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To cite this article: Cheryl S. Y. Shea, Yanru Jiang & Wendy L. Y. Leung (2022) David vs. Goliath: transnational grassroots outreach and empirical evidence from the #HongKongProtests Twitter network, *Review of Communication*, 22:3, 193-212, DOI: [10.1080/15358593.2022.2106793](https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2022.2106793)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2022.2106793>



Published online: 30 Aug 2022.



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# David vs. Goliath: transnational grassroots outreach and empirical evidence from the #HongKongProtests Twitter network

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the digital transnational advocacy network of the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement on Twitter. We present how grassroots users strategically utilize social media for achieving diplomatic engagement with foreign actors. The Twitter network analysis and natural language processing of tweets ( $N = 88,800$ ) identify the key opinion leaders and their three core grassroots frames: universal values, humanitarian concerns, and geopolitics. We find that the low threshold of Twitter participation provides additional direct channels for ordinary users to engage with foreign politicians and create their own public opinion wave. The Anti-ELAB digital transnational grassroots advocacy network was found to have more high-profile actors, such as corporations and celebrities, due to pressure from grassroots users to stand with them. Though the two traditional frames, universal values and humanitarian concerns, adopted from the organizational-centered outreach remain prevalent, grassroots users extend geopolitical frames to incorporate their cultural capital and economic power.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 August 2021  
Accepted 25 July 2022

## KEYWORDS

social movement; grassroots;  
transnational  
communication; network  
analysis; natural language  
processing

The year 2019 was “the year of street protest,” and the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement was one of the social movements that caught global attention.<sup>1</sup> As its name suggests, the movement was triggered by a proposed extradition bill that allows the government to send suspected fugitives to mainland China. The demonstration, held on June 9, 2019, was attended by hundreds of thousands, and was widely regarded as the beginning of the decentralized movement. Next to street protests that persisted for over half a year, digital media enabled protesters to keep up the movement’s momentum online, extending their influence on foreign audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Here, Hong Kong Anti-ELAB users actively reached out to international audiences on Twitter, coining the term “international front” to refer to the active targeting of high-profile users in a series of lobbying efforts both online and offline. Different from the political activists who have maintained active connections with state-level actors, these observed grassroots users in the Anti-ELAB network are spontaneous individual

participants, dominated by Hong Kong locals and those in the diaspora. In this study, we identify grassroots users as individuals who have no organizational affiliation and have limited prior mobilization experience. The networked environment enables them to reach out and engage with specific international actors, such as individual foreign politicians. Here, engagement on Twitter is essential not only to create a public opinion wave against pro-China internet commentators, but also to strategically initiate diplomatic engagement with important international actors.<sup>3</sup>

While numerous research studies discuss how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activist groups engage in transnational advocacy, there has not been much work that explores how individuals participate in a “transnational advocacy network.”<sup>4</sup> The reason is obvious, as it was almost impossible for individuals to get contact with supranational organizations and foreign political actors, not to mention transnational advocacy and related diplomatic engagements when the concept was coined in the late 1990s. However, the presence of political actors on social media and the prevalence of Twitter as a “real-time, public, many-to-many broadcasting” platform greatly diminishes the border,<sup>5</sup> boundary, and hierarchy of transnational advocacy conversations, opening up a shared public sphere for local grassroots users to reach out to global actors and compete with “official forces” for attention and support.<sup>6</sup> The originally formal, hierarchical, and organizational transnational outreach could now be utilized in connective social movements that capitalize on individual actors and bottom-up characteristics. The Hong Kong Anti-ELAB movement is a useful case to illustrate how massive, spontaneous, and individualized voices could turn into meaningful and effective calls for transnational advocacy via social media.

Recent social movement theory suggests that grassroots participants seek egalitarian engagement while rejecting representation from identifiable organizations whose agendas conflict with their own.<sup>7</sup> In bypassing such mediating organizations, grassroots users can leverage their cultural capital and economic power to reach out to opinion leaders and tailor their frames to incorporate perspectives traditionally underemphasized by organizations. This study, therefore, aims to explore grassroots users’ transnational outreach on Twitter surrounding the digital activism in the Anti-ELAB movement by identifying (a) key communities and opinion leaders that dominate the transnational network, (b) frames from organizational-centered transnational advocacy networks that have been adopted and recreated in individual-initiated outreach, and (c) grassroots users’ strategies of applying different frames to different foreign targets. We first review the relevant literature on the development from organizational-centered to individual-centered transnational outreach. We then provide an overview of actors’ specific strategic engagement, based on a network analysis of Twitter posts under hashtags addressing the Anti-ELAB movement, and present the discursive frames that grassroots users repurpose from organizational-centered outreach.

