Building a Better Boomerang?
Human Rights NGOs and the New Media*

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1   Introduction

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

The quote from Human Rights Watch summarizes what Keck and Sikkink have called the "boomerang pattern," the strategy of identifying human rights violations someplace and then generating attention in the West in order to bring international pressure to bear on the perpetrators back in the initial country of concern.

For this strategy to be truly effective, transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must be able to expose human rights violations in the international news media. The largest advocacy groups may also enjoy other means of communicating with world leaders, but to build significant momentum for change requires the ability to raise awareness, frame issues, and hold abusers accountable in the public sphere (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Ron, Ramos, Rodgers 2005; Bogert, 2011).

Thanks to the Internet and the rapid emergence of new and social media platforms, NGOs have more tools at their disposal than ever to sound the alarm and generate international awareness and many observers have heralded the arrival of a new era in NGO effectiveness. Clay Shirky (2011: 28) has argued, "As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action." Ed Norton (2011), actor, activist, and founder of CrowdRise, a social activism platform, sums things up more simply: " the reach and power of the individual with passion for a cause will be greater than at any time in human history." In short, the NGO community appears to believe that it is in the process of building a much better boomerang.

Such comments illustrate the optimists' position in the broader debate over the emerging role of the Internet in politics and foreign affairs. Few question that new technologies are reshaping political behavior in important ways, but there is as yet less agreement about the nature of the changes and whether they portend major shifts in political power among nations, or between nation states and non-state actors. Optimists point to the Arab Spring; pessimists note that activists and revolutionaries existed without Twitter and that governments, though perhaps slow to adopt new media strategies, will in the end use new technologies to enhance state power at the expense of citizens and activists (Shirky 2011; Howard et al 2011; Morozov 2011; Gladwell 2010).

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

At this stage of the debate, although there has been a great deal of anecdotal and case study-based discussion of the effectiveness of specific campaigns, there has been very little quantitative examination of the boomerang pattern and the conditions under which NGOs will be most successful in getting attention. And despite NGO optimism about the future, previous research provides at least two important reasons to question how effective an "old boomerang" most NGOs have wielded to date via news coverage and what the "new boomerang" relying on social media will look like.

First, research on media coverage of politics, interest groups, and foreign affairs strongly suggests that most NGOs will have great difficulty establishing any traction in the mainstream media for their causes (Danelian and Page, 1994; Berry, 1999; Thrall, 2006). A central question that remains unanswered by previous research on transnational advocacy groups is the extent to which the same pattern holds for the old boomerang strategy of raising the alarm through news coverage and what this might mean with respect to the new boomerang. Second, research on web site popularity suggests that the public's attention online is even more heavily skewed toward a few sources than it is for traditional media. Moreover, despite the decreasing costs of distributing information online, the production of information remains expensive, thus sustaining existing inequalities in the capability to create attention-worthy news and information (Hindman, 2008).

In short, then, now is a perfect time to ask: are transnational NGOs building a better boomerang? This paper assesses the success of 100 transnational human rights NGOs at using both the old boomerang (relying on traditional news media) and the new boomerang (relying on social media) to get attention and investigates whether NGOs are now reaching more people via the new boomerang than the old.

The next section reviews the boomerang pattern, the emergence of the new media, and outlines our research questions. We then describe our approach to measuring the old and new boomerangs and present our findings. We conclude with a brief discussion of the effectiveness of the old and new boomerangs and the implications for NGO strategy and success.

2   The Evolution of the Boomerang

In their pioneering work, Activists Beyond Borders, Keck and Sikkink (1998) identified the boomerang pattern as a central element of transnational activism. The function of the boomerang, they argue, relies on four central tactics: information politics (providing information about problems to international audiences), symbolic politics (using symbols to impress international publics), leverage politics (putting pressure on governments), and accountability poli-

tics ("naming and shaming"). Central to the eventual success of each tactic is the level of visibility an NGO's efforts receive.

