Norm contestation in the digital era: campaigning for refugee rights

NINA HALL*

In the European summer of 2015 there was a significant increase in the numbers of asylum-seekers crossing, and dying in, the Mediterranean Sea. On 2 September the image of a Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, washed up dead on the coast of Turkey shocked the world and rallied public support for refugees. Yet many world leaders initially opposed accepting more refugees, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau being rare exceptions.[1] Their counterparts in Australia, Ireland and the UK expressed concern about refugee deaths, but did not want to increase their own refugee intakes.[2]

Two weeks after the Aylan Kurdi story broke, several governments, including those of Australia, Ireland and the UK, dramatically changed their position and agreed to take in more refugees from Syria. There are many potential explanations for this changed position: norm leadership by Merkel; the perceived 'scale' of the crisis, which meant governments felt compelled to take some action, even if inadequate in scale; and/or the remarkably high degree of media attention and public pressure on the issue.

Of particular interest here is how many individuals and organizations lobbied strongly for reluctant governments to take more refugees. These included a

* The author would like to thank Anette Stimmer and Lea Wisken, the editors of the special section of this issue of *International Affairs*, for their constructive feedback. My thanks also to the participants in the 'Dynamics of dissent' workshop held at Nuffield College, University of Oxford, in 2017, for valuable discussions on norm contestation; to the Hertie School of Governance for supporting the research conducted in this article; and to Rebecca Johns for her invaluable research assistance.

1 Note that Trudeau was not prime minister at the time, and was elected to this office on 19 October 2015. Obama acknowledged these two leaders' contributions explicitly at a UN summit as 'Germany and Canada—two countries that have gone above and beyond in providing support for refugees. And I want to personally thank Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Trudeau, and the people of both those countries—because the politics sometimes can be hard, but it's the right thing to do': The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Remarks by President Obama at leaders summit on refugees', UN, New York, 20 Sept. 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-refugees. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 18 Jan. 2019.)

2 Patrick Wintour, 'Britain should not take more Middle East refugees, says David Cameron', *Guardian*, 3 Sept. 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/david-cameron-migration-crisis-will-not-be-solved-by-uk-taking-in-more-refugees; 'Taoiseach and Tánaiste defend Ireland: one country cannot fix Europe's "enormous catastrophe"', *The Journal.ie*, 1 Sept. 2015, https://www.thejournal.ie/burton-migrants-crisis-2304411-Sep2015/; Matthew Knott, 'Drowned Syrian toddler: Tony Abbott says "tragic" picture a reminder of need to stop boats', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Sept. 2015, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/drowned-syrian-toddler-tony-abbott-says-tragic-picture-a-reminder-of-need-to-stop-boats-20150904-gjevx5.html.

International Affairs **95**: 3 (2019) 575–595; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiz021
© The Author(s) 2019. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of International Affairs. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

number of digital advocacy organizations, such as GetUp! (Australia) and 38 Degrees (UK), which were extremely active in this period even though they are not refugee experts. They responded rapidly to the Kurdi moment: GetUp! worked with other refugee advocacy organizations to mobilize thousands of people in all the major Australian cities. In the UK, 38 Degrees initiated a petition, eventually signed by 137,000 people, demanding local councils accept more refugees.[3] However, we know remarkably little about how digital advocacy organizations campaigned for refugee rights, or how they engage in norm contestation.

The digital era has brought into play new advocacy tools, tactics and organizations, with activists now taking action through online petitions, hashtag-inspired social movements and social media campaigns.[4] Yet no International Relations (IR) scholarship has systematically examined the contribution of digital advocacy to norm contestation. Instead, the IR scholarship on norm contestation focuses largely on the role of states, norm entrepreneurs, transnational networks and traditional NGOs.[5] Digital advocacy organizations warrant study, given their international reach, their longevity and their ability to mobilize large memberships on issues as diverse as refugees and trade. They are permanent organizations with professional campaigning staff. MoveOn has been campaigning actively since 1998 in the United States, Campact in Germany since 2003, and GetUp! in Australia since 2005. These organizations use digital platforms to mobilize people rapidly both online and offline.[6] They campaign across multiple issue areas simultaneously, from tax reform to climate change, refugee rights to gay marriage. They are member-driven organizations, and select campaigns by surveying and testing member preferences.[7] Digital advocacy organizations are permanent institutions with professionally employed staff, so are distinct from digital social movements such as #metoo, #OccupyWallStreet or #GeziPark.

This article explores the role of digital advocacy organizations in norm contestation on refugee rights in 2015–16. It focuses on the responses of three organizations, based in the UK, Ireland and Australia, to the same external crisis: an increasing number of refugee deaths in the Mediterranean. These countries were selected because they all have advocacy organizations of the same form and all faced the same external crisis around the same norm (refugee burden-sharing). Furthermore, they are all western democracies and signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but were further removed from the refugee flows across the Mediterranean than continental European countries.[8]

[3] 38 Degrees, 'Refugees Welcome', online petition, https://you.38degrees.org.uk/efforts/refugees-welcome.

[4] Nina Hall, 'Innovations in activism in the digital era: campaigning for refugee rights in 2015–2016', in *The governance report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 143–56.

[5] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Richard Price, 'Transnational civil society and advocacy in world politics', *World Politics* 55: 4, 2003, pp. 579–606.

[6] David Karpf, *The MoveOn effect: the unexpected transformation of American political advocacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ariadne Vromen, *Digital citizenship and political engagement: the challenge from online campaigning* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[7] David Karpf, *Analytic activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[8] Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and other continental European states had refugees arriving in their territories on foot and by boat, which posed different challenges and opportunities for refugee advocacy

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

By examining the same type of organization at the same moment of external crisis in different national political contexts, it is possible to develop theories of how digital advocacy organizations engage in norm contestation.

The article focuses on the norm of refugee burden-sharing as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which implies that states should cooperate to share the costs of accepting refugees. Burden-sharing is not clearly defined in the 1951 Convention, the preamble stating merely that 'the granting of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and … a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without *international co-operation*'.[9] Burden-sharing is a more ambiguous norm compared with the precision of *non-refoulement*, which means that: 'No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'; non-refoulement is an 'essential and non-derogable' component of international refugee protection.[10]

Although states have often referred to the need for burden-sharing of refugees across countries, exactly what this means is contested both between countries (i.e., at the international level) and within countries (i.e., at the domestic level between interest groups and governments). It can be broadly understood in at least three ways: *sharing the financial costs* of hosting refugees (whereby the global North finances refugee camps in the global South); *distributing refugees* for resettlement across multiple countries (rather than relying on the neighbouring countries to host the majority, which is often the case); and/or changing the *incentives for destination choice* (such as harmonizing EU asylum legislation).[11] This article focuses on the *domestic* contestation of refugee burden-sharing, and specifically on how to distribute refugees internationally, during a period of intense politicization. As noted above, all three of the countries in the case-studies are signatories to the 1951 Convention.[12]

The article builds on Stimmer and Wisken's article in this issue, which distinguishes between *discursive* contestation (where actors debate the meaning and importance of norms) and *behavioural* contestation (where actors influence the implementation of norms).[13] Stimmer and Wisken have suggested that actors with greater access to implementation and (material, social or positional) assets for putting norms into practice are more likely to engage in behavioural contestation than those with low implementation access. This article looks at instances

organizations.

