

Exploring the relationship between global Twitter campaigns and domestic law:
methodological challenges and solutions

Reilly Dempsey Willis^a

^aSchool of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Suffolk, Ipswich, UK

r.willis5@uos.ac.uk

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
Information and Communications Technology Law on 19/8/20, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13600834.2020.1807136>

Exploring the relationship between global Twitter campaigns and domestic women's rights: methodological challenges and solutions

This study uses nearly one million Tweets from eight campaigns targeting seven countries to explore the relationship between social media and domestic legal change, specifically in the area of women's rights. The research is underpinned by a critique of the spiral model of human rights change and second wave normative scholarship. The study focuses on quantifying contextual, independent (online behaviours), and dependent variables (legal change) in order to model the effectiveness of campaigns. Using the space of social media presents a wide range of opportunities as well as threats. It may be that these campaigns are indeed leading to the change sought after by domestic women and girls, and that, as many posit, the weight of the international attention leads to positive outcomes. Equally, it may be that the campaigns are ineffective or, worse, lead to harmful government backlashes. This research seeks to understand these outcomes in depth, using empirical data to model the effectiveness of campaigns. This article in particular focusses on the methodological challenges and solutions with this kind of large-scale comparative social media research.

Keywords: social media; human rights; women's rights; transnational advocacy networks; methodology

Introduction

This research initially stemmed from practitioner work; as an activist and an advocate for women's rights it was impossible to ignore the monumental shift to social media campaigning. Yet these online campaigns, despite becoming central to the work of myriad advocacy networks and NGOs, were relatively understudied. Those undertaking and even spearheading the campaigns appeared to shift to social media modalities without first implementing proper monitoring and evaluation processes. The superficial answer was simply that social media was a free, relatively easily accessible communication tool. Why *wouldn't* NGOs want to take advantage?

The reality is that social media is not simply a communication tool.¹ It is a much more complex, intricate, and organic space. It can be exploited, mediated, censored, and co-opted. It can also open dialogue, bring new voices to the fore, overcome inequalities and power imbalances, break down geographic barriers, and spread information at speed.² The problem therefore is, with all of these potential utilities and outcomes, how can human rights advocates responsibly, ethically, and effectively utilise the space for the latter rather than the former? The first step, I argue, is empirical evidence.

This article provides some insight into how that empirical evidence can be gathered and used in a specific and targeted way to improve understanding of social media campaigning. The paper first presents a brief overview of the theoretical

¹ María Paula Martínez, 'Latino/a Gender Mobilizations in Times of Social Media' (2018) 20 *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 161; Kate Ott, 'Social Media and Feminist Values: Aligned or Maligned?' (2018) 39 *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 93; Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Second edition, Polity Press 2015); Chrysi Dagoula, 'Mapping Political Discussions on Twitter: Where the Elites Remain Elites' (2019) 7 *Media and Communication* 225; Sebastian Stier, Wolf J Schünemann and Stefan Steiger, 'Of Activists and Gatekeepers: Temporal and Structural Properties of Policy Networks on Twitter' (2018) 20 *New Media & Society* 1910.

² Tilly A Gurman, Catherine Nichols and Elyssa S Greenberg, 'Potential for Social Media to Challenge Gender-Based Violence in India: A Quantitative Analysis of Twitter Use' (2018) 26 *Gender & Development* 325; 'Bring Back Our Girls: Boko Haram Should Be Scared of a Hashtag' *The Independent* (13 May 2014)

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-bring-back-our-girls-campaign-is-working-boko-haram-should-be-scared-of-a-hashtag-9360830.html>> accessed 11 December 2018.

framework, an in-depth presentation of methodology, and tentative overall conclusions. As this study is, to the best of my knowledge, novel and innovative, several methodological challenges emerged. This paper focusses primarily on how the study benefitted from turning these barriers into strengths through creative yet rigorous research design. The study examines in detail eight Twitter-driven, transnational campaigns targeting domestic legal change for women in seven countries. Twitter behaviours are identified and explored alongside detailed analysis of human rights change, attempting to better understand how and why some Twitter campaigns are associated with more positive versus more negative outcomes.

Existing Research

This study begins to fill a gap in existing literature, scholarship, and perhaps most importantly empirical research. While there is extensive work theoretically exploring social media and its role in transnational advocacy networks and politics,³ less has been

³ Richard D Waters and Meredith Lord, 'Examining How Advocacy Groups Build Relationships on the Internet' (2009) 14 *International Journal of Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Marketing* 231; Bart Cammaerts, 'Protest Logics and the Mediation Opportunity Structure' (2012) 27 *European Journal of Communication* 117; Dv Shah and others, 'Information and Expression in a Digital Age - Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation' (2005) 32 *COMMUNICATION RESEARCH* 531; Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White and John Peloza, 'The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action' (2014) 40 *Journal of Consumer Research* 1149; Cerise L Glenn, 'Activism or "Slacktivism?": Digital Media and Organizing for Social Change' (2015) 29 *Communication Teacher* 81.

done empirically.⁴ This research aims to break relatively new ground in social media research, using comparative, quantitative, ‘big’ data and modelling to provide an evidence base for better understanding campaign behaviours and legal outcomes. It is not new to use these models; however it is unique to use a large scale comparative approach, modelled on a critical approach to the spiral model, specifically addressing women’s rights.⁵

Theoretical Grounding

Constructivist Approach

The study began with the development of a strong theoretical framework to inform the research design and methodology. Again, as this research is attempting to break relatively new ground, it was critical to ensure that all decisions and directions came from a theoretically justified, well established foundation.