A great deal of useful communication certainly occurs among NGOs and between NGOs and governments. But in order to set public agendas, raise political stakes, change government incentive structures, and reframe existing situations, NGOs rely on the media to amplify their voices. This is especially true given the geographic and cultural distances between the groups NGOs are trying to help and the publics and governments NGOs are trying to mobilize. As Keck and Sikkink (1998: 22-23) point out, "The media is an essential partner in network information politics. To reach a broader audience, networks strive to attract press attention. Sympathetic journalists may become part of the network, but more often networks activists cultivate a reputation for credibility with the press, and package their information in a timely and dramatic way to draw press attention." With respect to creating the leverage from the boomerang pattern, Keck and Sikkink (1998: 22-23) argue, "Although NGO influence often depends on securing powerful allies, their credibility still depends in part on their ability to mobilize their own members and affect public opinion via the media."

Scholars have pointed to numerous examples of the boomerang pattern in action and the successful use of the media to raise global awareness including the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, and the Free Tibet movement (Risse-Kappen, Ropp, Sikkink, 1999; Khagram, Riker, Sikkink, 2002; Bob, 2005). In each case the NGO networks involved were able to share new information, reframe existing problems, and inform public opinion by engaging the news media, thereby encouraging governments to take action.

As several observers have noted, however, the number of NGOs with the capability to engage effectively in this kind of work is relatively small. Transnational advocacy is a complex and costly activity. Few groups command the resources necessary to conduct large-scale operations in multiple nations, package information for news media consumption, and conduct aggressive public relations efforts on a global scale. Likewise, few organizations enjoy the credibility and contacts necessary to interact effectively with governments and news media organizations. The result, as Clifford Bob (2005) points out, is that a handful of large and influential NGOs act as the first set of global gatekeepers, determining which causes and groups seeking help will gain access to the broader transnational human rights network.

In turn, NGOs must deal with a second set of gatekeepers: the news media. And because NGOs do not occupy official positions of power and often lack the credibility and trust afforded to political parties and elected officials, NGOs must fight an uphill battle to gain media attention for their campaigns. Previous research on U.S. domestic interest groups has shown, for example, that most groups get almost no sustained media coverage and simply cannot rely on

gaining access to the elite mass media news outlets that are most critical for agenda setting and pressuring governments. Moreover, even the most heavily covered interest groups get very little attention relative to other political actors in government (Danelian and Page, 1994; Thrall, 2006).

The difficulty that NGOs face in getting past the news media gatekeepers has inescapable consequences for NGO strategy and tactics. Some groups, like Witness, a video-production oriented organization founded by rock star Peter Gabriel, specialize in operations that produce high levels of conflict, drama or compelling video, hoping that their efforts will be more newsworthy as a result. Similarly, many NGOs have sought to gain celebrity endorsements to draw attention to their cause (Thrall et al, 2008). Others have focused more on building credibility and the ability to speak authoritatively about their issues. Groups like International Crisis Group and Physicians for Human Rights, for example, employ scientists and researchers and conduct careful analyses both to inform policy makers and to convince journalists to seek out their group for comment (Ron, Ramos, Rodgers, 2005). Only a few groups have the resources to do all of these things. Most do not have the resources to carry any of the strategies very far.

As a result, most NGOs have looked at the emergence of the web and social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as the foundation of a new boomerang – a way of bypassing the news media gatekeepers altogether and communicating directly with the global public. Given the phenomenal growth of the new public sphere, NGO interest in taking advantage of the web and social media appears quite sensible. As of 2012 there are over 1 billion people on Facebook, over 140 million Twitter accounts, and over 2 billion web users (Carlson, 2012; Bercovici 2012). People are also turning increasingly to online news sources, including social media as well as blogs and the web sites of traditional news organizations (Pew Center for People and the Press, 2010).

A recent episode illustrates the promise of social media strategies for NGOs. In early March 2012, the NGO Invisible Children launched a new media campaign – "Kony 2012" – to draw attention to Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, a group that has terrorized and murdered its way through Uganda and neighboring countries for over 20 years. The founder of Invisible Children, Jason Russell, articulated the goal of their campaign this way (Invisible Children, 2012):

> "We know what to do. Here it is, ready? In order for Kony to be arrested this year, the Ugandan military has to find him. In order to find him, they need the technology and training to track him in the vast jungle. That's where the American advisors come in. But in order for the American advisors to be there, the American government has to deploy them. They've done that, but if the government doesn't believe the people care about Kony, the mission will be can-

celled. In order for the people to care, they have to know. *And they will only know if Kony's name is everywhere"* (emphasis added).

