

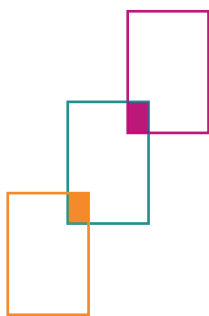


Centre for  
**Global  
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Research**

Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt

# Building Bridges or Digging the Trench?

## International Organizations, Social Media, and Polarized Fragmentation



## Global Cooperation Research Papers 34

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Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt

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## Preface

*In an era marked by complex societal dynamics and increasing political polarization, major international organizations (IOs), including prominent ones like the United Nations, grapple with the evolving landscape of global communication. Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt's paper delves into the intricate challenges faced by IOs, emphasizing the impact of social media platforms, such as Twitter, on their communication strategies. As IOs increasingly turn to these platforms to engage directly with citizens, the paper outlines how structural features of social media encourage a shift towards political advocacy over transparent dissemination of institutional processes. Matthias provides an insightful analysis of the UN's communication on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), an internationally significant yet controversial document. The GCM, while advocating a cosmopolitan approach to migration, witnessed withdrawal by several governments, sparking heated debates online. Rather than fostering cross-ideological communication, the UN's Twitter communication seems to contribute to the formation of distinct and polarized clusters. Employing a comprehensive methodology that combines qualitative content analysis, supervised machine learning, and social-network analysis, the paper highlights the intricate dynamics of IOs' engagement on social media and their role when it comes to communicating global governance issues. Even more so, Matthias' work ties to the Centre's research on (de)legitimation in global cooperation by shedding light on how IOs try to gain social legitimacy and how their use of social media influences legitimacy beliefs in the wake of globalism.*

Sabrina Pischer (Editorial Board)

# Building Bridges or Digging the Trench? International Organizations, Social Media, and Polarized Fragmentation

Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Major international organizations (IOs) like the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations must nowadays communicate to a strikingly complex and assertive societal environment (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Dingwerth et al. 2019; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Bexell, Jönsson, and Stappert 2021). Most of these IOs faced successive waves of politicization for decades, repeatedly making their authority and its legitimation a salient topic of progressive activism calling for the more effective protection of human rights or the environment as well as fostering global justice and public accountability (O'Brien et al. 2000; della Porta 2007; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). Recent iterations of politicization suggest a new spin on questioning IOs' legitimacy as linchpins of such progressive 'globalism', making IOs powerful symbols on both sides of a deepening cleavage between cosmopolitan (or 'liberal') and anti-cosmopolitan (or 'anti-liberal') orientations (Kriesi et al. 2008; Strijbis, Holmer, and de Wilde 2018; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019b; Norris and Inglehart 2019). In this context, IOs increasingly employ social media platforms such as X/Twitter<sup>2</sup> or Facebook to reach out to citizens directly (Bjola and Zaiotti 2020). These platforms have remarkable advantages for political communication but also pose new challenges, such as a highly competitive economy of attention and the fragmentation of audiences driven by networked curation of content and selective exposure (Garrett 2009; Conover et al. 2011; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Klinger and Svensson 2015; Williams et al. 2015; Barberá

<sup>1</sup> This working paper is an early (preprint) version of an article published by the *Review of International Organizations* after peer-review and revisions (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2023b). I want to thank Matthias Hofferberth, Jutta Joachim, Janet Xue, Alena Drieschova, Sigrid Quack, Malcolm Campbell-Verduyn, Frank Gardinger, Nina Schneider, Carolina Aguerre, Karolina Kluczevska, Anna Geis, Axel Dreher for their very helpful comments and suggestions before submission. I am especially grateful to Paula Roth, Saina Klein, Clemens Weggen, Jonathan Jesse, Sabrina Pischer, and Andrew Costigan for their research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> In July 2023, Twitter was rebranded to X. I refer to the platform as 'X/Twitter' throughout the paper to avoid confusing readers and emphasize continuities.

and Zeitzoff 2017; Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon 2020). As a consequence, IOs on social media have to make tough choices about what to communicate and how. According to the main argument developed in this paper, structural features of social media set strong incentives for IOs to privilege political advocacy – for example, to promote cosmopolitan issues such as human rights or sustainable development – over transparency-focused public information about institutional processes and operations. Such choices have substantial repercussions on how individual users receive IO social media communication as well as the overall topology of networked communication that results from such action. IO advocacy garners substantial resonance on social media, making it a central voice of the respective debate online. However, such advocacy is prone to fail to the extent that it successfully reaches only the already like-minded part of the usership but further turns away the sceptics. Thus, IO advocacy on social media substantially fuels an already problematic process of fragmentation along ideological divides (‘digging the trench’) instead of furthering exchange and consensus across camps and cleavages (‘building bridges’). This suggests that IO advocacy can substantially aggravate widely noted problems of organizational delegitimation and what has been termed a crisis of the ‘liberal international order’ (Ikenberry 2010; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019b; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). It can further undermine the credibility of IOs as sources of trustworthy information – a worrying consequence of advocacy in times of post-truth, in which shared understandings of global problems across camps are in short supply (Adler and Drieschova 2021).

This paper illustrates the plausibility of this argument through an analysis of X/Twitter’s networked communication on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) – a non-binding international document that was signed by 164 state representatives on 10 December 2018 in Morocco and endorsed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) about a week later. The GCM takes a cosmopolitan approach to migration that frames it as beneficial for all if well managed globally but also as potentially dangerous – especially for vulnerable migrants – if it is not. In line with this approach, the GCM stresses the human rights obligations of states, the need to confront xenophobia, and the need to expand legal pathways of migration (Guild, Basaran, and Allinson 2019; Nyers 2019; Pécoud 2021). The process that led to the GCM proved to be highly controversial and resulted in the withdrawal of several governments – including the United States (US), Australia, Austria, and Hungary. Along the way, negotiations were accompanied by heated debates in parliaments and the general public, which saw messages of advocates as well as sceptical voices going viral online (Bjola 2020).

Analyzing this online debate, the paper pursues an ecological approach, taking into account not only how the UN communicated the GCM on X/Twitter

but also how this communication resonated with an audience that actively curated the spread of UN messaging by means of retweets, mentions, and hashtags. Methodologically, it combines qualitative content analysis with supervised machine learning and social-network analysis of X/Twitter communication. Results suggest that the UN Secretariat sent a clear message of advocacy for a GCM by way of tweeting, retweeting, mentioning, and (hash) tagging. Other users responded in kind by treating the UN Secretariate as an advocate. Like-minded users widely shared its content, frequently mentioned UN official accounts, and used the UN main hashtag #ForMigration to self-identify as advocates. In contrast, critics carefully avoided any reference to UN communication in what was shared, who was mentioned, and which hashtags were used. As a consequence, two polarized clusters of like-minded communication evolved on X/Twitter, with UN accounts holding a central position in the advocates’ cluster but failing to reach those critical of the GCM as well as migration and the UN in general. Remarkably, instead of facilitating cross-cluster communication (‘building bridges’), UN communication on X/Twitter thus seems to have fostered the formation of clusters (‘digging the trench’), raising important questions of what role IO public communication can and should play in the face of a deepening rift of ‘cosmopolitan’ versus ‘anti-cosmopolitan’ politicization of global migration governance and beyond.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Part 2 provides a brief discussion of recent research on IO public communication and develops my argument with regard to its use of social media and suggested problems of polarized fragmentation. Part 3 provides details on the GCM and the selection and coding of related tweets. Part 4 presents the results of the GCM case study before a brief conclusion summarizes and discusses these results.

## 2 The general argument: IOs, social media, and polarized fragmentation

### 2.1 *IO public communication in the digital age*

IOs ‘go’ digital (Bjola and Zaiotti 2020; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2020, 2023a, 2024). Most of them increasingly rely on social media such as Facebook, Weibo, X/Twitter, or Instagram for disseminating a variety of information about, for

example, speeches of organizational leaders, symposia of affiliated experts, the meetings and decisions of intergovernmental bodies, or the launch of major policy programs. What is more, they share related content provided by other organizations, such as like-minded advocacy groups or member states' governments. This process is part and parcel of a broader trend to communicate with non-state audiences more ambitiously (Dingwerth et al. 2019). Over the last decades, IOs have codified public communication as an organizational task, departmentalized this task into well-staffed departments, and finally intensified strategic planning of public communication as indicated by the release of a multitude of strategy documents. Communication professionals inhabiting these bureaucratic spaces target a widening array of audiences – such as journalists, experts, advocacy organizations, corporate lobbies, and citizens – and have diversified communication channels to reach them, including social media (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018).