The theoretical framework is, in its most basic form, a constructivist endeavour, with human rights change measured primarily through the domestic institutionalisation of norms.⁶ The approach taken in this research is best summarised by Adler: ‘the main

⁴ Henrik Serup Christensen, ‘Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?’ (2011) 16 First Monday

<<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3336>> accessed 7 July 2016.

⁵ Ben O’Loughlin and others, ‘Twitter and Global Political Crises: Cycles of Insecurity in #PrayforParis and #PrayforSyria’ (2017) 10 Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication 175; Andrew Chadwick, Cristian Vaccari and Ben O’Loughlin, ‘Do Tabloids Poison the Well of Social Media? Explaining Democratically Dysfunctional News Sharing’ [2018] New Media & Society 4255.

⁶ See, e.g. Emanuel Adler, ‘Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics’ (1997) 3 European Journal of International Relations 319; John Gerard

goal of constructivism is to provide both theoretical and empirical explanations of social institutions and social change with the help of the combined effect of agents and social structures.’⁷ Here the study aims to provide empirical explanations of political change (involving both domestic and international structures and agents) via social media (structures) and its users (agents). The role of language and information, central to constructivism, is also of the utmost importance in this work.⁸

This study uses a constructivist definition of norms: ‘standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations’⁹ or refined as ‘a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity.’¹⁰ Under these definitions, accepted norms

Ruggie, ‘What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge’ (1998) 52 *International Organization* 855; Thomas Risse, ‘“Let’s Argue!”: Communicative Action in World Politics’ (2000) 54 *International Organization* 1.

⁷ Adler (n 6) 325.

⁸ See, e.g. Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’ (1992) 46 *International Organization* 391; Richard J Evanoff, ‘Universalist, Relativist, and Constructivist Approaches to Intercultural Ethics’ (2004) 28 *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 439; Matthew J Hoffmann, ‘Is Constructivist Ethics an Oxymoron?’ (2009) 11 *International Studies Review* 231; Risse (n 6).

⁹ Friedrich Kratochwil and John Gerard Ruggie, ‘International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State’ (2009) 40 *International Organization* 753.

¹⁰ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics and Political Change’ (1998) 52 *International Organization* 887, 891; See also Peter J Katzenstein, Robert O Keohane and Stephen D Krasner, ‘International Organization and the Study

thus create obligations and consequences for non-compliance.¹¹ It is this approach to understanding norms that is used to gauge and assess human rights change.

The Spiral Model of Human Rights Change

The spiral model of human rights change was developed from the analysis of a series of case studies, with the aim to develop a consistent and widely applicable model of how states can move from a human rights repressive regime to full institutionalisation of the norms in question.¹² The authors of the model found that many states followed a similar pattern, working through five phases of change. As evidenced by the quote above, a key component of the model is the role of transnational advocacy networks and foreign (i.e. Western) pressure.

In sum, we argue that the diffusion of international norms in the human rights area crucially depends on the establishment and the sustainability of networks among domestic and international actors who manage to link up with

of World Politics' (1998) 52 *International Organization* 645; Audie Klotz, 'Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and U.S. Sanctions Against South Africa' (1995) 49 *International Organization* 451.

¹¹ Andrew P Cortell and James W Davis, 'Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms: A Research Agenda' (2000) 2 *International Studies Review* 65; Robert Axelrod, 'An Evolutionary Approach to Norms' (1986) 80 *The American Political Science Review* 1095.

¹² Thomas Risse, Stephen C Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge Univ Press 1999).

