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Human rights organizations and online agenda setting

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to better understand agenda setting by international human rights organizations in the online environment and at the same time contribute to agenda-setting theory. The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the area of human rights is clarified, and agenda-setting and related concepts are discussed.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The study focuses on how attention is drawn to human rights issues in online communication by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International. A content analysis of online forums of HRW and Amnesty International was conducted by monitoring their web sites and Facebook and Twitter pages over a period of 3 months. In addition, two expert interviews with representatives of Amnesty Finland were conducted to better understand how the organization's online communication activities relate to its policies in drawing attention to human rights.

Findings – Based on this study, drawing attention to human rights issues is a goal that leads to active online communication. NGOs aim at attracting attention to their issues online by initiating a dialogue via online forums and motivating the public to participate in activities that may influence the media and the political agenda. The existing agenda-setting research tends to emphasize the role of journalists in setting the public agenda, and mentions NGOs primarily as a source for journalists and as a political player. The online environment shows, however, that these NGOs mostly aim at setting the public agenda to create social change, while the media and political agenda are also not forgotten.

Research limitations/implications – This study suggests that the interdependence of the media, public and political agendas is more complex than has thus far been considered in agenda-setting theory, especially in the current online environment. It investigates online agenda-setting by two international NGOs, but does not discuss the role of the media or the public at large in their relationship with these NGOs. As this study has a limited time-frame, a content analysis over a longer period and interviews with representatives of a wider variety of NGOs could be a next step. Future research could also compare the online communication of NGOs with that of profit organisations.

Practical implications – The findings show how agenda setting is supported by intricate multi-platform activities in the present-day online environment by the organizations studied in order to initiate a dialogue on societal issues. This suggests that in the online environment, the media, public and political agendas are becoming increasingly interrelated and within this triangle the public agenda seems to be gaining further in importance.

Originality/value – The impact that NGOs have on today's society is growing, and hence studying their online agenda setting is valuable from the perspective of corporate communication. International NGOs early on recognised the value of online communication.

Keywords – Agenda setting, social media, Internet, human rights, NGOs.

Paper type - Research paper

1. Introduction

Globalization has changed the environment in which international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) function. The changing environment calls for new agenda-setting tactics and online communication strategies. Currently, many NGOs are searching for ways to reach large public groups, companies and governments globally. In order to do so, NGOs must distinguish themselves from competing organizations.

An essential aim for NGOs is to get their messages onto the media, public and political agendas. In this way issues can become salient in the arena of public debate. Moreover, NGOs can initiate social change by using online communication and inviting the public to participate in debate on an issue. Through issue salience and public debate, NGOs can attract more people and invite them to participate in grass-root level activities, including activism. Thus, the role of NGOs in the public arena can grow, as can their impact on political agendas. Also, NGOs can influence decision-makers directly, thereby becoming part of the legislative process regarding issues of relevance to them.

Earlier, agenda-setting theory showed how the media agenda may influence the public agenda (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989), while more recently researchers have pointed to the interdependence that subsists between the media, public and political agendas (Young and McCarthy, 2009). Thus far, the role of companies has mainly been mentioned as a source for journalists, while interest groups have been mentioned in relation to the political agenda. The emphasis has been on understanding the role of the press in setting the public agenda, which in turn could influence the political agenda. However, nowadays the prevalence of online communication channels creates opportunities for organizations to interact directly with publics. This study examines the phenomenon of agenda setting in the online environment from the perspective of NGOs.

The study combines a literature study with some empirical research, a content analysis of online platforms and expert interviews. Its purpose is to enhance understanding of agenda setting in the online environment by international human rights organizations. The study focuses on two NGOs, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW), and how they draw attention to human rights issues. These NGOs were selected for the reason that they are the biggest and most well-known international human rights organizations.

1.1 The role of NGOs

Non-governmental organisations, NGOs, are “private, non-profit, professional organizations, with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals” (Clarke, 1998: 36). Commonly, NGOs not only focus on welfare but also on a wider array of societal issues, including e.g. nature protection and animal rights. The field of NGOs and their operations is hard to classify, since these organizations are very diverse

(Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2002). According to Bob (2002), many researchers see NGOs as moral entrepreneurs rather than organisations. The role of NGOs as a countervailing power is created by mobilizing public support and bringing sensitive issues to public and political notice. They often make the impossible possible, by doing what governments cannot or will not do (Simmons, 1998).

It is clear that many societal problems cannot be solved by governments or profit organizations alone (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2002). Nowadays NGOs are included in the decision-making process. They urge governments and profit organisations to respect human rights and include local development programs in their organizational operations (Evuleocha, 2005; Dhir, 2007). Financial freedom is undoubtedly a resource for NGOs, as also are legitimacy, information and knowledge (Yanacopulos, 2005).

