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Advocacy Organizations' Evaluation of Social Media Information for NGO Journalism: The Evidence and Engagement Models

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Abstract

This article contributes to the emergent literature on the use of social media at advocacy organizations. Much of this existing literature focuses on these organizations' production of social media information; this article, however, explores the complementary and relatively unexamined consumption of social media information that can form part of advocacy work. By drawing parallels between journalism and advocacy, the article develops two theoretical models of how advocacy organizations evaluate social media information as part of this consumption. These models differ according to the information values at their cores and according to how these values are evaluated in practice; correspondingly, the models interact differently with social media's affordances. The key information value for the evidence model is the veracity of the information's metadata, and this is largely evaluated through a time-intensive verification process requiring corroboration and drawing on human expertise. In contrast, the key information value pertaining to the engagement model is participation, which is evaluated by measuring the volume of participants in the information's production and transmission. The affordances of social media are often hindrances for the evidence model, because they can make metadata more difficult to verify. In contrast, the engagement model capitalizes on social media affordances, because these affordances facilitate participation as well as the evaluation of participation volume using digital analytics. In addition to shedding light on approaches to social media information evaluation at advocacy organizations, this article urges researchers and practitioners to be alive to related barriers to pluralism as they study and use these approaches.

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Introduction

Human rights advocacy organization Amnesty International traditionally relied on in-person investigations by staff researchers and on a network of long-term source relationships to gather information on the human rights situation in Syria. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, however, Amnesty, like its fellow international human rights organizations, had trouble getting country access for its researchers. Simultaneously, a plethora of social media sources began publishing information they claimed documented particular events in the Syrian conflict. As Maha Abu Shama, Amnesty's campaigner on Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, described it,

> So many activists popped up in different areas—new activists whom we were not aware of. We didn't know their history, we had not worked with them before, and the activists that we know didn't know them either. So, especially at the beginning, when many of these activists were uploading things spontaneously online, whether on Youtube or Facebook or Twitter, we had to play catch up. (Personal communication, interview, April 3, 2013)

This "catch up"—namely, the process of incorporating social media information into reporting on human rights in Syria—is one example of the phenomenon of advocacy organizations increasingly evaluating social media information as part of their work.

This phenomenon is symptomatic of a wider adoption of social media by advocacy organizations—and organizations in general—that we as researchers do not yet fully understand (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This article contributes to the emergent literature on the use of social media at advocacy organizations; whereas much of this literature focuses on how these organizations produce social media information (e.g., Briones, Kuch, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2011; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Obar et al., 2012), this article explores the complementary and relatively unexamined practice of how advocacy organizations consume social media information, particularly with respect to how they evaluate it as part of that consumption process.

Advocacy organizations are organized actors that systematically pursue particular causes (Prakash & Gugerty, 2010), often through directing information at targets with the intention of impelling change.[1] The media and communications field has increasingly approached advocacy and other civil society organizations' communication practices as a particular form of journalism—namely, NGO (nongovernmental organization) journalism (e.g., Beckett & Ball, 2012; Cooper, 2011; Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Kalcsics, 2011; Powers, 2014). This rationale for this designation is two-pronged. First, NGOs are progressively producing the news we consume, whether

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via mainstream media or social media. Second, NGOs communicating for advocacy often engage in similar practices to news organizations, such as evaluating, producing, and transmitting information, whether or not this information is formally designated as journalism. This article accordingly draws on the parallels between journalism and advocacy, deploying literature from the media and communications field toward constructing two of the possible theoretical models addressing how advocacy organizations evaluate social media information for NGO journalism.

In practice, these models contribute to the determination of advocacy-worthy information—in other words, the events and issues on which an advocacy organization should focus its finite advocacy resources. Of course, many other factors are in play in the determination of advocacy-worthy information, such as the political and economic contexts and the organization's particular priorities. Relatedly, the content of the information—what it is about—is important. But as we shall see with respect to social media information, its metadata—namely, the data about the content, such as its sources, times, and places of production and transmission—are also determining factors. One of the fundamental ways in which social media information can vary from information communicated via other forms of media is in its metadata, as I explain in more detail below. The two evaluation models featured in this article value metadata differently; in other words, they have different information values with respect to metadata. Accordingly, the models encompass distinct practices for evaluating these information values. Specifically, the evidence model values veracity, which is tested by corroboration and the deployment of human expertise. The engagement model values participation, which is measured by the volume of sources contributing to the information's production and transmission.

The bulk of this article develops these two models, but it first begins by using the media and communications literature about the determination of newsworthiness to explain the determination of advocacy-worthy information, including the role of information values. It then outlines three ways in which the use of social media changes the metadata of information. These are the affordances of user-generated information, disembodied information, and digital analytics. After developing both evaluation models by drawing again on the media and communications literature and through the use of examples, the article concludes by framing these models within a central concern of the study of journalism. This is the exposure and elimination of barriers to pluralism in the public sphere, created as inadvertent byproducts of the practice of journalism.

Information Values in the Evaluation of Information

By examining organizations that the literature normally considers to be journalistic sources as organizations that produce journalism, I am—in line with Schlesinger's (1990), Schudson's (2000), and Power's (2014) directives—extending the chain of analysis of journalism. Like news organizations, advocacy organizations are producing information for the consumption of others. For example, they produce journalism for mainstream news organizations to fill the news vacuum created by decreasing newsroom resources (Cooper, 2011; Fenton, 2010). They transmit direct-to-citizen via

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digital platforms, such as Amnesty International's AiCandle iPhone application, which features a "News" bar button (Amnesty International, 2011a), and Avaaz's Daily Briefing website, which is currently in beta mode (Avaaz, 2013c). Their campaign communications concerning causes, even when these are not specifically designated as journalism, are produced to be consumed by the targets of their advocacy. Therefore, like journalism, advocacy is fundamentally a communicative act (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Of course, advocacy organizations' communications can differ significantly from journalism in several respects, such as their communicative aims, which include fundraising and social change, and their packaging of information, which often appeals directly to emotion and action and aligns with particular moral and political stances and goals (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Moon, 2012; Powers, 2014). Furthermore, not all of advocacy organizations' advocacy communications are anchored in the consumption of information from other sources about causes—although a significant proportion is, and we can refer to this proportion as NGO journalism. It is the evaluation aspect of this consumption of information to produce NGO journalism that is of concern here.

