Tweeting to Save Succeeding Generations from the Scourge of War?
The UN, Twitter and Communicative Action

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Abstract: Against the alarmed diagnosing of alleged crises, discussions in and on global governance have recently focused on the legitimacy of actors involved. In response, international organizations such as the UN have invested heavily in their public communication. With the potential to disseminate information, ideas, reason, and arguments in an instance, the ways international organizations utilize social media in particular have become highly relevant to their overall public perception and whether their actions are perceived as legitimate. As such, scholars need to understand whether and how international organizations use social media to reach out to their potentially global constituencies, maintain their legitimacy as global governors and maybe even further their mission (such as saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war). Looking at the UN and its use of Twitter, the paper discusses the following questions: How does the UN approach and engage with their audience? How do they frame their global public in the first place? What topics are being addressed and what broader discourses are initiated and maintained? Drawing on the normative dimension of Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action and its applications in International Relations, the article further provides a detailed assessment of the UN Twittersphere. It thus provides a detailed case study how different stakeholders and actors, both individual and institutional, within and towards this global organization communicate through tweets. More specifically, the paper (1) in an exploratory fashion based on a qualitative content analysis of UN tweets from the 73rd UN Session in 2018 reconstructs the UN Twittersphere to determine how and whether this global organization engages its public audience in discourse and (2) assesses this engagement in light of communicative action in order to contribute to a new line of normatively informed IO research which considers new forms of digital communication.

Keywords: United Nations, Social Media, Twitter, Communicative Action Theory
Though it is easy to view tweets merely as a crude mode of communication, doing so misses the impact tweets have […].

For active users of Twitter, posting tweets is part of their identity maintenance and the constancy of active Twitter users confirms this relationship or, as a Cartesian aphorism: I tweet, therefore I am.

(Murthy 2012: 1063)

Introduction

The international order of global governance and multilateralism with the UN at its core has recently suffered multiple blows and is under severe stress. In particular, events such as the election of Donald J. Trump and other right-wing populist leaders around the world, Brexit, the rise of new powers seeking greater voice, renewed emphasis on national over global solutions and an overall perceived ‘democratic recession’, have been interpreted not only as challenges but as profound crises of global governance (Zürn 2018; Acharya 2016). In response, practitioners, pundits, and scholars alike, still recognizing the potential and need for global governance, have called for reforming both the United Nations system (UN) as well as the overall global order on which it rests (Moore/Pubantz 2017; Weiss/Kamran 2009). Crucial for such reform efforts, it has been argued, is to establish and maintain legitimacy defined as believing in the appropriate nature of authority exercised. Given that there is no direct democratic control on the global level plus rather diverse stakeholder expectations and interests in global contexts between states, non-state actors and other international organizations (IOs), ‘going public’ and ‘cultivating support’ from different constituencies by committing to and communicating efforts to increase accountability, participation and performance has thus become a new imperative for any global governor (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Tallberg et al. 2018).

With the introduction of social media as a new form of public engagement, global governors (including IOs) have a new tool at their disposal to directly relate to their audience, influence the tone of public deliberation and international negotiations, and establish legitimacy (Duncombe 2017). This is particularly important for the UN because ever since its creation, scholars, practitioners and the global public have debated its role and impact in world politics. In these debates, different images, from instrument of the powerful to collective agency of and for the weak, have been evoked to describe what this unique organization does and what it stands for (Weiss et al. 2010; Archer 1983; Claude 1956). Almost seventy-five years after its creation, the debate, both in its theoretical and practical dimension, still remains unsettled, leaving us with rather different assessments and perceptions of ‘three different UNs’ (i.e., the intergovernmental, the institutional, and the non-governmental) (Weiss et al. 2009). What has recently changed, though, through social media is the organization’s active engagement in forming and

1 I would like to thank Julia Juarez, Javier Roman, Sarah-Madeleien Torres, and Veronica Vazquez who provided research assistance for this project and coded the majority of tweets in the analysis.

2 Following (Treem/Leonardi 2016: 145-6), I think of social media as those outlets in which the user, individual or institutional, is responsible for the generation of content and its exchange with others. Among others, social media outlets thus include blogs, wikis, social networking services and social tagging, with Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram arguably being the most popular sites.
sustaining its own image(s) through communication and ‘corporate branding’. In other words, the UN has taken a more active role in projecting its own image(s) and thus establish its own legitimacy as it engages with its global public. In this communicative action, the UN presents, and opens for debate, its ideas, reasons and narratives in regards to what kind of organization it is and what it should be. As will be argued in detail below, I contend that through this engagement, global governance delivered through the UN can potentially be improved. However, it can also be weakened if the use of social media is limited to strategic attempts to present a streamlined version of the UN (Urquhart 2004).

**Image 1: Current Profile Image of the Main @UN Twitter Handle**

Utilizing new social media technologies, the UN has expanded its presence significantly within the last couple of years and is currently exploring new avenues of engaging its potentially global public. With currently 67,500 total tweets and almost 11 million followers, the UN’s primary Twitter account (@UN – see image 1) alone makes it the most active global organizations on Twitter. Drawing on recent literature on IOs, legitimacy and legitimization (Tallberg/Zürn 2019; Tallberg et al. 2018; Dingwerth et al. 2014; Keohane 2011) as well as the normative dimension of Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas 1981a: 273-337) and its applications in International Relations (Risse 2000, 2004; Müller 2004), I contend that this social media appearance and its ensuing Twiplomacy, if committed to the dissemination and exchange of reason and arguments, holds the potential to improve global public deliberation and thus contribute to a more legitimate form of global governance by the UN. In other words, if oriented towards understanding, arguing, and thereby establishing consensus through the ‘better argument’ (Habermas 1981a: 328), tweets of what the UN does and what it stands for carries the potential to strengthen the organization as such and provides another form to reach out, establish its legitimacy, and further its mission and mandate.

Following Barbera/Zeitzoff (2017), political communication through social media thus is a constitutive outlet which influences what people think and feel about otherwise abstract and distanced orga-

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3 As an illustration of the increased UN’s branding efforts, consider among others the UN Guidelines on the Use of the UN Emblem.

4 See [http://twiplomacy.com/organisation/un/un/](http://twiplomacy.com/organisation/un/un/), retrieved April 19, 2019. In addition to Twitter, there are two UN channels on YouTube with more than 215.000 subscribers, thirteen official UN appearances on Facebook, and presences at Flickr, Google+, Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Medium. See [http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-website/un-social-media/index.html](http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-website/un-social-media/index.html) for the full list.
organizations. In other words, I think of the UN to be engaged with their global public in critical discourses and Twitter provides a new tool in this engagement with great potential to facilitate discussion. More specifically, I understand the UN’s micro-blogging presence on Twitter, if used this way, as an opportunity to initiate and maintain deliberation and thereby bestow legitimacy to its actions. Through the effective use of social media in general and Twitter in particular, one can envision a more engaged and informed global public which, while holding the UN accountable, has a clear understanding of the values and beliefs this unique organization represents as it critically engages with its reasons and justifications for decision-making. Simply put, if following standards of communicative action to be outlined in detail below, we can envision on the one hand a more reflective, better justified and thus ultimately more legitimate organization. Tweets on the other hand, however, can be limited in their discursive impact and provision of legitimacy if they are limited to only sharing obvious or trivial information, do not engage in discussion or in fact try to deceive the public by presenting a deliberately manipulated image. In this vein, cynics and skeptics have quickly pointed out that social media only serves the strategic end of self-presentation and, in the case of the UN, blue-washes the organization and its actions as it merely offers a streamlined but otherwise not representative self-image to its stakeholders. As with other forms of communication, the impact of social media thusassumingly remains limited (Chadwick 2013) or in fact can be used by incumbent elites to manipulate the public (Morozov 2011).

