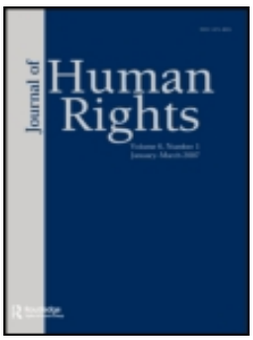

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A new era of human rights news? Contrasting two paradigms of human rights news-making

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ABSTRACT

Past research suggests that news coverage of human rights is shaped primarily by interactions between journalists, political elites, and leading NGOs. To what degree do contemporary transformations in media, politics, and civil society alter this established wisdom? In this article, I sketch out the possibility that we are witnessing a new era of human rights news, characterized by the expansion of information producers and social contexts to which human rights frames are ascribed. In this era, leading NGOs and news organizations must increasingly interact with individual activists and others on the selection, framing, and dissemination of human rights news. These developments may remedy some of the weaknesses identified in previous research on human rights news, even as they create new concerns about the veracity and pluralistic nature of human rights news content. I suggest ways to study this new era so as to integrate findings with past research.

Introduction

In 2004, a group of Inuit leaders circulated a petition detailing the ways in which climate change had wrought havoc on their daily lives.[1] Rising temperatures, they said, threatened their food supply, endangered their health and imperiled their capacity to live in the Arctic. Seeking redress, they filed a formal complaint to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, naming the United States—at the time the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases—a violator of the 1948 Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. To boost awareness of their concerns, they participated in the production of a documentary video and circulated information about the issue online. Attention grew steadily. While the Inuit leaders did not initially pursue coverage in the mainstream media, they received it in late 2004, when a number of news outlets, including the *New York Times* (Revkin 2004), spotlighted the effort to highlight the ways in which communities were increasingly talking about climate change in human rights terms.

The efforts by Inuit leaders to frame climate change in human rights terms differ substantially from the established paradigm of human rights news. For starters, the usual producers and distributors of human rights discourses—nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and

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news organizations, respectively—were not integral to the original efforts to publicize the issue. Instead, local activists used low-cost digital technologies to raise awareness and to target international governing bodies. Moreover, the discourse of human rights itself departed from human rights stories that emphasize political violations (e.g., torture, abuse, etc.) that occur in the Global South. By reframing climate change as a human rights issue, the Inuit activists sought to alter public perception of the nature of human rights violations and to implicate culprits in the Global North. Together, these developments suggest the possible dawn of a "new era" of human rights news, one that may be less dependent on the mass media and may involve the use of digital technologies to fashion new forms of human rights reporting.

In this article, I explore some of the ways in which a new era of human rights news may be taking shape. To do so, I (a) identify the extant paradigm and highlight its various strengths and weaknesses, (b) discuss how a set of institutional, discursive, and technological changes may usher in a new paradigm, (c) delineate a set of features that characterizes various cases of human rights news-making today and that seem to depart from the established paradigm of human rights news, and (d) suggest some implications of these developments for future research. The argument put forward raises the question of a new era of human rights; it does not aim to settle it. Instead, it draws out some of the contrasts and orients some key questions for scholars interested in the production and circulation of human rights news. To do so, it draws on recently published research, as well as examples from my own work on the changes in the world of human rights reporting.[2]

Writing about a potential new era of human rights news raises questions about what exactly is meant by the terms "human rights" and "news," respectively. Drawing on Foucault (1977), I will define human rights as a "discursive formation," that is, as a way of speaking that exceeds the boundaries of any single usage. Human rights discourses embody multiple ideals (e.g., legal conventions, political rhetoric, social movement activism), which are sometimes in tension. These various ideals generate debates about the "true" meaning of human rights, which differ from legal interpretations that use international laws to define human rights norms. Yet, news coverage of human rights is more flexible than legal prescriptions; the definition used here reflects that need for a capacious approach. Relatedly, I will define "news" as information and/or commentary on contemporary affairs in which one or more actors identify an issue related to human rights (Schudson 2011). In this definition, news may come from news organizations, but it may also come from NGOs, civic groups, or indeed even individuals. Like human rights, news is defined loosely so as to reflect the shifting information environment in which news is produced and circulated today.