Thus, public communication has arguably become the most important intermediary practice of current international governance. It bridges 'structural holes' between the 'inside' of international negotiations and policy programming with the 'outside' of domestic and transnational publics in its organizational environment (Burt 2005). Along with non-state actors and experts (Steffek, Kissling, and Nanz 2008), this makes communication departments powerful 'brokers' (Burt 2005) of information inside-out, which can have a substantial impact on how publics perceive and evaluate organizations' mandates, procedures, and operations.<sup>3</sup> In this way, public communication may arguably play a key role in facilitating public control if approaching a mode of transparency-enhancing 'public information' (Brüggemann 2010): if informing the public about what an IO is and does, communication departments may effectively level information asymmetries, thus making the respective IO (and those actors working in their machinery) more accountable to all those affected by their talk, decisions, and action (Buchanan and Keohane 2006). What is more, in case of internal conflicts among stakeholders about procedures or policies, transparency-enhancing public information, by definition, should include balanced accounts of such conflicts and give voice to alternative perspectives on such issues.

Empirical evidence indeed suggests that a great deal of the long-term trend of IOs to 'go public' can be attributed to changing norms of legitimate global governance that value institutional transparency as a precondition for public accountability (Grigorescu 2007; Dingwerth et al. 2019). Strikingly, mandates of major communication departments often frame the task as 'public information' (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018). In explaining its decision to establish

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3 Remarkable, many communication departments of IOs are also tasked to span organizational boundaries outside-in, by systematic screening of target audiences to better understand public opinion as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of communication activities.

its Department of Public Information (DPI) in 1946, the UNGA started out by acknowledging that the 'United Nations cannot achieve the purposes for which it has been created unless the peoples of the world are fully informed of its aims and activities' (United Nations 1946: Annex I, para 2). In this spirit, the UNGA approved 'the press and other existing agencies of information [being] given the fullest possible direct access to the activities and official documentation of the Organization'. Consequently, it also placed the DPI under the obligation to limit itself to 'positive informational activities' and to eschew 'propaganda'.

In a setting of widespread politicization and delegitimation, such an approach to public communication can be deemed a strategic imperative to some extent. IOs can seek social legitimacy by bringing their communication in line with societal expectations about proper institutional conduct, for example, by providing a constant flow of information about action and results. Indeed, moments of massive public delegitimation (by protests or scandals) explain a great deal about the timing of the organizational enhancement of public communication and the adoption of new technologies such as social media (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018). At the same time, they may motivate biases in privileging information about successes over failure in order to protect the organization from reputational damage (Christian 2022).

However, much of IO public communication is not concerned with institutional transparency (or self-legitimation by molding public perception of successes and failures) but with *political advocacy* promoting social change. IOs are important 'governors' of global politics, mandated to implement ambitious policy programs vis-à-vis non-state actors (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010). In this context, communication departments are often tasked with advocacy campaigns targeting citizens directly – e.g., for women's rights, sustainable development, or sanitary standards (Coldevin 2001; Alleyne 2003; Servaes 2007). Tellingly, those IOs active in respective issue areas are more prone to adopt and use social media as new channels of public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2020). This also applies to the UN, where the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications has recently called social media 'a key' for a strategy shift towards 'cause communications' whereby the aim is 'not just to inform, but also to inspire people to care and to mobilize them for action' (United Nations 2021: 3, 33). Consequently, the UN Social Media Team is located at the Communications Campaigns Service in order to 'strengthen the full integration and the effective use of flagship social media platforms in various UN campaigns on priority themes' (United Nations 2021: 3).

Notably, IO advocacy plays an essential role in terms of organizational self-legitimation (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016). IOs are widely held to gain legitimacy as 'community organizations' representing shared values (Abbott and

Snidal 1998). By advocating for social change, IOs may find wide recognition as ‘moral authorities’ if such efforts credibly serve the normative aspirations of their audience (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). As impartial guardians of a greater good, they gain autonomy vis-à-vis member states and enhance their chances to induce deference by powerful states.

However – and despite often claiming the opposite – much of IO advocacy is highly political in nature (Barnett and Finnemore 2005: 174f; Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010: 18ff). Definitions of ‘shared values’ or ‘principles’ in global cooperation almost inevitably raise questions about the extent to which they are truly shared (or even universal) or whether there are at least alternative readings of their implications (Ignatieff and Appiah 2003). In the face of increased ideological polarization in Western societies, IO public communication regularly appeals to a cosmopolitan (or ‘liberal’) discourse that is notoriously contested by right-wing populist forces and treated with suspicion by its followership (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Kriesi et al. 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Strijbis, Holmer, and de Wilde 2018). Thus, to the extent that IOs become identified with cosmopolitan norms and values, their advocacy makes them powerful symbols on both sides of the divide. While sceptics seem to take IO advocacy as final proof of its hostile intent, IO advocacy substantially enhances its moral authority vis-à-vis the like-minded parts of the audience.

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If this reading is correct, public information and advocacy constitute, to some extent, alternative imperatives of IO public communication that might increasingly be hard to reconcile because of their problematic coupling with a third one, self-legitimation. In the context of widespread ideological polarization, IOs can play an eminent role as credible sources of problem knowledge across ideological divides as well as impartial facilitators to negotiate and implement joint action to solve such problems. However, the public recognition of IOs as trustworthy guardians of the greater good can suffer to the degree that IOs gain a public profile as partisan advocates of contested norms and values. As a consequence, advocacy could substantially undermine their credentials as sources of ‘public information’ as well as their legitimacy as legitimate facilitators of joint action (at least for all those not cherishing what the respective IOs advocate for).

## 2.2 *Social media and the temptation to privilege political advocacy*

The extended use of social media by IO communication departments suggests new possibilities for pursuing public communication in several ways, including those broadly captured by a dichotomy juxtaposing ‘public information’

and ‘political advocacy’ as ideal types. A turn towards social media communication is all the more striking as digital spheres are deemed hotbeds of ideological polarization, which have arguably aggravated processes of IO delegitimation and stalemate over recent years (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Adler and Drieschova 2021). So, how does social media afford or constrain public communication of IOs?

To start with, the more IOs develop direct channels, the more we should expect citizens to experience IOs as autonomous voices. Empirical evidence indeed suggests that several IOs have been surprisingly successful in gaining a central position in online communication networks, for example, in the case of global climate governance (Goritz et al. 2022). However, such centrality is far from inevitable and deserves a closer look. The reasons for this are at the core of networked communication: on social media, communication goes ‘many-to-many’ and is largely based on a logic of virality in terms of a ‘network-enhanced word of mouth’ (Klinger and Svensson 2015: 1248). Shared meaning emerges through a crowd-driven process of networked agenda-setting and framing, which gives ‘the crowd’ much more discursive power to curate and contest messages as well as to appropriate their meaning (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon 2020; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020). At the same time, the production of content is cheap; hence, networks are characterized by an abundance of voices and viewpoints, making attention a scarce resource. Relatedly, IO communication also faces a substantial share of ‘Digital Natives’ on social media, which are said to gravitate ‘toward “shallow” information processing behaviours characterized by rapid attention shifting and reduced deliberations’ (Loh and Kanai 2016: 2). For such an audience, new content typically pops up as ‘ambient’ information at the periphery of users’ awareness (Hermida 2010), thus rewarding extreme behaviour and opinions to the expense of more moderate voices (Tufekci 2017: 270ff).

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To complicate things further, social media typically affords the communication of various kinds of content – including text, images, and audio – but nevertheless puts substantial constraints on how much is packed into the message as such. X/Twitter is an obvious case in point: with a maximal length of 280 characters, tweets are ‘structurally ill equipped to handle complex content’ (Ott 2017: 61). Empirical evidence suggests that tweet length substantially constrains users from providing evidence for political claims as well as to foster impoliteness and even incivility to give tweets meaning at all (Oz, Zheng, and Chen 2018). The relaxation of this constraint from 140 to 280 characters in late 2017 – as well as similar adaption like no longer counting in certain components such as links and mentions – has arguably increased the deliberative quality to some extent; however, ‘brevity’ remains the ‘the soul of Twitter’ (Jaidka, Zhou, and Lelkes 2019: 1). Strikingly, much of political communication taking place on social media is linking external content

to overcome such constraints (Jakob 2020). But even then, communicators arguably face tough choices of which bits of information to highlight in the individual communication in order to attract attention for what is linked.