With such stakes on the line and the legitimizing potential of communicative action through social media undecided, it is important to understand whether and how the UN engages their audiences. More broadly, IOs as communicative stakeholders frame not only content but also their constituencies in such engagements. If reconstructed carefully, the respective use of social media and the images communicated throughout thus reveal (a) what the organization stands for as well as (b) how it relates to others and in particular how it views and frames its stakeholders. Following Murthy (2012: 1061-2), I argue that tweets in this regard represent a crucial form of social media and thus, as a case study on the broader potential of IOs using (or misusing) social media, reconstruct how the UN engages its audience through Twitter. Given its potential to effectively and quickly disseminate ideas and reason, however much reduced and potentially distorted in its limited characters, Twitter can provide reasoning and justification for decisions. It further invites everyone to assess and evaluate these reasons and justifications. It can also generate social action, whether it is through retweeting and hashtags or through real-world support (Denskus/Esser 2013: 410-1). Finally, among all social media, Twitter seemed to have become the most important outlet for the UN as all its institutions and senior officials engage with it on an almost daily basis.5

With the UN only recently embracing Twitter and no systematic research on this yet, as it stands, the nature and quality of the UN engagement in and through Twitter in terms of communicative action as well as its overall content remains undetermined. The paper is thus interested whether and to what extent the UN Twittersphere resonates with deliberation and the desire to reason since this would not only validate global public constituencies but also transcend UN discourses to a higher level of public engagement. To determine the quality of such engagement through the UN on Twitter, I first introduce

5 This echoes a larger trend in which “Twitter has become one of the most popular social media sites in the political arena” and thus consistently ranks high as the most popular website in different countries, outgrowing in many instances even Facebook and YouTube measured by user-base (Usherwood/Wright 2017: 372). See https://www.similarweb.com/top-articles for more information and the appendix for detailed numbers on Twitter Handles considered.
the theoretical framework based on Habermas (1981a, 1994, 1996). In this section, I theorize what the UN Twittersphere is and why it is important. Using a communicative action framing, I will discuss how and whether tweets engage and stimulate public discourse and thus establish legitimacy or fail to do so. In the second section, I outline our methodology for reconstructing and assessing the UN Twittersphere. In addition to discussing which twitter handles were considered, this section also includes the coding scheme developed to explore and map the nature, content, direction, and UN images expressed in tweets as well as the media and forms of engagements used within. This section also establishes the hypotheses and expectations for the coding and outlines under which conditions one could consider the UN Twittersphere as engaging. The third section then discusses the results in regards to whether tweets provided and nourished a public discourse on the UN or not. The conclusion will summarize these findings and discuss ideas of how social media research can help us expand our understandings of international organizations in general. As such, I provide both a detailed account of the UN Twittersphere as well as a normative assessment of how the UN engages the global public through Twitter and relate both to the broader context of IOs, their critical role in global governance, and their use of social media to respond to new demands and challenges.

**IOs, legitimacy and social media – Theorizing the UN Twittersphere**

Just like other organizations, IOs are ‘subjects of ongoing legitimation’ within their broader social environments and depend on acceptance and recognition from their stakeholders (Deephouse/Suchman 2008: 54). Even more so, arguably, in the absence of direct democratic control on the one hand and diverse stakeholder expectations on the other, ‘cultivating support’ from different constituencies becomes the *sine qua non* condition for their ongoing existence and operations in world politics. Such constituencies include nation states as primary stakeholders (i.e., principals) but also broader public and civil society stakeholders as well as those who are affected by IO decisions (Dingwerth et al. 2014: 168-70). In other words, IOs have to constantly reach out to their environment and more specifically to different groups within to justify their existence and seek legitimacy as they compete in organizational turf-battles and find themselves in disputes over respective areas of responsibility (Gronau/Schmidtke 2016: 539-42). Stemming from successful justification of their right to rule through engaging with their constituencies, legitimacy, once established, becomes an organizational resource for IOs to further extend one’s mandate and overall authority to develop new rules and norms. Legitimacy thus can be thought of “as beliefs of audiences that an IO’s authority is appropriately exercised” while legitimation entails IO efforts to respond to stakeholders and direct “process[es] of justification and contestation intended to shape such beliefs” (Tullberg/Zürn 2019: 3).

While legitimacy *substantially* depends on congruency between prevailing norms of one’s constituencies and one’s action, it can also be established and sustained *procedurally* through responding to and addressing the concerns of different stakeholders. In other words, organizational legitimacy equally stems from words as it does from deeds. While this opens a door into the broad realm of public relations and the management and branding of communication with one’s broader environment, IOs constantly adapt their communication strategies to signal responsiveness and thereby claim legitimacy (Dingwerth et al. 2014: 180-5). In fact, whether practiced as ‘public diplomacy’ or ‘information policy’ (Altman/Shore 2014; Nye 2010), establishing legitimacy procedurally through responding to changing normative environments and
new stakeholder expectations, has become critically important for IOs. Such attempts to legitimate intended to reach broad(er) audiences become “observable when international institutions’ representatives engage in proactive communication, in which they justify institutional identity and purpose on the basis of social norms” (Gronau/Schmidtke 2016: 541). Overall, such ‘going public’ has become just as relevant as political action and perceived appropriateness thereof in the IOs’ quest to establish legitimacy. Thus, it comes at no surprise that (a) IOs have become more strategic about it and (b) scholars of international organization discovered this as a newly emerging research agenda (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018: 2-4).

In one of the most recent adaptations of ‘going public’ and expanding communication efforts, IOs comprehensively embraced social media as a direct means of reaching out to their constituencies. While still in a rather early and thus to some extent experimental stage, almost all IOs today have a social media presence to connect to their constituencies (Twiplomacy 2018).6

Research on social media in IR in general and on IOs in particular, however, is still in its infancy stage.7 In fact, given the pace in which social media has been adopted and the reluctance to integrate this into our studies of world politics, it has been argued “that social media adoption in organizations is outpacing [our] empirical understanding of the use of these technologies and our theories about why they may alter various organizational processes” in a rather dramatic fashion (Treem/Leonardi 2016: 144). It might be even more dramatic since the potential of social media to increase institutional transparency and thus foster public accountability and ultimately legitimacy is, in comparison to conventional outreach, rather evident. Drawing from work on non-profit and profit organizations utilizing social media (Thelwall/Cugelman 649-61; Treem/Leonardi 2016; Lovejoy et al. 2012; Macnamara/Zerfass 2012) as well as research on political communication, campaigns, elections and global conferences (Hopke/Hestres 2018; Usherwood/Wright 2017; Gervais 2015; Ross/Bürger 2014; Vergeer et al. 2011), three mutually related and thus reinforcing advantages of this particular form of communication have been discussed in the literature:

- Social media is instantaneous and direct. It establishes an immediate connection between the author and its audience without any delay or filter while providing instant reaction time. Other than the will to commit, there is virtually no limit such as airtime or paper space to communicate through social media and new content can always be produced in the blink of a tweet.
- Social media connects and is interactive and dynamic. It is open in terms of participation and thus represents a more egalitarian, horizontal instead of one-way, top-down communication. While the

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6 The main UN Twitter account (UN) and others representing the IO, for example, were established in March 2008 just two years after Twitter was launched. At the same time, with important handles such as the ones of the General Assembly and the ECOSOC President (see discussion below) not starting to tweet until 2012, the use of social media within the UN, just like with ‘traditional media’ represents an ongoing process of trial and error and organizational learning (Crossette 2007).