NGOs may feel that societal change cannot be initiated at government level but only from the bottom up. The more people NGOs can attract in support of their operations, the more power they may have in the eyes of decision-makers. It is the public that can create change processes (Goss, 2001), and therefore NGOs encourage public participation at the grass-roots level, including the public in their operations, e.g. by writing letters, framing petitions, and organizing demonstrations and user boycotts (Scholte, 1999).

NGOs function differently from profit organisations, since they seek political impact instead of profits (Blood, 2004). Despite their differences, profit organizations and NGOs also share similarities. NGOs and profit organizations both seek to generate attention to topics related to their goals. The fact that NGOs market products, i.e. campaigns and ideologies (Blood, 2004), forces them to distinguish themselves from other NGOs, their competitors. There are signs that this competition has weakened the support for and effectiveness of many NGOs (Ohanyan, 2009).

Undoubtedly, NGOs have power in the global arena, if not politically, then as pressure groups. As a result, some observers fear they may evolve from watchdogs and grass-root movements into power holders. Moreover, NGOs may not be governed democratically. But although they may also suffer from elitism and bureaucracy, in recent years NGOs have provided solutions to problems without being perceived as interfering (Hoffman, 2004). NGOs initiate discussion about societal issues, thus enhancing dialogue between the public and decision-makers. Human rights organizations aim at social change by drawing attention to human rights violations.

The General Assembly of the United Nations presented the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 10, 1948, just two years after the end of the Second World War. The declaration has been adopted by almost all of the member countries. However, it is not legally binding and human rights violations are common and occur in every part of the world. Indeed there is little will to protect basic human rights in many countries (Spini and Doise, 1998). Although dictators and hostile governments may ignore human rights, they also seek to maintain a positive image in the global arena and cannot fully silence human rights NGOs (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Human rights organizations try to generate attention to human rights and initiate discussion on sensitive issues such as human trafficking. This paper is focused on agenda setting and how this is addressed in online communication by human rights NGOs.

1.2 Agenda setting

To understand how human rights organizations draw attention to human rights issues, the agenda-setting theory is utilized. The theory of agenda setting, which was proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on the basis of earlier work by, e.g., Lippmann (1922), postulates that a clear connection exists between news media coverage and public opinion. The basic assumption of the agenda-setting theory is that the news media in particular, more than the media in general, have an influence on public opinion (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005).

This does not mean that the press is successful in swaying their audience to adopt a certain point of view, but rather that there is a high level of correspondence between the amount of coverage given to issues and the level of importance assigned to these issues by people who have been exposed to media reports (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). An agenda is a list of issues discussed and ranked according to their importance. In agenda setting, the salience of issues or objects viewed in the news media is transferred to the public as knowledge (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002). Agenda-setting theory explains how issues reported in the media can become important among the public. In other words: what the media report, people at large may see as more important. When reporting issues, the media add emphasis to some of these (Sheafer, 2007). The coverage of issues by the media has an effect, but the level of salience that an issues gains varies from one issue to another (Dunaway, Branton and Abrajano, 2010; Walgrave, Soroka, Nuytemans, 2008).

To understand agenda setting, priming and framing are important concepts. In priming, the media repeat and emphasize the importance of issues and, this way, particular issues appear more relevant in the eyes of the public (Weaver, 2007). Framing stresses certain aspects of issues over others, and thus it is a selective process (Lecheler and De Vreese, 2010). It occurs when the particular way in which issues are characterized in the media has an influence on how they are understood by the audience (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Through priming and framing, the mass media shape the audience's views on issues (Entman, 2007).

Through the media agenda, journalists can influence which issues are high not only on the public but also on the political agenda. The media, public and political agendas are interrelated. Weaver (1990) suggests that the media agenda is, in fact, formed together by politicians, their advisors and journalists. In this way, the agendas of the public, the media and the decision-makers are unified (Young and McCarthy, 2009). However, the time lag for inter-agenda influence remains debatable, as there is no conclusive evidence showing how long it takes for an issue to become salient in another agenda (Stroud and Kenski, 2007; Winter and Eyal, 1981). Consequently, the media are not the only agenda setters: "the public and the news media are joint participants in the agenda-setting process" (McCombs, 1997: 437).

Uscinski (2009) argues that the classical agenda-setting theory leads to overestimation of the power of the media to influence public opinion, and proposes the concept of an audience-driven framework, where the public influences the media. In audience-driven agenda setting, issues discussed by the public lead the media to adjust their agenda. Much research on agenda setting indeed focuses on the role of the news media, and although journalists create the agenda of the news media, the reality is more complex as many actors are involved in agenda setting. Journalists are approached by various sources attempting to get their issues on the media agenda

(Moreno and Kiouisis, 2009). Where the agenda-setting literature mentions the role of organizations, it is mainly as sources for journalists or in relation to the political agenda. As agenda setting is an important goal of NGOs, especially for human rights organizations that need to generate attention to human rights violations, investigating their agenda setting may bring a fresh perspective to the debate. This is even more the case in the online environment. The prevalence of online communication may change the current agenda hierarchy and thus the inter-relationships between the media, public and political agendas.

