# May We Have Your Attention Please? Human Rights NGOs and the Problem of Global Communication[*]

A. Trevor Thrall
George Mason University
athrall@gmu.edu

Dominik Stecula
University of British Columbia
d.stecula@alumni.ubc.ca

Diana Sweet
George Mason University
dsweet5@masonlive.gmu.edu

## Abstract

Historically, 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 competition 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.

---

# 1  Introduction

> "By focusing international attention where human rights are violated, we give voice to the oppressed and hold oppressors accountable for their crimes. Our rigorous, objective investigations and strategic, targeted advocacy build intense pressure for action and raise the cost of human rights abuse." *Human Rights Watch*[1]

The quote above summarizes the strategy of publicizing human rights violations in order to bring international pressure to bear on the perpetrators. Though of course 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 anti-Apartheid 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 (Froehling 1997; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Price 1998; Risse-Kappen, Ropp, Sikkink 1999; Khagram, Riker, Sikkink 2002; Bob 2002, 2005, 2009; Burgerman 2001; Price 2003; Ron, Ramos, Rodgers 2005; Bogert, 2011; 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 (Price 2003; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) 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 2006; also Benkler, 2006; Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, Mazaid 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

---

[1] *http://www.hrw.org/about. Accessed October 19, 2011*

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.

Further, 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.

## 2 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. Though 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, Ramos, Rodgers 2005). This is es-

pecially 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 NGOs 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; Dale 1996; Murdie and Pekksen 2012).

Though 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 since attention is a critical prerequisite for political action, it follows that the competition for attention is strenuous and victory requires significant resources (Downs 1972; Walker 1983; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Neuman 1990; Zhu 1992; McCombs and Zhu 1995; Koopmans 2004; Webster 2011).

## 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, Lawrence, and Livingston 2008). Since 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 (2008), for example, found that not a single African country made the list of top 20 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. Though global news attention to human rights has steadily increased since the 1980s (Cmiel 2004; Ramos, Ron, Thoms 2007), the overall level of Western/Northern media coverage given to human rights issues in most nations is quite low. Ramos, Ron, and Thoms (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 dataset reveals that 78% of the 200 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 (Schattschneider 1960; Berry 1997) 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. Further, 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 (Florini 2000; Bob 2009).

### 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 since 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 (Hindman 2008, Kwak, Lee, Park, Moon 2010, Farrell and Drezner 2008, Cheng, Dale, Liu 2008). 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 to 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.

## 3   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 towards 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 Three and Four 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 Three and Four lie at the crux of the current debate. Though many observers would acknowledge that Hypotheses One and Two 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 Three and Four must be false. If they are true, on the other hand, 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 Five:

*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. Though 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 Six.

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

# 4   Data and Methods

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 dataset includes both the largest, best funded, and well known groups like Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch 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 One 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 three years from 2010 through 2012 – a time period that coincides with emerging widespread social media usage by NGOs. 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, etc. 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 Three 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% of the NGOs used Facebook, 74% used Twitter, and 58% used YouTube. For attention-measuring purposes we counted those NGOs that did not use a

---

[2]A complete list of the groups is available in the Appendix.

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 Two and Four we rely here on each NGO's annual budget as reported in annual reports on their web sites or, in some cases for US-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 (Wu 2000; Ron, Ramos, Rodgers 2005; Thrall 2006). 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 Five 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 NGOs total news appearances in that era with its visibility in the social media as measured in 2012.

Finally, to test Hypothesis Six we used the Twitter API to gather all tweets (almost 8000 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, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, and Doctors Without Borders. We then analyzed their tweets to measure how often the NGOs used specific topical hashtags (e.g. #syria, # armstreaty, #foodcrisis) 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.

## 5  Results

Figure One provides strong support for Hypothesis One. In any given year, 40% 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, Human Rights Watch, and Oxfam – accounted for 50% of all NGO news appearances between 2010 and 2012. Twenty-six NGOs, just ten percent of our sample, accounted for 91% of all news appearances.

*Figure 1.* Distribution of Global News Coverage of Human Rights NGOs, 2010-2012.



Table One illustrates the same dynamic with respect to global public attention, supporting Hypothesis Three. Public attention via the social media is in fact just as heavily concentrated as news media attention. The top ten percent of the sample enjoyed 92% of the Twitter followers, 81% of the Facebook likes, and 90% 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% of the NGO's in each medium are in fact getting about as much attention as the average individual user of Facebook or Twitter.

*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 |
| N | 13 | 26 | 129 | 257 |

Table Two 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 Two and Four. 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.