[9] Preamble to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951 (emphasis added).

[10] Non-refoulement is outlined specifically in art. 33 (para. 1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention. For further clarification of non-refoulement see UNHCR, *Advisory opinion on the extraterritorial application of non-refoulement obligations under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol* (Geneva, 2007), http://www.unhcr.org/4d9486929.pdf.

[11] Christina Boswell, *Burden sharing in the new age of immigration* (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute, Nov. 2003), http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/burden-sharing-new-age-immigration.

[12] UNHCR, *States Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol*, http://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b73b0d63/states-parties-1951-convention-its-1967-protocol.html.

[13] Anette Stimmer and Lea Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent: when actions are louder than words', *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiz019.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

when actors with low implementation access engaged in behavioural contestation, and asks: when and why do digital advocacy organizations engage in behavioural contestation for refugee rights? In doing so, it examines and explains the sequencing of discursive and behavioural norm contestation.

The author conducted 80 interviews with refugee experts, journalists and campaigners in Australia (GetUp!), the UK (38 Degrees), Canada (LeadNow), Germany (Campact), Austria (#aufstehn), Ireland (Uplift), New Zealand (ActionStation), Poland (Akcja Demokracja), Sweden (Skiftet) and Switzerland (Operation Libero). Many of these organizations belong to the Online Progressive Engagement Network (OPEN) and share the same model of organizing, which they define as digitally facilitated, member-driven, rapid response, multi-issue and people-powered.[14] The author interviewed staff responsible for refugee campaigns in each organization, and often other senior campaign and management staff.[15]

The author also conducted participant observation at private summits of digital advocacy organizations held in January 2016 near Sydney; in May and August 2016 in Berlin; and in February 2017 near Vancouver. Only accredited members of the OPEN network were able to attend these summits. The May 2016 summit was specifically focused on refugee campaigns; the other three were general summits. The author also interviewed experts (such as journalists, members of NGOs and lawyers specializing in refugee law) in Austria, Australia, Germany, New Zealand and the UK, and visited as an observer the offices of 38 Degrees and GetUp!. This research generated a deep understanding of digital advocacy organizations beyond their digital output.

This study contributes a comparative perspective to a nascent scholarship on digital advocacy organizations. Thus far the literature has focused on single case-studies of MoveOn,[16] 38 Degrees[17] and GetUp!.[18] There is as yet no scholarship investigating the similarities and differences between the organizations, although there have been calls for this gap to be addressed.[19] In considering the work of these organizations, scholars should look at both online and offline activities as a whole, rather than claiming such groups engage merely in 'clicktivism'.[20] After all, digital advocacy organizations may mobilize people in protests, boycotts and direct action, all of which are forms of discursive and behavioural norm contestation.

It should be emphasized that this article does not investigate whether the advocacy efforts of these groups *caused* a particular policy change, as it is method-

[14] OPEN, http://www.the-open.net/; Nina Hall and Phil Ireland, 'Transforming activism: digital era advocacy organizations', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 6 July 2016, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/transforming_activism_digital_era_advocacy_organizations.

[15] Some of these organizations (e.g. GetUp!) have specialist refugee campaigning staff, while others (e.g. 38 Degrees) do not. Furthermore some (e.g. Uplift) are very small, with only a handful of staff who work across all campaigns.

[16] Karpf, *The MoveOn effect*.

[17] Andrew Chadwick and James Dennis, 'Social media, professional media and mobilisation in contemporary Britain: explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the citizens' movement 38 Degrees', *Political Studies* 65: 1, 2016, pp. 42–60.

[18] Vromen, *Digital citizenship*.

[19] See e.g. Vromen, *Digital citizenship*.

[20] Malcolm Gladwell, 'Small change: why the revolution will not be tweeted', *New Yorker*, 4 Oct. 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

ologically difficult to do so. All of these organizations were part of a broader movement of civil society initiatives, and it would be problematic to attribute policy change to their actions alone. Furthermore, decision-makers may also be influenced by broader global shifts and the actions of other states.

The article finds that digital advocacy organizations used both *discursive* contestation (debating the meaning and importance of norms) and *behavioural* contestation (influencing the implementation of norms). Their ability to engage in behavioural contestation is an intriguing finding, as non-state actors typically have low implementation access. It finds that digital advocacy groups are most likely to start with discursive contestation and then move to behavioural contestation, because it costs less to mobilize people online than to take direct action to influence the implementation of a government policy. Overall, this article argues that IR scholars should pay greater attention to the power of digital advocacy organizations in norm contestation, as they are now a permanent feature of world politics.

Norm contestation and digital advocacy organizations

Over the past decade, constructivist scholars have developed and challenged theories of norm diffusion and implementation. One influential theory suggested that norms evolve through a life cycle from norm emergence to cascading and finally becoming widely internalized and accepted.[21] Recent scholarship has challenged this linear account, and suggested that norms are contested at many—if not all—stages in this process. First, they may be contested at the outset, within networks of norm entrepreneurs, and thus certain issues may never even emerge as championed norms.[22] Second, norm entrepreneurs often face strong opposition from 'norm antipreneurs' who have more power when a norm is deeply entrenched, and thus benefit from 'inherent institutional advantages' as they are supporting the status quo.[23] Third, norms may be contested during implementation owing to divergent understandings of the norm by different actors.[24] Local actors may play a prominent role in translating norms, in the course of which they may resist or 'displace' norms within their local context.[25] Scholars have also suggested that norms are never settled, and that contestation is an ongoing process.[26] Underlying much of the current scholarship is the assumption that the dynamics of contestation matter at all stages of norm development.[27]

[21] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 887–917.

[22] Charli Carpenter, 'Studying issue (non)-adoption in transnational advocacy networks', *International Organization* 61: 3, 2007, pp. 643–67.

[23] Alan Bloomfield, 'Norm antipreneurs and theorising resistance to normative change', *Review of International Studies* 42: 2, 2016, pp. 310–33 at p. 326.

[24] Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard, eds, *Implementation and world politics: how international norms change practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[25] Amitav Acharya, 'How ideas spread: whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism', *International Organization* 58: 2, 2004, pp. 239–75.

[26] Mona Lena Krook and Jacqui True, 'Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: the United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality', *European Journal of International Relations* 18: 1, 2010, pp. 103–27.