Comparing advocacy to journalism allows us to borrow from the media and communications literature to understand advocacy organizations' information evaluation values and practices. A significant theme in this body of research is the determination of newsworthiness, or the narrowing of available information from a variety of sources to useful information for news purposes (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Tuchman, 1978). This evaluation of information is influenced by a range of factors, including political, economic, social, organizational, and cultural conditions (Cottle, 2003; Schudson, 2000). A significant cultural determinant of newsworthiness is the information values commonly referred to in the literature as news values.

News values are notoriously opaque and subjective. Even so, numerous studies have attempted to outline "taxonomies of news values" that identify information characteristics such as unexpectedness, negativity, and drama (Galtun & Ruge, 1965; Golding & Elliot, 1979; cited in O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). These studies indicate that a measure of universality of news values exists among news organizations, but O'Neill and Harcup (2009) also posited that differences can be found across times, places, and sectors and resulting from the introduction of new technologies. Based on my ethnographic research of human rights reporting in Mexico, I found that the credibility of the information's source was just as important as the information's content in determining its inclusion as news—if not more important, because the source credibility trumped content characteristics such as novelty and impact (McPherson, 2010). Source credibility is an aspect of information's metadata, or the data about conditions of production and transmission such as source, place, and time. As such, news values can be separated into those that pertain to the content of information and those that pertain to its metadata. Transferring these analytical categories to advocacy organizations, then, we can understand their information evaluation practices as being driven, in part, by their own information values pertaining to content and metadata. Next, I summarize three changes that the use of social media for communication heralds for information metadata.

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Relevant Social Media Affordances

Social media are but the latest of a sequence of technological transformations changing the production, transmission, and consumption of information—transformations that Thompson (1990) referred to as the "mediazation of modern culture" (p. 164). Although social media increasingly blur the boundaries between the practices of producing and consuming, resulting in new categories of practice such as "produsage" (Bruns, 2008), disaggregating these stages of communication can be analytically useful. This is because social media change the production and transmission as well as the consumption and associated evaluation of information in different ways. It is helpful to think about social media according to these changes, in contrast to defining social media according to platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, which creates the potential for research narrowness and even obsolescence as new platforms are developed and older ones die out (Obar et al., 2012; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Specifically, therefore, the literature defines social media by their affordances, or what they allow their users to do. Affordances are shaped by a particular tool's characteristics or materialities; in the case of social media, these materialities are often rooted in their digital nature (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

At least three affordances of social media are relevant for the evaluation of social media information at advocacy organizations; two of these affordances alter the conditions of the information's production and transmission, and therefore the information metadata that are available for advocacy organizations to evaluate. These are the affordances that support user-generated information and disembodied information. User-generated information results from social media's lowering of the technical and financial barriers for users to produce and transmit information. The implications for metadata are an increase in the variety and volume of sources producing content. Disembodied information arises because social media facilitate users' ability to transmit their information separately from the time and space of its production, and to obscure their own offline, physical identities as sources through the use of pseudonymous online identities. Disembodied information can thus complicate or render impossible the evaluation of metadata. The third affordance alters the conditions of information consumption by enabling particular types of evaluation. With respect to metadata, digital analytics are especially strong in evaluating more objective aspects, such as volume, rather than more subjective aspects, such as veracity. As we shall see in the models of social media information evaluation below, whether these three affordances support social media information evaluation depends in part on the information values shaping evaluation practices.

Social Media Information Evaluation Models

The literature on advocacy organizations—and, more broadly, on NGOs—addressing their use of social media is emergent. As I mentioned, it tends to focus on these organizations' production of social media information rather than on their evaluation and consumption of it. Given this lacuna and the parallels between journalism and

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advocacy outlined above, it is useful to draw again on the media and communications literature to think about evaluation practices focused on social media information. This literature, also emergent (Hermida, 2013), is concomitant with the rise of these practices at news institutions, themselves spurred by the increasing prevalence of citizen journalism transmitted via social media, particularly during disasters (e.g., see Bruno, 2011; Cooper, 2011; Keating, 2010; Murthy, 2011). The literature suggests at least two models of social media information evaluation based on different information values. The *evidence model* evaluates social media information as another variety of evidence to support advocacy claims. As such, the *veracity* of metadata is a key information value, and this is currently measured largely through corroboration undertaken by human experts. In contrast, under the *engagement model*, advocacy organizations evaluate social media information for an indication of the public's engagement with its topic. As such, the information value sought in the metadata is *participation*, which is evaluated by measuring the volume of sources participating in the information's production and transmission.

These evaluation models are models of practice, not organizational models. Advocacy organizations evaluating social media information no doubt typically engage in both; that said, one might expect a preponderance of use of the evidence model at what Tsui (2009) called "legacy" NGOs, because these organizations may have bolted social media onto existing information evaluation practices. In contrast, we might expect to see a greater employment of the engagement model at the "networked" NGOs (from Tsui, 2009) born in the era of—or because of—social media.[2] This is because these organizations are devising their information evaluation practices from scratch; they are therefore more likely to create practices that reflect and draw on the affordances of social media. To illustrate these models, I use examples of social media information evaluation at two advocacy organizations; as I emphasize in this article's conclusion, it is worth keeping social media use at these organizations in perspective, because it is just one of a variety of channels of information and communication this type of organization draws upon in advocacy work (Kavada, 2012). We will look at the use of the evidence model in evaluating YouTube videos about the conflict in Syria at Amnesty International, an advocacy organization that states its aim as "campaign[ing] to end grave abuses of human rights" (Amnesty International, 2013c). Subsequently, we will turn to the use of the engagement model in evaluating information deriving from the Community Petition platform belonging to Avaaz, an advocacy organization that describes itself as a "global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere" (Avaaz, 2013a).[3] These models are, at this stage, hypothetical and preliminary; I propose them to propel the research in the underexplored area of the use of social media information at advocacy organizations for NGO journalism.