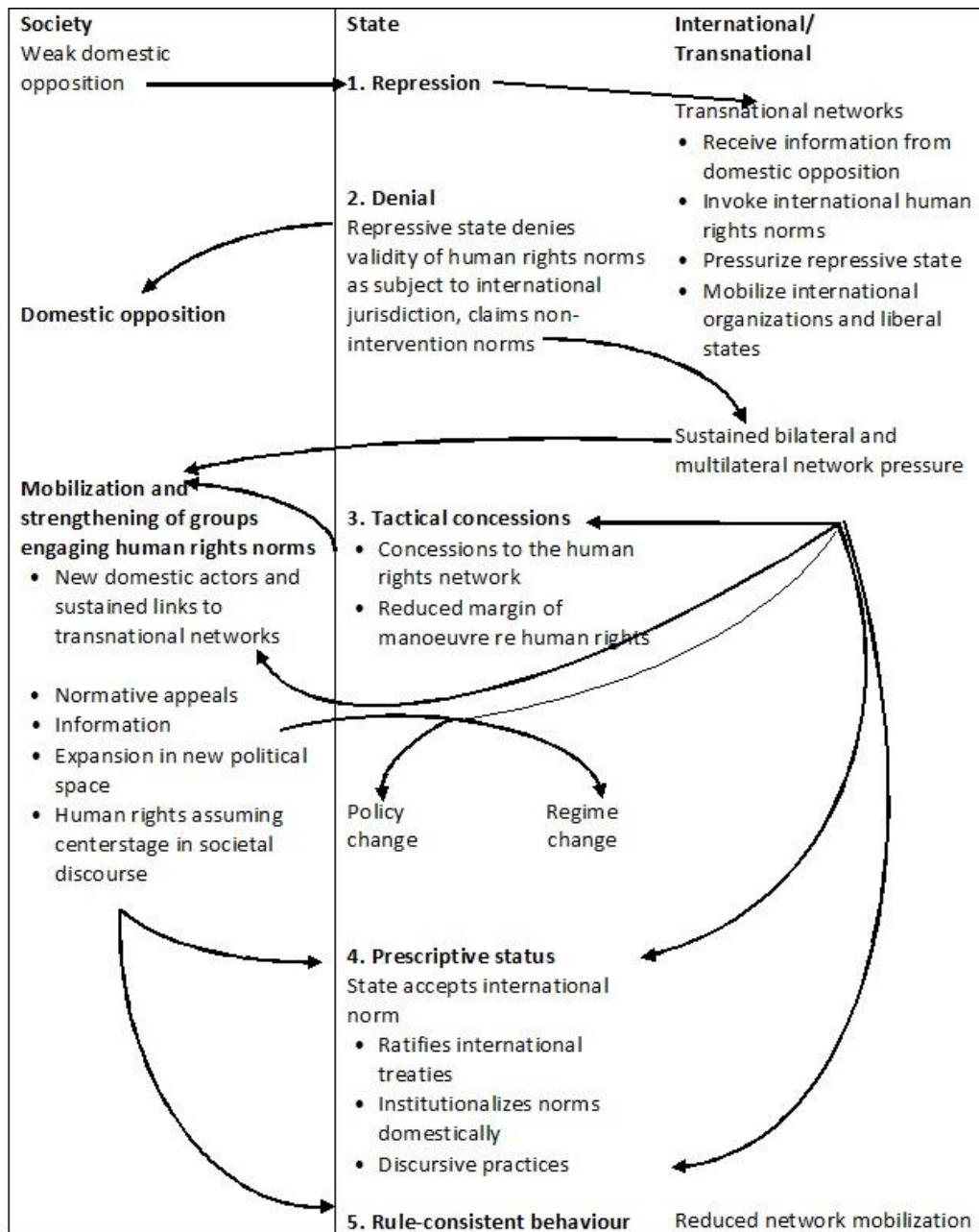
international regimes, to alert Western public opinion and Western governments.¹³

Figure 1 (below) shows an overview of the model based on the work of Risse, Ropp and Sikkink.¹⁴

Figure 1: Five phases of the spiral model

¹³ *ibid* 5.

¹⁴ Risse, Ropp and Sikkink (n 12).



'Second wave' normative theories

At the same time, a growing body of literature critiques mainstream normative scholarship, such as the spiral model, as being overly Westernised, ignoring or undervaluing domestic factors and power.¹⁵ This stream of thinking reverses most existing thoughts on the institutionalisation of norms, suggesting that theoretical approaches should consider norms which move from the 'rest' to the 'West', as opposed to most research which starts from a Western perspective.¹⁶ Domestic variables, including existing norms, agents, and structures are prioritised over international and transnational institutions. The critiques find that early normative work tended to overlook domestic factors and viewed norms through an inherently Western lens. This research sits within this critical body of literature, working to shift thinking from the top-down approach to a domestically-centred approach.

Critiques of the Spiral Model

¹⁵ See e.g. Amitav Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism' (2004) 58 *International Organization* 239; Lisa L Martin and Beth A Simmons, 'Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions' (1998) 52 *International Organization* 729; Andrew P Cortell and James W Davis, 'How Do International Institutions Matter? The Domestic Impact of International Rules and Norms' (1996) 40 *International Studies Quarterly* 451; Jeffrey T Checkel, 'Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe' (1999) 43 *International Studies Quarterly* 83.

¹⁶ Elias Steinhilper, 'From "the Rest" to "the West"? Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Western Bias in Norm Diffusion Research' (2015) 17 *International Studies Review* 536.

There are many scholars who examine, apply, test, and critique the spiral model. The critiques can be grouped into roughly five categories:

1. Lack of focus on domestic actors/overemphasis on Western approaches¹⁷
2. Potential government backlash¹⁸

¹⁷ Alison Brysk, 'Communicative Action and Human Rights in Colombia: When Words Fail' [2009] *Colombia Internacional* 36; Anthony Tirado Chase, 'The State and Human Rights: Governance and Sustainable Human Development in Yemen' [2003] *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 213; Isabelle Cheng and Lara Momesso, 'Look, the World Is Watching How We Treat Migrants! The Making of the Anti-Trafficking Legislation during the Ma Administration' (2017) 46 *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 61; Umit Cizre, 'The Truth and Fiction About (Turkey's) Human Rights Politics' (2001) 3 *Human Rights Review* 55; Xinyuan Dai, 'The "Compliance Gap" and the Efficacy of International Human Rights Institutions' in Thomas Risse-Kappen and Stephen C Ropp (eds), *The persistent power of human rights: from commitment to compliance* (Cambridge University Press 2013); Man-ho Heo, 'Mongolia's Political Change and Human Rights in Five-Phase Spiral Model: Implications for North Korea: Mongolia's Political Change and HR' (2014) 29 *Pacific Focus* 413; Alejandro Anaya Muñoz, 'Transnational and Domestic Processes in the Definition of Human Rights Policies in Mexico' (2009) 31 *Human Rights Quarterly* 35; Rolf Schwarz, 'The Paradox of Sovereignty, Regime Type and Human Rights Compliance' (2004) 8 *The International Journal of Human Rights* 199; Beth A Simmons, 'From Ratification to Compliance: Quantitative Evidence on the Spiral Model' in Thomas Risse-Kappen and Stephen C Ropp (eds), *The persistent power of human rights: from commitment to compliance* (Cambridge University Press 2013); Andreas Laursen, 'Israel's Supreme Court and International Human Rights Law: The Judgement on "Moderate Physical Pressure"' (2000) 69 *Nordic Journal of International Law* 413.