[27] Clifford Bob, *The global right wing and the clash of world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

However, scholars have not yet resolved which actors have power, and of what sort, at the various stages of norm contestation. To investigate this further I adopt the distinction between discursive and behavioural contestation. As noted briefly above, discursive contestation occurs when political actors engage in debates about different understandings of the meaning and/or (relative) importance of a norm.[28] In this case contestation involves discourse, and actors intentionally and consciously contest a norm. In contrast, behavioural contestation occurs during norm implementation. Implementation covers a wide range of actions, from 'the steps necessary to introduce the new international norm's precepts into formal legal and policy mechanisms' through to subsequent use of these legal and policy frameworks.[29] Actors engaging in norm contestation do not question the validity or meaning of a contested norm on a discursive level but challenge how actors are implementing the norm. Thus a policy change may be enacted, and then 'unmade' through dissuasion, intimidation, tarring or blocking.[30]

A wide range of actors may be involved in either discursive or behavioural norm contestation. Scholars have typically focused on norm entrepreneurs, NGOs and transnational advocacy networks as progressive drivers of change.[31] They have examined the strategies these actors employ to influence states, which in turn become champions of norm change on the international stage.[32] More recent scholarship has explored the role of international advocacy networks in resisting change.[33] Here norm contestation may take place through dissuasion, and/or reducing the priority to address certain norm changes.

Digital advocacy organizations represent a challenge for conventional IR theories of advocacy. In contrast with the sustained commitment of norm entrepreneurs, digital advocacy organizations switch campaigns rapidly and will drop campaigns that are not successful.[34] In fact, scholars of political communication have emphasized that digital advocacy organizations undergo an extraordinary amount of bureaucratic 'shape shifting', campaigning as they do across multiple issues without being committed to a single issue area.[35] Moreover, they typically do not claim subject expertise, unlike traditional NGOs and norm entrepreneurs (for example, Greenpeace and the environment; Amnesty International and human rights; Save the Children and children). Rather, digital advocacy organizations select campaigns based on 'crisitunities', framing a crisis as an opportunity.[36] They wait for a 'tipping point' moment, when there is already significant public attention on an issue, and then mobilize people rapidly to put pressure on decision-makers, either pushing for a norm to be implemented or resisting a government decision.

[28] Stimmer and Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent'.
[29] Betts and Orchard, *Implementation and world politics*, p. 3.
[30] Bob, *The global right wing*, p. 194. Tarring means saying negative, and potentially false, things about someone to influence others' opinion of them.
[31] Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics'; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders*.
[32] R. Price, 'Transnational civil society and advocacy in world politics', *World Politics* 55: 4, 2003, pp. 579–606.
[33] Bob, *The global right wing*, p. 53.
[34] Karpf, *The MoveOn effect*.
[35] Chadwick and Dennis, 'Social media', p. 44.
[36] See Ben Brandzel, *From moment to movement and beyond: a guide to email writing for action*, http://www.slideshare.net/bnwklr/from-moment-to-movement-and-beyond-1256515.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

Many digital advocacy organizations share a common campaigning model of rapid response advocacy. They can establish and launch a new campaign website, contact members, and send out an online petition within hours of a news story breaking.[37] They are often relatively small organizations, with little bureaucracy and no cumbersome sign-off processes. This extremely fast-paced advocacy relies on their use of digital platforms: it is much faster to send out a million emails than to post a million letters, or call a million members by phone.[38] Their power comes from their ability to mobilize thousands of people to take action—online or offline—at crisis moments. They claim to reflect the will of citizens, which they use to lobby democratically elected politicians.[39]

Importantly, the digital advocacy organizations examined here are all progressive, independent, member-funded and member-driven. Members are individuals who receive emails from the organization, and do not necessarily pay dues, and thus have weaker links than they would to a union or political party. Digital advocacy organizations listen closely to their members using digital technologies: they test campaigns and messages, poll members, and select campaigns which have sufficient member support.[40] Rather than committing to an issue on a sustained basis, these digital advocacy organizations take up and drop campaigns depending on members' interests.

These organizations pose a puzzle as they do not fit neatly into the existing categories of norm entrepreneurs or norm antipreneurs.[41] Unlike norm entrepreneurs, they do not develop and put new norms on the political agenda and their campaigns are often reactive. Like norm antipreneurs, they may occasionally 'defend the entrenched normative status quo against challengers';[42] however, they will also drop campaigns rapidly once the critical juncture has passed. We know little about how these organizations engage in norm contestation, and whether or why they resort to discursive or behavioural contestation. These are important matters to study, given these groups' distinctive model of rapid-response, people-powered, digitally based advocacy.

This article challenges the hypothesis set out in the introduction to this special issue, which suggests that implementation access is crucial for behavioural contestation. Stimmer and Wisken argue that some actors, such as states, have more of the 'positional, material and social assets' required for implementing a particular norm.[43] The greater an actor's role in the implementation of norms, the more likely they are to resort to behavioural contestation. Thus we would expect behavioural contestation to be practised by states, and not by actors such as (digital)

[37] Hall, 'Innovations in activism'.
[38] Karpf, *The MoveOn effect*.
[39] Civil society groups have used internet platforms to campaign in authoritarian contexts (e.g. in the Arab Spring). However, there are no digital advocacy organizations of which the author is aware that are following this model and operating in authoritarian contexts.
[40] Karpf, *Analytic activism*.
[41] Bloomfield, 'Norm antipreneurs'.
[42] Bloomfield, 'Norm antipreneurs', p. 321.
[43] Material assets may include financial or military resources to operationalize a norm. Social assets are non-material assets such as expertise. Positional assets refer to institutional power, and the ability of holders to decide over norm implementation. See Stimmer and Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

NGOs which have lower implementation access. Yet this conception of implementation access overlooks an important resource—the ability to rapidly mobilize people—which digital advocacy organizations do possess. This article suggests that 'people power' can lead to both discursive and behavioural norm contestation. Digital advocacy organizations can mobilize citizens to express discursive support for, or resistance to, a norm online or offline. They can also mobilize citizens to directly sabotage and/or enhance implementation of a particular norm.

Furthermore, this article suggests that IR scholars should examine the *costs* and *sequencing* of discursive and behavioural contestation. After all, the costs of discursive and behavioural contestation differ. It takes less time and costs less (in financial and human resources) to make a rhetorical statement than to intervene in norm implementation. Thanks to the internet, digital advocacy organizations can easily issue a statement, email or post on social media to challenge one or more states' position on a particular norm.[44] However, it requires significant time, costs, commitment and resources for a group to organize a blockade or direct action to sabotage norm implementation. There is also a difference in cost for the public: it takes less than 30 seconds to sign an online petition, but hours to occupy a coal mine, or block a deportation. Many digital advocacy organizations start out by asking their members only for support that is quick and easy to give, and then, once this has been done, try to engage them in time-intensive and/or risky actions (the so-called 'ladder of engagement'). Owing to differences in cost for both the organization and its members, digital advocacy groups are most likely to begin with discursive contestation and then move to behavioural contestation.