The Evidence Model

The communication of evidence related to causes is a core element of advocacy work (Clark, 2001). The production of this evidence relies on an evaluation of available

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related information, and a key value sought in this information is veracity. In this subsection, I develop the evidence model by first outlining the reasons behind advocacy organizations' concern with veracity. I go on to explore journalism's concern with the same information value, as well as what the emergent literature indicates this concern's implications are for evaluation practices concerning social media information. The example of evaluation practices at Amnesty International as applied to YouTube videos on the conflict in Syria illustrates this model, in which we see that the evaluation of information veracity depends in part on the veracity of its metadata. This takes time, the triangulation of methods and sources, and human expertise. I conclude the subsection by considering how the model unites the information value of veracity with the relevant affordances of social media in its evaluation practices—awkwardly, as it stands, although this may change with advances in digital analytics.

Establishing veracity can help advocacy organizations bolster their reputations; pursue their advocacy mandates, including meeting standards for evidence in a court of law; and allocate resources. We can see the value of veracity in the case of Amnesty International, which was founded in 1961 and currently has an international support base of more than 3 million members who campaign against a broad array of human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2013b, 2013c). The aim of these campaigns is to "exert influence on governments, political bodies, companies, and intergovernmental groups…through various communication and media channels but also by mobilizing public pressure through mass demos, vigils and direct lobbying" (Amnesty International, 2013a). Amnesty's trajectory coincides with the historical rise of human rights NGOs in terms of political prominence and persuasiveness. This rise is at least in part attributable to the "credibility of their fact-finding" (Orentlicher, 1990, p. 92; see also Hopgood, 2006). Abu Shama of Amnesty referred to this connection among veracity, organizational credibility, and organizational mandates when she described her team's approach to social media information:

> The strength of Amnesty's work in general is its credibility and impartiality. That is why our reports and our statements have an influence on policy-makers and media. So of course we are very careful in the ways we deal with social media because, if we commit a mistake, that would not only harm Amnesty's work on Syria, but it also could have an impact on our work in other countries and areas. That is why this long and complicated process of verification is essential.

In terms of bolstering reputations, human rights NGOs have developed and publicized clear investigation methodologies (Orentlicher, 1990). This is in part because those accused of human rights violations may deny the facts behind the accusations and attack NGOs' credibility, and in part because convincing targets to act and react depends on conveying credibility (Brown, 2008; Land, 2009). Practices for evaluating the veracity of information content and metadata are a crucial element of these investigation methodologies; besides protecting organizations' reputations, these practices also help them meet organizational mandates. As Cristoph Koettl, the emergency response manager at Amnesty International USA, who blogs for Amnesty

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about technology and human rights, wrote (Koettl, 2013b), "We are looking at turning stories into evidence for use in advocacy and courts." Law is a major mechanism through which human rights advocacy functions (Moon, 2012). As Koettl (2013b) explained, "Identifying the place and time of an incident"—in other words, verifying information's metadata—"is crucial for determining International Humanitarian Law compliance." Finally, as demonstrated by the humanitarian organizations that are the subject of Tapia, Bajpai, Jansen, Yen, and Giles' (2011) and Tapia, Moore, and Johnson's (2013) research into social media information evaluation, establishing the veracity of an incident is also relevant to the deployment of resources, whether related to disaster relief or to advocacy.

Amnesty's website description of its general information evaluation practices underscores the value the organization places on veracity. On its "Frequently Asked Questions" page (Amnesty International, 2013a), the first sentence responding to the question of "How does Amnesty International carry out its work?" is "All our campaigning and research is fact based." In response to the question "How does Amnesty International make sure it has the facts right?" the webpage continues,

> Before any statement, publication or report is issued, its text is subject to close review to ensure it is factually accurate, politically impartial and consistent with Amnesty International's mission.
>
> When Amnesty International deals with allegations rather than undisputed facts, it makes this clear in its findings and may call for an investigation.
>
> If Amnesty International makes a mistake, it issues a correction.
>
> As a result, Amnesty International's research is recognized globally for its reliability.

The emphasis in this text on concepts correlated with veracity, such as "factually accurate" and "research … reliability," is clear. The distinctions in terms of treatment of "undisputed facts" versus "allegations" and "mistake[s]" serve to further underline Amnesty's commitment to verification practices.

Veracity and the verification practices it engenders are core elements of journalism as well (Bruno, 2011; Hermida, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé, & Mychajlowycz, 2013). Studies have shown that verifying social media information at news organizations has largely been a matter of applying existing evaluation practices to it (Hermida, 2012, 2013); despite the digital nature of the information, verifying it is more about "journalistic hunches than snazzy technology" (Turner, 2012). For example, a new handbook written for journalists on how to verify digital information (Wardle, 2014) states that "there is no quick way" of verifying the identity of a social media account. Rather, this verification of source requires "painstaking checks," including reviewing the source's network and previous social media postings. Ideally, the journalist should speak directly with the original source of the information. These practices are akin to "old-fashioned police investigation" (Wardle, 2014, pp. 28–29).

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At advocacy organization Amnesty International, practices for evaluating veracity are similarly “long and complicated,” as Abu Shama described it. “It requires a lot of follow up [and] diligence … especially when we don’t have access to the country ourselves,” she said, with reference in particular to the human rights situation in Syria since 2011. Despite the wealth of social media information surfacing about Syria, Abu Shama made clear that this material “by itself—it cannot stand.” This is not unique to social media information, Abu Shama explained, “What I am saying is that one thing alone is not enough. You need to use different things to weave together to establish a story.” Correspondingly, Amnesty describes the organization’s general information evaluation methodology as one of “cross checking and corroborating information from a wide variety of sources” (Amnesty International, 2013a).

