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## SOCIAL MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

### INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has seen its concomitant celebration as a 'liberation technology,' namely a technology that supports social, political, and economic freedoms (Diamond, 2010). Though most notably manifest in the media fervor around the 'Twitter revolutions' and 'Facebook revolutions' of the Arab Spring, techno-optimism about social media's potential for human rights persists in both the popular and academic consciousness. This chapter provides a framework for understanding how the use of social media intersects with the practice of human rights advocacy at NGOs. This framework is not to deny the disruptive possibility of human rights advocacy conducted over social media, but rather to ground related techno-optimism in the broad and complex terrain that influences this potential (Youmans and York, 2012; Madianou, 2013).

Social media liberates advocacy by disrupting its traditional pathway to visibility – at least, this is the largely untested idea that has fueled a spate of experimentation and innovation among those practicing human rights (Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014). Specifically, the hope is that social media allows advocates to bypass the gatekeeper mainstream media – whose newsworthiness decisions can seem inscrutable and captured by elites – to instead communicate direct-to-citizen and direct-to-policy-maker (e.g. Auger, 2013). Furthermore, as any digitally literate actor can publish on social media, this is complemented by the perspective that social media may be a leveler in terms of the equality of visibility (e.g. Nah and Saxton, 2013). These views, however, rests on an incomplete conception of visibility, one which focuses on the production of communication and overlooks the corresponding reception of that communication necessary for visibility to take place (Hindman, 2010). Furthermore, production and reception are not correlated; rather, communication is mediated by the fields it crosses between producer and recipient.

In the case of human rights advocacy over social media, then, there is no direct-to-anyone. The visibility of this advocacy depends on the logics of the social media field, the target audience fields, and the political field(s) in which the communication takes place. This chapter overviews this field theory approach to communication before outlining in broad strokes what we know about each of these logics. Equally important, however, is what we don't know. For different reasons, each of these logics is somewhat inscrutable – that of the social media field because of its novelty, mutability, and proprietary secrecy; those of target audience fields because social media advocacy effects are both hard to isolate and under-researched; and those of political fields because surveillance tactics are often covert. All of this inscrutability creates risk, and risk, as we shall see, is anathema to visibility. One of the benefits of the field approach is its concern with inequality (Bourdieu, 1993). As an actor's ability to mitigate risk corresponds to his or her resources, it may be that – instead of being a leveler – social media advocacy is exacerbating inequalities of visibility within the human rights field

(Beck, 1992; Mejias, 2012; Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014). The chapter concludes by sketching a research agenda for the use of social media in human rights work.

### SOCIAL MEDIA ADVOCACY AS COMMUNICATING ACROSS FIELDS

Building loosely on the approach developed by Bourdieu (e.g. 1993), we can view the practice of social media advocacy as communicating across fields. Participants in a field adhere to a shared logic (or logics) – the explicit and implicit rules that govern success in a particular field and thus shape the practices in that field (Thompson, 2010). Actors are positioned hierarchically within each field according to their relative distributions of the forms of capital valued in that field. These can include financial capital, social capital, cultural capital or knowledge, and symbolic capital or reputation (Bourdieu, 1986). Conceptualizing a field's participants as occupying relative positions based on their relative wealth naturally turns a lens concerned with inequality on that field.

Fields that trade in information are often, in Bourdieu's (1993) term, heteronomous to the logics of other fields which are producing or receiving their information. This is particularly the case for fields, like journalism or human rights NGOs, where success depends on attracting the attention of those outside of the field. Whether this concern for other logics is deleterious or beneficial to these fields' own logics, it is unavoidable (McPherson, 2016). This heteronomy is a theme in the small but growing literature on NGO journalism, focused in particular on how NGOs are adjusting their information logics to the information logics of the mainstream media through which they traditionally reached their target audiences – and still do today (e.g. Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Waisbord, 2011; Powers, 2014; McPherson, 2016).

This approach is a useful starting point for understanding how the field of social media platforms may be inflecting the visibility of advocacy – in part through inflecting the other fields relevant to the human rights advocacy communication chain. This section overviews each field in turn, though this overview is necessarily a simplification, as each field can contain a variety of logics, and these interact within and across fields with much complexity (Waisbord, 2011; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). During this overview, it is worth keeping in mind that an actor's ability to understand and to match external logics is itself correlated with resources (Gandy, 1982; McPherson, 2016). Conversely, an inability to understand external logics can create risk, and risk can stymie visibility (McPherson, Forthcoming).