1.3 Online communication and agenda setting

Online communication has challenged traditional media outlets as the universal agenda-setting outlet (Meraz, 2009). It has become the new mass medium (Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002). According to Wallsten (2007), the public, through blogs and other social media, can shape the media agenda, but this is not self-evident and tends to be issue-related. Online communication has benefited international NGOs since it is a useful tool for mobilizing people across borders, allowing discussion among several participants (Kiely, 2005). NGOs also organize events, using online communication, to get their issues on the media agenda. With newsworthy events, they find themselves competing for space in the media (Oliver and Maney, 2000). The competition for a slot in the news is fierce, which is why NGOs could benefit from alternative independent 'news outlets' on the Internet.

There are also other reasons for favouring online communication. The Internet offers greater visibility and an opportunity to make direct connections (Fortunati, Sarrica, O'Sullivan, Balcytiene, Harro-Loit, Macgregor, Roussou, Salaverría, deLuca, 2009). If the media or politicians are unaware of or reluctant to discuss human rights violations, then individual people and NGOs have the possibility to speak about these issues online. Online communication offers individuals, groups, journalists, politicians and organizations a lively platform, e.g. to express opinions and connect with like-minded people. Internet users can discuss issues and subsequently influence agenda setting (Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002).

Naturally, the online media do not, in any way, have absolute power or autonomy. Selective exposure (Hutchings, 2001; Mendelsohn, 1973) also exists in online communication. If bloggers are not discussing issues deemed important, they may be excluded from the media and political debate (Wallsten, 2007). Similarly, issues that do not attract much interest in online discussions may not be seen as pressing or worthy of the public's interest, and as a consequence are not transferred to the media agenda by journalists (Uscinski, 2009).

Human rights organizations attempt to have their issues perceived as salient and worthy of attention. Media and initiative campaigns can be used to increase public awareness and understanding of issues (Tolbert, McNeal and Smith, 2003). In this paper online communication is investigated to find out how human rights organizations draw attention to their key issues using internet platforms.

2. Methodology

This study aims at understanding agenda setting by international human rights organizations in the online environment. The research problem is how human rights organizations draw attention to human rights issues on the Internet. This is addressed by two research questions.

RQ1: What online communication activities are used by human rights organizations to initiate interaction on human rights issues? RQ2: How are the online communication activities of human rights organizations linked with organizational agenda-setting policies?

The study focused on online communication by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, since they are the two most well-known and biggest international human rights NGOs, both have a long history, and both combine their own research with action-taking. HRW was established in 1978, after the creation of Helsinki Watch, to support citizen groups by monitoring governments in the Soviet sphere of influence as well as to shed light on human rights violations. In 1988, after the creation of multiple area Watches, they formally adopted the name Human Rights Watch. The headquarters of Human Rights Watch is located in New York, USA.

The foundation of Amnesty International (Amnesty) in 1961 was initiated by the article 'The Forgotten Prisoners' by the British lawyer Peter Benenson in the Observer. The article addressed the imprisonment of two Portuguese students, who were imprisoned for raising their wine glasses in a toast to freedom. After the article had also been published in many other newspapers, thousands of people all around the world offered to help. Amnesty's general secretariat is located in London, the United Kingdom.

To answer the first research question a content analysis of the online communication platforms of HRW and Amnesty International was conducted. The aim was to see how both organizations utilize online means of communication. By checking the organizational web pages it became clear that both organizations actively used Facebook and Twitter, and thus these platforms were also included in the investigation. Over a period of 3 months the organizations' web sites and their Facebook and Twitter pages were monitored (RQ1).

To answer the second research question, two expert-interviews with representatives of Amnesty Finland were conducted to better understand how the organization's online communication activities further the organization's goal of drawing attention to human rights issues and in this way support its agenda setting (RQ2). Although it was not possible to obtain cooperation for an interview with HRW, the organizations were deemed similar enough to provide insight into the purpose of their online activities and how their agenda setting is supported by online communication. However, to improve the reliability of the results, the similarities and differences between the two organizations were addressed in the interviews with representatives of Amnesty.

2.1 Content analysis

To investigate the online communication by HWR and Amnesty a content analysis of their respective Internet sites and Facebook and Twitter pages was conducted (for the web addresses see tables 1 and 2). The aim was to monitor how both organizations utilize online communication in a qualitative analysis. The researchers collected the data over a three-month period, from mid-February to mid-May 2010. The Internet sites, Facebook and Twitter pages

were visited twice a week, on Monday and Friday. On the Internet sites the news and report sections and the links that were included in those sections were observed. On Facebook and Twitter, the posts and tweets, including links, were analysed. The researchers' role in relation to the research topic was silent and non-participatory.

