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Building democratic public spheres?

Transnational Advocacy Networks and the social forum process

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What, if anything, can Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) contribute to the democratisation of public spheres outside of Westphalian frameworks? On the one hand TANs excel at turning international public campaigns into political influence, connecting people and power across borders. On the other hand, the increasingly policy-orientated nature of TANs raises questions about their legitimacy in speaking on behalf of multiple publics. This article suggests that a TANs success in ensuring the political efficacy of public spheres, whilst at the same time undermining their normative legitimacy, reflects two sides of the same coin; a consequence of the recent internal professionalization of advocacy networks. Framing professionalization as a particular form of communicative distortion within TAN decision-making, the article suggests that networks should incorporate internal deliberative mechanisms, adapted from international social forums, as a way to enhance the normative legitimacy of democratic public spheres.

Key words: Transnational Advocacy Networks, Public Spheres, NGOisation, Deliberation, Social Forums

Introduction

Transnational civil society organisations have increased exponentially over the past few decades. A number of scholars have recently explored the possible role that these organisations can play in enhancing democratic spaces outside of the traditional Westphalian system (Bohman 2010; Dryzek 2005: Eckersley 2007; Germain 2010; Nanz and Steffek 2004; Samhat and Payne 2003). As an intermediate structure between domestic civil society and international regimes, transnational civil society can contribute to the cultivation of *transnational public spheres*; "discursive arenas that overflow the bounds of both nations and states" (Fraser 2014a). In the absence of formal democratic institutions at the global level, these public spheres are said to represent alternative democratic spaces where civil society organisations can mobilise public opinion across borders whilst challenging political decisions at the international level (Bohman 2007: 65).

What, if anything, can the emergence of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) contribute to the democratic institutionalisation of transnational public spheres? TANs have become an ever increasing presence in world politics, comprised of a complex web of NGOs that overlap with state agencies, international organisation staff and the media (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Florini 2000; Bob 2002). Often sporadic and unevenly distributed, TANs are anchored by advocacy-orientated NGOs that share information and mutual support to generate collective action across national borders (Price 2003; Smith and Jenkins 2011; Stroup and Murdie 2012). TANs have been successful in connecting 'people and power' (Young 2001: 73); elevating and coordinating domestic struggles outside of national borders whilst pressurising states and international organisations to change their established patterns of behaviour (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1999; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Florini 2000).

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On the one hand, TANs excel in connecting to political 'power' through a mixture of public campaigns, and private lobbying, to influence the establishment of new international legal frameworks. On the other hand, however, their differentiation from transnational social movements as professional networks with "more specialised resources of expertise" (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001), raises questions about their legitimacy in being able to speak on behalf of the 'people'. Nancy Fraser (2014a) argues that *both* conditions are requisites for TANs to effectively contribute to democratic public spheres; public opinion channelled through civil society must be *normatively legitimate*, that is, it is communicatively generated through an open and inclusive process, as well as *politically efficacious;* able to exert significant influence over political authority.

This article argues that a TANs ability to implement the political efficacy, whilst diminishing the normative legitimacy, of public spheres, are two sides of the same coin; a consequence of a new socio-economic shift in the internal composition of TANs, towards increasingly professional organisations. This process of 'NGOization' (Alvarez 2009; Jad 2004; Lang 2009; 2012; Merz 2012), can increase the opportunities for policy influence, but at a cost of elevating *strategic action* within TAN decision-making. The consequence of which is a reduction in the inclusivity and participatory parity of decision-making in networks, generating 'pseudo-publics' (Junge 2012) disconnected from a communicative environment.

Viewing the professionalization of NGOs through a critical-theoretical lens, the article suggests that scholars should seek to address the problems of strategic action and the distorting effects of powerful communicators that can stifle broader input within advocacy networks. Legitimate decision-making therefore requires the development of *deliberative* spaces to ensure that those marginalised within networks have the chance to influence, contest and validate campaign strategies across 'an even playing-field'. As such, the article turns towards the innovative decision-making mechanisms utilised within *international social forums* as a possible model for TANs to improve the inclusivity, participatory parity, and thus the normative legitimacy, of public spheres.