## **Organization-centered and individual-centered transnational communication**

Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink first introduced the concept of “transnational advocacy network” to pinpoint the significant roles of nonstate members in the sphere of global politics.<sup>8</sup> Actors from different places are bound together by shared values or

common discourse to get involved in domestic issues.<sup>9</sup> In particular, local organizations failing to influence a state's interest seek help from external parties and create a boom-erang pattern in mobilizing support from other states and international organizations. By doing so, these organizations hope to exert pressure on the original state by proposing policies, enacting sanctions, or offering conditional aid to the domestic actors. However, in this conventional framework, the strategic mobilization of information from domestic actors to leverage over more powerful foreign governments usually happens on the organizational level. Besides organization-to-organization communication, transnational outreach also happens between organizations and *foreign publics*. For example, studies found that due to the lack of access to regular diplomatic channels, some rebel organizations utilized various ideological frames to get foreign publics' attention and involvement in domestic issues.<sup>10</sup> Emerging in the late 20th century, this type of diplomatic communication was recognized as important in domestic mobilization for rebel organizations amid civil war or phenomena such as the Arab Spring.<sup>11</sup>

With the rise of digital technologies and proliferation of social media, individual-initiated outreach has recently emerged as a phenomenon to pursue one's own agenda in social movements. Platforms such as Twitter give users a direct channel to comment on social issues and engage in social movements. This structural reduction in participation cost significantly empowers previously marginalized communities, activists, or even grassroots participants to actively participate in social movements both online and offline.<sup>12</sup> Grassroots users can challenge conflict narratives by crafting messages according to their own ideas and disseminating these messages to a broader audience online.<sup>13</sup> With a direct information distribution system, nonstate players can compete with official forces to gain attention from international audiences and public figures.<sup>14</sup> Using the counterframes that protestors construct, foreign players can learn from persuasive arguments that appeal to moral values and reproduce them in worldwide mainstream media.<sup>15</sup>

## Public diplomacy on Twitter

In instrumentalizing the technological affordances of Twitter, elite local political activists in Hong Kong have consciously managed their networks and built up connections with foreign publics from previous local pro-democracy movements.<sup>16</sup> However, the general Twitter usage only surged when grassroots users recognized the urgency of the cause and were motivated to use Twitter to garner international support. Though grassroots participants did not necessarily follow the agenda of political activists, their involvement essentially scaled up Anti-ELAB's public diplomacy on Twitter. While acknowledging the presence of existing networks and resources in the Twitter network, this study is particularly interested in the role and participation pattern of these grassroots users, who are ordinary citizens and unaffiliated with organizations. The advantages of digital platforms are believed to be a key element to extend public diplomacy from a tight organizational structure to a loosely coordinated transnational grassroots network.

Twitter provides a public space for political discourse where users can directly interact with public figures by mentioning and replying to them.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, we see the strategic use of Twitter as a transnational diplomacy instrument that enabled individual users to reach out to international players publicly to lobby in the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB

movement. Due to different resource and capital access, the strategies for constructing frames and targeting key political actors differ for grassroots-led communication. In traditional transnational communication by activist organizations, the focus is on finding new allies (such as global political actors) and involving international organizations in supporting their domestic requests.<sup>18</sup> The weak-tie affordances of Twitter—like the functions of hashtags (#) and mentions (@)—enable grassroots participants to involve more opinion leaders in the conversation. They do so by contacting supranational organizations, individual politicians, and other politically active figures from other states.<sup>19</sup> These attainable foreign political forces give grassroots and protesters opportunities to bypass domestic censorship regulation, asymmetric information, or even propaganda generated by state players for both national and international audiences.<sup>20</sup>

Although grassroots participants invite international political players to join the Twitter conversation, it is unclear which types of foreign opinion leaders (including politicians, politically active figures like scholars and experts, celebrities, media, and corporations) they would seek. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

*RQ1: Which international stakeholders dominate the transnational Anti-ELAB Twitter network?*

In his work on the Twitter network, Kevin Wallsten observes that, although decentralized network structures avoid the gatekeeping effect for information flow among the public, the Twitter accounts of government officials, politicians, and media professionals still dominate political conversations on Twitter.<sup>21</sup> Considering that grassroots participants utilize transnational outreach to involve international forces in the discourse and seek worldwide attention, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1a: Hong Kong grassroots users are more likely to mention government officials, politicians, and media professionals than supranational organizations.*

The selection of outreach targets is strategic and sensitive to global political dynamics as well. During the Anti-ELAB movement, grassroots users have been aware of the intense China–U.S. relationship due to their prolonged trade war, and some positioned Hong Kong as the frontline of a global battle between the resurgent Chinese expansion and the world.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Hong Kong has long been located at the overlapping sphere of influence, where China and the United States have shared interests and power.<sup>23</sup> With such concerns, we expect that Hong Kong protesters are more likely to reach out to U.S. actors as their key leverage point to channel their values and gain the power to stand against China:

*H1b: Hong Kong grassroots users mention politicians and politically active actors from the United States more than those from the other countries.*

## **Lobbying strategies from organization-relayed to individual-centered outreach**

This study argues that grassroots users develop their outreach strategies based on a shared understanding of the social movement and the traditional organization-centered targeting strategies regarding who to target and what to say. Individual participants

further extend the organization-centered strategy by utilizing their own cultural capacity and economic power.

In the traditional advocacy model, due to a plethora of global sufferings, local individuals first have to curate frames to fit targeted NGOs' requirements and values.<sup>24</sup> Bypassing the mediating organizations removes one significant persuasion barrier, which allows the individuals to employ apposite frames directly to their political targets. For resource-allocation concerns and unwritten rules, lobbying between organizations inevitably faces greater constraints than the individual units. Grassroots users enjoy the flexibility of drawing upon different topics and prevalent issues to promote their agendas.

With a high variety of topical choices for the frames, the individuals' power can be manifested via various forms of declarations. Boycott as a form of consumer politics is consciously adopted not only as an economic act, but also as an enactment of political considerations.<sup>25</sup> Without the organizational constraints, grassroots users have their full autonomy to boycott and/or defame products or business entities at the individual level. In this sense, their cultural capital can be leveraged to select and respond to the apposite targets and issues. Such individual determination is coordinated into collective consumer power in social struggles and is often regarded as a "weapon of the weak against the strong."<sup>26</sup> The strength of individual actions with collective mobilization triumphs over organization-centered lobbying because of its greater freedom for discussion themes and tools in a contentious incident.