¹⁸ Brysk (n 17); Omar G Encarnación, 'International Influence, Domestic Activism, and Gay Rights in Argentina' (2013) 128 *Political Science Quarterly* 687; Ryan Goodman and Derek

3. Lack of long-term progression¹⁹
4. Ignores domestic capacity issues²⁰
5. Ignores material or nuanced incentives²¹

Jinks, 'How to Influence States: Socialization and International Human Rights Law' (2004) 54 *Duke Law Journal* 621; Kathryn Sikkink, 'The United States and Torture: Does the Spiral Model Work?' in Thomas Risse-Kappen and Stephen C Ropp (eds), *The persistent power of human rights: from commitment to compliance* (Cambridge University Press 2013); Anja Jetschke, 'The Power of Human Rights a Decade after: From Euphoria to Contestation?' in Thomas Risse-Kappen and Stephen C Ropp (eds), *The persistent power of human rights: from commitment to compliance* (Cambridge University Press 2013).

¹⁹ Raed A Alhargan, 'The Impact of the UN Human Rights System and Human Rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with Special Reference to the Spiral Model' (2012) 16 *The International Journal of Human Rights* 598; Brysk (n 17); Jetschke (n 18); Eran Shor, 'Conflict, Terrorism, and the Socialization of Human Rights Norms: The Spiral Model Revisited' (2008) 55 *Social Problems* 117.

²⁰ Tanja Borzel and Thomas Risse, 'Human Rights in Areas of Limited Statehood: The New Agenda' in Thomas Risse-Kappen and Stephen C Ropp (eds), *The persistent power of human rights: from commitment to compliance* (Cambridge University Press 2013); Jack Goldsmith and Stephen D Krasner, 'The Limits of Idealism' (2003) 132 *Daedalus* 47; Shor (n 19).

²¹ Goldsmith and Krasner (n 20); Jérôme Y Bachelard, 'The Anglo-Leasing Corruption Scandal in Kenya: The Politics of International and Domestic Pressures and Counter-Pressures' (2010) 37 *Review of African Political Economy* 187; Ronald R Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric' (2007) 13 *European Journal of International Relations* 35; Robyn Linde, 'Statelessness and Roma Communities in the Czech Republic: Competing Theories of State Compliance' (2006) 13 *International Journal on Minority & Group Rights* 341; Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri,

It is these critiques which form the backbone of this research. In essence, the study attempts to explore the utility of the spiral model when tested in a social media environment. The model would appear ripe for flourishing on social media, with the ability for domestic groups to tap into Western pressure greatly improved. Conversely, the critiques outlined above *also* are more likely to escalate in a social media environment. Without empirical evidence, advocates will not know which outcome dominates – the opportunities or the threats.

Methodology

This research sets out to answer two questions, derived from the theoretical framework outlined above: can international campaigns originating in and driven by Twitter contribute to domestic legal change in women's rights? If so, which campaign behaviours are associated with change? Three sets of variables are used to answer these questions – context, independent (online behaviours), and dependent (legal changes). The Twitter variables are grouped into four categories: persistence, engagement, users, and content. The legal variables are also broken down into four groups: legislation, institutionalisation (including soft law, government discourse, budgets, etc.), law enforcement, and the representation of norms through dialogue with UN treaty bodies.

The critiques of the spiral model were then explored against identified risks inherent in social media campaigning. First, social media is an elite-driven, non-neutral

'Trials and Errors: Principle and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice' (2003) 28 International Security 5.

tool.²² Not only do algorithms and filter bubbles affect user's control over the information they receive and generate, but statistically, social media is still dominated by the Global North.²³ Second, social media is, by definition, organic. This often in turn contributes to chaotic messaging and framing, the antithesis to traditional hierarchical advocacy campaigning.²⁴ Third, social media campaigns move quickly; that which is trending today may very well be forgotten next week. This speed can work against the slow methodical process of legal change and norm institutionalisation.²⁵ Fourth, as an offshoot of the overly Westernised critiques, participants in transnational social media campaigns are not likely to have first-hand knowledge of the domestic situation.²⁶ This then opens to the door to domestic government backlash against foreign interference. Finally, reflecting the 'slactivist'

²² Dagoula (n 1); Ott (n 1); Stier, Schünemann and Steiger (n 1); Grant Blank, 'The Digital Divide Among Twitter Users and Its Implications for Social Research' (2017) 35 *Social Science Computer Review* 679.

²³ Blank (n 22); 'Digital in 2018: World's Internet Users Pass the 4 Billion Mark - We Are Social' <<https://wearesocial.com/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>> accessed 4 December 2018.