Whereas TANs suffer normative deficits but are politically efficacious, international social forums are the reverse; able to generate communicative power amongst diverse participants but lacking the ability to connect to political power. By combining various aspects of both, implementing the social forum process as a decision-making mechanism *internal* to TAN campaign strategies, a balance can be struck. As a consequence, TANs can support the production of both communicative and administrative power within democratic public spheres.

Transnational Advocacy Networks and public spheres

How do civil society organisations contribute to the democratisation of transnational public spheres? The origins of the public sphere can be traced back to late Renaissance Europe, with the rise of new spaces for citizens to collectively deliberate on public matters outside the realm of formal politics (Habermas 1991). At a conceptual level, it represents an "institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (Fraser 1990: 57) where different viewpoints and opinions are expressed, resulting in streams of communication that are then synthesized into "bundles of topically specified *public* opinions" (Habermas 1996: 360). For critical theorists, the theory of a public sphere was not simply developed as a category for understanding new communication flows but as a critical-normative resource to interrogate the relationship between public opinion and political power. The democratic health of public spheres can therefore be judged on how they function as a public site of deliberation over common issues of concern, as well as how far they can act as a "vehicle for marshalling public opinion as a political force" (Fraser 2014: 9).

The social infrastructure of a public sphere is constituted by civil society, an "organisational substratum of the general public of citizens…who want to have an influence on institutionalized opinion- and will-formation" (Habermas 1996: 367). Civil society organisations often undertake a defensive and offensive role; protecting the *opinion-formation* of public opinion, whilst implementing its *will-formation*. Defensively they can preserve the critical nature of the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld, through the generation of subcultural counter-publics, as well as acting as a barrier to protect social identity formation from state and market intrusion. Offensively, civil society organisations can mobilise matters of public concern to shape political will and pressure policy-makers to remain publically accountable (Arato and Cohen 1994: 519-32; Habermas 1996: 370).

Although the public sphere was originally theorised as a discursive space within the nation-state, scholars have recently charted the possible emergence of a multitude of *transnational public spheres* that operate as intermediary structures between domestic civil society and international regimes (Bohman 2010; Eckersley 2007; Fraser 2014a; Germain 2010; Nanz and Steffek 2004; Samhat and Payne 2003). The transnationalisation of civil society organisations that have proliferated in recent decades reflects the emergence of post-Westphalian public spheres; however, their democratic potential depends upon their ability to generate communicative power across borders, whilst attaining meaningful influence over policy-making at the international and supranational level (Germain 2010).

Can Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) support the normative requirements for the realisation of democratic public spheres? As networks comprised of a number of public advocacy[1] NGOs, they interact with citizens and grassroots organisations, as well as policy-makers in international organisations. In terms of enhancing the *political efficacy* of public opinion, civil society needs to be able to 'translate' (Fraser 2014a: 31) communicative power into new binding laws; thus political institutions must be 'responsive' (Steffek et al 2010: 110-112) to the demands of civil society. TANs have arguably been successful in this regard, shaping state behaviour through concerted public campaigns on a range of transnational issues leading to the establishment of new legal frameworks. This includes a number of successful cases in the areas of cluster munitions and landmines (Bolton and Nash 2010; Price 2003; Shawki 2011), the environment (Orsini 2013; Wallbott 2014), human rights (Hertel 2006; Wong 2012), and gender (Moghadam 2005; Zippel 2004).

Despite the important role that TANs can play in enhancing the political efficacy of public opinion they arguably fare less well in consolidating the *normative legitimacy* of public opinion. According to Fraser (2014a: 28) a normatively legitimate process of opinion-formation can only be satisfied when it meets both the condition of inclusiveness and the condition of participatory parity. The first is loosely underpinned by the Habermasian 'all-affected principle'[2] that those affected by political decisions should have the chance to participate in the process of opinion-formation (Näsström 2011). The second recognises that mechanisms must be established to ensure that all participants have a chance to equally express and challenge the different views and opinions generated. In essence, satisfying participatory parity means "dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others" (Fraser 2013: 123) and enhancing the 'transparency' of dialogue to facilitate fair deliberation (Steffek et al 2010: 112-115). These two idealised conditions therefore can be used as a gauge to help expose the presence of unjustified exclusions and disparities within the communicative generation of public opinion (Fraser 2014a, p28fn).

