

May We Have Your Attention Please? Human-Rights NGOs and the Problem of Global Communication

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Abstract

Historically, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have relied on mainstream news media to expose human-rights violations and encourage governments to pressure the perpetrators. Thanks to the Internet, NGOs are crafting new strategies for conducting information politics. Despite the obvious democratization of access to the means of communication, however, the new media may in fact represent a more challenging environment in which to be heard for some groups seeking global attention. We draw on agenda-setting research to develop a theory of global attention bottlenecks and use it to explain the success of 257 transnational human-rights groups at generating attention in both international mainstream news media and social media outlets. We conclude that most NGOs lack the organizational resources to compete effectively for either traditional news coverage or for public attention and that the Internet is unlikely to resolve the problem of global communication.

Keywords

social media, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, NGO, human rights, news media, advocacy

Amnesty International doesn't just reveal the outrage of human rights abuse but inspires hope for a better world through public action and international solidarity. We help stop human rights abuses by mobilizing our members and supporters to put pressure on governments, armed groups, companies and intergovernmental bodies.

—Amnesty International¹

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The quote above summarizes the strategy of publicizing human-rights violations to bring international pressure to bear on the perpetrators. Although of course nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engage in a wide range of advocacy activities and not all NGOs seek publicity to help them in their work, most of the literature on transnational activism acknowledges that the ability to raise awareness, frame issues, and hold abusers accountable in the public sphere is a critical asset. Scholars have pointed to numerous examples of successful efforts to raise global awareness, including the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the campaign to ban landmines, and the Free Tibet movement. In each case, scholars have argued that NGO networks were able to share new information, reframe existing problems, and inform public opinion by engaging the news media, thereby encouraging governments to take action (Bob 2005, 2009; Bogert 2011; Burgerman 2001; Froehling 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Khagram and Sikkink 2002; Price 1998, 2003; Risse-Kappen et al. 1999; Ron et al. 2005; Shipper 2012).

Thanks to the Internet and the rapid emergence of new and social media platforms, NGOs have more tools at their disposal than ever to sound the alarm and generate international awareness; many observers have heralded the arrival of a new era in NGO effectiveness (Deibert 2000; Earl and Kimport 2011). Clay Shirky (2011: 28–43) has argued, “As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.” Such comments reflect an important thrust of constructivist arguments about the emergence and impact of norms in world politics (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Price 2003) and a plank in the optimists’ platform in the debate over the emerging role of the Internet in politics and foreign affairs (for an excellent brief discussion, see Chouliaraki 2008; also Benkler 2007; Howard et al. 2011; Shirky 2011; Waldorf 2012). In short, many observers believe that the Internet is “supersizing” the NGO community’s capacity to conduct information politics of various kinds (Earl and Kimport 2011; Kingston and Stam 2013).

We argue, on the contrary, that the optimists have made the mistake of focusing too much on the nature of technology and too little on the central problem of global communication: the scarcity of attention. In short, although some of the specific challenges have changed with the evolution of the Internet, the enduring scarcity of both news media and public attention ensures that transnational information politics is an expensive and highly competitive process. As a result, conducting even modestly successful global information campaigns is much more difficult than many have believed and will remain difficult in the future.

Furthermore, despite a good deal of case study-based scholarship on NGO information politics, there is little quantitative evidence to support the notion that NGOs are able to make regular, strategic use of the global news media, much less the newer social media. In fact, despite the centrality of news coverage to many accounts of NGO success, there are few studies that examine the NGO news coverage link or how much news coverage specific transnational NGOs generate and the factors that determine their success. As a result, the debate over the potential impact of the Internet lacks an important baseline for comparison.

In this article, we address the debate about the potential impact of the Internet on NGO global communication efforts and attempt to establish such a baseline by asking how successful NGOs are at generating attention with respect both to global news media coverage and to the Internet and the social media. Our findings strongly suggest that conventional assumptions about the effectiveness of the traditional news media-enabled information politics are misguided and cast serious doubt on the notion that the Internet presents a solution to the problem of global communication.

In the next section, we briefly review the literature on NGO information politics and describe the problem of attention scarcity. We then outline and test several hypotheses regarding the potential success of human-rights NGOs at gaining attention through both the traditional and new media. After describing our data and methods, we present our findings and conclude with a discussion of the implications.

Transnational Information Politics and the Competition for Attention

In their pioneering work, *Activists beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink (1998) identified information politics as a central element of transnational activism. Almost by definition, the power of information politics generally and of the boomerang pattern more specifically stems from the level of visibility an NGO's efforts achieve. Although NGOs conduct a great deal of useful work and communication that is not visible to public audiences, transnational human-rights NGOs rely on information politics to set public agendas, raise political stakes, change government incentive structures, and reframe existing situations, which historically has meant reliance on the media (Cottle 2008; Cottle and Nolan 2007; Franks 2010; Koopmans 2004; Ron et al. 2005). This is especially true given the geographic and cultural distances between the groups NGOs are trying to help and the publics and governments NGOs are trying to mobilize. Almost by definition, the power of information politics stems from the level of visibility an NGO's efforts achieve. As Keck and Sikkink (1998: 22–23) argue,

The media is an essential partner in network information politics . . . Although NGO influence often depends on securing powerful allies, their credibility still depends in part on their ability to mobilize their own members and affect public opinion via the media.

Thus, like most political actors, NGOs will almost always prefer more attention to less attention, other things being equal (Cottle and Nolan 2007; Murdie and Peksen 2014).