The campaign, which included a web site (www.kony2012.com), a 30-minute documentary hosted on the video sharing sites YouTube and Vimeo, and a Twitter campaign (#stopkony). The campaign began on March 3rd and soon went viral. By the end of March 9th that video had been viewed almost 80 million times, thanks in large part to the ability of viewers to share the video through their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The case reveals the two main pillars underpinning the optimists' position. First, Invisible Children reached its audience without first getting the attention of the mainstream news media or Western governments. In the three days before the story of the campaign finally broke in the mainstream media, for example, there were no stories about Kony at all. Second, thanks to the ease of sharing other people's information online, every citizen is now a node on the network and represents an opportunity for an NGO to spread its message through mechanisms that did not exist just a few years ago. The social aspect of Facebook and Twitter allowed the Kony 2012 campaign to reach massive numbers of people from a standing start. In the mainstream news media, issues do not go from zero coverage to global coverage overnight absent a major crisis. In the social media, on the other hand, citizens and the connections between them determine how large the audience will be.

In the face of the Kony 2012 success, however, a good deal of research suggests that the Internet will not transform the ability of the average citizen or NGO to reach mass audiences for two basic reasons. First, although the web dramatically reduces the costs of distributing information, it has done little to reduce the costs of producing information that people want to consume (Hindman 2008, Bimber 2003). For NGOs, collecting data and creating compelling stories still requires a network of people around the world with expertise, equipment, and support structures. Few groups have the resources to generate such content and thus the skeptical position suggests that despite the ease of distributing their messages, most NGOs will not be able to grab the attention of the mass public.

Second, online attention is not evenly distributed, thanks in large part to the uneven distribution of resources and in part to the link structure of the web that favors already well-known organizations. Web traffic, Facebook friends, and Twitter followership do not follow normal distributions but instead are heavily skewed toward a handful of popular people and groups. The most popular news web sites enjoy millions more visitors than less popular ones do; the most followed Twitter and Facebook users have millions of followers compared to the 120 or so of the typical users, and for every video that goes viral on YouTube there are thousands that almost no one ever sees (Hindman, 2008, Morozov 2011). In short, the Kony 2012 campaign is more likely to be the exception than the rule.

Human Rights Watch, an older, far wealthier and better-connected organization than Invisible Children, launched its own Kony video in November 2010, a moving appeal from Congolese victims of Kony.[2] But despite Human Rights Watch's standing in the global NGO community, that video had been viewed just 52,000 times as of early June 2012.

3 Research Questions

The tension between optimism and skepticism about the democratizing influence of the social media on the public sphere provides the framework for our comparison of the old and new boomerangs. We have broken the comparison out into three specific research questions.

RQ 1: How much coverage do human rights NGOs receive from major world news media outlets?

As noted, despite a healthy qualitative literature describing and explaining NGO successes, very little quantitative data exist to help understand the role that the news media have played in generating the "old boomerang" pattern. A straightforward way to begin to do this is simply to ask: how visible are human rights NGOs in the sorts of traditional elite news outlets that are the most critical for agenda setting, mass opinion formation, etc? Other things being equal, of course, we would expect that the more visible a group is and the more often a group appears in stories about its core issues, the more effective its boomerang should be.

The optimistic expectation here is that NGOs are able to promote their causes through the global news media. Citing previous research, however, the pessimistic view suggests that most NGOs will be unable to gain access to elite news media on a regular basis and that coverage will be concentrated heavily on those few organizations that enjoy the greatest financial and human resources.

RQ2: How many connections do human rights NGOs have in the new and social media?

If the optimists are correct, even NGOs that have had difficulty getting coverage from elite news media should be gaining traction on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and their own web sites. Without gatekeepers to restrict their communications, an NGO's social media visibility should be less constrained by factors that previously may have limited their visibility in the traditional media. On the other hand, research on web traffic and social media popularity suggests that we should expect heavy concentration on a few NGOs, with most groups reaching relatively few friends and followers, and attracting relatively few visitors to their

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[2]The video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNL2oyvrJZ0&feature=plcp. Accessed June 4, 2012.

web sites. We might also expect success with the new boomerang to be related to success with the old boomerang. Organizations that are highly visible in the news media, for example, seem likely to have a head start in building sizeable followings online.