7 Arguably, toddler stage might describe this field more accurately with “IR scholars […] increasingly recognizing the importance of social media in world politics” (Duncombe 2017: 549) – an intuition easily confirmed by anecdotally browsing through recent academic journals and ISA programs –, studying Twitter in the contexts of diplomacy (Duncombe 2017; Seib 2012), individual state representation (Barbera/Zeitzoff 2017), the Arab Spring (Howard/Hussain 2011), and in light of global conferences (Hopke/Hestres 2018; Denskus/Esser 2013). However, individual authors approach the topic in rather different frames, there is little consensus emerging, and most of the work has not been advanced in mainstream IR journals (yet).
author produces content, the audience decides whom to follow or unfollow. As such, social media relinquishes control as it involves the co-creation rather than the simple delivery of meaning.

- Social media is efficient and impactful. Given its low costs and the potential to reach broad if not global audiences, social media significantly expands the ability of any organization to influence its public relations and increase its visibility with seemingly little to no costs. It has to, however, relate directly to the user experience and thus needs to be used prudently to maintain its impact.

While all three equally apply to social media in general, Twitter arguably takes these characteristics and advantages to the next level. More specifically, Twitter features a particularly high connectivity, sociality and impact (or at least the potential thereof if carried out strategically and with stakeholder expectations in mind). Simply put, Twitter and its brevity, conciseness, and immediacy further ‘amplifies’ the characteristics and effects of social media (Lovejoy et al. 2012). Tweets thus have become “common means of sharing opinions and updates for individuals as well as for business, governments and nongovernmental organizations active in the field of international development” but also obviously beyond and as such serve as important indicators within any discourse (Denskus/Esser 2013: 405). Overall, instant message updates, hashtagging and retweeting, the option to directly address other accounts or add hyperlinks, the character limitation in the first place, as well as the embedding of other media (images, videos, etc.) may not be unique to Twitter but, brought together, explain why this micro-blogging application in particular became so successful as it fills a specific niche (van Dijck 2012: 171). To no surprise then, within political contexts, Twitter has been recognized as “a positive force [for politicians and political organizations alike] in supporting their communication with constituents” (Ross/Bürger 2014: 48).

The UN is surely not an exception in this trend as it is very dedicated to its own social media presence in general and the cultivation of its own ‘Twittersphere’ to be introduced in the next section (Anderson 2018).

**Introducing the UN Twittersphere**

With the “digital revolution percolat[ing] down to the political classes” (Ross/Bürger 2014: 46-7), social media has changed the ways IOs interact with their stakeholders. As the largest micro-blogging site and the seventh most popular website globally, Twitter in this development has become the “most used social media application in official public relations, advertising, and marketing campaigns” (Lovejoy et al. 2012: 313). Arguably, it thus represents the most important outlet to communicate reason and provide justifications for action in real-time and with a potentially global audience on mind today. The UN began to use Twitter as early as 2009 and today reaches almost 11 million followers just through its main handle. Institutionally, the UN Department for Public Information plays a crucial role in this. According to their own website, this department “help[s] manage the United Nations’ relationship with major social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Twitter, WeChat and Weibo; develop policies and procedures for the use of social media platforms by the UN; and provide

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8 See Ross/Bürger (2014: 55-6) for a detailed discussion from the practitioner’s view in political contexts on the difference between Facebook and Twitter.

9 See https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites, retrieved April 19, 2019. There are also methodological and practical reasons to focus on Twitter, which will be elaborated below.

10 See https://twitter.com/un, retrieved April 19, 2019. How many of these are in fact automated bots is beyond the scope of this paper.
social media guidance and support to UN officials and Member States". However, the Department does not control but rather works with individual agencies and senior staff members in their social media use. Accordingly, the “UN’s Twitter presence is not accurately reported or integrated into its official communication strategy [while] its affiliate and special agencies are widely represented” through separate and independent efforts (Anderson 2018: 42). For example, there are only few Twitter handles tagged as ‘official’ and those do not include the UN GA President, UNWomen or other specialized agencies. As such, the UN Twittersphere accurately echoes the confusing and ‘multifaceted information system’ that was already in place and appears just as ‘erratic and episodic’ as the UN itself (Crossette 2007: 275-9).

Approaching the UN and Twitter in conceptual terms, we think of the organization and its many actors and stakeholders as being discursively engaged with their potentially global public audience. This communicative engagement, which we frame as the UN Twittersphere, is obviously nestled in broader discourses in which (global and national) media reports on the UN. Against these media discourses, Twitter allows the UN itself to become actively involved in the dissemination of its ideas and reasons for action directly to the public. Switching its focus from “What are you doing?” to “What’s happening?”, Twitter communication can be considered more public and reportorial than other social media (Seib 2012: 89-90). In fact, with its restriction to initially 140 and now 280 characters, the option to embed further content, and the extensive use of hashtags, Twitter as micro-blogging lends itself particularly well to stakeholder engagement (Lovejoy et al. 2012). Through this engagement, the UN can “be seen as a gigantic river of innumerable stories about itself and its components, which are mutually reinforcing, partially overlapping, incompatible, or incommensurate, continuously told, retold, modified, rejected or forgotten” (Suganami 1999: 379). Ongoing references to particular themes and justifications, selecting certain topics over others, and the ways in which the global public is engaged, thus constitute the overall content and direction of the UN Twittersphere over time. In other words, tweets as discursive reflections determine an otherwise indeterminate social organization in the ongoing stream of communicative action played out in a new public sphere (van Dijck 2012: 162-6).

Given the complex and multi-layered nature of the UN as such (Weiss/Kamran 2009), it comes as no surprise that different actors and agencies populate and constitute the UN Twittersphere, which thus reflects multiple and potentially conflicting normative commitments as it speaks to different discourses. Against this background, we understand the UN Twittersphere to consist of more than the actual @UN handle or the rather short list of official accounts. Rather, it represents a communicative realm filled with many different voices and actors. Just like the geographical spaces in New York City, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi and elsewhere, the virtual space of the UN Twittersphere expands beyond any single group of actors but rather includes UN committees, different agencies within the UN, UN staff members, permanent missions, other state representations and their individual staff, as well as non-governmental organizations in consultative status, their senior staff and other UN Special Ambassadors and celebrity supporters since they all tweet the UN. Two dimensions are relevant to structure this diverse collection of handles.

First, handles in the UN Twittersphere differ to the extent in which they represent larger institutions or individual positions. Handles such as @UN, @UNPeacekeeping, @UNDPPA (Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs) as well as those of the General Assembly and ECOSOC presidents (@UN_PGA

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Table 1: Twitter Handle Ideal Types & Selected Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>Individual</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For the UN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UN</td>
<td>@antonioguterres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNPeacekeeping</td>
<td>@jayathmadw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Towards the UN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(state actors)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@AfghanmissionUN</td>
<td>@MahmoudSaikal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@USUN</td>
<td>@nikkihaley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Towards the UN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(non-state actors)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNWatch</td>
<td>@HillelNeuer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@Global_Witness</td>
<td>@EmmaWatson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and @UNECOSOC) are permanent features within the UN and its use of Twitter. As such, we can expect them to speak on behalf of the UN and/or their respective UN agency as they relate to the overall organization in an official capacity. At the same time, we can think of exposed individuals and senior staff in the UN such as the directors and administrators of specific programs. While still serving the UN, they do so in their individual capacity as they rotate in and out of office. Such a list includes, among others, the Secretary-General (@antonioguterres) and the Deputy Secretary-General (@AminaJMohammed) but also, to name a few more, Nancy Groves as UN Social Media Team Leader, Phumzile Mlambo as Executive Director of UN Women, and Jayathma Wickramanay as UN Youth Envoy.12

Second, echoing in particular the notion of three ‘different UNs’, the UN Twittersphere equally features an intergovernmental, a non-governmental and an UN-institutional dimension (Weiss et al. 2009: 125-9). Some handles thus represent agencies and individuals working for the UN, whereas others represent agencies and individuals working towards the UN. In other words, we distinguish handles that are authorized to tweet on behalf of the UN from those that tweet to the UN. For example, following what has been discussed above, tweets can come from permanent state missions (such as @AfghanmissionUN or its US counterpart @USUN) or from the respective head delegates and ambassadors leading those missions (such as @MahmoudSaikal or its US counterpart @nikkihaley serving until the end of 2018). Both represent intergovernmental dynamics and explicitly national interests within the UN and its virtual space as they tweet and respond to the organization with an agenda in mind.13

Second, with the same rationale in mind, handles from non-state organizations recognized under the consultative status through ECOSOC as well as their representative leaders and directors must be considered as well. Table 1 combines these two dimensions and lists selected examples.