Although the strategy of information politics is appealing from the perspective of pluralist democratic theory, we argue that significant information effects, whether via old or new media, will always be exceptions rather than the norm and that the ability to initiate them is for the most part limited to a handful of organizations. The central reason for this is that attention is a scarce resource. As the extensive literature on agenda setting has demonstrated, no matter which audience we consider (the news media, individual citizens, government officials, etc.), the amount of attention that audience can pay to what is happening in the world is fixed.

As a result, the competition for attention is a zero-sum game. Any attention one actor gains is attention lost by another. On any given day, the volume of issues and voices looking for attention vastly exceeds the carrying capacity of any of these audiences. And because attention is a critical prerequisite for political action, it follows that the competition for attention is strenuous, and victory requires significant resources (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Downs 1972; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Koopmans 2004; McCombs and Zhu 1995; Neuman 1990; Walker 1983; Webster 2011; Zhu 1992).

NGOs and the Competition for News Media Attention

Human-rights groups seeking global news coverage face several obstacles stemming from the scarcity of attention. First, they must compete both against other, more powerful political actors as well as with an increasing number of other human-rights NGOs and their causes (Cooley and Ron 2007; Cottle and Nolan 2007), not to mention other kinds of news and information altogether. As a great deal of research has shown, most reporting about public policy is indexed to official sources and traditional government beats (Bennett et al. 2008). As NGOs typically lack a formal role in the policy process and many are relatively unknown, even to journalists, the indexing process ensures that most NGOs are fighting an uphill battle to gain media attention for their campaigns (Danelian and Page 1994; Franks 2010; Thrall 2006; Waisbord 2011).

Second, as many studies have shown, the attention of the Western/Northern news media is heavily skewed toward a few countries; most countries in the developing world get almost no coverage whatsoever even in the few elite newspapers like the *New York Times* that provide extensive coverage of foreign affairs (Wu 2000). Wu (2007), for example, found that not a single African country made the list of top twenty most covered nations in either the traditional or online versions of major U.S. news media (including television) during two sample periods in 2003. Thus, NGOs active in those less visible nations must face the reality that their efforts will likely claim a very small proportion of the global news hole.

Third, the skewed distribution of overall news attention extends to coverage of human rights more specifically. Although global news attention to human rights has steadily increased since the 1980s (Cmiel 2004; Ramos et al. 2007), the overall level of Western/Northern media coverage given to human-rights issues in most nations is quite low. Ramos et al. (2007) have shown that two leading Northern news organizations (the *Economist* and the now-defunct *Newsweek*) provided very little overall coverage of human rights on a nation-by-nation basis and that most of that coverage was concentrated on a handful of countries—typically the same nations that already received a great deal of attention from the Northern media (Russia, China, etc.). Although they do not report this result directly, an analysis of their replication data set reveals that 78 percent of the two hundred nations in their study received zero human-rights coverage in either the *Economist* or *Newsweek* in any given year between 1986 and 2000—a serious obstacle to NGO media efforts across most of the world.

To win the competition for news media attention, NGOs need organizational resources such as money, credibility, technical capability, and close relationships with political elites. These resources, however, tend to be unevenly distributed (Berry 1999; Schattschneider 1960), and victory in attention-getting competitions tends to be self-reinforcing. NGOs, for example, which manage to win the competition for the attention of donors, will be able to build strong organizations capable of winning other attention competitions. Furthermore, as Cottle and Nolan (2007) observe from their interviews with NGO communication managers, the competition among NGOs for both media attention and funding has heightened with the proliferation of NGOs over the past two decades. With big budgets, NGOs can hire scientists and activists, design engaging Web sites, film video in distant locations (Franks 2010), and package all of their materials in multiple formats for easy media and public consumption. This, in turn, will lead potential donors to consider those NGOs better investments, further enhancing those NGOs' ability to win the competition for media and public attention at the expense of less well-funded NGOs. Over time, this process has led to significant polarization in attention and to a situation in which just a handful of "gatekeeper" NGOs with massive budgets tend to symbolize the human-rights community in the mind of most of the public and the news media, while the vast majority of NGOs get very little attention (Bob 2009; Florini 2000).

NGOs and the Competition for Public Attention

The difficulty of satisfying news gatekeepers, of course, is exactly what has spurred so many groups to turn to the Internet where they can communicate directly to the public. In doing this, however, NGOs have simply traded one attention-getting competition for another because the amount of attention citizens can pay to NGOs is limited in the same way the news media's attention is limited. Rather than competing for the news media's attention, NGOs now compete for the attention of individual citizens themselves. In short, NGOs must now build audiences online and in the social media in much the same way that news organizations do, by offering content and opportunities for interaction that are more compelling than that available elsewhere.

In the increasingly fragmented online environment, however, this has become an extremely challenging feat and one that requires substantial resources. Although digital technologies and the Web have dramatically reduced the costs of distributing information, they have done less to reduce the costs of producing information that people want to consume or marketing that information to the public (Hindman 2008). Digital video cameras are cheaper, for example, but people skilled in making movies and telling good stories are not. Moreover, NGOs are not the only beneficiaries of the falling costs of communication. Thus, NGOs' communication efforts must also compete with a rapidly increasing amount of communications and information from all kinds of other sources.

The result of competition for attention in the online environment, studies have shown, is that Web site and blog traffic, YouTube video views, Facebook likes, and Twitter followership are all heavily skewed toward a relatively small number of

popular people, organizations, or outlets both generally and with respect to any given subset of people or topics (Cheng et al. 2008; Farrell and Drezner 2008; Hindman 2008; Kwak et al. 2010). The most popular Web sites enjoy millions more visitors than less popular ones do; the most followed Twitter and Facebook users have millions of followers compared with the 120 or so of the typical users, and for every video that goes viral on YouTube, there are thousands that almost no one ever sees. Given all this, we argue, few NGOs will have the resources to generate substantial amounts of attention-worthy content and successfully market it to a global audience on a regular basis.

