Adaption to Data-Driven Practices in Civil Society Organisations: A Case Study of Amnesty International

Digital membership organisations assert that their innovative use of data-driven practices are at the heart of their people-powered decision-making models. These data-driven practices, and associated values, have become aspirational to other organisations. However, there are growing concerns that data practices reinforce the decision-making power of the data collector at the expense of the rights of the data subject. This research considers how traditional membership organisations adapt to these new data-driven practices, while addressing these concerns. This paper demonstrates how the political communication theory of the trustee, delegate and responsible leadership models resolves the tension in the discourse surrounding data practices by exploring the positives and negatives of both decentralised decision-making and centralised decision-making. The framework is then explored in practice through an ethnographic case study of Amnesty International. The results show how the use of data to be people-powered is a powerful discourse, but ultimately new data practices are only used to centralise power, as is purported by critical literature.

# Adaption to Data-Driven Practices in Civil Society Organisations: A Case Study of Amnesty International

There is rising popularity of a new form of civil society organisation (CSO), digital membership organisations such as Avaaz, Change.org, and MoveOn, which are distinguished by the use of data-driven technologies to support large scale membership-led campaigns. This is not dissimilar to traditional membership CSOs that collect personal data, such as contact and financial details, from their members and include their members in decision-making. However, digital membership organisations define themselves by the large-scale participation in their “people-powered” campaigns (OPEN, 2017). This large-scale participation is possible due to a unique set of tactics using data-driven technologies such as online petitions, hosting large mailing lists and testing different communication strategies on online platforms (Karpf, 2017). In the article *The MoveOn Effect* (2009) Karpf writes that MoveOn has created “field-defining shifts” (2009, p.2) which have influenced the way campaigning works. Not only have new organisations been founded with these ways of working in mind, but older organisations have also been influenced to take on many of these tactics (Hall, Schmitz, & Dedmon, 2019).

However, as these data-driven techniques have become more prevalent in political communication, concerns have also arisen. There are academics and campaigners who argue that data practices are used to reinforce the decision-making power of the data collector to the detriment of the rights and freedoms of the data subjects. For example, Roger Clarke (1988) coined the term dataveillance, subsuming data practices with surveillance, where elites asserting control over data subjects by monitoring their actions at the expense of their privacy. The term dataveillance was used more recently by Lyon (2015) who presents how data practices necessarily endorse mass collection of data, usually without consent and involve predictive tactics that narrow the picture of the data subject and all of which reinforce the power of the data collector. Zuboff (2019) also made a connection between surveillance power and data practices by conceptualising the understanding of the rise of big data as surveillance capitalism. Tufecki (2014) created the term computational politics to encapsulate how the data practices of political elites are used to engineer consent by targeting people with personalised content (2014).

Traditional CSOs are presented with a dichotomous picture of data-driven practices which are either celebrated because they can support decentralisation of decision-making power to the data subject or criticised as they necessarily reinforce the decision-making power of the data collector. The problem is that there is little information on what distinguishes these practices. This research aims to progress the understanding of how data can be used to support political communication in CSOs by asking: can data practices be used both to centralise and decentralise decision-making power and if so, what distinguishes these practices? To examine this, I first argue that the discourse can move forward by applying a traditional political theory, the responsible leadership model, formed from both the trustee and delegate models, which presents the risks and benefits of both the centralisation or decentralisation of decision-making power respectively. Through the lens of this theory, I present ethnographic research examining how Amnesty International’s adaption to new data practices aligns with the values they hold regarding the way they wish to communicate with, and subsequently represent, their constituents. The findings show that despite staff’s desire to be seen to be using data-driven technologies to increase the involvement of membership in strategic decision-making, the staff only use data-driven tools and tactics to persuade constituents to support decisions that have already been made.

***The Theory: The Trustee and Delegate Models and Data Practices***

The increase of data-driven practices since the 1960s has provoked extensive academic debate. There are scholars who focus on the conceptualisation of data practices under a single term such as boyd and Crawford’s (2012) presentation of ‘Big Data’, Tufecki’s computational politics (2014), or Zuboff’s surveillance capitalism (2019). Some scholars aim to examine the ability of data to accurately represent that which it measures such as Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier’s presentation of data practices as “an essential enrichment in human comprehension” (2013, p.96) as data gives a new richer understanding of the things around us. Conversely, Rita Raley criticises the concept of raw data which she argues is never a ‘neutral’ representation of reality as it is always processed by humans, and subsequently afflicted with bias and errors (2013). There is also a debate about how data practices affect the balance of decision-making power between the data subject and data collector in political communication in governance, elections, media cycles, and CSOs’ campaigns. This is where this research is situated.