In practice this means that when TANs are engaging with policy-makers, they need to ensure that the articulation of public grievance has been subject to an inclusive internal debate where all who

stand to be affected are given a stake in the decision-making process underpinning issue mobilisation. This is what Bohman (2010: 434) describes as a successful transition from communicative freedom to communicative power, when a TAN's political success is underpinned by an open and inclusive debate amongst stake-holders. TANs, however, have a more controversial relationship when it comes to the representation and participation of grassroots organisations within their advocacy campaign structures. Indeed they have been roundly criticised across a number of quarters for their apparent elitism and unaccountability to diverse publics (Collingwood and Logister 2005; Hudson 2001; Ossewaarde et al 2008). These networks appear to be very effective at implementing policy, but often fail to assess their own internal democratic credentials. Interestingly it is the *professionalization* of NGOs that sits at the heart of the inverse correlation between a TANs ability to enhance the political efficacy, whilst undermining the normative legitimacy, of public spheres.

Diluting normative legitimacy? The professionalization of Transnational Advocacy Networks

Over the past two decades there has been "an explosion of international opportunities" (Reimann 2006: 46) for NGOs to obtain funding and access to international networks and organisations. As a consequence, many have undergone a particular form of organizational reconfiguration that increasingly reflects the international climate within which they now operate. This process of 'NGOization' (Alvarez 2009; Jad 2004; Lang 2009; 2012; Merz 2012) refers to social movements and grassroots organisations that "professionalize, institutionalize and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy-outcome-orientated organizations" (Lang 2012: 63-4). This process is prevalent within TANs, comprised of member organisations that are often at the forefront of policy-engagement. Professionalism in this context is the result of NGOs attempting to imitate professional political agencies, involving a self-conscious form of 'impression management' (Minkoff and Powell 2006: 597) on behalf of NGOs who desire external legitimacy with policy-orientated audiences. In practice, this includes an organisational shift towards hierarchical bureaucratic structures with boards of directors and permanent staff members, as well as the creation of a professional cadre with technical and administrative expertise in project management (Alvarez 2009; Jad 2004; Nazneen and Sultan 2009). Crucially, this shift towards higher degrees of professionalism can affect the mission, goals and management of NGOs, as well as influence the trajectory of their advocacy strategies (Lang 2009: 62).

One of the most noticeable features of TANs in recent years is how this organisational shift can actually enhance an NGO's political opportunity structures, organisational strength and resource mobilisation; key for successful frame resonance with policy-makers. The ability for TANs to gain political salience over certain issues, and thus affect the *political efficacy* of public spheres can be linked to the 'internal composition' (Wong 2012) of NGOs. The more formalised, centralised and public-policy orientated an organisation, the more their highly skilled staff can "manipulate the political opportunity structure to their advantage by gaining institutional access, mobilizing support from influential allies, and exploiting changes in political alignments and conflicts" (Joachim 2003: 269). A higher degree of NGO technical proficiency is linked to a rise in advocacy credibility in some circles; certain NGO staff can now "sit at government tables" (Lang 2012: 64) as well as offer expert commentary on directives, codes of practice and treaty drafts in formal institutional settings (Zeppel 2004). Conversely, transnational campaigns can fail to gain political traction without the specific support of 'advocacy elites in central hubs' (Carpenter 2014: 149) of the network; the gatekeepers of advocacy success.

Despite the role that professionalism can play in ultimately 'opening doors' (Pieck 2013: 8) for advocates and ensuring the translation of public campaigns into real political success, the