## Frames in transnational activist communication

Framing is essential for persuasion, as it provides clues and highlights particular angles for audiences to make sense of certain issues.<sup>27</sup> In social movement studies, frames are ideological packages that include central ideas and a set of discursive devices for discussing issues.<sup>28</sup> Effective framing plays a significant role in garnering help from foreign parties when their attention is dispersed, and resources are scarce. In traditional transnational outreach, three types of frames are commonly adopted by local protesters.

First, framing social movements as "battles for universal values" is a common strategy adopted by protesters to appeal to both local and global audiences. Such a strategy assists audiences who are unfamiliar with the precise protest context to resonate with the cause. This strategy also creates an impression that protesters are not solely driven by local interests but striving to safeguard shared global values.<sup>29</sup> Pursuing universal values such as human rights, freedom, and democracy has been a leitmotif of transnational advocacy.<sup>30</sup> Appealing to global values could foster a sense of global solidarity in order to garner support from other movement participants with similar political demands.

While the mainstream movement underlines a myriad of common moral values, Clifford Bob observes that emphasizing specific moral values, or addressing the self-interest of targeted supporters, enables a higher chance for a local movement to garner their support.<sup>31</sup> Protesters usually approach human rights organizations and actors in democratic countries by reporting the misbehaviors of their political opponents for failing to meet the "international standard" of human rights and democracies. Protesters also legitimate their activism by aligning with universal moral values and internationalizing. Activists often reach out to actors in the United States due to its sensitivities to human rights violations.<sup>32</sup> Benjamin T. Jones and Eleonora Mattiacci

find that Libyan rebels exploited American concerns about civilian targeting by tweeting copiously about their government's attacks on civilians and framing themselves as "freedom fighters."<sup>33</sup>

Second, Keck and Sikkink highlight that bodily harm to vulnerable individuals as well as inequality of opportunity are two of the most appealing issues to global audiences—regardless of differences in race, religion, or language.<sup>34</sup> While each protest involves various cultural conflicts and political implications, the "emotive power of the personal narratives"<sup>35</sup> is the one that resonates best in foreign environments. Humanitarian crises featuring suffering are especially helpful to advance the agenda of international human rights organizations and attain the resources required with the help of foreign actors.<sup>36</sup> Scenes of repressed activists and human suffering have greater potential to garner sympathy outside the local context, as well as undermine the legitimacy of local governments and policing organizations.<sup>37</sup> A delegitimization of in-state opponents is essential for any transnational outreach, since it generates room for international organizations or transnational actors to get involved.

Another important frame is geopolitics, which involves strategic evaluation and calculation vis-à-vis the larger political and global context. Morality and sympathy by themselves fail to explain the choice as to why foreign actors get involved in another country's issue. In this fierce worldwide competition for attention and help, foreign governments and organizations prioritize those aligned with their cultural values while attempting to circumvent becoming embroiled in unfavorable situations.<sup>38</sup> For the in-state players, approaching the right targets and disseminating country-specific frames that target the foreign actors' gain and anticipate the loss increases the chance to receive assistance. To achieve efficient persuasion, geopolitical awareness is crucial for activists. Keck and Sikkink highlight that the importance of geopolitics in transnational advocacy networks significantly affect how local organizations set their agendas and approach foreign states.<sup>39</sup>

These traditional outreach frames, which have proven effective, serve as the starting point for grassroots users to derive their outreach strategies. With their global audiences in mind, they select suitable frames to distribute. The nature of individual actions on social media are expected to result in a greater diversity for target and frame choice in the network:

*RQ2a: How do individual grassroots users borrow frames commonly used in organization-centered transnational advocacy communication?*

*RQ2b: What new frames do individual grassroots users develop in their individual-centered transnational advocacy communication?*

*RQ3: How do individual grassroots users adapt their frames to different foreign targets?*

## Method

To address the questions of specific framing and targeting strategies in individual-centered outreach, this study investigates the Twitter network of the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB movement with a specific focus on the transnational outreach of Hong Kong grassroots users during the protests.



## Data collection

Our sampling period ranges from June 9, 2019 (the first million rally) to May 31, 2020 (the formal announcement of the National Security Law). The Twitter conversation regarding the Anti-ELAB movement has shifted distinctly due to grassroots users' concerns about censorship and surveillance under the new regulation, making this period fruitful to analyze the movement's transnationalization. We collected our data from 13 Anti-ELAB movement hashtags: #HongKongProtests, #HongKongProtester, #Stand-withHK, #StandWithHongKong, #LiberateHK, #LiberateHongKong, #wearehkers, #Wearehongkongers, #hkpolicebrutality, #ProtectHKStudents, #hongkongpolice, #PassHKHumanRightsandDemocracyAct, and #HKHumanRightsandDemocracyAct. Using the Python package GetOldTweet3, we collected 1.6 million tweets. To investigate the transnational outreach of Hong Kong grassroots users, we focused specifically on the influence they exerted using the mentions feature to target specific Twitter users.<sup>40</sup> After filtering the dataset to include only tweets with mentions and removing posts that appeared multiple times, we were left with a final  $N = 88,800$  tweets with mentions for our data analysis.