The findings were coded according to groups of variables for further analysis, focusing on: (1) the kind of content found; (2) style of language; (3) how the web platforms were linked; and (4) whether discussion was generated among users. The content of the three online platforms was monitored simultaneously to see if there were similarities in messages and connections between the online forums. During the three-month observation period a weekly summary of the content was displayed in a table format using Excel spread sheet software, one file for each organization. The Internet site, Facebook and Twitter were in rows while the above-mentioned groups of variables formed the columns of the Excel file. The observations were made to describe the online communication activities of HRW and Amnesty International, and see how the web platforms initiated interaction on human rights issues.

2.2 Expert interviews

To understand how online communication activities serve the organizational aim of drawing further attention to human rights issues, two expert interviews with representatives of Amnesty Finland were conducted. It was not possible to obtain cooperation for an interview with HRW; however, the similarities and differences between the organizations were addressed in the Amnesty interviews. The first interview was with an expert in online communication from Amnesty Finland and focused on how the organization utilizes online communication, while the second interview was with the executive director of Amnesty Finland and focused on how the organization's online activities contribute to its policies in drawing attention to human rights issues.

Both of the semi-structured interviews lasted one hour and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The first interview addressed: (1) the NGO and its communication goals, (2) the NGO's agenda setting and online communication. The questions for the second interview addressed: (1) the NGO and agenda setting, (2) its goals, target audiences, and role in society. During the interviews, additional questions were asked, turning the interviews into a free-flowing discussion. One of the researchers served as interviewer. After the interviews, the collected data were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed by the researchers, focusing on online communication strategies and their relation to achieving the goal of drawing attention to human rights issues. For the purpose of the study the answers were translated.

3. Results

The mixed method study threw light on how these human rights NGOs used communication and agenda setting on the Internet to further their policies.

3.1 Content analysis

During the observation period, the international online forums of both international human rights organizations showed considerable activity. The findings for the Internet page, Facebook and Twitter will be explained below, first for HRW and then for Amnesty International.

3.1.1 Online communication by HRW

Table 1 shows an overview of the international online forums of HRW, based on the analysis of the Internet content during the three-month monitoring period.

Table 1 Overview of the investigated international online platforms of Human Rights Watch

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Main web site: | www.hrw.org (287 posts) |
| <i>(1) Content</i> | Formal, lengthy documents, annual and topical reports as PDF files, interviews, videos, and links |
| <i>(2) Style</i> | Official reporting style, offering information and news stories depending on their content; also available e.g. in Dutch, French, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish |
| <i>(3) Links</i> | Present in various news items; often to previous stories or news items on HRW's web sites, videos, interviews, letters, and sometimes to outside web sites |
| <i>(4) Discussion</i> | No discussion, but information provided on 16 groups of topics including multiple issues; also available by region; one section on taking action; almost all the topics were updated once or twice a week |
| Facebook: | www.facebook.com/HumanRightsWatch (148 posts) |
| <i>(1) Content</i> | International Slogan: "Tyranny has a witness"; short news items, with links to external sites |
| <i>(2) Style</i> | Official and brief |
| <i>(3) Links</i> | Links are available to multiple external sites, mainly to hrw.org, on each post |
| <i>(4) Discussion</i> | Many posts generated discussion among Facebook users; many posts received between 1- 103 comments and likes between 19 and 119 |
| Twitter: | http://twitter.com/hrw (349 tweets) |
| <i>(1) Content</i> | Short items of news and information, only 140 signs allowed |
| <i>(2) Style</i> | Brief and detailed |
| <i>(3) Links</i> | Every tweet has links, most often to hrw.org |
| <i>(4) Discussion</i> | No notable discussion, tweets linked to other twitter accounts |

HRW's web site

On its web site, HRW represents itself as a researcher, informant and official human rights expert. It provides research reports based on investigations of human rights issues and violations, in this way sharing information with the wider public and promoting awareness rather than direct participation. HRW's Facebook and Twitter provide people with information in an informal environment, and invite them to visit the main web site www.hrw.org for more detailed and 'official' information. During the period 287 news postings were made. As mentioned before, they were analysed according to the kind of content found, the style of the language, how the web platforms were linked and whether discussion was generated among users.

All the materials, including texts, photos, videos and reports, provided information in a neutral, matter-of-fact way. The *content* provided was based on research conducted by HRW's researchers in the field. The pictures and video clips had some dramatic content, but with a clear intent to inform. These photos and videos included information on human rights violations, as well as on the life of refugees and persecuted people.

In *style*, what emerged clearly from scrutiny of the HRW web site www.hrw.org was the formal quality of the language used. The texts on research and the policy side of human rights work were presented with an official sounding tone, although the analysed section was titled news and reports. Often, versions in other languages were available.

Many of the news items and reports had *links*, such as videos or reports made by HRW for e.g. the United Nations.

