




Media and  
Communications

## Media@LSE Working Paper Series

Editors: Bart Cammaerts, Nick Anstead and Richard Stupart



**‘We the People’ in the Twitter Age:  
Digital Diplomacy and the Social  
Legitimacy of the United Nations**

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues that the rising to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders in key United Nations member states poses an existential threat to the Organization and the whole multilateral world order created after the Second World War, which is now facing a process of mass-based disintegration. In a period of unprecedented attacks against the multilateral system, the UN Secretariat relies mostly on digital diplomacy and mediated public diplomacy, through media coverage and a growing social media presence, to inform the global public about its activities and defend its legitimacy.

Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 6,302 tweets posted on four United Nations flagship Twitter accounts in January-September 2019, this paper shows what kind of messages resonate more with the public and provoke more engagements. It also demonstrates that the UN is not using its social media – and especially so the Secretary-General’s personal account - to their full potential to help the Organization achieving its ‘real-world’ political and diplomatic goals, and to effectively contrast the danger posed by right-wing authoritarian actors.

*"I'm a big proponent of soft power. It's the only one I have."*<sup>1</sup>

António Guterres

United Nations Secretary-General, New Delhi, 2 October 2018.

## 1 LEGITIMACY, HEGEMONY AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

The multilateral world order - i.e. the post-Second World War system of global governance institutions promoted by the United States and the allied nations that defeated Nazi fascism - is in crisis and appears increasingly fragile<sup>2</sup>. The very idea of multilateralism is questioned. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, has warned, "multilateralism is under fire [...]. Trust is at a breaking point. Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order" (Guterres, 2018). In place of shared approaches to global problems – from climate change to mass migrations, from multiplying armed conflicts to trade disputes – narrowly-conceived national interests have recaptured almost undisputed primacy. In the political arena, the language of multilateral cooperation has often been substituted by angry appeals to national pre-eminence, fearmongering, scapegoatism and religious fundamentalism, when not to overt racism and xenophobia. Demagogues and authoritarian leaders all over the world have built their electoral fortunes on divisionary politics. Multilateral institutions are in the cross hairs.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/UN\\_Spokesperson/status/1047080008542371840](https://twitter.com/UN_Spokesperson/status/1047080008542371840)

<sup>2</sup> I prefer not to use the definition of *liberal world order*, as several key Member States of the United Nations have never been liberal democracies.

According to Klabbers (2016, p. 141), International Organizations (IOs) are defined by four basic requirements: they are typically (1) set up between states, (2) based on a treaty, with (3) at least one organ, which (4) is supposed to have a distinct will (i.e. a degree of independence) from the organization's member states. The United Nations, instituted in 1945, is the most comprehensive IO ever created, with an extremely vast range of activities and a nearly universal membership: as per 2020, it has 193 member states (plus two countries, Palestine and the Vatican, with observer status), which have equal voting rights in the General Assembly, regardless of their size, population or GDP. Created "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," as stated in the UN Charter's preamble, the organization represented a much-needed neutral diplomatic space where the major powers could interact during the Cold War, but it never had any real enforcement power toward its Member States, except in very specific cases related to peace and security matters. The UN permanent bureaucratic structure – the Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General – does not control the Organization's budget and cannot take any real action when its recommendations are disrespected, or when veto-holding members of the Security Council (the so-called P5) decide to resort to military action unilaterally (that is, *illegally*), as was the case of the US and UK-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Even for the P5 countries, it is important to be able to obtain the Security Council's endorsement before engaging in military action, as such authorization is crucial to guarantee the national and international public opinion's support to a given intervention. Leaders of democratic countries need public support for their foreign policies, and citizens - who generally have limited interest in international affairs - need indications to decide whether to offer that support; the United Nations' decisions can provide such cues to citizens. The decisions made (or not) by the Security Council make headlines all over the world, but global public opinion usually fails to see the distinctions between the Member States' actions and the United Nations Secretariat's capacity to implement the decisions made by the Security Council and the General Assembly. As the former UN Under-Secretary General for Public Information Shashi Tharoor noted, the United Nations is often seen as a "shapeless aggregation, in which the sins of omission of individual governments [...] are routinely blamed on the organization" (Tharoor, 2007, p. 41).

In recent years, a growing number of national governments – but also non-governmental organizations, social movements and influential media organizations – have been criticizing the UN's performance and showing disbelief about its capacity to deliver concrete solutions for the most pressing global challenges. The reiterated bad press – justified or not – about sexual abuses in peacekeeping operations, bureaucratic slowness, minor corruption scandals and perceived diplomatic irrelevance in major crises (such as the Palestinian question or the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya) have also made a dent in the Organization's image. Peacekeeping has been an especially difficult and "very harmful" theme for the UN, as "internal information and reports of scandals and calamities of various sorts have been suppressed, ignored or shelved for unconscionable periods of time by higher-ranking people in a hierarchical system" (Crossette, 2018, p. 374). Any image damage is dangerous for an organization whose influence and legitimacy depend. Reputation is a strategic concept centred on long-term impressions constituted by the accumulation of images and actions of a given entity (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005). Hence, when the moral stature of an organization like the UN is undermined by allegations of scandals, its legitimacy is also weakened (Lehmann, 2011, p. 3).

Legitimacy can be defined as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of a given entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Also, legitimacy refers to the belief held by different actors that certain rules or institutions should be obeyed (Hurd, 2011). There are basically two types of legitimacy for international organizations: normative and social.

*Normative legitimacy* can be defined as the right of an international organization to determine regulations (either binding or not) to be followed by its Member States, based on the conformity to certain values and principles, and to a commonly agreed set of rules – such as, in terms of global governance, the Charter of the United Nations, the conventions based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the World Trade Organization's agreements, etc..

*Social legitimacy* can be defined as the acceptance of an international organization's supranational role and values by states and society. This kind of legitimacy must be constantly gained and strengthened. Social legitimacy is a process based on constant communications streams, ideas that

are shared and the perception that different actors can project a common vision of the future. For any international organization, reputation is the cornerstone of its social legitimacy. On the other hand, if the public believes that a given international institution lacks legitimacy, it may seriously undermine its overall viability and effectiveness. Likewise, if IOs possess extensive normative authority (like the European Union), but have insufficient or declining social legitimacy, global governance suffers a democratic deficit (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2017), which can favour the political fortunes of anti-systemic candidates and movements. Hence, the “perception of legitimacy matters, because, in a democratic era, multilateral institutions will only thrive if they are viewed as legitimate by democratic publics” (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006).

Social legitimacy is not measured by the intrinsic rightness or the ethical values of an organization; the concept refers exclusively to the public’s acceptance of and support for that organization, which is not constant and may vary over time and across subsets of the public (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015). Institutions that are perceived as legitimate can more easily secure compliance with the principles they establish and mobilize the resources required for their work.

## **1.1 The United Nations’ Global Image**

The United Nations has so far preserved an overall largely positive global image. Recent opinion polls conducted by the US-based Pew Research Center showed that the UN had a positive international image in most of the world’s regions in late 2019 (Annex I). Across 32 surveyed countries, a median of 61% had a positive view of the Organizations, whereas 26% had a negative view. Support for the UN was strong in Europe (on average, 66% positive and 23% negative). Most Canadians (69%) and Americans (59%) also expressed favourable opinions about the Organization. Above average unfavourable opinions were notably registered in Israel (65% negative), Russia (43% negative), and Japan (35% negative) (Pew Research Center, 23 September 2019). These results are

similar to those of the Edelman Trust Barometer<sup>3</sup>, which in its 2019 edition found that the average trust in the UN in 27 surveyed countries was 59%, that is, greater than the average trust level in relation to national governments (47%), the media (47%), the business sector (56%) and non-governmental organizations (56%). The European Union was trusted less (53%) than the UN (Annex II). Also converging with the Pew survey findings, the countries with the lowest level of trust in the UN were Russia (32%) and Japan (39%) (Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, 2019). Another global survey, carried out in 29 countries representing 74% of the world population and presented at the 2019 edition of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (Annex III), revealed that 76% of the respondents considered “extremely important” or “very important” the international cooperation among countries (Globalization 4.0, 2019).

It can be argued that the United Nations retains a quite solid social legitimacy, which is reflected in its overall good global image. By its own changing nature, however, social legitimacy is never acquired once and forever: it must be constantly won, through an effective mix of concrete actions and persuasive communications. Statistical data analyses suggest that citizens’ perception of the UN’s legitimacy is primarily anchored in evaluations of its capability to deliver concrete solutions for urgent challenges, and the benefits it generates for states and societies (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015).

Political attacks not necessarily undermine the Organization’s legitimacy. It can be argued, on the contrary, that US president Trump’s hostility against the UN has somehow been positive for the Organization, as it has deflected the scepticism against it. As Tana Johnson (2010) has demonstrated, unfavourable views toward a state tend to result in scepticism about the legitimacy of international organizations in which that state has influence. The more extensive the influence, the stronger the ‘guilt by association’ tends to be. Conversely, the more independent an international organization appears to be in relation to powerful member states, the more credibility and social legitimacy it earns.

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<sup>3</sup> The Edelman Trust Barometer is a yearly survey carried out since 2000 by Edelman, the world’s largest communications and PR firm (The Holmes Report, n.d.).



To advance its agenda on complex or controversial topics – such as climate change, gender equality, human rights, inequality reduction – it is crucial for the United Nations to foster consent in relation to its positions and assert its *hegemony* in the sense described in the 1930s by Antonio Gramsci: a “moral and intellectual leadership” (Gramsci, 1975, p. 2010), which allows a given group to unify a complex and non-homogeneous social reality marked by contradictions. Hegemony is a form of power, which creates submission not to force, but to ideas. According to Gramsci, this process takes place especially through ideological instruments, which he called “private apparatus of hegemony”: an articulated network of cultural institutions that includes schools and universities, churches, the media and the entertainment industry. This is a very different approach from mainstream realist international relations theory, which traditionally regards hegemony as the preponderance of one state actor over others, mainly because of asymmetrical military and economic resources (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 24).

## **1.2 Raw Power, Soft Power and Digital Diplomacy**

After World War II, all major powers have progressively implemented strategies aimed to achieve their political and diplomatic goals by consent and without necessarily resorting to force (but seldom hesitating to use raw military power when other methods do not accomplish the intended goals). To this effect, the concepts of social legitimacy, hegemony and soft power are closely interconnected. *Public diplomacy* is a term originally coined in 1965 by the American scholar Edmund Gullion, who defined it as a set of tools used by governments to cultivate public opinion in other countries and influence “public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies” (Cull, 2009, p. 19). After the end of the Cold War, the concept of public diplomacy evolved into the notion of *soft power*, as firstly formulated by Joseph Nye (1990), according to whom governments should aspire to positively interact with the citizens of foreign nations in order to advance their interests by means of the attractiveness of their countries’ culture, values, institutions and foreign policy, rather than coercion or payment – the traditional tools of *hard* power. There are clear similarities between Gramsci’s hegemony and Nye’s soft power, as the latter has acknowledged (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 14). Using the soft power paradigm, by means

of a multidimensional communications strategy and concrete actions, nations can build a global constituency to advance their goals. The same model can arguably be applied to international organizations.