professionalization of organisations within TANs can undermine the *normative legitimacy* of public spheres. Although Keck and Sikkink (1998) assumed that advocacy networks shared internal common interests and values, scholars have recently highlighted the internal spaces of contestation and conflict that can affect agenda-setting and strategic framing across networks (Andrews 2013; Bob 2002; Carpenter 2007; Henry et al 2004; Wong 2012). The process of NGOization in particular, can "foster hierarchical organisational structures and the concentration of power among professionals" (Salgado 2010: 512) exacerbating the unequal relationship between elite professional hubs and those increasingly on the outer spokes of networks. Highly centralised agenda-setting within hubs can improve the coherence and effectiveness of advocacy, however, it can also have the effect of "disallowing dissent from a variety of perspectives" (Wong 2012: 74) within the network. Elite advocacy organisations can effectively 'vet the advocacy agenda' (Carpenter 2014: 150) to ensure that "things get taken off the agenda before it goes to a broader audience of decision-makers" (Wong 2012: 76). In light of Fraser's (2014a) co-requirement of the condition of inclusivity and participatory parity, these centralised and professional hubs can be deeply exclusive, contributing to a participation gap in the decision-making process underpinning issue selection and advocacy strategies within networks. Recent studies on Transnational Feminist Networks (TFN), for example, chart the rise of a centralised bureaucratic elite dominated by a hierarchical professional cadre that can marginalise or even exclude those seeking more radical advocacy strategies outside of formal channels (Bretherton 2003; Fernandes 2005; Hertel 2006; Jad 2004; Lang 2009; Mendoza 2002; Pieck 2013). Local feminist groups can struggle to shape agenda-setting and are often at a disadvantage compared to professional NGOs who often prioritise issue selection based upon expected political success (Hertel 2006).

The valourisation of professionalism also exacerbates the 'uneven geography' (Smith and Weist 2005) across networks between the global North and the global South. The increasing internationalisation of Northern NGOs are all too frequently at the central nodes of an advocacy network; strategic direction and policy planning tends to be centralised around a small dominant cluster who act as gatekeepers to "determine which techniques of mobilisation will be considered legitimate and effective" (Pommerolle 2010: 265 see also Lake and Wong 2009; Hervé 2013). These dominant clusters are tightly interconnected through 'inner-circle brokers' that enhance grant capture from external sources as well as keeping a tighter control over decision-making surrounding project budgets (Hervé 2013: 406; Girgis 2007). Northern NGOs tend to take on the responsibility for drafting and producing policy documents and reports owing to their higher degree of technical proficiency; Southern NGOs are less likely to be included in strategic discussion and design (Hervé 2013: 411).

The increasing trend of professionalization within networks can also result in a depoliticised and conservative approach to advocacy, a shift from contentious to conventional politics, where radical organisations are forced to adapt and transform their behaviour in order to participate (Bretherton 2003; Lang 2009; Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2011). Fernandes (2005) describes how some feminist networks have been forced to focus squarely on media outreach over network-building; as a consequence a new dominant cadre of 'media-savvy professionals' have emerged. Across networks the process of professionalization can include a transfer of skillsets and the "replacement of activists by communication professionals found in other policy areas" (Saurugger 2006: 271). Equally activists find themselves recently having to positively assert themselves as highly trained professionals in order to secure further grants (Fernandes 2005: 44) and adopt conservative and conformist strategies in-line with those that distribute financial resources (Stroup and Murdie 2012: 430). Critics suggest therefore, that the rise of professional organisations within feminist networks has led to the "bureaucratic reduction of a feminist equality agenda" (Lang 2009: 340). TANs arguably struggle to

meet the condition of participatory parity when actors are forced to change their identity and behaviour within networks; feminists activists for example have been vocally critical at the elevation of technical proficiency across networks for enforcing a level of "emotional self-control" (Bretherton 2003: 104) within advocacy. Pieck (2013) found that tensions were exacerbated between activists that brought an 'emotive charge' to agenda setting and professional staff members who were more concerned to "satisfy their programmatic goals and their funders" (2013: 132).

Legitimacy and authenticity: from strategic to communicative decision-making

Whilst the professionalization of organisations within TANs can undermine the conditions of inclusivity and participatory parity, how does this particular transformative process impact on the generation of communicative power? At the heart of a democratic public sphere is the ability for civil society to channel communicative power into administrative power. The professionalization of NGOs can increase the use of *strategic action* in decision-making; diluting and marginalising communicative power.