 Data-driven technologies are presented as either supporting elites in facilitating spaces for constituents to lead the strategy of the organisation or, to the contrary, data-driven technologies are used to educate and mobilise constituents in line with the vision of the elites. This two-sided debate is reflected across various literature surrounding CSOs and political communication (see Table 2). For example, in development NGOs the two models are referred to as the paternalism model, where elites make decisions on what their beneficiaries need, or the empowerment model, where beneficiaries make decisions which are supported by elites (McCormack, 2011). Skocpol (2013) documents the two models for social and political rights CSOs: traditional membership organisations which are built for and by broad groups of people who come together to represent and achieve the group’s interests or staff-led advocacy organisations structured by professional staff who are in control of the strategy and implementation, and whose work is usually funded by grants.

Instead of these context-specific frameworks, this research turns to a broader political communication theory by Wahlke, Eulau, Buchanan, and Ferguson (1962). Their theory of *responsible leadership* proposes that elites carry out a combination of two models, the trustee model and the delegate model, which represent each side of the discourse. In the trustee model, elites retain decision-making power and hold the belief that constituents should not, and cannot, make strategic decisions. In contrast, the delegate model, the elite’s role is to facilitate spaces for constituents to set and implement strategies.Wahlke et al. (1962) present responsible leadership as a theory of practice in which political representatives carry out each model at different times dependant on the context. For example, while taking the delegate role is often presented as the better option, such as in the presentation of the digital membership organisations’ ‘people-powered’ rhetoric, there are times when organisations would want perform a trustee role, particularly for initially unpopular and long-term campaigns such as the abolition of the death penalty. In these cases, CSOs will hire staff for their expertise in a topic, and it is these staff who decide the strategy and design the campaigns of the organisation.

 Responsible leadership is an appropriate theory for this research because there is space for both the critical perspectives of data practices as well as the optimistic. Both models of representation are viable in different contexts and both require minimum standards of transparency, consent and public debate. This is in line with context-dependant approach to privacy in which data is collected based on a social contract between data subject and collector: for example, it may be acceptable for an elite to collect data without consent if it seems appropriate for protecting the data subjects (a trustee approach) but this collection is not acceptable if there is no benefit for the data subject. Data is collected so as to support political elites in representing their constituents based on the agreement between the elites and constituents.

The ***delegate model***is the predominant model in digital membership organisations as the staff engage with data practices to facilitate the capacity of their constituents to set and implement the strategy. Online surveys and polls help membership organisations gather opinions from a large scale of constituents. MoveOn use a tool called PileOn to send a petition to 1000 members and monitor the quantity of signatures on the petition to evaluate the level of support for that campaign. If support is high enough the campaign will become a priority for the organisation, receiving funding and staff-time (Karpf, 2017, p.89). Avaaz, another digital membership organisation, have an annual membership survey in which emails are sent to members to ask for their input on the organisation's priorities for the following year (Karpf, 2017, p.44).

On top of surveys and polls, CSOs that aspire to a delegate role can also collect data the constituents do not knowingly contribute. This data is collected from a variety of places, including but not limited to social media metrics, website traffic, and google analytics, as well as data lists that organisations can buy from data brokers which can include further information such as financial status and demographic information. This data can represent the opinion of a larger constituency than the engaged few that respond to surveys and also limits the risk of consultation exhaustion. Furthermore, staff can monitor individuals in almost real time rather than what might have previously been quarterly or annual evaluations. The individual’s opinions appear genuine or are revealed as they are collected without the individuals knowing their actions are being monitored which eliminates the Hawthorne effect – the change in behaviour of data subjects when they are aware of the researcher such as in surveys or focus groups. In addition, organisations can segment this data, and therefore constituents, by topics they are interested in, demographics, regions they live in, or headlines they respond to which can help personalise content to these groups (Kreiss, 2016).

The best documentation of the use of this trace data in political communication is in news organisations. Anderson’s 2011 research revealed how audience metrics, such as click-throughs from advert to article and shares of articles on social media, have begun to replace the expertise of editors in deciding the topics to be covered. This use of data to guide the choice of content is also demonstrated in the increase of ‘most read’ sections on news websites instead of editors choice. In another example, Yahoo’s now defunct blog, UpShot, was written based on data gathered from search queries to report on current topics of interest (Pariser, 2012, p.71). CSOs using indirect data is documented by Chadwick (2013) and Karpf (2017) who describe “iterative feedback” where data is used to choose what information to communicate next and how. However, the documentation of the impact of indirect data on deciding top-level strategy for CSOs is minimal.