The tools traditionally used by national actors for their public diplomacy are a mix of cultural and academic diplomacy, tourism and business promotion, and “mediated public diplomacy,” which is implemented through the so-called PEOS model: *paid*, *earned*, *owned*, and *shared* media (Golan, Manor & Arceneaux, 2019, p. 1670). The role of the media in mediating the diplomatic discourse is crucial, because most citizens worldwide learn about foreign affairs from the media. National governments of major nations have the resources to maintain media outlets aimed at foreign publics and to pay for advertisement campaigns in foreign countries (*owned* and *paid* media). International organizations, on the other hand, rely mostly on *earned* media (the coverage of their activities by media outlets) and on contents *shared* on social media channels (Seib, 2012). The latter phenomenon is quite recent, as social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram etc.) have only started being widely used after 2008.

The growing use of social media by national governments as well as by international organizations, non-governmental organizations and non-state actors has been named *digital diplomacy*; it can be defined as the use of social media by international actors to accomplish their foreign policy goals and proactively manage their image and reputation (Manor & Segev, 2015). The use of social media and other internet-based tools allows all interested actors to directly engage with foreign publics without the intermediation of traditional media gatekeepers. It has also deeply changed the nature of diplomacy itself, as it has dramatically accelerated the rhythm of diplomatic action and has altered the rites and procedures of the interaction among different actors.

During delicate negotiations or international forums, diplomats have started using social media to disseminate their positions and inform the public, according to their interests and agendas. World leaders now exchange messages – and accusations and threats – with their peers on Twitter. Journalists must thus follow the relevant accounts to get timely information, and they demand immediate answers and reactions from the parties, as the news cycle has become a 24/7 affair. All interested actors compete for the public’s attention and try to impose their framing on the events, in

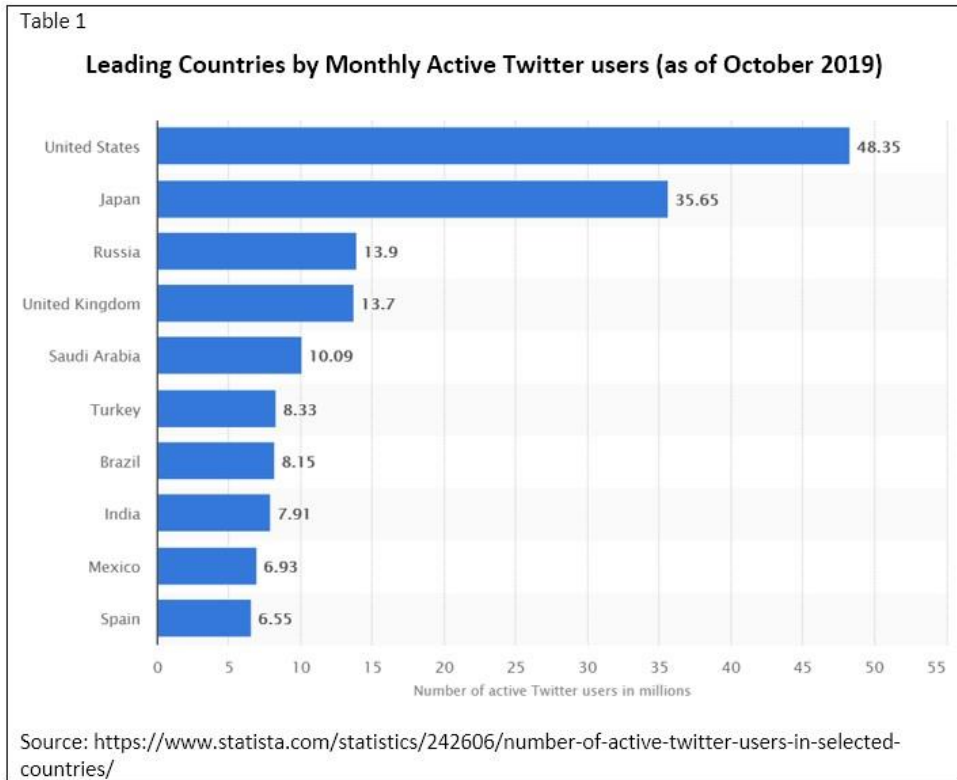
order to generate a narrative favourable to their goals. The framing competition is especially tough during times of conflict and crisis, when different actors engage each other on the social media battlefield (Golan, Manor & Arceneaux, 2019, p. 1671). As the public expects to receive plenty of information without any delay, the whole global discussion has become much faster, louder and superficial. The traditional approach to diplomacy as a slow-paced closed-doors club is increasingly seen as archaic and ineffective (Seib, 2016, pp. 12-27).

Facebook is the world's most popular social medium, with around 2.4 billion monthly active users, while Twitter has about 330 million monthly active users (Facebook, 2019; Twitter, April 2019). Nevertheless, because of its widespread use by policymakers, opinion leaders and journalists, Twitter has unparalleled influence in the shaping of the global news cycle and in the distribution of information, both at the national and international levels. Borrowing from the New York Times' definition, in the case of big events, Twitter is the "go-to [social medium] for conversation and breaking news" (Isaac & Ember, 2016). According to Twiplomacy, a study carried out annually by the communications agency BCW (Burson Cohn & Wolfe)<sup>4</sup>, in 2018 187 of the 193 UN member states had an official presence on Twitter - the exceptions were Laos, Mauritania, Nicaragua, North Korea, Swaziland and Turkmenistan (Twiplomacy, 2018).

Twitter is particularly popular in the US but much less so in the rest of the world (Table 1). Even in the US, a small group of users is responsible for most of the tweets about political issues: 97% of tweets about US politics published between June 2018 and June 2019 came from just 10% of adult American users (Pew Research Center, October 23, 2019). Twitter is clearly an essential tool for media relations, mediated public diplomacy and digital diplomacy; on the other hand, it is arguably not the most efficient tool to establish and maintain a direct communication flow with the general public, except in specific countries.

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<sup>4</sup> The name Twiplomacy was created by the UK-based communications company Burson-Marsteller, which carried out the first editions of the study in 2012. In February 2018, Burson-Marsteller merged with Cohn & Wolfe (subsidiaries of WPP plc, a British advertising and PR company). The new Company, BCW, is the third largest PR company in the world (Holmes, 2019).



## 2 POPULISM, RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS AND TWITTER

In 2016, the results of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States took public opinion and the global establishment by astonished surprise. Since then, few terms have been used more than ‘populism’ to describe a wide range of political phenomena. The electoral fortunes of extremist politicians around the world and the inability of national governments to offer credible answers to the mounting global dissatisfaction have set off a generalised alarm. As the United Nations Secretary-General said, “the disquiet in streets and squares across the world is proof that people want to be heard.” (Guterres, February 4, 2020).

The abrupt rise of inequality and wealth concentration over the last few decades have translated into a growing sense of unfairness and widespread perception of low social mobility (Sachs, 2019), especially acute in middle- and high-income countries where the middle class has paid a heavy price in terms of wage compression, job security and reduction of welfare state rights. The aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis was especially severe in Western Europe, as the European Union has imposed a stringent austerity policy, contributing to a growing resentment against the national political elites. Despite this growing dissatisfaction, any political leader or movement that criticizes the globalization status quo is quickly labelled as *populist* by mainstream media, credit rating agencies and establishment politicians. As Stavrakakis noted, “populism is seen

as violating or transgressing an established order of how politics is *properly, rationally* and *professionally* done. [...] it disrupts a supposed 'normal' course of events" (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 524). Populism, however, is a "notoriously vague term" (Canovan, 1999, p. 3) and hardly adequate to describe the current global turmoil without refining its definition.

"Government of the people, by the people, for the people," the famous Abraham Lincoln's sentence, could easily be used today by so-called populists. The reference to "the people," though, is present in many constitutions, starting with the preamble of the US Constitution, which directly inspired the preamble of the UN charter ("We, the people of the United Nations..."). What profoundly differs is the meaning attributed to the noun *people*. As Pasquino stressed, the US Constitution indicates that the people are the citizens, with their rights and duties, which can exercise their sovereignty within the limits and forms codified in the Constitution itself. This is the traditional democratic conception. A second possible definition of people revolves around the *nation*: people are citizens that "have the same blood and share the same territory, who belong to the same tradition" (Pasquino, 2005, p. 8.). Pushed to the extremes, the latter definition is not compatible with democracy and fuels an openly xenophobic political discourse.

Mudde has defined populism as an "ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Albertazzi and McDonnell proposed a broader concept, according to which populism is an "ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). There are at least two additional common elements in the discourse of populist leaders, regardless of their countries: emphasis on 'popular sovereignty' and the glorification of the heartland as an "retrospective utopia" (Engesser, Ernst, Esser & Büchel, 2017, pp. 1111-1113) – a concept that, for instance, Trump has successfully translated into his electoral slogan "Make America Great Again." The main difference between different types of populism is that "attacks on the economic elite are preferred by left-wing populists," while "attacks on the media elite and ostracism of others are predominantly conducted by right-wing speakers" (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1109).

The rise of neoliberalism as the global dominant ideology since the late 1970s has led most governments to adopt policies that position the markets as the main mechanism for managing all social arrangements, in which everything is a product and citizens are essentially regarded as customers (Edwards, 2018). The very ideal of basic social rights, as formulated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), has been constantly mined and attacked. Thus, it is not contradictory that the very same leaders who openly contest any multilateral or supranational approach to foreign policy often also defend a neoliberal economic agenda. Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro are arguably the main current examples of this breed. On the opposite political side, other leaders and movements, also labelled as populist, defend a multilateral approach to complex problems and the reduction of economic inequalities. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) have appropriately suggested distinguishing between *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* types of populism, the former being focused on the reduction of social and economic inequalities and the latter concentrated on nationalism and the danger posed by *others*.

While the inclusionary-exclusionary categorization is useful, exclusionary populist politicians could arguably be more precisely defined as *Right-Wing Authoritarians (RWA)*, as proposed by Fuchs (Fuchs, 2016, p. 6). The RWA classification originates from the F-Scale (the F stands for "fascist") proposed in 1947 by Theodor Adorno. The concept was later updated and refined by Altemeyer in the 1980s, who proposed a Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Altemeyer, 1988). Besides the omnipresent invocation of "the people" and the attacks against "the elites," Fuchs has suggested that right-wing authoritarianism is defined by four main characteristics:

- 1) Belief in the importance of authoritarianism and strong leaders.
- 2) Nationalism and ethnocentrism: belief in the superiority of a specific community (nation or ethnicity).

3) Friend /enemy antithesis, according to Carl Schmitt's definition (Schmitt, 2007, p. 27): the national community is defined in relation to one or more constructed out-groups that are portrayed as dangerous enemies that should be opposed, fought and eliminated<sup>5</sup>.

4) Patriarchy and militarism: belief in conservative values, including traditional gender roles, sexism and the heroism of the military (Fuchs, 2016, p. 53).

Using these criteria, numerous political leaders can easily be identified as right-wing authoritarians because of their discourses and actions. A partial list may include heads of states and governments, such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Recep Erdoğan (Turkey), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India), Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel) and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines); and leaders of far-right movements, such as Matteo Salvini (*Lega*, Italy), Marine Le Pen (*Rassemblement National*, France), Nigel Farage (Brexit Party, UK), Jörg Meuthen (*Alternative für Deutschland*, Germany) and Santiago Abascal (*Vox*, Spain)<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.1 Tweets, Political Influence and News Cycle Control

Several authors have stressed that populism is inherently a *communication phenomenon*, as “the communicative tools used for spreading populist ideas are just as central as the populist ideas themselves” (De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann & Stanyer, 2018). With the notable exceptions of Orbán and Duterte, who do not have a significant social media presence, most contemporary right-wing authoritarian leaders heavily rely on a specific social medium - Twitter – as the privileged channel for direct communication with their political base and for interaction with the traditional (legacy) media. They use social media to bypass the information gatekeeping of the

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<sup>5</sup> The friend / enemy rhetoric is often used by inclusionary (left-wing) leaders, but in this case the othering is mostly aimed against economic elites (“We are the 99%”; “For the many, not the few”), which can be seen as a transfiguration of the XX Century-style class conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars, as Jason Stanley (2018) and Bart Cammaerts (2020), refer to some of these leaders simply as ‘fascists’ or ‘neo-fascists’.

legacy media (often depicted as biased or hostile, and part of the ‘corrupt’ elites that the RWAs affirm to be fighting against) and, at the same time, to deliberately influence the legacy media coverage.