Regarding IOs, this suggests a remarkable disadvantage of using social media as a channel for comprehensive public information. Classical outputs of communication departments include press releases that often lay out in remarkable detail what officials have to say about major decisions, who has spoken about what in major plenary meetings, or the many aspects an expert report has raised on certain policy issues. Such complexity cannot simply be ‘translated’ into micro-messages such as tweets or posts; it has to be massively simplified and (re)framed in a way that makes what is left meaningful at all.

Compared to public information, social media seems to be much more suitable for advocacy campaigns. Social media platforms such as X/Twitter are widely held to ‘invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression’ (Papacharissi 2016: 308; Hansen et al. 2011; Veltri and Atanasova 2017; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020; Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon 2020). Political advocacy tends to privilege emotive language and symbols aiming at the compassion of the audience ever since; still, it seems even more prone to focus on emotions in order to enhance issue salience in the context of networked communication (Hall 2019; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020). As such, the current usage of digital communication by larger IOs such as the UN suggests a privileged targeting of an audience that is hoped to empathically connect with a moral cause such as humanitarian aid, human rights, or sustainable development (Hofferberth 2020; Bouchard 2020). In terms of a *first hypothesis*, we should thus expect to find IOs to more generally privilege advocacy over public information in their social media communication.

### 2.3 Social media and the peril of polarized fragmentation

If this conjecture holds, however, IO advocacy on social media can be expected to fuel an often-lamented aporia of networked communication, particularly if what IOs advocate for is tied to greater political controversies: polarized fragmentation. The most basic reason for this is the demand for filtering on social media. The aforementioned abundance of content suggests a necessity to individually control what is consumed as well as a need to be selective in order to handle problems of ‘information overload’ (Schmitt, Debbelt, and Schneider 2018). In such a context, users tend to ‘selectively expose’ to content that confirms their pre-existing attitudes while avoiding dissonant information to some significant degree (Garrett 2009). Personalization algorithms suggesting content, followers, and ‘trending hashtags’ have

been found to notoriously aggravate such privileged exposure to like-minded content (Hannak et al. 2013; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016).

Much of current writing assumes that both kinds of ‘filtering’ foster the fragmentation of communicative ties and even include prominent warnings of highly self-referential ‘echo chambers’ (Sunstein 2007: 11) or ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser 2011). Empirical studies have found fragmentation into homophile communities of like-minded users to exist, such as in the case of electoral politics (Conover et al. 2011) or climate change discourse (Williams et al. 2015). Arguably, such fragmentation is of eminent relevance for future global governance because it might severely undermine the potential of rational and inclusive consensus on important issues such as climate change or international inequality – problems for which a solution cannot be conceived without strong global regimes based on a broad public consensus. For years, empirical descriptions of increasingly transnationalized communication (Peters et al. 2005) have been taken as promising hints to an emerging global public sphere (Volkmer 2003) that could function as a building block of a global cosmopolitan order capable of legitimate as well as effective global policymaking. Against this backdrop, increasing fragmentation of communication can be expected to pose a significant challenge by aggravating the polarization of many societies into ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘anti-cosmopolitans’, thus narrowing the domestic window of opportunity for democratic governments to successfully negotiate a further delegation of competences to the international level (Kriesi et al. 2008; Strijbis, Holmer, and de Wilde 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Arguably, though, sensational warnings of the decentralized ‘power of complete filtering’ (Sunstein 2007: 11) in network communication are far too (techno-)deterministic (Bruns 2019). Among other factors, a high-choice media environment not only facilitates selective exposure but also a diverse media diet across platforms, especially for those more interested in politics (Dubois and Blank 2018). What is more, every use of social media comes with a substantial degree of ‘incidental exposure’ (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018) to political information, for example, because selected content is, on average, sufficiently diverse in terms of alternative viewpoints (Garrett 2009; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). Finally, for most users, social networks are predominantly shaped by non-political interests such as family, sport, business, or local communities online as well as offline. Thus, mechanisms of selective exposure and personalized filtering might be effectively ‘counteracted by the sheer messiness of empirical reality’ (Bruns 2019: 116). The most striking argument against a techno-deterministic account of fragmentation, however, is the empowered user itself. Social media afford users to privilege like-minded voices in many ways; at the same time, however, they also allow them to intervene and partly override fragmentation. A brief discussion of three key affordances of social media –



forwarding, mentions, hashtags – may be in order to justify this claim:

To start with, *forwarding* of messages is widely perceived as one of the most transformative affordances of social media platforms, offering new opportunities to ‘knit together’ individual utterances and to ‘provide a valuable conversational infrastructure’ (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010: 7). As in many seemingly ‘technological’ affordances, it started as a social practice of attributing content to others, which platforms later turned into ‘buttons’ (Kooti et al. 2012). Such automatization of forwarding transformed every message into an original with a number of countable copies, making respective counts a viable measure of ‘virality’ that steers the attention of other users (Paßmann 2019). Most importantly, evidence suggests that it is widely perceived to signal ‘not only interest in a message, but also trust in the message and the originator, and agreement with the message contents’ (Metaxas et al. 2015: 4). Despite such wide recognition of signalling endorsement, some uses forwarding to mock inconsistencies, ridicule messages, or even ‘hate-linking’ seemingly inappropriate content from another context (Tufekci 2014). More to the point of homophile fragmentation, users may pursue a ‘no endorsement’ approach by avoiding forward advocacy content entirely or consistently ‘index’ voices across a debate in order to facilitate transparency, if not dialogue.

Second, most social media platforms also afford to explicitly address other users, for example, by applying the @user-convention (*mentions*). Similar to other affordances of social media, mentions evolved in a co-evolutionary process of social conventions and technology (Honeycutt and Herring 2009; Halavais 2014). In terms of meaning, mentions are widely used in political campaigns to reaffirm allegiances to like-minded advocacy groups (Hemsley et al. 2018). Relatedly, Liu and Xu have argued that relief agencies address a multitude of stakeholders during emergencies to ‘signal to the greater public or the third-party stakeholders about inter-organizational alliances, joint action commitment, or moral support’ (Liu and Xu 2019: 4922). In this way, mentioning also allows for the effective enhancement of the reach of messages with like-minded users. For example, activists and campaigners have strategically employed mentions of celebrities to garner cascades of retweets by their large followership (Tufekci 2017: 56; Hemsley et al. 2018). At times, users nevertheless employ mentions also as tools to reach across the aisle and directly address opponents in a political conflict. For example, mentions are regularly used to signal openness for conversation across candidates and play a remarkable role as a ‘simulacrum of interaction’ on social media in times of elections (Hemsley et al. 2018).

Lastly, hashtags are some of the most powerful affordances of online discourse. As ‘discursive assemblages’, they combine both a meaningful term (‘text’) with a searchable tag as ‘metatext’ (Rambukkana 2015: 3). In terms

of the former, hashtags are employed as important ‘soft structures’ of storytelling (Papacharissi 2016) and tools for framing content (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). With regard to the latter, hashtags function as an ‘indexing system’ (Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright 2019) on social media and constitute important vehicles of self-curated thematic content (Meraz 2017). If employed, content becomes easier to search and identify by other users as a contribution to a specific conversation and facilitates ‘hashtag publics’ (Rambukkana 2015). Both – the quality as text as well as metatext – makes them part and parcel of what has been termed ‘hashtag activism’, where hashtags of high valence (e.g., #MeToo, #ClimateAction, #BuildTheWall) are used as a ‘primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media’ (Tombleson and Wolf 2017: 2). In this regard, political debates on social media seem to promote hashtags that are predominantly employed by the like-minded user, thus fostering their recognition as ideological markers (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter vs. #AllLivesMatter) and, by implication, social fragmentation (Conover et al. 2011: 95). At the same time, however, hashtags can be employed to overcome an ideological rift. Located at the ‘macro-layer’ of X/Twitter communication, they are prone to reach beyond established networks of followers (Bruns and Moe 2014). By (ab)using ‘high-valence’ hashtags, outsiders may even deliberately ‘hashjack’ the selection routines of a segregated community in order to inject deviant content into its internal debate (Conover et al. 2011; Tombleson and Wolf 2017; Darius and Stephany 2019).