The web site showed no *discussion* but detailed information on 16 groups of topics. The topics varied from arms to women's rights. Also, issues were available by region. There was one section on the web site where the users could read about eight special cases, sign pre-written petitions or find out whom to contact in order to take action. The most updated posts were: Children's rights, ESC (economic, social and cultural rights), Counterterrorism, Torture and Women's rights.

HRW's Facebook and Twitter

HRW takes a strong stand on the top of its Facebook page with the slogan "Tyranny has a witness". By this means HRW is cast in the role of that witness, as an authority on human rights issues exposing human rights violators.

The *content* of the pages consisted of brief news items that linked to external pages for background information. During the observation period 148 posts and 349 tweets were made.

In *style*, the Facebook and Twitter posts were short and compact, indicating that the messages were urgent and inviting people to learn more.

All news items contained *links* to external sites, such as HRW's main web site, YouTube videos, and events supported or recommended by HRW. Users were directed from one site to another, ultimately visiting Facebook, Twitter and the main Internet site.

The Facebook pages included *discussion* of many campaigns; while some news items were accompanied by brief comments, discussion mostly was initiated by the users themselves, not HRW. Some news items generated active comments, varying from just one comment to 103 comments. In their comments, the public often openly and passionately shared opinions and provided many external links. On Twitter, discussion was not notably present.

It can be concluded that HRW makes active use of online communication, creating interaction with members of the public. All of the online tools were used by HRW once a day, or more, and it was only on rare occasions that tweets, Facebook posts or news bulletins were absent. The main web site stresses research results and detailed formal information, while on Facebook and Twitter short messages invite users to find out more. When a new report was posted on www.hrw.org, it was soon mentioned in a tweet and/or Facebook post. In this way, all the online forums were combined to form a single multi-platform online tool.

3.1.2 Online communication by Amnesty International

Table 1 shows an overview of the international online forums of Amnesty International, based on the analysis of the Internet content during the three-month monitoring period.

Table 2 Overview of the investigated international online platforms of Amnesty International (USA)

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Main web site: | www.amnesty.org (163 posts) |
| (1) <i>Content</i> | Formal, lengthy documents, special and topical reports as PDF files, links included in some news, special sections for videos and good news |
| (2) <i>Style</i> | Official reporting style, offering information and news stories depending on their content; also available e.g. in Dutch, French, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish |
| (3) <i>Links</i> | Present in various news items; often to previous stories or news items on Amnesty's web sites, videos, interviews, letters, and sometimes to outside web sites |
| (4) <i>Discussion</i> | No discussion, but information provided on 27 groups of topics including multiple issues; also available by region; sections on joining in, donating and taking action; almost all the topics were updated once or twice a week. |
| Facebook: | www.facebook.com/pages/.../Amnesty.../111658128847068 (126 posts) |
| (1) <i>Content</i> | Amnesty US Slogan: "Fighting the bad guys since 1961"; short news items, with links to external sites |
| (2) <i>Style</i> | Official and brief |
| (3) <i>Links</i> | Links are available to multiple external sites, mainly to amnesty.org , on each post |
| (4) <i>Discussion</i> | Many posts generated discussion among Facebook users; many posts received between 1 to over 100 replies and likes between 3-251. |
| Twitter: | http://twitter.com/AmnestyOnline (270 tweets) |
| (1) <i>Content</i> | Short items of news and information, only 140 signs allowed, 260 tweets |
| (2) <i>Style</i> | Brief and detailed |
| (3) <i>Links</i> | Every tweet has a link, often to www.amnesty.org |
| (4) <i>Discussion</i> | No notable discussion, tweets linked to other twitter accounts |

Amnesty's web site

The web site of Amnesty International shows many similarities with the web site of HRW. Amnesty has three aims: to research human rights violations, report about these violations and generate activism. On Amnesty's web site these three roles have their own sections. On the web

site Amnesty share their research results in detailed news stories and special reports. Amnesty's Facebook and Twitter offer quick news bulletins and urge people to participate in events and sign petitions, while inviting people to visit the web site www.amnesty.org for more 'official' information. During the period 163 news postings were made.

All the materials, such as texts, special reports, photos and videos, provided information in a neutral, matter-of-fact way. The *content* was based on research conducted by Amnesty's researchers and eye witnesses in the field in various countries. The photos and video clips had some dramatic content but with the intent to inform on human rights violations. The sections 'Donate' and 'Join' sought to persuade people to fund Amnesty's operations and join Amnesty's activism.

In *style*, the information posted on Amnesty's web site www.amnesty.org was rather formal. Although Amnesty promotes activism, the texts based on its own research have an overall formal quality to position the organization as an authority on human rights issues. Often, information was available in various language versions.

Many of the news items and reports had *links*, to videos or reports made by Amnesty or e.g. the United Nations.

The web site contained no *discussion*, but detailed information was given on 27 groups of topics. The topics varied from the arms trade to violence against women. Also, news was available by region. There was section on the web site where the users could learn about how to take part in activism, sign pre-written petitions or donate money to Amnesty. The issues most addressed were: economic, cultural and social rights, women's rights and the rise of civil society in Africa and the Middle East.