Trump, Modi, Erdoğan and Bolsonaro are among the heads of state with the most followers to their accounts. Three of them use Twitter massively (more than 10 posts a day), while Erdoğan uses it sporadically. Regardless of the quantity of daily messages, all these leaders’ accounts have good engagement rates (Table 2). All their messages receive a high number of endorsements (likes) and are widely redistributed (retweeted) by followers to their accounts. These three actions (to follow an

Table 2

**Followers and Engagement Rate of Twitter Accounts – Right-Wing Authoritarian Leaders**

Account	Followers	Tweets per day	Average likes per original tweet	Average retweets per original tweet	Average engagement rate
<b>@realDonaldTrump</b>	66,625,081	14.2	48,681.7	11,842.0	0.09%
<b>@narendramodi</b>	51,164,156	10.5	13,444.9	2,147.4	0.03%
<b>@RTErdogan</b>	14,327,831	1.7	20,741.5	4,379.1	0.17%
<b>@jairbolsonaro</b>	5,382,046	11.7	13,699.7	2,709.2	0.29%

Data elaborated on the 200 latest tweets posted on each account, retrieved on 8/11/2019 with the TAGS tool (tags.hawksey.info).

account and, most importantly, to like messages and to retweet them) demonstrate a level of support of millions of users for these leaders and contribute to increasing the reach and social approval of their messages (Zhao, Zhan & Liu, 2007, p. 552).

By using social media, political leaders communicate directly with their “primary audience,” i.e. their sympathizers and supporters, who re-circulate the information, thus extending the network’s reach to a “secondary audience” (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015, p. 1026). When users select some content instead of other, they promote a specific interpretation of facts. Therefore, with the exponential increase of social media usage, traditional media organizations have progressively lost their monopoly over news framing, as social media users select or discard certain messages and “frame social events by affecting the frequency of words, images, and embedded links that circulate among connected peers” (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018, p. 480). At the same time, journalists working for legacy media are now obliged to follow the accounts of key actors in their beat area and to report



about their tweets. Thus, the impact of leading Twitter accounts goes way beyond the number of the direct followers and has become an integral part of the news cycle.

Twitter is especially prone to be effectively used by right-wing authoritarian politicians. The limit of 280 characters per message forces the oversimplification of arguments, while the fast speed of messages scrolling over the users' timelines also discourages any meaningful or serious debate. In Fuchs' definition, "Twitter is the best medium for the emotional and ideological politics of outrage, scapegoating, hatred and attack because its ephemerality, brevity and speed" (Fuchs, 2016, p. 181). However, not all RWA leaders use the social medium in the same way. While both Trump and Bolsonaro use openly their Twitter accounts (and also Facebook and WhatsApp, in the case of the Brazilian president) as political clubs to attack enemies, close ranks with supporters and make constant announcements, for Modi and Erdoğan Twitter is a communication tool used mostly to strengthen the image of wise statesmen that they aim to project on the international arena, while leaving the dirty work of disinformation and personal attacks to other branches of their authoritarian governments (Cammaerts, 2020, p. 9).

For right-wing authoritarian leaders who rise to power via elections, the relationship with mainstream media appears to be binary. They are either able to control them or they work actively to undermine their independence. In the first case, they do not need to rely exclusively, or predominantly, on social media as their main communication tools; in the second case, the incessant use of social media becomes essential to communicate with their supporters and keep them mobilized against their adversaries. The aggressive use of social media allows RWA leaders to bypass the legacy media's gatekeeping, but it also has a direct influence on the whole news cycle.

### **3 THE IMPACT OF RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM ON THE UNITED NATIONS**

The United Nations, as stated in its Charter, must be impartial and cannot "intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state" (article 2.7), which means it should not interfere in the internal political affairs of its member countries. Nevertheless, the coming to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders has a direct negative impact on the work of the

UN and is an existential threat to the very existence of the Organization. The UN embodies the ensemble of the world order's principles, rules, and norms that have been slowly and painfully agreed since 1945, and that RWA politicians are now attacking. Examples of this trend are the aggressive stance against that RWA leaders have expressed on recent occasions, such as the strong opposition to the 2016 Paris Agreement on climate change, the assault on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the unprecedented financial crisis faced by the UN Secretariat in the second half of 2019 because key member states failed to pay their due contributions.

Trump and many authoritarian leaders are not just opposed to the Paris Agreement – from which the US has formally started the withdrawal process in November 2019 - as they negate the very existence of the climate problem. And after the Bolsonaro's election, Brazil announced that it would not host the COP 25 Conference on Climate Change, scheduled for November 2019. The new Brazilian president appointed as foreign affairs minister an obscure career diplomat, Ernesto Araujo, who had published articles arguing that climate change is part of a plot by “cultural Marxists” to stifle Western economies and promote the growth of China, and that he saw his mission as to “help Brazil and the world to liberate themselves from globalist ideology” (Watts, November 15, 2018).

In the case of the Global Compact – a UN-promoted, non-binding agreement to “facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration, while reducing the incidence and negative impact of irregular migration” – the discussion started in September 2016, weeks before Trump's election. At the time, all UN member states agreed. In December 2017, the US officially announced that it would not be participating in the GCM, as it was inconsistent with the new Administration's immigration policy. During the negotiation process, the GCM became the target of fierce anti-migrant rhetoric by RWA leaders all over the world, who unleashed a virulent online and offline campaign against the Compact, depicting it as an insidious globalist conspiracy. The Global Compact was finally adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. Five countries voted against (the US, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Israel) and twelve abstained (including Italy, because of the Lega's opposition). Brazil voted in favour but, after taking office, Bolsonaro announced that the country would withdraw from the agreement. On Twitter, the UN's only reaction was a soft-toned tweet on

@UN\_News\_Centre, the least followed of the Secretariat's accounts: "It is always regrettable when a Member State disengages from a multilateral process, particularly from one so respectful of national specificities"<sup>7</sup>.

The non-payment of due contributions to the UN budget constitutes an even more dangerous attack against the Organization, as it jeopardizes its capability to carry out its work. The financial situation of the UN Secretariat became so dire in October 2019 that Secretary-General António Guterres had to publicly alert that the Organization would soon default on salaries and payments unless member states paid their contributions. Trump reacted with an aggressive tweet: "So make all member countries pay, not just the United States!"<sup>8</sup>. In fact, by that date 128 of the 193 UN member states had paid their contributions in full. The US is the single largest contributor to the regular budget of the UN Secretariat (22% of the total, or US\$ 674 million a year) and to the separate budget for peacekeeping missions (28% of the total, or US\$2.2 billion a year); but it is also the largest debtor to the Organization, and Brazil the second largest. In October 2019, the unpaid US contributions totalled US\$3.4 billion, and the Brazilian ones totalled US\$430 million (Pollard, 2019).

The funding to the UN System – the dozens of specialized agencies and entities related to the Organization - has always been a highly politicized matter. Most contributions to the UN System are provided by a small group of top contributors (in decreasing order: the US, Germany, the UK, the European Union, Sweden, Japan, Norway, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and Italy), which exercise a strong discretionary power. Only 20% of the total funds are 'core' contributions (i.e. mandatory), while 80% are 'earmarked' funds, for projects and priorities defined unilaterally by the donor countries. The core contributions to the UN Secretariat represent only a small fraction of the total United Nations System budget (US \$2.6 billion versus US \$53.2 billion in 2017) but are a crucial political battlefield to influence and shape the Organization's activities (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation & United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2019, pp. 11, 45, 166). As Laurenti (2018) summarized, "finances are a fundamental metric of power—the

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<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/UN\\_News\\_Centre/status/1083136794055581697](https://twitter.com/UN_News_Centre/status/1083136794055581697)

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1181891356274413570>

wherewithal that gives tangible effect to the verbal intentions that political authorities solemnly proclaim.”

Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) was the last US president to pay US assessments to the United Nations on time, in full and without conditions. The United States has been a chronic source of financial instability for the Organization since 1982, under Ronald Reagan's presidency. Like Reagan, Trump never hid his dislike of the UN. Just before his inauguration, Trump tweeted twice about the Organization, with tone both threatening and contemptuous: "As to the UN, things will be different after Jan. 20th."<sup>9</sup> and "The United Nations has such great potential but right now it is just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!"<sup>10</sup>. The Trump administration has openly used UN funding as a political weapon to advance its aggressively conservative agenda. In April 2017, it announced the cut of US voluntary contributions to UNFPA, the agency responsible for family planning and ending deaths in childbirth, accusing it of favouring pro-abortion policies. In August 2018, the State Department announced the cut of all funding (US\$1.1 billion a year) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main programme helping Palestinian refugees – as the Israeli government had been requesting for years. These decisions were not met by sufficiently strong international criticism and set the precedent for Trump's later decision to suspend the US contributions to the World Health Organization in May 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Trump's aggressive attitude also became an example for other RWA leaders. In September 2018, then Italy's interior minister Matteo Salvini was reacted to a critical declaration of the UN Human Rights High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet by threatening to cut

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<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/812390964740427776>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/813500123053490176>

the Italian contributions. “Every year Italy gives the #UN more than 100 million euros. If these gentlemen allow themselves to give lessons to Italians, we will evaluate the usefulness of continuing to pay so much money to finance waste and corruption.”<sup>11</sup>

In Brazil, Bolsonaro harshly criticized the UN during his electoral campaign - “it is of no use, it is a meeting place for communists” (Balloussier, 2018) – and has kept up his belligerent tone against the Organization after taking office. On 28 October 2019, he published on Twitter a video in which he compared himself to a lion surrounded by hyenas – the UN, the media and the left (Image 1). In December 2019, he vetoed the inclusion of “the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals” – the global agenda adopted in 2015 by all UN member states to promote global equitable and environmentally-conscious growth - among the guidelines of the Brazilian government’s 2020-2023 Multi-annual Plan (Zaia, December 30, 2019).



The divide between the multilateralist vision and the nationalist authoritarian attitude of the US and Brazilian presidents was made evident before the eyes of the world in the opening session of the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2019. The first to speak, the Secretary-General António Guterres pronounced a passionate speech about the global challenges of our time and on the need to “do everything possible to avert the Great Fracture and maintain a universal system – a universal economy with universal respect for international law; a multipolar world with strong multilateral institutions” (Guterres, September. 24, 2019). Immediately after him, as UN protocol dictates, spoke Bolsonaro and Trump. In Guterres’ speech, the most recurrent words were *people, rights, world* and *humanity*. Bolsonaro repeated *Brasil* (Brazil) 41 times. Trump’s most used words were *nations, countries, America, Americans*; he referred 18 times to *the United States*. Both presidents referred to *god*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1039452864240861184>

five times in their speeches<sup>12</sup>. With Cold War language, they evoked the “specter of socialism” (Trump) and the “cruelty of socialism” (Bolsonaro) as major threats to the world order. Heavily criticized in the previous weeks for how the Brazilian government had managed the multiplying of fires in the Amazon, Bolsonaro attacked the “media lies” about the crisis and the “manipulation” by “foreign governments” of the Indigenous people who live in the rainforest (Bolsonaro, 2019). Trump bragged about the US military might and delivered a passionate manifesto for nationalism and for international relations based on coercion more than on diplomacy: “The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens.” Trump openly despised the United Nations’ role in defining common rules: “There is no circumstance under which the United States will allow international entities to trample on the rights of our citizens” (Trump, 2019).