Thus, a brief discussion of how social media may be used for social media advocacy (and beyond) suggests that there is no place for a techno-social determinism with regard to how users – including IOs – contribute to processes of polarized fragmentation by means of affordance such as tweeting, forwarding, mentions or hashtags. Users have a choice to employ technical means in alternative ways – including those ‘digging trenches’ as well as ‘building bridges’. This calls for a deeper look at the potential of IO communication for enhancing polarized fragmentation as well as overcoming it. By privileging like-minded voices and arguments, an advocacy approach to IO communication may effectively contribute to the virality of respective content and strengthen the public presence of like-minded voices. At the same time, *IO advocacy sends a strong signal of partisanship to its environment, thus fostering the resonance of its own advocacy content among like-minded voices, while turning away those users with alternative stances in the debate (my second hypothesis)*. If that is correct, we should find like-minded users to react to IO advocacy by substantially forwarding its messages, mentioning its accounts, and using its hashtags. However, we should find sceptics to do the opposite, that is, to carefully avoid spreading IO messages in their networks, to mention IO accounts, and to use its advocacy hashtags. As a result, we can expect such handling of IO advocacy to shape the overall topology of topical communication on social media in remarkable ways. From what we

know about the dynamics of social media, we can infer that *IO advocacy should substantially contribute to the formation of self-referential clusters of polarized communication* (*‘dig trenches’, my third hypothesis*). Notably, an alternative approach of ‘public information’ would be possible: IOs could keep a focus on non-advocatory information as well as use the aforementioned affordances to enhance transparency by providing a balanced picture of alternative voices and arguments. Thus, an inclusive approach of ‘public information’ could facilitate the perception of neutrality as well as proactively foster cross-cluster communication by way of forwarding, mentioning, or hashtagging (*‘building bridges’*). However, assuming that my first conjecture is correct and IOs tend to privilege advocacy over public information in their social media communication, I expect polarized fragmentation to be the more likely outcome.

### 3 Method of the GCM Case Study

To illustrate the plausibility of my general argument (and the related three conjectures), I focus on global migration governance, which has seen intensive and heated multilateral negotiations under the auspices of the UN. The GCM process started in early 2017 when UN member states agreed on the process and timeline for three phases of consultations, stocktaking, and final negotiations. It came to a close when the UNGA formally endorsed the GCM through a resolution on 19 December 2018, which was supported by 152 countries, with 12 abstentions and the governments of the US, Hungary, Israel, the Czech Republic and Poland voting against it.

By and large, this process has been heavily controversial, as an increasingly deep divide between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan voices has led to hardened dissensus on the future of international order at various levels. Strikingly, universalist claims are at the core of the GCM: its approach focuses on ‘orderly and regular’ migration as being to the benefit of all, i.e., migrants as well as home, transit, and host societies (Nyers 2019; Pécoud 2021). At the same time, it frames migrants as a vulnerable group that deserves special protection, given multiple threats such as trafficking, exploitation, and xenophobia. Such claims are most fiercely contested by anti-cosmopolitans who denounce global migration as a self-serving project of ‘liberal elites’. Global migration governance is accused of neglecting inherent distributional conflicts on territory, culture, and sovereignty to the detriment of specific groups or simply ‘the people’. Thus, the GCM is arguably a ‘most-likely case’ (e.g., Gerding 2007) for finding those dynamics on social media that seem to be most challenging for IO communication, but for which we know least in terms of reach and impact.

I chose X/Twitter for a detailed discussion of GCM-related social media communication. Although X/Twitter is only one of many other social media platforms, a recent study suggests that about four out of five IOs had at least one active handle on X/Twitter, with most of them having several (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2020, forthcoming).<sup>4</sup> Set up as a microblogging service, X/Twitter came to be used for more interactive debates on political issues (Kooti et al. 2012). Consequently, X/Twitter functions not only as a primary news source for many users but also as a conversational sphere that allows for the networked curation and negotiation of political meaning (Mitchell, Rosenstiel and Christian 2012). Most importantly, X/Twitter is explicitly used by the UN for ‘reaching a wide and diverse global audience’ (United Nations 2021: 16), thus a plausible case for testing to what degree an IO might fail to achieve a normative sound organizational goal via public communication.

The analysis combines two sets of tweet data: (a) all GCM-related tweets of UN accounts run by the Department of Global Communication (UNDGC) of the UN Secretariat (UNDGC, ‘Corpus 1’) and (b) a sample of all tweets related to the GCM-process for five selected days during major events of the GCM negotiation process (‘Corpus 2’).

For *Corpus 1*, I relied on information provided by the UNDGC about 24 handles directly run by the Department (see Appendix for a complete list of accounts).<sup>5</sup> All tweets posted by these accounts in 2017 and 2018 were retrieved if they contained the terms ‘pact’, ‘compact’, or ‘treaty’ in combination with at least one of the terms ‘migrant’ or ‘migration’ (or related strings like ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘immigrant’, or ‘immigration’). After reading through all provided tweets, a total of N = 270 tweets were identified as directly addressing the GCM.

For *Corpus 2*, I used purpose sampling for six important days along the GCM process, for which a minimal relevance of the topic – and, consequently, a high turnout – could be expected.<sup>6</sup> After a close inspection of UN communication online, the following six days were identified as most promising for analysis by maximizing (a) the number of tweets released per day and (b) a desirable spread over the course of the GCM process:

<sup>4</sup> The resonance of IO handles is remarkable in terms of followers, too; however, variation is notable. For example, while the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (@NAFO1979) draws about 600 followers in late 2020, the UN main handle (@UN) alone has more than 13 million.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/sections/about-website/un-social-media/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> While purpose sampling had practical advantages at the moment the project started, I acknowledge two drawbacks: first, the degree to which results can be generalized across days remains unclear. Second, the focus on days with GCM-related events at the UN-level might skew the picture towards content that is addressing the UN to some degree as well as the salience of UN tweets.

- 12 October 2017, the final thematic session, ‘Irregular migration and regular pathways’,
- 4 December 2017, the first day of the stocktaking meeting,
- 13 July 2018, the release of the finalized draft of the GCM,
- 26 September 2018, the high-level event ‘Road to Marrakech’ at the UNGA,
- 10 December 2018, states adopt the GCM in Marrakesh,
- 19 December 2018, the UNGA endorses the GCM (A/RES/73/195).

Again, all English tweets (including retweets) sent on these days were collected if containing the terms ‘pact’, ‘compact’, or ‘treaty’ in combination with at least one of the terms ‘migrant’ or ‘migration’ (or related strings like ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’, ‘immigrant’, or ‘immigration’). The retrieval provided a total of  $N = 69,609$  tweets fulfilling these criteria, of which 9925 (14.3 per cent) are original tweets and 59,684 (85.7 per cent) retweets.

In the next step, Corpus 1 ( $N = 270$ ) of UNDGC tweets completely went into a *qualitative content analysis* with Atlas.ti. Additionally, a stratified random sample of Corpus 2 was drawn and coded as well. For this sample, all retweets of Corpus 2 were excluded to focus on non-redundant content. Then, the number of retweets per original tweet (+1 to prevent tweets with no retweets from being dropped) was used as a sampling weight to account for the occurrence of similar text content in Corpus 2. A random sample (2,000 picks with replacement) was drawn, resulting in a sample of  $N = 768$  tweets. Due to the use of sampling weights, this sample is equivalent to a 31,528 sample (45.3 per cent) of all items of Corpus 2 ( $N = 69,609$ ).

The selected tweets of both corpora ( $N = 270 + 768$ ) were carefully read and annotated, which resulted in a detailed coding scheme. Coding was not aiming at uniquely classifying tweets per se but specific phrases, so multiple codings were deemed likely and valid indications of more complex content. The subset of codings used for the following analysis focuses on evaluative statements of one of the core aspects of the GCM debate on X/Twitter: the GCM, migration or migrants, multilateralism, and the UN itself (see Appendix). For this subset, the inter-coder reliability of the two coders involved (the author(s) and one graduate student in IR) was repeatedly tested while elaborating the codes using random samples of tweets and Krippendorff’s Alpha (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). After the last round of revisions, the estimated values of Alpha suggest a formidable level of inter-coder agreement ranging from .80 to 1.00 for the codes used to quantify tweet content in the rest of the paper.

For the quantitative analysis, *tweets were classified* as ‘advocative’, ‘critical’, ‘mixed’, or ‘neutral’, according to the modal orientation of the specific tweets. That is, a tweet coded with one or more positive evaluations was deemed ‘advocative’, in the case of positive as well as negative evaluations classified as ‘mixed’, with only negative evaluations ‘critical’ and with not a single evaluation ‘neutral’. Examples are provided in the next section of the paper. Note that a number of tweets reported evaluations by other actors – including tweets of UNDGC as well as news organizations such as CNN, Reuters, or The Hill. For the analysis in this paper, such evaluations have been included because they played an important role in the debate (for example, negative evaluations of the GCM by the US administration were only reported by other actors, for example, with regard to its final dissenting vote in the UNGA).