RQ3: Do NGOs now reach more people through the new boomerang than the old?

Previous work provides less guidance about what to expect on this point. On the one hand, the optimist camp might point out that because NGOs are able to control the pace of their social media strategies we should expect most groups to be reaching fairly large numbers of people even if there were not getting any exposure in the traditional news media. In addition, NGOs should benefit from the social transmission of information; in the best cases NGO information will go viral and reach a very large audience. Moreover, given the rising importance of new media, the optimistic position might suggest that NGO success in the new media will eventually translate in to greater success in the traditional news media.

On the other hand, the clear prediction from the skeptics is that the biggest winners in the new public sphere will be the same groups who were winning in the traditional public sphere. Further, given the relatively high threshold of coverage required to break through the din and capture public attention, the skeptical position suggests that even with the addition of the new media most NGOs will not generate enough exposure to do so. For every group like Invisible Children that manages to use the social media to break in to the mainstream news cycle, many more will not.

4   The NGO Dataset

To answer these questions we assembled a dataset of 100 NGOs active in transnational human rights advocacy. To identify the NGOs we turned to two primary sources, an NGO database[3] maintained by the Duke University Library and Human Rights Worldwide (Kabasakal 2006), a handbook of international human rights organizations. These produced a list of several hundred group.

Our goal was to include only those groups for whom the boomerang pattern and media visibility were critical. We thus eliminated groups that only provided services to other NGOs or followed a strategy that did not involve publicity. We then pruned the list further to include only groups that had been in existence since at least 2000 and for which we could gather sufficient information through web searching and through LexisNexis searches. This reduced our list to 100 NGOs, a number sufficient to provide analytical leverage and

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[3]The database is available at
http://library.duke.edu/research/subject/guides/ngo_guide/ngo_database.html

yet manageable from a data collection perspective for a small research team. Though it is impossible to say precisely how representative it is of the universe of human rights groups, the dataset incorporates a great deal of variation across all of our measures and includes both the largest, best funded, and well known groups like Amnesty International, Oxfam, and Human Rights Watch as well as much smaller, poorly funded, and far less well known groups like Worker Rights Consortium, Migrants' Rights International, and Global Lawyers and Physicians.
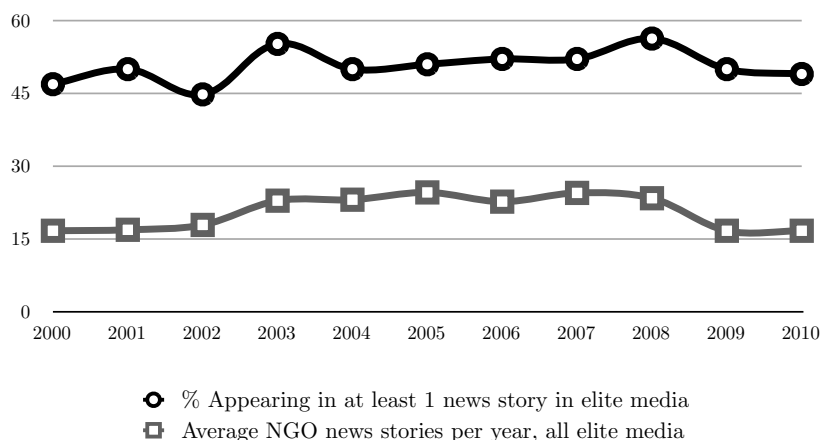
5   Results

RQ 1: How much coverage do human rights NGOs receive from major world news media outlets?

To measure the attention getting stage of the old boomerang we first analyzed the success of each NGO at attracting news coverage from five elite national newspapers: the New York Times (USA), the Times of London (UK), the Globe and Mail (Canada), Corriere della Sera (Italy), and the Australian (Australia) as well as CNN International, a television news network with viewers in over 100 countries. These outlets, located in countries that tend to be among the most active in putting pressure on human rights violators, represent an important test of an NGO's boomerang capability. It is hard to see how an NGO that cannot spur coverage in these news outlets will be able to generate much pressure for action in those respective countries.

