

Alternative Agency Through the Lens of Online Diplomacy: A Grounded Case Study of the Taiwanese NGO Scene

David Gorombolyi

Department of International Relations,
Budapest University of Economics and Business, Hungary

Approved: 10 September 2026
Posted: 12 September 2026

Copyright 2026 Author(s)
Under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0
OPEN ACCESS

Cite As:

Gorombolyi, D. (2026). *Alternative Agency Through the Lens of Online Diplomacy: A Grounded Case Study of the Taiwanese NGO Scene*. ESI Preprints.

<https://doi.org/10.19044/esipreprint.9.2026.p466>

Abstract

This study explores how Taiwanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) perform functions traditionally associated with diplomacy and how digital communication has transformed their international agency. Based on nine semi-structured expert interviews, online content analysis, and secondary sources, it identifies advocacy, international representation, network-building, expertise-sharing, coalition-building, and public engagement as recurring elements of Taiwanese NGOs' diplomatic activities. Diplomatic agency does not necessarily require diplomatic status or even diplomatic intent: thematic NGOs may acquire representational functions simply through international activity. More importantly, the Taiwanese case suggests that the diplomatic impact of digitalization may depend on actors' pre-existing access to international channels. Where such access is structurally constrained, digital tools may become constitutive rather than simply supplementary to international agency. Finally, the findings identify an attribution problem of blurred boundaries between independent NGO communication and state-connected international messaging.

Keywords: Digital diplomacy; non-state actors; NGOs; PRC; RoC; Taiwan; Web 2.0; diplomatic agency; public diplomacy; statehood; disinformation

Introduction

Social sciences have long been intrigued by the public sphere of Taiwan. This unique part of China¹ carries a complex international, political, and social contextual package that, even for the thorough researcher, takes great effort to untangle, and that often even the people of Taiwan have contesting or opposing views about.

Having served two decades as a diplomat and numerous years as a university professor, having researched extensively how diplomatic activities evolved with the emergence of interactive online tools, and having lived on *the beautiful island*² researching its constitutional and social context, it has been fascinating to me how this Taiwan uniqueness reflects in the international messaging of different actors in the semi-official realm of international relations, in the online age that we live in.

It is with a distinct pleasure, therefore, that I invite the reader to experience on these pages how Taiwanese civil society has become involved in diplomatic tasks usually associated with state institutions, and how, courtesy of Web 2.0 tools, their options for global messaging multiplied in the last decade and a half.

Scope and Objectives

Through this research, I examine the evolving role of Taiwanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international communication, with particular attention to their engagement in practices resembling diplomatic functions. Positioned at the intersection of international relations, communication studies, and digital diplomacy, the study presents how Taiwan's constrained international position interacts with the opportunities provided by digital communication tools.

The scope is twofold. First, I present Taiwanese NGOs demonstrating international outreach through partnerships, advocacy, or transnational networks, seeking to identify elements of diplomatic activity in their work³. Second, I examine how the online toolkit shapes the form, content, and potential of these NGOs' international agency.

Rather than assessing diplomatic agency exclusively through formal status or declared intention, it also has to be considered whether such agency

¹ For definitional questions, see Chapter 2.3. Let it be stated from the outset that this paper does not intend to analyze or debate questions of sovereignty. As both the PRC and RoC constitutions agree on this question, Taiwan is defined as a province within China, while simultaneously being a geographical entity, the island of Taiwan.

² Ilha Formosa, or "the beautiful island" – as labeled by the Portuguese explorers in the 16th Century, when passing by.

³ International NGOs active in Taiwan and Taiwanese NGOs with purely domestic agendas fall outside the primary focus.

can emerge unintentionally through international activity and, importantly, if under conditions of constrained international access, digital tools may become constitutive rather than merely supplementary to international agency. Finally, the empirical findings raise an additional question concerning attribution: as civil-society actors increasingly perform diplomatic functions, the boundaries between independent NGO communication and state-connected international messaging may become increasingly difficult to identify.

Research Question and Hypotheses

With this background, the central research questions are formulated as:

- Do Taiwanese NGOs assume roles, intentionally or unconsciously, that in traditional settings would belong to official diplomatic institutions?
- How have online communication tools changed Taiwanese NGOs' international activities?
- Do these tools merely expand an existing operational repertoire, or fundamentally transform, even enable NGOs' capacity to become internationally visible and consequential actors?

On this basis, I advance the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Under conditions of constrained access to formal diplomatic channels, Taiwanese NGOs assume functions traditionally performed by diplomatic institutions, including international signalling, relationship-building, and representation. Such roles may emerge intentionally or simply as a consequence of international activity.
- Hypothesis 2: Online communication tools significantly reshape Taiwanese NGOs' international activities by enabling more direct, frequent, interactive, and diversified engagement with foreign partners and audiences while reducing geographical, financial, and institutional barriers.
- Hypothesis 3: For Taiwanese NGOs, digital communication constitutes more than an expansion of the existing toolkit. Under conditions of constrained international access, these tools may become fundamental enablers of international visibility and engagement, transforming not only how NGOs operate internationally but also their capacity to become international actors at all.

The hypotheses therefore allow the Taiwanese case to test whether the diplomatic impact of digitalization is conditioned by actors' pre-existing international access, while the empirical analysis also considers the related questions of attribution and organizational independence identified above.