Amnesty's Facebook and Twitter

There are many similarities between Amnesty (USA) and HRW (USA) in the use of Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, for example, Amnesty positions itself strongly with the slogan "Fighting the bad guys since 1961". By doing so, Amnesty is positioning itself in the role of an activist who is on the side of good. During the observation period Amnesty made 126 posts.

The *content* of the pages consisted of brief news that linked to external pages for background and detailed information. There were 126 Facebook and 260 tweets made during the observation period.

In *style*, both the Facebook and Twitter posts were short, suggesting that the messages were urgent and inviting people to learn more about the issues in question.

All news items contained *links* to external sites, such as Amnesty's main web site, YouTube videos, e-petitions and events organised or recommended by Amnesty. Users were directed from one site to another, ultimately visiting Facebook, Twitter and the main Internet site.

The Facebook pages included *discussion* on many campaigns and contained invitations to events; while some news posts were accompanied by brief comments, discussion was mostly initiated by the users themselves, not Amnesty. Amnesty sometimes replied to comments. Some news generated active comments, varying from one to 119 comments. In their comments, the public shared heated and opinionated comments with some external links. On Twitter, discussion was not visible, just a few re-tweets.

It can be concluded that Amnesty uses online communication by creating multiplatform space online to promote human rights issues. Amnesty seeks to create activism while it disseminates its research results online. It updates its online tools almost daily; only on rare occasions were tweets, Facebook posts or news bulletins absent. The main web site stresses research and activism, and how individuals can have an impact on human rights performance, while donations can also play a part in activism. Amnesty's short messages in Facebook and Twitter invite users to find out more.

In sum, both human rights organizations combined all the online forums to construct an integrated multi-platform online tool. When, for example, a new report was posted on www.hrw.org or on www.amnesty.org, it was soon mentioned in a tweet and Facebook post. The emphasis on content was slightly different; Amnesty also promoted activism next to research in its online forums, whereas HRW focused primarily on research.

3.2 Interview results

In the expert interviews, the relation of the online communication strategies used to the overall policy goal of generating attention to human rights issues was investigated. First, the use by Amnesty of online media is examined and, second, the role of online communication in drawing attention to human rights issues.

3.2.1 Online media

According to the interviewees Amnesty carefully plans its campaigns and means of communication to achieve pre-set goals and achieve the best possible effect. Amnesty Finland follows the same online communication strategy as Amnesty International. The organization feels that online forums can add to the traditional media, as journalists are not always willing to address issues that Amnesty sees as important. It realises, though, that getting its messages through is relatively easy as, according to the interviewee, the organization is one of the most trustworthy brands offering independent and reliable information on human rights.

The online media have had a lasting effect on how Amnesty shares information. The organization intensively uses online communication. Table 2 lists the aim and purpose of Amnesty's online communication channels and is based on information received from the interviewees. This clarifies how the different platforms, including both local and international web platforms, are intended to mesh.

Table 3. Overview of Amnesty’s online platforms

| Name | Aim and purpose |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Main web site www.amnesty.org International | Information channel All annual and campaign related reports and statements can be found here. It serves as a library and database of information on campaigns, and also gives details on how to donate money. |
| Local web site www.amnesty.fi Finnish, similar web sites in other countries | Information and activism channel Information on campaigns and how to join campaigns. Encourages civil activism and is also a channel for financial contributions. |
| Main Facebook page www.facebook.com/pages/.../Amnesty.../111658128847068 International | Information and activism channel Information on campaigns and brief news items. Encourages action- taking and participation, such as signing petitions and visiting the main forum (amnesty.org) for more information. |
| Local Facebook page www.facebook.com/pages/.../Amnesty.../134934386349 Finnish | Information and activism channel, Used for quick sharing of information, when something needs to be addressed regarding a human rights situation. It has three main purposes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Information on up-to-date news and events, (2) Event notifications and invitations , and (3) Quick action-taking requests. It encourages action-taking and participation: signing petitions and visiting the main forum (amnesty.fi) for more information. |
| Main Twitter page http://twitter.com/AmnestyOnline International | Quick information and notification channel Short news items and interesting issues. Direct links to a new site, often to other twitter pages or additional Amnesty forums, e.g. Amnesty.org and Amnesty.org.uk. |
| Local Twitter http://twitter.com/amnestyfinland Finnish, similar web sites in other countries | Quick information and notification channel Channel for quick reactions. Used to share links and persuade people to visit Amnesty.fi to find more information and sign petitions. |

According to the interviewees Amnesty uses multiplatform tactics online. The main sites, both international and Finnish, are used as databases. There, information on all Amnesty’s campaigns can be found, annual and special reports downloaded, and financial donations made. While the main sites are used for information libraries and databases, the Facebook and Twitter pages are used for quick reactions on topical issues.