*Table 2. Organizational Resources and NGO Attention Getting.*

| | Organizational Budget | | | |
| | < $1 Million | $1M - $10M | $10M - $100M | >$100M |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean News 2010-2012 | 58 | 139 | 1500 | 2608 |
| Mean Facebook Likes | 845 | 7684 | 23997 | 124863 |
| Mean Twitter Followers | 788 | 10074 | 63854 | 130780 |
| Mean YouTube Views | 22406 | 227877 | 394028 | 816368 |
| Mean Inlinks | 329 | 1152 | 2599 | 4156 |
| N | 42 | 69 | 23 | 11 |

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for each relationship above. In every case, the results were statistically significant, with p=0.000

This finding confirms and extends what previous research has shown regard-

ing the importance of organizational resources for attracting attention from the news media. 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, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders, and Save the Children. These NGOs have offices around the world, 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 65 NGO's 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. Though 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 news coverage or visibility in the social media. 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 forthcoming). 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 dataset 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, e.g.). 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 the 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 Two supports this reasoning and supports Hypothesis Five, 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 offline. 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.

*Figure 2. NGO Attention Getting in Traditional vs. New Media.*
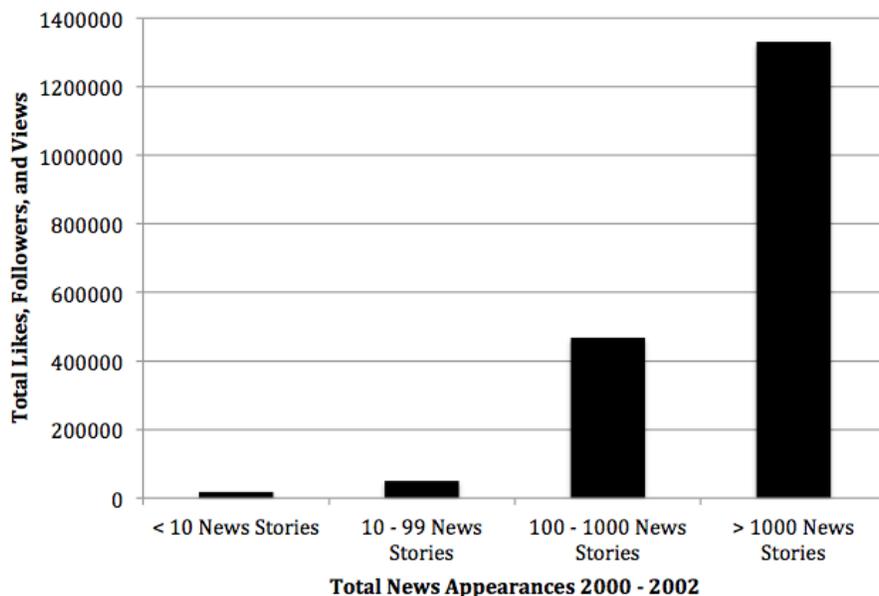


Turning to the question of whether NGOs can use social media communications to help shape news media coverage of specific issues, our initial results support Hypothesis Six and suggest that the answer is no. As Table Three indicates NGOs appeared in just 2% of the news stories on the 15 topics most frequently 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, NGO success does appear to depend to some degree on both strategy and context. NGOs appeared in 0.9% of news stories on the five most heavily covered topics (1000 or more news stories per topic) and 2.7% of stories on topics that generated 100-999 stories, but in 7.8% of the five topics receiving the least coverage. Slicing the cases from the other direction, NGOs appeared in .2% of the stories about topics they tweeted about least, but they appeared in 2.7% of stories about topics they tweeted about most frequently. Though the sample here is too small to generate statistically significant results, the findings echo previous work by Ramos, Ron, and Thoms (2007) and suggest that NGOs are likely to be at least somewhat more influential when issues are quite new or underreported.

14

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

| Top Hashtags (NGO) | Total Uses of Hashtag* (as % of all NGO tweets) | # NYT Stories on Hashtag Topic | % of NYT Stories That Mention A Tweeting NGO |
|---|---|---|---|
| #russia (HRW) | 19 (0.2) | 3415 | 1.4 |
| #egypt (AI) | 173 (2.2) | 1821 | 1.2 |
| #syria (AI, HRW) | 268 (3.4) | 1760 | 4.1 |
| #climate (Oxfam) | 172 (2.2) | 1380 | 0.5 |
| #libya (AI, HRW, MSF) | 277 (3.5) | 1242 | 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 |

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 the news radar and coverage reverted to pre-Kony 2012 levels within a couple of months. As the figure illustrates, 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.