This is evident in Abu Shama’s account of the practices she would typically deploy to evaluate the veracity of a YouTube video that, from initial appearances, related to the human rights situation in Syria. This video might portray a violation, which

> means something, it’s shocking … but we need much more. We need to know: When did it happen? By whom? How? Is this video genuine or not? Is it authentic? We can’t act on it unless we verify all those details.

To begin verifying a YouTube video, Abu Shama said she would first try to establish its location. She would then search for witnesses by scanning her offline network to see if she knows anyone from that location. If not, she asks network members if they might be able to put her in touch with their own contacts in that spot; “It’s all networking,” Abu Shama explained. The established sources that make up this network have gone through a lengthy credibility assessment process themselves, which Abu Shama explained:

> There is a lot of personal judgment about that, but also history and dealings with the person. First, you think about the type of information they are giving you: does it rhyme with the pattern of abuses that you are aware of? If it is too odd or too different, you will be a bit more suspicious. If it rhymes, then you talk to other witnesses, other sources, and you compare. If they are public speakers, you constantly follow their activities and the statements they make to assess their agenda. Based on what you know about them, you also understand what the motivation is behind the information they have given you, as well as the agendas of other sources who might be telling you something about that person because they want to ruin their reputation or discredit them.

The new witnesses found through the network are also subject to a credibility check. Talking with firsthand witnesses and survivors of violations is paramount, but other sources of information are also consulted for verification purposes. Abu Shama gave the examples of forensic pathologists, who might evaluate videos and photographs of bodies for signs of torture (see Amnesty International, 2011b), and of satellite imagery, which might identify the destruction of buildings. Other sources listed by Amnesty with reference to its evaluation process in general are lawyers; journalists; diplomats; workers at religious, community, humanitarian, and human rights organizations; and

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refugees, prisoners, survivors of violations, and their families and representatives (Amnesty International, 2013a).

In addition to the importance of triangulation of sources and methods, evident in these veracity evaluation practices is the contribution of human expertise, which corresponds with a long tradition of the import of expertise to Amnesty's research (Hopgood, 2006) and the research of human rights NGOs in general (Land, 2009). The researcher must have expertise akin to the "journalistic hunches" referenced above; as Abu Shama described it, "There's a lot of skill and personal judgment that you definitely develop with time and with practice." Witnesses have expertise with respect to the violation in question, because they were present. Other sources, like those listed above, have various varieties of professional expertise. Corroborating information through the deployment and consultation of expertise is hard, time-intensive work—"there is a lot of chasing," Abu Shama said—and the changes to information attributable to social media can complicate it further.

Social media's affordances supporting user-generated and disembodied information—the latter especially if anonymity is sought—facilitate the amount of social media information emanating from Syria. Koettl (2013a) described the scenario as follows:

> The torrent of videos from citizens and soldiers exposing possible war crimes and crimes against humanity…is truly unique to the Syrian conflict. Having worked on several armed conflict situations, I have never before witnessed such volume of new video on a daily basis.

Although this citizen activism via video is, at first glance, a boon (Gregory, 2010), especially in a closed-country context, the information is only of use if it can be verified. As Abu Shama commented, with respect to sifting through the results of entering the names of military units into YouTube's search function:

> It is quite a time consuming thing—and there are so many materials on Youtube that you can look at, but not that many that are usable and useful. Although they might be documenting a violation, it's not clear when, how, or by whom.

These affordances of social media have introduced a tremendous number of unknown sources, which means that no known person—and perhaps no person at all—is immediately available to question on the information's content or metadata. If not explicitly included or embedded, the place and time of social media's information's production and transmission may also be difficult to establish at the point of evaluation. By separating the source, place, and time of the information's production from its content, the disembodied information affordance of social media also affords the production of false information. For example, Abu Shama described a YouTube video that purportedly documented a serious abuse in Syria but that actually was an edited version of a video filmed in Mexico some time beforehand and overlaid with new audio. As such, the same characteristics of social media that are affordances for the production and

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transmission of information, are—by obfuscating that information's metadata—hindrances for its evaluation under the evidence model.

The evaluation of social media information for veracity creates a bottleneck between available and valuable information at news organizations as well. This is in large part because the ability to detect veracity remains—or remains to be understood as—a human ability grounded in expertise. Bruno (2011) and Hermida (2013) wrote about the disconnect between the speed of social media information generation and the time required for verification as driving new practices for information evaluation. One such practice is crowd-sourced or collaborative expertise, which matches the volume of social media information with a greater volume of human evaluators. For example, news organizations engage witness members of the public in "collaborative verification" in the live blog format for breaking news (Hermida, 2011, 2013). Amnesty International is partnering with a university to create "verification corps" of students to sift through social media videos (Koettl, 2014; Nixon, 2013).

These practices still, however, center on human expertise. Social media's affordance of digital analytics has not yet cracked the verification problem, although work is ongoing in that direction. Diakopoulos, De Choudhury, and Naaman (2012), for example, designed an algorithm-based interface to support journalists in locating and evaluating Twitter sources. This interface includes "heuristics for credibility" such as the predominant locations of a user's network; this heuristic is based on the assumption that the more people the user knows in an area in question, the more accurate the user's tweets about that area are (Diakopoulos et al., 2012, p. 10). Another example of emergent "verification technologies" (Bruno, 2011, p. 67) is the InformaCam smartphone and tablet application, currently in beta form and the product of a collaboration between Witness, the Guardian Project, and the International Bar Association. Among other functions, this app embeds a variety of metadata into video to facilitate its evaluation, which is supported with desktop software (Guardian Project, 2013; InformaCam, 2013; Witness, 2013). That said, the evaluation of social media information for veracity likely will continue to involve human expertise because of its subjectivity. Even so, as social media's affordance of digital analytics extends—as long as this corresponds with expanding comfort with artificial intelligence—the evidence model's bottleneck should widen.