## Twitter network

To establish the network relationship between the source (the user who mentioned) and the target (the user who was mentioned), we counted a tweet with multiple mentions as having multiple edges (linkages between source and target) in this Twitter network.<sup>41</sup> For instance, if user A mentioned users B, C, and D in a tweet, we would record three edges (A—B, A—C, and A—D), in which A is the source, and B, C, and D are the targets.

## Identifying frames

First introduced by Lu Guan, Yafei Zhang, and Jonathan Zhu, the word segmentation and topic/frame extraction method based on word2vec and K-Means clustering have been tested and implemented across various social media and online archives in computational method studies.<sup>42</sup> This study used the same unsupervised natural language processing model word2vec to identify four frames, two of which had been proposed earlier (*Universal Values* and *Humanitarian Concerns*) and two of which were new frames commonly adopted by individual transnational outreach (*Help* and *China Threat*). The word2vec model solves the limitation of Latent Dirichlet allocation topic modeling, which exclusively focuses on co-occurrence and word frequency to classify words and topics, ignoring the context of input data.<sup>43</sup> By converting words into a vector format, word2vec captures the context of each word by considering its relative positioning among all input data.

We used K-Means clustering to group all vectorized words from word2vec into  $n$  ( $= 16$ ) different subframe clusters. Our word2vec word-embedding method quantified similarities between terms by generating a proximity score between each pair of words based on their vectorized units. Navid Rekabsaz, Mihai Lupu, and Allan Hanbury have tested multiple word2vec models and suggest a general threshold of 0.85 for the best proximity measurement between two terms.<sup>44</sup> Based on the threshold of 0.85, we



identified a dictionary of similar words for the centroid of 16 subframe clusters. Inspired by Dror Walter and Yotam Ophir's text analysis innovation of treating each news topic as a framing element and combining framing elements into news framing packages,<sup>45</sup> we further combined the 16 frame packages (subframe clusters) into the four parental level frames identified above (*Universal Values*, *Humanitarian Concerns*, *Help*, and *China Threat*) for better generalization.

We conducted an additional content analysis to verify that all words suggested by the word2vec model and K-Means clustering accurately imply their frames. Each word dictionary was verified by two coders with knowledge of the Anti-ELAB movement. All four frames passed the intercoder reliability test, as measured by Krippendorff's Alpha (*Universal Values*  $\alpha = 0.89$ , *Humanitarian Concerns*  $\alpha = 0.84$ , *Help*  $\alpha = 0.82$ , and *China Threat*  $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

Using a frame dictionary generated by machine learning and content coded by the coders, we validated our dictionaries to identify the types of frames contained in each tweet. Although the number of words varied across different frame dictionaries, this variance only moderately affected our frame labeling because we were labeling according to the presence of words in the dictionary and because the most-used similar words would capture the majority of the tweets under those frames. In other words, the effect of adding an additional word to a dictionary was minimal. To avoid ambiguity, we removed all hashtags and mentions when having the computer automatically validate our dictionaries.

Two coders additionally conducted a content analysis on 215 preprocessed tweets regarding the four transnational frames. The 215 tweets were selected using stratified sampling, with the presence of each frame approximating 25% of the sampled tweets. They first coded 100 tweets that were drawn from random sampling and passed the intercoder reliability test, as measured by Krippendorff's Alpha (*Universal Values*  $\alpha = 0.97$ , *Humanitarian Concerns*  $\alpha = 0.88$ , *Help*  $\alpha = 0.94$ , and *China Threat*  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). This was followed by annotating the rest of the tweets to achieve satisfactory accuracy for all frames: *Universal Values* (91.16%), *Humanitarian Concerns* (93.02%), *Help* (95.35%), and *China Threat* (94.42%). The frame categorization, dictionary examples of frames, tweet samples, and the content analysis codebook can be accessed online in Appendix I–III.<sup>46</sup>

### **Identifying opinion leaders**

Previous research used 10% of overall in-degree levels as the threshold for identifying opinion leaders in an online community.<sup>47</sup> Due to our large sample size, we analyzed results based on different types of opinion leaders, extending our analysis to include the top 666 opinion leaders who received more than 25 mentions for correlation analysis and the top 216 most-mentioned opinion leaders for ANOVA analysis. For each opinion leader in Anti-ELAB's Twitter network, we began by having two coders identify their attributes from the following categories: U.S. politicians (including government officials), non-U.S. politicians, NGOs, Hong Kong actors (local politicians, officials, NGOs, and activists), Media and reporters, and Others.<sup>48</sup> We realized that the initial categories were not concrete and comprehensive. First, it is difficult to draw firm distinctions between NGOs, activists, columnists, scholars, and political pundits. Second, some corporations and celebrities were mentioned when the Hong Kong grassroots

users were dissatisfied with their interactions with China; some protesters were even boycotting these corporations online. Here is a tweet showing how corporations and celebrities were embroiled in the political conversation:

[#BlizzCon2019] In favoring China, @Blizzard\_Ent has taken actions that outrageously intervened free speech of players in Oct. Protesters are now speaking up for freedom of expression and #HongKong.

In distinguishing NGOs and corporations/celebrity classifications, we placed opinion leaders in the following final categories: *U.S. politicians*, *Non-U.S. politicians*, *Politically active figures in the United States*, *Non-U.S. politically active figures*, *Hong Kong activists and actors*, *News media and reporters*, *Companies and celebrities embroiled in the incidents*, and *Others*. The Krippendorff's Alpha of intercoder reliability is 0.93.