The extant paradigm of human rights news

To date, scholarship examining the relationship between media and human rights suggests a news paradigm that is characterized by (a) news organizations serving as the primary vehicle for reaching large audiences (Keck and Sikkink 1998), (b) NGOs that are heavily reliant on those news organizations to raise awareness of human rights issues (Bob 2005; Hopgood 2006), and (c) human rights issues that pertain primarily to violations of political rights (e.g., torture, illegal detention, etc.) that are committed beyond the United States and Western Europe (Clark 2001; Winston 2001). In this paradigm, news media act as key "gatekeepers" that decide—based on established news norms (Gans 1979)—which of the seemingly

infinite number of human rights issues can occupy a portion of the news agenda. This paradigm has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, human rights news can under certain conditions motivate government officials to participate in actions that improve human rights conditions (Clark 2001). On the other hand, media reporting and NGO publicity strategies exhibit biases that limit what types of issues get covered and how (Bob 2005). In this section, I provide an overview of the key features of this paradigm and discuss its relative strengths and weaknesses with respect to the news coverage it produces.

Because of the news media's central role in circulating human rights news, much scholarship has investigated the techniques NGOs and civic groups use to capture public attention. In their pathbreaking work, Keck and Sikkink (1998) discussed the emergence of an "information politics" (18) that saw advocacy groups strategically deploying facts and narratives in order to capture the attention of journalists—and, by extension, larger publics. In their account, NGOs provide news organizations with credible information that also adheres to established news norms of drama and timeliness. As they note: "[B]oth credibility and drama seem to be essential components of a strategy aimed at persuading publics and policymakers to changes their minds" (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 19). More recent accounts have further developed analyses of the methods such groups use to gather credible information (Clark 2001; Hopgood 2006), how NGOs translate their issues to appease dominant news norms that favor conflict and spectacle (Cottle and Nolan 2007; Waisbord 2011), and what conditions lead news organizations to pick up the information messages that NGOs send to them (Powers 2015a). Together, they point to the central role played by NGOs and the news media in shaping human rights news.

These efforts by NGOs to capture media attention have led to a number of success stories. Numerous case studies attest to instances where NGOs have broken into the news and secured substantial amounts of sympathetic coverage. For example, early efforts by Amnesty International to raise awareness of human rights violations under the Greek military junta in the 1960s successfully captured media attention in part due to the group's framing of political torture occurring in the "cradle of democracy" (Clark 2001). These efforts isolated the junta from the Council of Europe, which Greece was forced to leave — under threat of expulsion—in 1968 (Clark 2001: 41). Human Rights Watch enjoyed similar early successes by attacking the complicity of the Reagan administration in human rights violations throughout Latin America. By challenging the administration's claims with on-the-ground research, the group was able in some instances to get the administration to change policy (Neier 2003). More recent cases have identified similar instances where NGOs successfully work within the extant paradigm of human rights news to capture media attention and to force governments to alter their behavior on specific issues (Becker 2013).

Despite evidence of these successes, research has also identified a number of ways in which this paradigm limits what issues get covered and how. For starters, the total number of actors involved in producing most human rights news tends to be limited to a few elite NGOs (Thrall et al. 2014). Smaller groups are typically excluded from coverage, unless they can convince leading NGOs to partner with them. According to Bob (2005), such partnering efforts are often unsuccessful, as leading NGOs typically privilege causes and issues that conform to their own cultural, linguistic, and organizational preferences (as opposed to the nature of the human rights violation per se). Moreover, the relationship between NGOs and news outlets is itself not marked by parity. As Waisbord (2011) notes, the journalistic "beat" system favors governments, not NGOs. Groups like Amnesty International and Human

Rights Watch may succeed in capturing media attention, yet many of their efforts to generate coverage fall flat (Ron et al. 2005). In particular, their efforts to capture media attention on issues far outside the media spotlight are often futile. As one Amnesty International executive has put it: "You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn't give a rat's ass about Mauritania" (as quoted in Ron et al. 2005: 576).

This comment links up with a more general limitation of the human rights news paradigm: namely, its tendency to focus on a few topics and places that align with a narrow vision of human rights. Systematic content analyses conducted by Ramos and his collaborators (Ramos et al. 2007), for example, find that human rights news tends to be negatively associated with poverty. Other analyses argue that human rights tends to focus primarily on "political" violations like torture and detention, while sidelining human economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g., right not to live in poverty or, as indicated in the introductory example, "the right to be cold"; see, e.g., Williams 2010; Winston 2001). Still others find that attention cycles in the news media tend to be limited to a few cases (Thrall et al. 2014). Together, this means that many countries and issues fail to ever capture any level of news attention that would match objective measures of human rights conditions (e.g., levels of violence, poverty, etc.) in their country.