To begin we asked how often each NGO appeared in each mainstream news source from 2000 through 2010. Over the 11 years in question, 86% of the groups appeared in at least one news story. On average NGOs appeared in between 16 and 25 stories per year. In a given year, however, as Figure One indicates, only about half of the NGOs in our study appeared in at least one news story, while the percentage of NGOs appearing in any particular outlet in a given year ranged from roughly 10% (Corriere della Sera) to 35% (New York Times).

Figure 1. NGO News Coverage 2000 – 2011.


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     2000  2001  2002  2003  2004  2005  2006  2007  2008  2009  2010
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  ◯ % Appearing in at least 1 news story in elite media
  ▢ Average NGO news stories per year, all elite media

What is difficult to picture from Figure One, however, is just how skewed NGO news coverage really was. Across the 11 years and all seven news outlets, five NGOs accounted for 78% of the total news story appearances (18,032 of 23,161 total stories). 60% of the NGOs, by contrast, appeared in one story per year or fewer.

RQ2: How many connections do human rights NGOs have in the new and social media?

The analysis of the new boomerang takes a similar form. We first asked how many groups are using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to spread the word and then investigated how successful they were at attracting fans, followers, subscribers, and visitors to these various platforms. All of the NGOs had a website but surprisingly just 49% of the groups used all three of the social platforms studied here (7% of the NGOs used none, 17% used one; 27% used two). Twitter was the most popular; 87% now tweet about their activities, 69% had a Facebook page, and 64% had their own YouTube channel.

The popularity of NGOs online varied tremendously and like news coverage, skewed heavily toward a handful of groups. NGO Facebook popularity varied from a low of 29 "likes" (Committee of Concerned Scientists) to a high of 647,162 (Witness). The five most popular Facebook pages accounted for 78% of all NGO Facebook fans. NGO popularity on Twitter also varied widely from a group with just four followers – Child Soldiers International – to Witness, which had almost 330,000 followers. Again we see a heavy concentration of attention on the most popular NGOs; the top five attracted 79% of all followers. NGO popularity on

YouTube followed the same basic pattern. The average NGO YouTube channel had 778 subscribers. Amnesty International had the most subscribers: 13,829, while Redress Trust had the fewest: 2. Finally, the popularity of NGO web pages also varied considerably, from Human Rights Watch, which welcomed over one million visitors to its web site in the previous 12 months, to many groups with traffic too low be have been measured by the companies that track such things. And though web traffic was somewhat more evenly distributed than the other media, the five most popular sites averaged 750,000 visitors over the past year compared to just 38,000 for the other 95 NGOs.

RQ3: Do NGOs now reach more people through the new boomerang than the old?

To answer this question we calculated the total annual potential impressions generated by each boomerang – the number of people each boomerang could have reached in a given year multiplied by how many stories or messages they could have seen. Potential total impressions, of course, are just that: potential. Obviously not every person who reads the newspaper will read each story, nor will each person read each tweet by people or groups that they follow on Twitter. The holy grail of audience measurement is actual total impressions – the number of times people actually read a news story, watch a show, or read a tweet. Potential impressions, however, has a simple advantage: it is much easier to calculate. And other things being equal, the more potential impressions an NGO generates the more actual impressions will result.

To provide a more comprehensive measure of the old boomerang's global potential we measured the number of stories in which each NGO appeared in the LexisNexis Major World Publications database in 2010, a database that contains over 600 news sources (including all but two of our original news outlets and scores of other leading national newspapers and other widely-read publications). We then multiplied the number of stories an NGO appeared in by the estimated average circulation of the publications.[4]

Measuring the potential impressions of the new boomerang took a few more steps. For Facebook, we calculated potential impressions by first multiplying the number of Facebook fans (likes) by an estimate of number of Facebook posts each group made in the past year – what might be considered the original potential impressions. We then determined the additional, "social potential impressions" for each NGO by estimating how many additional people could have seen the post thanks to fans sharing the original posts with their own friends. We then added the two figures together to come up with the potential annual reach for Facebook. Though the result is an admittedly rough measure, we be-