The delegate role is also performed in CSOs who support their constituents in creating and leading the implementation of the strategy. CSOs will support and share content created by citizens – their petitions, their protests, and their campaign plans. Furthermore, personal data representing the constituent’s demographics, behaviours, and interests can be retained in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The organisation can use the data to record preferred activities of individuals, track their development and help create personalised opportunities for individuals to be directly involved in implementing change (Han, 2014). This is aided through ‘engagement ladders’ or ‘supporter journeys’: sets of tools designed to move constituents from minimal commitment activities, such as liking a Facebook post, to full participation and shared ownership of delivering outcomes (Arnstien, 1969).

When adhering to the***trustee model***, a select group of professional experts decide the strategy for the CSO. Constituents are then encouraged to show support for these decisions such as through joining membership, voting in elections, donating or signing a petition. Anderson’s research into newsrooms (2011), outlined above, also shows how a traditional organisation embraces a trustee model and limits the impact of audience-metrics to outreaching journalist-led content. In another example, in 2012, The New York Times did not allow journalists to see how many people clicked on their stories, trusting instead their considered editorial expertise (Pariser, 2012). The number of votes, people in attendance at protests or online petition signatures is used as a tool to represent the level of support for a campaign and used to persuade other elites such as government officials. This may include less intentional political actions such as watches of a YouTube video or Facebook likes and shares.

CRM can host data on constituents which can be used to create profiles alongside predictive modelling to give people a score on their level of support for a campaign, and what an individual is most likely to be persuaded by, to understand whether the campaigners want to mobilise or convert the constituents support and, if so, how best to design their communications to achieve that (Hersh, 2015; Kreiss, 2016). As Tufecki describes the aim is to use data-driven technologies “to profile people, sometimes in the aggregate but especially at the individual level, and to develop methods of persuasion and mobilization” (Tufecki, 2014, p.2). For example, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, p.301) document Republican and Democratic party staff taking a trustee approach by using data to find the most salient arguments to educate the public and win their support, based on the staff’s “strong and consistent disdain for the public’s competence to understand policy and offer reasons input into policy making.” Data-driven tactics were used in the Obama campaign to collect data on what colour, size and order of information on their website lead to the most online donations (Kreiss, 2016). Documentation of CSOs adhering to the trustee model using data technologies is limited.

Most organisations will perform the role of ***responsible leadership*** where they take on both roles, of trustee and delegate, at different times (Wahlke et al., 1962). Digital membership organisations, which claim to perform a delegate role, often only support ‘progressive’ politics and therefore take a trustee role when then choose not to work with anyone considered to be extremist, or with right wing causes – even if this is where they can find large-scale support. CSOs who adhere to a trustee model will respond to the needs of constituents at times, particularly as funding from grant organisations can be dependant on overarching topics in the public debate.

***Methodology: An Ethnographic Case Study of Amnesty International***

This research uses ethnography to examine organisational data practices. Howard (2002, p.553) defines ethnography as the “systematic description of human behaviour and organizational culture based on first-hand observation”. Discourse surrounding new technologies and elites is dependant on understandings of political communication that pre-date the technologies, which an inductive approach of ethnographic research can help eliminate (Karpf et al., 2015; Boswell et al., 2017; Halperin and Heath, 2012). An ethnography also helps to document how values of elites align with their data practices supporting the development of a practice-based theory. This is due to the long-term, real-time observations and detailed thick description method of ethnographic research (Geertz, c1973.). Furthermore, the negative reviews surrounding data-driven tactics mean that people may be inclined to overstate their understanding or their ethical approach to the topic (Halperin and Heath, 2012, p.298). Due to the long-term nature of an ethnography, behaviour normalises over time which helps to understand what elites say they do as well as what they actually do (Halperin and Heath, 2012, p.298; Boswell et al., 2017).

I carried out a six month ethnography at Amnesty International’s International Secretariat (Amnesty, here on) in London. Amnesty is an international membership CSO which campaigns on human rights. Amnesty is older than the new data-driven techniques, and is in the process of trying to decide when and how to integrate new data-technologies. I was situated in the offices of Amnesty’s International Secretariat for three days a week for six months between September 2017 and March 2018. I took on the roles of “observer as participant” and “participant as observer” (Gold, 1958). These two roles allowed me to observe and participate in the organisation's activities alongside staff, while being open about my role as a researcher. Through these roles I could embed myself within decision-making to not only see the outcomes or face-value of decisions, but also to understand the values and beliefs at the heart of decision-making. I also conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with managers and staff across relevant teams (see Table 1).

