



International Relations

Networks

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I'm very interested in how to explain change in the world. In my lifetime, I've witnessed a lot of what I would call genuine change. The rise of new issues, like human rights, women's rights, environmental justice, has led to change. New institutions have been created.

And I felt that the existing theories in political science/international relations didn't help me explain this change. The existing theories tended to focus on stability. They were very useful in helping explain why states stayed the same. But they weren't helpful in understanding why a change occurred.

So when I looked at explaining why change occurred, I felt that we needed to pay attention to bottom-up actors, actors that I would later call 'transnational advocacy networks'. So we wrote a book called *Activists Beyond Borders* that had the subtitle, *Transnational Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. And we invented that term - 'transnational advocacy networks'. We invented the term because it described a reality we saw when we went out and interviewed people about human rights or the environment or women's rights.

They described themselves as being part of networks. So we coined this term, transnational advocacy networks, because these networks were engaged in advocacy. They were arguing in favour of particular positions.

They were pressuring and lobbying to get their ideas in politics. And they were transnational, because they crossed borders. They weren't limited to a single country. We felt that transnational advocacy networks were an important part of the explanation for why these exciting changes were happening in politics.

The first thing I should say is explain what we mean by transnational advocacy networks. Political scientists and sociologists have used the notion of a network for a while. And by network, they mean something that's voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal. So what does that mean?

It's not like a bureaucracy. Or it's not like an organisation. In a bureaucracy and an organisation, you can do a chart of the way power flows in the organisation. And if you have a boss, your boss tells you what to do. And your boss can fire you.

In a network, it's voluntary, because people choose to enter the network. And they can choose to leave the network. It's formally horizontal, because there's no organisational chart

where you have a boss and your boss can't fire you. No one in the network can fire you from the network.

And its reciprocal, because people join networks because they want to get something out of the network. And one reason they stay in networks is because they do get something out of it. People do mutual favours for one another. But also, they help one another out.

So that's the basic notion of a network. But a network can be in a town, in a city or in a country. To be a transnational advocacy network, first you have to work across borders. And so to be transnational in our field, usually we think it has to work in at least three countries. To be an advocacy network, it needs to be advocating for particular positions or particular ideas. And so we thought that a transnational advocacy network was that group of relevant actors who are working together, who share a common discourse, a common set of ideas. And they engage in dense exchanges of information and services. So what does that mean?

In the human rights movement that I study, it means groups like Amnesty International - that's an organisation - gets into a network that might include individuals like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, which means the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, one of the major human rights organisations in Argentina that worked to protest the disappearance and killing of their children. It means having people in the network, like the Ford Foundation, that may be providing money to Amnesty International and to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to help them carry out their work.

It means linking sometimes to people in the media or people in academia, or people in international organisations, or even parts of governments. So a network doesn't mean just civil society organisations or non-governmental organisations, what we call NGOs. NGOs and civil society organisations are always an important part of networks. But networks are much more than just civil society groups.

A theory of transnational advocacy networks differs from most other theories in international relations, because it's bottom-up, because it focuses on non-state actors. It focuses on actors who traditionally have not been considered an important part of international relations. Most theories of international relations, be they realist theories or neoliberal institutionalist theories or liberal theories, tend to look mainly at states as the primary actors of world politics.

They sometimes look at international organisations, gathering states together. They look at transnational corporations who are economically powerful actors. But traditionally, those theories have ignored non-state actors and, particularly, not very powerful organisations, like civil society groups or NGOs.

States continue to be the main actors in the international system. And no one denies that.

Transnational advocacy networks are important, because they often are pressuring states to try to change state policies. No one is more aware of the importance of states than transnational advocacy networks. States are their main targets.

So we're not trying to say that states don't matter. But we're trying to say that states are not the only important actors out there. And you may not be able to understand what states are doing, unless you understand something about the pressures they receive from outside, including from transnational advocacy networks.

The international relations scholars have, for many years, used this metaphor of anarchy to describe the international system. You've already heard John Mearsheimer talk on anarchy. I'm not going to define it for you. But what I will tell you is that I have argued - and I've argued this with a colleague, Michael Barnett - that anarchy is an outdated metaphor. And it really is, for the most part, no longer useful to understand most of what's happening in the international system.

We prefer the notion of global society. Or we can talk about global governance. Both of those metaphors come closer to describing most of what happens in the international system.

Transnational advocacy networks are an important part of global society, and they engage in, and pressure for, forms of global governance.

Networks can be simultaneously agents or actors in world politics. And they're also structures. Margaret Keck and I, when we wrote the book *Activists Beyond Borders*, we argue in that book that networks can be either agents or structures. We preferred to focus on the actor side, the agent side, of networks.

We wanted to do that because we were interested in explaining change. To explain change, we thought we needed actors. We need real agents, real people, who struggle to bring about change. And so most of my research has focused on the emergence of new norms and new ideas. And there, I've needed and used this understanding of advocacy networks as agents. Other scholars are more interested in networks as structures. And by that, they mean that networks have these enduring qualities that affect the outcomes that happen by virtue of their structure. So for example, networks, I said that networks are formally horizontal. But informally, we know that even networks have hierarchies within them.

In the human rights network, there are some organisations, like Amnesty International or like Human Rights Watch, that are more powerful than other organisations in the network. So those organisations may create a certain structure of the network. Maybe they're at the centre of it.

They're like a hub and wheel network, which is one description we use of one possible network structure. In those types of networks, those organisations can be what we call gatekeepers. So Charli Carpenter has written that the powerful organisations within networks can be gatekeepers and decide which issues get adopted and which issues are not accepted.