The Engagement Model

Like the evidence model, the engagement model centers on a key information value: participation. This participation is a manifestation of engagement and can be evaluated using measures of quantity and quality. Dahlgren (2009) usefully distinguished between engagement and participation, stating that engagement "refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object. It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation" (p. 81). In contrast, participation is an action. In this section, I first explain why member engagement and participation are fundamental to advocacy organizations. I then turn to the literature on social media evaluation at news organizations to explore how engagement in a topic of information can be gauged by measuring the volume of source participation in the production and transmission of that

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information. This is illustrated in Avaaz's evaluation of the information emanating from its proprietary social media platform, the Community Petitions website (see Avaaz, 2011a). The measure of volume of participation can be performed in real time with digital analytics. I conclude the section by explaining how, in contrast with the evidence model, the engagement model is highly compatible with the affordances of social media. Because this model is generally used in tandem with the evidence model, however, the information in question can still encounter an evaluation bottleneck.

The engagement and participation of members in advocacy organizations' causes are essential to their reputations and the pursuit of their mandates.[4] With respect to reputation, characteristics such as legitimacy and credibility depend on advocacy organizations' abilities to both mobilize and represent their members' and the public's engagement (Brown, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Advocacy organizations' reputations, in turn, influence their ability to attract volunteers and donations (Brown, 2008; Gibelman & Gelman, 2004). With respect to their mandates, engaging members can be an important part of the advocacy process—although not always, because NGOs might also lobby their targets directly and provide expert testimony, among other practices contributing to a single cause campaign (Davis, Murdie, & Steinmetz, 2012; Karpf, 2010). That said, a key mechanism at human rights NGOs, for example, for influencing a state to act on its human rights record is through "shaming" the state publicly, which galvanizes public participation and thus pressure on the state (Davis et al., 2012; Land, 2009). Public participation may take many forms, including marches, sit-ins, petition signing, and sharing on social media.

The importance of engagement and participation to Avaaz's work is evident in how it describes itself on its website. Avaaz was founded in 2006 by two other advocacy organizations, Res Publica and Moveon.org, and it has almost 34 million members (Avaaz, 2013d, 2014a). The organization has characterized itself as a "global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere" (Avaaz, 2013a). It "empowers millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues" by deploying a "model of internet organising that allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force" (Avaaz, 2013a). The emphasis in these descriptors—such as "global," "people-powered," "millions of people from all walks of life," "thousands of individual efforts," and "collective force"—is on participation, and specifically the volume of participation. Avaaz is one of what Karpf called "large-scale netroots" advocacy organizations (2012, p. 12). These organizations build on the affordances of the internet to stay closely attuned to the causes that engage their members and map their priorities accordingly. In contrast with single-issue organizations, like Amnesty International with its focus on human rights, these organizations are therefore what Karpf (2012) termed "issue generalists." As Avaaz's "About Us" webpage explained (Avaaz, 2013a),

> Avaaz staff don't set an agenda and try to convince members to go along with it. It's closer to the opposite: staff listen to members and suggest actions they can take in order to affect the broader world. Small wonder, then, that many of our most successful campaigns are suggested first by Avaaz members themselves.

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Avaaz chooses its campaign priorities via membership polls; for example, "preventing catastrophic climate change" is, as of this writing, the membership's priority for Avaaz campaigns in 2014 (Avaaz, 2014b). Member polling is one way to evaluate engagement, as is the random sampling of 10,000 members on a weekly basis to test specific campaigns (Avaaz, 2013a; Kavada, 2012). "Only initiatives that find a strong response are taken to scale," the organization's website stated, meaning that they are sent out to the entire membership (Avaaz 2013a). But Avaaz also has developed a platform for capturing and evaluating spontaneous and autonomous issues of member engagement. This is its Community Petitions website, a proprietary social media platform that facilitates members' participation in causes and Avaaz's evaluation of the volume of participation.

To explain how the volume of participation can be an information value, I return to the literature on the evaluation of social media information at news organizations. As Diakopoulos, Naaman, and Kivran-Swaine (2010) pointed out, social media information "may aid and augment reporting" at news institutions both via "individual content items," as we saw in the evidence model, but also via "aggregate information from the crowd's response" (p. 1). The value for the determination of newsworthiness in the latter scenario is in the volume of participation in the information's production and transmission—an aspect, therefore, of the information's metadata.

We can see the value of participation in Hermida's (2010a, 2010b) understanding of Twitter as an "awareness system" and a source of "ambient journalism." The characteristics of Twitter, such as its reach and brief format, fuel users' awareness of current events and contribute to the omnipresence of journalism in our surroundings. The awareness system's demands on the user, however, are low level unless a phenomenon catches the user's attention. This capture of attention occurs predominantly through scale. As Hermida (2010b) explained, "In an awareness system, value is defined less by each individual fragment of information that may be insignificant on its own or of limited validity, but rather by the combined effect of the communication" (p. 301). So the volume of public engagement in particular information on Twitter—visible through retweets and the trending of hashtags, for example—can support the determination of newsworthiness.

Similarly, Avaaz's Community Petitions website can support the determination of advocacy-worthy information. This "warehouse site" (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 18)—namely, a platform for user-generated information—allows any digitally literate individual connected to the internet to start his or her own petition. The site guides users wishing to produce a petition by asking the questions "Who do you want to petition? What do you want them to do? Why is this important?" (Avaaz, 2013h). This is followed by a page of transmission prompts with buttons that users can click to share their petitions online. Users visiting a community petition page reach an interface that allows them to consume, produce, and transmit the petition's content. For example, on March 13, 2014, I visited the Community Petitions website and clicked through to one of three petitions highlighted at the top of the homepage. This petition, written by user "Carol C." of Ireland, was targeting the European Commission to "ban the import of animal trophies into EU member states" (see Carol C., 2014). On the right-hand side

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of the petition page was a box encouraging me to "sign this petition" with my email address, and at the bottom were buttons allowing me to share the petition via Facebook, email, and Twitter and to copy the petition's link. The page is replete with indicators of participant volume: a barometer that measures the number of signers against the petition's goal; a live ticker tape that lists the four most recent signers by name, how long ago they signed, and country (at the moment of my visit, these were signers from Germany, Namibia, the United States, and France, who had signed in a time frame ranging from "just now" to several minutes previously); and counters displaying the number of times each "Share" button had been clicked. Some of these indicators of the volume of participation were changing in front of my eyes as other Avaaz members signed and shared the petition, and thus participated in its (re)production and transmission.