### *THE LOGIC OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS NGO FIELD*

Though human rights NGOs are by no means the only entities that practice human rights, I focus on their field in particular because of NGOs' relative influence in the human rights space and because of their relatively consolidated practices around communication (Krause, 2014; Nash, 2015). A key aim of their dominant logic is to speak truth to power through advocacy, a communication practice focused on visibility with and persuasion of target audiences to impel change. In the human rights context, these target audiences are usually policy-makers – sometimes human rights violators themselves but usually those who can exert pressure on the violators; the advocacy is often amplified through media coverage and by raising public moral outrage; and the change sought is the adoption of human rights frameworks as well as the mitigation of cases or trends of violations (Keck and Sikkink, 1999).

Advocacy about human rights violations may be a 'weapon of the weak,' but its potency is evidenced by accused violators' efforts to counter-claim the accusations and discredit human rights organizations – efforts that can jeopardize human rights advocates' security and correspondingly silence their advocacy (Brysk, 2013). This potency stems from other aspects of human rights NGOs' logic that work to enhance the visibility of their communications, including the pursuit of social capital within the 'transnational advocacy networks' in which they usually operate and the pursuit of symbolic capital, namely credibility (Keck and Sikkink, 1999; McPherson, 2016). This credibility is fundamental to NGOs' work: credibility in the eyes of political audiences is key to persuasion, credibility with publics is important for mobilizing outrage, while credibility with journalists gets media coverage and with volunteers and donors gets resources (Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Land, 2009). While credibility is a source of strength for human rights NGOs, it is also their Achilles' heel, as it is a precarious reputational resource that can easily be lost through poor performance, bad associations, and the discrediting discourses of opponents (Thompson, 2000; McPherson, 2016).

The rise of social media as a communication channel has implications for these established practices through, on the one hand, promise for advocacy, and, on the other, effects on security and resources not fully understood by human rights practitioners. That said, advocates are certainly experimenting with, knowledge exchanging on and dedicating resources to social media communication strategies – even if more cautiously than one might expect (Powers, 2016). These strategies include mobilizing supporters, directly and publicly targeting policy-makers and influencing journalists (McPherson, 2015b). A handful of social media campaigns, such as Invisible Children's viral video *Kony 2012*, which called for the capture of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, and Plan's 2014 campaign, which highlighted the plight of child brides through a fake blog by a 12-year old Norwegian girl about her impending marriage to a 37-year-old, are renowned for their extraordinary visibility. Still, the adoption of social media introduces a new and, for many human rights advocates, unknown or under-known logic – that of the field of social media platforms. This logic raises many questions about how it intersects with the human rights NGO logic, as well as with other relevant logics, not least those of target audience fields and of the broader political field(s) in which advocacy takes place.

#### *THE LOGIC OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA FIELD*

Social media are of interest to human rights advocates because, among other potentialities, their platforms afford visibility. Thinking about social media in terms of affordances, or what they enable users to do, is a common practice in the literature – in part because it allows conclusions to be drawn across platforms and to outlast platform obsolescence. Yet, this view of affordances may place too much agency in the hands of the user through obscuring the influence of the technology designers as well as of the decisions in technology-user interaction increasingly made by the technology itself (Nagy and Neff, 2015). As explored in this section, both the logic behind social media's design, which is predominantly commercial, and the design itself, which involves an inscrutable combination of algorithmic and human decisions, have significant impacts on social media visibility.

Similarly, the literature on advocacy and activism too often treats social media platforms as 'tabula rasa[e]' for communication when, instead, scholars and practitioners should approach them the same way as they have traditionally approached the mainstream media (Madianou, 2013, p. 251). Namely, these are mediators following their own logics, which may coincide with the logics of communicators but often do not – and this coincidence is not necessarily predictable. Human rights

advocates who seek visibility via social media, just like those who seek visibility via the mainstream media, need to understand platform logics and decide to what extent they wish to shape their communications to meet these logics.