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[4]One downside of the decision to use the Major World Publications database was that we were unable to compile precise circulation figures for all the publications. As a result we used an estimated circulation figure of one million potential readers per story, which was roughly the average daily circulation – on and offline combined – of our original set of elite newspapers.

lieve that it is a reasonable one and is likely to be in the ballpark for most of the NGOs.[5]

For Twitter, measuring an NGO's potential impressions is equally complicated. However, we benefitted from the fact that Twitter makes gathering historical data on users much easier. Using data from Twitter metrics providers Twitalyzer, Tweet Grader, and Trst.me, we were able to estimate the number of tweets each NGO produced in a year.[6]We then calculated potential impressions by multiplying the number of annual tweets by the "potential reach" figure provided by Twitalzyer (the sum of a NGO's Twitter followers added to the sum of its followers' followers).[7]

YouTube's contribution to potential reach was measured very directly by simply noting the total number of views of the organization's videos, a number thoughtfully provided on each group's YouTube channel. The potential reach of an NGO's web site was calculated by noting how many people have visited the web site in the past year.[8]

Building a Bigger Boomerang

Table One reveals that the new boomerang is already almost as large as the old boomerang, at least for the outlets and platforms studied here. NGOs averaged roughly 168 million potential annual impressions for the traditional news media (median 5,500,000), compared to 133 million for the new media (median 1,132,000).

Moreover, 49% of the NGOs had a bigger new boomerang than old boomerang, including 28 of the NGOs that had zero visibility in the world news media in 2010. For these groups, the new boomerang clearly represents a critical new strategy for overcoming the obstacles to communicating with the public. Given how new the social media are (NGOs in our study have been using Twitter, for example, for an average of just 26 months) this represents a dramatic change in the NGO community's ability to communicate with the public.

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[5]The social potential impressions figure relies on two estimated values. The first is the virality rate for Facebook posts. We have used 1% here, meaning that we are estimating that 1% of an NGO's Facebook fans will repost each post. Unfortunately there are not yet great figures for this from Facebook itself. The second figure is our estimate of how many Facebook friends each fan has. Facebook has reported that this figure is 120. To calculate social potential reach we then multiplied the number of NGO fans by 1% and then multiplied that product by 120.

[6]These are three of the growing number of social media analysis firms. Company websites: http://twitalyzer.com; http://tweet.grader.com; http://trst.me.

[7]For more information see http://www.twitalzyer.com.

[8]Web traffic data comes from http://www.compete.com

Table 1. Potential Impressions of the Old and New Boomerangs.[9]

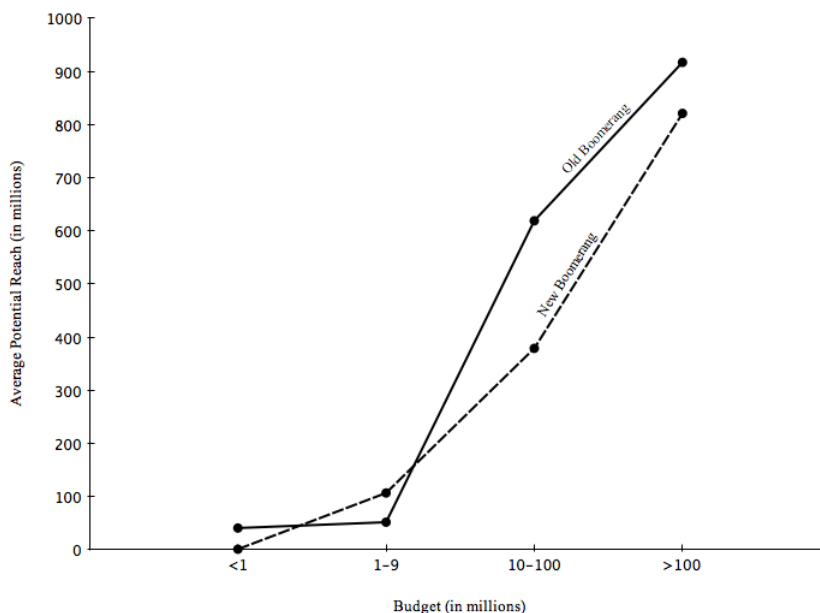| *Average Annual Potential Impressions (in millions)*			
	Top 5%	Top 10%	All	Bottom 50%
Old Boomerang				
Major World Publications	2,364	1,440	168 (5.5)	.97
New Boomerang				
Facebook	340	183	20 (1.1)	.32
Twitter	1,701	1,052	130 (1.1)	.16
YouTube	3.2	2.2	.42 (.03)	.07
Website	.75	.51	.08 (.01)	.004
New Boomerang Total	1,908	1,224	133 (1.1)	.22