If we think of social media in terms of the affordances of user-generated information, disembodied information, and digital analytics, the Community Petitions website—with its member-written petitions, its signers producing and transmitting petitions throughout time and space, and its numerability—is clearly a social media platform proprietary to Avaaz. These affordances create new opportunities for the production, transmission, and evaluation of information communicated via this platform. The editability (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) of user-generated information, in this case, means that the members who engage with the information can participate in its production and transmission. By signing a petition, for example, a member contributes to the production of its content and its metadata. Namely, the page's signature counter and ticker tape stream (content) and the number of sources involved in its production (metadata) increase by one. Transmitting a petition is also an act of production typical of the blurring of stages of communication on social media (Bruns, 2008), because sharing it via one platform or another increases the share count on the petition's page, thus altering, again, content and source metadata. The disembodied information affordance of social media allows this cumulative contribution to occur throughout time and space and with online identities that may or may not correspond to offline identities. The digital analytics affordance of social media automatically sums these acts of participation using counters, so that petitions are instantly comparable with respect to the participation volume they elicit. As such, under the engagement model (as under the evidence model), the affordances of social media are influencing the nature of metadata and how they are evaluated.

Because of the centrality of engagement and participation to advocacy work, advocacy organizations are interested in being able to measure them. As engagement is a subjective feeling and participation is a concrete action, it may be that participation is easier to measure; feelings of engagement must be elicited, whereas participation can be observed. A common dichotomy present in evaluations of engagement and participation—and specifically in critiques about armchair activism and clicktivism—is that of quantity versus quality, with quality seen as more effective and desirable (Karpf, 2010). These criticisms aside, quantity of public engagement and participation can be a very useful metric for advocacy, because it conveys the "volume of citizen interest" to the targets of advocacy campaigns (Karpf, 2010, p. 8).[5] Prior to the advent of social

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media and other internet-enabled platforms, advocacy organizations were evaluating engagement, but this was a lengthy and expensive process (Karpf, 2010). Karpf (2012) cited the example of the Sierra Club, which had to contract a research company to survey its membership. Online platforms, however, introduce a number of "'analytics' tools" that advocacy organizations can use to evaluate "nearly in real-time, which issue topics, message frames, and action requests are of greatest interest to their online membership" (Karpf, 2012, pp. 36–37).

According to Avaaz Communications Director Sam Barratt's description of how his organization monitors its Community Petition website, this site is one such platform (personal communication, interview, January 9, 2013). Evaluation of the social media information generated by the site is one element of Avaaz's determination of what information is advocacy worthy. The organization is looking for community petitions that "demonstrate the ability to generate significant support"; if a petition falls into this category, "Avaaz may send the petition on behalf of the whole Avaaz community to larger segments of our membership" (Avaaz, 2013g). One of the ways a petition's potential for generating support can be determined is by measuring the volume of participation in the production and transmission of the petition.

With reference to petitions accumulating a number of signers, Barratt said, "It's a case of an impact chance. So if we see campaigns that are rocking, we say, 'Ok, let's give this guy a hand to see what we can do.'" Beyond sending the petition out to wider membership tranches, assistance can include connecting the petition's original producers with contacts in the media and political sectors. As such, Barratt explained, Avaaz can act as a "voice amplifier." Similar to advocacy organization MoveOn's digital petition platform, Avaaz's Community Petitions site is also what Karpf (2012) described as a "'trickle up' mechanism, in which activists around a local or peripheral issue can demonstrate the popularity of the topic, increasing the issue's exposure in turn" (p. 33).

The engagement model, as demonstrated by the evaluation of proprietary social media information emanating from petition platforms, is thus based on the information value of participation, measured via the volume of sources. The affordances of social media support this model, because participation is facilitated by the lowering of barriers to user-generated content and by the disembodiment of information from time and space—and even from identity, because who the sources are, under this model, is not as important as how many there are. Evaluation of the volume of participation is supported by the social media affordance of digital analytics—visible in counters throughout the petition website—which is particularly strong on numeracy. Avaaz highlights its compatibility with digital affordances in statements on its website such as "From technology, new nimbleness and flexibility" (Avaaz, 2013a). Similarly, in response to the frequently asked question "Does online activism actually work?" the website stated,

> Yes! Technology alone doesn't create change, but it can supercharge campaigns that have a clear strategy and theory of change. By connecting citizens across borders at a scale and speed that was previously impossible, online tools allow many small actions to add up to something powerful. (Avaaz, 2013f)

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As Karpf (2012) pointed out, it is not just advocacy organizations that are using digital analytics to evaluate engagement and incorporate it into their information decisions about what information is advocacy worthy. News organizations are also folding audience engagement into their determination of newsworthiness. That said, the engagement model of evaluating social media information generally is not used on its own at either type of organization; rather, it is an early step in determining the value of information to be used in advocacy or as news. For organizations whose credibility depends on the veracity of their information, information identified via the engagement model is subsequently evaluated via the evidence model. This is evident in Avaaz's "commitment to accuracy," which is explained on a corresponding webpage, linked to its homepage, in the following way:

> Much like a newspaper or a media organization creates stories, Avaaz creates and publishes hundreds of campaigns every year, and sends out thousands of emails, press releases and statements about these campaigns. Also like journalists, we often do these on very short timescales responding to urgent events.
>
> We strive for accuracy, and 99.9% of the time we succeed. But it's impossible to get it right every time, and when we get it wrong, we're committed to publishing corrections to our public communications on this page. (Avaaz, 2013b)

At the stage of verifying information emanating from the Community Petitions platform, Avaaz faces the same challenges as outlined in this article for Amnesty with respect to assessing social media information under the evidence model.[6] Although social media's affordances fundamentally make "large-scale netroots advocacy" organizations (Karpf, 2012, p. 12) possible through their facilitation of engagement, they may continue, under current verification practices, to be hindrances when advocacy seeks to pair engagement with evidence.