“We use Facebook in three ways: to inform people about large scale topical issues, to inform about current events/demonstrations, and to ask for quick participation when something is wrong. Facebook is a very useful gadget for quick requests. Of course we also get an idea of what people think about us through Facebook.”

“There are no international limitations or guidelines as to how to use the social media. We can basically do how we see fit. Then, of course, we have unofficial fan sites on

Facebook, where we as an organization have no say in the content. But they are quite funny.”

However, Facebook and Twitter are not used as a tool for two-way communication but mainly for one-way information.

“Of course, they are being monitored and (we) react to questions and answer them. To some extent, I try to tempt people to participate, but this is mostly done on Twitter. We use twitter to persuade people to visit our Amnesty.fi web site.”

According to the interviewees, Amnesty has three main functions, in which online communication has an essential role: (1) to research human rights; (2) to report human rights violations; and (3) to generate activism on the grass-roots level. Although Amnesty has a stronger emphasis on activism than HRW, there are also many similarities and the multi-platform approach online is used by both organizations.

3.2.2 Amnesty and agenda setting

Regarding its strategies, Amnesty follows the guidelines issued by its Secretariat in London. The objective is to ensure alignment in how the organization approaches its self-appointed task of improving human rights worldwide and initiating change in this way. However, the Amnesty organizations set up in different countries also have own strategies, approved in their annual meetings, on important issues.

“Our methods are selected according to the issue. These issues are very diverse, e.g. if we are addressing the issue of a Chinese political prisoner, we may see it as important to implement direct action, since communication with the Chinese authorities will often simply not work. Then we ask people to sign a petition, which has proven effective, and then send these letters to the prison.”

The interviewed executive director stated that the NGO's power comes from combining Amnesty's weight or legitimacy, and its civil activism. This way a change process can be initiated, or at least, decision-makers can, it is hoped, be reached. Activism, or grass-roots support, is valued by Amnesty. Given that human rights violations are big issues and widely condemned, Amnesty feels that the issues frame themselves and do not need PR to influence perception.

“We don't have to frame or shape our core messages. We don't have to sell them or be 'juicy' either. Human rights violations are such an important message. They are sent as they are. We don't want to shock people. That would change our role and would not be smart. We simply tell people 'here we have human rights violations; you can have an influence by writing a letter or coming to our event'. That is how we create contact with the people who take part into our operations.”

Thus, Amnesty sees that all it needs is to get human rights higher on the agenda through getting people interested in these issues or willing to participate in Amnesty's campaigns. Online communication is an important means, next to media relations, to achieving this objective. The

NGO stresses that when people become aware of issues, societal change can occur, e.g. when people become active and sign petitions or send letters as a way of exerting pressure to end human rights violations. Most of Amnesty's messages are aimed at the general public, but the strategies chosen differ. For example, the Violence against Women ('Joku Raja') campaign, carried out in Finland, was aimed at raising awareness and changing the law in Finland regarding violence against women. As the issue is culturally engaging, and has not been widely discussed in the public arena, it required different methods.

"Then we aim to achieve a dialogue, because it is the only way to get through. In situations like this, we can't use petitions or send letters to a man who has assaulted his wife. The situation requires different means to intervene. So, in this campaign there were elements of PR and information sending, seeking donations, and activism as well as lobbying. Also, we had an expert working solely with this campaign, doing influencing and research. This is how we think: if people become aware of human rights violations, some kind of change can occur."

The protection of human rights is a principle that many states have agreed to, but to put it into practice entails that attention be drawn to ongoing human rights violations. The interviewees stated that Amnesty has been very successful in bringing new issues onto the public, media and political agendas. Amnesty thus proclaims itself a permanent member of policy formation coalitions.

"Disappearance (of people)... Amnesty was perhaps the organization that brought this issue onto the public agenda. The International arms trade treaty, no one was talking about it, or even interested. Amnesty started the advocacy work in 2001, arguing that this kind of treaty is needed. In 2003-04 the advocacy work expanded into a larger (public) campaign. In 2005 the UN started a process where the development work for this treaty began and eventually the member states would ratify the treaty. Hence, it was us who brought the issue onto the public agenda."

"Our aim is to bring new issues onto agendas. It is equally important to us to react to existing issues."

Amnesty sees itself as provider of trustworthy information, as well as an initiator of volunteer-based activism. With its knowledge and with the public's participation, it informs decision-makers and seeks political change. Amnesty and HRW both are clearly aware that they need to involve a wider audience to put human rights issues high on the agenda. This explains why they prioritize online communication and pay much attention to it, using multiplatform strategies that carefully inter-relate the information on their main web sites and in social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Human rights NGOs are regarded as experts on human rights issues. The UN resolution on human rights is valued, but it is not a legally binding document and human rights violations occur in all parts of the world. The two NGOs studied here seek to increase the

salience of human rights issues and utilize the opportunities for agenda setting offered by the social media as an essential part of their operations. Both Amnesty and HRW carefully choose online communication strategies for maximum effect in order to initiate public debate. Both discuss their main issues in several online forums.