A final limitation of the extant human rights news paradigm is its tendency towards simplified, and sometimes highly misleading, narratives. This stems from the need for timeliness and drama required by news organizations to cover human rights issues (Cottle and Nolan 2007). Because news organizations provide news access to topics and issues that are newsworthy (rather than important per se), scholars have identified multiple instances where NGOs oversell or distort their claims to satisfy the news media's demands. In a particularly egregious example, Cohen and Green (2012) find that news reports systematically overstated the relative rate of sexual violence during the Liberian civil war. In that case, both NGOs and journalists claimed that 75% or more of women had been raped, even though detailed surveys and interviews placed that number at somewhere between 10% and 20%. Such instances raise questions about whether the desire (and need) for media coverage may in fact reduce the long-term credibility of human rights news providers.

Taken together, the available research points to a paradigm of human rights news that is premised on the central role of the news media as gatekeepers, the important role played by leading NGOs as information providers, and a tendency to focus on human rights violations that emerge in the realm of politics more than economics, society, or culture. This paradigm has helped to make human rights news a regular topic in the news and, in some cases, it has also helped to spur government action on human rights problems. At the same time, though, the paradigm of human rights news tends to exclude a great number of human rights actors and issues; furthermore, its coverage of human rights issues often simplifies and distorts complex situations. This is a paradigm that came of age during the dominance of print and television news. As I discuss below, a number of changing contexts raise questions about the degree to which such a paradigm remains in operation today.

Changing institutional, discursive, and technological contexts

The paradigm of human rights news described above is based on a set of institutional, discursive, and technological contexts that are themselves being transformed. This raises interesting questions about whether the paradigm for human rights news will change alongside

them, or if it will endure despite these changes. Below, I highlight three sets of changes that set the stage for thinking about a possible "new era" of human rights that may depart in some ways from this established paradigm of human rights news.

In the extant model of human rights news, the news media function as the primary gatekeepers, and NGOs are essentially reliant on them for publicity. Yet, remarkable changes in both sectors suggest that this relationship may be in the process of being reconfigured. Consider journalism first. Since the end of the Cold War, US news outlets have slashed their foreign news budgets: Fewer correspondents now staff fewer news bureaus in fewer parts of the world (Hannerz 2004). The amount of news space dedicated to international news has similarly decreased: from an average of nearly 40% of all news content in the 1980s to about 17% today (Powers 2013).Whatever the quality of their earlier "gatekeeping" efforts, today there exist real questions about the media's role in human rights news (both in terms of whether they will report on an issue and in terms of how they will be able to separate out competing claims with little on-the-ground expertise; see Otto and Meyer 2012).

At the same time as the news media have cut back on human rights coverage, NGOs have assumed increasingly prominent roles in the provision of human rights news as a result of growing professionalization (as well as the institutionalization of human rights norms internationally). In addition to conducting original research, advocating with public officials, and waging public awareness campaigns, these groups take on a number of seemingly "journalistic" functions. To take just the two leading human rights NGOs as examples: Human Rights Watch now assigns photographers and videographers to produce multimedia packages that can accompany research reports (Bogert 2010). It draws from a staff of more than 400, a workforce that rivals the entire foreign news bureaus of leading US news providers like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. Similarly, Amnesty International staffs a "new unit" charged with being an online portal for human rights news (Bartlett 2011). It employs more than 125 research staff to gather information about human rights issues worldwide (Powers 2015b). Together, these changes in the journalism and NGO sectors raise the possibility of NGOs playing a more direct role in shaping news coverage of human rights, both in the news media and beyond for a variety of purposes, including but not limited to mobilizing supporters, to raising funds, and to providing the legal basis for criminal prosecution.

Beyond these institutional changes, the past decade has witnessed a transformation in the discursive meaning of human rights itself. If human rights news consistently focused on political abuses, this stemmed in part from the focus that the human rights community paid to these issues (Clark 2001). Over the past decade, though, the human rights community has developed a greater interest in social and economic rights (Robinson 2003). Moreover, human rights discourses are increasingly used to frame not only international affairs but domestic ones. In the United States and Europe, same-sex unions, reparations, and prison abuses are increasingly framed as human rights issues (see, e.g., Becker 2013). Analysts have evaluated these developments in negative or positive terms; my point here is simply to note the evolution of human rights discourses to accommodate a growing number of issues under its umbrella. This raises the possibility of human rights news focusing on a growing number of issues, perhaps on a growing number of places, including not just underdeveloped countries in the Global South but issues in the developed Global North that garner little media traction.