### Counting frames

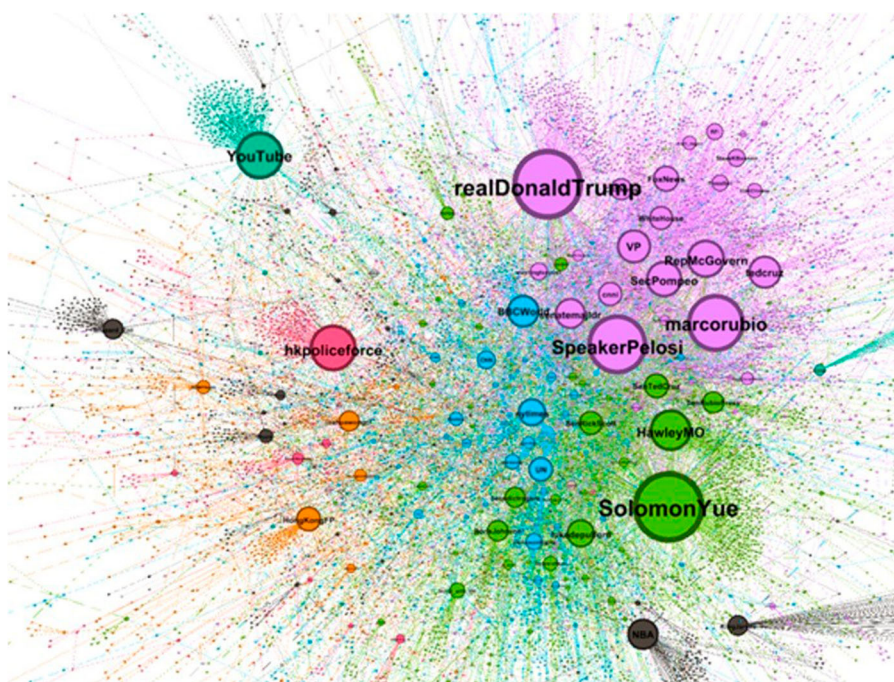
Because this study focuses on the transnational outreach frame strategy of grassroots users, we have chosen to exclude 3,769 tweets posted by 666 opinion leaders defined above from the Twitter network, which accounts for 4.28% of all tweets with mentions. Then we recorded the number of times a frame was used when mentioning a specific opinion leader and divided this number by the total number of mentions the person received, thus calculating the percentage of each frame for all opinion leaders. By using the percentages of frames, we avoided the issue of overrepresenting opinion leaders with greater numbers of mentions (as opposed to using the sum of frames), although the percentage may overrepresent opinion leaders with small numbers of mentions. We further ran a correlation test and checked relationships between the sum of mentions and percentages of frames to ensure the overrepresentation for opinion leaders with fewer mentions did not affect the percentage of frames in the whole pool.

## Findings

### Network analysis

In addressing RQ1 and testing H1, we conducted a preliminary analysis to identify dominant communities and opinion leaders in the transnational Anti-ELAB Twitter network. We used Gephi to visualize the Twitter mention community of Hong Kong protests (see [Figure 1](#)). A random sample of 20,000 edges was drawn from 88,800 edges. This study used the Modularity method for community detection, which is measured by how communities in a network are sufficiently different from a fully random graph.<sup>49</sup> In this visualization, the node size is associated with in-degree levels (i.e., the number of mentions received) for each user. Seven major clusters have been generated within this network; they are all led by opinion leaders from each community. Some distinctive communities are as follows:

- (1) U.S. politicians and government officials who are in powerful positions to influence international relations (e.g., President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Mike Pompeo, Nancy Pelosi, etc.)



**Figure 1.** Network Analysis Drawn from 20,000 Samples.

- (2) U.S. politically active figures who are responsive and engage frequently with Hong Kong grassroots users on Twitter (e.g., Solomon Yue)
- (3) International mainstream media outlets (e.g., *BBC News*, *New York Times*, and *CNN*)
- (4) Local Hong Kong media outlets (e.g., *Hong Kong Free Press* and *South China Morning Post*)
- (5) Companies and celebrities embroiled in the political conversation (e.g., NBA, LeBron James, Blizzard Entertainment, Disney, and Apple)

Overall, U.S. politicians dominate the Twitter conversation in this network and have been mentioned by Hong Kong grassroots users substantially more than other opinion leaders. The official account for the Hong Kong police force also constitutes a large node due to incidents of police brutality going viral on Twitter during the protests.

### **Usage of frames**

To address RQ2, we examined both opinion leaders' and Hong Kong grassroots users' use of different frames on Twitter. Frequency analysis in [Table 1](#) revealed that grassroots users did not mirror opinion leaders in their frame usage strategy in the Hong Kong Twitter network, as the frequency distributions between the two were distinctive.

Tweets with labeled frames also provide qualitative details of how Hong Kong grassroots users applied these frames to court foreign support. The Anti-ELAB movement, like many other political movements, is highly associated with universal values such as

**Table 1.** Frequency Analysis of Opinion Leaders' and Grassroots Users' Frames.

Frames	Opinion leaders' tweets with opinion leader mentions (%) $n = 3,638$	Grassroots users' tweets with opinion leader mentions (%) $n = 72,740$
Help	5.44	20.97
Universal Value	18.77	20.19
Humanitarian Concern	11.98	16.51
China Threat	12.97	16.44

Note: The total numbers of tweets from opinion leaders and grassroots users were 3,769 and 85,031. This frequency analysis only focuses on the outreach strategies of these actors. The numbers of tweets that mentioned opinion leaders were  $n = 3,638$  for opinion leaders and  $n = 72,740$  for grassroots users.

freedom and democracy.<sup>50</sup> These value-oriented frames were leveraged by Hong Kong protesters to approach politicians from democratic countries like the United States. The *Universal Values* frame is composed of the subframes of illiberality and democratic values. The illiberality perception in the Hong Kong content refers not only to the short-term opposition of government-enforced extradition bills, but also to the long-term dissatisfaction with mainland China's interference and declining trend of Hong Kong political efficacy.<sup>51</sup> Grassroots users approached the *Universal Values* frame by illustrating the insufficient democracy of the Hong Kong government and pressuring Western political influencers with appeals to democratic and Western values:

*Illiberality:* A clear message for @BorisJohnson and @GOVUK today, as hundreds of thousands march peacefully in Hong Kong against a government that has lost all legitimacy. There can be no more excuses for inaction from the UK government.