Digital advocacy organizations shift to behavioural contestation because it sends a stronger signal to decision-makers than discursive contestation, and thus is more likely to be effective. Often, digital discursive actions (online petitions, Twitter storms, Facebook posts) are seen as 'cheap talk', whereas direct action is disruptive.[45] Swedish student Elin Ersson, for instance, refused to take her seat on a departing plane, to stop the deportation of a man back to Afghanistan.[46] Behavioural contestation also has a stronger impact on decision-makers precisely because members demonstrate their greater commitment to the cause. Ten thousand emails sent to a member of parliament are not as powerful as ten thousand people blockading the Houses of Parliament, particularly if participants are willing to get arrested. Thus we would expect to see a sequence of discursive contestation followed by behavioural contestation, owing to the higher costs of the latter.

Importantly, all advocacy organizations make choices in their campaigning between online and offline tactics, radical and moderate approaches, insider and outsider strategies, and discursive and behavioural norm contestation. There is no clear separation today between online and offline activism: well-established NGOs such as Greenpeace and Oxfam use online actions (Twitter feeds, Facebook posts) to complement offline action, and many digital advocacy organizations

[44] Clay Shirky, *Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

[45] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and tear gas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[46] David Crouch, 'Swedish student's plane protest stops Afghan man's deportation "to hell"', *Guardian*, 26 July 2018.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

operate offline as well as online. When Ersson, the Swedish student mentioned above, filmed herself blocking a deportation, the film was watched over 2 million times online, and the digital advocacy organization Avaaz started an online campaign to support her, magnifying the impact of her initial action.[47] Nor is there any inherent connection between discursive contestation and online action, or between behavioural contestation and offline action. As table 1 demonstrates, both forms of contestation can occur online and offline.

Table 1: Examples of norm contestation offline and online

Type of contestation	*Online*	*Offline*
Discursive contestation	Statements	Petitions
	Online petitions	Statements
	Twitter posts	Protests
	Facebook posts	Vigils
	Emails to MPs	Letters to MPs
Behavioural contestation	Hacking	Blockades
		Direct action

Some NGOs tend more towards behavioural contestation: Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd frequently use direct action to halt action by states and private actors.[48] These organizations have the in-house capacity and the will to engage in risky actions in their quest to save the environment.[49] They scale oil rigs, blockade coal mines and interrupt Japan's whaling activities. In the online realm, Anonymous is well known for 'hacktivism', a form of behavioural contestation. Members of Anonymous have attacked the website of the New York Stock Exchange, targeted websites hosting child pornography, and disabled Koch Industries' website for a short period of time.[50]

Other advocacy organizations may see such actions as too risky, and instead opt for discursive contestation. Transparency International, for example, regularly monitors and reports on corruption, and has successfully raised the profile of corruption through its global corruption perceptions index.[51] However Transparency International does not typically intervene directly to stop states engaging in corrupt activities. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (HRW) monitors human

[47] Avaaz, 'Stop the deportations to hell!', https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/end_swedish_deportations_11/.

[48] Lars H. Gulbrandsen and Steinar Andresen, 'NGO influence in the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol: compliance, flexibility mechanisms, and sinks', *Global Environmental Politics* 4: 4, 2004, pp. 54–75; Richard Price, 'Transnational civil society and advocacy in world politics', *World Politics* 55: 4, 2003, pp. 579–606.

[49] Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Teale N. Phelps Bondaroff, 'From advocacy to confrontation: direct enforcement by environmental NGOs', *International Studies Quarterly* 58: 2, 2014, pp. 348–61.

[50] Whistleblowers, Activists and Citizens Alliance (WACA), 'Anonymous', https://www.waca.net.au/anonymous.

[51] Transparency International, *Corruption perceptions index: overview*, https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

rights abuses around the world, and names and shames the abusers. HRW does not typically intervene directly to stop a human rights abuser in action.

Some advocacy organizations use both discursive and behavioural norm contestation. NGOs that are funded by the state (such as Oxfam and Transparency International) are less likely to engage in behavioural contestation as they would be biting the hand that fed them. NGOs that are funded by members or other independent sources (such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd) are more likely to engage in behavioural contestation. It is thus imperative to take into account who funds discursive or behavioural contestation.

Digital advocacy organizations and refugee rights

In late August and early September 2015 there was a global 'crisitunity' precipitated by two events. On 24 August Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she would open the German borders and disregard the EU's 'Dublin' asylum system, established in 1990, whereby refugees are required to register at their first country of arrival. Notably, the message was first communicated by a tweet.[52] Then on 2 September a Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, drowned while attempting to cross from Turkey to Greece with his family. A startling photo of his body, washed up on the Turkish shore, featured on newspaper front pages and social media forums around the world. Public opinion shifted dramatically: people were appalled by the loss of young life, and even anti-immigration tabloids featured sympathetic coverage of the event. A number of campaigners and experts highlighted this 'Aylan Kurdi moment' as a tipping point.[53] Governments in Europe and beyond faced a hard question: how many refugees were they willing to take?

Within this context, digital advocacy organizations across the world took action on refugees' and migrants' rights.[54] MoveOn (in the United States) and LeadNow (in Canada) initiated online petitions through which people pledged to welcome refugees.[55] In Poland, Akcja Demokracja asked members to set a place for refugees at their Christmas dinner, drawing on a Polish tradition of leaving an empty seat at the Christmas table for a stranger. In Sweden, Skiftet organized a demonstration of solidarity with asylum-seekers. In New Zealand, ActionStation hosted an online petition, which received more than 16,000 signatures, calling on the government to double its refugee quota.[56] The conservative New Zealand government announced in September 2015 that it would not double the quota, but would take in an additional 600 Syrian refugees.[57] There are many other examples

[52] Augustin J. Menéndez, 'The refugee crisis: between human tragedy and symptom of the structural crisis of European integration', *European Law Journal* 22: 4, 2016, pp. 388–416.

[53] Author's interviews with NGOs and digital advocacy groups, July–Sept. 2016.

[54] I have also examined digital advocacy campaigns for refugee rights in Germany and Austria. See Hall, 'Innovations in activism'.

[55] These were launched through 'distributed petition' platforms which enable anyone to start their own petition. See MoveOn (US), http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/syrian-refugee-resettlement-1, and LeadNow (Canada), https://you.leadnow.ca/petitions/provide-homes-for-the-homeless-both-syrian-refugees-and-canadians.

[56] OPEN Refugee Summit, Berlin, 6 May 2016; Murdoch Stephens, *Doing our bit* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2018).

[57] More recently, Zazim in Israel mobilized over 100 pilots and air crew to declare they would refuse to deport

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

of refugee advocacy. Below, I focus on the campaigns of digital advocacy organizations in the UK, Ireland and Australia. These cases were selected because all three share the same form of advocacy organization and are western democracies which are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, they differ in their proximity to refugee flows and in their domestic political contexts. Through examination of the same type of organization at the same external crisis moment, these cases can help in developing new theories about the norm contestation strategies of digital advocacy organizations.