²⁴ Castells (n 1); Manuel Castells, 'Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society' (2007) 1 *International Journal of Communication* (19328036) 238.

²⁵ Nima Naghibi, 'Diasporic Disclosures: Social Networking, NEDA, and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Elections' (2011) 34 *Biography* 56; 'Bring Back Our Girls: Boko Haram Should Be Scared of a Hashtag' (n 2); Marta Poblet and Jonathan Kolieb, 'Responding to Human Rights Abuses in the Digital Era: New Tools, Old Challenges' (2018) 54 *Stanford Journal of International Law* 259.

²⁶ E Schwarz, '@hannah_arendt: An Arendtian Critique of Online Social Networks' (2014) 43 *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 165; Naghibi (n 25).

literature, social media campaigns can be perceived by decision-makers as lacking in risk to participants.²⁷ In other words, decision-makers are not pressured by social media campaigns in the same way they are pressured by offline campaigns.

The research proceeds forward by mapping the spiral model critiques against the social media risks and measuring the relationships between the variables. The hypothesis being that the spiral model critiques are amplified or realised by the social media risks, thus rendering campaigns ineffective, or worse. On the other hand, campaigns which show less evidence of the risks and critiques are more likely to be associated with positive changes. In the end, the results were much more complexed, interconnected, and nuanced, but as an initial map for conducting the research this was a useful exercise.

The over-emphasis on Western actors in the spiral model is likely to be exacerbated by the elite-driven, Global North dominated nature of social media. If there is concern that traditional advocacy campaigns may place too much emphasis on the role of transnational/Western actors, this risk is greater in a social media environment where campaigns are more likely to be dominated and/or driven by foreign/Western elite participants. The lack of inclusion of the potential for government backlash in the spiral model may also be intensified by the chaotic behaviours on social media. The

²⁷ Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky, 'From Innovation to Revolution: Do Social Media Make Protests Possible?' (2011) 90 *Foreign Affairs* 153; Malcolm Gladwell, 'Small Change' [2010] *The New Yorker* <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>> accessed 14 March 2016; Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (2nd edn, Blackwell Publishing 2006).

potential inability to manage social media messaging means that campaigns may be framed in a way which unintentionally or inadvertently sparks government backlash. The spiral model is also critiqued for its lack of long-term progression; the speed at which social media moves is significantly faster than the campaigns explored in the spiral model. The short attention span of social media may not give campaigns long enough to properly effect long-term, meaningful, institutionalised change – even more so than traditional campaigns. Domestic capacity issues are overlooked in the spiral model. Equally, it is statistically likely that the majority of participants in transnational social media campaigns will be foreign without knowledge of the domestic situation. Twitter campaigns may be asking for changes which the domestic government is not in a position to make. This concern was relevant to traditional campaigns with much more organisation and knowledge; the nature of social media campaign participants raises even more concern about the lack of knowledge of the domestic government’s capacity to institute change.

Parameters and variables were set for each of these critiques and risks to empirically explore these relationships. Ultimately, the research sought to understand if campaigning in a social media environment intensified the risks of transnational campaigning exposed by the critics of the spiral model, rendering the campaigns ineffective or worse.

Campaign Selection and Exclusions

With this map to direct the research, the next critical step was campaign selection. An initial open-ended search was undertaken to capture all potential campaigns, based on those with international following and in the realm of women’s rights. An iterative process then led to the formulation of four set criteria:

1. International attention
2. More than 1,000 Tweets
3. Seeking specific domestic legal change in the area of women's rights
4. Originating in, and continuing to be driven by, Twitter

Strictly applying these criteria and aiming for geographic and issue-based variety, a final list of 10 campaigns was carefully selected. Many of the initially identified campaigns had awareness or fund-raising goals and thus were not appropriate for this research.

The smallest campaign selected was #stopstoning, which used one particular case to demand that the Iranian government change the Penal Code to remove death by stoning, a sentence which disproportionately is used against women. The next campaign also targeted Iran. #letwomengotostadium campaigned for the lifting of a ban with legal effect against women attending sporting events. Although this may at first blush seem to pale in comparison to the stoning campaign, just recently a woman who was facing charges of attempting to enter a stadium self-immolated on the steps of the court.²⁸ The third campaign moves to Afghanistan. #farkhunda erupted after the brutal

²⁸ 'Iranian Woman Facing Prison for Sneaking into Soccer Match Burns Herself to Death' <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-blue-girl-iran-woman-caught-sneaking-soccer-stadium-dies-setting-herself-fire-rather-than-prison/>> accessed 12 December 2019; Nada Altaher CNN, 'Iranian Woman Denied Soccer Stadium Access Dies after Setting Herself on Fire' (CNN) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/10/football/iran-football-women-sahar-khodayari-spt-intl/index.html>> accessed 12 December 2019; Minky Worden, 'Woman Banned from Stadiums in Iran Attempts Suicide' (*Human Rights Watch*, 9 September 2019) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/09/woman-banned-stadiums-iran-attempts-suicide>> accessed 23 October 2019.

mob murder of a young woman, in the presence of police, was caught on film and went viral. Given the overtly public nature of the incident, the campaign focused on law enforcement to address the deeply rooted problems of impunity around violence against women particularly in the public domain. #sendeanlat sought to address increasing rates of femicide in Turkey. The campaign specifically targeted problems in the existing laws to prevent violence against women. Next, a woman in Nairobi was publicly and violently stripped naked because she was wearing a mini-skirt and the campaign #mydressmychoice began, advocating for stronger laws to protect women from violence and improvements in front line policing. When a young woman was brutally gang raped and murdered on a bus in India, her story ignited outcry via social media with the hashtag #delhigangrape. The campaign demanded that the government strengthen laws and law enforcement, particularly in the courts, to protect women and girls. The only campaign to target a Western country was #niunamenos, which, similar to #sendeanlat, sought to address shockingly high rates of femicide in Argentina through legal reform. The final campaign in the study was #women2drive. For decades, a religious decree banned women from driving in Saudi Arabia. Activists decided to use social media to reinvigorate their campaign to lift the ban.