*Democracy:* Thank you @marcorubio! #HongKongers treasure freedom as much as Americans. #HongKong is at the frontline to fight against totalitarian regime, stand with us, #StandWithHongKong to fight for a free world.

The Anti-ELAB movement is also featured for a significant degree of tactical radicalization and protest violence,<sup>52</sup> which is relatively rare compared with the peaceful non-violent protests in the past. Hong Kong grassroots users raised humanitarian concerns by stressing the hostility between armed police and vulnerable protesters. These universal frames were utilized to offer evidence to delegitimize the local powerful parties and bolster the grassroots users' need for foreign assistance:

*Police Brutality:* Tonight, #HongKongPolice suddenly shot a live round in Mongkok in #HongKong without facing imminent threat!!! @SolomonYue @marcorubio @HawleyMO @SenRickScott

*Vulnerable Civilians:* HKpolice arresting a lots of students and some teens today for stop their protest against the China law that will be pass today. @realDonaldTrump @SecPompeo @HawleyMO @SolomonYue @SenRubioPress ...

Different from ideology-oriented organizational outreach, individuals commonly used the action-oriented *Help* frame to directly ask for help from political influencers. Social media affordance supports grassroots individuals using help phrases to get attention from foreign actors and international audiences.<sup>53</sup> Among the Hong Kong Twitter network, the motivation of utilizing help frames is more explicit in two ways. First, some backstage action plans and campaigns, such as the proposal of Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Acts, were put forward during the movement. The individuals could refer to these existing bill proposals and relay with politicians for help with

minimal effort. Additionally, the intensified in-state suppression and reference to past crackdowns made the Hong Kong situation more urgent, requiring direct help from the international actors.

*Asking for Help:* There will be a massacre once they cut off the internet access. Please help us. Stop the Chinese government from killing the civilians. @SpeakerPelosi @VP

*China Threat* was also the novel frame observed in the individual-centered outreach. As early as the late 20th century, the term “China Threat” was introduced when Westerners recognized that China would become the next economic and military superpower, expanding their influence, and threatening the status quo of the Global North via destabilization of regional security.<sup>54</sup> In recent years, the power of Chinese money is even considered to be corrupting domestic politics, which poses great challenges to the economic interest and diplomatic cohesion in Europe.<sup>55</sup> The expansion of political influence also casts a shadow over cooperation with Chinese companies and associations.<sup>56</sup> Grassroots users approached this frame by condemning corporations and celebrities for submitting to Chinese consumerist power and reminding political influencers of China’s geopolitical threat:

*Political Threat:* Free speech matters! That’s why we are protesting at #BlizzCon2019 in against totalitarian China’s speech controls and influence on global companies—including @Blizzard\_Ent.

*Consumerist Power:* Shame on @NBA pls safeguard the American values rather than kneeling down over CCP for blood money! Freedom is like air. If you are losing freedoms, it’s hard to breath! That’s why Hongkongers have been fighting over 4 months! It’s our now or never! Win or die!

We further correlated the *Help* frame with the three ideological-oriented frames as seen in Table 2. In general, Pearson’s correlation of *Universal Values* ( $r = .13, p < .05$ ) and *Humanitarian Concerns* ( $r = .34, p < .001$ ) to the *Help* frame is significant. On the other hand, the *China Threat* frame rarely appeared with the *Help* frame ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ). The *Universal Values* frame, instead, strongly correlated with the *China Threat* ( $r = .54, p < .001$ ).

## Frames and targets

The third part of the analysis addressed RQ3 by covering how Twitter users varied the frames for their target audiences. We conducted a one-way ANOVA test to examine how different frames were brought up according to the regions and categories of the opinion leaders. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of frames targeting various positions. Table 4 presents the differences specifically within politicians in

**Table 2.** Intercorrelation among the Studied Frames.

Frames	1. Help	2. Universal Value	3. Humanitarian Concern	4. China Threat
1. Help		.13**	.34***	-.18**
2. Universal Value			-.40**	.54**
3. Humanitarian Concern				-.07
4. China Threat				

Note:  $n = 660$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** ANOVA Analysis of the Usage of Frames by Targets.