### **3.1 Authoritarianism and the Mass-Based Disintegration of the Multilateral Order**

Even in the recent past, the impact and implications of the rise to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders were often minimized by mainstream politicians and legacy media pundits who tended to assume that, once in office, the new political actors would start acting within the expected and long-established limits of traditional politics. Concrete experience has shown otherwise. As Kane and McCulloch (2017) have convincingly argued, the crude nativist rhetoric of such leaders does not evaporate after the elections and translates into acts and proposals that further deepen divisions among the electorate. Consequently, any kind of compromise by lawmakers on complex matters that have symbolic value as well as substantial importance, such as immigration, climate change, reproductive rights and gender equality, LGBT rights, repression of hate speech and redistributive economic policies becomes extremely difficult. Moreover, the anti-establishment rhetoric leads to the appointment of new, inexperienced foreign policy officials, often picked for loyalty rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Word frequency use calculated with NVivo 12 software (QSR International, Melbourne, VIC, Australia).

experience, which produces a foreign policy apparatus that is often inconsistent and inefficient. This has already happened in both the United States and Brazil. The rhetoric of other RWA leaders, such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini or Jörg Meuthen, suggests that, should they one day come to power, they could follow a similar pattern. But even if they do not become presidents or prime ministers, they have already had a strong impact on the political discourse in their countries. Discriminatory stances against refugees and immigrants, especially if Black or Muslims, and a security-based approach to migration policies, for instance, have become mainstream. The boundaries of what used to be unthinkable, or at least unspeakable in public discourse, are constantly being pushed further to the right.

RWA politicians tend to be sceptical of international cooperation, and less inclined to support supranational governance arrangements (Stengel, MacDonald & Nabers, 2019). This trend has dangerous implications for the future of democracy and poses an existential threat to international organizations and non-governmental organizations that defend a rights-based development agenda (Galasso, Nelli Feroci, Pfeifer & Wlash, 2017). The paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism, as reasoned by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), is that the enemies of democracy utilize the very democratic institutions to progressively destroy democracy from within, often with the 'legal' endorsement of national congresses and courts. Conversely, member states of international organizations may attempt to unilaterally change, erode or terminate the terms of existing international agreements, treaties and procedures. It is a process that Stefanie Walter (2019) has accurately defined as mass-based disintegration: disintegration, because it aims to partly or fully withdraw from the agreed rules of international institutions; and mass-based, because it is often based on a strong domestic support, either expressed through a referendum vote (such as Brexit) or as part of a candidate's successful election campaign. Thus, mass-based disintegration is a process that starts at the national level, but has international implications as soon as a government, based on its internal constituency, puts pressure on the other states to modify the rules of an international organization, or unilaterally withdraws from specific rules.

Not all right-wing authoritarian leaders constantly attack the UN, but all of them represent a danger for a rights-based world order. For the United Nations, the paradox is that the Organization cannot openly act to hinder the rise to power of leaders who could later try to undermine the very pillars of



the multilateral world order. What the UN could indeed do is to use its soft power to implement an effective communication strategy aimed at two converging goals: on one hand, to actively disprove the fake news and manipulations spread by RWA leaders and movements; and, on the other hand, to disseminate tailor-made content on crucial issues (human rights, opposition to nationalism and xenophobia, climate change, gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, etc.) to contribute to validating national political actors and agendas in key countries that may counter the mounting RWA tide. Strengthening the social legitimacy of the United Nations is not to be seen solely as a matter of self-interest, but as a tool to help defending democracy and international cooperation.

#### 4 THE UNITED NATIONS FROM THE TELEGRAPH TO TWITTER

The need to acquire and strengthen social legitimacy as a form to secure support for the United Nations is as old as the Organization itself. The Department of Public Information (DPI) was created in 1946 by the General Assembly with the mission of “communicating to the world the ideals and work of the United Nations; to interacting and partnering with diverse audiences; and to building support for the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations”<sup>13</sup>. Over the decades, communications technologies have evolved from, literally, the telegraph to Twitter, and DPI has been rebaptized - since 1 January 2019 it is called the Department of Global



Source: Tschauko, S. (December 13, 2017). *UN Branded: A Look at Branding and Visual Identity in the United Nations System*. United Nations Designers Meeting & PCP Meet-up, Geneva.

Communications (DGC). Today, it has almost 700 staff, working at headquarters and in dozens of field offices, with a total annual budget of about US\$94 million<sup>14</sup>. Among many other tasks, they produce multimedia and multilingual materials for global distribution over different platforms: websites, downloadable radio broadcasts, video feeds, photographs, documentaries -- and social media posts.

Over the decades, the United Nations System has grown to be a very complex structure, with the UN Secretariat at its centre, and over 50 among specialized agencies, funds, programmes and institutes<sup>15</sup>. New names and logos have been added over time without planning or guidelines. As a result, the UN branding is complex and confusing (Image 2). Practically all entities have their own communications staff, which manage websites and social media accounts, at Headquarters and in the field. Therefore, the UN System has literally thousands of different social media accounts: "no-one really knows how many accounts there are" (Dickinson, 2018, p. 13).

The UN Secretariat currently utilizes a wide range of social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Tumblr, Flickr and Pinterest. In 2017, DPI created a dedicated social media team of 23 staff based in New York, to manage different platforms in several languages. Additionally, other staff across the Department produce multilingual and multimedia content (Gloves, 2018). The UN has six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). The first official Twitter account - in English - was created in 2008. Over the years, accounts in seven additional languages were also launched, including Hindi, Kiswahili and Portuguese. As the Chinese government blocks internet access to Twitter in the country, the UN launched instead an official account on China's leading social medium, the micro-blog Weibo.com. The accounts in English, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic are the only ones with a significant number of followers (Table 3).

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/74/6%20\(INTRODUCTION\)](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/74/6%20(INTRODUCTION))

<sup>15</sup> The complete list is available at <http://www.unsceb.org/>

Table 3

**United Nations Official Twitter Accounts in Different Languages**

Language	Account	Created on	Followers
Arabic	<b>@UNarabic</b>	10/01/2012	785,962
Chinese	<b>www.weibo.com/un</b>	NA	9,858,895
English	<b>@UN</b>	16/03/2008	11,579,063
French	<b>@ONU_fr</b>	01/03/2011	280,983
Hindi	<b>@UNinHindi</b>	10/07/2018	22,366
Kiswahili	<b>@UmojaWaMataifa</b>	21/08/2009	8,300
Portuguese	<b>@NacoesUnidas</b>	17/06/2009	50,560
Russian	<b>@UnitedNationsRU</b>	07/03/2012	40,301
Spanish	<b>@ONU_es</b>	04/03/2010	1,311,120
		Total	23,937,550

Data as of 7 November 2019, retrieved via third-party application follor.me

The accounts of the UN Secretary-General, the Spokesperson of the Secretary-General, and the main UN multimedia news service publish posts almost exclusively in English. On some occasions, tweets in French, Spanish and Portuguese are also published, but there are not

resources available to do so on a regular basis (S. Dujarric, personal communication, October 4, 2019).

All Twitter accounts have a very basic level of moderation. Social media staff eliminate hate speech messages, fake news, insults and profanities, but they neither answer to messages nor engage in conversations with followers (D. Pedroza, personal communication, June 3, 2019). Critical comments are not removed. Many of them focus on the fear of undue UN interference in national affairs or accuse the Organization of not doing enough about the crisis of the moment (Groves, 2018). The lack of human resources to interact with followers make the UN social media an example of old-style, one-way communication: dissemination of information to the public instead of interaction with followers.

**4.1 The UN Secretariat on Twitter – Data Gathering and Research Questions**

This paper is focused on the analysis of four flagship Twitter accounts in the English language managed by full-time by UN Secretariat staff (Table 4).

Table 4

**United Nations Secretariat's Main Twitter Accounts in English – by Number of Followers**

Account	Name	Description	Joined Twitter on	Followers
<b>@UN</b>	United Nations	Official account of #UnitedNations. Get latest information on the UN.	16/03/2008	11,498,647
<b>@antonioguterres</b>	António Guterres	Official Twitter account of Secretary-General of the @UN António Guterres.	20/12/2016	673,722
<b>@UN_Spokesperson</b>	UN Spokesperson	Official Twitter account of the Office of the Spokesperson for United Nations Secretary-General @antonioguterres	26/05/2010	610,201
<b>@UN_News_Centre</b>	UN News	Official twitter account of the United Nations News, the UN's multimedia news service.	12/01/2010	428,848
			Total followers	13,211,418

Data as of 10 October 2019, retrieved via third-party application foller.me

The choice of analysing the use of Twitter is based on three reasons: 1) Twitter is the social medium that totals the most followers. In October 2019, the @UN Twitter account (in English) had 11.5 million followers, and the @unitednations Facebook account had 4.7 million. As both were created practically at the same time, it can be said that Twitter is the UN main social media tool for digital diplomacy. 2) Differently from Facebook, Twitter has been actively trying to crack down on malicious users and fake automated accounts (bots), which has reduced the count of Twitter's active users but has made the current numbers closer to reflecting how many real people are using the platform (Kastrenakes, 2019). 3) Twitter is the only major social medium whose contents can be relatively easily 'mined' using the API (Application Programming Interface) available to developers, companies and academics. For this research, I used both a third-party service ([www.Followersanalysis.com](http://www.Followersanalysis.com)) and a free tool called TAGS (<http://tags.hawksey.info>), a Google Sheet plugin that allows to recover up to 3,200 old tweets. Overall, researchers have legal access to a huge set of data to be analysed – which is almost impossible in the case of Facebook. From an academic point of view, it should be acknowledged that this situation creates a paradox: most of the

research on the use of social media focuses on the relatively small Twitter instead of the giant Facebook.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was carried out to assess UN communications via Twitter using three main criteria: 1) content; 2) level of engagement ; 3) language (verbal and visual). According to these criteria, I have identified the characteristics of UN Twitter-based messaging that better resonate with the public. As a first step, I classified the tweets according to the level of engagement. As argued by Stacks and Brown (2013, p. 21), engagement in social media can be defined as “any action or response from a target audience resulting from proactive communications that creates a psychological motivation [...] to engage through participation.” Tweets with higher levels of engagement can be considered as successful, and those with lower levels as unsuccessful in contributing to UN digital diplomacy – and by extension, to strengthening the UN social legitimacy.

There are several ways to calculate and evaluate the engagement rate of a given Twitter account. Without having access to the number of impressions (i.e. how many times each post was seen by followers), which is not public information, the method generally utilized by social media marketers considers the number of interactions, posts and followers. The formula is: Average Engagement Rate (%) per post = [Engagements (Likes + Retweets) / followers / number of posts] x 100. Evaluating the results obtained with this formula, it is generally agreed that an engagement rate between 0% and 0.02% is low; between 0.02% and 0.09% is good; between 0.09% and 0.33% is high; and above 0.33% is very high (Mee, n.d.)<sup>16</sup>.