Through the process of data collection and analysis, two campaigns from the original selections (#malala and #notacriminal) were eventually excluded. The #malala campaign quickly lost its focus on domestic legal change and became a campaign around Malala herself as a role model, thus failing on criteria three. #notacriminal was determined to be a wholly subsidiary campaign to #repealthe8th, which failed on criteria four. It was not a campaign rooted in and driven by Twitter. Including the two excluded campaigns, 1,051,525 unique Tweets were collected. After #malala and #notacriminal were excluded, a total of 743,671 Tweets were analysed.

Methodological Challenges

There are many methodological and research design challenges with a project of this nature, which could contribute to the relative paucity of empirical research in this area. This project seeks as much to address and overcome these challenges as it does to find answers to the research questions. Although solutions may not be perfect, in the end it *was* possible to collect and analyse data of this size, nature, and scope, with exciting results. The study aims at all times to achieve the ‘gold standard’ in research design, minimising bias and flexibility and maximising protocol and neutral interpretations.²⁹

Data Collection

In order to comply with Twitter’s current terms and conditions, it was necessary to collect Tweets manually.³⁰ This took considerable time and carefully designed processing. It could take hours to collect the Tweets from just one day in one campaign. All in all, the collection of Tweets took just over five months.

While at first this seemed like a Sisyphean task, in actuality it became a core part of the research itself. Monitoring content while loading Tweets onto the page allowed a close and first-hand inspection and reading of material. Had the Tweets been

²⁹ John PA Ioannidis, ‘Why Most Published Research Findings Are False’ (2005) 2

PLOS Medicine e124 Although from the field of medicine, this article is an excellent example of potential failings in research design.

³⁰ ‘Developer Agreement and Policy’ <<https://developer.twitter.com/en/developer-terms/agreement-and-policy.html>> accessed 13 September 2018; ‘Archiving Tweets: Reckoning with Twitter’s Policy | Insight News Lab’ <<http://newslab.insight-centre.org/tweetarchivingchallenges/>> accessed 13 September 2018.

collected through an automated process or purchased as a bulk data set, this level of researcher intimacy with the campaigns would not have been achieved. By manually loading each and every Tweet, it was possible to have a much better handle on the timelines of the campaign, understanding the ebb and flow of attention. It was also pivotal to collect qualitative observations and impressions of messaging. Identifying visual trends (i.e. images shared over and over and over again) or Tweets which appeared perhaps several hundred times became an important part of the overall understanding of the campaign behaviours. It was also possible to track the activities of those users who were driving the campaigns. This helped to inform the resulting quantitative, in depth analysis. Starting the research from a place of understanding and heightened familiarity with the campaigns inevitably informed the analysis and interpretation of the quantitative findings in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

One of the most intriguing findings of the study was the presence and prevalence of counter-narratives, individuals and groups who were acting against the goals of the campaigns.³¹ Although excluded from the final study, the counter-narrative was *more* prevalent in #notacriminal than the campaign itself across several variables. Similar results were found in #malala, #mydressmychoice, and #women2drive. The overwhelming presence of these counter-narratives may have gone undetected, or perhaps under-valued, had the data collection not demanded that each Tweet be manually collected. This particular aspect is a good example of how a perceived challenge was turned into a positive aspect of the research design itself. This process

³¹ Reilly Dempsey Willis, 'To Tweet or Not to Tweet: How Hashtag Campaigns Open Spaces for Counter-Narratives' (2018).

also aided in quality and assurance checks, as certain expectations were in place for the data to behave in an anticipated fashion.

Translation

At the outset, the issue of translation seemed insurmountable with the high volume of non-English Tweets and the significant cost of translation services. The initial design therefore included only Tweets written in English, regardless of the location of the target government. Given the focus on the overly Western nature of campaigns, this approach seemed almost hypocritical.

In the initial design of this section of research, a novel solution to the translation problem was therefore crafted. The normative analysis was loosely based on the work developed and undertaken by Meier and Kim.³² The analysis uses a deductive coding process to identify the presence of international norms in the Twitter campaigns. To understand the reflection of international women's rights norms, a list of 93 words and phrases was drawn up from 40 sources. Equally, to understand the organically emerging norms, lists of the 100 most used words across event-based time periods were generated. As only certain key words and phrases were to be analysed, it was possible to use Google Translate to translate these key words and phrases individually for the mother tongue in each of the campaigns. For example, the international norms list of 93 words could easily be translated into Persian (#stopstoning, #letwomengotostadium), Turkish (#sendeanlat), Spanish (#niunamenos), or Arabic (#women2drive). Equally,

³² Benjamin Mason Meier and Yuna Kim, 'Human Rights Accountability Through Treaty Bodies: Examining Human Rights Treaty Monitoring for Water and Sanitation' (2015) 26 Duke Journal of Comparative and International Law 139.

lists of 100 words for the organic norms analysis could be translated into English. Therefore, as these were the only variables that required translation, the content of all campaigns in mother tongue could be included and studied. The other variables were numerical (dates, retweets, etc.) or could be translated by hand (user profiles). This was the planned process at the start of the data analysis.