Definitional Questions

The length of this article does not allow for a separate and comprehensive discussion of definitions; yet it is always essential to clarify how certain concepts are used. Diplomatic activities refer broadly to practices of any actors, through which international relations are conducted, including communication, representation, negotiation, relationship-building, and the construction of strategic narratives. Such activities are no longer exclusive to states: contemporary horizontal diplomacy increasingly involves networked interaction among state and non-state actors, as opposed to the predominantly hierarchical, state-centred interactions of traditional vertical diplomacy. Within this environment, NGOs are understood as non-state, non-profit organizations operating independently of government structures, while international representation refers to the articulation and projection of interests, identities, and narratives internationally.

Web 2.0 refers to the interactive generation of internet technologies characterized by user-generated content, networked participation, and real-time communication. These characteristics are particularly relevant to public diplomacy, understood here as communication and engagement with foreign publics aimed at shaping perceptions and relationships, and to soft power, or influence achieved primarily through attraction, persuasion, values, and perception-building rather than coercion.

Although this research does not examine sovereignty itself, the terminology surrounding Taiwan requires clarification because it directly affects parts of the empirical analysis. China is used as the complete territorial and political entity to which the competing constitutional concepts of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (RoC) lay claim. The PRC and RoC are consequently understood as competing constitutional state formations claiming the whole of China while exercising effective governance over its distinct, non-overlapping territories. Naturally, under the One China Policy, the overwhelming majority of the international community and the International Organizations (including the UN system) recognize the PRC as the sole representative of Chinese statehood; however, from a theoretical-scientific angle (and because a minority of sovereign countries recognize the RoC), the understanding of competing constitutional concepts is accurate.

Taiwan refers geographically to the island and, where context requires, to the territorial and political base of the RoC's effective governance. In constitutional terms, both the PRC and RoC frameworks regard Taiwan as part of China; the term is therefore not used to denote a separate sovereign state.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design appropriate to its exploratory focus on meaning, perception, and practice. Its empirical foundation consists of three main sources of data. First, to provide a grounded base, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted in Taiwan between April and June 2026 with representatives of Taiwanese NGOs maintaining some form of international outreach, focusing on their international engagement, communication strategies, and perceptions of the impact of digital tools. Second, a qualitative examination of the Web 2.0 presence of participating and other Taiwanese NGOs provided observable evidence of their international communication and online activities. Third, academic literature and publicly available documents were used to provide theoretical and contextual background and to triangulate the empirical findings.

Interviews

Interviewees were selected to represent organizations with diverse backgrounds, objectives, sizes, and forms of international engagement. The sample covered three groups: 1) NGOs created by RoC state institutions or other public actors with the purpose of representing Taiwan internationally; 2) NGOs primarily concerned with broader public affairs, whose international activities naturally involve some representational functions; and 3) thematic, non-political NGOs, included to examine whether similar functions also emerge outside explicitly political or representational activities.

To further diversify the sample, one large, one medium-sized, and one small organization was selected from each group, except for the first group, where no suitable small organization could be identified, and two medium-sized organizations were therefore included. As NGO size lacks a generally applicable academic classification, participants categorized their organizations relative to the Taiwanese NGO environment.

It is of utmost importance to note that each interview addressed not only the participant's own organization but also their knowledge of the broader Taiwanese NGO scene. The nine interviews therefore functioned as expert discussions generating data on many (sometimes even each other's) organizations⁴ and contextual tendencies.

To ensure anonymity, interviews are referenced throughout the study as i1–i9 (i1 being “group1-big organization”, i2 being “group1-medium”, ...

⁴ Naturally, dozens of NGOs were mentioned by the name during the interviews, many of them multiple times, and dozens more were examined through their online profiles. In the text, focusing on the tendencies and not individual actors, no organization is explicitly mentioned.

i9 being “group3-small”). The primary material was additionally complemented by a scholarly interview with Professor Lin Chiung Chu of Chung Cheng University, referenced as (Lin, 2026).

Analysis and Research Ethics

Interview data were coded in line with grounded theory principles to identify recurring analytical categories and subsequently cross-checked and triangulated with online content analysis and secondary sources. The study applies an interpretive approach, examining how actors understand and articulate their roles while relating these perceptions to observable communication practices. Rather than seeking positivist causal relationships, the analysis identifies recurring patterns, tendencies, and emerging roles relevant to understanding non-state participation in international communication.

Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research. Interviews were conducted anonymously; no identifying personal or organizational information is disclosed, and collected data were used exclusively for academic purposes. Particular care was taken to represent participants' views accurately while acknowledging the interpretive and intersubjective nature of qualitative research and leaving the findings open to scholarly scrutiny and alternative interpretation.

Literature Review

It goes without saying that the transformation of international communication in the digital age has significantly expanded the range and behaviour of actors participating in activities traditionally associated with diplomacy, so before turning to the findings of the research, it is worth taking a brief look at the main strands of literature arising from this phenomenon, and directly relevant to the research.

The growing international role of non-state actors has long been established in the literature. Keck and Sikkink (1998) demonstrated how transnational advocacy networks enable NGOs to mobilize information, build coalitions, frame issues, and influence international agendas. This development corresponds with Castells' (2009) concept of the network society and Benkler's (2006) networked public sphere, both emphasizing how changing communication structures allow actors to acquire international visibility and influence beyond their formal institutional status.