For some parts of the argument, the analysis uses additional information provided by an *automated classification of tweets*. For this classification, the manually coded tweets were used to train two machine-learning algorithms – one for detecting positive evaluations and one for negative evaluations – to predict the classification of the remaining tweets. Both models classify unlabeled tweets based on their similarity in word occurrences within the training data. Both were estimated with a linear Support Vector Machine (James et al. 2017) – a non-probabilistic (binary) supervised-learning classifier that is implemented in the Caret package in R and widely employed in similar research (Hemsley et al. 2018; Bozarth and Budak 2021). Test statistics suggest an excellent fit between training and test data (with Accuracy = .89 for negative content and .84 for positive content, respectively) according to established scientific standards (Landis and Koch 1977).

Based on this final classification of all tweets, *users have been classified* according to the mode value of observed tweeting: users most frequently posting advocative content have been classified as ‘advocates’, and those predominantly tweeting critical content are ‘critics’. Moreover, I classified users as ‘ambivalent’ if they mostly tweet mixed tweets or equally often advocative and critical tweets and as ‘neutral’ if they most frequently post non-evaluative content.

Finally, the analysis repeatedly operates with a *classification of UN accounts* in those (1) directly run by UNDGC, (2) a category of ‘Wider-UN’ accounts ( $N = 106$ ) not directly run by the UNDGC but belonging to other official branches or offices of the UN, and (3) all other accounts. A full list of accounts of the second category (‘Wider-UN’) is provided in the Appendix.<sup>7</sup> hitherto.

<sup>7</sup> For replication of results, all data and codes are accessible at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MEckerEhrhardt>.

## 4 Results of the GCM Case Study

With regard to the GCM debate on X/Twitter, the following analysis provides ample evidence for three related conjectures in line with the general argument laid out above: first, UN social media communication was mainly advocative, thus sending a clear signal of partisanship to other users. Second, the UN was treated accordingly by other users, that is, as a partisan voice on the GCM. Content provided by UNDGC was widely shared by like-minded users but nevertheless, by and large, ignored by critics of international migration governance. Third, the overall structure of networked communication that resulted from this interaction shows the fragmentation of the GCM debate into two segregated ‘bubbles’ – a result substantially driven by UNDGC’s communication.

### 4.1 How UNDGC advocated the GCM on X/Twitter

To start with, the UN advocated the GCM with regard to all of the four dimensions of X/Twitter communication addressed above: tweeting, retweeting, mentions, and hashtags. Regarding its own *tweets*, the relative frequencies of evaluative content of UN tweets most clearly testify to the advocacy role that the UN assumed in its X/Twitter communication. In almost every tweet (94.8 per cent) from UNDGC accounts, one finds some evaluative content in terms of praising or positively framing issues at stake, such as the GCM, migration, migrants, multilateralism, or the UN itself.

Most tweets (91.1 per cent) signalled endorsement of the GCM (or ‘Marrakech’), for example, by calling the finalization of the treaty text a ‘historic moment’ (@UN\_News\_Centre, 2018-07-13, 1017890484793020416) and the Global Compact to be ‘grounded in principles of state sovereignty, responsibility-sharing, non-discrimination and human rights’ (@UNWebTV quoting the UN Secretary-General, 2018-12-10, 1072018714399334400). More than half of all UN tweets (52.2 per cent) somehow addressed well-regulated migration in positive terms while emphasizing the many dangers migrants face in unregulated migration.

Migration has benefits for host and home countries alike. The Global Compact for Migration makes the most of these, while tackling the forced and irregular migration that carries high risks for migrants (@antonioguterres, 2018-09-26, 1045044113207431168)

In this context, UN tweets regularly referred to migration as an essential ‘part of our humanity’ (@UN\_PGA, 2017-11-28, 935472278917255168)

and migrants (e.g., ‘children & youth on the move’, @UNDESA, 2018-06-22, 1010166442938036225) to have a legitimate claim for international protection. To some extent (6.7 per cent), the UN (or some of its staff or branches) praised itself, for example, by claiming the GCM negotiations to prove that ‘#UNGA remains best place for states to address global issues & cross border challenges’ (@UN\_PGA, 2018-06-04, 1017890484793020416).

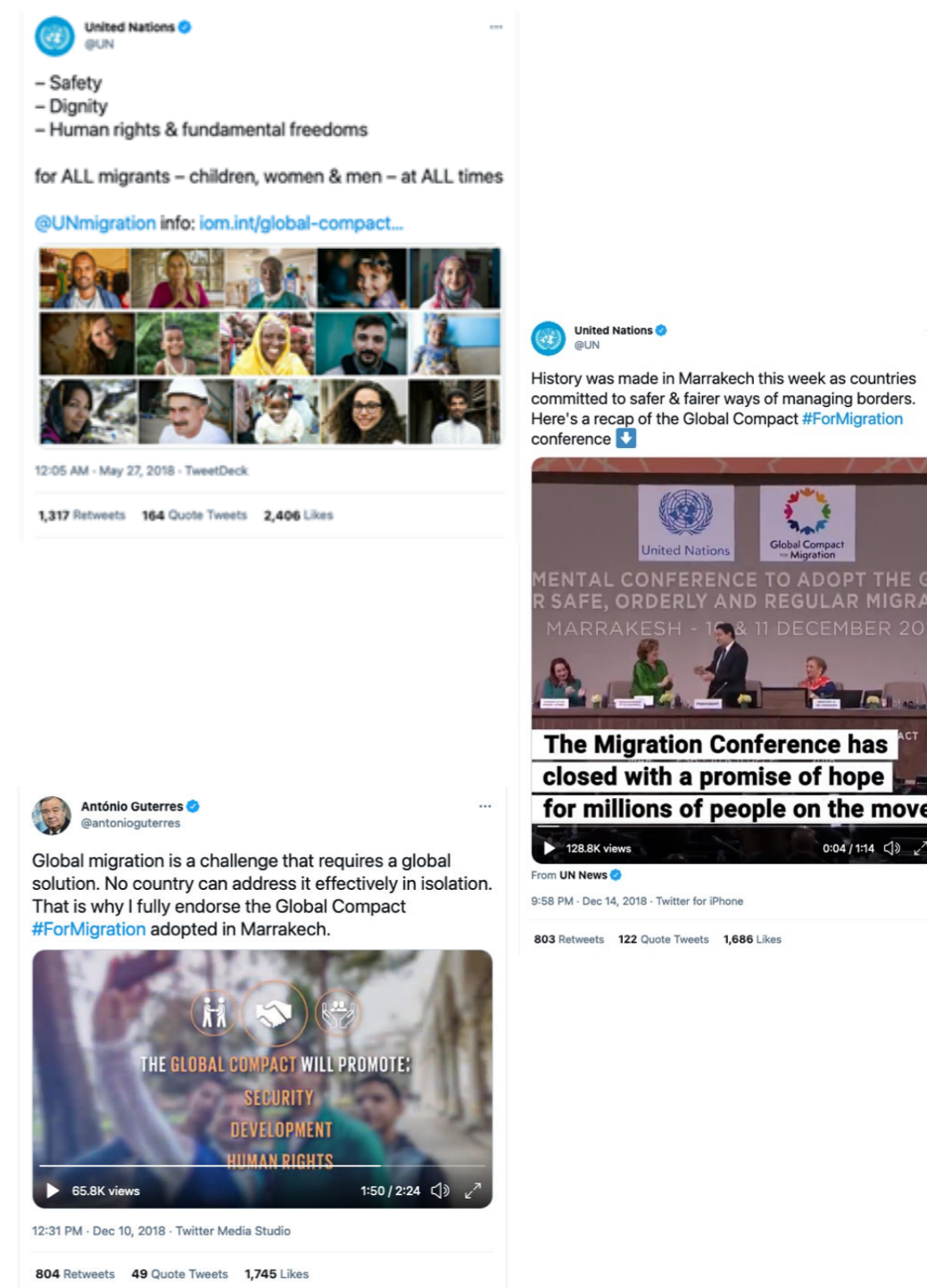


Figure 1: Selected tweets from UNDGC

To grasp the visual quality of UNDGC advocacy, Figure 1 provides a small selection of prominent UNDGC tweets that nicely illustrate the use of pictures and videos as embedded content. While an in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, much of the imagery employed by UNDGC consists of ‘smiling migrants’ and the UN as a forum of effective multilateralism, typically enriched with additional text along the lines of the overall messaging (Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020).