Obviously, these distinctions are ideal-types and thus gradual. For example, a strong ECOSOC President tweeting from his institutional handle could still represent his own individual views just as

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12 This distinction follows from the dynamics we have seen between @POTUS and @realDonaldTrump with the institutional account, featuring 22.5 million followers, being passed on from his predecessor and his individual handle sitting at almost 49 million followers. Thelwall/Cugelman (649-61: 654) follows a similar distinction as they distinguish ‘corporate’ and ‘personal’ accounts.

13 Despite the trend that nation states invest more into their social media presence (Barbera/Zeitzoff 2017), it is interesting to note that not every permanent mission nor every head delegate to the UN has its own account (yet).
much as or even more than a weak Executive Director of any UN agency who, while using her or his individual handle, strictly follows institutional protocol. As a rule of thumb to methodologically maintain the distinction between institutional and individual handles, I used the simple proxy of whether or not an identifiable individual was in charge of a handle (i.e., whether the handle featured an individual’s name or not), assuming that this would allow them to fill their Twitter presence in different ways and potentially offer different content. In other words, despite the annual rotation of @UN_PGA and @UNECOSOC, for example, I assume the respective office holder to be more inclusive and considerate in his or her tweeting compared to those of elected officials and designated individuals serving a longer but potentially more independent tenure for which they use their individual Twitter handle (such as the Deputy Secretary-General and other program directors). Likewise, as the Afghan ambassador serving as Permanent Representative to the UN, Mahmoud Saikal’s handle arguably hold the potential to carry more individual thoughts on the UN than the official handle from the state mission he represents – while the former might carry more weight as the official Afghan position, I expect the latter to be potentially more outspoken and direct about controversial issues. With these distinctions in place to structure the otherwise open-ended and diffuse UN Twittersphere, the paper in the next section revisits Jürgen Habermas (1981a) and his Theory of Communicative Action to assess the use of and engagement through Twitter by and for the UN.

**Tweeting as Communicative Action**

Concerned with social structure, individual motivation, and language, Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* develops a typology of different modes of social interaction (Habermas 1981a, 1994, 1996). In this ideal-type scheme, instrumental action oriented towards and driven by consequences and individual interests (i.e., action motivated by *Zweckrationalität*) is juxtaposed to communicative action oriented towards and driven by reaching consensus and establishing social understandings (i.e., action motivated by *Wertrationalität*) (Heath 2001: 12-4). Whereas the former compels actors to engage in *strategic bargaining*, rhetorical action and potentially deception to maximize ones interest, the latter presupposes that actors depend on their social context and *constitutive arguing* in order to seek reasoned consensus and stabilize it (Joas/Knöbl 2009: 234-5). In other words, Habermas expanded individualist notions of action based on independent and thus isolated actors by stressing the importance of language and social discourse in the determination of such actors and their interests in the first place. Emphasizing in particular the fundamentally social nature of actors and their interests, Habermas thought of communicative action “whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1981a: 285-6). In other words, since never fixed, communicative action is action not (only) driven by interest. Rather, against the indeterminateness of social situations, actors need to communicate and agree on intersubjective meaning to maintain their agency and stay involved in interaction (Risse 2000: 10-1).

While initially introduced as an ideal-type distinction, Habermas’ approach was quickly read in normative terms since it incorporated the idea of public accountability. In this vein, Habermas contended that communicative action and the deliberations it initiates depend on the amount and quality of publicly shared reasons for action. Against these reasons, any “agent can be held accountable for her conduct in a way that an agent acting from strictly instrumental motives cannot” (Heath 2001: 14). As such, actors
engage in communicative action to justify their decisions, seek understanding and build consensus, as well as to confirm norms, develop and stabilize their social identities and ‘learn’ their interests. In normative terms, communicative action thus resonates with the hope to eventually transcend public discourses to a higher order of justification, reasoning, and understanding. In this light, the theory of communicative action argues that actors and their interests should be determined in public deliberation (Taylor 1991: 23). Constantly engaged with each other through communicative action, actors seek reason and relate to others to (ideally) establish meaning and understanding which will ultimately provide accountability, a more engaged public and better decision-making (Habermas 1981a: 397-9). Reading communicative action in its normative dimension, one can thus contend that (a) deliberative action (as in arguing) is to be preferred over strategic action (as in bargaining) and that (b) actors should engage in informed discourses to provide better justifications for their action (Owen 2002: 172-86). Simply put, if political actors argue instead of bargain, this can provide (more) legitimacy and thus improve the overall quality of governance (Müller 2004). More specifically, in global contexts otherwise characterized by the absence of rules and hierarchies, communicative action in particular can “increase the deliberative quality of decision-making” as it engages new stakeholders, fosters transparency and provides reasons for actors to realign or even redefine their interest (Risse 2004: 311). Ideally, such deliberation is advanced among equal and mutually recognized stakeholders able to empathize, sharing a ‘common lifeworld’ in which interaction is aimed at reasoned consensus achieved through the force of the better argument in discourses otherwise void of coercive power, manipulation and threats (Habermas 1981b: 119-52).

In this light, despite legitimate critique and concerns on the theory as such from different angles (Roberts/Crossley 2004: 10-7), the paper contends that the UN Twittersphere represents another outlet in which communicative action can take place. As outlined above, the quality of communicative action through tweeting depends on the willingness of the authors to commit to deliberation and consensus seeking. Read from a communicative action perspective, tweets thus can represent the desire to engage in debate or they can follow a strict script of presenting the organization in a positive light. They can either connect to shared concerns, norms and beliefs among stakeholders or, in non-empathic ways, remain unrelated and distanced. Either way, tweets are expressive self-presentations advanced in social and normative contexts which can be studied and assessed in terms of their claims and their legitimacy:

“[E]xpressive self-presentations have, like assertions or constative speech acts, the character of meaningful expressions, understandable in their context, which are connected with criticizable validity claims. Their reference is to norms and subjective experience rather than facts. The agent makes the claim that his behavior is right in relation to a normative context recognized as legitimate […]” (Habermas 1981a: 15)\textsuperscript{14}

Understood as communicative action, Twitter can bring together otherwise isolated and otherwise disparate constituencies in order to create a new public based on informed deliberation (van Dijck 2012: 163). More explicitly, tweets can express a commitment to understanding and the logic of arguing and reasoning. As social media, Twitter in its most basic feature facilitates social interaction and enables the exchange of ideas and collaboration. In other words, it features the potential of bottom-up deliberation and collaborative development of political goals and (better) justifications (Murthy 2012: 1061-2). Being

\textsuperscript{14} Joas/Knöbl (2009: 234-5) expand on this argument and describe communicative action as different from strategic action based on “the fact that it suspends the validity of predetermined goals, because it resolves around honest discussion with other people, which cannot and must not be aimed at achieving a fixed goal"
event-driven and allowing users to directly share their concerns and political views, Twitter can reframe old and even legitimate new discourses (Anderson 2018: 22). From the UN’s perspective, it could thus empower the organization as such as well as special agencies within. Through tweets, both can break their own news, communicate their visions more freely and get these out to their constituencies and stakeholders in their own words (Murthy 2012: 1063-4). As a consequence, the UN and established media would meet on a more equal playing field: While it has never been easy to send concise messages from an organization as diverse and complex as the UN, more voices and stories could be shared through Twitter than through traditional media. This is important since the UN always had an uneasy relationship with those reporting on it (Crossette 2007: 282-3). Put simply, Twitter provides the UN with new opportunities to engage its audience in public civil discourse and thus increase the quality of governance through deliberation. Documenting willingness to discuss its own actions, tweets can become a catalyst towards reaching consensus and ultimately create a more positive image of the UN and support for its policies.

