“When Digital Saviors Stand Corrected:
Exploring Counter-Campaigns in Hashtag Activism”

Global human rights advocacy increasingly takes place online. Advocacy groups which in the past reached their publics through the mainstream media now also use social media, and ask, for instance, followers to retweet their “hashtag campaigns”. In parallel we have seen hashtag counter-campaigns, in which concerned stakeholders highjack the hashtag initiatives for their own purpose. Professor Budabin has developed an analytical framework to understand how hashtag campaigns are held to account by counter-campaigns. Her current research considers whether new social media has diffused power in the advocacy market-place, and probes how counter-campaigns pressure established actors to account for the unintended consequences of their initiatives.

Human rights advocacy often combines raising public awareness with insider lobbying. Professor Budabin’s research builds on Keck and Sikkink’s conceptualization of the “boomerang model” in advocacy (1998), Carpenter’s research on gatekeeping and vetting in the advocacy world (2014) and de Waal’s work on insider policy advocacy (2015). Taken together, this past scholarship show how oppressed groups reach out to allies, usually in the Northern Hemisphere, for research, public and political access, and must market themselves in a competitive vetting process. In this hierarchical marketplace for advocacy, information is the currency. De Waal, and Budabin herself (with Pruce 2016), argue that information is made marketable as it travels from South to North, and put to various uses: to mobilize the public; to publically name and shame human rights abusers; as evidence in court; etc.

Budabin particularly underlines how human rights information is repackaged in narrative form, and collapsed into two-dimensional categories: victims in need of saving; perpetrators; saviors; etc. Research on conflict management shows how inaccurate narratives lead to misguided policy. For instance, recent work by Severine Autesserre shows how advocacy assertions about the relationship between conflict minerals and sexual violence in the Congo, and associated calls to strengthen the Congolese state, divert attention from the true causes and solutions of the abuse. As new forms of social media emerge, Budabin suggests, actors on the ground may have more power to respond to misguided and potentially pernicious narratives.
Twitter in particular has become a forum through which stakeholders can hold policymakers accountable. The hashtag function enables users to follow or join social conversations, enabling them to challenge from below the established institutions usually regarded as human rights saviors. Hashtag counter-campaigns evaluate these traditional actors against their own normative understanding of legitimacy: their perception of whether the actions of the entity are desirable or appropriate according to their particular construction of norms, beliefs and definitions. Budabin’s analytical framework focuses on three specific counter-campaigns, in which attempts to co-opt the hashtag campaigns gained significant publicity by examining the co-opting actor, the alternative narrative presented, and how the counter-campaign raised legitimacy challenges to practices in human rights, humanitarianism, and development.

The case studies are “#stopkony”, “#bringbackourgirls” and “#adaywithoutshoes”. In the first, the advocacy group Invisible Children concerned with the issue of child soldiers launched a viral 29 minute video, in which celebrities and military and International Criminal Court officials called for the capture of Lord’s Resistance Army leader, Joseph Kony. In the second, a domestic Nigerian campaign condemning the inadequate response of their government to the kidnapping of school girls by Boko Haram gained international traction, and the support of the United States First Lady Michelle Obama. In the third, the footwear business “Toms Shoes” called for its followers to spend a day barefoot and promised to donate a pair of shoes per participant to needy children. In each case, counter-campaigns were initiated by actors drawn from civil society, southern stakeholders, state governments, foreign observers, development practitioners, and on-the-ground activists. These co-opting actors hijacked original campaigns to highlight unintended human and economic consequences with alternative narratives, and advocate for more urgent issues on the ground.

In Budabin’s analysis, counter-campaigns do not invalidate the need for original hashtag campaigns, but increase the pressure on them to do better: to be more researched, inclusive, aware, targeted. More generally, counter-campaigns point to the insufficiency of social-media as a vehicle of human rights support. Hashtag campaigns cannot replacement political and humanitarian engagement. Thus countercampaigns show accountability in action on the internet. With this argument, Professor Bonubin stresses that her research is still underway. She underlines her interest studying further the features of successful hashtag campaigns, and how human rights’ advocates are changing their methods in response to increased scrutiny and accountability claims.