The field of social media platforms has tended towards conglomeration and monopsony, and the resulting social media behemoths are, at their cores, commercial institutions (Mejias, 2012). The profit-motivated drive for users and thus advertisers shapes many aspects of social media platforms' orthodox logic. These include the promotion of popular content and the suppression of problematic content in order to maximize user engagement – and thus eyeballs for advertisements (Youmans and York, 2012; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). The popularity of content – rewarded with visibility on social media platforms and, at the extreme, with virality – is determined by a complex interplay of user activity, including designing content and building networks, as well as algorithmic and human decision-making (van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Tufekci, 2015). Problematic content is handled with a content moderation system. Users first report content as offensive or inappropriate, triggering a review by a content moderator who assesses the content's compatibility with the platform's community guidelines. Relevant to human rights content are policies about gratuitous violence, which a graphic video of a human rights violation might contravene – unless posted with sufficient explanatory notes highlighting its documentary and news value (Bair, 2014).

Though social media platforms therefore act as information gatekeepers, they do not do so in exactly the same way or with the same consequences as news outlets: Their decisions are both less transparent and less accountable (Tufekci, 2015). For example, social media algorithms are considered proprietary trade secrets and may be programmed to evolve via machine learning, making them unpredictable even to their creators. Their decisions are customized to individual users, and they are tweaked often – almost once a week in the case of Facebook's News Feed (Tufekci, 2015).

Though clearly humans are doing this tweaking, the human judgment – and, indeed, bias – behind algorithms is obscured. Rather, algorithms' automation imparts a veneer of objectivity and technology-enabled neutrality, as does social media's discursive positioning as platforms rather than as publishers (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that more than half of Facebook users interviewed in a recent study were unaware that their News Feed is filtered by an algorithm (Eslami *et al.*, 2015). Content moderation also appears automatic, but is actually performed invisibly by low-wage laborers around the world who spend their workdays reviewing potentially disturbing and upsetting content (Roberts, Forthcoming). Recent uproars about social media platforms' gatekeeping have shed little light on the process, as when commentators queried why *#Ferguson* news was appearing in their Twitter feeds but not in their Facebook feeds, or when a former Facebook contractor made the allegation, subsequently denied by Facebook, that he and other 'news curators' consistently manipulated Facebook's Trending Topics list (Tufekci, 2015; Nunez, 2016).

The upshot is that the logic of social media platforms can be profoundly unknowable, at least with respect to being able to predict visibility. Strategies do exist, however, for gaining certainty about visibility. As explained by Facebook on its new 'facebook for nonprofits' site, money buys visibility. Nonprofits can pay to boost their posts among their existing followers or to reach out to new, targeted audiences, among other advertising strategies (Facebook, 2016b). Another strategy, as with news outlets, is for nonprofits to conform their content to their mediator's expectation of

audience interest. In addition to suggesting nonprofits strive for 'authenticity' in their posts and include visuals, Facebook (2016a) recommends the following in terms of 'voice':

*Facebook is a place where people connect with friends and communicate in a personal, casual way. Organizations tend to succeed when they also use a conversational, authentic style. Overly formal language can feel out of place. When writing a message, whether it's funny or serious, think about how you'd write it to a friend. Posts that evoke emotion often stand out in News Feed. Inspiring, solutions-oriented messages are often the most engaging. Placing blame or otherwise alienating others can be offensive and typically doesn't lead to high engagement.*

This is quite a departure from the traditional discursive register of human rights reports, which tend to be lengthy, legalistic, and illustrated by statistics and testimonials (Moon, 2012). Echoing earlier criticisms of the logics of the mass media field, scholars have raised the concern that the logic of the social media field is inflecting the logics of other fields (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). In this case, this includes the fields of target audiences and the political field in relation to the human rights advocacy in question.

#### *THE LOGICS OF TARGET AUDIENCE FIELDS*

As the communication strategies of human rights advocates depend on inflecting the beliefs and behaviors of their target audiences, they traditionally have been very attuned to these audiences and their information logics. For example, Human Rights Watch contracted research on United Nations and European Union policymakers, finding out that they tend to get their news from the *New York Times* and the BBC (Powers, 2016). Human rights advocates in Mexico know that their politicians are very switched on to coverage related to them in newspapers, as these newspapers are their gateways to the electorate (McPherson, 2016). Advocates correspondingly focus their communication efforts on the mediating news outlets to which their target audiences pay attention and have developed relationships with their journalists in order to secure visibility (McPherson, 2016; Powers, 2016).