Interpretation is a necessary and valued aspect of an ethnography: “what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse...and fix it in perusable terms” (Geertz, c1973.). This can create an issue that the findings reflect the researcher’s own biases. To mitigate this my own experiences will be recorded in the field notes so as to reflect where my own biases may occur. An ethnographer's presence can also have an impact on the participant's behaviour, reflecting what they perceive to be desirable. The advantage of longer-term field research is that communities tend to normalise the presence of a researcher (Boswell, 2017). In addition, the rich and deep nature of the observed data, valuable for understanding the context, also reveals the specific aspects of the research that make it less translatable to another context. The features of the organisation and context are outlined from which other researchers may be able to draw parallels.

***Findings: A Case Study of Amnesty International***

Wahlke et al. (1969) present that elites will carry out a combination of both trustee and delegate models, which they term *responsible leadership*. The findings show that Amnesty carry out responsible leadership: while they predominantly perform a delegate role through a member-led and member-funded structure, there are certain contexts in which the organisation take on the role of a trustee. Amnesty determine the contexts in which they switch between the delegate and trustee roles through the division of their audiences into decision-making-constituents and support-constituents respectively. Amnesty does not engage with data-driven technologies to perform a delegate role and instead relies on traditional discursive and qualitative methods such as face to face meetings and collaborative documentation with the decision-making-constituents. This is because the staff believe data practices encourage the extremes of the delegate model: to be popularity-driven subsequently ignoring long-term and difficult campaigns. Amnesty does aspire to be like the new digital membership organisations, but only to be able to compete with the scale of their engagement numbers. Amnesty staff only engage with the new data-driven practices when they take a trustee role: to profile and target the support-constituents to encourage them to support the organisation’s predetermined strategy.

***Different Roles for Different Constituents***

Amnesty performs responsible leadership, a combination of the delegate and trustee models. The staff openly recognise that both models are important to the organisation’s ways of working, albeit in Amnesty-specific language. A staff member of the strategy and evaluation team said “Amnesty is both campaigning and research so it will always be both about the experts here and the campaigns with the people” (Interview 9887). Her colleague from the same team said “Amnesty has a “somewhat rare combination of activism base...and institution” (Interview 4771). A manager explained the importance of both models as “the movement gives breadth and legitimacy but organisational structures gives us credibility, rigour and structured direction and both seek to make human rights happen” (Interview 8443). These statements highlighting contrasts within Amnesty demonstrate their engagement with both staff-led and constituent-led models.

 Amnesty manage the balance between trustee and delegate by dividing their audiences into two categories: decision-making-constituents or support-constituents. Decision-making-constituents include members, and sometimes activists and beneficiaries with whom Amnesty use qualitative and discursive approaches; support-constituents include donors, followers, and again sometimes activists and beneficiaries with whom Amnesty utilise the new data-driven methods. While many of these defined categories may actually refer to the same person, who may be a donor, member and follower, the relationship with each audience-type is separated within the organisation by team and consequently managed through a distinct set of practices.

Firstly, members are a decision-making constituent. They are defined by the statute of the organisation and are formally given a role in part of the governance (Amnesty International, 2017). There are three steps to obtaining the status of member: registering interest in doing so, donating regularly (unless the fee is waived), and providing a single identifying piece of data such as an email address. In this way, the member-led nature of Amnesty International begins from a different starting point to the digital membership organisations whose members usually only have to register interest by providing an email address. Further, and significantly, an Amnesty member is defined as “a person who contributes to and shares the Vision, Mission and Core Values” (Amnesty International, 2017). A senior manager in governance reiterated the importance of this in an interview saying they must “adhere” and “contribute” to Amnesty (Interview 5190). Amnesty secure a group of constituents who already align with the organisation's core values. In the following section I will describe how the organisation facilitates the role of these individuals’ in decision-making, performing a delegate role, through qualitative and discursive processes of strategic decision-making, and as such members are decision-making-constituents.

The second group of constituents are ‘action takers’ or ‘activists’ (here on referred to as activists) who sometimes play the role of decision-making-constituents and at other times of support-constituents. These are individuals who are interested in the organisation, have taken an action (such as sign a petition) and have given permission for Amnesty to contact them (Amnesty International, 2016). They are not members as they have not fulfilled the requirement to register as one and/or donate. Individuals in this audience are usually associated with a contact data point such as an email address, social media account, mobile phone number or postal address. This audience are sometimes consulted with to make decisions and in other situations are managed into supporting the organisation through profiling and targeting, and therefore this audience are sometimes a leading-constituent and at others a support-constituent.

There is a group of constituents that Amnesty refers to as followers defined as Facebook fans, Twitter follows, and YouTube subscribers (Amnesty International, 2016). The numbers representing these groups are not included in the strategy documents of the organisation, and are rarely seen in the evaluation documents. The organisation always take a trustee role when engaging with this set of constituents, using data to target content to gain and mobilise their support. Followers are support-constituents only.