*Figure 3. News Coverage of Joseph Kony.*
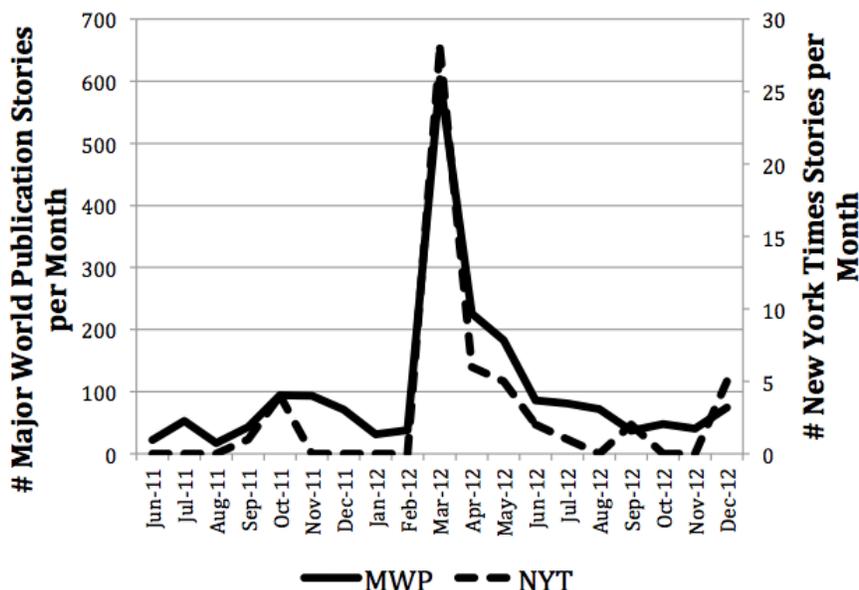


By way of contrast, let us also consider the efforts of Human Rights Watch (HRW) to bring the Kony case to the world stage, and to the U.S. political agenda in particular. HRW, we note, is one of the world's most important human rights organizations, one of the "gatekeeper" NGOs (Bob 2009) responsible 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 57,000 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 common one, suggesting that scholars need to pay more attention to the information politics campaigns that fail in order to put those strategies in perspective. If the largest and best-funded NGOs like Human Rights Watch can't generate social media attention and news coverage on command, it is hard to

16

imagine smaller and more poorly funded groups doing so.

# 6    Conclusion

In sum, we find that global attention is heavily skewed towards 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 newsworthy and compelling information for both media and public audiences. As a result, 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. Secondly, 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.

# 7    References

Benkler, Yochai (2007). The Wealth of Networks. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Berry, J.M. 1999. The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups. Washington: Brookings.

Bennett, W. Lance, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. 2008. When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Berry, Jeffrey M. 1999. The Interest Group Society, New York: Longman.

—— 1999. The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups. Washington: Brookings.

Bob, Clifford. 2005. The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Bob, Clifford, ed. 2009. The International Struggle for Human Rights. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bogert, Carol. 2011. "Whose News? The Changing Media Landscape and NGOs," in Human Rights Watch World Report 2011, pp. 24-36.

Burgerman, Susan. 2001. Moral Victories: How Activists Provoke Multilateral Action, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. 1989. Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Carpenter, Charli. 2007. "Setting the Advocacy Agenda: Theorizing Issue

Emergence and Nonemergence in Transnational Advocacy Networks," International Studies Quarterly 51: 99-120.

Cheng, Xu, Cameron Dale, and Jiangchuan Liu. 2008. "Statistics and Social Network of YouYube Videos," 16th International Workshop on Quality of Service, 229-238.

Chouliaraki, Lillie. 2008. "The Symbolic Power of Transnational Media," Global Media and Communication, 4: 329-351.

Cmiel, Kenneth. 2004. "The Recent History of Human Rights," American Historical Review 109: 117-135.

Cooley, Alexander, and James Ron. 2007. "The NGO scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action," International Security 27: 5-39.

Cottle, Simon. 2008. "Reporting Demonstrations: The Changing Media Politics of Dissent," Media, Culture, and Society, 30: 853-872.

Cottle, Simon, and David Nolan. 2007. "Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid-Media Field: 'Everyone Was Dying for Footage'," Journalism Studies, 8: 862-878.

Danelian, Lucius H., Benjamin. I. Page. 1994. "The Heavenly Chorus: Interest Group Voices on TV News," American Journal of Political Science 38, 1056-1078.

Deibert, Ronald J. 2000. "International Plug 'n Play? Citizen Activism, the Internet, and Global Policy," International Studies Perspective 1: 255-272.

Downs, Anthony. 1972. "Up and Down With Ecology. The Issue Attention Cycle," Public Interest 28: 38-50

Earl, Jennifer, and Katrina Kimport. 2011. Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

Ferrell, Henry, and Daniel W. Drezner. 2008. "The Power and Politics of Blogs," Public Choice 134: 15-30.

Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," International Organization 52: 887-917

Florini, Ann M. 2000. The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society. New York: Carnegie Endowment.

Franks, Suzanne. 2010. "The Neglect of Africa and the Power of Aid," The International Communication Gazette, 72: 71-84.

Froehling, Oliver. 1997. The Cyberspace "War of Ink and Internet" in Chiapas, Mexico," Geographical Review 87: 291-307.