Hypotheses

The preceding argument implies several hypotheses regarding the success NGOs will have at getting attention that run contrary to the existing literature on information politics and the emerging optimism about NGO use of social media. Given the unequal distribution of organizational resources, our first two hypotheses are that world news media coverage of NGOs will be heavily skewed toward a relatively small number of groups and that the distribution of attention will correlate closely with the distribution of organizational resources and the head start that larger and better funded NGOs enjoyed with the advent of social media.

Hypothesis 1: Global news media attention will be heavily concentrated on a few NGOs.

Hypothesis 2: The distribution of global news media attention among NGOs will correlate closely with the distribution of organizational resources among NGOs.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 make the same predictions but with respect to getting the attention of individual citizens via the Web and social media:

Hypothesis 3: Global public attention on the Web and in social media will be heavily concentrated on a few NGOs.

Hypothesis 4: The distribution of global public attention will correlate closely with the distribution of organizational resources among NGOs.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 lie at the crux of the current debate. Although many observers would acknowledge that Hypotheses 1 and 2 are likely to be true, the premise recent enthusiasm about the Web and social media is the supposed democratization of communications. If the Internet is indeed democratizing NGO communications, then Hypotheses 3 and 4 must be false. If they are true, however, then the promise of the Web and social media to provide improved access to the global public for all groups—especially the less wealthy and powerful in society—may turn out to have been an appealing illusion. Unfortunately, perhaps, we predict that the very same groups that have had the most success getting attention from the traditional news media will be the same groups that have the most success getting attention in the emerging public sphere of the Web and social media. Thus, Hypothesis 5 is as follows:

Hypothesis 5: The distribution of global public attention among NGOs will correlate closely with the distribution of news media attention among NGOs.

And despite the promise pointed to by many in the wake of Invisible Children's Kony 2012 campaign, the same iron law of attention applies to the ability of NGOs to win news media attention through their use of social media. Although it is certainly true that NGOs have on occasion managed to break in to the traditional news cycle through communications that began in the social media arena, in general we argue that the same limits of attention will make it very unlikely for even the largest NGOs to make a regular habit of generating news coverage through social media efforts. Simply put, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and tweeting are no more likely to make news for an NGO than press releases have ever been, leading us to Hypothesis 6.

Hypothesis 6: NGO social media communications efforts will not correlate with NGO news coverage on specific issues.

Data and Method

To test our hypotheses, we measured the amount of attention 257 human-rights NGOs received both in the global news media and directly from the public via the new and social media. The NGO sample included organizations identified as active in transnational human-rights advocacy by the Yearbook of International Organizations, the keeper of record of such organizations. Our goal was to include only those groups for whom media visibility was clearly critical to their work. We thus eliminated groups that only operated domestically or that only provided services (training, legal research, etc.) to other NGOs. The data set includes both the largest, best-funded, and well-known groups like Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) as well as much smaller, poorly funded, and far less well-known groups like Worker Rights Consortium, Migrants' Rights International, and Global Lawyers and Physicians.²

To test Hypothesis 1, we searched for each group's name in the Lexis-Nexis Major World Publications database and determined the number of stories in which each group appeared in each of the three years from 2010 through 2012—a time period that coincides with emerging widespread social media usage by NGOs.³ The Major World Publications database contains 628 news outlets and includes many of the most prominent newspapers in the world from every continent including the *New York Times*, the *Times* of London, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Moscow Times*, and so on. This database, though not perfectly representative of the global news hole, reflects a very wide swath of international news coverage. If an NGO cannot manage substantial coverage across the news outlets in this collection, which includes the agenda-setting newspapers in the nations most likely to provide human-rights support, then it is almost impossible to imagine that the NGO is using mainstream news media to conduct effective information politics.

To test Hypothesis 3, we measured each NGO's ability to gain direct public attention in several ways. First, we conducted Web searches for each organization's name using Google to see how many hits that search returned and then determined how many links on the Web led to each NGO's Web site. These two figures provide a high-level summary of how visible each NGO is online (on this, see Hindman 2008). Second, we determined whether each NGO had an active account or channel on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and, if so, how many likes, followers, or views the group had as of December 2012. As it turned out, 82 percent of the NGOs used Facebook, 74 percent used Twitter, and 58 percent used YouTube. For attention-measuring purposes, we counted those NGOs that did not use a given social media as having zero likes, followers, or views, respectively. Our logic here is straightforward: Given that any NGO could be using all of these social media to reach people, the very fact that a group is not using one of them is a relevant fact. And, even more simply, it is a truism that an NGO's reach is in fact zero for any medium in which it does not communicate.

To measure organizational resources and test Hypotheses 2 and 4, we rely here on each NGO's annual budget as reported in annual reports on their Web sites or, in some cases for U.S.-based groups, from tax forms located on the Charity Navigator Web site. Ideally, we would be able to measure the relative impact of various forms of attention-generating capability such as scientific expertise, strategic marketing effort levels, staff and membership size, proximity to news media headquarters, and the like (Ron et al. 2005; Thrall 2006; Wu 2000). However, most of these organizational resources have a direct connection to financial resources—Having a bigger staff and serving a larger membership both require bigger budgets. Thus, all things being equal, an organization's budget should be a reasonably good proxy for its attention-generating capacity.