There are a set of constituents defined as donors. There is a lot of overlap between donors and members: to be a member you have to donate regularly, and if you donate regularly, often all you have to do is register interest in becoming a member to become one. Different teams in the organisation manage the relationship with these two audiences, even when it is the same person. For example, someone who is a member may receive communication from the campaigns teams in their role as a member and another communication from the fundraising team in their role as a donor. The donors are treated as support-constituents through the data-driven methods described above.

Finally, there are beneficiaries who are the individuals and communities which Amnesty aims to support as their human rights have been violated or are at risk. This set of constituents are the only time privacy is consistently mentioned. The relationship with this audience is managed by research or campaigning staff. They collect qualitative data from this audience, sometimes including them in decision-making, sometimes making decisions on their behalf where they think necessary.

***Amnesty Use Data to Support a Trustee Model***

“We need to learn from the Avaaz and Change.orgs of the world”

- Senior Manager, Campaigns and Communications Team (Interview 1582)

The quote above is taken from an interview with a senior manager in the campaigns and communications team in which he described how he believes that Amnesty needs to learn from Avaaz and Change.org – both examples of digital membership organisations. The senior manager showed a lot of interest in the use of data-driven technologies and was optimistic about their potential. The statement above was followed by a description of how Amnesty’s developing membership models to be less stringent have recently caused Amnesty's overall membership numbers to jump from three to seven million. The senior manager believes that seven million is still a small number, which is what prompted him to say Amnesty could learn from the collectively termed “Avaaz and Change.orgs of the world” (Interview 1582). This demonstrates not only the appeal of large-scale membership, but by referring to the two organisations synonymously, the organisations are recognised as representative of the new movement of digital membership organisations.

A direct comparative reference to Avaaz was also expressed by a staff member who worked with international membership. She said “If our numbers keep dwindling, is anyone going to listen?” followed by “even 7 million globally, is that enough, when Avaaz is 45 million?” (Interview 8473). This reference to Avaaz is, again, in reference to their membership size. This is symbolic of the biggest impact that the digital membership organisations, and their use of data-driven technologies, have had at Amnesty: to grow and maintain a large-scale membership, where their successful engagement with their constituents is represented by a number. I will show how the staff use data-driven methods to gain and represent a high level of engagement to demonstrate the support for the organisation’s decisions. The staff use the resultant numbers to influence other stakeholders and as a symbol of their integrity as a membership, and therefore delegate, organisation.

The use of data-driven methods to achieve scale in membership has been embedded into Amnesty’s organisational strategies and institutionalised in one of their five global goals. At the time of writing Amnesty have five global goals for a four year period from 2016-2019. These cover all aspects of the organisation’s work, and are titled and summarised by Amnesty as (Amnesty International, 2016):

Goal 1: reclaiming freedom: “A world in which everyone knows and can claim their rights”

Goal 2: equal rights for all: “A world in which human rights and justice are enjoyed without discrimination”

Goal 3: responding to crises: “A world in which people are protected during conflict and crises”

Goal 4: ensuring accountability: “A world in which human rights abusers are held accountable”

Goal 5: maximising our resources and engagement: “We will be a truly global human rights movement of people defending human rights for all”

Goal 5 (as it is referenced internally and from here on) pertains to the organisation's relationship with their audience. The manager who gave me access to the organisation also made the association between goal 5 and my research and initially I was buddied with a staff member who works on the strategy and evaluation of this goal.

The objectives of goal 5 are to grow the number of members to 25 million, the number of donors to 4 million, to raise 400 million euros in fundraising and to increase the participation of supporters in decision-making. Other than the last point, which I discovered has a limited role in the Goal 5 project, these objectives reflect new standards of numerically measurable goals supported by the collection of personal data. The focus of this goal is new to the organisation, showing how it is not how they have traditionally worked. In a goal 5 planning meeting, one of the core team members said “we’re special, we are a little different from the other goals” (Observation Day 14). A staff member in fundraising also commented on the goal’s uniqueness saying that at the international level they had “no tradition of making long-term goals for volume” of participation and membership (Interview 2990). The other goals are more aligned with their traditional goals, based on impact such as changing laws, freeing prisoners and even around activism, types of impact of the activism. Goal 5 is notably a new way of working for the organisation: membership is a goal within itself, and the goal is expressed in a large-scale number.