Finally, the development of new information technologies creates new possibilities for the production and distribution of human rights news. In terms of production, the costs of

documenting human rights abuses have fallen precipitously (Beutz Land 2009). With little more than a mobile phone, individual activists can—and do—capture human rights abuses. In terms of distribution, new information technologies also provide activists with ways to bypass the traditional journalistic and NGO gatekeepers (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Chadwick 2013). Case studies, for example, have shown activists make creative use of social media, gaming technologies, and more as a way to raise public awareness of human rights issues (Becker 2013). This raises questions about how and in what ways the elite NGOs and news organizations do or do not incorporate these novel technological possibilities into their news-making practices.

Taken together, these institutional, discursive and technological changes amount to a possible departure from the status quo. They create the possibility of more information producers inserting human rights frames with more news stories in a range of different contexts. This may correct for some of the weaknesses of the extant paradigm of human rights news, or it may reinforce those same tendencies. In the next section, I describe some of the features of the new era of human rights news, noting the strengths and weaknesses of these developments vis-à-vis their predecessors.

Features of a new era of human rights news

Here I want to highlight five features of human rights today that result from the shifting institutional, discursive, and technological contexts discussed above. In discussing them, my aim is to highlight ways in which these features contrast with the established paradigm of human rights news. From the outset, I want to stress that this potentially new mode does not wholly displace its predecessor. Rather, I identify these features so that they can be explored subsequently in terms of how and in what ways they interact with the extant paradigm of human rights.

With these preliminaries in mind, I want to suggest that the following features point to a possible new era of human rights news that can be characterized as follows: Human rights news involves a growing number of newsmakers and a proliferating number of contexts in which issues become human rights topics. These developments have the potential to add a greater number of human rights frames onto news stories. At the same time, uncertainty about the veracity of human rights reporting, as well as a tendency towards simplified and misleading coverage, is likely to co-occur as a result of an intense battle for limited public attention.

Human rights news is increasingly produced by a mix of amateurs and professionals

The first feature of human rights news today is that a growing mix of amateurs and professionals produce it. By amateurs, I refer to persons without training or membership in a field of human rights information production. By professionals, I refer to persons that have experience working in and producing human rights news, usually as a journalist or NGO professional. While human rights news was never solely the production of elite NGOs and news organizations, these groups did set the agenda and produced much of the information. Today, it is increasingly common for individuals, acting alone or in small groups, to document human rights issues with digital devices, oftentimes from places where media coverage or NGO presence is quite limited. Moreover, in many cases, leading NGOs are responding

to these developments by dedicating growing resources to monitoring and evaluating the social media feeds of amateur producers. These trends have the potential to loosen the editorial grip of information elites even as it raises questions about the veracity of the information being provided.

Several recent examples are illustrative of this trend. Papo Reto (Straight Talk) is a Brazilian collective that uses mobile technologies to document political violence in favelas on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro (Shaer 2015). It is comprised mostly of activists who live in the favelas and have little to no experience in either journalism or human rights reporting. After they receive word of a violent event (many of which involve police officers), members of the collective go to the scene, record what is happening and then disseminate the information through text messages, group chats, and social media channels. Initially, Papo Reto members gathered this information to ensure the safety of the favela's residents. At some point, larger NGOs, like the New York-based Witness, became interested in partnering with the group to document human rights violations in places with little media or NGO presence. These larger organizations held trainings to teach Papo Reto members about the types of information needed to hold human rights violators to account. These techniques include capturing the time and location, as well as details about who committed the violation (e.g., a police officer's badge number). Through this collaboration between amateurs and professionals, a growing number of human rights violations are documented and circulated.

A similarly illustrative, if less rosy, example further highlights the growing interactions between amateurs and professionals. Since the start of the Syrian civil war, amateur reportage has served as a primary source of information for both journalists and leading NGOs, whose access to the country remains heavily restricted (Lynch et al. 2014). Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch dedicate growing resources to monitor the information feeds produced by amateurs purporting to be on the ground (McPherson 2015). Moreover, in some cases, these groups are teaming up with bloggers like UK-based Brown Moses in an effort to verify information about human rights abuses (Radden Keefe 2013). In addition to successful collaborations, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also helped to circulate bogus information. In 2011, for example, both groups drew attention to the case of an 18-year-old woman who, they claimed, had been beheaded by the Syrian government. This was information they gathered from a video uploaded to YouTube. The findings were reported in several prominent news outlets (CNN, Associated Press). Weeks later, the young woman appeared on Syrian television, claiming she had fled her home to escape domestic abuse. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch issued retractions (Mawad 2012).