To test Hypothesis 5, we did two things. First, we simply compared NGO news coverage against NGO online and social media visibility metrics. Second, to make provide a stronger sense of our argument about the direction of causality and the importance of having a "head start" in the battle to win public attention in the social media, we also gathered news coverage data on the NGOs from 2000 to 2002 in nine elite news outlets around the world. We treat this period as the "pre-social media" era and correlate each NGO's total news appearances in that era with its visibility in the social media as measured in 2012.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 6, we used the Twitter API to gather all tweets (almost eight thousand of them in total) between August 31, 2011, and July 1, 2012, from four of the NGOs that were most heavily covered in the news media: Amnesty International, HRW, Oxfam, and Doctors Without Borders. We then analyzed their tweets to measure how often the NGOs used specific topical hashtags (e.g., #syria, #armstreaty, #food-crisis) and recorded the five most frequently used topical hashtags for each organization. To the extent that NGOs are using Twitter as a strategic communication device, the most frequently used hashtags should be a good indicator of where they are focusing their information politics efforts. We then compared NGO Twitter activity with news coverage of those topics.

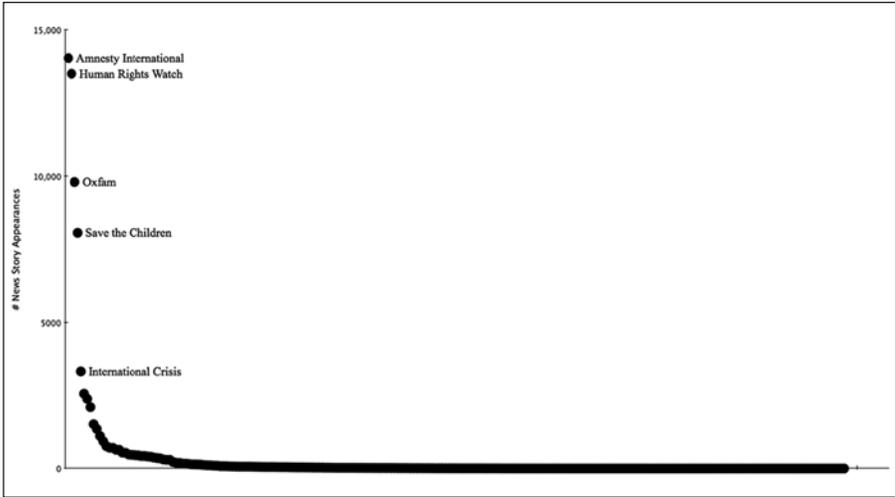


Figure 1. Distribution of global news coverage of human rights NGOs, 2010–2012.
 Note. NGOs = nongovernmental organizations.

Results

Figure 1 provides strong support for Hypothesis 1. In any given year, 40 percent of the NGOs failed to appear in even one news story in the global news flow—and a quarter of the groups failed to appear in a single news story between 2010 and 2012. Conversely, the three most heavily covered NGOs—Amnesty International, HRW, and Oxfam—accounted for 50 percent of all NGO news appearances between 2010 and 2012. Twenty-six NGOs, just 10 percent of our sample, accounted for 91 percent of all news appearances.

Table 1 illustrates the same dynamic with respect to global public attention, supporting Hypothesis 3. Public attention via the social media is in fact just as heavily concentrated as news media attention. The top 10 percent of the sample enjoyed 92 percent of the Twitter followers, 81 percent of the Facebook likes, and 90 percent of the YouTube views. Thanks in part to many groups simply not even trying to use the social media and in part to a simple lack of success in getting attention online, the least visible 50 percent of the NGOs in each medium are in fact getting about as much attention as the average *individual* user of Facebook or Twitter.

Table 2 shows the relationship between annual budgets and the ability to generate global attention both from the news media and from the public, providing support for Hypotheses 2 and 4. The results appear to indicate that there is a threshold budget of about \$10 million per year before NGOs start getting any real traction in the attention-getting game in either the news or the social media.

This finding confirms and extends what previous research has shown regarding the importance of organizational resources for attracting attention from the news media.

Table 1. Distribution of Global Public Attention to NGOs.

	NGO Attention-Getting Category			
	Top 5%	Top 10%	Bottom 50%	All
Mean Google Hits	9,876,923	5,673,077	52,113	744,000
Mean Inlinks	9,432	5,786	83	893
Mean Facebook Likes	148,286	84,028	262	10,438
Mean Twitter Followers	250,987	134,657	97	14,792
Mean YouTube Views	2,060,229	1,253,673	83	141,580
<i>n</i>	13	26	129	257

Note. NGOs = nongovernmental organizations.

Table 2. Organizational Resources and NGO Attention Getting.

	Organizational Budget			
	<\$1 Million	\$1M–\$10M	\$10M–\$100M	>\$100M
Mean News 2010–2012	58	139	1,500	2,608
Mean Facebook Likes	845	7,684	23,997	124,863
Mean Twitter Followers	788	10,074	63,854	130,780
Mean YouTube Views	22,406	227,877	394,028	816,368
Mean Inlinks	329	1,152	2,599	4,156
<i>n</i>	42	69	23	11

Note. A one-way ANOVA was performed for each relationship above. In every case, the results were statistically significant, with $p = .000$. NGO = nongovernmental organization; ANOVA = analysis of variance.

In short, the data indicate that the ability to conduct traditional information politics on a global scale is restricted to organizations with annual budgets in the hundreds of millions, groups like Amnesty International, HRW, Doctors Without Borders, and Save the Children. These NGOs have offices around the world, and employ scores of professionals with the expertise required to demonstrate credibility on the issues and to interact effectively with legal, governmental, academic, and journalistic audiences.