Many policy-makers now have their own social media accounts, which in theory creates another channel for human rights advocates to attract their attention. Opportunities for visibility may have increased, but so has the competition, while attention has an upper limit (Mejias, 2012; Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014). Directing resources towards social media communications generally means redirecting them from somewhere else, and it is not necessarily clear to human rights advocates that this investment is worth it. Some reported that they have little understanding of how much attention target policy-makers pay to social media (Powers, 2016). Others are nervous about how the content exigencies of social media logic, like those outlined by Facebook above, line up with the information logics of their target audiences (McPherson, Forthcoming). Conversely, might the emphasis on the visual in social media communications support the emotional appeal of human rights communication and expand audiences through transcending literacy and linguistic divides (Brysk, 2013)? We may have seen this with the 2015 viral image of the Syrian refugee child, Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach. These are still open questions for human rights advocates and are further complicated by the logics of the broader political field addressed by the advocacy.

*THE LOGICS OF POLITICAL FIELDS*

Human rights advocacy about violations inevitably presents a threat to the government actors identified as perpetrators. An unfortunate consequence, neither uncommon nor diminishing, is the retaliation of these actors through discrediting discourses, physical threats, or attacks to silence their critics. Though the history of information wars between human rights advocates and their opponents is a long one, the digital space is a new battleground (Hankey and Ó Clunaigh, 2013). Whether or not social media is beneficial for human rights advocacy, then, also depends on the logic of the contextual political field vis-à-vis critics (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Pearce and Kendzior, 2012).

To some extent, this battle has been characterized by an arms race, with early adopters in the human rights community able to leverage social media to surface information and exert pressure on governments. These opportunities have, however, become risks as states scrambled to catch up, propelled by their vast advantages of resources and legislative power and by knowledge exchange between regimes (Diamond, 2010; McPherson, 2015b). These advantages have allowed states to engage cutting edge tactics and technologies, including building websites to dupe Syrian activists into downloading malware by purporting to provide security tools; engaging bots, or automated Twitter accounts, to sabotage activist hashtags such as the ones protesting the 2014 disappearance of 43 students in Mexico; and reporting activist content during the Arab Spring as a contravention of social media platform community standards (Youmans and York, 2012; Scott-Railton and Marquis-Boire, 2013; Finley, 2015). States' legislative power can also force the complicity of social media companies, including compelling them to hand over user profile information. The collection of user profile information is one area where the logics of social media platforms and states overlap, as corporate surveillance for the purposes of selling user data to advertisers tracks many data points, such as name and location, useful to governments bent on identifying dissidents.

A political context in which states use the digital footprints of human rights advocates against them has a double-bind dampening effect on their social media visibility. On the one hand, if advocates do not anticipate their adversaries' tactics, they may inadvertently jeopardize their security. On the other, advocates may very well know of these tactics because government actors are using them to create a chilling effect on the public sphere, as was the recent case in Azerbaijan (Pearce and Kendzior, 2012). As sketched above, it is clear the visibility of social media advocacy goes far beyond whether or not human rights advocates use it, but depends also on the logics of various intersecting fields. These logics do not, however, have blanket effects on human rights NGOs; rather, these effects are variegated according to the respective resources of NGOs.

**RISK, VISIBILITY, AND INEQUALITY**

As we have seen, the rise of social media creates a host of uncertainties for human rights advocates. Uncertainty begets a certain kind of risk – the perception of hazards combined with the impossibility of knowing their likelihoods (Lupton, 2013). The risks felt by human rights advocates about social media use are in line with the broader 'digital risk society' in which risks are particularly 'lively' and increasingly unknowable given the rapid evolution and growing penetration of technology (Lupton, 2016, p. 302). The inscrutability of social media logic leads to a variety of risks, including the risk of expending precious resources on social media advocacy only to have visibility stymied by opaque algorithms. The uncertain compatibility of social media content with target audiences' information logics means that even if human rights NGOs master social media logics, their advocacy

may fall on deaf ears – again, a waste of time and money. Whether or not their social media advocacy received attention from target audience fields, adversary actors in broader political fields may be sharply attuned to NGOs' digital activity. The possibility or probability of this surveillance creates security risks for human rights advocates. It is not hard to see that these risks can have a dampening effect on the production of social media advocacy, while their accompanying hazards can have a dampening effect on both its production and its reception.