Obviously, the engagement rate should not be the only parameter to evaluate the effectiveness of digital diplomacy. As Sevin and Ingenhoff (2018) have argued, the measurement criterion— number of likes and retweets - ceases being a good measure as soon as it turns into a target by itself, while it remains critical to evaluate the relationships established with the target audiences, and

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<sup>16</sup> Some methods include the number of replies to tweets in the total engagement calculation. However, this is a practice better applied to accounts that are actively managed and where replies from followers are answered to (two-way communication). For this paper, I have decided to focus on the engagements (likes and retweets) that unquestionably show a positive attitude and support in relation to the Organization.

observe how these bonds translate or not into observable changes in public opinion and political action.

I have analysed an initial data set of 8,948 Twitter messages (original tweets, retweets and replies) published on the four selected accounts from 1 January to 30 September 2019. The timespan was long enough to both collect a significant number of messages and to include the opening of the United Nations General Assembly's general debate, in September, which is traditionally one of the busiest periods of the year for the Organization. I refined the data by eliminating all duplicate posts, retweeted across different accounts. This process reduced the data set to 7,956 messages, of which 6,302 (79.2%) were original tweets and replies, and 1,777 were retweets from 232 other different Twitter accounts. Some accounts (such those belonging to UNICEF, FAO, UNHCR, WFP and the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed) were retweeted dozens of times; most other accounts just once or twice. For the analysis, I only considered the final set of 6,302 original tweets and replies.

To identify trends and common characteristics of the most effective tweets I used the software NVivo 12 (QSR International, Melbourne, VIC, Australia) to generate word clouds and lists of the most used words: in the total set  $n=6,302$ ; in subsets of tweets with above-average engagement levels; and in the single accounts. I manually cleaned articles, prepositions and numbers, in order to analyse only significant verbs and nouns. Subsequently, I coded the 100 tweets with the highest engagement level, according to technical and value-based criteria.

Based on the data obtained, this paper aims to answer to three main questions:

- What is the nature of the United Nations' digital diplomacy, as reflected in the content of the tweets published on the Organization's flagship accounts in the English language?
- What are the topics that have more impact, as reflected by the audience's reaction and engagement? And what are the topics that resonate less?
- Is the UN Twitter-based digital diplomacy an effective tool for political action, to resist the attacks against the multilateral world order and the Organization's legitimacy carried out by authoritarian leaders?

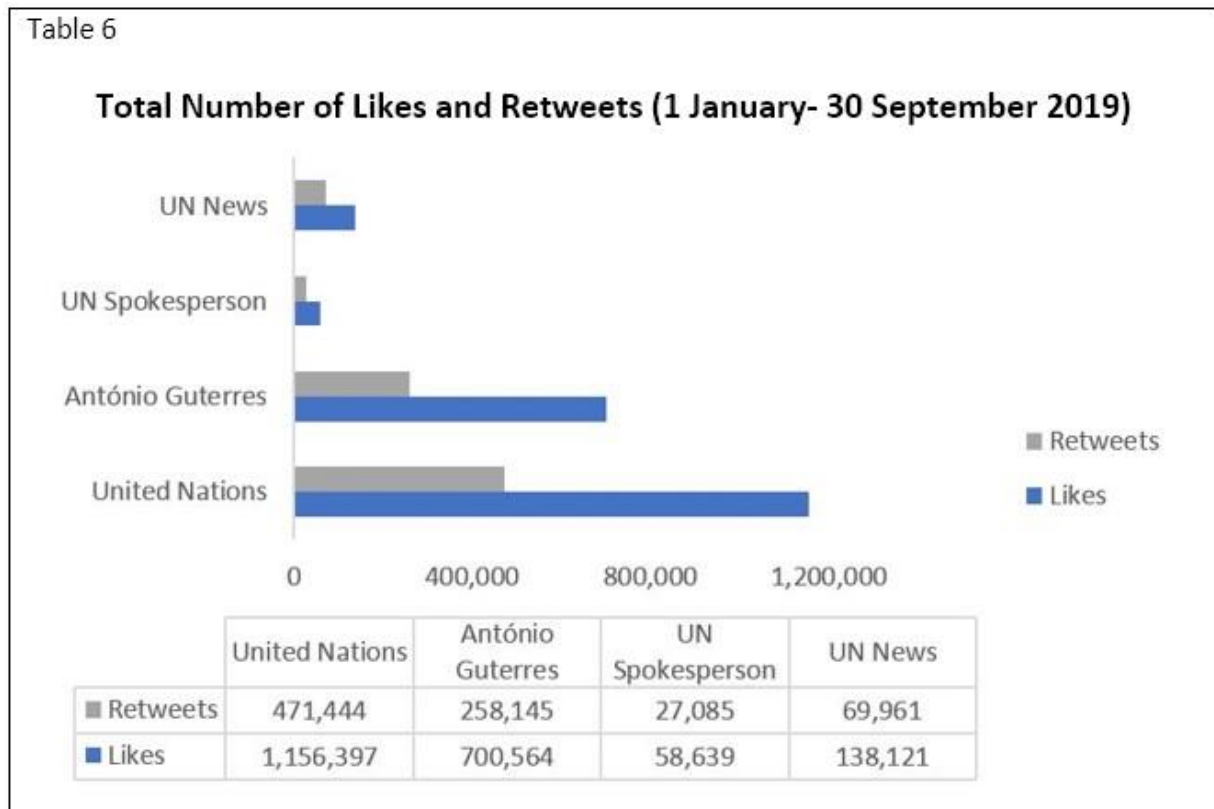
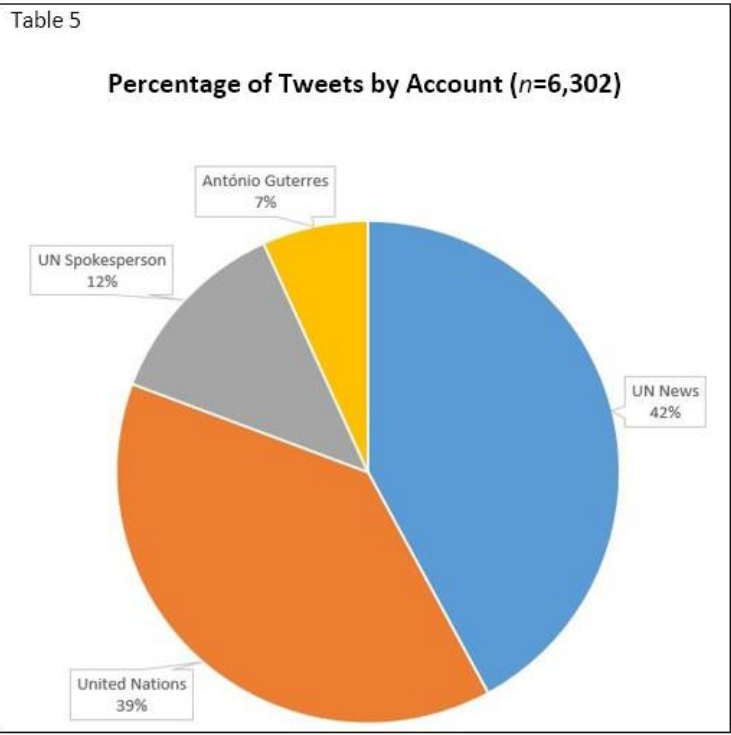


## 5 ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS FLAGSHIP TWITTER ACCOUNTS

The accounts @UN\_News\_Centre and @UN were responsible for 81% of the original messages (tweets and replies) posted in the chosen timespan: 5,086 out of 6,302 (Table 5). The @UN\_Spokesperson account posted 787 original messages (12%) and the Secretary-General's @antonioguterres 429 (7%).

The quantity of posts did not translate into a higher level of engagement: the highest average

engagement level (0.33%) was registered by the @antonioguterres account, which had only a fraction (5.8%) of the @UN account's followers. Table 6 shows the engagements registered for each account. The @antonioguterres account was the most effective one. The 45 tweets with the best results on the Secretary-General's account (about 10% of the total number of tweets posted in the analysed period) registered an extremely high engagement rate (1.2%). As Table 7 shows, the average engagement level of the other three accounts are, on the contrary, rather low. The lowest





was obtained by the account with most followers (@UN): an average engagement level of 0.006% (Table 7).

Table 7

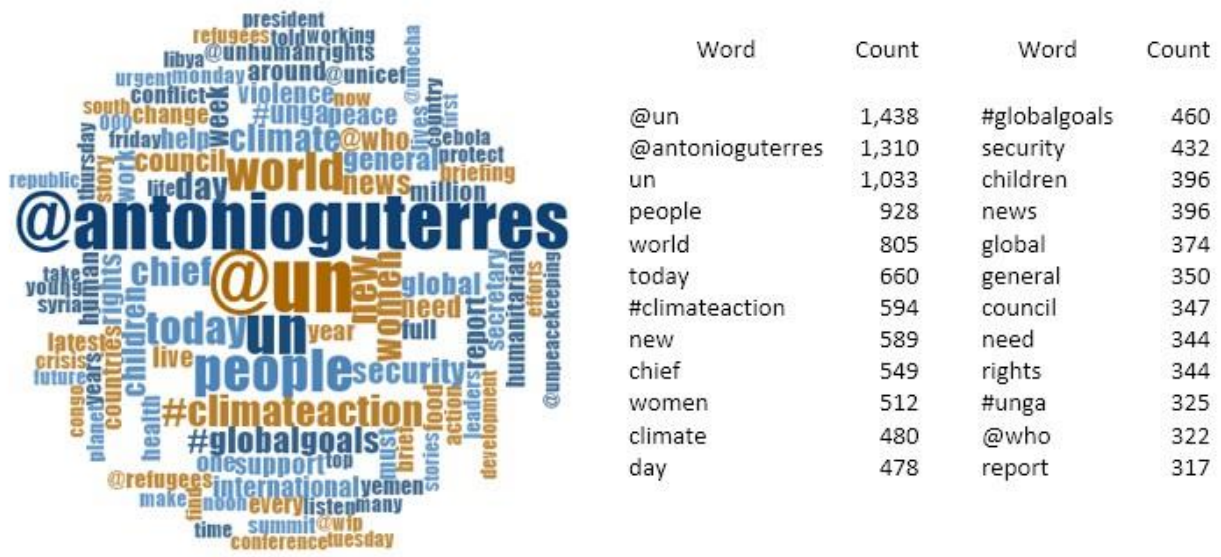
**Engagement Results for Selected United Nations Twitter Accounts (1 Jan. – 30 Sept. 2019)**

Account	Tweets and replies	Likes obtained	Average Likes per tweet	Retweets obtained	Average RTs per tweet	Average engagement (%)
<b>@antonioguterres</b>	429	700,564	1,633	258,145	601.7	0.33%
<b>@UN_News_Centre</b>	2,652	138,121	52	69,961	26.4	0.018%
<b>@UN_Spokesperson</b>	787	58,639	74.5	27,085	34.4	0.017%
<b>@UN</b>	2,434	1,156,397	475.1	471,444	193.7	0.007%
Total all accounts	6,302	2,053,721	325.9	826,365	131.1	0.003%

On average, from 1 January to 30 September 2019, the four accounts posted a total of 23 original tweets a day (and an overall number of 32.7 messages a day, including retweets and replies). As only a few posts are usually published during the weekend, on workdays the four accounts posted more than 40 messages, on a wide diversity of subjects.

Table 8

**Most Used Words in 6,302 Tweets Posted on Selected United Nations Accounts\***



\*@UN; @antonioguterres; @UN\_Spokesperson; @UN\_News\_Centre (1 January - 30 September 2019).