More surprisingly, given the optimists' claims is how important organizational resources appear to be in explaining success with the social media. If social media strategies were the solution to the news media bottleneck that optimists have suggested, we should expect to see a relatively large number of NGOs with low news visibility getting plenty of attention in the social media. To the contrary, however, of the sixty-five NGOs in the lowest quartile of news attention, just two had above average social media visibility (Earth Justice and International Women). And in fact, the global public's attention is even more polarized between winners and losers than the news media's attention has been.

Admittedly, these findings establish only a correlation between organizational resources and the ability to get attention from the media and from individual citizens. Although we do not directly test alternative explanations here, it is worth a moment to consider whether there might be another variable at work here. Of course, this variable will not only have to correlate with attention-getting outcomes but also with organizational resources. This rules out several possibilities such as the location of organizational headquarters, specific areas of organizational concern, organizational structure, and so forth, none of which correlate with organizational resources. In fact, it is very difficult to imagine any other variable that would explain organization visibility and be related to but independent from organizational resources.

One possibility is that strategic choices, rather than resources, might explain the results (Powers 2014). On the face of it, there is good reason to imagine that NGO communication strategies are closely connected to the level of organizational visibility. On a case-by-case basis, we would be surprised if organizations that place a premium on making news or gaining followers on Twitter, for example, did not enjoy greater visibility than those that do not. At the broad level, however, we find strategic choice an unlikely primary driver of these results for at least two reasons. First, as noted above, we culled the data set to ensure that it contained only transnational NGOs whose very missions make broad visibility a positive outcome. It seems unlikely that any of these NGOs would voluntarily choose the path of less attention. Second, and perhaps most importantly, organizational resources dictate the range of available strategies. Large, well-funded NGOs could make a decision to avoid publicity, but no such organizations exist in our sample. Conversely, however, all of the smaller and least well-funded organizations struggle to gain any visibility whatsoever in any venue. Accordingly, organizational resources, not strategic choice, seem far more likely to be the primary explanatory factor at work. Finally, if strategic choice did explain the results, the results would still fly in the face of the optimists' position, which argues that the social media should be boosting the fortunes of smaller organizations.

To be clear, the problem is not that less well-funded groups cannot afford to use Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube—The NGOs with budgets under \$1 million use social media at rates only somewhat lower than the best-funded groups. The dilemma, we suggest, is threefold. First, well-known NGOs start with the advantage of being well known; lesser known groups must work harder and spend more to build name recognition and awareness of their efforts (on the increasing competition to create NGO brand identities see Cottle and Nolan 2007). Unfortunately, the second challenge is that the poorer NGOs also lack the resources to market themselves and to attract people to their Web sites and Twitter feeds in the first place. And third, many poorer NGOs simply cannot keep up with the array and quality of information that is generated by the larger groups (see Franks 2010 on the increase in NGO-generated media content, for example). A cursory look at the Web sites and social media accounts of our NGO sample reveals a chasm between the depth, relevance, quality, and sheer volume of information generated by wealthy groups like Amnesty International on one hand and the much less impressive information coming from more poorly funded groups like

Migrant Workers' Rights, Global Lawyers and Physicians, or the Prison Watch Network on the other (Kingston and Stam 2013).

Figure 2 supports this reasoning and supports Hypothesis 5, indicating that the very same groups who have long been the most effective at getting attention in the traditional news media are also the most effective at getting the public's attention online and through the social media. The correlation between an NGO's total news appearances between 2000 and 2002 and its combined Facebook likes, Twitter followers, and YouTube views as measured in 2012 is .76 ($p = .000$). We see two dynamics at work here. The first is simply the point made above: Creating attention-getting content is expensive regardless of the distribution platform and thus resource-rich groups are likely to do better in the competition online as well as off-line. The second is that visibility in the traditional news media translates to an important advantage in the online attention competition. NGOs that have appeared in the news media historically enjoyed a significant head start at the dawn of the social media era. People are more likely to seek out these NGOs online because people already know who they are. Newsworthy NGOs are also more likely to be included in the tweets and posts and videos of news organizations, further raising their visibility in the social media.

Turning to the question of whether NGOs can use social media communications to help shape news media coverage of specific issues, our initial results support Hypothesis 6 and suggest that the answer is no. As Table 3 indicates, NGOs appeared in just 2 percent of the news stories on the fifteen topics most frequently tweeted about by their organizations, suggesting that Twitter's ability to help NGOs break in to the traditional news media is quite limited. That said, NGOs' success does appear to depend to some degree on both strategy and context. NGOs appeared in 0.9 percent of news stories on the five most heavily covered topics (one thousand or more news stories per topic) and 2.7 percent of stories on topics that generated 100–999 stories, but in 7.8 percent of the five topics receiving the least coverage. Slicing the cases from the other direction, NGOs appeared in 0.2 percent of the stories about topics they tweeted about least, but they appeared in 2.7 percent of stories about topics they tweeted about most frequently. Although the sample here is too small to generate statistically significant results, the findings echo previous work by Ramos et al. (2007) and suggest that NGOs are likely to be at least somewhat more influential when issues are quite new or underreported.