These developments have also influenced understandings of diplomacy itself. Pamment (2013) identifies the growing involvement of civil-society and other non-state actors in public diplomacy, while Bjola and Holmes (2015) examine how digital technologies enable faster, broader, and

more interactive diplomatic engagement⁵. Related scholarship on soft power similarly demonstrates how non-state actors can contribute to international perception-building and the projection of values without explicitly identifying their activities as diplomacy.

A parallel literature examines Taiwan's particular international position and its reliance on alternative channels of engagement. Lee (2012) discusses strategies for maintaining international presence despite limited diplomatic recognition; Rockover (2011) examines Taiwan's use of social progress, culture, and civil society as soft-power resources; and Rawnsley (2014) emphasizes public diplomacy, communication, civil society, and other non-traditional channels of international visibility. Research on Taiwanese civil society, including Chen (2001), further identifies its high level of development and participation in transnational networks and cooperation.

These works, together with the wider literature, establish three relevant developments: NGOs have become consequential participants in international advocacy and communication; digital technologies have transformed the accessibility and practice of international engagement; and Taiwan has developed alternative means of international participation under conditions of constrained formal diplomacy. But these strands have largely developed in parallel. Limited attention has been paid to whether Taiwanese NGOs themselves assume diplomatic functions through digitally mediated activities, or whether digitalization may have a qualitatively different impact where access to conventional international channels is systematically constrained.

This study addresses this intersection by examining Taiwanese NGOs not simply as contributors to civil society or soft power, but as potential practitioners of alternative diplomatic agency. It further considers whether digital communication merely facilitates such agency or can become constitutive of it, while examining the related problems of organizational independence and attribution that emerge as the boundary between state and non-state international communication becomes increasingly blurred.

Findings of the Research

Alternative Actors in Diplomacy

The findings of this research, similarly to those of numerous others (Pamment, 2013; Hocking, 2005; Görömbölyi, 2026), confirm that diplomacy in the twenty-first century requires a broader understanding of

⁵ In my earlier research, I have also established the “horizontalization” of diplomatic activities with the advancement of the digital toolkit, from classical state actors all the way to individuals like Malala, Bono, or Greta Thunberg, capable of influencing international agenda-setting, and, with sufficient online backing, even decision-making.

international actors than the traditional state-centric model. While states and international organizations do remain central, corporations, universities, think tanks, local governments, media organizations, experts, advocacy networks, and last but not least, NGOs increasingly participate in international communication, representation, partnership-building, and narrative-shaping (Hocking, 2005). Boosted significantly by digital communication, these activities increasingly take place through horizontal cooperation between state and non-state actors.

Diplomatic activities have consequently become more distributed. Public communication, advocacy, reputation-building, information-sharing, coalition-building, and thematic cooperation are no longer monopolized by foreign ministries or diplomatic missions, but are frequently performed within networks where state and non-state actors operate simultaneously (i2; i4). Such horizontal engagement is particularly relevant to NGOs, whose international roles frequently emerge within these structures (i1; i4; i5; Ayhan, 2019).

Globally, NGOs perform several recurring international functions (Keck, Sikkink, 1998): they advocate particular causes and norms (i1; i3; i5), connect actors and facilitate transnational cooperation (i3; i4; i6; i7), provide expertise and information to governments, international organizations, and foreign audiences (i4; i7; i9), and contribute to representation and image-building by projecting values, identities, and narratives associated with their societies (i1; i2; i6; i7). Although organizations do not necessarily label these activities as diplomatic, in international environments they frequently resemble diplomatic functions in practice (i3; Lee, Ayhan, 2015; Görömbölyi, 2026). Recent research has likewise demonstrated how non-official actors from both sides of the Taiwan Strait exercise diplomatic functions through international professional meetings, illustrating the relevance of alternative diplomatic channels in the Cross-Strait context (Feng, 2024).

Taiwan provides a particularly interesting setting for these developments. Its civil society is internationally networked (i2; i3), with NGOs active in fields ranging from humanitarian assistance and democracy promotion to environment, health, culture, education, and technology (Rawnsley, 2014), often maintaining international partnerships despite limitations affecting the RoC's formal participation.

The research further identified considerable diversity in the origins and international orientation of these organizations (MOFA of the RoC, 2023). Some were established specifically to strengthen Taiwan's international visibility or external engagement (Lin, 2004); others pursue broader public-affairs objectives but have developed significant international roles; while thematic or technical NGOs may acquire similar functions

through professional cooperation and network-building. Taiwanese NGOs therefore form a spectrum from organizations with an explicit representational purpose to those whose international representation emerges indirectly through their primary activities (i3; i4; i8; i9).

While their specific activities vary considerably, the sector illustrates how international communication and functions traditionally associated with diplomacy increasingly extend beyond formal diplomatic institutions.

The New Web 2.0 Toolkit

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies greatly expanded the communication toolkit available to diplomatic and other internationally active actors (Bjola, Holmes, 2015). Compared with traditional reliance on face-to-face meetings, official correspondence, telephone communication, press releases, and mass media, interactive online platforms enable direct, immediate, continuous, and low-cost international communication, networking, representation, and visibility.