According to Payne (2001), in the majority of case-studies written on TANs, advocates often apply pressure and coercion to change state policy through a process of strategic framing (2001: 41). These frames do not naturally emerge from a pool of possible interpretations, they are subject to internal political wrangling and competition between framing agents. Persuasive frames can sometimes be the result of strategic manipulation, thus the selection process may simply reflect "the distorting material influence of an advocate" (Payne 2001: 46). Payne's concerns of strategic manipulation within TAN decision-making originates from Habermas' (1987; 1996) writings on a specific form *strategic action* orientated towards successful persuasion in dialogue. Speakers exercising strategic action within decision-making tend to deploy a more instrumental focus on bargaining and coordination, over cooperation and argumentation. As a result, strategic action often arises in processes of decision-making that are dominated by powerful self-interested actors (Baxter 1987: Payne 2001; Risse 2000). Strategic action, can however, be contrasted with *communicative action,* a form of "normative and open-ended communication" (Cohen and Arato 1994: IX) that is strongly orientated towards "mutual understanding, intersubjectively shared norms and collective values" (Habermas 2001: 82). Habermas was of course equating strategic interests associated with technocrats and policy-makers in the political sphere; juxtaposing it with the 'civil-social periphery' (Habermas 1996: 381) where actors can easily raise validity claims on normative issues through open argumentation rather than strategic bargaining (Baxter 1987: 42-45).

The development of a professional cadre of advocacy technocrats across TANs, however, raises important questions about this link between strategic and communicative action deployed in civil society opinion-formation. The process of NGOization can arguably contribute to the distortion of communicative power through the homogenising proliferation of an 'expertenkultur' (Power and Laughlin 1996: 446) within NGOs, consolidating the central hubs of advocacy networks where "a few powerful actors dominate and possibly block participation by diverse actors" (Knappe and Lang 2014: 15). Professional practitioners of course do care about social issues and social change within advocacy strategy, but they are increasingly "selective and strategic in attending to different issues" (Carpenter 2014: 151). According to Cohen and Arato (1994: 450), the increasing bureaucratisation of the structures of civil society can sometimes lead to individuals deploying strategic action in decision-making; NGOization can therefore exaggerate the 'strategic dimensions' (Lang 2009: 87) of advocacy. This is crucial to understanding how norms that arise from within and across TANs may not reflect the full spectrum of grievance claims and in fact espouse more insular, institutional and strategic interests.

The process of agenda-setting within advocacy networks can therefore be said to be legitimate, or *authentic*, when it reflects the outcome of a genuinely voluntary consensus amongst individuals who are given equal opportunity to "test the veracity of claims and claimants" (Payne 2001: 47) in a communicative framework among norm setting actors (Deitelhoff and Mueller 2005; Risse 2000; Wiener 2007). Professional actors within TANs are fundamentally important for the *implementation* of advocacy strategies; success requires different skillsets such as report writing requiring technical proficiency, and policy lobbying requiring media savviness (Wong 2012: 193). The underlying campaign decision-making must, however, be open to all who have a stake in the campaign, to influence, challenge and steer the direction of advocacy within a communicative environment. How can TANs minimalise strategic capture and enhance communicative decision-making within organisations and across networks? Lang (2012: 64) suggests that some NGOs have attempted to subvert NGOization by 'highly visible' public advocacy campaigns to maintain links with grassroots communities. Although publicity is key for representation, simply increasing participation and visibility doesn't necessarily improve participatory parity; decision-making is still deeply structured with some agendas being 'vetted' by strategically-driven actors.