Staff across different teams including campaigns, fundraising, membership engagement and governance all agreed on the need of large-scale membership numbers for demonstrating the strength of the organisation. One staff member expressed the concern that without a large-scale membership “who is going to listen?” (Interview 8473). The staff make comparative claims that the goal of 25 million members will positively affect the organisation’s ability to have impact. A manager in fundraising, part of the goal 5 team, explicitly said “25 million is definitely about authority” (Interview 9309). The manager went on to explain that the more support the organisations has “the more power and the better advocacy, even behind closed doors” (Interview 9309). Another fundraising staff member said in an interview “We need 2% of the population because that's how to have power” (Interview 2990). He followed this with an example of how his team had sought meetings with a politician to lobby for a bill the team were campaigning for. As soon as the membership of the national office hit 100,000 they suddenly began getting meetings. An interview with a staff member working in a topic-based campaigns team said that data “is evidence of public opinion” (Interview 6311). The staff believe that publishing these large-scale numbers in public reports and the media or communicating them in direct communications with external stakeholders, such as politicians, will help lead to their desired social change.

The figures are also symbolic to the staff of their own credibility. As a staff member from governance team said in relation to the growth of numbers of membership from 2 to 7 million “the set of members we have signifies the strength of our performance, seriousness of our claims and how we are a representative point of view for those people” (Interview 5190). He also argued that to be a global movement “we need way more than 25 million” (Interview 5190). To the staff, the numbers are symbolic of the organisation’s ability to represent the public. The manager leading the goal 5 project said that “the drive for people is one of credibility, having 10 people taking 1 million actions compared to 1 million taking 1 million actions, having those people who are actively engaged, the bigger the activists base, the more credibility you have.” (Interview 0164). In these cases, the discussion of representing large-scale support is not in relation to a specific impact, but to the organisation’s credibility overall. Referring to the digital membership organisations, such as Avaaz and Change.org, when discussing the scale of membership numbers also shows a sense of competition with these digital membership CSOs. At Amnesty, numerical representation of success was there before, but now it is centralised and formalised in the organisational goals. Further, no longer is it the amount of actions recorded, but the number of people involved in the actions – the collection of personal contact details is central to their new objectives.

To achieve large-scale membership and donations staff from campaigns, engagement and communications present communications that they have already designed to audiences with the aim to persuade them to show their support. One staff member working closely with engaging activists and supporters said “we use data for everything” and “we talk in numbers a lot” (Interview 8473). Both observing the team’s practices, and in her descriptions in the interview she confirmed this approach. They use the audience tools in Facebook and Google and advertising services from the online platforms. The team also used metrics from Google analytics, social media metrics managers, Sprinklr and a Facebook Ad manager. The staff test different email titles, social media content and images in advertising and look at what affects responses to petitions and other calls to action. One staff member uses Google analytics for website traffic and social media metrics software to understand what produces the highest numbers on the relevant platform.

Amnesty use a CRM to host data of individuals for whom they have contact details. I did not have access to their CRM which means I cannot present the exact data they collect or how they analyse it. I did learn they were using the CRM provider Engaging Networks which offer a variety of services including hosting individual behavioural data such as donations the constituents have made and campaigns they have participated in, as well as segmenting supporters by behaviours and demographics. I spoke to one staff member who was working on a new project to split up the audience in a more nuanced way of pro and against support for the organisation. Their tactics for profiling are behavioural, demographic and level of support for the organisation, but they do not use ‘psychometric’ profiling such as that used by Cambridge Analytica.

The staff use data-driven tactics to perform a trustee role: to inform the audience and instruct them to act in support of the organisation’s pre-decided campaigns and strategies. The data does not to feed into strategic direction of the organisation such as to form the five goals in the current four-year strategy. How these goals are set is discussed in the next section. One story was told regularly in interviews showing the staff’s desire to use the data-driven techniques to create a symbol of support for their expert and member-led decisions, rather than for leading their strategy. Amnesty carried out a survey in 2014 to try to reach a large number of people to input into their strategy. Staff would introduce the tool with pride, quickly followed by a declaration of its outreach to 25,000 people. However, this was always followed by a rejection of the use of this survey content for strategy. For example, one staff member said, “data from the survey confirmed decisions already made” (Interview 8443). In another example, a campaigner in one of the country teams carried out a social listening project where they examined what people were saying about a topic on Twitter and public Facebook pages. When I asked if they are ready to change projects if their results showed a difference of opinion, she said they would not change the strategy but perhaps their messaging. The staff use data to understand how to communicate their strategy, not set their strategy.