Big Budget = Big Boomerang

Figure Three confirms and extends what previous research has observed about the importance of organizational resources. Unsurprisingly, the old boomerang has been a tool reserved for the largest and best-funded organizations, groups like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam International, Doctors without Borders, and the International Crisis Group. These groups have offices around the world, enjoy budgets in the hundreds of millions and employ scores of professionals with expertise on the full range of issues required to demonstrate credibility to and interact effectively with legal, governmental, academic, and journalistic audiences.

What is somewhat more surprising, perhaps, given the optimists' rhetoric, is how important organizational resources appear to be in explaining success with the new boomerang. If the new boomerang were a great strategy for getting by on less and bypassing the media gatekeepers, we would expect to see a relatively large number of groups who received very low news exposure getting plenty of exposure in the social media. Instead, we see that success with the new boomerang seems predicated on success with the old boomerang. Just two groups – Witness and the Polaris Project – had an old boomerang reach below the mean but a new boomerang reach above the mean.

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[9]Averages for social media include only NGOs actively using a given platform. The total potential impressions of the new boomerang includes all NGOs, however, and thus does not equal the sum of the components. Figures in parentheses are medians. Finally, the old boomerang – world publications – is for 2010. The new media reach figures are for February 2011 – February 2012.

Figure 3. NGO Budgets and Potential Impressions.

6   Conclusion: Is Bigger Big Enough?

NGOs, of course, do not have to choose between the old and new boomerangs but instead are busy creating strategies that seek to leverage both of them. In that vein NGO's now wield a "modern boomerang" averaging 302 million potential impressions per year. On the surface that sounds impressive. At the same time, however, our analysis reveals that the concentration in both the news media and social media is significant, with attention heavily skewed to the most popular groups.

This finding suggests that scholars have oversold the role of the media in the traditional boomerang pattern to some extent. It also suggests that those NGOs most likely to make good use of the new media are the very same NGOs that need it the least thanks to their resources and connections. With respect to the old boomerang, most NGOs are effectively invisible in both the elite news outlets studied here and the broader world news database. 28 NGOs had zero visibility in the news media, and another 35 generated fewer than 12 million potential impressions, averaging less than one story per month globally in 2010. 18 NGOs managed to average 10 or more stories per month globally, but only a small handful made enough news to truly be considered visible on a regular basis. As Russell Neuman (1990) has shown, crossing the threshold of public

attention in the U.S. typically does not occur until the New York Times alone is generating ten stories per month. Below that level various interested citizens may take notice but it is unlikely that there will be any major impact on the mass audience. These data thus cast serious doubt on how effective the old boomerang has been for the vast majority of human rights groups, at least in terms of setting public agendas, shaping public opinion, or pressuring Western governments to act.

With respect to the new boomerang, the story is much the same. The median NGO on Twitter generates 1.1 million potential impressions, roughly the equivalent of one-half a New York Times story per year. Facebook offers the median NGO the exposure of one New York Times story every two years, and it would take 74 years for the median NGO's YouTube channel (27,000 people) to equal a single New York Times story. At this rate it does not look like most NGOs will be setting the world on fire via the social media.

Given how quickly the technological and media landscapes are changing, scholars would be well served to avoid making too many bold predictions about what the future holds. Nonetheless, at least two predictions seem reasonable. First, given the explosive growth of the social media, it is a safe bet that most NGOs will soon be reaching more people via the social media than the mainstream news if they are not already. This finding should provide the optimists with at least some satisfaction. At the same time, however, is also seems a safe bet to expect that the uneven distribution of resources and attention that has followed NGOs as they have migrated from the traditional public sphere to the new media will continue. No matter how many new ways of communicating emerge, attention will remain a scarce resource and one that typically does not follow democratic distributions. Thus, the pessimists can also take some satisfaction from our results.

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