The UK: 38 Degrees

After Chancellor Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders, then British Prime Minister David Cameron was adamant that the UK would not accept any more refugees. On the morning of 3 September, immediately after the Aylan Kurdi story broke, the UK-based organization 38 Degrees called a special meeting and launched a rapid campaign to put pressure on Cameron to accept more refugees.[58] They did so at a moment of 'crisitunity'. All the major British newspapers covered the incident; the tabloid *Daily Mail* ran an unusually sympathetic story headlined 'The final journey of tragic little boys washed up on a Turkish beach: Mother and sons who died in sea tragedy are taken from morgue after heartbroken father says goodbye to the family he couldn't save'. Cameron acknowledged the Kurdi story, stating that he was 'deeply moved', but gave no indication of any change in policy to accept more refugees.[59]

38 Degrees asked people to start their own local petitions under the slogan 'Refugees Welcome' and demand that their local councils accept more refugees. Local campaigns were launched, from the Scottish highlands to Norwich and Oxford, that together gathered over 137,000 signatures. Although there were slight variations in the statements used by the various local campaigns, they all demanded that the UK should take more refugees from Syria. Almost all of the petitions directly challenged the government's refugee policy, and stated: 'We don't want Britain to be the kind of country that turns its back as people drown in their desperation to flee places like Syria.'[60] In this way, 38 Degrees was challenging UK norms of refugee burden-sharing discursively, stipulating that the UK government should take in more refugees. They turned first to discursive contestation, challenging government policy online as it was a fast and efficient way to mobilize members.

Over 633 local petitions were launched under the 38 Degrees 'Refugees Welcome' initiative. They resulted in more than 78,000 emails sent to MPs, thousands of

refugees. Following a broad-based campaign, the Supreme Court of Israel stopped the government's deportation activities. See 'High Court temporarily halts deportation of African migrants', *Times of Israel*, 15 March 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/high-court-temporarily-halts-deportation-of-african-migrants/.

[58] Author's interviews with 38 Degrees staff members, 6 May and 4 Aug. 2016.

[59] Matt Dathan, 'Cameron finally breaks silence on refugee crisis—but he still won't take more', *Independent*, 3 Sept. 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/aylan-kurdi-david-cameron-says-he-felt-deeply-moved-by-images-of-dead-syrian-boy-but-gives-no-10484641.html

[60] 38 Degrees, Refugees Welcome petition, https://you.38degrees.org.uk/efforts/refugees-welcome.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

phone calls, and the formation of local refugee welcome action groups.[61] Then on 7 September, David Cameron announced that the UK would accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next four to five years.[62] This was a dramatic shift in his position. This shift cannot be solely attributed to 38 Degrees as the organization was part of a broader domestic movement which discursively contested the UK government's refugee policy, and in particular the number of refugees the UK should take.[63] 38 Degrees' distinctive contribution was to rapidly launch a large number of campaigns distributed nationwide, which mobilized thousands to put pressure on their local councils.

Interestingly, the work of 38 Degrees went beyond online petitions, emails and telephone calls. The organization's members subsequently engaged in behavioural contestation through offline actions, seeing a need for greater assistance for refugees than the government was providing. Through crowdfunding, they raised more than £300,000 for refugee causes, including refugee assistance packs for new arrivals in the UK, and to support the creation of the National Refugee Welcome Board, a new national, independent coordination entity. 38 Degrees also played a critical role in bringing together UK NGOs and civil society organizations to provide practical support for councils and communities in resettling refugees. 38 Degrees helped to convene the first meeting of the National Refugee Welcome Board on 10 December 2015, which brought together over 40 major civil society organizations including Islamic Relief and the Salvation Army.[64] The aim of the Board was to collectively mobilize resources and support the government directly in resettling the pledged 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. 38 Degrees also worked with partners to finance lawyers and send them to Calais to file cases on behalf of refugee children to bring them safely to the UK. This was a form of behavioural contestation, as in doing so 38 Degrees was challenging the government's implementation (or lack thereof) of a policy to bring child refugees to the UK.[65]

In summary, 38 Degrees engaged in discursive and subsequently behavioural contestation. The group launched online petitions (discursive), but also supported the new National Refugee Welcome Board and mounted legal cases to bring refugees to the UK (behavioural). Through these actions it was contesting the UK government's policy on how many refugees the UK should take, although other norms also came into play, such as children's rights.[66] They shifted from discursive to behavioural contestation as their members were willing to go beyond

[61] OPEN email, 'Our common humanity: lessons from OPEN's Refugee Summit', 3 June 2016.

[62] Matthew Weaver, 'Refugee crisis: UK will resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years—as it happened', *Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2015/sep/07/refugee-crisis-pushes-un-agencies-towards-bankcruptcy-live-updates.

[63] Cynthia Cockburn, *Looking to London: stories of war, escape and asylum* (London: Pluto, 2017), pp. 206–207.

[64] 38 Degrees, https://home.38degrees.org.uk/2015/09/16/refugees-thank-you/.

[65] There could also be a discursive element of this norm contestation, as if lawyers were justifying their cases in court by challenging the government's understanding of a norm. The final decision of the court may also discursively challenge government norms. My thanks to Anette Stimmer for pointing this out.

[66] Note that while these organizations did not necessarily refer to the norm of 'burden-sharing' or the UN Refugee Convention, their rhetoric and actions implied a concern over what the UK's responsibilities to refugees were.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

just signing an online petition and to invest more time and funding in assisting refugees, particularly at the height of the refugee 'crisis' in late 2015.

However, 38 Degrees did not sustain its pressure on the government's refugee policy. Several 38 Degrees staff members explained that refugee campaigns were a low priority for many members, and did not regularly make the list of top ten issues in weekly member surveys.[67] Members tended to favour other issues such as protecting the National Health Service and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Refugee campaigns which were sent to their full list of members—such as a campaign to protect the children of Calais in October 2016—were often not well received.[68] Furthermore, 38 Degrees did not closely monitor whether Cameron's December pledge to welcome more refugees was implemented.[69] Owing to the lack of member support for this issue, then, 38 Degrees did not sustain its behavioural and discursive norm contestation for refugee rights.