As the analysis began, however, an even simpler solution came to light. Fairly late in the process it was decided to run each campaign through a sentiment analyser program. Although not part of the original design, it was a fairly straightforward process that added another dimension of understanding to the study. The sentiment analysis was run with TextBlob (through Python).³³ An add-on through TextBlob automates a process of sending text to Google Translate. Therefore, it was possible to translate the full content of Tweets in mother tongues for campaigns with a majority of non-English Tweets.

This is yet another example of a potential barrier to Twitter research which was dealt with and led to extremely interesting and important findings. Significant thought and creativity went into the initial solutions to identify a way to include as many Tweets as possible without being limited to English only. By adopting a novel empirical approach to coding norms, it was possible to include several different languages in the final study outcomes. This ensured that voices from the domestic locations were included in the analysis. Given that the theoretical grounding for this research critiques other scholars for a lack of domestic focus and an overly Westernised approach, it

³³ TextBlob, 'TextBlob: Simplified Text Processing' <<https://textblob.readthedocs.io/en/dev/>> accessed 18 September 2018.

would have held the study back greatly if only English Tweets had been included in the content analysis.

Correlation

The most frequently asked question when presenting this research is ‘how can you prove causation?’ The answer to that is simply that it is not possible to *prove causation*. However, it is possible to see correlations and associations and to identify trends and patterns. Several aspects of the research design and methodology have been specifically tailored to address this aspect.

The most important selection criteria was that the campaigns in the study are rooted in and driven by Twitter. The campaigns all rose to international attention through some kind of Tweet or specific use of Twitter to spread the word. These are campaigns which are referred to by their hashtag name more often than not, and parallel, offline advocacy activities are generally organised and publicised via Twitter. It is this foundation in Twitter and Tweets that defines the campaigns, and the continued use of social media as the primary information sharing platform and organisational space that sets these campaigns apart from other advocacy and activist campaigns. This is perhaps best exemplified by the exclusion of #notacriminal based on the wider campaign strategies. Rather than a primarily Twitter-based, hashtag campaign that used other strategic tools to achieve goals, #notacriminal (and #repealthe8th) was primarily a more traditionally driven campaign that used Twitter as one strand of strategy. Diligently adhering to this criterion ensures that the campaigns are comparable and, by definition, different from other campaigns.

This is the primary method of establishing baseline correlations. As Twitter was the main driver of the campaign, then any changes which result will necessarily be related, at least in some way, to the Twitter campaign. It also bears noting that this study

does not purport to argue that decision makers sit at their desks reading Tweets; rather that campaigns that are rooted in and driven by Twitter as the primary strategic tool are inherently different from other campaigns, as shown in the research map.³⁴

Correlation can also be underscored by timelines, quotes, and government activities. For example, in some cases there were spikes in Tweets followed by government action (#delhigangrape).³⁵ In other cases, the government specifically referred to the hashtag campaign when discussing legislative changes (#stopstoning).³⁶ Government officials implementing change even referred to the hashtag itself, announcing changes on Twitter (#niunamenos).³⁷ The campaigners themselves used Twitter as the platform to engage officials in some instances. In #niunamenos, candidates in upcoming elections were asked to sign a pledge to implement the campaign demands and, critically to Tweet this pledge out.³⁸

Several candidates used the slogan ‘#NiUnaMenos’ directly in their campaign ads. While to some this may smell of political opportunism, for Beck, Correa,

³⁴ Reilly Dempsey Willis, ‘Can Twitter Change the Iranian Legal Landscape for Women?’

(2018) 0 International Review of Law, Computers & Technology 1.

³⁵ Gethin Chamberlain, ‘Five Years after the Gang-Rape and Murder of Jyoti Singh, What Has Changed for Women in India?’ *The Guardian* (3 December 2017)

<<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/dec/03/five-years-after-gang-murder-jyoti-singh-how-has-delhi-changed>> accessed 6 March 2018.

³⁶ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, ‘Annual Death Penalty Report 2012’ (2012).

³⁷ ‘Four Months From #NiUnaMenos: Has Anything Changed?’

<<http://www.argentinaindependent.com/currentaffairs/four-months-from-niunamenos-has-anything-changed/>> accessed 21 November 2017.

³⁸ *ibid.*

and Etcheves [campaigners] it was important to have the participation of politicians and public figures.³⁹

Evidence such as this further underscores the relationship between the hashtag campaigns and legal outcomes. While it is without doubt that this study cannot *prove causation* there is enough evidence to support correlation.

Quantification

The final aspect of the methodological challenges to be explored in this paper is the quantification of qualitative evidence to determine the level of legal change. Context data and the majority of Twitter data was quantitative and did not undergo the process of quantification. Legal data, however, was qualitative in nature and needed to be quantified into order to perform statistical analysis. This entailed the collection of evidence across the four sub-areas: legislation, institutionalisation, law enforcement, and UN dialogue. Documents, reports, and other materials were gathered from before the campaign and during and after the campaign. An average of 190 pieces of evidence were collected for each campaign.