However, tweets can also shut down public discussion if they remained limited to a logic of instrumental PR-streamlining and redundant information dissemination. In addition to ‘death by rampant, excessive, and over-stimulating information’ (i.e., unwanted noise), Twitter as self-presentation can easily become another outlet for organizational showcasing and thus remain rather limited in its deliberative and democratizing effects (Murthy 2012: 1063-4). That said, the engaging character of tweets is more a potential than a reality. Simply put, Twitter can be just as much one-way communication as other media if users communicate to instead of communicate with each other (Ross/Bürger 2014: 44-5). As such, even (or maybe rather specifically) for advocates of communicative action, Twitter might not live up to its promised potential as it runs the danger of transforming engagement and political interest into ‘point-and-click’ politics which are otherwise ineffective in creating social change (Morozov 2011: 193-5). Against this light of potentially non-realized potential and the fact that the UN always had difficulties presenting its mission and accomplishments, it remains to be seen whether the embrace of Twitter and the emergence of the UN Twittersphere really marks deeper engagements and advanced deliberation. In other words, while an “interactive framework” with instant communication is there, providing “the means whereby a debating space in which many voices can talk to each other is enabled, finally realising Habermas’ vision, quite how many of those voices are heard, by whom and with what consequences is currently unknown” (Ross/Bürger 2014: 50-1, original emphasis). To answer this question, the next section outlines how I approached the UN Twitterphere in methodological terms.

**Reconstructing & Assessing the UN Twittersphere**

As outlined in the previous section, it is against the normative dimension of Habermas’ theory of communicative action and the potential Twitter holds for the UN that the paper reconstructs and assesses the UN Twittersphere. As such, the first step was to determine key agencies and individuals within the UN Twittersphere (i.e., who is tweeting). Given the focus on how the UN uses Twitter, both institutional as well as individual handles within the UN had to be considered. At the same time, given the intergovern-

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15 Considering the individual user, Murthy (2012: 1064) argues that the ‘demotic turn’ in Twitter might be limited after all to “trending topics such as what people are listening to, celebrities one hates, or the ‘#lesserbooks’ trending topic which called for book titles which never made it to the shelf (e.g. ‘Zen and the Art of Unicycle Maintenance’).
mental nature of the UN and the *UN Twittersphere*, agencies (i.e., Permanent Missions) and individuals (i.e., Permanent Representatives) speaking and acting on behalf of their sovereign member states had to be included as well. Finally, given the importance of non-state actors and civil society within the UN and for global discourses as such (Wapner 2007), handles from NGOs and their directors were also included. Following the rationale of Denskus/Esser (2013: 408-10) to narrow down data by focusing on specific events and conferences in real-world diplomacy, tweets from were collected during the opening weeks of the 73rd UN Session last year. Also known as the ‘UN season’, the Session started on September 18th and ended on October 5th. Put simply, this is when ‘things happen’ in New York, at least when focused on regular instead of emergency meetings (Moore/Pubantz 2017: 119-24). With primarily the General Assembly but also all other UN agencies involved and multiple high-level plenary meetings with heads of state occurring in conjunction, the paper thus contends that this selection, as a snapshot, offers representative and rather recent insight into the *UN Twittersphere*.16

Table 2 lists all Twitter handles whose tweets, if sent in English, Spanish, German, or French, were collected and analyzed. Among the institutional UN handles, the main UN account as well as those of the General Assembly and ECOSOC Presidents, the Departments of General Assembly & Conference Management, Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Economic and Social Affairs as well as UN News Centre were collected. Trying to connect institutional and individual handles, representatives and directors of each UN agency followed were considered. As such, the handles of Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, Maria Fernanda Espinosa as President of the General Assembly, and Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications and head of United Nations Department of Public Information Alison Smale as well as UN Social Media Team Leader Nancy Groves were followed.17 As to states, all permanent Security Council members were followed. This included the Permanent Missions of all of the P5 as well as Karren Pierce (UK) and Nikki Haley (US).18 Finally, for non-state actors, relevant civil society organizations with special consultative status were considered since only those have access “not only to ECOSOC, but also to its many subsidiary bodies, the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations, ad-hoc processes on small arms, and special events organized by the President of the General Assembly”19. Among those, high-profile NGOs serving in a ‘watch-dog’ capacity for the UN were selected, including the United Nations Association of the United States of Amer-

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16 See http://sdg.iisd.org/events/73rd-session-of-the-un-general-assembly/, retrieved April 19, 2019, for dates and rationale. During those three weeks, the 56 handles outlined below sent out a total of 5,353 tweets.

17 See https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/senior-management-group, retrieved April 19, 2019. Note that further Under-Secretaries relevant for the research question – Rosemary A. DiCarlo, Under-Secretary of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs as well as Jeffrey D. Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, and Catherine Pollard, Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management – were not active on Twitter by the time of research.

18 The other Permanent Representatives are either not on Twitter (China) or did not tweet throughout the 73rd UN Session last year (France and Russia). For a broader debate on dynamics between permanent and nonpermanent Security council members and why one should consider the permanent members in particular, see Hurd (2002).

Table 2: Handles Followed During 73rd UN Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For the UN</th>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@UN</td>
<td>@Chinamission2un</td>
<td>@antonioguterres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UN_PGA</td>
<td>@Franceun</td>
<td>@AminaJMohammed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNECOSOC</td>
<td>@RussiaUN</td>
<td>@alison_smale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UN_News_Centre</td>
<td>@UKUN_NewYork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UN_Spokesperson</td>
<td>@USUN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNDGACM_EN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNDPFA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@UNDESA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Towards the UN (state actors)

Towards the UN (non-state actors)

ica (UNAUSA), and UNWatch. Correspondingly, leading individuals such as Chris Whatley, Executive Director of UNAUSA and Hillel C. Neuer, Executive Director of UNWatch, were considered.20

In practical terms, tweets were collected through an application programming interface (API). This allowed to collect and consider tweets in real-time, even if they were deleted by the respective user at a later point in time.21 In methodological terms, the paper applied a qualitative content analysis in order to make sense of the rather large amount of data (Schreier 2012). In this light, individual tweets were interpreted as “artefacts of social communication” and considered in terms of their words, meaning, and framing (Berg/Lune 2012: 353). More specifically, given the research interest in assessing the quality of communicative action, tweets were coded based on their purpose, content and direction as well as

20 See Appendix for an overview of all Twitter handles considered including the total number of tweets for each handle. This selection of handles obviously reflects elite discourses since it does not include direct responses of the audience. However, the paper contends that the quality of communicative action in and through the UN Twittersphere can at least be approximated by looking at the three faces of the UN outlined above without factoring in responses from the audience. In other words, the paper is mostly interested in how the UN and other actors involved ‘project’ communicative action into the UN Twittersphere rather than determining whether they succeed and influence discourses. Further research might thus focus on whether and how the global public – if such a collective exists in the first place– responses and how this influences the quality of the discourse.