The key takeaway here is that the growing prominence of amateurs may loosen the grip of NGOs and news organizations in producing human rights news. The effect of these developments on the quality of human rights news remains to be seen. On the one hand, growing collaborations between professionals and amateurs raise the potential for a greater number of human rights issues to circulate publicly. The shadow of publicity this creates may incentivize governments to minimize violations, and the collaborations themselves may loosen the grip of leading NGOs and news outlets on deciding which human rights issues become news. On the other hand, these developments raise questions about the veracity of the underlying materials and suggest that incentives for overhyped and misleading narratives continue to persist in the new media environment. In

fact, a member of a leading human rights news provider from Syria—the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights—remarked to me in an interview that journalists often seem most interested in reports about "clashes" rather than death tolls per se (the former being seen as more newsworthy) (Interview with Syrian Observatory for Human Rights official, May 2, 2012). Thus, the mixture of amateurs and professionals may challenge some aspects of the human rights news paradigm, even as it reinforces old tendencies towards sensationalism and dramatization.

Efforts to publicize human rights news are not solely dependent on the mass media

A second distinguishing feature of human rights news today is that the path to publicity has diversified. Under the old paradigm, the news media functioned as the primary gatekeeper for human rights news. Without media coverage, issues failed to gain public traction. Today's media space contains a mixture of mainstream media, niche sites, and social media (Chadwick 2013). This creates opportunities for human rights advocates to diversify their publicity strategies, using direct targeting when it makes sense and seeking mass media publicity at other points. Together, these different publicity options suggest an information environment that fosters different levels and types of public engagement, from communicating with political elites to raising citizen awareness of human rights issues.

Today's publicity options seem to diverge from the past reliance on mass media in at least two ways. First, advocacy groups can now act as their own "newsmakers" outside of the mainstream media. The largest NGOs, like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have websites that serve as de facto news destinations. These sites provide access to reports and news releases, as well as a growing number of videos, slideshows, and interactive maps (Powers 2015b). These groups also publish social media feeds that push information out to journalists, government officials, other activists, and the public. There is evidence that leading NGOs see opportunities in these new technologies to reach new types of audiences. For example, on a recent reporting trip to the Central African Republic, Human Rights Watch paid a professional photojournalist to supplement a researcher's account with visual imagery (Interview with Human Rights Watch staff member, March 4, 2015). These efforts helped the group to reach policymakers and human rights advocates sympathetic to the issue.

A second way that publicity differs today is that human rights advocates can pursue "hybrid" (Chadwick 2013) strategies in their efforts to raise broad public awareness of key issues. The highly controversial campaign by Invisible Children to make Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony "famous" is a case in point. Rather than target the news media with information about human rights abuses in Uganda, the organization asked celebrities to recirculate the information to their social media followers (Zuckerman 2012). Following the precepts of what Andrew Cooper (2007) calls "celebrity diplomacy," the group enlisted celebrities to help put the issue on the agenda with the hope of generating mass media coverage (it also led to coverage questioning both the ethics and efficacy of Invisible Children's larger strategy for achieving social change). In this case, publicity was "hybrid" in that it integrated the novel features of digital media (e.g., viral sharing outside the realm of traditional news providers) in order to ultimately garner the attention of leading news outlets.

The diversification of publicity options raises a broader question about what types of public pressure are most effective for human rights news to spur social change. In the past, news

coverage by leading newspapers was often seen as a proxy for access to government officials (Clark 2001). Of course, many nongovernment officials also read these newspapers, yet this readership was often seen as almost incidental to the desired audience of political elites. Today, the diverse paths to publicity raise questions about how best to reach any of these publics. Is the *New York Times* still the most effective way to reach policymakers in the US State Department? Or would human rights newsmakers be better served by targeting blogs or niche websites that staffers might be more likely to read? Relatedly, is presence in the mainstream media still the most effective way to generate widespread public support of human rights causes? Or might advocacy groups find alternate routes that more successfully achieve this goal, perhaps while also maintaining a greater degree of editorial control over their information materials?

