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## **Introduction: Economy and diplomacy in the digital communication age: a web of uncertainties**

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**Biographical notes:** Huub J.M. Ruël is a Professor of International Business at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle, the Netherlands. He has a wealth of research experience in international business and is interested in commercial diplomacy, international business diplomacy, multinational enterprises, e-HRM in international organisations and cross-cultural settings and HRM in the Middle East. His current focus is on the cooperation between businesses and governments to successfully operate internationally. He was awarded a PhD at the University of Twente and started working at the Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in March 2013. He has published a book on commercial diplomacy and numerous articles in various journals.

Robin Visser is a PhD student at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. He is interested in commercial diplomacy, export promotion, investment promotion, foreign market entry strategy and the internationalisation of SMEs. His current focus is on the value commercial diplomacy. He received a Masters in International Management from the University of Twente in 2011 and has recently commenced his PhD studies. His publications include articles and a book chapter on commercial diplomacy.

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Economy and diplomacy have become ‘closer friends’ during the past decade in many countries around the world. The global economic development has proved to be very closely connected to geopolitical issues and international relations. For example, political instability in a number of countries and regions has resulted in economic sanctions and therefore limited business opportunities, while conflict resolution in other parts of the world offers opportunities for economic growth.

One of the major developments impacting the current era is the dynamic advancement in information technology (IT). It has affected the way economic activities are being undertaken, for example, the emergence of e-business, as well as the way diplomacy is being conducted, the emergence of cyber diplomacy or digital diplomacy. However, the

dynamics in IT has also influenced the interaction between the economy and diplomacy, entering the territory of economic and commercial diplomacy in many ways. Research has been relatively slow to analyse and understand the way the dynamic developments in IT relate to the interaction between the economy and diplomacy.

This special issue aims to contribute to boosting the discussion and inspiring research on the relationship between the economy, diplomacy and IT.

The theme of this special issue is 'Economy and diplomacy in the digital communication age', a theme that connects three realms, of the economy, of diplomacy and of IT. Each of these realms has its core elements: the economic realm has business activity (extending to the global level), the realm of diplomacy has the dialogue between nation states or state-like actors, and the realm of IT has the speed of data processing, analysis and transfer. The most important shared commonality of these three realms is uncertainty: the development and direction of global business activity follow quite unpredictable paths, the dialogue between nation states and state-like actors has an uncertain dynamics, and the advances in electronic data processing, analysis and transfer possibilities present an unpredictable course. Who would have predicted that smart devices would become a lifestyle for many? And what will be the next big killer app?

The interaction between the three realms can be labelled a web of uncertainties, and it is for this reason that scholars are increasing their efforts to contribute to an understanding of this interaction between the economy, diplomacy and IT.

This special issue aims to support a better understanding of the economy and diplomacy in the digital communication age with its four articles.

The first article, entitled 'Digital channels and technologies for commercial diplomacy: conceptualisation and future research propositions' by Sevin and Dinnie, presents a conceptual model for the relationship between commercial diplomacy, public diplomacy and nation-branding. Then they describe how digital communication channels affect and are affected by these phenomena.

The second article, entitled 'Digital public diplomacy on Twitter? The case of @sweden' by Hoffmann, presents the case of Curators of Sweden. Every week, the official Twitter account of Sweden is given to a new citizen, who is asked to share his or her view of Sweden and represent the diversity of the nation. This 'Curators of Sweden' project was received with great interest globally, inspired many epigones and was highly acclaimed in the media.

The third article, entitled 'Electronic commercial diplomacy: a research model and an empirical analysis of embassy websites' by Ruël, Gesink and Bondarouk, addresses the issue of the application of the internet for commercial diplomacy purposes. The authors develop a research framework that presents a perspective on electronic commercial diplomacy (e-CD), or in a broader sense the area of interaction between IT, diplomacy and the economy, and outlines the various aspects and potential research areas for this topic. The article also presents the results of an empirical analysis of embassy websites in terms of their commercial diplomacy functionality and usefulness.

The fourth article, entitled 'Rebranding strategy in the international context: the role of country image' by Afef Ben Youssef Zghidi, Faouzia Mida and Imed Zaiem presents the results of a study in which country image is assumed to play a moderating role in the relationship between rebranding and customer-based equity. The study was done in Tunisia in the mobile telephone operator industry. The results show that when customers have a positive the image of a country, the relationship between rebranding and customer-based equity is positive, while when customers' image of a country is negative,

the relationship becomes negative. This supports the importance and relevance of nation branding, an instrument in commercial and economic diplomacy to increase a country's image in an international context.

These four articles together form a valuable contribution that will help to shape the agenda for much needed research on the topic of the economy and diplomacy in the digital communication age.