Remarkably, UNDGC (as well as other UN accounts) only rarely tweeted without such positive evaluative content (4.8 per cent), mainly by providing information about a scheduled press conference or the state of negotiations. To illustrate, one of these tweets informs users that ‘(a)head of Global Compact #ForMigration meeting in Morocco, UN Climate Conference #COP24 in Poland discusses recommendations for countries to cope with displacement of people as result of climate change’ (@UN, 8 December 2018, 1071517776039227392). Even more telling: a critical evaluation is only reported once, that is in one single tweet on the final UNGA vote (@UN\_News\_Centre, 2018-12-19, 1075487598116855808), which also communicated some member states’ dissent (coded as a ‘mixed’ tweet because it reported negative as well as positive evaluations). However, even in this case, support of the UN Secretariat for the GCM is explicitly articulated by adding that the Secretary-General calls its adoption a ‘key step to reduce chaos & suffering’ (@UN\_News\_Centre, 2018-12-19, 1075487598116855808). Thus, no room is left for interpretation as to how the UN Secretariat positions itself vis-à-vis internal opposition.

Regarding *retweets*, accounts run by the UNDGC exclusively shared content of other UN accounts – most of them being themselves run by the UNDGC (58.3 percent), but also many of them run by other UN bodies or agencies (such as the International Organization for Migration, United Nations Population Fund, and UNICEF), respectively. As far as their tweets have been coded as well, none contained negative evaluations, suggesting that UNDGC deliberately focused on retweets as a means for advocacy.

Similarly, UNDGC used *@mentions* mostly to feature its own accounts (63.1 per cent) and less frequently to refer to other UN accounts (26.1 per cent) or beyond. To the extent these accounts sent tweets on the GCM that have been coded, all of them show a clear profile of advocacy for the GCM. This suggests that UNDGC uses mentions to support (and strengthen ties with) other parts of the GCM advocacy network, not to reach out to critics or those being ambivalent.

Finally, UN accounts used a number of *hashtags* to refer to the overall process of negotiating a Global Compact, including #migration or #GCM. However, they started early to keep a strong focus on #ForMigration (other UN accounts even more than those run by UNDGC, with 73.8 per cent compared to

64.0 per cent). This choice is remarkable: while #migration and #GCM suggest being widely read as neutral ‘topic markers’ in terms of substance, #ForMigration articulates a strong claim to advocate for migration as something good and worthy (instead of a problem to be solved as such). To conclude, UN communication, as run by the UNDGC, shows a distinctive profile of advocacy for the GCM, narrating it as a cosmopolitan project fostering shared interests of all those involved as well as core values of the UN system (such as human rights) by means of international cooperation.

#### 4.2 *How UNDGC advocacy resonated with the like-minded (only)*

UN advocacy took place in the context of a highly polarized debate: about half of the shared content (55.5 per cent) can be classified as ‘critical’, and only one-fourth (23.3 per cent) as ‘advocative’ (Figure 2). In fact, most viral tweets in the sample include one sent by Fox’s anchorman Lou Dobbs on 4 December 2017, praising Donald Trump for leaving the GCM process with heralding ‘#AmericaFirst More than a Slogan for @realDonaldTrump as He Overrides Deputy, Pulls USA Out of U.N.’s Pro-Immigration Treaty’ (@LouDobbs, 12 April 2017, 937553337918148608). On the same day, another tweet celebrating the withdrawal authored by @ScottPresler misleadingly adds, ‘No One Is Talking About This: Did you know that the UN used to control which migrants came to America?’ (@ScottPresler, 4 December 2017, 937557502484451328). Over the course of the GCM process, we find similar content that frames the GCM as an attempt by the UN to illegitimately force nation-states to open borders for migrants. In many cases, migrants are targeted directly, too. For example, in one tweet, @Eisdus calls the GCM an

[o]rchestrated take down by the globalist institutions of western society thru mass influx of culturally incompatible unskilled poorly educated welfare bound migrants. Overloading of public services, cultural problems, societal conflict #resistglobalism #nationalism (@Eisdus, 20 December 2018, 1075699061880225792).

Such blunt devaluations of the GCM, the UN, multilateralism, migrants as well as migration overall are frequently articulated together, suggesting an attempt to integrate all these aspects in a ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) of ‘globalist’ bads.

In a strong contrast, only a minority of tweets relate positively to the GCM process. By and large, in line with UN advocacy, such tweets cheer the overall project to address global migration governance in a comprehensive process of negotiations, reaffirm a shared responsibility to protect migrants from ex-

plotation and abuse, or point to the overall societal benefits of migration.

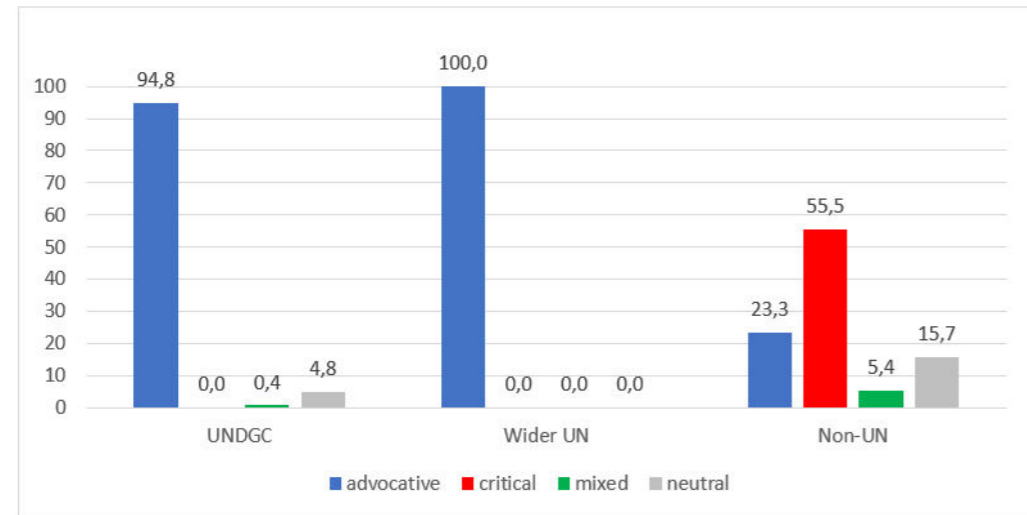


Figure 2: Ideological leaning of tweets by groups of accounts

Note: Data for estimating relative frequencies of non-UN accounts and those accounts of the ‘wider’ UN (and not run by UNDGC) are taken from the larger sample for selected days,

enhance precision.

To what extent did UN advocacy resonate within this environment, especially with the more ‘like-minded’ part but not the critics (my second hypothesis)? While critics for UNDGC are taken from the full collection of UNDGC tweets (N = 270) to UN accounts, first of all, substantially succeeded in triggering other users to share its content by retweeting it. About 6.7 per cent of all retweets collected on the six selected days are shared tweets sent off by UNDGC, and another 6.1 per cent have retweeted content from UN branches. This success might be partly attributed to an immense number of followers – @UN had more than 11 million in 2018 alone. But Figure 3 also suggests that UN advocacy overwhelmingly resonated with like-minded users, who used sharing as a means for online activism and ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). To illustrate, the selected tweets shown in Figure 1 are also the three most often shared tweets of UNDGC – all in strong support of the GCM, which made retweeting them an act of advocacy itself. Not surprisingly, critics have carefully avoided sharing UN content for not being associated with such advocacy. Consequently, they have also been hesitant to ‘ping’ UN accounts directly by using the @mention-convention. While UN accounts are frequently mentioned overall (about 19.0 per cent of UNDGC accounts plus 7.9 per cent of other UN accounts), they are overwhelmingly addressed by like-minded users (with a share of 82.6 per cent regarding UNDGC accounts). Thus, evidence strongly supports the expectation according to which UN advocacy successfully connected to the like-minded while turning away the sceptics, who tend to avoid any direct linkage to the UN. The same holds for the use of the UN hashtag #ForMigration. As argued above, the hashtag signals advocacy

by deliberately supposing migration to be something positive per se. Usage by other participants in the GCM debate suggests a similar interpretation. Found in about 7.8 per cent of GCM-related tweets, #ForMigration is the most frequently used hashtag of the debate. However, as the data also indicates, the hashtag was almost exclusively used in tweets that articulated a positive stance towards the main issues at stake – the GCM, migration, the UN, and multilateralism. Thus, UNDGC succeeded in making its hashtag a main device for signalling a positive stance and an act of advocacy. At the same time, it made it easy for other users to curate respective content along partisan lines, including efficiently avoiding UN communication entirely.