Ireland: Uplift

Ireland was insulated from the large increase in refugees entering Europe in 2015, largely because of its location and its opt-out from the European resettlement plan. In late August that year the director of Uplift, Siobhán O' Donoghue, started to receive messages from members stating that they wanted the government to do more, with many saying that they would be happy to offer a room to a refugee.[70] Motivated by these members' concerns, O' Donoghue decided to launch an online petition in solidarity with refugees just a day before the Aylan Kurdi story was released. The petition, headed 'Refugee crisis: stand in solidarity', was directed at Ireland's Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny. It stated: 'The biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War is taking place right now. We are calling on you to commit to allowing thousands not hundreds of refugees to seek refuge in Ireland.'[71] The petition was signed by 38,500 people across Ireland—a remarkable number for a small organization, with just one full-time employee and a volunteer, in a total population of just 4.5 million.[72] In this petition, like that launched by 38 Degrees, members were discursively contesting the Irish government's commitment to the norm of international burden-sharing, demanding that Ireland take a larger proportion of refugees.

After the Kurdi story broke, Uplift created an additional petition to 'Pledge a Bed' to a refugee. This pledge was widely covered by the media and 14,000 beds were pledged. In early September many requests were made to the Irish

[67] Author's interview with former 38 Degrees staff member, Berlin, 4 Aug. 2016.
[68] Author's interview with 38 Degrees staff member, London, 27 Oct. 2016.
[69] By the end of June 2016 the total number of Syrian refugees resettled was 2,659, or 13% of the overall target of 20,000 by 2020. For further details see https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Syrian-Vulnerable-Persons-Resettlement-programme-Summary.pdf.
[70] Author's interview with Siobhan O' Donoghue, Uplift, 1 July 2016.
[71] Claire Healy, 'Refugee crisis: how YOU can plead with the Irish government to do more to help—sign this petition now', *Irish Mirror*, 3 Sept. 2015, https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/politics/refugee-crisis-how-you-can-6374362.
[72] Healy, 'Refugee crisis'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

government to respond to Irish people's pledges to house refugees by increasing the refugee quota.[73] Uplift, working with other refugee advocacy groups, also organized vigils around Ireland in solidarity with refugees. As O' Donoghue explained in an interview, 'one member encouraged me to create a physical space, as it was important to give people a space to connect with others'.[74] They held vigils all around the country, from small towns in West Clare to Dublin, where over 1,000 people came and encircled the river Liffey holding hands. Other refugee organizations held vigils to increase the pressure on the government. Then on 10 September 2015, the Taoiseach Enda Kenny announced he would extend protection to 4,000 refugees by the end of 2017 under the EU resettlement and relocation programme (they were previously committed to 600).[75] Uplift's campaign was an important part of the civil society movement which directly, and discursively, contested Ireland's refugee intake.

Interestingly, the government decided to enlist the public's pledges of support to host refugees, many of which were made through Uplift. Thus norm contestation shifted towards norm convergence between Uplift and the Irish government. The Red Cross was officially appointed to manage the pledges on the government's behalf, and followed up with all pledgers to check if they were still willing to host a refugee and for how long, and even sent staff to check their housing conditions.[76] This is an unusual example of a government using an online petition with the intention of delivering on its promises. Uplift may have influenced the implementation of Irish refugee policy, as its 'Pledge a Bed' campaign could have translated into actual beds for refugees.

However, Ireland has been slow to accept new refugees. As of July 2016 the Irish government had accepted 273 refugees and many Irish pledgers are still waiting to host.[77] One Irish Red Cross staff member claimed the government's resettlement plan had been slowed down by delays in refugee processing in Greece and Italy. As early as December 2015, a coalition of refugee and migration advocates were criticizing the Irish government for 'not living up to the commitments made after considerable pressure from the Irish public to respond proactively to this situation'.[78] Uplift's engagement took the form of discursive contestation (online protest and vigils) and did not escalate to behavioural contestation. This is partly

[73] Sarah Brady, 'Irish "pledge a bed" for refugees campaign is overwhelmed with offers', *Irish Independent*, 3 Sept. 2016, http://www.independent.ie/irishnews/irish-pledge-a-bed-for-refugees-campaign-is-overwhelmed-with-offers-31500342.html.

[74] Author's interview with Siobhan O' Donoghue, 1 July 2016.

[75] Irish Department of Justice and Equality, 'Ireland to accept up to 4,000 persons under Relocation and Resettlement programmes—Fitzgerald', press release, 10 Sept. 2016, http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR15000463; Irish Refugee Protection Programme, 10 Sept. 2016, http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Irish_Refugee_Protection_Programme_(IRPP).

[76] Author's interview with Red Cross Ireland staff member, 19 July 2016.

[77] Ireland has taken 273 pre-screened refugees voluntarily from camps in Jordan and Lebanon. See European Commission, Representation in Ireland, *More reforms to Europe's asylum system*, https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/news/tuilleadh-leasuithe-ar-ch%C3%B3ras-tearmainn-na-heorpa_en. One interviewee explained that the government's resettlement plan is slowed down by the delays in refugee processing in Greece and Italy: author's interview with Red Cross Ireland staff member, 19 July 2016.

[78] Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition, *Protection, resettlement and integration: Ireland's response to the refugee and migration 'crisis'* (Dublin, 2015).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

because members were not willing to invest the time and resources necessary to support mass refugee campaigns in 2017.[79]

Australia: GetUp!

Australia, despite its distance from Europe, was also affected by the Aylan Kurdi moment. Immediately after Kurdi's death, over 20 refugee advocacy organizations including GetUp! established the 'Light the Dark' campaign to 'send a message to the world that Australians Say Welcome' [to refugees].[80] A call went out to rally under the hashtags #refugeeswelcome and #LightTheDark to lobby the government to accept more Syrian refugees. These challenges were targeted at the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who had responded to the Kurdi image by stating that countries needed to adopt tough policies to stop asylum-seekers arriving by boat, and that Australia would not increase its overall refugee quota.[81] On Monday 7 September vigils were held in Australia's major cities—Adelaide, Perth, Sydney, Hobart, Darwin, Canberra and Brisbane—as well as many other locations, and thousands of people across Australia attended. GetUp! used social media to amplify this message, and claimed that 10,000 people in Sydney and 15,000 people in Melbourne gathered in protest at the government's policies.[82] GetUp!, like 38 Degrees and Uplift, initially engaged in discursive contestation, both online and offline. On 9 September, under pressure from the public and politicians at state and national level, Abbott declared that Australia would welcome an extra 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees.[83]

This was a significant shift in the space of a week. As Daniel Webb, Director of Legal Advocacy at the Australian-based Human Rights Centre, explained to the author: Abbott 'was left with little choice, such was the public outcry. In just about every other moment, there's been more political capital in cruelty than compassion … but in that moment the political dynamic changed.'[84] However, it is difficult to attribute Abbott's decision solely to GetUp! or the 'Light the Dark' campaign. As Ben Doherty, a *Guardian Australia* journalist, explained: 'I don't think that the Abbott government listens particularly to those campaigns … The government saw a huge global need, a growing global expectation that Australia would do something given how big the need was. I don't know that

[79] Author's interview with Siobhan O' Donoghue, 1 July 2016.

[80] GetUp!, *Light the Dark campaign*, https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/light-the-dark-for-aylan/light-the-dark-australia-welcomes-refugees.