Conclusion

This article has developed two theoretical models of how advocacy organizations evaluate social media information. These models differ according to the information values at their cores and according to how these values are evaluated; correspondingly, the models interact differently with social media's affordances. The key information value for the evidence model is the veracity of the information's metadata, and this is largely evaluated through a time-intensive corroboration process drawing on human expertise. In contrast, the key information value pertaining to the engagement model is participation, which is evaluated by measuring the volume of participants in the information's production and transmission. In sum, the affordances of social media are often hindrances for the evidence model, because they can make metadata more difficult to verify. On the other hand, the engagement model capitalizes on social media affordances, as these affordances facilitate participation and the evaluation of participant volume using digital analytics.

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Throughout, the article has drawn on the media and communications literature. In addition to shedding light on social media evaluation models, this literature is useful for exploring the power dynamics of a normative aspect of journalism, whether occurring at advocacy or news organizations: pluralism. The media and communications literature tends to hold journalism to particular journalistic norms regarding the roles journalism should play in a democracy. Pluralism, with respect to journalism's facilitation of the participation of a number and variety of voices in the public sphere, is a key journalistic norm; among other benefits to democracy, the media's support of pluralism can rectify power imbalances by enabling the less powerful to expose the abuses of the more powerful (Curran, 1993, 2000; Habermas, 1989; Keane, 1991; Thompson, 1995).

Talking about pluralism to advocacy organizations is a bit like preaching to the converted. Advocacy organizations contribute to pluralism not just through their own voices, which are predominantly alternatives to those of political and economic elites, but also by creating channels to the public sphere for the voices on behalf of whom they advocate. When the media and communications literature is useful is not in evangelizing a purposeful commitment to pluralism, which journalists and workers at advocacy organizations often share in any case, but in identifying the possibility of unintentional barriers to pluralism that arise in the determination of newsworthiness. For example, critical media scholars argue that a consequence of journalists' pursuit of objectivity and related information values is the privileging of elite sources, which are seen as more authoritative and more likely to deliver facts rather than opinions (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Hall et al., 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 2002). These elite sources also benefit from the scarcity of resources like time and money in newsrooms, because both impel journalists to focus on sources that can provide the most amount of news with the least newsroom expenditure (e.g., Gans, 1979; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McPherson, 2012; Tuchman, 1978). The very invisibility, inadvertence, and insidiousness of these sorts of barriers to pluralism urge their exposure as the first step toward rectification.

It is therefore worth considering how the evaluation models outlined in this article might impede their users' enablement of pluralism despite their commitment to pluralism. This area is ripe for research, to the benefit of both scholars and practitioners; here, it is possible to use the literature to lay some theoretical groundwork. First, we can assume that a source's ability to reach the public sphere via an information gatekeeper like a news or advocacy organization correlates with that source's ability to create the information value being sought by the gatekeeper. Second, we can assume that this correlation strengthens as the gatekeeper's resources for conducting information evaluation diminish. Third, we can assume that the source's ability to create the information value in question is correlated to that source's resources. To think about these resources expansively, we can consider them as forms of capital—including economic, symbolic (reputational), social (network), and cultural (education) capital—notable in that one form is convertible into another (Bourdieu, 1986).

Abstracting away from the examples used in this article and thinking about the use of the evaluation models among institutions, it is possible to imagine these dynamics

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at work. For example, the evaluation of social media information for veracity is a significant drain on the resource of time at news and advocacy organizations. Sources that can speed up this evaluation process by providing verification shortcuts may find that their information is advantaged; this is because they are providing what Gandy (1982) termed an "information subsidy," in that they do some of the journalists' work for them. For example, a new verification guide for digital information written for journalists suggests that one verification strategy is checking a Twitters user's profile for a blue checkmark badge, which indicates that Twitter has verified that user's identity (Wardle, 2014). Another strategy used by humanitarian organizations (Tapia et al., 2013) as well as by human rights workers I have interviewed is to monitor social media information from curated Twitter lists of known and trusted sources. A strategy increasingly being adopted by social media sources in Syria, according to Abu Shama, was stating the date and location of the video's production on camera so as to supply the metadata that are a starting point of evidence model evaluations.

These strategies are not power neutral. According to Twitter's description of how it assigns its verified badges, verified Twitter users tend to be replete with symbolic capital; they are "highly sought users in music, acting, fashion, government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, business, and other key interest areas" (Twitter Help Center, 2014). "We don't accept verification requests from the general public," Twitter's website went on to state. The users' curated Twitter lists have symbolic and social capital that advantages their information, in that their reputations and/or connections mean that the evaluating organizations already see them as credible. The deliberate enhancement of metadata provision in citizen witness videos, whether incorporated through on camera statements or by using an app like Informacam, requires cultural capital related to understanding how advocacy communication and digital communication work.

Source resources are potentially influential in the engagement model as well, because sources that can more easily generate the volume of participation sought by this model may be advantaged. Certainly, information can attract participation through its content. As Dahlgren (2009) pointed out, participation and engagement are underpinned by passion; in the case of advocacy, content that elicits emotion may be more likely to attract participation. This is aptly underscored by the Community Petition's webpage outlining pointers for petition success, which stated (Avaaz, 2011b),

> TRUST YOUR GUT
>
> Your experiences, emotions, and intuition are a better barometer than a lot of people give them credit. If you feel something is unjust and actionable, there's a good chance others would agree with you.