Facebook, Instagram, and X constitute the principal global social-media environment for public outreach, multimedia communication, real-time reactions, international signalling, and interaction with audiences (Cull, 2013; i1; i2; i3; i5; i7; i9). Their functions are complemented by video platforms, particularly YouTube, which facilitate audiovisual communication, storytelling, educational content, interviews, events, and livestreaming without traditional media intermediaries (i2; i5), and professional platforms such as LinkedIn, used primarily for institutional visibility and international professional networking (i4; i7).

Messaging applications have meanwhile become central tools of international coordination and relationship-building (i1; i3; i4; i6; i8; i9). Globally widespread services such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, and Signal coexist with strong regional preferences: WeChat dominates the mainland Chinese digital environment, while LINE has a particularly important role in Taiwan for both private and organizational communication. Internationally active organizations consequently adapt their platform use to different target audiences.

Videoconferencing further expanded the toolkit by enabling international meetings, conferences, workshops, training, and other forms of cooperation without physical travel (i2; i4; i6). Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and similar services became indispensable during the COVID-19 pandemic and have remained embedded in international communication because of their efficiency and exceptionally low cost (i6; i8). Websites, blogs, podcasts, newsletters, discussion forums, and collaborative platforms occasionally provide additional supporting channels for information-sharing and cooperation.

More recently, artificial intelligence and emerging Web 3.0 technologies have begun to complement this environment (i1; i4). AI-assisted content production, translation, analytics, monitoring, and chatbot-based communication can further reduce barriers to international communication, although their adoption remains uneven and they have obviously not displaced the dominant Web 2.0 platforms.

These technologies constitute an interconnected digital toolkit that has significantly expanded the communication possibilities of state and non-state actors (Benkler, 2006; Görömbölyi, 2026). Their accessibility, speed, interactivity, and low cost substantially lower the practical threshold for participation and facilitate previously unseen networked forms of international engagement.

Taiwanese NGOs' Online Diplomatic Activities

Earlier research already identified the emergence of transnational networks among Taiwanese civil organizations and the relationship between such activities and Taiwan's constrained position in formal international relations (Chen, 2001; Hsu, 2012).

The digital communication environment described above provides the technological foundation upon which Taiwanese NGOs conduct an increasingly diverse range of international activities. Although these organizations are different in many aspects, the online content analysis and the interviews revealed several patterns that together illustrate the current state of their international engagement.

Overview of Activities

The most visible online activity of Taiwanese NGOs is the continuous dissemination of information related to their fields of expertise (Lovejoy, Saxton, 2012). Organizations publish news, research findings, policy recommendations, project updates, educational materials, events, and reports, thereby providing information and maintaining visibility (i1; i2; i3; i4; i7). This communication may also highlight international partnerships, invitations, awards, or other forms of foreign recognition, strengthening organizational credibility and, in some cases, Taiwan's international visibility (i2; i3; i5).

Beyond information-sharing, many organizations engage in international advocacy (Keck, Sikkink, 1998), addressing fields including environmental protection, humanitarian assistance, education, technology, human rights, healthcare, indigenous issues, gender equality, and culture. Although their thematic focus varies, international audiences are frequently invited not merely to observe but to support, cooperate, or participate (i2; i4; i5; i6; i8; i9).

A further major online activity is maintaining and expanding international professional networks (Castells, 2009). Taiwanese NGOs establish partnerships, joint projects, workshops, exchanges, research cooperation, and other professional relationships, much of which is coordinated through messaging applications and videoconferencing (i3; i6; i7; i9). Their online communication frequently documents interaction with foreign experts, parliamentarians, diplomats, academics, journalists, and representatives of international organizations (i2; i6), demonstrating that digital platforms function not merely as publicity channels but as an infrastructure of international networking towards different (global, regional, bilateral) target audiences (Lin, 2026).

Closely connected to this is participation in international conferences and multilateral events, increasingly including online participation. The interviews suggest two distinct dynamics (i1; i3; i5; i7): organizations may participate because of their professional expertise, or participation itself may constitute an objective by providing Taiwanese actors with international presence despite the lack of formal RoC representation. The latter becomes somewhat problematic when political narratives originating from official institutions are channelled through NGOs and presented as independent civil-society contributions⁶, potentially obscuring their actual origin. Digital communication facilitates both dynamics: online networks help generate opportunities for participation, while remote attendance considerably reduces the financial and logistical barriers involved (i1; i2; i3; i4; i5; i6; i7; i8; i9).

Other recurring activities include expert commentary on international developments (i1; i3), fundraising and resource mobilization through donations, volunteering, internships, crowdfunding, or emergency campaigns (i2; i4; i7; i8; Lovejoy, Saxton, 2012), and public participation through discussions, surveys, petitions, webinars, livestreams, Q&A sessions, and interactive campaigns (i2; i3; i5; i6; i8; Waters et al., 2009). These practices transform online communication from one-directional messaging into continuous interaction with domestic and international audiences.

Of particular relevance to this research is international representation (Rawnsley, 2014). Some organizations explicitly communicate the RoC's narratives concerning governance, technology, environmental policy, humanitarian contributions, or other achievements to international audiences. Others perform a similar function indirectly by presenting Taiwanese expertise and professional standards through international cooperation. Among internationally oriented organizations, this representational role may be intentional (i1; i4), whereas thematic NGOs often acquire it almost unconsciously as a consequence of acting internationally while originating

⁶ See the question of attribution discussed below.

from Taiwan (i6; i7; i8; i9). International representation (a diplomatic activity) may therefore emerge without diplomatic intent, as an outcome of international presence itself (Lin, 2026).