These risks are not experienced universally by all actors in the field of human rights NGOs. Rather, the ability to mitigate 'differential risk' is associated with access to resources, and resources vary across actors in the human rights NGO field, just as they do across all fields ( Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991, p. 126). Financial capital, for example, can buy visibility in the form of social media advertisements and can pay for target audience research. Offline social capital can translate into online social media networks as well as into cultural capital through knowledge exchange. Cultural capital in terms of social media literacy allows advocates to construct popular content, to evade reports of problematic content, and to minimize the risk of mistakes and miscalculations detrimental to NGOs' hard-won symbolic capital (McPherson, Forthcoming). Cultural capital in terms of digital security – too meager among members of the human rights community – reduces exposure (Hankey and Ó Clunaigh, 2013).

A recent study made only too clear how the distribution of resources within the human rights NGO field translates into social media visibility. Of 257 human rights NGOs, 92 percent of the group's total Twitter followers, 90 percent of YouTube views, and 81 percent of Facebook likes belonged to only 10 percent of the NGOs, which were also those with the most financial resources (Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014). This is in line with other research that has shown that inequalities of visibility are, if anything, amplified online (e.g. Hindman, 2010). Though the distribution of social media visibility within the field of human rights NGOs is of concern in and of itself, it also has implications for the individual victims and witnesses of violations on whose behalf these organizations are advocating (McPherson, 2016). Violations that are the subject of advocacy at less-resourced organizations face the social media visibility barriers confronting those NGOs. Those taken up by better-resourced organizations will fare better – but only if they are represented in line with the logics of the fields across which these organizations are communicating.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, it is clear that unpicking how communication is mediated by the fields it traverses tempers the techno-optimistic view that conducting advocacy on social media will result in greater visibility for human rights. Though, undoubtedly, social media has enabled visibility and participation in particular cases, for many others, it has heightened uncertainty and inequality (Hindman, 2010; Mejias, 2012; Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014). The rise of the social media logic has inflected the logics of other fields, from that of human rights NGOs, to target audiences and the political field (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). The social media logic, which is commercial and centers on promoting popular content and eliminating problematic content, is notoriously opaque in its mechanics due to proprietary algorithms and a lack of clarity around human versus machine decisions. The intersection of social media logics with the logics governing the attention of target audiences is also opaque, and human rights advocates are not sure how these audiences will respond to content tailored for social media visibility – if it is visible to them at all. State adversaries, whose logics with respect to human rights critics have often involved repression, have used advocates' social media communications

covertly or overtly against them. It is likely that better-resourced actors in the human rights NGO field are more able to understand social media logics and the opportunities and risks they create for advocates – while the less-resourced are potentially left further and further behind.

The techno-optimist view of social media advocacy rightfully points out the medium's potential for providing new channels of not just visibility, but also accountability, mobilization, and other benefits for social, political, and economic freedom (Diamond, 2010). Yet, in stopping there, this view also has many shortcomings – not least the oversight of inequalities outlined in this chapter. Additional shortcomings include an amnesia about how past liberation technologies have been used for *and* against freedom as well as a myopia about how much progress is actually due to offline rather than online activity (Diamond, 2010; Mejias, 2012; Shapiro, 2015). Furthermore, by celebrating the emancipatory potential of social media platforms, this view elides their commercial logics and thereby becomes a discourse that plays into the hands of social media companies wishing to benefit from association with democratic projects. In so doing, this perspective falls into line with the long-standing discourse, renewed with each ICT invention, that technology creates progress (Mansell, 2010; Fuchs, 2012; Waisbord, 2015).

Though techno-optimism has no doubt waned as social media spaces become more commercial, opaque, and surveilled, empirical research counter-balancing this perspective remains sorely needed. The framework outlined here – focused on visibility, advocacy, and NGOs – provides a good starting point for examining the intersection of social media and human rights. Future research should, however, also stretch beyond this to consider other metrics such as representation, other practices such as fact-finding, and other participants such as the amateurs whose labor is increasingly incorporated, via technology, into previously professional human rights practices (e.g. Bair, 2014; McPherson, 2015a; Land, 2016). Other methods, less familiar for the scholars of human rights and of media and communications, may also be in order – such as reverse-engineering algorithms and conducting social network analysis. Beyond benefiting the literature, this research will also support human rights defenders, for whom the logic of social media and its impacts on their own practices and those of relevant other fields remain opaque. This opacity creates risk, and risk can be silencing. Clarity, therefore, can support human rights visibility.

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