That said, for a consumer of information to have an emotional reaction to a piece of information, the information has to reach him or her first. A significant way for an Avaaz-hosted community petition to spread is via transmitting it via producers' networks. "It's simple," the Avaaz (2013e) website stated in its guide to promoting

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petitions; "The more people you tell about your petition, the most signers you'll get." The webpage goes on to recommend that, among other sharing strategies, petition producers email their friends ("More people have signed Avaaz petitions after being emailed by someone they know than from anything else") and post their petition to Facebook and Twitter ("And ask that friend with 10× as many followers as you to retweet you"). So the volume of participation in a community petition is due, at least in some part, to the producers' networks—their social capital.

Given the dynamics of these models, and the import of their core information values to the work of advocacy, one cannot expect to eradicate these inadvertent barriers to pluralism altogether (see Land, 2009, for a comparable point with reference to human rights organizations framed in terms of participation versus professionalism). Instead, as I stated, investigating these hidden barriers to pluralism is a first step to redressing them—to finding ways to ensure that the information of the relatively resource poor is folded into the communication practices of advocacy organizations. These may involve, as the organizations featured in this article do, complementing these social media evaluation models with a variety of avenues for sources to reach them. For example, according to Abu Shama, her team's preferred method for verifying information is on-the-ground research through which sources can be interviewed face-to-face; this eliminates, for example, the need for these sources to have the digital literacy form of cultural capital mentioned above. Avaaz's Community Petitions homepage has a "Happening Right Now" feature, which streams the petitions being signed at that moment, thus increasing their exposure and introducing a measure of serendipity unrelated to producers' digital social capital into their volume of participation.

Thinking about the inadvertent barriers to pluralism in these evaluation models also feeds into the wider debates about the impact of digital media on democracy. As Hindman (2010) documented, much excitement exists around the opportunities for pluralism afforded by digital media. Indeed, we have seen that social media do afford a wide variety of sources and a great volume of information production and transmission related to advocacy (although, of course, digital-divide issues limit these opportunities to sources that have digital access and literacy). But, as Hindman cautioned, "It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard" (p. 142). In line with this, the social media evaluation models remind us that pluralism is a two-way street; to understand it, we have to look at both the producers and the evaluators of information. This includes the middlemen institutions like advocacy and news organizations that are both evaluators and producers, and whose production for the public sphere often follows an evaluation of information produced by less powerful entities. The pluralism of information consumption—or, in Hindman's terms, who is heard—depends, therefore, in part on the information values at stake and the resources belonging to the evaluator and to the source. The changes that new media bring to communication can alter the power dynamics of pluralism by affecting the nature and the distribution of the resources involved. Of course, these are not the only factors influencing pluralism in NGO journalism, and a full assessment of this burgeoning area requires researching the political, economic, social, organizational, and other

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cultural factors referenced above. Insight on pluralism in advocacy would also be gained by examining the same influences on information consumption all along the NGO journalism chain, including the targets of NGO journalism such as the mainstream media, politicians, and members of the public. These areas are part of the broader remit of ongoing research associated with this article. This article has aimed, in the meantime, to shed light on approaches to social media information evaluation at advocacy organizations and to urge researchers and practitioners to be alive to related barriers to pluralism as they use and study these approaches.

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Notes

1. In this article, I refer mainly to those organizations whose primary mandate is advocacy, but the article's framework and models can also be applied to other types of civil society organizations, such as aid or operational NGOs, when they engage in advocacy.
2. Of course, as Keck and Sikkink (1998) explained, advocacy organizations have a tradition, long predating social media, of operating in networks with others who share their aims.
3. These examples draw from my preliminary and ongoing research into NGO journalism. I selected them, borrowing from the case study approach (Gerring, 2007), to gain insight on the broader population of advocacy organizations through exploratory research and the generation of hypotheses, namely, my models of social media information evaluation. Amnesty International and Avaaz are representative of a particular category of advocacy organizations: those that (1) have the interest and the resources to engage in the use of social media information (the resource criterion means that this research does not address digital-divide issues, although this is an area for future research); (2) are relatively large organizations, in terms of membership and funding; and (3) are international in focus but headquartered in the West. These organizations do, however, differ in the eras of their establishment vis-à-vis the rise of social media, with Amnesty preceding it and Avaaz rising with it. Therefore, although these organizations are considered typical of the advocacy organization category outlined above, they also provide insight in terms of their variance (Gerring, 2007) along the legacy–networked (Tsui, 2009) continuum of advocacy organizations referenced above. In terms of analysis, I conducted a thematic analysis of semistructured background interviews with key informants and documents that are available publicly on both organizations' websites. These informants were Maha Abu Shama, Amnesty International campaigner for Syria, Lebanon and Jordan; and Sam Barratt, communications director of Avaaz. Interview topics and corresponding analytical themes included the uses of social media at their organizations, attitudes toward and methods for verification of social media information, and the risks and opportunities of social media use.

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4. Because of the fluid boundary between notions of publics and notions of members, I use them interchangeably in the context of engagement with an advocacy cause. For more on the expanding notion of organization membership, see Karpf (2012).
5. See Karpf (2010) and Kessler (2012) for rebuttals of criticisms of clicktivism, including the point that advocacy organizations tend not to depend on this type of participation on its own, but rather in collaboration with a plethora of other advocacy tactics to campaign for a cause.
6. Just as Avaaz is interested in both participation and veracity, so is Amnesty; as I mentioned, these models are often deployed in a hybrid fashion. Participation is a key element of Amnesty's strategy, which is evident in its traditional letter-writing campaigns and in its contemporary harnessing of digital analytics to render metadata around participation, as in its AiCandle app (see Amnesty International, 2011a). This app headlines causes under an "Activism" tab, each listed with a corresponding number of "Actions Taken," which are generally electronic petitions signed or prepopulated emails sent.

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