[81] Matthew Knott, 'Drowned Syrian toddler: Tony Abbott says "tragic" picture a reminder of need to stop boats', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Sept. 2015, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/drowned-syrian-toddler-tony-abbott-says-tragic-picture-a-reminder-of-need-to-stop-boats-20150904-gjevx5.html; Stephanie Peatling and Gareth Hutchens, 'Australia ready to take more refugees from Syria, Tony Abbott says', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 Sept. 2015, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-ready-to-take-more-refugees-from-syria-tony-abbott-says-20150906-gjg6ud.html.

[82] GetUp!, https://twitter.com/GetUp/status/640803857761628160.

[83] Latika Bourke, 'Abbott government agrees to resettle 12,000 Syrian refugees in Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 Sept. 2015, http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/abbott-government-agrees-to-resettle-12000-syrian-refugees-in-australia-20150909-gjibqz.html.

[84] Author's telephone interview with Daniel Webb, 15 July 2016.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

he was particularly moved by Light the Dark.'[85] It is difficult to attribute policy change to GetUp!'s work, as other factors—including the UK's decision—may have influenced the Abbott government's policy shift.

Subsequently, in February 2016, GetUp! ran a strong and sustained campaign for refugee rights.[86] In coalition with other Australian refugee advocacy organizations, it launched the 'Let them Stay' campaign to ensure 267 asylum-seekers, including 33 babies, would be allowed to stay in Australia, where they had come for medical care, and not be returned to offshore detention centres.[87] The detention centres are part of Operation Sovereign Borders, a bipartisan Australian policy to stop asylum-seekers reaching mainland Australia, by strictly patrolling the northern sea border with Indonesia, forcing boats to turn back and putting asylum-seekers in offshore detention camps on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. Human rights experts, psychologists and doctors have all documented the horrific conditions in the detention centres, where many asylum-seekers have been abused and/or have committed self-harm, including self-immolation and suicide.[88]

GetUp! and its partners, the Human Rights Law Centre, the National Council of Churches Australia and the Darwin Asylum Seeker Support and Advocacy Network, made front-page news in the major Australian newspapers, with photos of the 33 babies who were at risk of being forced back into detention.[89] Their online petition urged Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton not to 'send the 267 vulnerable men, women, and children currently in Australia back to Nauru or Manus Island. They will face a future of indefinite detention on tiny islands with no prospect of a decent life. They will be at serious risk of physical and sexual assault.'[90] The petition is an example of discursive contestation of Australia's approach towards its refugee obligations. In particular, GetUp! and its supporters emphasized that these asylum-seekers had a legal right to seek asylum in Australia, and should not be kept in offshore detention centres, where they lived in limbo in terrible conditions.

GetUp! tried to win over the broader public by highlighting how similar asylum-seekers were to Australians: they featured stories of the refugees' jobs,

[85] Author's telephone interview with Ben Doherty, immigration and refugee journalist, *Guardian Australia*, 26 July 2016.

[86] This case is distinct from the 'crisis' driven by an increasing number of asylum-seekers drowning in the Mediterranean. I have included it to demonstrate how digital advocacy organizations may sustain contestation of government refugee policies.

[87] The case to keep the 267 asylum-seekers on the Australian mainland originally centred on the legality of the offshore detention centres, and when this was called into question the government passed legislation retroactively to avoid prosecution. Author's telephone interview with Daniel Webb, 15 July 2016.

[88] The Nauru files, released by the *Guardian*, document some of these abuses. Paul Farrell, Nick Evershed and Helen Davidson, 'The Nauru files: cache of 2,000 leaked reports reveal scale of abuse of children in Australian offshort detention', *Guardian,* 10 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-2000-leaked-reports-reveal-scale-of-abuse-of-children-in-australian-offshore-detention. The campaign resulted from a court case run for the asylum-seekers by Daniel Webb at the Human Rights Law Centre against the Australian government. When the case looked as if it might fail, Webb approached GetUp! as 'they're a formidable campaign machine'. Author's telephone interview with Daniel Webb, 15 July 2016.

[89] They did this with the informed consent of all the families. Author's interview with Natasha Blucher, Advocacy Coordinator at Darwin Asylum Seeker Support and Advocacy Network, 20 July 2016.

[90] GetUp!, 'Let them stay', https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/refugee-x/let-them-stay.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

music tastes and hobbies. The core campaign group worked closely with the broader refugee sector, lobbied politicians, and formed a broad-based movement of churches, medical practitioners and teachers who called for the government to '#LetThemStay'. Over several weeks the campaign was front-page news, with members of parliament, state premiers, and many members of civil society coming out in support. Thousands attended protests in the streets; many made their own banners bearing the slogan '#LetThemStay' and hung them from prominent places including Sydney Harbour Bridge. These protests were a form of discursive contestation, a public challenge to the government's practice of preventing refugees who arrived by sea from seeking asylum in Australia.

The campaign culminated in a dramatic stand-off between guards and doctors at the Lady Cilento Hospital in Brisbane over a one-year-old child among the asylum-seekers. Baby Asha had been transferred, along with her family, from Nauru to the hospital for medical care. On 20 February, doctors at the hospital refused to discharge her after she had finished her treatment because they were concerned the Australian government would deport her back to Nauru. The doctors were supported by an estimated 300 protesters who rallied and held vigils outside the hospital. The doctors, supported by the protesters, stopped the government from taking Baby Asha into custody and she was instead released into the community.[91] This is a remarkable example of behavioural contestation, in which doctors, supported by GetUp! protesters, faced down the government's refusal to change its policy and blocked the government's deportation of an asylum-seeker. GetUp! was able to engage in this higher-cost behavioural contestation as it had public support for riskier, time-intensive actions which it believed would be more effective than discursive contestation alone.

The government eventually reversed its decision and allowed all 267 of the asylum-seekers to stay in Australia in the community. However, this was only a partial victory: the government reserved the right to deport the asylum-seekers at 72 hours' notice, and on 26 July deported a Sudanese man to Christmas Island.[92] Furthermore, the detention camps on Manus and Nauru continue to operate, and the Australian government continues to block access to the Australian mainland for asylum-seekers arriving by sea. GetUp!, for its part, has continued to actively contest Australian refugee policy.

Findings: discursive and behavioural contestation

Digital advocacy organizations have used both online and offline tactics, including email petitions, Twitter campaigns, demonstrations, vigils and blockades. In Ireland, the UK and Australia, they challenged governments to accept more

[91] Jorge Branco, 'Baby Asha to stay at Lady Cilento Children's Hospital "overnight at least"', *Brisbane Times*, 20 Feb. 2016, http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/concerns-baby-asha-soon-to-be-taken-from-lady-cilento-childrens-hospital-20160220-gmza4e.html.