21 In contrast to other social media platforms, Twitter provides rather comprehensive access to its data through its API, with the quantity and quality of extractable data well-suited to meaningful analysis (Vergeer et al. 2011: 486-7). The now established and ongoing collection of tweets allows future research on the UN Twittersphere in light of any special events and emergency meetings in the future.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content of Tweet</strong></td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development &amp; Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment &amp; Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UN &amp; UN Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose of Tweet</strong></td>
<td>Call for Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information Dissemination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direction of Tweet</strong></td>
<td>Towards Global Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards States &amp; World Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards the UN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards other Int. Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards NGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UN Image in Tweet</strong></td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral / Balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Addressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 lists the categories and dimensions of coding in detail applied to all tweets collected.

Breaking down the individual categories, as to *content of tweets* (i.e., what is tweeted), the coding framework reflects the larger commitments of the UN as such (Moore/Pubantz 2017). Tweets were thus coded whether their focus was on security, economy, human rights, environment and health or the UN and its own structure. These primary distinctions were further broken down to reflect more specific themes such as war, terrorism, disarmament (security), global production and world trade, development and aid, and labor and employment (development & economy), education and culture, migration and refugees, and political and civil rights (human rights) and finally climate change, ecological sustainability and disasters and diseases (environment & health). Finally, tweets focused on the UN were distinguished whether they referred to the UN and its potential reform as such, to proceedings and administrative functions, or more
broadly to multilateralism within the UN and its future. With these fine-grained frames, the coding was able to capture and reflect debates and thematic shifts within and between different handles. To assess these, tweets were once again coded based on their primary focus (i.e., a tweet arguing for development through gender equality was coded as economic). 22

To assess the quality of engagement in this dimension, the overall distribution of tweets among the different topics was considered. In addition to representing a balanced picture by covering the full mandate of the UN, it was also measured how much the topics covered between the different groups of handles corresponded. While full consensus cannot be the yardstick for communicative action, at least some basic agreement on what needs to be discussed is required to establish engagement. In other words, if UN agencies developed their own ‘pet projects’ irrespective of stakeholder concerns (and vice versa), one can reasonably expect public discourse to fall short. Put simply, tweets from different stakeholders must overall paint a consistent picture to be considered as effective and normatively desirable communication. Consequently, against an overall balanced distribution, the more thematic overlap between different stakeholders exists, the more the UN Twittersphere meets the normative standards of communicative action.

As to the purpose of tweets dimension (i.e., why is tweeted) was coded based on whether the tweet represented a call for action, a discussion statement, or information dissemination. This distinction follows the framework provided by Lovejoy et al. (2012) which recognizes different purposes such as mobilization, promoting discussion and sharing information. These can be used to assess whether tweets were engaging in debate or shutting down public discourse. To qualify as a call for action, tweets needed to express an immediate notion to act as well as an intended target group. Examples from the sampling included calls for ceasefires, climate action, or supporting refugees. Discussion statements, on the other hand, featured arguments that the audience could relate to and either confirm or contest. Simply put, anything that reflected an expressed opinion on the topic at hand fell under this code. As such, I included the sharing of ‘facts’ in this dimension as long as (a) the facts are contested and (b) the author presented them in an argumentative fashion. For example, a tweet that stated that torture during interrogations is illegal, immoral and ineffective, and thus should be abandoned was coded as a discussion statement. 23 Finally, information dissemination included announcements, events and publications as well as recognizing new directors, new programs or something similar. 24 Given the shortness of tweets, each tweet was coded with only one dimension – a tweet either represented (more of) a discussion statement than an information announcement.

Against the theoretical framework, communicative action by the UN, in order to engage its public, should advance a mix of different tweets following different purposes. At the same time, however, calls for action and discussion served as indicators for more engagement and value-commitment since they more explicitly reflect organizational reasoning and rationale for action. Simply put, calls for action and

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22 Arguably, the choice to connect certain topics and their particular combinations reveal deeper logics of engaging and reasoning and should be revisited as an issue in further research.

23 Note that the same tweet would have been coded as a call for action if, in addition, the author had added that ‘all member states are called upon to stop using torture during interrogations’.

24 Further note that some of the information announcements related to events that themselves were contested within the UN, such as the announcement of a new program director that did not enjoy the full support of all member states. However, since the tweet itself did not engage with a discussion of said director but rather ‘just’ shared the appointment, we coded it as such.
discussion statements as more direct forms of reaching out to the audience represent a higher quality of communicative action. Likewise, information dissemination, specifically if obvious, trivial and limited in its depth and quality, does not transcend the discourse from bargaining to arguing. Rather, such tweets were considered as branding or providing otherwise redundant information and thus were considered as limited in its engagement with a passive audience not able to contest reason and justification. Consequently, against an overall balanced distribution, the more tweets coded as discussion and mobilization, the more the UN Twittersphere meets the normative standards of communicative action (Anderson 2018: 33-4).

In terms of direction of tweets (i.e., who is tweeted at), the coding scheme reflects the intended audience and whether or not specific entities were explicitly addressed. As such, the default code represented an unspecified ‘global public’ – if no one was addressed specifically, it was concluded that the tweet was meant for everyone. Following Karns et al. (2015 (3): 8-20), in terms of more specific actor groups engaged in global governance, further dimensions reflected whether a tweet was directed towards member states and world leaders, towards the UN itself, towards other international organizations, towards NGOs and civil society or towards business actors.

25 Coding these, however, was based on whether there was an explicit reference or not. With potentially multiple addressee at once, tweets in this dimension could be double-coded (i.e., addressing states, civil society, and business actors alike).

Arguably, the more a speaker specifies his or her audience in communicative action, the more engaging it becomes. In other words, if there is awareness and a designated target, rapport can be established and arguing can replace bargaining (Risse 2004: 294-300). In other words, while one can expect that information and arguments are sent out without specific targets, connecting to those strengthens the overall quality of communication. More specifically, direct communication creates a ‘shared lifeworld’ in which one can relate to another and begin to consider the extent of shared norms and values (Habermas 1994). Consequentially, against an overall balanced distribution, the more specific audiences are identified, the more the UN Twittersphere meets the normative standards of communicative action.

As to the fourth and final category, the overall UN image conveyed in each tweet was coded (i.e., how is the UN represented). This included a code for not addressing or mentioning the UN at all as well as a range from positive and affirmative to neutral and balanced to negative and critical. Affirmative tweets included appreciations and argumentative efforts to strengthen the UN whereas the latter included challenges, denials, and explicit reservations as to whether the UN could realize its mandate. As such, well-intended and benevolent criticism based on the assumption, that the UN has the potential to meet its ambitious goals, was coded as a positive image whereas definite criticism not seeing a role for the UN to play in a world of nation states was coded as negative.

While a positive undertone recognizes the UN as such and thus facilitates arguments as well as persuades the audience to consider the UN legitimate, there is a thin line not to be crossed and enter the realm of PR streamlining and corporate branding. More explicitly, it can be considered as overstatement and thus as a weakness if the majority of tweets reflect narratives of excellence, efficiency and legitimacy. This rings particularly true if their is discrepancy between the self-image of the UN and...
those of other stakeholders. Consequentially, against an overall balanced distribution, the more balanced the UN presents itself and the more this echoes stakeholders’ assessments, the more the UN Twitter-sphere meets the normative standards of communicative action. With the coding scheme now outlined and expectations expressed, the next section discusses the results from the content analysis of all tweets considered.