Perhaps the most interesting finding concerns framing, misinformation, and disinformation⁷. All nine participants acknowledged engaging in disinformation or misinformation themselves, for example through communicating Taiwan, rather than China or the RoC, as their “country of origin”. When asked about the basis of this description, several participants (i1; i3; i4; i5; i9) admitted being aware that Taiwan does not constitute a sovereign country, and knowing that consciously false communication is disinformation. Others (i6; i8) stated that they had “not thought about the issue deeply” while nevertheless routinely describing Taiwan as a country, which, in their case, is misinformation rather than deliberate disinformation. The remaining participants (i2; i7) strongly maintained that Taiwan is a country without providing a constitutional or international legal basis; and given the sensitivity of the issue, I refrain from classifying these two cases.

At this stage of several interviews, participants (i1; i3; i5; i9) sought reassurance concerning anonymity because of possible professional repercussions. They described an environment in which the narrative that “Taiwan is a country” is strongly promoted by the incumbent government and much of the mainstream media, while openly questioning it, even if on constitutional grounds, could result in marginalization or reputational consequences within professional networks or even their own organizations.

More importantly for understanding alternative diplomatic agency, some participants (i1; i3; i5) reported that state institutions occasionally communicate narratives concerning other political, social, or international issues through personal connections or work meetings/emails, and NGOs are routinely expected to represent these online without consultation. According to these accounts, colleagues were routinely not allowed to oppose a “request from above”.

The sample is insufficient to establish how widespread this phenomenon is, but the finding points toward a potentially important blurring of civil and state communication. If NGOs function as mere channels through which official institutions communicate internationally

⁷ For clarity, framing refers here to presenting factual information through a politically selective interpretation, misinformation to communicating false information unknowingly, and disinformation to doing so knowingly.

while lacking meaningful freedom to debate or reject the narratives they transmit, their classification as independent NGOs becomes questionable⁸.

This finding also introduces a broader attribution problem. Digital communication enables organizations presented as civil-society actors to address international audiences directly, while those audiences may have little reason or ability to examine their financing, institutional connections, or actual independence. The same online environment that expands alternative diplomatic agency can therefore make the institutional origin of international messaging less transparent.

These findings show that Taiwanese NGOs' online international activities extend considerably beyond organizational self-promotion. They encompass advocacy, expertise, international networking, representation, coalition-building, and public engagement, thereby reproducing numerous functions of diplomatic actors. Importantly, these functions may emerge without diplomatic intent. The findings concerning state-connected messaging demonstrate that the expansion of alternative diplomatic agency simultaneously complicates the question of who such actors actually represent.

How Online Platforms Changed Diplomatic Potential

The interviews suggest that Web 2.0 tools have done more than provide Taiwanese NGOs with additional communication channels (Manor, 2019). They have increased these organizations' capacity to perform functions resembling diplomatic practice and, under Taiwan's particular international constraints, enabled forms of international engagement that would previously have been difficult or impossible (i5; i6; i8; i9).

Traditionally, international visibility depended heavily on established media, conferences, government institutions, personal networks, and other intermediaries. International outreach was consequently expensive, slow, and institutionally dependent. Digital platforms substantially reduce this dependency (Benkler, 2006): even small organizations can directly address foreign audiences, maintain international networks, and develop visibility without extensive infrastructure. Digital communication therefore lowered the threshold for international engagement rather than simply providing another channel through which already established actors communicate.

The most immediate transformation concerns the form of international communication (i1; i2; i4; i6; i7; i8; i9). Social media, messaging applications, videoconferencing, livestreaming, and other digital platforms allow communication to become continuous, immediate, and

⁸ This suggests either the use of a qNGO (quasi-NGO) category for such organizations, or, where meaningful independence is absent altogether, their exclusion from the NGO definition applied in this research.

multimodal rather than occasional and event-driven (Seib, 2012). International partners, journalists, donors, volunteers, and other audiences can observe and engage in organizational activities almost in real time.

Equally important is interactivity. Instead of merely broadcasting information, NGOs can respond to comments and criticism, conduct discussions and surveys, organize online events, and maintain direct communication with supporters and partners (Cull, 2013). International relationships consequently became more continuous and less dependent on physical meetings. Face-to-face interaction remains important, but online communication maintains relationships between such encounters while substantially reducing financial and geographical barriers.

These changes in form have also expanded the content and functions of international activity (i1; i3; i6; i7; i8; Bjola et al., 2019; Görömbölyi, 2026). As demonstrated above, Taiwanese NGOs use digital communication for advocacy, providing expertise, humanitarian activities, fundraising, coalition-building, mobilization, public participation, and international representation. Many of these correspond to functions of contemporary diplomatic actors, including public diplomacy, agenda-setting, network-building, and the projection of values to foreign audiences.