One campaign manager confirmed that “data has value but shouldn’t determine what we work on” (Interview 6311). She expands “...over the next two to four years we know what we will be working on...the data will affect how we facilitate what the messaging looks like and what the actions look like…” (Interview 6311). One of the ways this manifests is through the use of topics that the data shows people are interested in to bring people on board with other less popular topics that are more relevant to the organisation’s strategy. A staff member in the engagement team explained “how do you ride the wave and take advantage of that” (Interview 8473). She gives the example that Amnesty may not have a specific campaign around Donald Trump, but as there is so much interest they should take advantage of that to get people signed up to the campaigns they do have going on. In a planning meeting with other teams she said Amnesty “needs to be timely...what topics are people talking about and lets match our campaigning with that” (Observation Day 14). The others in this planning meeting agree, including staff from fundraising and media teams. The purpose is not to work on those topics because the data shows the audience would like to work on them, but to use these topics to encourage the audience to be interested in the topics Amnesty has already chosen. This use of data to support their communications strategy to persuade people to support them demonstrates the association of data techniques with the trustee model.

In the organisation there is a dedicated fundraising team who take a trustee role in relationship with donors, and substantially use data to support this work. As part of Goal 5 the fundraising staff are working on raising 400 million euros during the four year period. The fundraising team rely heavily on a variety of data-driven techniques in designing and implementing their communication strategy with their donors which has increased with the ongoing development of new technologies. A senior manager in fundraising started an interview with the statement “fundraising is all data” (Interview 9309). The manager did not feel the need to justify this with specific examples but the whole interview oriented around the various methods in which they use data. The managers and staff use benchmarks and targets to evaluate how much money has been donated compared to how much is expected at Amnesty, in different countries and in other CSOs. The staff examined the behaviours of audiences to understand what channels are used to donate (phone, web, social media, face to face), their donation history (how much how often and when they donate), and their reasons for donating (such as what topics prompted them to donate, or what style of messaging). The staff also created profiles to categorise the audience into those who donate more and those who donate less, payment preferences of different demographics, and likely journeys different individual will take from hearing about the organisations to donating. The staff constantly analyse how best to motivate individuals into delivering the outcome the staff want using data-driven methods. For example, staff saw that face-to-face fundraising carried out by young people would attract more young people to donate and so set up more young fundraisers to do face-to-face fundraising.

As a justification of this use of data to support their role as a trustee, within an organisation which proclaims a delegate status, a few of the engagement and fundraising staff argued the importance of personal data to begin a relationship with a constituent. As one fundraiser put it: “Fundraising is like dating: you might have long-term goals like marriage but you have to start with a few dates...What you do with the data creates the relationships” (Interview 2990). The individual is then encouraged to become more involved in decision-making activities that do not use the new data-driven methods, outlined in the next section. Another justification given by staff was that staff and constituents agree to be support-constituents, and that the staff are to make the decisions – in a trustee role. Several fundraisers commented that donors are often an individual who wants to contribute who does not have time but does have money. The relationship is built on the assumption that the individual already supports the goals of the organisation and wants to give money and the fundraising team’s job is to make that engagement as easy as possible. This perception of the audiences assume a trustee approach for the organisation, and perhaps this is how the donor sees it too.

The actions corroborate the arguments that data practices are innately about control from scholars such as Clarke (2003), Lyon (2015) and Tufecki (2014) but also confirm that this does not necessarily have to be negative – as seen in the theory of the trustee model. Staff professed the positives of this approach either because it was the agreement with the constituent that the staff should retain decision-making control or because it helps begin a relationship with the constituents. However, there was little internal discourse regarding the negative outcomes associated with the trustee roles. The staff considered that it was helping persuade people to do what they wanted but did not have any way of showing that it was not manipulative or violating the rights of the data subject.

Privacy was a fleeting concern of some staff, but there was no active conversation about how to manage privacy around the communications data. The only situation the staff discuss privacy regularly is a database which hosts qualitative data on a specific set of individuals who benefit from the organisation’s projects. During 2016 staff planned a new system to host the data, and conducted a Privacy Impact Assessment. The plans set out a more secure system due to the sensitive nature of the data. In this assessment, they also set out a context for when they would not use consent: when the individual is unable to give consent because of their situation such as they are incarcerated or need help in a timely manner and it would be impossible to gain consent in time to run the campaign. The lack of need for consent shows a strong line of where the staff see themselves in a trustee role – when an individual cannot speak for themselves and is in urgent danger. This is in line with arguments that the trustee approach may end up bypassing issues of consent and privacy for security, without falling fowl to the aspects of this that have received criticism surmised by Lyon (2015): it is neither a mass collection of personal data, nor is it without a specific justification.

***Amnesty Do Not Use Data to Support a Delegate Model***

Amnesty, as a membership organisation, do have a strategy that is set by members but to do this the staff traditional qualitative methods and integrated discursive approaches. The qualitative methods consist of face-to-face discussions in which both the conversation and decisions are captured in minutes, summary notes or other formal documentation such as written recommendations, resolutions or policy documents. Integrated discursive methods bring together stakeholders to discuss strategies together through conversation and collaborative documentation.