Results & Discussion

Given the different stakeholders involved in the UN Twittersphere, I will first discuss results from those tweets sent for the UN (i.e., from institutions and individuals within the UN) to then compare this with those who tweeted at the UN. Looking at content first, what really stands out for tweets from UN institutions and individuals is that they are strongly self-referential as they discuss the UN, its structure, and its proceedings more than any other topic. In particular among the institutional handles, more than half of all tweets primarily speak about the UN and not about the topics the UN speaks about. Between the other topics tweeted, there is a fairly even distribution with human rights and environmental topics being slightly more likely to be shared. Among the individual handles, preferences for certain topics could be identified (i.e. Antonio Guterres tweeting slightly more frequently about environmental and human rights issues whereas Amina Mohammed refers more often to developmental topics). Hence, there is some more diversity which can be read as individual championship for certain topics. Notably, looking a little deeper in individual handles, security issues seem to be slightly less relevant for the Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General.

Image 2: Content of UN Tweets during 73rd Session (Total: 1,293)

Considering the dimension of purpose, the vast majority of UN institutional tweets reflect rather generic information statements. Commonplace statements that the UN is now in session or documentation of handshakes between diplomats and the fact that they are in meetings (without substantial reflection on what the meeting is about) seem to be the most common tweets. Only about 20 % of all tweets coded reflected discussion statements intended to initiate or respond to public debate. Also, very little direct
calls for action or any other mobilization could be found. Individual handles on the other hand, present a different picture, at least in regards to the amount of discussion statements which constitute slightly more than half of all tweets from these handles. UN individuals, potentially freer from institutional pressure and need to speak as one voice, are more willing to raise hot button topics and hope to engage in debate on those. At the same time, there is still a certain reluctance to translate discussion into requests as all individual handles restrain themselves from requesting direct action.

![Pie charts showing purpose of UN Institutions and UN Individuals](image3.png)

**Image 3:** Purpose of UN Tweets during 73rd Session (Total: 1,293)

The generic nature of why the UN tweets is echoed in terms of whom it tweets to. Obviously, given that this is constitutive for the medium, it comes as no major surprise but the vast majority of 95% of all tweets are not specifically directed at any particular actor and hence arguably remain limited in their engagement. This is specifically the case since the audience remains not only global but also in most cases unspecified or simply not addressed at all. Among those few cases where an actor or a group of actors could be identified, it is nation states and their leaders with almost no tweets in the complete sample directly addressing NGOs, business or other international organizations. This is true for UN institutions and individuals, who are only slightly more likely to address nation states directly.

In terms of UN images and self-assessment, there is also surprisingly little difference between institutional and individual handles. Between both, the overall UN image conveyed is neutral. In fact, 75% of all tweets project the UN in neutral terms, whereas the remaining tweets either paint a more positive picture or do not mention the UN at all. In other words, among the 1,293 tweets coded from the UN, there are only two tweets which express concern about the institution as such. With virtually no reference to any shortcomings or weaknesses, the UN image conveyed is one based on neutral statements with moderately advanced indications of its potential for greater good at certain times and under certain conditions (e.g., when supported by member states and speaking with one voice).

Comparing these results to the aggregated handles of state and non-state institutions (i.e., Permanent Missions and watch-dog NGOs) as well as their individual representatives (i.e., Ambassadors to the UN and executive directors), interesting differences emerge. In terms of tweet content, state and non-state actors refer to the UN as such far less frequently. Rather, topics of development, security and human

26 This echoes observations from the Twiplomacy report on user engagement throughout the same time period, see [https://twiplomacy.com/blog/following-unga-2018-looking-engagement-followers/](https://twiplomacy.com/blog/following-unga-2018-looking-engagement-followers/) for more details.
rights are covered more consistently and at greater length with the UN only being mentioned in the discussion rather than the other way around. For example, the topic is introduced first to then indicate that the UN discusses it in session and not emphasizing the UN first. This is in particular true for the individuals where only one quarter of all tweets directly speak about the UN while other issues such as security and human rights receive more attention. Among those topics, there is a certain neglect towards development and environment with human rights and security being more likely to be tweeted. 27

As to purpose of tweets, both missions and NGOs are more likely to share controversial statements and hence invite to debate. While still limited in terms of mobilization and with only a few direct calls for action, at least there seems to be an understanding of the importance of discussing political topics critically and of opening oneself up to the global audience in this regard. Notably, comparing the missions with their leaders, permanent representatives are more reluctant to engage in debate and often follow a rather cautious script of diplomacy with few personal reflections and opinion included. These reflections

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27 Given that we only coded tweets from permanent Security Member states, the focus on security is not surprising. At the same time, each of these states is also active in a wide range of other UN bodies and hence other topics should be discussed in the missions as well. If anything, this is an indication that in external communication, 'hard issues' to prove UN relevance remain salient.
remain moderate, indicating that while UN individuals speak more freely for their organization, state representatives are more careful representing their own thoughts.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Image 7:} Purpose of State & Non-State Tweets during 73\textsuperscript{rd} Session (Total: 1,356)

In terms of directing one’s tweets, similar pattern between institutional and individual handles exist. Again, the audience for the most part remains undefined as tweets are not addressed in any particular way. With this similar pattern, the particular use of Twitter as a generic message board in international diplomacy becomes obvious. In this light, even the permanent missions do not use their Twitter handles to directly engage another mission and thus do not consider ’twiplomacy’ as an alternative or supplement for their outreach. If anything, such outreach manifests only at the individual tweeting when Nikki Haley and Karen Pierce in a few tweets address other members of the Security Council or conflict parties elsewhere. Such an outreach, however, remains limited with the audience remaining undefined.

Finally, in terms of the UN image conveyed through their tweets, the institutional accounts of both state and non-state actors analyzed remain rather neutral again with only a few negative references which are also mostly balanced out by a few positive remarks as well. This is true for all missions (including China

\textsuperscript{28} Note that from the P5 ambassadors to the UN, only Nikki Haley (US) and Karen Peirce (UK) tweeted during the time period considered and hence this result remains limited.
and Russia) and also for UNAUSA, which together echo the neutral to positive image of the UN handles. Interestingly, UN Watch does not fit into this pattern since this organization is significantly more critical of the UN. Expressing the same watchdog commitment on the individual level, we find the same amount of negative tweets from Hillel Neuer, who therefore on average represent the most critical voice among those studied in the UN Twittersphere in this paper.

In light of the theoretical expectations following from Habermas’ Communicative Action, granted that those are rather high, the UN Twittersphere does not exhaust its full potential of engaging the audience. What really stands out is that the UN is only communicating to rather than communicating with the global public. Lecturing and informing rather than debating, the UN Twittersphere treats its audience(s) as passive customers instead of informed citizens to engage with in debate. More specifically, almost in an attempt to echo traditional media and obviously not fully understanding the nature of social media yet, one-way messages are broadcast rather than used to initiate dialogue. Reluctance to engage remains as “practitioners may neither understand [it] nor believe that social media is the cure-all for organizational communication efforts” (Lovejoy et al. 2012: 316). Thus, against the potential laid out from a communicative action perspective, the UN Twittersphere can be read as a missed opportunity.
More specifically, in terms of content, self-reference as well as a mismatch between the different actors groups and which topics they tweet stand out. As to why actors tweet, there is a clear imbalance between information dissemination and discussion (and the obvious lack of any mobilization or generating support). This generic approach is echoed through the non-specification of any audience. Quite obviously, Twitter creates more than one public and public spheres are much more diverse than Habermas might have thought of (Fraser 1992). However, while tweets are generic by nature, there is a loss of communicative engagement if they remain vague and unspecified. Add to this the dimension of the UN image, in which, despite all self-references, there is little recognition of the limitations of the organization. Twitter, it seems, is used mostly to generate a brand (at least from the UN institutional handles) or only in very cautious ways limited by diplomatic protocol (for state actors). Overall, there is little creative use of the Twittersphere to capitalize on the advantages the medium offers. The concluding section will place this result into the larger context of IOs, legitimacy, and the alleged crisis of global governance.