Significantly, such diplomatic agency does not necessarily require diplomatic intent. Organizations established specifically to strengthen Taiwan's international visibility generally recognize representation as part of their mission, whereas NGOs primarily concerned with healthcare, environment, education, culture, or other thematic fields may communicate internationally for professional reasons. Nevertheless, by presenting Taiwanese expertise, practices, achievements, and values to foreign audiences, they simultaneously contribute to international perceptions of Taiwan. Digitalization can therefore facilitate the emergence of diplomatic agency as a consequence of international activity itself.

The digital environment has likewise transformed international networking (i1; i2; i3; i4; i5; i9). Initial contacts can develop online into partnerships, projects, conferences, research, advocacy, or humanitarian cooperation, while existing relationships can be maintained at zero cost. Several participants considered these tools indispensable where financial resources limited international travel. As one participant summarized: *"Without videoconferences, WhatsApp groups, or live streams, we would drown in travel expenses. Or rather, we would not have any international projects at all"* (i6).

Digital communication also substantially increases transparency (i2; i4; i8; i9; Görömbölyi, 2023; Lin, 2026). Projects, fundraising, partnerships, initiatives, or even explicit reviews and reports become continuously observable by supporters, donors, journalists, policymakers, foreign partners,

and competitors (Saxton, Guo, 2011). This increased visibility then generates even stronger expectations of openness, consistency, and explanation of organizational activities.

Closely connected to transparency is increased accountability (i2; i4; i8; i9). Netizens actively evaluate messaging, question decisions, call out inconsistencies, and share doubts, allowing reputational consequences to emerge. NGOs consequently operate in an environment where credibility increasingly requires responsiveness and consistency, as well as effective communication (Ebrahim, 2003).

These opportunities are accompanied by new vulnerabilities (i3; i4; i5; i6; i8; i9). Organizations face IT attacks, malware, coordinated reputational or political campaigns, and dependence on privately owned platforms whose algorithms influence the visibility of their communication (Manor, 2019; Görömbölyi, 2026). Participants also identified the pressure to continuously produce content, maintain engagement, and respond rapidly to developments as an organizational burden (i4; i6; i7).

This new reality should naturally not be interpreted as NGOs replacing traditional diplomacy (i1; i2; i4; i7; Bjola, Holmes, 2015). Taiwanese NGOs do not negotiate treaties, establish diplomatic relations, or formally represent sovereign authorities. Nevertheless, they increasingly perform activities resembling public diplomacy, representation, advocacy, information exchange, coalition-building, and narrative-building.

The significance of this transformation is particularly strong under conditions of constrained international access. For actors embedded within fully recognized states, digital communication can simply complement international structures already available to them. For Taiwanese NGOs, the interviews indicate that some international activities would be substantially smaller or would not exist at all without digital communication. Web 2.0 therefore changes not only how these organizations operate internationally, but in some cases if they can even become meaningful international actors (Lin, 2026).

The Taiwanese case consequently suggests a broader proposition: the impact of digitalization on diplomatic agency may be conditioned by the actor's pre-existing access to international channels. The greater the structural constraint, the more digital tools may become constitutive rather than merely supplementary to international agency. In this sense, Web 2.0 has not simply modernized Taiwanese NGOs' communication practices; it has fundamentally expanded, and in some cases, quite simply, allowed for their diplomatic presence.

Conclusions

Answering the Research Questions

This research set out to examine whether Taiwanese NGOs carry out diplomatic activities, how online communication tools have changed these activities, and whether digitalization merely expands their operational repertoire or fundamentally transforms their capacity for international agency. Within the limits of an intersubjective analysis, the findings provide a largely affirmative answer to all three questions.

First, the examined NGOs perform a broad range of activities resembling contemporary diplomatic functions, including advocacy, international representation, information provision, network-building, agenda-setting, coalition-building, expert communication, public engagement, and the dissemination of narratives to foreign audiences. Individually, these functions are not exclusively diplomatic; however, as a package, they form a pattern closely resembling substantial parts of modern diplomatic practice. Taiwanese NGOs communicate with foreign publics, establish international relationships, participate in international forums, and contribute to the international representation of their community of origin without possessing formal diplomatic status.

Importantly, this diplomatic relevance is not limited to organizations created with international representation in mind. NGOs primarily concerned with thematic fields may acquire representational functions simply by becoming internationally active. By presenting Taiwanese expertise, practices, achievements, values, or narratives abroad, they inevitably influence international perceptions of Taiwan. One of the central findings of the research is therefore that diplomatic agency can emerge as a consequence of international activity itself, without being a consciously declared organizational mission.

Second, Web 2.0 has substantially transformed both the form and content of these activities. International communication has become more direct, continuous, interactive, immediate, and inexpensive, while messaging applications, videoconferencing, livestreaming, and online events allow relationships and participation to be maintained without physical presence. At the same time, digital platforms enable advocacy, expertise-sharing, mobilization, fundraising, coalition-building, representation, and direct public engagement on a scale that would previously have required greater institutional and financial resources.

Digital visibility also increases transparency and accountability. NGO activities can be continuously observed, questioned, or criticized by partners, donors, journalists, supporters, opponents, and ordinary users. These advantages are accompanied by vulnerabilities, including platform and algorithm dependence, reputational attacks, IT risks, and the growing

organizational burden of continuous communication. Digitalization has therefore increased both the opportunities and the risks associated with international visibility.