Amnesty’s global long-term strategies are set at a bi-annual International Council Meeting (ICM). 500 people including elected members from national offices and external experts such as activists and beneficiaries come together to form working groups based on the topics the organisation has been working on and is thinking of working on in the future. In these working groups, a discursive approach is taken where the constituents discuss, negotiate and integrate their opinions to draft policies, strategies and processes. On the final day of the meeting, members vote to accept or reject the decisions and policies. This is how the overarching goals of the organisation are decided. The national offices then set strategies for how to achieve these overarching goals. The national offices consult with their members through various forums, especially annual general meetings (AGM), a similar format to the ICM, to make decisions on what campaigns to run. In some cases staff also work with activists and beneficiaries to implement the strategy. Amnesty refer to this process as active participation and encourage discussions to produce collaboratively made decisions through focus groups, long-form communications through email or face-to-face conversations and feedback to surveys with free text answers.

Amnesty not only value qualitative and discursive methods to set the strategy, but actively reject the new types of data practices for this task. This is not because they believe that the data-driven ways of working can only support a trustee role but because they believe data-driven methods are associated with the negative aspects of a delegate model: popularity-based short-term opinions. The staff also expressed concern that the data technologies show results from a large public audience that they do not want to guide their strategies. One campaigner on a thematic issues team expressed, in relation to broad audience collected data, that she did not want the “tail wagging the dog” (Interview 6311). The campaigner used this phrase to explain that she did not want to use the data-driven tools as it would lead to an instrumental part of the audience controlling the organisation. She confirms data can help “as long as its a tool and doesn’t dictate the agenda” (Interview 6311). A campaign manager used the same phrase in her interview: “you have to be careful whether it is the dog wagging the tail or the tail wagging.” (Interview 0164). She continued by arguing that using this data would not allow the organisation to work on less popular issues. She explicitly mentioned the work of Change.org, a new CSO, and their Beau the dog campaign, which produced 632,896 signatures to save a dog from euthanasia (Change.org, 2015). The campaign manager confidently claimed their team could easily generate this sort of interest, referencing the high level of signatures on the petition, but did not want to choose topics based on this data alone. She believes Amnesty will decide what topics are meaningful to work on through the formalised, qualitative, member-led decision-making processes shown above.

Exemplary of the rejection of data practices, in preference of qualitative and discursive practices, is a story told by many staff about their work on the decriminalisation of sex workers. In 2015, Amnesty International began a consultation to adopt policy recommendations on how to protect sex workers from human rights violations. There was controversy around whether adopting a policy which protects sex workers could actually encourage exploitation of sex workers. Two staff members commented in interviews that the data showed how they would lose supporters and even some members who did not agree with the final decision but they had to adopt the policy nonetheless (Interview 6311; Interview 1387). Another staff member said “It is good to get feedback from data if you are on the right track but you wouldn't listen to it for important policies like sex workers” (Interview 1582). The adoption of the policy went through the process described above. At the ICM, a working group of elected representatives, who represent the views of members from their countries, looked at a draft policy and reflected the views into the discussion. Through questions, discussions and sometimes the advice from external experts, the staff from the international office, would make amendments to content and language. Finally, the working groups proposed a negotiated policy paper to the participants at the ICM who voted to accept the paper (Amnesty, 2016). Amnesty does adopt a delegate model for a lot of the top-level decision-making but does so without using data-driven practices of the digital membership organisations.

***Conclusion***

Carrying out this research addresses a timely need for an understanding of what is considered acceptable data practices in political communication. Through the lens of the political theory of the trustee, delegate and responsible leadership models, and using an ethnographic approach to document how values and practices align, this research has provided an analysis of a traditional CSO’s adaption to data practices. Data-driven methods are used in Amnesty in the implementation of projects in which the staff wish to communicate with constituents to educate them and mobilise them on pre-decided strategic decisions, in other words to support their role as a trustee. While this confirms the arguments which conflate the data practices with the behaviour management of constituents (Clarke 2003; Tufecki, 2014; Lyon, 2015), it is also seen as an acceptable use of data within the trustee model as the staff argue this is part of their agreement with their constituents.

Amnesty recognise the influence that digital membership organisations have, in particular due to their large membership numbers. However, Amnesty rejected data-driven methods at strategic level decision-making based on the bias the methods have towards short-term popular opinions, associated with the dangers of the delegate model (Wahlke et al., 1962), or ‘pandering’ to the public (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). There may be an increase in the development of the digital membership organisations, but it may not replace older organisations’ tactics. There is a need for further research on how other types of CSOs are adapting to the availability of data technologies and whether digital membership organisations are learning from traditional CSOs.

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