Generated with NVivo12 Ta

Table 8 lists the words and hashtags most used in the whole set of messages. The most used term in the set of tweets was “https” (8,627 times), which shows that one or more links to online content are present in most messages. As the term only indicates an intertextual communication, it was not considered in the content analysis. The abundant use of hyperlinks, however, indicates that most tweets were not stand-alone messages, but a kind of vitrine to online materials. While the use of short videos embedded in tweets is an efficient practice, studies have shown that most social media users consume news largely through headlines: very few people click on links and even fewer read to the end of a story (Waterson, 2019).

Using the NVivo12 software, I carried out a machine-enabled textual analysis of all tweets to evaluate the subtext and emotional value of words and expressions, mapped out on a positive-negative polarity. Almost half (47.5%) of the tweets contained either very negative or moderately negative messaging; 22% of the tweets had moderately positive or very positive messaging; about

one third of the tweets (30.5%) were neutral<sup>17</sup>. Then, to evaluate what messages better resonated among the public, I analysed the 100 most liked tweets posted on the four accounts. Although they represent only 1.58% of the whole set of messages, these 100 tweets totalled 576,258 likes and 219,583 retweets, equivalent to 27.6% of the total engagements. 77 tweets were posted on the @antonioguterres account, 20 on @UN (including the three most successful tweets of the whole set, as shown in Annex IV), two on @UN\_News\_Centre and one on @UN\_Spokesperson. The average engagement rate for this subset of messages was good (0.06%). The concentration of engagements in a small percentage of the tweets and mostly in a single account (@antonioguterres) shows that certain types of messages, posted by specific users, are much more effective than others, and that the number of followers alone is not the most important parameter to assess the impact and effectiveness of Twitter-based communication.

The analysis of the 100 most successful tweets (Table10) shows a predominance of messages related to climate change and its variants (crisis, emergency), events (the 23 September 2019 Climate Summit held) and testimonials (such as the Swedish youth climate activist Greta Thunberg, mentioned in 9 tweets). The hashtag #ClimateAction, used by the UN to refer to all activities connected to the topic, is present in 40 tweets, most of which were published on the @antonioguterres account. No other topic had a comparable incidence on the Secretary-General's account. The constant messaging about climate-related matters and the engagement results demonstrate that the topic was a real priority for Guterres' communication, and that his followers reacted positively to the messaging.

The positive-negative polarity in the subset  $n=100$  was balanced: 49 tweets contained negative messaging and 49 contained positive messaging. Annex IV shows the ten most successful tweets by

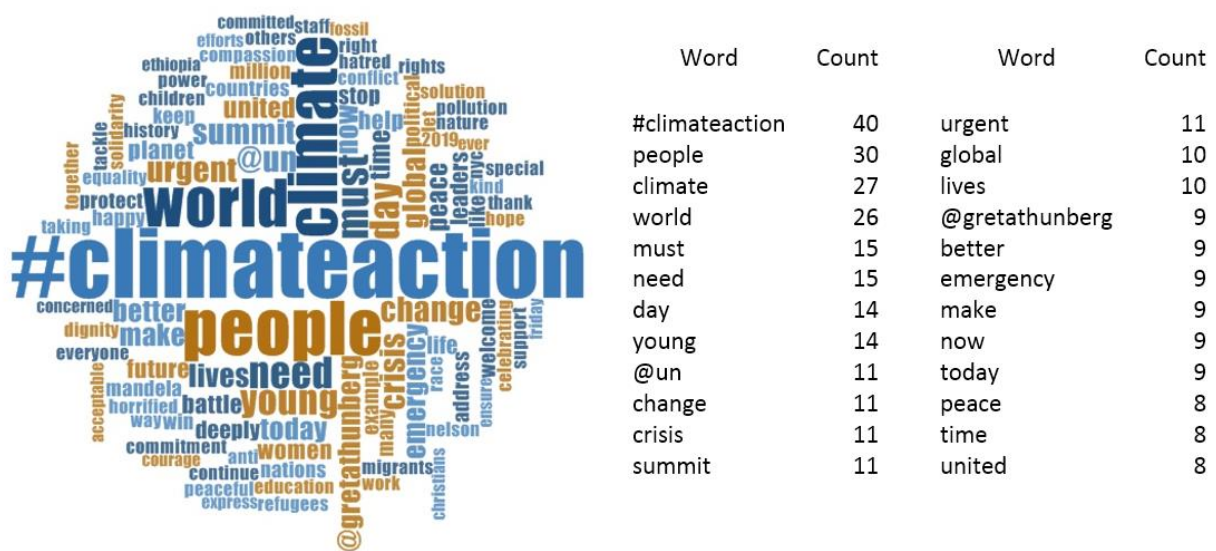
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<sup>17</sup> NVivo's sentiment dictionary considers words such as war, conflict, crisis and violence as indicators of negative messaging; the topics usually addressed in UN social media posts explain the predominance of negative polarity. Examples of negative messaging include tweets like: "Al-Shabaab still biggest source of insecurity in Somalia, top UN official tells Security Council, days after attacks on @UNSomalia compound in Mogadishu" (<https://twitter.com/un/status/1080919299882213377>). An example of positive messaging is "Human rights are for everyone - no matter who you are or whom you love! #StandUp4HumanRights & join @free\_equal to support fair treatment of lesbian, gay, bi, trans & intersex people" (<https://twitter.com/un/status/1086345002479964160>).

number of engagements and the type of messaging according to the positive-negative polarity. Besides the sentiment analysis, I also coded the all 100 tweets according to both visual, content-based and value-based criteria (Annex V). 75 out of the 100 tweets contained some type of images, with a slight predominance of videos over pictures and postcards. A picture or video of the Secretary-General was present in 38% of the messages. Interestingly, all text-only tweets (i.e. without any kind of images) were posted on the @antonioguterres account, which is, by far, the most successful in terms of engagement. In the case of the Secretary-General’s communication on Twitter, what seems to really matter is the content of his messages, regardless of the visual supports used<sup>18</sup>.

Table 9

**Most Used Words in the 100 Most Liked Tweets on Selected United Nations Accounts\***



\*@UN; @antonioguterres; @UN\_Spokesperson; @UN\_News\_Centre (1 January – 30 September 2019)

Generated with NVivo12

Over

er three quarters (78) of the most successful tweets were related to current events. Besides climate-

<sup>18</sup> Since the beginning of his tenure, Guterres has preferred to travel with only a small group of advisors, which seldom includes a photographer or videographer. Consequently, often the UN social media teams in New York did not receive images of the travels. On some occasions, when Guterres travelled to areas affected by climate change-related crises, he was accompanied by communication staff, who produced powerful images to be used on all UN platforms.

related matters, the topics that most resonated were political and humanitarian crises (Libya, Venezuela, Kashmir), messages of condolences or condemnation for specific events<sup>19</sup>, the launching of UN reports and the celebration of International Days. The impact of messages increased significantly when they were tweeted on the Secretary-General's account; tweets about current affairs on other accounts often generated low engagements.

## 5.1 Close-Up: The Secretary-General's Account

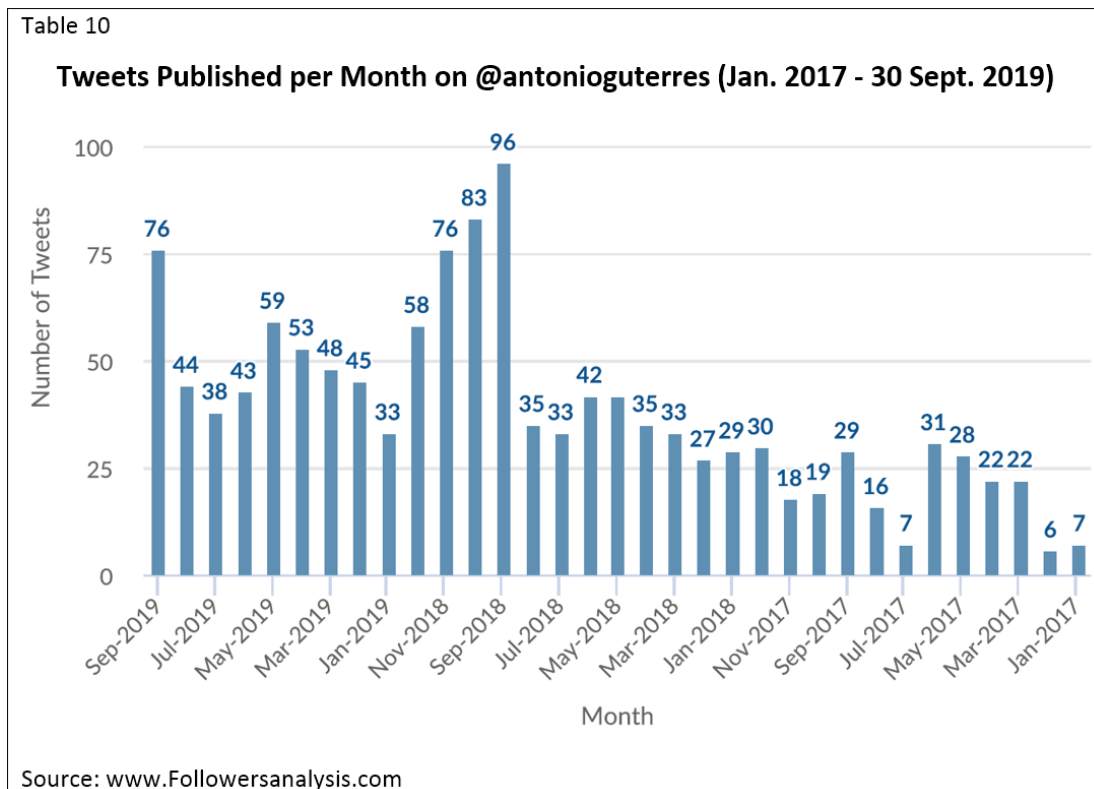
António Guterres was appointed as the 9th Secretary-General of the United Nations in October 2016, and he started his first five-year term on 1 January 2017. His predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, did not have any social media accounts. An official Twitter account for Guterres was created on 20 December 2016 and an Instagram account in May 2019. As per 1 February 2020, Guterres did not have an institutional Facebook account, and likely will never have one, because of the reputational damages suffered by this social medium after the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 <sup>20</sup> (Pedroza, 2019).

Starting from zero, Guterres' Twitter account has steadily grown to reach 680,000 followers by the end of September 2019, with an average engagement level consistently higher than all other UN flagship accounts. A former prime minister of Portugal, Guterres is a very effective communicator, visibly at ease when dealing with journalists, which was not the case for most of his predecessors, with the notable exception of media-savvy Kofi Annan. Although Guterres does not personally tweet, he reviews the messages prepared by his communications team before they are posted. During the first two years of Guterres' mandate, there were no staff working full time on the Secretary-General' social media, although several people contributed to it, in coordination with DPI

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, the tweet "I'm saddened & strongly condemn the shooting of innocent people as they prayed peacefully in mosques in New Zealand. I express my deepest condolences to the victims' families. Today and every day, we must stand united against anti-Muslim hatred, & all forms of bigotry & terror" obtained over 18,000 engagements on 15 March 2019. <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1106540575493419008>

and the UN Spokesperson’s social media team (Groves, 2018; Pedroza, 2019). A social media advisor and a Director of Communications working directly for Guterres where hired in 2019. Usually, the social media team makes a series of message proposals at the beginning of each week, which are then revised and adapted when needed. The account is not very active; since its launching, it has published on average 1.19 tweets a day. In the first nine months of 2019 the average was 1.57 tweets a day (Table 10).