To explore this argument in a bit more depth, we turn to a consideration of the Kony 2012 campaign. Figure 3 illustrates the level of coverage concerning Joseph Kony in the *New York Times* and the Major World Publications database from June 2010 through July 2013. As Figure 3 makes clear, there was zero coverage of Kony in the *New York Times* and very little across the Major World Publications in the months leading up to the Invisible Children campaign in March 2012. The unprecedented speed and size of the Kony 2012 social media campaign (Hudson 2012; Kron and Goodman 2012; Waldorf 2012) did indeed translate to attention from the news media—The *Times* mentioned Kony in 28 stories in March, and Kony appeared in 603 stories across the Major World Publications that month. But, as is inevitable given the nature of the attention-getting competition in the news media, Kony quickly fell off

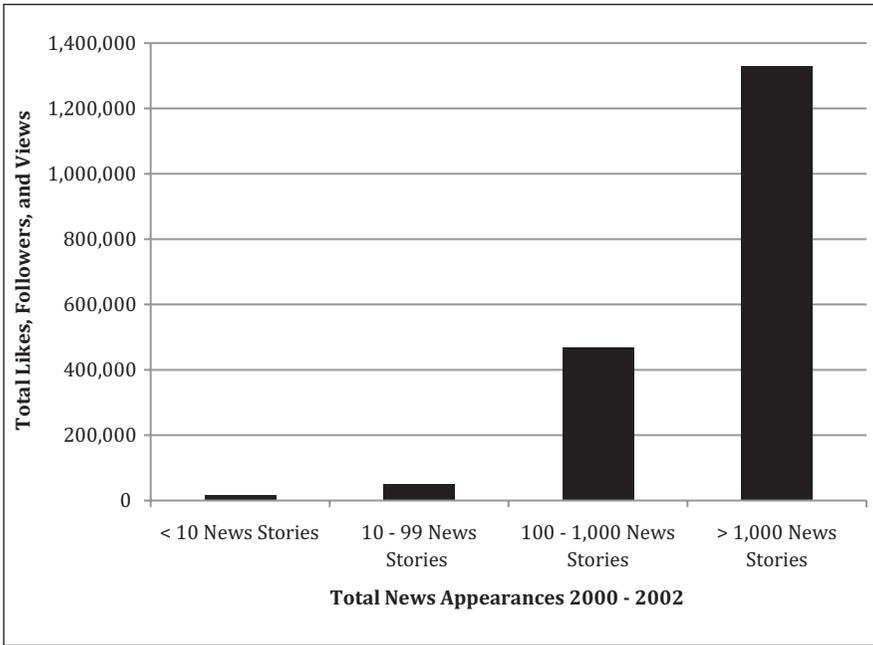


Figure 2. NGO attention getting in traditional versus new media.
 Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

the news radar and coverage reverted to pre-Kony 2012 levels within a couple of months. The same pattern held for mentions of Invisible Children itself, though the episode led to somewhat elevated coverage of the NGO in the aftermath, illustrating that getting attention does indeed have important benefits for NGOs.

By way of contrast, let us also consider the efforts of HRW to bring the Kony case to the world stage and to the U.S. political agenda in particular. HRW, we note, is one of the world’s most important human-rights organizations, one of the “gatekeeper” NGOs (Bob 2009) responsible for helping anoint causes as human-rights issues in the first place. HRW launched a campaign expressly to encourage the Obama administration to intervene to deal with Kony in the fall of 2010 (Mackey 2012). The campaign included a professionally produced Web video along with supporting press releases, content on HRW’s Web site, and so forth. However, despite HRW’s status and obvious intention to generate publicity and news coverage in the American press, HRW did not appear in a single *New York Times* story that mentioned Kony until October 2011, *after* Obama ordered the Special Forces to Uganda. In total, HRW appeared in just five *New York Times* stories about Kony from 2010 through the end of 2012 and its Kony video had been viewed only fifty-seven thousand times over two years.

Thus, even history’s most successful social media campaign provided only a limited solution to the problem of scarce attention. HRW’s experience is the more

Table 3. NGO Hashtag Use and News Coverage from August 1, 2011, to July 31, 2012.

Top Hashtags (NGO)	Total Uses of Hashtag ^a (As % of All NGO Tweets)	#NYT Stories on Hashtag Topic	% of NYT Stories That Mention a Tweeting NGO
#russia (HRW)	19 (0.2)	3,415	1.4
#egypt (AI)	173 (2.2)	1,821	1.2
#syria (AI, HRW)	268 (3.4)	1,760	4.1
#climate (Oxfam)	172 (2.2)	1,380	0.5
#libya (AI, HRW, MSF)	277 (3.5)	1,242	0.5
#southsudan (MSF; Oxfam)	276 (3.5)	457	1.8
#lgbt (HRW)	19 (0.2)	440	0.23
#somalia (MSF, Oxfam)	237 (3.0)	427	2.1
#bahrain (AI, HRW)	125 (1.6)	308	4.9
#hiv (MSF)	113 (1.4)	286	3.5
#strvd (MSF)	160 (2.0)	244	10.2
#foodcrisis (Oxfam)	189 (2.4)	86	4.7
#g20 (Oxfam)	130 (1.6)	59	0
#armstreaty (AI, Oxfam)	301 (3.7)	8	100
#patentpool (MSF)	86 (1.1)	0	0

Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization; NYT = New York Times. HRW = Human Rights Watch. AI = Amnesty International. MSF = Medecins Sans Frontieres.

common one, suggesting that scholars need to pay more attention to the information politics campaigns that fail to put those strategies in perspective. If the largest and best-funded NGOs like HRW cannot generate social media attention and news coverage on command, it is hard to imagine smaller and more poorly funded groups doing so.

Conclusion

In sum, we find that global attention is heavily skewed toward a few large and well-funded NGOs regardless of the venue. Moreover, our results suggest that the competition for the attention of individual citizens online not only advantages those organizations that were already well known but may even be more strenuous than the competition for traditional news coverage has been. Our findings suggest several implications and avenues for future research.