Almost all news has the potential for a human rights news frame

The third feature of human rights news today is what might be called perpetual framing struggles. As advocacy groups, including NGOs, commit greater resources to information production, they have advocacy reporting and action recommendations at the ready. Their staffers look to find ways to insert these materials into the flow of daily news. As a result, human rights is not framed once and for all (by the publication of a single news story generated from a press release); rather, the effort to make a story a human rights issue is a continual effort, labored over by constantly monitoring the news agenda. As the discursive meaning of human rights expands and the digital environment enables real-time monitoring, this suggests that nearly *any* news story has the potential for a human rights frame.

An example from my own research helps to illustrate the point. In 2011, Amnesty International was reporting on human rights violations in Libya in the context of the "Arab Spring." Every day, the press officers would meet to discuss ways to get a human rights angle into this broader story. In June 2011, the UK press was debating what should happen to then-president-in-hiding Muammar al-Gaddafi. To Amnesty staffers, this was a debate with a clear human rights dimension: Gaddafi had committed numerous war crimes and should be prosecuted as such. To insert this frame into the debate, they sent press releases, monitored social media feeds and contacted reporters with the message that Gaddafi needed to be seen as a human rights violator. They tailored their language to suit the needs of the press, invoking Britishisms for greater journalistic and public appeal. In doing this, Amnesty was able to get the human rights dimension into news coverage about Libya.

Framing struggles also complicate the idea of what constitutes a human rights violation. As Moyn (2010) has argued, the relatively recent triumph of human rights discourses vis-à-vis alternative political ideologies has led to a cascading effect where various political goals (e.g., climate change, torture, poverty, etc.) are discussed under the banner of human rights. This creates a situation wherein a seemingly endless number of topics are framed as human rights issues. The anecdote at the introduction of this article suggests, for example, how climate change activists use human rights discourses to reframe the issue as one of personal and cultural autonomy. In the United States, human rights groups—in the context of documented police violence (Rios 2006)—have with increasing regularity addressed racial disparities as human rights problems (as opposed to civil rights). In 2014, for example, Amnesty International dispatched a research team to gather facts in the aftermath of the shooting of a 19-year-old black man by a white

police officer. While there, the leader of the organization's US section, Steven W. Hawkins, took to the airwaves to call the situation a human rights crisis.

In each of these cases, the point is that what constitutes human rights news is always potentially under negotiation. News articles without a human rights angle may become the object of advocacy reporting and action recommendations. And issues that otherwise find little traction in the press might be framed in human rights terms. The key issue here is that an expanded meaning of human rights as a discourse couples with technological capacities for monitoring that make it possible to insert advocacy reporting and action recommendations into the flow of daily news content.

Human rights news not only informs and persuades but it produces legal documentation of violations

A fourth feature of human rights today is that it aims not only to inform and persuade but also to document actual human rights violations. This development may help to reshape both the content and form of human rights news by mixing emotive appeals and calls for action with empirical evidence of a human rights violation. In the extant paradigm of human rights news, media coverage is useful for its capacity to shame violators, to raise public awareness, and to boost organizational branding. None of this has disappeared. However, it has been supplemented by a type of human rights news that functions simultaneously as information, provocation, and *documentation* of the human rights abuses. This latter function is key. In the past, clippings from the *New York Times* were rarely used in legal proceedings. In part, this was because there was no legal proceeding—no International Criminal Court—to which they could be submitted; thus, the institutional development of human rights bodies helps to fashion new types of human rights news. At the same time, this was also the case because coverage in the news media was seen as an intermediary point, between research and action. The former—that is, the research—was understood to be the evidentiary basis for the latter.

Today, there are growing efforts to ensure that human rights coverage can be used not simply for dramatic and attention-grabbing purposes but also as legal evidence. Human rights NGOs dedicate substantial resources to training local activists around the world in documentation practices. Activists are instructed to include geographic landmarks (e.g., mountains, historic buildings, etc.) in their visual efforts, which specify where the actions occurred. They are trained in best practices for capturing metadata (e.g., automated recording of the date and time of the filming; see, e.g., McPherson 2015). And they are informed to capture information that not only maximizes emotional impact but provides information that can be used in the human rights methodology. As one NGO professional puts it: "It's instinctual to shoot that puddle of blood or the body lying on the ground. It's not instinctual to turn around and get a badge number or the location of a communications tower. If you're strictly a media activist, you're not going to show the world a communications tower. It's not going to make the news…But from a legal sense, you need those details" (as quoted in Shaer 2015: para. 25).