DV: % of frames	Targets	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Statistics
Help	Politicians	81	0.28	0.09	Welch = 53.77***
	Politically active figures	22	0.19	0.08	
	H.K. actors	22	0.13	0.04	
	Media	60	0.13	0.07	
	Companies/celebrities	29	0.10	0.05	
Universal Value	Politicians	81	0.18	0.06	Welch = 15.53***
	Politically active figures	22	0.13	0.09	
	H.K. actors	22	0.14	0.05	
	Media	60	0.12	0.05	
	Companies/celebrities	29	0.24	0.10	
Humanitarian Concern	Politicians	81	0.16	0.04	<i>F</i> = 7.06***
	Politically active figures	22	0.15	0.05	
	H.K. actors	22	0.14	0.09	
	Media	60	0.14	0.04	
	Companies/celebrities	29	0.10	0.06	
China Threat	Politicians	81	0.13	0.09	Welch = 75.20 ***
	Politically active figures	22	0.12	0.07	
	H.K. actors	22	0.09	0.04	
	Media	60	0.13	0.08	
	Companies/celebrities	29	0.27	0.11	

Note: Since Levene's *F* test showed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated for *Help*, *China Threat*, and *Universal Values* frames, we addressed this by performing Welch's *F* test for these violated frames. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

different regions. After running suitable tests for each frame, there were statistically significant differences between group means for all four frames (see Table 3). Depending on whether it violates equal variance assumptions or not, we later ran an analysis of the post hoc test as determined by Tukey and Games–Howell respectively. The Games–Howell post hoc test indicated that politicians received more tweets with help-seeking purposes than the other four targets. On the business side, the Tukey test found that companies and celebrities were more associated with discussions regarding the *China Threat* than the other targets. The popularity of using *Universal Values* frames to politicians and celebrities was similar, which triumphs the three other targets.

After identifying politicians as the key targets for Hong Kong protesters to reach out to for help on Twitter, we further categorized foreign politicians to U.S. and non-U.S. to see if there is any difference by region. There were only significant differences between all

**Table 4.** ANOVA Analysis of the Usage of Frames by Regions.

DV: % of frames	Targets	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Statistics
Help	U.S. politicians	70	0.29	0.10	Welch = 56.83***
	Non-U.S. politicians	33	0.22	0.08	
	H.K. actors	22	0.13	0.04	
Universal Value	U.S. politicians	70	0.17	0.06	<i>F</i> = 2.20
	Non-U.S. politicians	33	0.17	0.09	
	H.K. actors	22	0.14	0.05	
Humanitarian Concern	U.S. politicians	70	0.16	0.04	<i>F</i> = 0.66
	Non-U.S. politicians	33	0.15	0.05	
	H.K. actors	22	0.14	0.09	
China Threat	U.S. politicians	70	0.11	0.04	Welch = 5.41**
	Non-U.S. politicians	33	0.16	0.14	
	H.K. actors	22	0.09	0.04	

Note: Since Levene's *F* test showed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated for *Help* and *China Threat* frames, we addressed this by performing Welch's *F* test for these violated frames. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.



group means with regard to the *Help* frame (Welch's  $F(2, 69.86) = 56.83, p < .001$ ) and the *China Threat* frame (Welch's  $F(2, 48.32) = 5.41, p < .01$ ). The Games–Howell post hoc test demonstrated that U.S. politicians were more likely to receive help-seeking messages than non-U.S. politicians and Hong Kong activists. The *Universal Values* frame was found to be universal, as there was no difference between U.S. and non-U.S. politicians. For the *Humanitarian Concerns* frame, we also found a significant difference between U.S. and non-U.S. politicians ( $F(2, 122) = 9.54, p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

In examining the active transnational outreach in the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB movement, this study analyzes how grassroots users strategically leveraged social media to reach out to more actors by using flexible frames, and to enlist support from foreign actors with lobbying power. While a large body of scholarship on digital media usage in protests focuses on how social media enables information exchange and logistic communication among local protest groups,<sup>57</sup> this study adds to the literature on individual transnational advocacy efforts with the affordances of digital media. On Twitter, the geographical and conversational barriers are minimalized, which lowers the participation threshold and facilitates access to international audiences. This provides an unprecedented desirable condition for local grassroots users to directly contact foreign individual politicians and promote their agendas and frames—through which they can enlist international actors' support with very low costs.<sup>58</sup>

In accordance with the knowledge that Twitter has enabled grassroots users to bypass traditional media and elites to create their own opinion waves,<sup>59</sup> our study extends this observation by identifying key frames in transnational outreach. Importantly, we note that organizational-centered transnational advocacy communication with the goal of help-seeking is now inherited in bottom-up individualized user engagement. Some universal values-oriented frames, such as *Democracy* and *Illiberality* of the in-state government, were found to bolster the help-seeking action to a foreign country. Besides setting a high moral ground for the protest situation, we argue that these two values were brought up by the grassroots users with the expectation of concrete action by foreign powers. In competing for global attention, grassroots users juxtaposed these *Universal Value* frames and frequently highlighted the *Humanitarian Concerns* frame by emphasizing civilian vulnerability and police brutality to justify their call for help. These two frames were inherited by grassroots users from organizational-centered advocacy communication.

Despite their popularity in the transnational Anti-ELAB Twitter network, geopolitical frames are extended to reflect grassroots cultural capacity and economic power. Differing from seeking help, these grassroots users adopted the common approach of utilizing geopolitical frames to remind targets of the *China Threat*. This frame was found to be strongly associated with the mentioning of universal values, such as an insufficient democracy or the violation of human rights from the Chinese authorities. At the same time, they highlighted the overwhelming expansion of Chinese consumerist power and condemned corporations' decisions to stay silent or pick the side of "blood money." Though each individual could be inconsequential, these users sought to peck away at China's control by leveraging their economic power as consumers.<sup>60</sup>



While grassroots users lacked pronounced formal organizational coordination in the Twitter network, individual users were very strategic in choosing the right targets. We observed an overall trend to engage with U.S. government officials and politicians. As illustrated by Solomon Yue's prominent presence in the network, not only were the officials who are believed to have great power to influence international politics their targets, but also being responsive to their tweets could encourage more engagements and follow-up from the grassroots users. Moreover, we found that foreign celebrities and international corporations were critical targets of the grassroots users in this particular activist network. Help-seeking was no longer the only objective for users in reaching out to foreign actors. In fact, the Twitter discussions with these commercial accounts mainly condemned them for not supporting the movement when incidents happened. In particular, our findings revealed that individual users stressed universal values such as freedom and democracy to foreign celebrities and corporations to a greater degree than to politicians. This highlighting of universal values could be regarded as activists' moral grounding in pressurizing commercial foreign actors to stand with them.