**Conclusion & Further Research**

Against the alleged crisis of global governance in general and international organizations and their multilateral approach in particular, the UN and others IOs over the last decade or so have engaged more heavily in what has been discussed as ‘public diplomacy’ and direct engagement with their stakeholders (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Altman/Shore 2014; Nye 2010). Social media in this quest for legitimacy and expansion of mandates plays a crucial role since it has the potential to project one’s own messages directly to a global audience with little cost and no delay or filtering. In other words, social media in general and Twitter in particular is more than just a ‘microphone for the masses’ but rather features the potential to serve an important role in the making and unmaking of organizations such as the UN. Confined to its few characters and tailored towards instantaneous outreach along one’s networks, Twitter in fact revolutionizes political communication just as much as prior interventions such as the telegraph, the telephone, or email had in the past (Murthy 2011). Thus, to no surprise, IOs have embraced social media. Somewhat more surprisingly, IR at large and IO research in particular have been rather slow to catch up with this development despite the fact that social media today clearly deserves the attention of scholars interested in the UN and other international organizations. Drawing on communicative action as a social theory framework, my intention in this paper was not to test Habermas’ theory. Rather, as a ‘leap of faith’, I content that the framework can provide insights into the UN Twittersphere and allow us to assess the quality of engagement and potential of the medium realized. Based on a first attempt to map how institutions and individuals within as well as towards the UN use Twitter and ascribe meaning to this unique organization in social media, more than 2,500 tweets from 22 handles from the 73rd UN Session in 2018 were coded. Since this really just represents a smaller sample of the UN Twittersphere, results remain preliminary and really just present a snapshot. Equally important, we did not include public responses in the sample. Hence, we did not, mostly for practical and methodological reasons, consider the audience in Habermas’ theory (yet). Nevertheless, two preliminary conclusions can be drawn.

First, while the realm of social media and Twitter seems to be less organized than traditional PR work and public diplomacy outreach, there seems to be a significant pull from the institution itself to mainstream and thus limit its twitter handles. The fact that neither institutional nor individual UN handles expressed any criticism is quite revealing. At the same time, state and non-state actors did not
differ dramatically in their account and practice. Thus, as it stands, Twitter is not considered as a tool of engagement and discussion but rather serves as an ‘echo chamber’ of validation and recognition of the organization itself and those involved within. Potentially not fully understanding the nature of the new medium (Lovejoy et al. 2012: 316), we find no indication for Twitter being used in sustained or innovative ways. Unlike, for example, the momentum created by hashtag campaigns such as #metoo or #FridaysForFuture, the will to tweet meaningfully and in engaging ways on behalf of such an organization like the UN, potentially due to limited resources and staff in the Department of Global Communication and the UN Social Media team (?: 16-8), remains limited. At least, while Twitter serves as a constitutive element in individual identity processes – “I tweet, therefore I am” – and features prominently and authentically for individuals (Murthy 2012: 1062-3), organizational social media use such as the one of the UN at least seem to be far more distanced and arguably less meaningful as it represents corporate branding and streamlining more than conversational engagement.

Second, despite the fact that there is a restrained engagement through Twitter across all handles, different handles use the medium still in rather different ways. For example, the amount of hashtags, images, and videos used in tweets differ significantly. Maybe even more importantly, the frequency of tweeting as well as the question whether one is active in the first place differs. While specifically state representatives resist the urge to become active in the first place, some agencies such the Department for Political Affairs or the ECOSOC President tweet significantly less than the UN Spokesperson for example. In other words, the willingness to embrace and use this new medium and thus the very understanding of its potential and what it really differs among institutional and individual accounts of the UN. At the same time, almost everyone within the UN feels compelled to use Twitter, which probably explains the overall rather limited engagement through and within the UN Twittersphere. It seems, for example, that the Social Media team has a hard time expressing the sobriety of @antonioguterres and his rather terse tone (even in relative terms to Twitter character limits) while making sure that there is enough news tweeted, often throwing in tweets of rather limited value and no informational importance. Sad as it is, there might be a reason why the UN has less followers than other politicians or celebrities.

Moving the project forward, with the UN Twittersphere database established, comparative research over longer time periods as well as in light of particular crises (such as Venezuela) could be advanced to see how consistent the patterns and results identified in this paper are. Further research could also draw on social network analysis, considering in particular the amount of reweeting and mapping who is connected within the UN Twittersphere. This could, on the one hand, include virtual connections between UN agencies speaking to organizational dynamics within as well as those connections between different missions and their ambassadors on the other hand (McClurg/Young 2011). In particular, the Twittersphere could be mapped in terms of who is engaged in exchange and diplomacy through Twitter, which could be related and compared to what is going on in the real world. This could further be complemented by an analysis on voting behavior and public opinion to see whether social media influences outcome at and perception of the UN. Either way, given that the UN is expanding its social media presence, scholars interested in this organization need to reconcile this new layer of communication. While tweeting alone will save no succeeding generation from the scourge of war, we are more likely to tweet it in the future and thus need to recognize and use this new form of communication to our best knowledge. As long as we do not, social media use will remain limited and will not make the audience view the UN as a legitimate actor of world politics.
References


### Table 4: Institutional Handles for UN – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UN Institution</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td>@UN</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN General Assembly President</td>
<td>@UN_PGA</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN ECOSOC President</td>
<td>@UNECOSOC</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Spokesperson</td>
<td>@UN_Spokesperson</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management</td>
<td>@UNDGACM_EN</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs</td>
<td>@UNDPPA</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs</td>
<td>@UNDESA</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5: Individual Handles for UN – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UN Individual</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antonio Guterres</td>
<td>@antonioguterres</td>
<td>UN Secretary-General</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina J. Mohammed</td>
<td>@AminaJMohammed</td>
<td>UN Deputy Secretary-General</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Fernanda Espinosa</td>
<td>@mfespinosaEC</td>
<td>President of the General Assembly</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison Smale</td>
<td>@alison_smale</td>
<td>Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey D. Feltman</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary A. DiCarlo</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Under-Secretary of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Pollard</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Under-Secretary for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Management</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6: Institutional Handles Towards UN (Member States) – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent Mission</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>@Chinamission2un</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>@Franceonu</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>@RussiaUN</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>@UKUN_NewYork</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>@USUN</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Individual Handles Towards UN (Member States) – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent Representative</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>Country Mission</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ma Zhaoxu</td>
<td>@N/A</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François Delattres</td>
<td>@FDelattre</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vassily A. Nebenzia</td>
<td>@NebenziaUN</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Pierce</td>
<td>@KarenPierceUN</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki Haley</td>
<td>@nikkihalley</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Institutional Handles Towards UN (Non-State) – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NGO</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Nations Association USA</td>
<td>@UNAUSA</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Watch</td>
<td>@UNWatch</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Individual Handles Towards UN (Non-State) – 73rd Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NGO Representative</th>
<th>Twitter Handle</th>
<th>NGO</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Total Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris Whatley</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>UNAUSA</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillel C. Neuer</td>
<td>@HillelNeuer</td>
<td>UN Watch</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>