Efforts to document violations through public channels also blur the lines between research and publicity itself. The legal evidence discussed in the preceding paragraph was always captured by NGOs; however, it was typically tucked into a research report whose circulation was limited largely to policymakers. As evidence is documented publicly, the line

between research and publicity changes. This blurring can be seen in the ongoing battle over fake images and videos that are repurposed in the immediate aftermath of a human rights violation (Mawad 2012). The value of these images lies in their appearance as truthful statements about current realities—that is, as a form of documentation. The threat is that false images cast doubt on all other documents too. This has practical implications for how NGOs cultivate social media materials. McPherson (2015), for example, has described the ways in which Amnesty International's efforts to evaluate social media information has led the group to favor accounts with more resources (suitable for providing metadata and the like). Thus, the blurring of research and publicity presents itself as an opportunity to reinscribe the lines of professionalism in the production of human rights news.

The methods for producing human rights news have diversified

A fifth feature of human rights news today has to do with the diversification of the methods of its production. Human rights news became an object for analysis in large part through the "boots on the ground" efforts of human rights activists and sympathetic journalists (Powers 2015b). Its credibility was boosted by the development of a methodology that could take the observations of witnesses—who were sympathetic but not inherently trustworthy—and find ways to generate veridical accounts of what happened. On-the-ground interviews have not gone away. But they, too, are being supplanted in the changing landscape of human rights news. These developments create the possibility for new types of human rights storytelling (not all of which are inherently positive, as discussed below).

In the past decade, leading NGOs have invested resources in the use of satellite-imaging devices (Herscher 2011). Unlike eyewitness reports, these images provide a bird's eye view of events on the ground, which allows researchers to view the overall amount of destruction wrought upon a specific locale. In cases where access is difficult and reports are conflicting, such imagery is used as a monitoring device. This creates not only an additional sort of witness but an altogether different type of witnessing. If human rights news was initially premised on the statements of individuals whose rights had been violated, technologies like satellite imaging are premised on the capacity for mechanical witnessing — a power premised on having the resources to be able to see in this way. This development creates the opportunity to shed light on human rights issues to a degree and scale previously unimaginable.

At the same time, the diversification of the method for human rights storytelling may also create doubt about the individuals who once formed the core of human rights reporting. In 2009, for example, human rights reporters in Sri Lanka declared that it was impossible to adjudicate competing claims between government officials (who said civilian deaths resulted from their conscription by rebels as human shields) and rebel groups (who said that the government directly targeted civilians; see, e.g., Herscher 2011). After looking into the events, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs claimed that it was impossible to know the truth because "no-one was there" (Herscher 2011: 143). Of course, that statement was hardly true: Many civilians *were* there. It was just that newer methods like satellite imagery were not available and thus definitive evidence seemed mixed. Thus, on the whole, it is difficult to generalize about the effects of the diversification of human rights reporting techniques.

Together, the five features discussed here suggest some ways in which the new mode of human rights news may improve upon its predecessor. It may cover more issues and include a

greater number of voices. At the same time, questions arise about the veracity of the information provided as well as the degree to which more complexity is incorporated into the news coverage (because the same developments that allow activists to bypass the media also encourage the simplification of information). In the next section, I consider the implications of these developments for future research examining the intersection of media and human rights.

Implications for research

The features identified above suggest the outlines of a new era of human rights news, one marked by the growing interdependence of amateurs and professionals, of multiple routes for achieving publicity and of perpetual framing struggles. The available scholarship on human rights news has not yet systematically examined these developments. Too often, the available research tends to assume the staying power of a paradigm marked by the dominance of news organizations and elite NGOs. It tests what factors drive the decision making of these two entities but pays far less attention to the role of amateurs, the information-generating practices of variously sized advocacy groups, or to the changing discursive meanings of human rights. As a result, scholarship generally retains a theoretical assumption in favor of the extent paradigm, with relatively little scholarship asking how and in what ways new developments may either alter that paradigm, or perhaps even usher in a new one (see the overview in Powers 2015c).

Here I want to highlight two questions that deserve further analysis and suggest some of the ways in which they might be studied so as to bring some of the theoretical issues raised by the potential emergence of a new human rights news paradigm to the fore. One question is empirical. In effect, it asks how and in what ways the new features identified here interact with the established paradigm of human rights news. This can be studied both with respect to the mainstream media and in emergent online news spaces. For mainstream media (which still constitute the lion's share of news production and consumption), there are questions about whether a new era of human rights news-making—characterized by the five features listed above—will open the news gates to a wider variety of topics and actors. For example, it is possible that the *prevalence* of human rights sources (e.g., NGOs, advocates, etc.) and frames (e.g., issues for which human rights angles are developed) is expanding as a result of the shifting institutional, discursive, and technological contexts. Related questions concern whether human rights advocates are able to widen the news agenda by introducing topics and issues otherwise excluded or marginalized in the news.