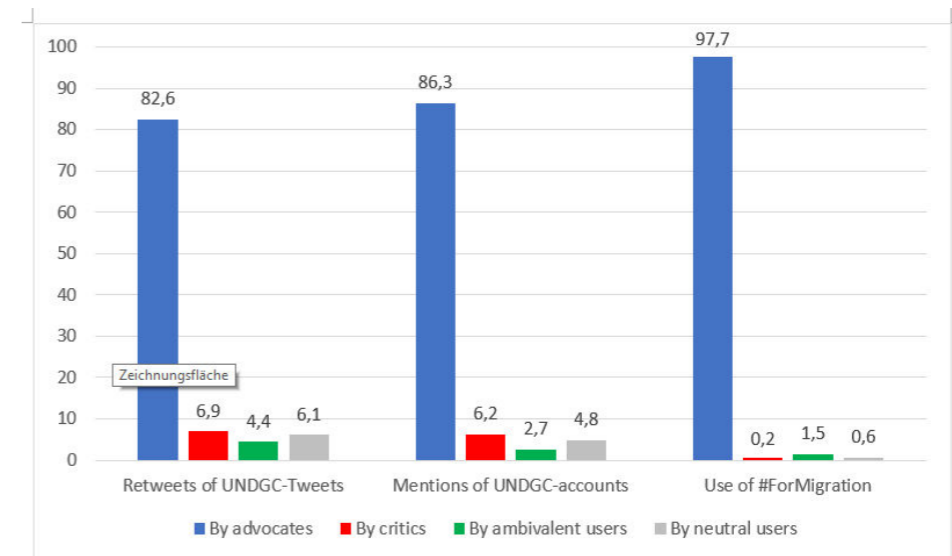


Figure 3: Resonance of UN accounts by ideological leaning of non-UN accounts

Note: The number of cases for which information about ideological leaning is available varies over kinds of resonance, that is, for retweets (N = 361), mentions (N = 819), and the use of #ForMigration (N = 528).

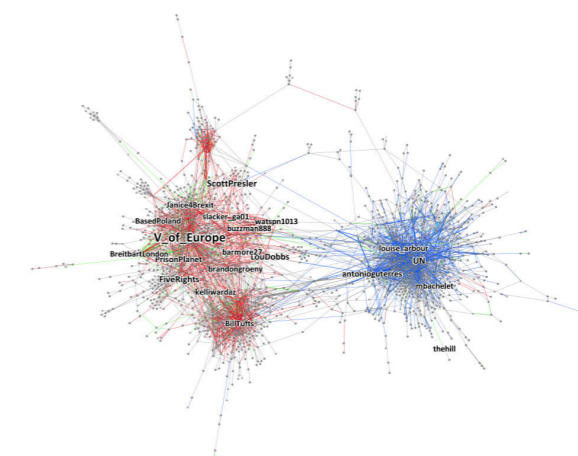


Figure 4: Polarized fragmentation in the GCM network

*Note: Network based on weighted data of retweets and mentions from Corpus 2. Nodes are only shown for those users ( $N = 1,695$ ) being mentioned or retweeted by at least one other user. Labels are given for the 20 most central accounts, with the size of labels and nodes reflecting the relative size of (eigenvector) centrality. The colour of the edges reflects the ideological classification of the retweeted tweets, with blue indicating mostly advocative, red mostly critical, green mostly mixed or neutral (re)tweets, and grey edges for which no information was available (about 38 per cent). The size of the edges reflects the relative frequency of mentions and retweets for the respective pair of users.*

### 4.3 The topological outcome: polarized fragmentation

According to the general argument, a high degree of IO advocacy fosters critics' avoidance of IO communication and thus nurtures the problematic fragmentation of political communication in by and large self-centric 'bubbles' of homophile interaction (my third hypothesis). Does the GCM debate match this expectation?

For inspecting the overall topology of the GCM debate on X/Twitter, information about retweeting and mentions were pooled in a dataset of directed links between user dyads indicating that a user (B) has targeted another user (A) by mentioning them or sharing some of their tweets by retweeting it at least once. Empirically, the collected data on GCM-related tweets and retweets allowed to construct a data set of 57,327 directed edges between 38,574 users as nodes. The actual sum of retweets and mentions for each directed link between users varies from one to 24 (with a median of one) and goes into the analysis as a weighting factor for respective edges. For the sake of simplicity, the visual analysis focuses on the largest connected component of this network and omits users that only target other users (by retweeting or mentioning them) without being targeted themselves (Figure 4).

Visual inspection suggests a high level of segregation between two large areas of more intense interaction. While modularity analysis (Blondel et al. 2008) indicates a number of smaller communities inside these broader clusters (modularity score = .60 for 31 communities), the overall topology is nevertheless dominated by a major divide. Remarkably, the UN main account on X/Twitter @UN has the highest eigenvector-centrality score in the GCM network overall, indicating the most incoming ties (being retweeted or mentioned) and taking into account that such ties matter more if the sending nodes are themselves highly connected (that is central to the network in their own right). Thus, @UN is the most powerful hub of GCM-related communication overall. However, it is only effectively connected inside of the right-hand cluster, which is made up, by and large, of UN accounts and all those users mentioning them or sharing their tweets, respectively.

The X/Twitter handle of the far-right media platform 'Voice of Europe' (@V\_of\_Europe) is most central for the left-hand cluster. A number of other right-leaning accounts such as @BreitbartNews, @ScottPresler, @LouDobbs, @FiveRights (by alt-right author Philip Schuyler), or @PrisonPlanet (by Paul Joseph Watson, editor-at-large of Infowars.com) are of high centrality here. While the partisanship of the main nodes of the clusters already suggests polarization, we can turn to the specific content of tweets to verify this intuition right away. All edges of the network are coloured based on the classification using supervised machine learning techniques (see method section). Strikingly, segregation in two major clusters largely overlaps with the ideological content of retweets and respective self-positioning of mentioned users, with advocacy for the GCM, migrants, migration, or the UN defining the almost exclusively bluish cluster on the right-hand side – the 'advocates' bubble' – , and all that is contesting respective advocacy on the left – the almost entirely red-coloured 'critics' bubble'. Thus, the overall structure of networked communication shows a high level of polarized fragmentation – a result that can partly be attributed to UN advocacy. Even if UN communication had an immense resonance on X/Twitter (with @UN being even the most central account of the entire network), it failed to build bridges across the ideological rift.

## 5 Conclusion

According to the general argument put forward in this paper, the trend of IOs to increasingly rely on social media suggests tough choices about what to communicate and how, aggravating inherent tensions of mandates to enhance institutional transparency ('public information') and to campaign for social change ('political advocacy'). Competition for attention and virality sets problematic incentives for IO social media communication to privilege high-profile advocacy over low-profile public information (my first hypothesis). In case they choose advocacy, IOs garner substantial resonance on social media but nevertheless fail to the extent they turn away critics (my second hypothesis). Its advocacy thus fosters the polarized fragmentation of networked communication (my third hypothesis). Evidence provided above indeed suggests that X/Twitter communication on the GCM took place in a highly fragmented network of homophile retweeting, mentioning, and (hash)tagging. In this context, UN social media communication largely failed to reach critics of the GCM and related issues such as migration, migrants, multilateralism, or the UN. In line with my general argument, UN accounts arguably fostered the divide by taking an advocative stance towards the GCM, retweeting and mentioning almost exclusive like-minded voices, and establishing the hashtag

#ForMigration as a defining feature of its social media advocacy for the Compact. Thus, it was arguably predominantly ‘digging the trench’ instead of ‘building bridges’ toward its critics.

Such remarkable impact of UN advocacy is instructive in the context of larger questions of legitimate international order and the role IO public communication is supposed to play therein. It sheds some light on a basic aporia of communicating international authority, which might be enhanced by ideological polarization: IO public communication has an eminent function as public information, which is supposed to neutrally inform about internal processes in order to make IOs transparent and accountable. At the same time, IOs have been tasked to promote norms and knowledge to the assumed benefit of societies, making IO public communication an important tool for spreading cosmopolitan ideas – such as a global regime of safe, orderly, and regular migration. Under the conditions of ideological polarization, both roles – of public information and of advocating social change – increasingly become undermined, if not contradictory. The more IO advocacy confirms critics’ expectations of the role IOs play in a clash of ideologies, the more any attempt to provide public information – about IO procedures, decisions, and policies – is doomed to fail because critics do not consider the information provided by IO public communication to be credible.