Hilgartner, Stephen, and Charles L. Bosk 1988. "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model," American Journal of Sociology 94: 53-78.

Hindman, Matthew T. 2008. The Myth of Digital Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Howard, Philip N., Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Mazaid. 2011. "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring?" University of Washington, Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, Working Paper 2011.

Hudson, J. 2012. "Admit It: Kony 2012 Is Making a Difference," Atlantic Wire, May 25.

Huliaris, Asteris, and Nikolaos Tzifakis. 2012. "The Fallacy of the Autonomous Celebrity," Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 25: 417-431.

Jardin, Xeni. 2011. "Kony 2012's Visible Funding: Invisible Children's anti-gay, creationist, Christian right donors." <http://boingboing.net/2012/03/12/kony-2012-invisible-children.html> (2013, May 22).

Keck, M. and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Khagram, Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink. 2002. Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kingston, Lindsey N. and Kathryn R. Stam. 2013. "Online Advocacy: Analysis of Human Rights NGO Websites," Journal of Human Rights Practice 5: 75-95.

Koopmans, Ruud. 2004. "Movements and Media: Selection Processes and Evolutionary Dynamics in the Public Sphere," Theory and Society 33: 367-391.

Kron, Josh, and J. David Goodman. 2012. "Online, A distant conflict soars to topic no. 1," New York Times, March 8, 2012.

Kwak, Haewoon, Changhyun Lee, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon. 2010. "What is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media?" Proceedings of the 19th international conference on World Wide Web, 591-600. Mackey, Robert. 2011. "African

Critics of Kony Campaign See a 'White Man's Burden' for the Facebook Generation," New York Times, March 9. < http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com /2012/03/09/african-critics-of-kony-campaign-hear-echoes-of-the-white-mans-burden/> (2013, May 22).

McCombs, Maxwell, and Jian-Hua Zhu. 1995. Capacity, Diversity, and Volatility of the Public Agenda Trends From 1954 to 1994," Public Opinion Quarterly 59: 495-525.

Murdie, Amanda, and Dursun Peksen. 2013. "More Than Just Hot Air: The Impact of Human Rights INGO Shaming on Humanitarian Interventions," < http://www.amandamurdie.org/research.html> (2013, May 22).

Pew Center for People and the Press (2010) People Spending More Time with the News < http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/americans-spending-more-time-following-the-news/> (2013, 22 May).

Powers, Matthew. 2014. "The Structural Organization of NGO Publicity Work: Explaining Divergent Publicity Strategies at Humanitarian and Human Rights Organizations," International Communication Journal, forthcoming

Price, Richard 1998. "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines," International Organization 52: 613-644.

————. 2003. "Transnational Civil Society and Advocacy in World Politics," World Politics 55: 579-606.

Ramos, Howard, James Ron, and Oskar Thoms. 2007. "Shaping the Northern Media's Human Rights Coverage, 1986-2000," Journal of Peace Research 44: 385-406.

Risse-Kappen, Thomas, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1999. The Power of Human Rights. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ron, James, Howard Ramos, and Kathleen Rodgers. 2005. "Transnational Information Politics: NGO Human Rights Reporting, 1986-2000," International Studies Quarterly 49: 557-587.

Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. The Semisovereign People, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Shipper, Apichai R. 2012. "Influence of the Weak: The Role of Foreigners and NGO Networks in Democratizing Northeast Asia," International Studies Quarterly 56: 689-703.

Shirky, Clay. 2011. "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the

Public Sphere, and Political Change," Foreign Affairs, January/February, 28-43.

Thrall, A. Trevor. 2006. "The Myth of the Outside Strategy: News Coverage of Interest Groups," Political Communication 23: 407-420.

Thrall, A. Trevor et al. 2008. "Starpower: Celebrity Advocacy and the Evolution of the Public Sphere," International Journal of Press/Politics 13: 362-385.

Waisbord, Sylvio. 2011. "Can NGOs Change the News?" International Journal of Communication 5: 142-165

Waldorf, Lars. 2012. "White Noise: Hearing the Disaster," Journal of Human Rights Practice 4: 469-474

Walker, Jack L. 1983. "The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America," American Political Science Review, 77: 390-406.

Webster, James G. 2011. "The duality of media: A structurational theory of public attention," Communication Theory 21: 43-66.

Wu, Denis H. 2000. "Systemic Determinants of International News Coverage: A Comparison of 38 Countries," Journal of Communication 50: 110-130.

———— 2007." A brave new world for international news? Exploring the determinants of the coverage of foreign news on US websites," International Communication Gazette 69: 539-551.

Zhu, Jian-Hua. 1992. "Issue Competition and Attention Distraction: A Zero-Sum Theory of Agenda-Setting," Journalism Quarterly 69: 825-836.