Resonating with the extension of *China Threat* frames, grassroots users further leveraged their cultural capacity and acted collectively to force targeted international celebrities and companies to pick a side by commenting below their business accounts, acting as a "warning" to other companies in the online public sphere. Twitter's hashtag and open network structure facilitated grassroots participation to include as many everyday users and foreign actors as possible to create a transnational alternative activist opinion wave. Even though not all companies or celebrities responded to the campaign, these criticisms could still be influential by circulating online and undermining a brand's public image. In contrast to the past traditional advocacy, which was largely built on the political networks between states, intermediary organizations, and protesters, the individual-centered, digital media-enabled grassroots network includes more nonpolitical actors due to the difference in both resources and affordances.

## Conclusion and limitations

In view of a plethora of studies focused on elite transnational advocacy communication, the implications of our research on the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB protests suggest a new type of networked grassroots individual engagement that was enabled by digital media.<sup>61</sup> First, the inclusion of ordinary people brings in more diversified strategic frames, protesting tools, and target choices. Theoretically, every Twitter user with a sensibility towards the local context and issue could contribute to the protest network with their own cultural capacities and political understandings. Although merely mentioning a target and tagging them does not imply a direct enlistment of support from the actor, the flexibility and low cost of an individual-centered network still enable a wider reach without financial strain or resource concern.

Indeed, we observed that grassroots users rewarded politicians who were more responsive in the Twitter network, which could have incentivized them to retweet and comment. Moreover, such tagging and commenting with prompt responses circulated online make the sentiment more visible. Once someone spots and catches up with the contingent political incidents, others in the network could echo to create a public opinion wave.

While this is a study about grassroots outreach strategy, we reserve our argument that the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB grassroots users were autonomous and often disorganized actors. Such individual engagement still followed some degrees of shared understanding of the movement. They took up universal and traditional frames that organizations usually engaged with and targeted particular accounts and incidents to follow up. The presence of the Hong Kong activists in the movement's digital network was also a sign of the connection between "faceless" individuals and well-known political leaders. Twitter activists could become a significant source for certain frames to be adopted by grassroots users at a later time. Although the cost of one individual to participate in lobbying efforts is greatly reduced, their anonymous identity requires them to work collectively and strategically to amplify their voices. While calling for a boycott in a tweet is a conscious individual act, its influence largely depends on the collective effort.<sup>62</sup> These mapped tools and frames reflect the individual users' consciousness of a collective presence and collaboration with other actors on the international front.

Even for the same set of traditional frames, such as moral values and humanitarian concerns, this study captures how the same storytelling has benefited from the affordances of social media. The fast transmission rate on Twitter encourages more instantaneous reactions—in the activist context, this could mean promising support for a cause, providing or sharing images with impact, or prompting responses to circulate. Although moral values are still effective in delivering the need for foreign aid, frames that could induce sympathy and affect are equally adaptable in this digital environment. The prominent presence of the humanitarian frame suggests that the contrast between powerful armed police and vulnerable citizens was usually presented to gain sympathy for the latter. Additionally, the central nodes of the networks on social media are not necessarily the key players in a traditional advocacy network. Aside from their political bargaining power, politicians who are more active and responsive will be rewarded by individuals' replies and acknowledgments. On the other hand, the companies and celebrities that triggered controversies are more likely to be condemned and punished by individuals with negative comments and critiques.

The above implications should be interpreted with a few limitations in mind. First, this study provides an overview of the network and frame flows on an equally measured individual level, without examining the hierarchical relationships between grassroots users. Even when the lobbying efforts transferred down to the grassroots level, the influence between individuals could be different as well. While we acknowledge that grassroots users in the transnational network might not be completely autonomous, the discussion of the coordination effort between actors is outside the scope of this article. Future studies could extend the model by correlating follower numbers and interaction analytics into the usage of frames and strategies. Tracing the source tweet of a particular frame would also enable scholars to understand better the organization and negotiation within this loosely tied individual network. Second, the study is grounded for the mentioned tweets within 13 protest-related hashtags. Our findings revealed that transnational outreach manifested not only in tagging particular Twitter users, but also in initiating hashtag campaigns with their names for wider circulation. While this study only considers mentions as a network relationship under the Twitter conversation of Anti-ELAB, future studies could look into the latter part and examine whether different strategies could be adopted due to the different audiences imagined. Finally,

this study only captures how the grassroots users attempted to influence the online public discourse and reach out to foreign actors. Although we observed some politically active figures responding to individuals' tweets, the influence of such individualized engagement is not as obvious as the direct communication between domestic and foreign powers in the traditional lobbying model. It is worth investigating whether grassroots transnational communication is effective in social movements by considering actual engagement and tweet visibility on Twitter. Future studies could consider tweet endorsement and comments from foreign political actors, Western media outlets, and the general public in the Twitter network.

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