To this end, mechanisms to increase *democratic deliberation* amongst participants engaged in decision-making can play an important role in reducing strategic communication in often deeply divided and contested environments (Dryzek 2006). Deliberation stresses the importance of collective decision-making including the participation of all who stand to be affected by a decision, where participants are persuaded by the 'force of the better argument' alone (Elster 1998: 8). It is an inclusive ideal, giving those usually marginalised in expressing moral dissatisfaction a chance to participate in the negotiation of a genuine moral consensus on matters of public interest. The attempt to embed deliberative mechanisms across networks complements calls for NGOs to consider more democratic values internally (Eikenberry 2009). Many activists tend to focus on promoting voice and issue within advocacy networks; methods of communication and internal democratic practices of decision-making in campaigns are not always at the forefront of strategic priorities (Levine and Nierras 2007: 8 see also Hendriks 2006; Rubenstein 2014). Despite this, della Porta and Rucht (2013a) have traced a number of successful cases of small-group deliberation within Global Justice Movements (GJMs) where they observed both the co-presence of soft power and symmetric relationships among speakers (della Porta and Ruchts 2013b: 224). Although in their observations they also noted instances of asymmetrical power through bargaining, agitatory persuasion and pressure, activists increasingly challenged 'unjustified and illegitimate forms of power' (della Porta and Rucht 2013b: 223) within meetings. Various attempts to reduce distortions were implemented including installing moderators and 'silent observers', alternating speakers by gender, postponing or delegating divisive or intractable issues, limiting speaking time, and insisting on the value of reaching a consensus (della Porta and Rucht 2013b: 219-23).

Although these deliberative mechanisms were found to increase communicative power within small group settings, how would this work in practice within transnational advocacy networks increasingly constituted of asymmetric decision-making structures? This is particularly challenging given that meso-mobilisation groups involving strategically powerful organisations within a network are more likely to be "conflict ridden and characterized by power-orientated communication" (della Porta and Rucht 2013b: 230). The article now turns to an examination of how deliberative mechanisms might be embedded within diverse transnational networks. It suggests that drawing upon the communicative infrastructure of *international social forums* as an integral mechanism for campaign decision-making can increase the condition of inclusivity and participatory parity.

Communicative power, deliberation, and international social forums

The emergence and proliferation of *international social forums* in recent years offers a useful example of collective spaces where heterogeneous groups of activists and NGOs gather to debate public issues, whilst implementing innovative techniques to reduce power-orientated communication. The most famous of these, the World Social Forum (WSF) is unprecedented as a collective platform, incorporating activists from the local to the transnational within a highly participatory, horizontalist and autonomist organisational culture (Conway and Singh 2009: 70). Since its inception in 2001, the WSF has been a lightning rod for activists all over the world highly critical of current political and economic manifestations of globalization. Its overwhelming success as an innovative collective space has given credibility to the idea of a 'social forum process' that reflects a "laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political identity and practice" (Smith et al 2008: 41). The forum's innovative approach to dialogue includes self-organised workshops, panel discussions, plenary sessions and information tables as part of an 'open space' environment that has become "vital to the development of contemporary transnational activism" (Rucht 2012: 11). In recent years new informal approaches to networking have also been adopted including hosting film festivals, music concerts and cultural performances to foster a relaxed and informal environment (Katz-Fishman and Scott 2008).

Despite drawing upon the values of deliberation within its own charter of principles, the WSF itself is not necessarily a deliberative space; it lacks fixed rules for participatory parity or a centralised decision-making process. Indeed it excels as a communicative arena by its radically inclusive and decentralised nature but is "intentionally not structured to produce consensus" (Conway and Singh 2009: 71). The WSF's open space policy has been subject to fierce debate over the years with critics labelling it 'unmanageable' (Albert 2009: 364) due to its vast size and unstructured nature. This can hinder collective campaigns and renders the WSF far better at collective self-reflection than collective self-organisation (Ponniah 2007). These debates have played out in subsequent iterations of the WSF since 2001, including at numerous regional social forums that have emerged in recent years. Prior to the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, activists questioned the ability for the forum to challenge global practices without a stronger organisational composition (de Sousa Santos 2006: 72). The WSF has responded with working committees for policy guidelines and working groups with executive authority. Arguably, regional social forums such as the European Social Forum (ESF) have gone much further, developing a number of 'thematic network' meetings to facilitate coordination and campaign planning, supported by an overarching European Preparatory Assembly (Haug et al 2009). Equally, the United States Social Forum (USSF) created a 'People's Movement Assembly' to specifically move beyond the open-space framework of the forum and facilitate campaign organisation (Katz-Fishman and Scott 2008). At the 2010 USSF these assemblies were integrated closely into the forum process itself, creating a participatory mechanism that resulted in "effective deliberation and decision making" (Juris and Smith 2012: 299). The USSF therefore facilitates stronger collective action with little trade-off in terms of radical inclusivity; the forum continues to be seen as unique for its "diversity and its inclusion of so many politically marginalised groups" (Juris and Smith 2012: 299).