Despite the low activity, the high level of engagement achieved by the @antonioguterres account arguably demonstrates that followers are interested in listening to the Secretary-General, who represents and embodies United Nations values, rather than to the Organization’s institutional messaging. This is hardly surprising, as the hyper-personalization of politics has become ubiquitous in recent years. World leaders usually overshadow their own governments on social media<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> As per 27 January 2020, the French President Emmanuel Macron had 4.5 million followers to his personal account @EmmanuelMacron, while the government’s account @gouvernementFR did not exceed 630,000. President Trump had 71.7 million followers to his account @realDonaldTrump and 28 million to the White House’s official account @Potus. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had 4.7 million followers to his personal account @JustinTrudeau, while the

Politicians tend to utilize Twitter to inform about their daily activities, make announcements on relevant issues and strengthen the narrative of their public discourse. In the case of the UN, on the contrary, the institutional accounts tweeted more about Guterres' activities and speeches than the Secretary-General on his own account. In the examined timespan, 429 original tweets were published on the Secretary-General's accounts, while @antonioguterres was mentioned 1,310 times on the three other accounts. As shown in Table 8, "@antonioguterres" was the second most frequent expression in the set of messages. The information about Guterres' activities and statements most relevant for the media and the general public were usually tweeted on the other accounts. The Secretary-General's account, for example, tweeted three times in nine months about the civil war in Syria, while @antonioguterres was mentioned 14 times in tweets about this topic posted on the other accounts. On 12 July 2019, after a series of airstrikes destroyed hospitals in Idlib, Guterres made a strong declaration saying that those responsible for such "serious violations of international humanitarian law should be held accountable" - diplomatic shorthand for possible war crimes that could be prosecuted. Guterres' words were quoted in a tweet published by @UN\_News\_Centre<sup>22</sup> and in a story posted on the United Nations website<sup>23</sup>, but not on the @antonioguterres account. On the same day, two tweets were posted on Guterres' account, both about the humanitarian situation in Mozambique after devastating cyclones had hit the country.

All analyses confirmed that @antonioguterres was the most effective of the four UN flagship accounts to raise attention about significant topics. Despite the superior effectiveness of the @antonioguterres account, the strategy, according to the Secretary-General's social media advisor, David Pedroza, is that "on specific issues, other UN senior officials or specialized agencies take the lead in terms of communications" (Pedroza, 2019). On his Twitter account, the Secretary-General has mostly avoided controversial issues. Often, Guterres' speeches and interviews carry more direct and stronger messages than the tweets about the same topics, as we will see in three case studies.

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government's @Canada (in English) had 738,000 followers. Brazilian President Bolsonaro had 5.9 million followers to his personal account @jairbolsonaro, while the government's official account @govbr had a mere 205,000.

<sup>22</sup> [https://twitter.com/un\\_news\\_centre/status/1149702455187271685](https://twitter.com/un_news_centre/status/1149702455187271685)

<sup>23</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/07/1042311>

Overall, all UN communications, including social media, are managed with extreme caution. “The Secretary-General and the UN don’t make hostile comments about member states or leaders. [...] The SG’s work is not to make headlines at all price, in a period of crazy headlines. In communications, shouting is like running a 100 meters sprint; building trust and political bridges is a marathon,” explained the Secretary-General’s Spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, who had also worked with two of Guterres’ predecessors, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon. (S. Dujarric, personal communication, October 4, 2019). Guterres was especially careful in all communications that relate to the US administration. For instance, after Trump announced on 1 June 2017 that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, Guterres reacted with two mild-worded tweets (“Climate action is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.”<sup>24</sup> and “It’s essential that the world implements the #ParisAgreement & fulfils that duty with increased ambition.”<sup>25</sup>).

To finalize the study of the @antonioguterres account, I analysed two subsets of messages: the 50 tweets with the most engagements and the 50 tweets with the least engagements. As the word clouds in Tables 11 and 12 show, there are no striking differences of topics in the two subsets. However, 17 out of the 50 least liked tweets were in languages other than English, and all tweets in the most liked subset were in English. Also, in the subset of least liked tweets, 30 out of 50 messages were replies to messages from other users or to posts from the same account.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/870288465291878400>

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/870319113687769089>



Table 11

Most Used Words in the 50 Most Liked Tweets on @antonioguterres (1 Jan. – 30 Sept. 2019)



Word	Count	Word	Count
#climateaction	21	global	7
people	19	un	7
climate	17	urgent	7
world	14	around	6
need	11	crisis	6
must	9	take	6
every	8	@un	5
lives	8	battle	5
young	8	new	5
better	7	now	5
day	7	planet	5
emergency	7	address	4

Generated with NVivo12

From these observations, it can be concluded that most of the account’s followers expect to read single tweets (as opposite to threads) and may not be able or willing to read in languages other than English. The only exception was a tweet in French about the fire that destroyed the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on 15 April 2019, which received over 2,700 likes and almost 800 retweets<sup>26</sup>. In this specific case, a tweet in English with the same content provoked less engagement.

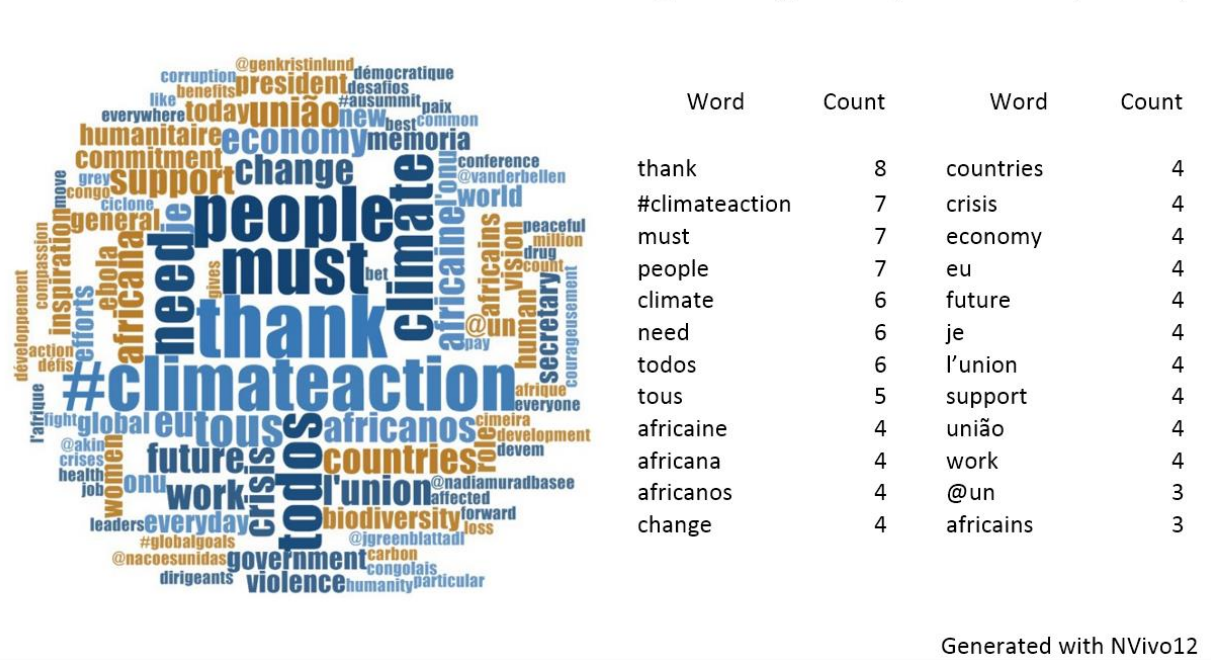
There is a clear contradiction between the aim of reaching a global audience and the use of one single language for doing so. English is certainly the main language of diplomacy, but to reach larger publics in different countries, accounts in other languages should be created and then constantly updated<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1117873538440941568>

<sup>27</sup> The best practice in this sense is probably that of the Catholic pope. The Twitter account @Pontifex core account in English has 8 additional language-specific accounts, that as of January 2019 totalled 48 million followers, making pope Francis one of the most followed global leaders in the Twiplomacy ranking.

Table 12

Most Used Words in the 50 Least Liked Tweets on @antonioguterres (1 Jan. – 30 Sept. 2019)



Generated with NVivo12

### 5.2 Case Study I: The Venezuela Crisis

During the first semester of 2019, the confrontation between the government and opposition in Venezuela was one of the most covered international news stories, with vast diplomatic and humanitarian implications for the United Nations. Journalists wanted to know the position of the Organization on the latest developments, including alleged widespread human rights violations, and what the UN was doing to mediate the crisis and bring humanitarian assistance.

An indication of the media’s attention was the frequency with which the topic was raised during the daily press briefings held at the UN Headquarters by the Secretary-General’s Spokesperson. In January 2019, the Spokesperson mentioned Venezuela in three briefings and answered 53 questions asked by journalists. In February, he mentioned Venezuela five times and answered 84 questions. In March, he mentioned Venezuela six times and answered 46 questions. In April, he mentioned Venezuela eight times and answered 48 questions. In May, as the media attention started to decline,

he mentioned Venezuela three times and answered 23 questions. Finally, in June, the Spokesperson mentioned Venezuela three times and answered 14 questions<sup>28</sup>.

Despite this huge media attention, only 95 tweets related to the crisis in Venezuela were posted on the four UN accounts from 1 January to 30 June 2019, equivalent to 2.48% of the original tweets posted in the period. On the @antonioguterres account was posted one single tweet, on 10 April (“7 million people in Venezuela need humanitarian assistance according to the latest estimates. We are working to expand our assistance, in line with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality & independence”<sup>129</sup>), which obtained a very high rate of engagement (0.9%, with 3,431 likes and 2,694 retweets).

Most of the tweets mentioned declarations by and activities by other UN high officials and specialized agencies; 14 out of the 95 tweets mentioned the Secretary-General, but with scarce impact. In the specific timespan, the @UN\_News account published 46 tweets related to Venezuela, with an average engagement rate of 0.017% (low) and the @UN account published 26 tweets, with an engagement rate of 0.005% (extremely low). The @UN\_Spokesperson account published 22 tweets, with an average engagement rate of 0.024% (good), 12 of which personally mentioned Guterres’ initiatives in relation to the crisis.

Not being cited directly on the Secretary-General’s account, the Venezuela crisis became almost invisible on the UN social media in English. The UN flagship account in Spanish (@ONU\_es) was more active. In the first semester of 2019, it published 34 original tweets and 24 retweets about Venezuela. The original tweets had a high average engagement rate of 0.07%, almost three quarters higher than the average engagement rate of the whole set of 996 tweets published on the account in the analysed timespan (0.05%). A specific tweet published on 31 January 2019, relating the criticism of the UN human rights expert Idriss Jazairy on the sanctions imposed by the US on the Venezuelan

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<sup>28</sup> The data were obtained by consulting the noon briefing transcripts available on

<https://www.un.org/press/en/advanced-search>

<sup>29</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1116027861801029638?lang=en>

national oil company<sup>30</sup>, was the third most successful tweet posted in the whole period: it received 5,693 likes and 6,050 retweets, equivalent to a very high engagement rate of 0.87%. A tweet about Jazairy's statement, posted in English on @UN\_News\_Centre<sup>31</sup>, had much less impact (370 likes and 187 retweets). The tweet in Spanish, however, was more direct: it quoted the expert as saying "Coercion, whether military or economic, should never be used to seek a change of government in a sovereign state. The use of sanctions by external powers to overthrow a government elected by the people violates all rules of international law." This specific quote was absent in both the tweet as and the news story published in English<sup>32</sup>.