[92] Ben Doherty, 'Asylum seeker flown out of Melbourne after standoff between police and protesters', *Guardian*, 26 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/jul/26/asylum-seeker-flown-out-of-melbourne-after-stand-off-between-police-and-protesters.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

Table 2: Case-studies of digital advocacy and norm contestation for refugee rights

Country	Advocacy organization	Aim of campaign	Discursive contestation	Behavioural contestation	Behavioural norm support	Outcome[a]
UK	38 Degrees	Petition government to accept more refugees	✓			7 Sept. 2015: PM David Cameron announces UK will accept 20,000 Syrian refugees
UK	38 Degrees	Support refugees who arrive in the UK through National Refugee Welcome Board		✓		
UK	38 Degrees	Legally challenge the UK government to accept more child refugees from Calais		✓		
Ireland	Uplift	Refugees Welcome and 'Pledge a Bed' petitions	✓		✓	10 Sept. 2015: PM Enda Kenny announces plan to accept 4,000 refugees by end of 2017
Australia	GetUp! and other refugee organizations	'Light the Dark' vigils targeted government to host more refugees in Australia	✓			9 Sept. 2015: PM Tony Abbott declared an extra 12,000 Syrians and Iraqis would be welcomed
	GetUp!	#LetThemStay campaign to stop asylum-seekers being deported from Australia	✓	✓		Stopped deportation of 267 asylum seekers

[a] It should be emphasized that outcomes are not attributed to the campaigns described.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

refugees through online petitions and mobilizing people on the streets (discursive contestation). Two organizations also engaged in behavioural norm contestation, with the aim of influencing the implementation of a particular policy. Table 2 illustrates this finding, showing that GetUp! and 38 Degrees took part in discursive and behavioural norm contestation.

All these organizations engaged initially in discursive contestation, because it was easier and less costly to do so. Furthermore, their mode of digital advocacy (through online petitions, emails and social media) is better suited to challenging norms through discourse than through implementation. It takes less commitment and resources to sign an online petition than it does to blockade a hospital and/or stop the deportation of refugees. Notably, these organizations also organized offline discursive contestation (vigils, demonstrations) which required higher levels of commitment, resources and time. Digital activists regularly repeated their desire to move members up the 'ladder of engagement' from easy, online actions to high-risk actions that required more commitment and were seen to be more effective.[93]

Several organizations also engaged in behavioural contestation. In the UK, 38 Degrees organized initial meetings of the Refugee Welcome Board and hired lawyers for children in Calais. In Australia, GetUp! initiated an online petition, and subsequently doctors blockaded Lady Cilento Hospital, opting for behavioural contestation when discursive contestation was not sufficiently effective. In Ireland, digital advocacy organizations tried to help implement government policy directly, rather than contest it. Uplift encouraged people to pledge to host refugees online, and subsequently the government and the Irish Red Cross adopted and sought to use the offers of assistance. Notably in all the cases of behavioural contestation, digital advocacy organizations were making their intentions clear, not operating 'under the radar'.[94]

These examples of behavioural and discursive contestation were generally brief, rapid-response initiatives. This is because digital advocacy organizations rely on member support both for the cause and for the tactic employed (behavioural or discursive contestation). They all campaign across multiple issues simultaneously and seek immediate victories. These organizations target their members and the wider public when an issue that is already contested reaches a 'crisitunity', and try to build broad-based support for a change. They will start and stop campaigns according to their members' commitment to an issue: 38 Degrees, for instance, was quick to start its refugee campaigns in early September 2016, and also quick to drop them. These groups are not staffed, or resourced, to promote and implement long-term solutions, unlike NGOs such as Transparency International or Human Rights Watch, which are funded to run sustained agenda-setting campaigns on a particular issue. Uplift, for instance, could not administer the 'Pledge a Bed' petition, so the Irish government handed it over to the Red Cross.

[93] OPEN start-up summit, Berlin, Aug. 2016.

[94] This contradicts what Stimmer and Wisken would predict. See Stimmer and Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent'.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

38 Degrees had no in-house refugee experts to support the regular activities of the National Refugee Welcome Board but raised funds to get it started. The exception among the case-studies discussed here is GetUp!, which does have staff dedicated to campaigning on refugee rights: this explains why it was able to sustain the relatively successful #LetThemStay campaign. Digital advocacy organizations engage first in discursive contestation to test out member and public interest, and then, if there is sufficient support, they may consider moving to behavioural contestation.

Conclusion

Digital advocacy organizations engage in discursive and behavioural norm contestation. They tend to start with the less costly discursive option, and then may shift to the more costly, but often more effective behavioural option, as we saw with GetUp! in Australia and 38 Degrees in the UK. Digital advocacy organizations challenge our understanding of what it takes to engage in behavioural norm contestation as they do not have implementation access. Their primary resource is the ability to mobilize people rapidly through digital platforms at tipping-point moments. They operate on a democratic assumption that governments should be accountable and responsive to citizens' preferences, and thus that mobilized citizens can influence government policy.

Advocacy organizations weigh up the relative cost of discursive and behavioural norm contestation. Behavioural contestation is generally more expensive, time-intensive and riskier than discursive contestation for these organizations. Behavioural contestation is also higher-cost for individual supporters: signing a petition is easier than blockading a hospital. Advocacy organizations will factor in the willingness of the public to engage in the higher levels of commitment, time and energy in undertaking behavioural contestation compared with discursive contestation. Cost is a factor in how willing their members are both to fund an issue directly and to support a cause through taking action. When digital advocacy organizations choose to use behavioural contestation, it is precisely because it is higher-cost, and thus seen to be more effective.

Overall, this article suggests that norm contestation theories should consider the power of mobilizing citizens. Much of the IR scholarship assumes that the most important resources are material resources (financial capacity), agenda-setting power, social resources (such as expertise and legitimacy) and moral authority. In the age of populist movements, norm theorists should consider how advocacy organizations (and politicians) mobilize the public to make statements or take direct action on contentious issues. Digital advocacy organizations have a distinctive role as they can mobilize people rapidly at tipping-point moments, and engage in both discursive and behavioural norm contestation.

This article leaves unanswered many questions, which further research should pursue. First, scholars should examine the precision of norms in the refugee regime and how this affects their contestation. After all, the principle of refugee burden-

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019

sharing is a vague norm, which is not so widely accepted as non-refoulement. It could be that the vaguer norms are, and the more widely accepted they are, the more likely we are to see behavioural rather than discursive norm contestation. In addition, scholarship should compare the role of digital advocacy organizations with that of established advocacy organizations, and in other issue areas such as climate change or human rights. We should test whether this sequence of discursive followed by behavioural contestation is unique to digital advocacy organizations or also holds for other types of NGO. Overall, this article challenges IR scholars to reconsider what resources actors need to engage in discursive and behavioural contestation. Advocacy organizations can use people power online and offline to engage in norm contestation.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/95/3/575/5420592 by CH Member Access user on 18 November 2019