This recent evolution of the social forum process towards greater collective action now includes examples of advocacy networks establishing their own 'thematic social forums' to integrate with regional and world social forums. One such initiative proposed to the International Council (IC) meeting of the 2015 WSF, was for the establishment of an *Internet Social Forum* (ISF). Spearheaded by JustNetCoalition, a group of NGOs focused on promoting a 'just and equitable internet', the intent is to create a thematic social forum as an *intrinsic process* to the establishment of a transnational campaign. The forum aims to promote a 'democratic space' for activists to debate the best methods to challenge the increasing centralised and corporate control of international

communications. It therefore calls for an internet for the global commons; a decentralised architecture that serves public rather than private interest (ISF 2015). The network comprises a multitude of activists and NGOs that are seeking to mimic the open structures of the WSF in their search to develop a coherent strategy with the eventual aim of writing a 'people's manifesto for the internet' (JustNetCoalition 2015). One of the lead proponents of the forum suggests that:

"we do need a space which is civil society only, where we can radicalize ourselves, make agendas which are coming from public interest, which really look forward to the interest of the people and marginalized, and can do it in an unconstructed manner" (Singh 2015)

Utilising social forums, such as the ISF, as a central point of decision-making for TAN campaign strategies maintains the centralisation of agenda-setting, whilst ensuring that the 'laboratory for experimentation' structure allows for dissent and disagreement to productively flourish. A forum process could allow individuals from both hubs and spokes of a network to engage in more communicative decision-making rather than the usual top-down Annual General Meetings (AGMs) where elite actors "announce and promote projects already in process rather than to brainstorm and debate possible future projects" (Junge 2012: 413).

International social forums may well increase inclusivity and participatory parity, however, there is a caveat; they can be described as 'counter-publics' (Conway 2004) or 'weak publics' (Habermas 1996: 307; Bohman 2007: 31-2) operating *outside* of the formal frameworks of governance. Their relative isolation from policy channels and occasional antagonism towards policy-makers can result in a disconnection from political will-formation (Patomäki and Teivainen 2004: 150). The WSF was established as an 'open space' to specifically counter the closed-door politics of the World Economic Forum (WEF); even the ISF is being developed as a reaction to the WEF's 'NETmundial Initiative' (ISF 2015). As a result, although social forums can improve the normative legitimacy of public spheres, they are somewhat hampered in being able to translate this communicative power into administrative power.

From weak to segmented publics: enhancing normative legitimacy and political efficacy

How can TANs improve the normative legitimacy of public opinion without sacrificing its political efficacy? One mechanism would be for TANs to deploy a *centralised* agenda-setting process underpinned by the decision-making framework of social forums, whilst *decentralising* 'implementation power' (Wong 2012) so that diverse actors and organisations can then carry out strategic action more effectively. This ensures that the more professional organisations within the network can still influence political will formation, whilst grassroots organisations can focus on raising publicity and connecting with local social movements. Although this of course represents a normative ideal, there is an interesting recent example of an advocacy network that has put something similar into practice. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has hosted two international civil society forums as an inclusive mechanism to generate a more normatively legitimate public campaign strategy *prior* to engaging directly with international policy makers through formal political channels.

ICAN was first established in 2007 as "a global campaign coalition working to mobilize people in all countries to inspire, persuade and pressure their governments to initiate and support negotiations for a treaty banning nuclear weapons" (ICAN 2016). Focusing on the specific humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, ICAN was integral to pushing for an international conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (HINW) as a mechanism to kick-start and transform stalling nuclear disarmament talks that have been going on throughout the last decade (Sauer 2015: 6). The network

gained significant traction with a number of sympathetic Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) and three key HINW conferences commenced in Oslo (2013), Narayit (2014) and Vienna (2014) culminating in the Austrian government announcing a 'Humanitarian Pledge' to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.