With respect to digital media, there are important empirical questions about how and in what ways human rights is produced and circulated in online spaces. While scholarship has begun to document some of the ways that human rights news is being produced through digital channels (described above), much less research has examined the degree to which new developments alter old paradigms. For example, social media use by advocates and NGOs may challenge extant patterns of news-making (bypassing the news media and targeting large audiences directly) or it may reinforce those same norms (by using social media primarily as a digital echo chamber). Relatedly, when and how human rights issues spill over from the digital sphere and break into the news more broadly remains scarcely understood. Finally, researchers know little about how advocates select publicity strategies, now that they have so many different options available to them. Each of these is an important empirical concern that requires further attention.

A second set of issues is analytical. In effect, it asks the following: To the extent that a new era does or does not supplant the characteristics of an earlier era, what explains it? The present status of human rights news offers an interesting test case for institutional theories of change. According to a dominant strand of institutional theory (see, e.g., Starr 2004), organizations and institutions tend to endure over time according to the principles and norms upon which they are founded. Journalism in the United States, for example, is premised on ideals of objectivity and news worth that can be traced back to struggles in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to differentiate news from public relations. For institutional and organizational theorists, the possibility of change typically arises during a period of churn or systemic shocks. The various institutional, discursive, and technological transformations make it plausible to imagine change (and to note key features of what this change may produce). Whether or not this change actually transpires will therefore be an empirical question with important analytical takeaways. In particular, continuity or change will require an account of the various mechanisms that help to ensure either a continuation of or departure from the status quo.

Such an analysis will help to inform key debates in human rights, communications, and journalism. Researchers have done much to identify the macrolevel conditions shaping human rights news coverage (e.g., the degree to which coverage corresponds to factors such as political violence, military aid, foreign assistance, the size of a country's civil society sector). Largely absent from these discussions are the meso-level conditions within the fields of journalism and advocacy that help to shape human rights coverage (for an exception, see Pollock 2014). Long-standing interests, for example, in the role played by funding, organizational dynamics, and professional norms are all likely to matter in shaping the degree to which a new era of technical affordances ends up creating a new paradigm of human rights news (Powers 2014).

Conclusion

Over the past half century, human rights news has formed a key part of the human rights advocacy paradigm. Reliance on the mainstream news media has led to occasional policy successes but frequent failures. Today, institutional, discursive, and technological changes raise the possibility of a new paradigm of human rights news-making: one that is more open to a wider range of actors and topics yet is also confronted with challenges about the veracity of on-the-ground reporting. To what degree such a new paradigm takes hold remains an open question. Here, my effort has been to contrast it with the extant paradigm of human rights news.

Whether a new era of human rights news marks an improvement over its predecessor also remains an open question. If newer forms of human rights news-making are indeed able to pioneer new information formats and broaden the number and types of issues with a human rights frame, then there will be room for cautious optimism. Yet if newer forms of human rights news correspond with growing levels of doubt or new forms of informational elitism, then the new paradigm may — somewhat paradoxically — reinforce the tendencies of the paradigm it displaces. In short, whether and how a new paradigm of human rights replaces its predecessor remains an important question for observation, analysis, and evaluation.

Notes

1. This example is taken from Callison (2014).
2. Since 2011, I have been engaged in interviews and observations with NGOs and journalists about how these actors produce human rights news. To date, I have conducted more than 70 interviews with human rights professionals in the United States and Europe. As a doctoral student at New York University, this research — covered under Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol HS#11-8339, "Making Foreign News: Journalism, Civil Society and the Public Sphere" — was determined exempt from requirements to obtain signed consent. As an assistant professor at the University of Washington, this research — IRB protocol #49863, "The New Boots on the Ground: NGOs in the Changing News Landscape" —was also determined to have exempt status. Interviews were conducted with journalists and NGO professionals (researchers, advocacy officers, and public relations professionals) with the aim of understanding how human rights news is produced in the twenty-first century. Interview questions examined the professional trajectories, daily practices, and respondents' perceptions of changes in the production of human rights news over time. For details, see Powers (2013) and Powers (2015b).

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