NGOs mainly derive power from public participation (Scholte, 1999). They need to encourage the public to take part in their campaigns and sign their petitions, to enhance their value in the eyes of decision-makers. Thus, both human rights organizations have gone where the public is: online. The online forums are heavily used by both NGOs. They publish information online and function as content providers without journalistic gate-keeping. Both Amnesty and HRW utilize multiplatform strategies and may be more active online than many governments and business organizations. The main Internet sites serve as databases, providing all the NGO's official information. In addition, Facebook pages and Twitter are used to attract attention and invite people to visit the main site, and to take part in the public debate and activism.

The information on Facebook and Twitter is presented in short messages, strengthening the relevance of the issues, while triggering the curiosity of people to learn more. According to the Amnesty interviewees, social media are used encouraging people to learn more about human rights issues, generating activism and promoting demonstrations or events. The content analysis of the online tools used by HRW suggests that HRW has similar starting points for its communication, although online it focuses more on its role as an expert authority on the topic and less on generating activism.

Agenda setting may be seen as a precondition to be heard in society nowadays. The findings of this study demonstrate that human rights organizations promote information and grass-roots participation, as well as their value as research organizations. An emphasis on grass-roots participation and research characterizes Amnesty, while HRW's online profile rather seems designed to fit their expert role in putting pressure on human rights violators through policy implementation.

To encourage people to support their cause and to cause their messages to be heard by decision-makers, both Amnesty and HRW make intensive use of the Internet and its many forums with strategies that either target the media agenda directly or via the public agenda, with the ultimate goal of influencing the political agenda. The intensive use of internet forums, as observed in this study, indicates that the relative importance of the news media in agenda setting may need to be re-evaluated.

To better understand agenda setting by international human rights organizations in the online environment, this study investigated how two major NGOs draw attention to human rights issues on the Internet. The first research question (RQ1) was: *What online communication activities are used by human rights organizations to initiate interaction on human rights issues?* The findings show that much emphasis is placed on online activities. Platforms are updated continuously and carefully linked in a multiplatform strategy. The social media provide rapid information about new activities, motivate involvement and invite users to access the web site for more detailed information. In this way both NGOs' communication activities serve to maintain inter-related internet platforms aimed at creating awareness of human rights issues and placing them high on the agenda.

The second research question (RQ2) was: *How are the online communication activities of human rights organizations linked with organizational agenda-setting policies?* The interviewees indicated that online activities are crucial in connecting with a wide audience, and hence mainly aim at the public agenda, although this cannot be seen in isolation from the media and political agendas. Through public attention the political agenda may be influenced not only, as mentioned above, in the case of petitions, but also in the case of a campaign aiming at public awareness and simultaneously at changes in legislation. Media attention can follow public attention or it can provide an alternative entry to the political agenda.

The emphasis in this study is different from that of most of the existing agenda-setting research. The focus is not on the influence of the media agenda on the public agenda and either through it or directly on the political agenda, but rather on the public agenda that, possibly reinforced by the media agenda, influences the political agenda.

This study was only a limited attempt to problematize the complexity of agenda setting in today's society. We suggest that there is a need for further research into the inter-relatedness of the public, media and political agendas, as our results indicate that the prevalence of online communication may change our understanding of agenda setting, although it is by no means clear how the picture may change in the years to come. It seems increasingly more difficult to keep the media, public and political agendas apart as they are so heavily intertwined in the social media.

The prevalence of online communication may also influence the relative dominance and the roles of the players involved. NGOs have primarily been mentioned in earlier agenda-setting research as a source for journalists or in the role of a political player, that is as an actor related to the media agenda or the political agenda, but this study suggests that their role in the public agenda is more important. Therefore, we suggest that future research investigates the interaction between the various actors. This may clarify the actual processes leading to the agenda-setting phenomenon, e.g. by including stakeholder theory and issues management.

For practitioners this study indicates that online communication may aim at agenda setting by means of well planned multiplatform strategies that combine the informal environment of the social media for fast real-time discussion, with the more formal environment of an internet site for detailed information.

As this study was based on the literature and only a limited empirical study, a broader investigation would be needed to gain a more complete picture of agenda setting by NGOs in the online environment. Also, the time-frame of the study was limited, and thus a content-analysis over a longer period and interviews with more NGOs is warranted. In addition, a comparison of NGO and company online communication strategies could be initiated. This study showed that for human rights organizations it is important to increase the salience of human rights issues by engaging in online media. It may be that companies have other goals that may call for different strategies in the online environment. It could be argued that agenda setting is especially important for human rights issues, as the principle of human rights is universally accepted and thus, rather than a change in opinions, the primary need is to get these issues high on the public, media and political agendas so as to institute preventive and corrective action in the case of human rights violations.

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