the office. From a diplomatic studies perspective, this is fascinating, as we are seeing the proliferation of a sort of zig-zag relation that transcends traditional diplomacy both "above" and "below" the state level by connecting multilateral voices directly with sub-state stakeholders.

As Silicon Valley and other "Tech Embassy" villages appear on the map of international politics, new networks and relations form around the nexus of diplomacy and technology. Scholars of diplomacy are well advised to consider these formations and may build in particular on public diplomacy scholarship that has long argued to stretch and break traditional conceptual boundaries. With this literature in mind, we can approach what is happening in Silicon Valley— and elsewhere—by asking about who is trying to speak to whom here? Who holds authority and what kinds of hard or soft power are at play? And how do we make sense of diplomatic practice in which governments and international organizations send staff to directly engage with sub-state actors or the private sector? Is what we are seeing in the Bay Area, in other words, classical public diplomacy understood as “the process by which international actors advance their ends abroad through engagement of publics,” or is it, given that big technology companies are often even more secretive and closed than diplomatic

institutions themselves, something else? The answers are yet to be found.