The third major finding concerns the degree of transformation itself. For organizations embedded within internationally recognized states, digital tools often just complement diplomatic, institutional, and media channels that already exist. Taiwanese NGOs operate under different conditions. Participants repeatedly indicated that substantial parts of their international cooperation would be considerably smaller or would not even exist without online options. Establishing contacts without institutional intermediaries, maintaining relationships at negligible cost, participating remotely in international events, and directly addressing foreign audiences change not merely how these NGOs operate internationally, but in some cases whether they can become international actors at all⁹.

The Taiwanese case therefore supports a broader proposition: the diplomatic impact of digitalization may depend on the actor's pre-existing access to international channels. Where such access is structurally constrained, digital communication may become constitutive rather than merely supplementary to international agency. In this sense, Web 2.0 does not simply modernize diplomatic practice; under particular conditions, it helps create diplomatic capacity that could otherwise remain absent.

A further and more sensitive finding concerns organizational independence. Several interviewees described situations in which political, social, or international narratives originating from state institutions were communicated to NGOs with an expectation that they represent them, sometimes despite internal disagreement. The sample is too limited to see the prevalence of this phenomenon, but it points towards a blurred boundary between independent civil-society communication and quasi-official international messaging. Where organizations lack the freedom to choose the narratives they transmit, their classification as independent NGOs becomes questionable.

This produces a broader attribution problem. Foreign audiences and partners encountering an organization presented as an NGO may have little reason or ability to examine its origins, financing, institutional connections, or actual degree of independence. This becomes particularly relevant where foreign actors avoid official RoC engagement, but allow for civil society exchanges. If the distinction between independent NGOs and quasi-state intermediaries is unclear, external partners may be misled about whom they

⁹ And just for a thought experiment: If we would lose the internet tomorrow, would we simultaneously lose a certain proportion of diplomatic actors worldwide, or would the new, "digital-age" non-state actors stay in the circulation of information and participation at a more limited level?

are actually engaging: an autonomous civil-society actor, or someone they don't intend to – an indirect channel of official communication.

The novelty of this research lies not simply in demonstrating that Taiwanese NGOs use digital tools internationally, but in linking four processes that are usually examined separately: the growing diplomatic relevance of NGOs, the digitalization of international communication, Taiwan's constrained formal access to the international system, and the resulting problem of institutional attribution¹⁰. Geopolitical constraint creates unusually strong demand for alternative channels of international participation, while digital communication enables civil-society actors to occupy part of that space. The outcome is not the replacement of formal diplomacy, but a horizontal expansion of diplomatic agency accompanied by increasingly blurred boundaries concerning who exercises that agency and on whose behalf.

The central conclusion is consequently twofold. First, in the digital era, meaningful diplomatic agency no longer necessarily requires diplomatic status or even diplomatic intent. Second, as such agency becomes less institutionally bounded and more networked, identifying the independence and representational character of the actors involved becomes increasingly important.

Limitations

As with any qualitative research, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the limitations of its research design. The empirical core is based on nine semi-structured expert interviews, complemented by an expert interview, online content analysis, and secondary sources. Although the interview sample was constructed to include NGOs of different sizes and relationships to international representation, it cannot statistically represent the entirety of Taiwan's NGO sector. The research therefore identifies patterns and tendencies rather than establishing their actual prevalence.

Further limitations come from the rapidly changing nature of the digital environment. Platforms, algorithms, patterns of use, and communication practices evolve continuously, while emerging AI and other technologies may further alter the activities examined here. The specific international circumstances of Taiwan also limit the generalizability of the conclusions to NGOs operating in substantially different contexts.

Finally, the epistemological limitations of the research should be explicitly acknowledged. The interview–coding–analytical process was inherently intersubjective: participants interpreted their own experiences and

¹⁰ This fourth conclusion came independent of the hypotheses, as result of the grounded interview process.

organizational environments, while I subsequently interpreted, categorized, and contextualized those accounts. Triangulation with observable online activities and secondary sources cannot fully eliminate this interpretive dimension. The findings should therefore not be understood as positivist claims, but rather within a broadly constructivist and interpretive understanding of social reality. They represent empirically grounded interpretations of recurring patterns within the examined environment and, as such, remain legitimately open to alternative interpretation, scholarly debate, and future empirical reassessment.

Applicability, Future Considerations

The findings have practical relevance for both Taiwanese NGOs and the international actors engaging with them. For NGOs, the research highlights the opportunities created by digital communication for international visibility, networking, advocacy, and representation, while emphasizing transparency, accountability, and organizational independence.

For foreign governments, international organizations, and other partners, formal NGO status should not automatically be equated with organizational independence. This is particularly relevant where actors engage with Taiwanese civil society while maintaining limitations on official contacts. Greater attention to organizational backgrounds can help foreign partners understand whom they are engaging, without automatically presuming that state cooperation itself compromises an NGO's legitimacy.

Future research could examine whether similarly constrained actors display comparable patterns and whether digitalization becomes increasingly constitutive of diplomatic agency as access to conventional international channels decreases. Larger samples and longitudinal research could further test the tendencies identified here.

The attribution problem offers another important research direction. Future studies could develop indicators for distinguishing independent civil-society organizations from hybrid or proxy actors, examining their origins, funding, institutional connections, and messaging autonomy. Research on foreign recipients could meanwhile investigate whether international partners recognize these distinctions and whether such knowledge affects their engagement with Taiwanese organizations.