Thus, what we see in the GCM case is instructive: UN advocacy seems to have quite effectively drummed up the already likeminded but presumably also added to its delegitimation because critics might have learned that the UN is partisan and thus not to be trusted – neither as a source of valid information about global migration flows, nor regarding what the GCM was actually about or that the UN works well as an accountable arena of fair and transparent international negotiations. In the long run, such advocacy could, therefore, do substantial harm to the projects it is advocating for – as it has presumably done in the case of the GCM. It might aggravate widely noted problems of delegitimation as well as institutional failure. This could undermine the credibility of IOs as sources of trustworthy information, which are desperately needed to establish a shared definition of global problems such as climate change or the structural sources of global inequalities. It may also weaken public recognition of IOs as fair and inclusive fora despite IOs’ increasing willingness to define ‘the people’ as a major (if secondary) legitimating constituency (Dingwerth et al. 2019).

Much more research is needed to investigate the extent to which such conclusions are empirically valid – with regard to the chosen case as well as beyond, that is, in terms of a general process of advocacy-driven fragmentation. To start with, the focus has been on the UN, which is arguably a very special case of a ‘general-purpose’ IO (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks 2019a: 75ff). At the same time, the analysis focused on migration governance and the GCM as a most likely case of fairly obvious relevance for cosmopolitan advocacy as well as anti-cosmopolitan contestation. Thus, other cases should provide important

insights into the distribution of alternative communication strategies that IOs pursue as well as the degree to which the topology of networked communication suggests a general correlation of IO advocacy and its centrality in one ‘bubble’ of likeminded users plus, by implication, a failure to reach its critics. With regard to the asserted workings of IO advocacy itself, X/Twitter is arguably an important platform – especially with regard to the Global North – but nevertheless only one of many where debates on international politics take place. Recent research points to X/Twitter as being especially conducive to polarization; thus, research on other platforms might find a more moderate outcome than the one presented here (Yarchi, Baden, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2021). Maybe most strikingly, however, while the descriptive results match what we would expect (advocacy spurs fragmentation), there is a dire need for further evidence with regard to ‘negative cases’ on both sides of the causal equation: while observations provided that UN advocacy was part and parcel of polarized fragmentation, additional evidence is needed that suggests that the opposite can be observed as well: does IO public information really facilitates a wider reach across camps and positions? How about more ambiguous exemplars? What are the causal conditions of having an impact? Intuition suggests that comparative case studies could provide important insights. Nevertheless, a turn to more focused experiments on how alternative approaches to IO communication affect audiences’ perceptions and legitimacy beliefs might be in order as well. In both ways, the presented findings suggest that such research could greatly contribute to our understanding of the legitimation dynamics of international governance in the ‘global information age’ (Simmons 2011).



## 6 Appendix

List of handles run directly by UNDGC (N = 24):

@UN	@UN_Spokesperson	@UNLibrary
@UN_Careers	@UNOCHA	@UNMediaLiaison
@UN_PGA	@UN_DPA	@UNWebTV
@UNPeacebuilding	@UNPeacekeeping	@UN_Photo
@UNDGACM_EN	@GlobalGoalsUN	@UN_News_Centre
@UNHumanRights	@_UNChronicle	@unpublications
@UNDESA	@UNYearbook	@UN
@UN_Disarmament	@aficarenewal	@antonioguterres

List of X/Twitter accounts (N = 106) not directly run by the UN Department of Global Communication but belonging to other official branches or offices of the UN (classified as 'Wider-UN'):

@mbachelet	@UNandAgeing	@UNinGhana
@louise_arbour	@UNGuinea_Bissau	@UNICLagos
@UNICEF	@UN_Lebanon	@UNICEF_UA
@IOMatUN	@UNODC_POSAL	@UNICEFAfrica
@UNYouthEnvoy	@DUA_UNRWASyria	@UN_SPExperts
@UNMGCY	@Eritrea_UN	@UNICEFnl
@UN_Women	@UN_EWEC	@UNDESASocial
@UNGeneva	@GlobalGoalsUN	@UNODC_ROMENA
@KorieUNFPA	@UNOGLibrary	@UNODC_Nigeria
@UNRIC_Italia	@UNOHRLLS	@UNICEFDjibouti
@article19UN	@UNACNCR	@UNHCRUK
@UNODC	@UN_Montenegro	@UNESCWA
@UNinBrussels	@UN4ALL	@UNGamesAfrica
@UNICManama	@UNUCPR	@UNDPUGanda
@UN_Vienna	@UNICEFGambia	@UNESCOdeBildung
@UNAOC	@UN_ACT	@NLatUN
@UN4Youth	@CarlaUNICEF	@UNICEF_uk
@UNICEFInnocenti	@UNICCairo	@UNCambodia
@UNFPAasia	@UNOCHA	@UNmigration
@Norimasa_UN	@UNICEFROSA	@Radicetti_IOM
@PopDevUNFPA	@UNhumansecurity	@IOMBurundi
@UNODC_HTMSS	@Journal_UN_ONU	@IOMFinland
@UNHCRWestAfrica	@UNDP_Danmark	@IOMROWCA
@UNESCO	@UNICEF_ECA	@IOM_Caribbean
@MaherNasserUN	@Purna_UNW	@IOM_GMDAC
@UNDevelopPolicy	@UNIraq	@IOM_MECC
@UNHCRDjibouti	@UNHABITAT	@IOM_Uganda
@UNIDOafg	@UNICEFCanada	@IOMatEU
@KenyaMUN19	@UNCTAD	@IOMchief
@UNESCAP	@VisitUN	@Health_IOM
@UNHCRSerbia	@UNCCD	@unicefchief
@HDRUNDP	@UNDP	@unhabitatyouth
@UNCityCPH	@UN_Piper	@UnitedNationsTZ
@UNESCO_Pacific	@UNLibrary	@FAONewYork
@UNODC_Brussels	@SayNO_UNiTE	
@UNICBeirut	@UNUniversity	

The following code families were applied during content analysis:

*Evaluative statements that explicitly refer to the GCM.* Those referring to the GCM in a negative way included phrases like 'don't vote for this (pact)!', 'this (agreement) is a disservice to the American people!'; those deemed positive in

evaluation may read as '[...] the Global Compact has immense potential to help the world'.

*Evaluative statements about migrants or migration* included phrases hinting at a negative evaluation, such as 'migration destroys culture [...] one homogeneous world is not what we want' or warnings of an increasing 'flow of refugees and illegal economic migrants'. Examples of positive evaluations included phrases like 'We cannot wait any longer for women's rights in migration!'; 'Stop criminalizing migrants'; 'Invest in migrant children. Invest in the future. Transform the lives of millions of #ChildrenUprooted.'

*Evaluative statements about or directed at the UN* included negative phrases like '@UN It's not you to decide!' or positive ones, for example, praising the UN in terms of 'Historic moment for @UN as an agreement was reached on the Global Compact #ForMigration.'

*Evaluative statements about multilateralism international/global cooperation* included negative phrases defaming international politics as 'globalism', referring to a 'New World Order' or rumors of a 'Kalergi plan'), criticizing an alleged loss of sovereignty by international cooperation in general (or specific IOs other than the UN). Positive evaluations were coded, for example, where multilateralism ('celebrate multilateralism') or international cooperation, in general, was explicitly mentioned in a positive way ('we must understand what drives irregular migration & address it through interstate cooperation').

Replication: All data and codes for replicating results are accessible at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MEckerEhrhardt>.

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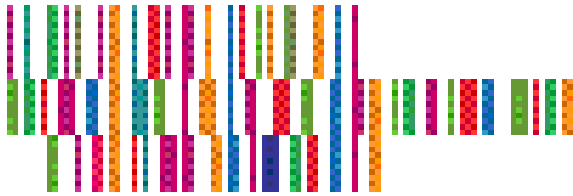
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## Abstract

Communication professionals working for International Organizations (IOs) are important intermediaries of global governance that increasingly use social media to reach out to citizens directly. Social media pose new challenges for IO public communication, such as a highly competitive economy of attention and the fragmentation of audiences driven by networked curation of content and selective exposure. In this context, IO social media communication has to make tough choices about what to communicate and how, aggravating inherent conflicts of IO communication between comprehensive public information (aiming at institutional transparency) – and partisan political advocacy (aiming at normative change). If IOs choose advocacy, they might garner substantial resonance on social media. IO advocacy nevertheless fails to the extent that it fosters the polarized fragmentation of networked communication and undermines the credibility of IO communication as a source of trustworthy information across polarized 'echo chambers'. The paper illustrates this argument through a quantitative content and social network analysis of X/Twitter communication on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM). Remarkably, instead of facilitating cross-cluster communication ('building bridges'), United Nations accounts seem to have substantially fostered ideological fragmentation ('digging the trench') by their way of partisan retweeting, mentioning, and (hash)tagging.

**Key words:** *international organizations; social media; public communication; echo chambers; advocacy; United Nations; Global Compact for Migration; content analysis; supervised machine learning; social network analysis*

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