First, the optimists are wrong about the Internet. Technology will not transform NGO communication ability because it can never resolve the central problem of global communication: the zero-sum nature of attention. To win attention competitions, we have argued, requires having the organizational resources necessary to create news-worthy and compelling information for both media and public audiences. As a result,

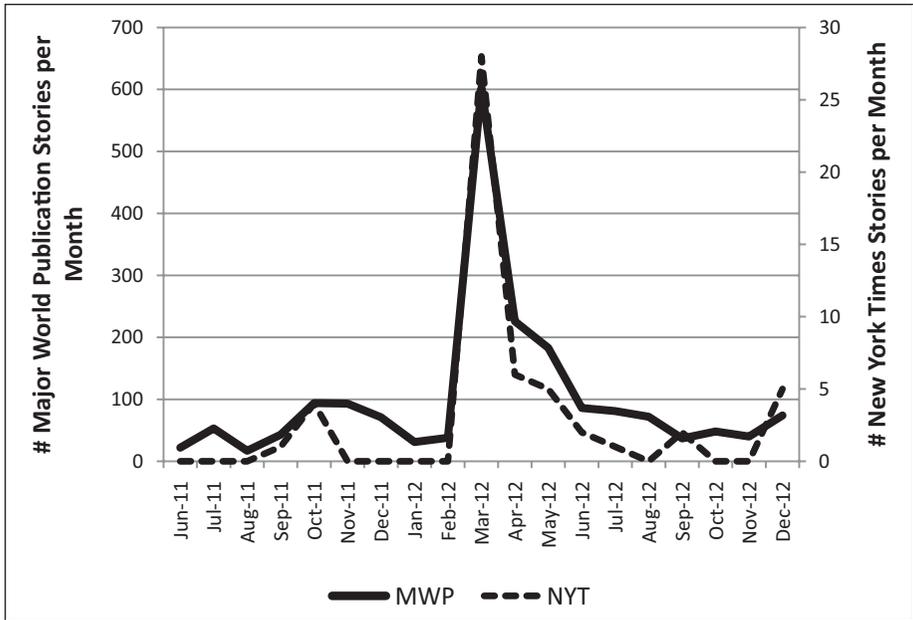


Figure 3. News coverage of Joseph Kony.
Note. NYT = New York Times. MWP = Nexis Major World Publications.

the overall distribution of attention will always tend to follow the distribution of resources in the NGO universe.

Second, the optimists were wrong even before the Internet. Previous research oversells the historical promise of transnational information politics, in large part thanks to focusing on successes without considering failures. Not only are most transnational NGOs incapable of mustering the necessary resources to conduct such a campaign, even the largest NGOs have always faced the reality of the limited carrying capacity of the human-rights agenda in the news media. Not all large NGOs can make front-page news about their own issue on a given day. Even leading NGOs must take turns waiting for the opportunity to create a serious spike in public awareness. Nor will this change with the Internet. We may not be able to predict exactly which human-rights issue will be the next big thing, but we can confidently predict that there will only ever be one big issue at a time taking up the majority of journalist and public attention. Given this, future research could extend our understanding by investigating more carefully both the successes and failures of NGOs to generate sustained global attention over time.

Third, attention scarcity also explains why there can only ever be a few high-profile NGOs in a given issue space like human rights. Different issue spaces, like economic markets, may be bigger or smaller according to the salience of the issue, but each issue space comes with its own attention limits that dictate how many NGOs that space can support. Given this, NGOs that manage to establish a leading reputation enjoy

advantages (funding, membership) that make it difficult for other NGOs to compete for attention. Future research exploring how NGO issue spaces emerge and evolve over time, as well as how specific organizational resources and strategies help generate visibility, will be useful to help understand this dynamic.

Finally, our findings imply that future research on global communications should focus not on technology but on how the distribution of attention is likely to change over time in light of new technologies. On this score, we predict that the evolution of the information environment and the continuing fragmentation of the mass audience will make things more difficult for all NGOs over time. First, the smaller audiences for news publications mean that winning the battle for media attention has a lower payoff than in the past. Second, thanks to citizens' increasing control over what information they consume in the digital age, winning attention from the public directly is also getting more difficult. Future research that helps us understand the evolution of attention will go a long way to improving our understanding of global communication more generally.

Appendix

Alphabetical List of NGOs

“Fray Bartolome de las Casas” Center for Human Rights
 3D—Trade—Human Rights—Equitable Economy
 ACSUR Las Segovias (La Asociacion para la Cooperacion en el Sur)
 Action on Disability and Development
 Advocacy Project
 Advocates for Human Rights
 Advocates International
 Africa Action
 Africa Legal Aid
 African Commission of Health and Human Rights Promoters
 African Partnership for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Girls
 African Rights Monitor
 Al-Awda—Palestine Right to Return Coalition
 Alliances for Africa
 Alternatives International
 American Anti-Slavery Group
 American Friends Service Committee
 American Refugee Committee International
 Amnesty International
 Amos Trust
 Anti-Slavery International
 Arab Association for Human Rights
 Arab Commission for Human Rights
 Arabic Network for Human Rights Information

Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions
Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
Asian Centre for Human Rights
Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development
Asian Human Rights Commission
Association for Progressive Communications
Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT)
Association for Women's Rights in Development
ASTRA—Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and
Reproductive Health and Rights
Avocats Sans Frontieres (ASF; Lawyers without Borders)
B'nai B'rith International
B'Tselem
Bread for the World, Stuttgart (Brot fur die Welt)
Breakthrough
Business and Human Rights Resource Centre
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
Campaign for an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR)
Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights (CLAIHR)
Carter Center
Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute
Center for Economic and Social Rights
Center for Health and Gender Equity
Center for Human Rights and Environment
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for Victims of Torture
Central American Women's Fund
Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions
Child Rights Information Network
Child Soldiers International
ChildHope UK
Children First International
ChildRight Worldwide
Civil Rights Defenders
Clean Clothes Campaign
Committee of 100 for Tibet
Committee of Concerned Scientists
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
Conectas Human Rights
Conscience—the Peace Tax Campaign
Consortium for Street Children (CSC)
Consumers International
Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility—Asia