These bodies of evidence were compiled, analysed, and ‘scored’ to provide a numerical representation of change. To ensure consistency, campaigns were scored on an ongoing basis, with the same criteria, by one researcher. A typical five-point Likert-type scale was used for both simplicity, accuracy, and range.⁴⁰ Scores were revisited

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Paul R Grim, ‘A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes in the Social Studies’ (1936) 15 Educational Research Bulletin 95; Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Fifth Edition, Oxford University Press 2016).

after each campaign analysis was completed for comparability. The scores were revisited again when all campaigns had been analysed. Although there will inevitably be a bit of bias in the quantification and scoring of the campaigns, as the scoring was completed by one individual with a consistent approach and process, the scale of the scoring should remain constant. In other words, even if the actual *number* of the score contains bias, *all* campaigns would include the same bias and thus remain comparable. This study aims to identify trends and patterns and uses simple correlations and regressions. As these methods are all based on relationships, the *actual* numerical scoring is less important as long as it is applied consistently. Quality assurance in the form of revisiting scores throughout the process was built in to the research to attempt to address bias concerns.

Conclusions

The research produced a number of insights and findings. The campaigns studied were associated with a range of legal outcomes. #stopstoning and #letwomengotostadium seemed to open the door to intense government backlash, which resulted in the situation being worse for Iranian women. These campaigns also showed the highest proportion of foreign users strategically driving the campaign. This tends to underscore the critiques of the spiral model around risks of a lack of drive from domestic voices. #farkunda, #sendeanlat, and #mydressmychoice were in the end ineffective. There was no overall perceptible legal change. There were small gains in some areas but these were countered by regressions in other areas of the law. These campaigns all exemplified the issues around timing and progression in the spiral model. All three campaigns showed extreme peaks at the very beginning of the campaigns but attention quickly died off, leaving the campaigns with little to no long-term activity. #delhigangrape and #niunamenos showed some positive signs of progress. Both

campaigns notably took off within close temporal proximity to democratic elections. Both showed signs that political leaders, with an eye towards re-election, swept through legislative changes as lip service to the campaigns. However, the speed with which the legislative changes were passed acted against any long-term institutionalisation or progression. While the laws have technically changed (a positive outcome), rates of incidents on the ground for women and girls have not changed over time, and may have even worsened. The only campaign showing an overall potentially positive outcome was #women2drive. While the research was being carried out, the Saudi king announced that the ban and its legal regulations would be lifted. Women are now legally allowed to drive in Saudi. However, this is a tentative success as many issues still remain around gender equality, primarily the continued use of guardianship laws, in the country. This campaign showed the least evidence of the critiques of the spiral model and the risks of social media campaigning – it was domestically driven with a strategically sound level of foreign pressure, participants actively Tweeted throughout the life span of the campaign showing positive persistence, users were highly engaged, and messages remained consistent and on point.

Aggregated modelling showed that Twitter campaigns showing behaviours which reflect the weaknesses of the spiral model are associated with poorer legal outcomes. Conversely, campaigns which show less evidence of the weaknesses are associated with more positive outcomes. Those which are domestically-driven, with consistent messaging focussed on women's rights, with high levels of persistence and engagement show the most positive legal changes. In particular, the strongest indicators of campaign success are the number of 'active' days (days with at least one Tweet and preferably more than 5), the level of replies during non-peak periods of time in the campaign, and the presence of international normative language relating to women's

rights. These variables are all strongly correlated with overall legal change (R scores ranging from 0.854 to 0.949, controlling for other factors where appropriate).

These findings are important for two key reasons. First, the research has shown that the methodological challenges, although numerous, can be overcome. This project was as much a methodological experiment as it was seeking to answer the research questions. The research design was successful and led to a series of important insights which can now be explored in greater detail. This kind of comparative work is therefore possible and indeed useful. Issues such as data collection, translation, correlations and associations, statistical design, and quantification all posed a potential derailment of the project. However, careful thought, creativity, and workarounds were possible for all of these major challenges. In many cases, the solutions to the problems in fact strengthened the research itself.

Second, the study is an important contribution to the body of literature exploring the spiral model of human rights change and, notably, its applicability and utility when tested in a social media environment. To reiterate, the spiral model tracks states moving from repression of human rights through to full institutionalisation of rights-based norms. The lynchpin of the model is pressure from international actors. Despite its continued use, the model has been the subject of critique, which is the framework structuring this project. This research finds that the identified and catalogued weaknesses of the model could indeed be aggravated when campaigns locate in social media. This calls into question the efficacy of using the spiral model, in its current form, in hashtag campaigns. Important lessons have been learned about how, when, and where social media campaigns are more likely to be associated with positive outcomes. It also provides critical learnings about when campaigns are at risk of potentially contributing to negative outcomes. If the spiral model is to continue to be of use in a

social media driven world, it may need some adjustments to maintain usefulness.⁴¹

These adjustments would likely strengthen the role of domestic actors and governments, limit and define more specifically the role of international actors and explore transitions between established phases in greater detail.

⁴¹ Shor (n 19).

The author would like to thank Brian Simpson for coordinating this special issue and the stream at the 2018 Socio-Legal Studies Association Conference.