Closing Remarks

Having concluded this study, taking a step back from the individual findings, perhaps the broader lesson of this research is a rather simple one: diplomacy has become increasingly difficult to confine within the walls of diplomatic institutions. Ideas, relationships, representation, and international influence travel through a much wider range of channels than they did only a

generation ago, and actors that possess neither diplomatic status nor substantial resources can now become meaningful participants in international affairs. Taiwan provides an unusually visible example of this development precisely because its structural constraints make alternative channels more important and therefore easier to observe. In this sense, the Taiwanese experience may offer useful lessons well beyond Taiwan itself, both for scholars trying to understand the changing nature of diplomacy and for practitioners learning to operate within it.

In both my research and teaching, I have long emphasized that building bridges, connecting communities, and facilitating communication lie at the heart of the diplomatic mindset, and online platforms carry all the potential to serve these noble diplomatic purposes. If the reader kindly allows me a personal comment at the end: I sincerely wish that in such a sensitive social setting as Taiwan, digital tools will also contribute to more intensive communication, deeper mutual understanding, and eventually, the genuine reconciliation between the brothers and sisters, and all communities on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Conflict of Interest: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The author's stay in Taiwan during the research period was supported by the Taiwan Fellowship. The funder had no role in the research design, data analysis, or the interpretation of the findings, nor in the preparation of the manuscript.

References:

1. Ayhan, K. J. (2019): The boundaries of public diplomacy and nonstate actors: A taxonomy of perspectives. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(1), 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky010>
2. Benkler, Y. (2006): The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom. *Yale University Press*.
3. Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (Eds.). (2015): Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice. *Routledge*.
4. Bjola, C., Cassidy, J., & Manor, I. (2019): Public diplomacy in the digital age. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14(1–2), 83–101. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14011032>
5. Castells, M. (2009): Communication power. *Oxford University Press*.
6. Chen, J. (2001): Burgeoning transnationalism of Taiwan's social movement NGOs. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 10(29), 613–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560120075037>

7. Chung, C.-Y. (2003): Global governance and civil society: Participant in international society of perspective of non-governmental organization in Taiwan [全球治理與公民社會：台灣非政府組織參與國際社會的觀點]. *Political Science Review*, 18, 23–52.
8. Cull, N. J. (2013): The long road to public diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in U.S. public diplomacy. *International Studies Review*, 15(1), 123–139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12026>
9. Ebrahim, A. (2003): Accountability in practice: Mechanisms for NGOs. *World Development*, 31(5), 813–829. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00014-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00014-7)
10. Feng, J. (2024): Political scientists' Track II diplomacy: The International Political Science Association and Cross-Strait relations. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 21(2), 345–360. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591424000172>
11. Görömbölyi, D. (2023): A közösségi média platformjainak hatása a diplomáciai tevékenységekre. [The effects of social media platforms on diplomatic activities] *Nemzet és Biztonság*. Vol. 2022, No. 1. (published in March 2023), Doi: 10.32576/nb.2022.1.6
12. Görömbölyi, D. (2026): The effects of Web 2.0 online tools on diplomatic activities. *Doctoral dissertation, Corvinus University of Budapest*.
13. Hocking, B. (2005): Rethinking the “new” public diplomacy. In J. Melissen (Ed.), *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations* (pp. 28–43). *Palgrave Macmillan*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931>
14. Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998): *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. *Cornell University Press*.
15. Lee, G., & Ayhan, K. J. (2015): Why do we need non-state actors in public diplomacy? Theoretical discussion of relational, networked and collaborative public diplomacy. *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 22(1), 57–77. <https://doi.org/10.23071/jias.2015.22.1.57>
16. Lee, W.-C. (2012): Diplomatic impetus and altruistic impulse: NGOs and the expansion of Taiwan's international space. *Brookings Institution*.
17. Lin, C.-L. (2004): 非政府組織(NGOs)外交：台灣經驗的戰略思考 [The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) diplomacy: A strategic thinking from “Taiwan experience”]. *全球政治評論 [Global Politics Review]*, (5), 31–54.

18. Lovejoy, K., & Saxton, G. D. (2012): Information, community, and action: How nonprofit organizations use social media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 337–353. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01576.x>
19. Manor, I. (2019): The digitalization of public diplomacy. *Palgrave Macmillan*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04405-3>
20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China. (2023): White paper on international cooperation and development policies. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*.
21. Pamment, J. (2013): New public diplomacy in the 21st century: A comparative study of policy and practice. *Routledge*.
22. Rawnsley, G. D. (2014): Taiwan's soft power and public diplomacy. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 43(3), 161–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261404300307>
23. Rockover, P. S. (2011): Projecting Taiwan: Taiwan's public diplomacy outreach. *Issues & Studies*, 47(1), 107–152.
24. Saxton, G. D., & Guo, C. (2011): Accountability online: Understanding the Web-based accountability practices of nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 40(2), 270–295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009341086>
25. Seib, P. (2012): Real-time diplomacy: Politics and power in the social media era. *Palgrave Macmillan*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137010902>
26. Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009): Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 102–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.006>
27. Zaharna, R. S. (2010): Battles to bridges: U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11. *Palgrave Macmillan*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230277922>