Corporate Watch
Crisis Action
Cultural Survival, Inc
Defence for Children International
Derechos Human Rights
Disabled Peoples' International
Doctors Without Borders
Doha Centre for Media Freedom
Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund
EarthRights International
East African Human Rights Institute
East Timor and Indonesia Action Network
Education Development Center
Egyptian Organization for Human Rights
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Emergency
Equal Rights Trust
Equality Now
Equipo Nizkor
Equitas (International Centre for Human Rights Education)
Eurochild
European Association for the Protection of Human Rights
European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights
European Digital Rights
European Disability Forum
European Roma Rights Centre
European Youth Network on Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Finnish Refugee Council
Food Information & Action Network
Freedom House
Global Exchange
Global Forest Coalition
Global Fund for Women
Global Human Rights Defence
Global Lawyers and Physicians
Global March Against Child Labour
Global Rights
Global Witness
HAI—Asia-Pacific
HelpAge International
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
Human Rights Association
Human Rights Council of Australia
Human Rights Education Youth Network

Human Rights First
Human Rights Foundation
Human Rights House Network
Human Rights Watch
Human Rights without Frontiers International
IBA Human Rights Institute
Institut kurde de Bruxelles
Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa
Institute of War and Peace Reporting
Inter-American Institute of Human Rights
Interights
International Alert
International Association for Religious Freedom
International Bridges to Justice
International Bureau for Children's Rights
International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran
International Campaign for Tibet
International Center for Transitional Justice
International Commission of Jurists
International Commission of Missing Persons
International Committee for the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas
International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe
International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS
International Council of Voluntary Agencies
International Council of Women
International Crisis Group
International Dalit Solidarity Network
International Federation for East Timor
International Federation for Human Rights
International Trade Union Confederation
Int'l Federation of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture
International Federation of Journalists
International Federation of University Women
International Freedom of Expression Exchange
International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
International Human Rights Association of American Minorities
International Human Rights Commission
International Human Rights Observer
International Humanist and Ethical Union
International Institute for Child Rights and Development
International Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development
International Labor Rights Forum
International League for Human Rights
International Lesbian and Gay Association

International Planned Parenthood Federation—global/central
International Prostitutes Collective
International Refugee Rights Initiative
International Rescue Committee, Inc.
International Service for Human Rights
International Women's Development Agency
International Women's Peace Service
International Women's Rights Action Watch
International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
International Youth Human Rights Movement
Isis Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange
Islamic Human Rights Commission
Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights
Jesuit Refugee Service
Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights
KidsRights
Kurdish Human Rights Project
Latin America Bureau, London
Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights
Latin-American Campaign for the Right to Education
Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies
Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada
Ligue de la zone afrique pour la défense des droits des enfants, étudiants et élèves
MADRE
Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights
Marie Stopes International
Media Foundation for West Africa
Mental Disability Rights International/Disability Rights International
Middle East Children's Alliance
Migrants' Rights International
Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Human Rights Center (Centro Prodh)
Minority Rights Group International
Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples
Network for Education and Academic Rights
New World Hope Organization
Norwegian Refugee Council
One World Foundation of New York
Overbrook Foundation
Oxfam International
Pan African Women's Organization
Peace Brigades International
Perhaps Kids Meeting Kids Can Make a Difference
Permanent Assembly for Human Rights
Physicians for Human Rights

Plan International (nexis = plan intl + children)
Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
Polaris Project
Prison Watch International
Progressio
Protection International
Public Services International
Rabbis for Human Rights
Rädda Barnen—Save the Children Sweden
Rafto Foundation
Red de Trabajadoras Sexuales de América Latina y el Caribe
Redress Trust
Refugees International
RenéCassin
Reporters sans Frontieres (Reporters w/o Borders)
Right Sharing of World Resources
Right to Die Europe
Right to Energy—SOS Future
Right to Play International
Rights and Resources Initiative
Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation
Robert F. Kennedy Center (formerly Speak Truth to Power)
Save the Children US
School of the Americas Watch
Simon Wiesenthal Center
Smokers Association
Social Justice Committee
Society for the Promotion of Human Rights in Employment
Soptimist International of the Americas
Soteria International
Survival International
Survivors of Torture International
Swedish NGO Foundation for Human Rights
Tactical Technology Collective
Terre des Femmes
Terre des Hommes Switzerland
The Advocates for Human Rights
The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism
Tibet Justice Center
Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International
Trans Africa Forum
U.S. Committee for Refugees
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
United for Foreign Domestic Workers' Rights

United for Intercultural Action
 Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights
 Vital Voices Global Partnership
 Waging Peace
 WAO-Afrique
 Widows' Rights International
 Witness
 Womankind Worldwide
 Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights
 Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace
 Women's Link Worldwide
 Worker Rights Consortium
 World Organization against Torture
 Youth for Human Rights International

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Notes

1. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/how-you-can-help> (May 20, 2013).
2. A complete list of the groups is available in the appendix.
3. The Major World Publications database does not contain full sets of the full text from all news outlets going back too far and thus cannot be used for longer time series. We also gathered news coverage data from 2000 through 2009 in nine elite newspapers (*New York Times*, *Times of London*, *Toronto Star*, *The Australian*, *Corriere della Serra*, *El Pais*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Washington Post*, *South China Morning Post*). Although we report primarily on the 2010–2012 data because they are more current, the general patterns do not change when we consider the longer time frame.

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