Crucially, ICAN took the decision to establish a two day 'ICAN civil society forum' prior to both the Oslo and Vienna conferences, with the participation of over 500 campaigners to help galvanise efforts to start negotiations for a comprehensive treaty banning nuclear weapons. Although the forum paid little attention to the internal democratic mechanisms underpinning agenda-setting, activists deployed a number of innovative formats echoing social forum procedures including open workshops, interactive panel discussions, rapid-fire 'lightning speeches', meet and greet sessions, a speakers corner and a marketplace for disseminating information (goodbyenuk.es 2014). The forum heard stories from the Hibakusha, Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb, as well as virtual media presentations from celebrities to policy-makers. Despite a few problems with the selection of delegates[3], and the lack of a central decision-making mechanism at the forum, ICAN helped to stimulate broad discussion and strategy amongst a diverse group of activists and organisations about the upcoming international HINW conferences.

Although the forums reflect 'weak publics' being isolated from policy-making and executive power, ICAN actively generated new strategies from the forums which was then channelled into the HINW conferences where they engaged substantially in dialogue alongside policy-makers. Policy makers highlighted throughout the HINW conferences the important role of civil society in providing new views, experiences and information on the Humanitarian Initiative (Gandenberger and Acheson 2014: 6) The HINW conferences therefore reflected a form of what Eriksen (2005) calls a 'segmented public'; the combination of civil society and policy-makers outside of formal and executive decision-making structures. Both the forums and conferences have arguably influenced the growing momentum of the Humanitarian Initiative, to date there have been 127 state signatures to the Humanitarian Pledge. Although there is a long road ahead for ICAN to be able to exert enough pressure to establish full legal and administrative reform in the form of a nuclear weapons convention, campaigners are hopeful of following in the footsteps of previous civil society influenced humanitarian disarmament conventions on landmines (1997) and cluster munitions (2008).

ICAN's utilisation of forums as a prelude to policy engagement certainly demonstrates how TANs can build weak publics to enhance communicative power prior to political will formation. Integrating a stronger decision-making social forum process for future campaigns could reap greater rewards and help TANs to improve the normative legitimacy of public opinion without sacrificing its political efficacy.

Concluding thoughts

Attempting to build inclusive and highly participatory networks that can also influence political change at the international level is a difficult task. The increasing shift towards professionalization within networks may well improve the political efficacy of public opinion; however, the cost is a reduction in being able to speak on behalf of multiple publics as communicative power can become blocked by strategic power in decision-making. Although this gap is growing as a consequence of TANs becoming more specialist and policy-focused, these networks should not be jettisoned in discussions of democratic public spheres as Fraser (2014b: 136-138) seems to imply. The task for scholars should be to search for mechanisms that can help *improve* TAN internal legitimacy by strengthening inclusivity and participatory parity, without sacrificing the ability to translate public campaigns into political success.

This article has demonstrated how NGOization can marginalise those spaces for broader decision-making, and the ability for actors to raise genuine validity claims, over the agenda-setting process. It has also tentatively suggested that strategic action may be reduced if decision-making over campaign strategies can be built around a centralised and open deliberative process such as the experimental models established at a number of international social forums. This would ensure a more open form of centralisation in agenda-setting across the network, whilst decentralising the implementation process so that professional NGOs can still excel at policy translation. Utilising a social forum process to build communicative power *within* advocacy networks may also help to circumvent the problems of international social forums as weak publics when it comes to implementing democratic public spheres that demand the translation of communicative into administrative power. Examples such as ICAN demonstrate that TANs can adopt more open and innovative practices of decision-making via forums, whilst retaining a significant degree of political influence within the international regimes. ICAN's attempt to build both weak and segmented publics offers an opportunity to protect and enhance this crucial link between communicative and administrative power; essential to the democratisation of transnational public spheres.

Notes

1. The origins of the term advocacy is closely linked to publicity; defending the rights and interests of excluded groups in society, guarding against the abuse of public power, and using public interest pressure to change established rules (Brelaz and Alves 2011).
2. Fraser prefers to use an 'all-subjected' principle in that "all those who are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it" (2013: 130).
3. The ICAN steering committee was able to select participants for the Oslo forum, whilst the Austrian government, as hosts, selected those for the Vienna forum. The forums were also state funded, raising questions about the autonomy and replicability of this model.

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