### ***5.3 Case Study II: Launching of the UN Strategy on Hate Speech***

Guterres launched the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech at the UN Headquarters in New York on 18 June 2019. In his remarks, he alerted about "a groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, violent misogyny, and also anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred", amplified through social media by extremist groups, and denounced that "in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, some political leaders are bringing the hate-fuelled ideas and language of these groups into the mainstream, normalizing them, coarsening the public discourse and weakening the social fabric" (Guterres, June 18, 2019). The tweet posted on @antonioguterres account about the launch was milder: "Hate speech is on the rise, threatening peace, social stability and democratic values. That's why I've launched a plan to identify, prevent, and confront hate speech, while upholding freedom of speech and expression"<sup>33</sup>. Quotes from Guterres' speech were

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<sup>30</sup> [https://twitter.com/ONU\\_es/status/1091024093191827460](https://twitter.com/ONU_es/status/1091024093191827460)

<sup>31</sup> [https://twitter.com/un\\_news\\_centre/status/1091108395699056642](https://twitter.com/un_news_centre/status/1091108395699056642)

<sup>32</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1031722>

<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1141066359255785474>

also posted in 10 tweets across the other flagship accounts; none of these tweets reported the phrase about leaders exploiting hate-speech for political gains. In terms of results, the single tweet on the Secretary-General account had more engagements (2,363 likes and 1,154 retweets) than the other ten combined (1,293 likes and 814 retweets).

The Plan of Action on Hate Speech was launched on an especially busy day for the UN social media team: the four flagship accounts posted 52 tweets (33 original tweets and 19 retweets from different UN entities). By number of tweets, the second-most relevant issue was the Sustainable Gastronomy Day, created by the UN Food and Agriculture Agency with the participation of renowned chefs, which was mentioned in eight tweets.

#### ***5.4 Case Study III: the G7 Summit***

The 2019 meeting of the seven Western-most industrialized countries was held in Biarritz, France, on 24-26 August. Besides presidents and prime ministers of the group, other global leaders were invited, among whom the UN Secretary-General. On the eve of the meeting, the wildfires in the Amazon basin were raging at an unprecedented level, making headlines all over the world. The new Brazilian president Bolsonaro reacted to the international criticism on his government by claiming that NGOs and environmental groups were responsible for the fires “to bring problems to Brazil” (Watts, August 21, 2019).

The G7 host, French president Emmanuel Macron, tweeted 37 times about the meeting between 22 and 27 August; six tweets were dedicated to the fires in the Amazon. The most successful one was posted on the eve of the meeting, with a strong message (in English) to the other Heads of State and a dramatic picture of the Amazon forest in flames: “Our house is burning. Literally. The Amazon rain forest - the lungs which produces [sic] 20% of our planet’s oxygen - is on fire. It is an international crisis. Members of the G7 Summit, let's discuss this emergency first order in two days!

#ActForTheAmazon”<sup>34</sup>). The tweet totalled a record 215,478 engagements, but also received plenty of angry reactions from Bolsonaro’s supporters<sup>35</sup>. Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in the midst of a difficult re-election campaign, was especially active on Twitter. Between 21 and 28 August, he posted 101 tweets on his account @JustinTrudeau; 47 of them were dedicated to the G7 meeting, of which 20 made direct reference to the Amazon fires, climate change and environment protection. Trudeau’s most successful tweet was a reaction to Macron’s message cited above: “I couldn’t agree more, @EmmanuelMacron. We did lots of work to protect the environment at the #G7 last year in Charlevoix, & we need to continue this weekend. We need to #ActForTheAmazon & act for our planet — our kids & grandkids are counting on us”<sup>36</sup>; the tweet obtained 68,000 engagements. Overall, Trudeau’s tweets from the G7 about environmental issues totalled 132,468 engagements. Under strong pressure on the home front, the Prime Minister skilfully utilized his Twitter account to help building a coherent political narrative on why embracing the fight against climate change was not only the *right* thing but also the *smart* thing to do for Canada<sup>37</sup>.

The only tweet that Trump dedicated to the Amazon fires, on 23 August 2019, said: “Just spoke with President @JairBolsonaro of Brazil. Our future Trade prospects are very exciting and our



<sup>37</sup> On 22 October 2019, Trudeau won a second term as Canada’s prime minister, but his Liberal party lost the majority in the House of Commons.

relationship is strong, perhaps stronger than ever before. I told him if the United States can help with the Amazon Rainforest fires, we stand ready to assist!"<sup>38</sup>. Two of Bolsonaro's sons thanked Trump on their accounts<sup>39</sup>. Bolsonaro himself rebuked Macron on Twitter ("We can't accept that a president, Macron, fire [sic] baseless and gratuitous attacks at the Amazon, nor that he disguise [sic] his intentions behind the idea of an 'alliance' of G7 countries to 'save' the Amazon, as if we were a colony or a no-man's land"<sup>40</sup>), and, on Facebook, he also mocked the looks of France's first lady Brigitte Macron.

Guterres tweeted three times about G7-related topics, two of which about the Amazon and climate change. The first tweet was posted on 22 August: "I'm deeply concerned by the fires in the Amazon rainforest. In the midst of the global climate crisis, we cannot afford more damage to a major source of oxygen and biodiversity. The Amazon must be protected."<sup>41</sup> It obtained 21,176 likes and 7,964 retweets, making it the most successful tweet posted on the @antonioguterres account in the whole analysed timespan. The second tweet was posted on 26 August ("I'm at the @G7 meeting in France because #ClimateAction cannot wait. People all over the world want a greener, cleaner and safer world. We have the tools to address the climate emergency, but we need more political will"<sup>42</sup>) and obtained 5,195 likes and 1,617 retweets. On 22-26 August, @UN\_Spokesperson posted eight tweets about the Amazon fires and Guterres' activities at the Summit. The single most successful tweet, on 22 August, obtained 888 engagements ("We have seen the reports of the Amazon forest fires & we are very concerned, both for the immediate damage they're causing & because sustaining forests is crucial in the fight against climate change."<sup>43</sup>); the others received little attention. A tweet posted on

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<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1165022004392681472> . It obtained over 203,000 engagements.

<sup>39</sup> <https://twitter.com/CarlosBolsonaro/status/1165023189493329921> ;  
<https://twitter.com/BolsonaroSP/status/1165127736379236352> .

<sup>40</sup> <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1165970376725319680>

<sup>41</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1164586391629705216>

<sup>42</sup> <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1165897947415891969>

<sup>43</sup> [https://twitter.com/un\\_spokesperson/status/1164575701032407041](https://twitter.com/un_spokesperson/status/1164575701032407041)

@UN at the end of the meeting, with a link to the transcript of Guterres' remarks to the media covering the G7, received negligible engagements.

In the end, the G7 meeting only approved a symbolic US\$ 20 million aid package to help Brazil and neighbouring countries to fight the fires in the Amazon. Differently from Trudeau and to a lesser scale Macron, Guterres did not use the full potential of his Twitter to strengthen the UN narrative about the climate emergency. Macron, however, emerged as one of the leaders most critical of Bolsonaro, which was positive for his international image. Guterres' participation in the Summit, on the contrary, was scarcely noticed in the media coverage.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The rise to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders and the mounting political influence of far-right supremacist movements in a growing number of countries represent an existential threat to the United Nations and the whole multilateral world order. For 75 years, the UN has been organizing the set of principles, values and rules that are now under unprecedented attack. A mass-based disintegration process appears to be under way: disintegration, because it aims to partly or fully withdraw from the agreed rules of international institutions; and mass-based, because it is often based on a strong domestic support to disruptive leaders.

As the UN embodies the multilateral principles under assault, the Organization is on an unavoidable collision course with governments and leaders that defend nationalist, racist, unilateralist and climate-change negationist agendas. Keeping a low profile and trying to avoid conflicts is not going to spare the UN from further confrontations, as the Organization is perceived by right-wing authoritarian leaders as a soft target that can be impunely attacked without risking not even a verbal rebuttal<sup>44</sup>. Such an approach may arguably end up eroding the Organization's

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<sup>44</sup> On 14 April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump announced the freezing of the US contribution to the WHO's budget. Guterres reacted with a statement, distributed by his Spokesperson, saying that it was not "the time to reduce the resources for the operations of the World Health Organization or any other humanitarian organization in



good public image (and by extension, its global social legitimacy) due to the perception of a ‘guilt by association’ with leaders who represent the antithesis of the values embodied by the UN. On the contrary, I argue, the Organization should use its soft power and communication resources to openly defend its core principles and legal framework and exploit its soft power to provide political arguments and moral support to all actors that defend multilateralist, human rights-based and science-based agendas in their respective countries.

Among all the social media used by the UN Secretariat, Twitter is the most prominent in terms of number of followers. A thorough analysis of 6,302 original tweets posted on four flagship accounts in the English language (@UN, @antonioguterres, @UN\_Spokesperson and @UN\_News\_Centre) from 1 January to 30 September 2019, allowed evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the use of Twitter as a tool for strategic communication and media relations.

While not the one with the most followers, Secretary-General António Guterres’ account resulted, by far, to be the most effective of the four accounts, i.e. the one that consistently obtained the highest engagement rates (and higher to those of RWA leaders as Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi and Erdoğan). This seems to demonstrate that the public is more interested in listening to the Secretary-General - the leader who embodies UN values - rather than to the Organization’s institutional messaging. Among the 100 most successful tweets (by net engagements) on the four UN accounts, 77 were posted on the @antonioguterres account. The Secretary-General, however, utilized Twitter sparingly and without exploiting its full potential. Most of the announcements about Guterres’ speeches, statements and activities were posted on the other accounts, which obtained fewer engagements and less public resonance – and therefore, less media coverage. More efficiently and boldly used, the account could become a crucial instrument to help building a powerful strategic long-term narrative of Guterres’ world vision and diplomatic action.

On the other hand, the different teams that administrate the UN Secretariat accounts posted too many messages on too wide a range of subjects, which made Twitter a rather ineffective tool for

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the fight against the virus.” The statement was disseminated on the @UN account (<https://twitter.com/UN/status/1250233326914453505>), but not on @antonioguterres.

agenda setting and media relations. At the same time, important information was often posted only once or twice, which gave it little visibility. In terms of content, the only issue that was thoroughly covered, amplified and kept in evidence was the climate emergency. Out of all analysed tweets, 742 (11.7%) were about climate and environment and the hashtag #ClimateAction was used in 609 tweets (9.6%). Other relevant issues and crises received less constant attention. The civil war in Syria, for instance, was mentioned in 251 original tweets (3.9%) and the civil war in Yemen in 225 tweets (3.5%), 121 of which published on @UN\_News\_Centre, the account with fewest followers. The crisis in the occupied Palestine territories was mentioned in only 60 original tweets (0.9%). Overall, the messaging on Twitter rarely transmitted a real sense of urgency about these conflicts nor effectively reflected all the humanitarian and diplomatic work carried out by the UN.

The defence of the Organization's core values under attack by authoritarian leaders was not strongly or constantly present in the messaging. There were only 24 mentions to "democracy" (0.3%) and 169 to "human rights" (2.6%), although additional 223 tweets (3.6%) mentioned activities of or statements by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. When the Secretary-General launched the UN Plan of Action on Hate Speech, with a declaration against the politicians who propagate "xenophobia, racism and intolerance, violent misogyny, and also anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred," the messaging on Twitter was very cautious and did not mention Guterres' strongest phrase.

The Twitter accounts analysed in this paper can certainly grow further in terms of both followers and engagements. In fact, in the four months passed between the data collection (10 October 2019) and the final drafting (19 April 2020) of this paper, the @antonioguterres account has grown 32.5% to over 893,000 followers and @UN has grown 7.7% to over 12.3 million. There is a real demand for listening to the UN and its Secretary-General, especially when the latter delivers statements that clearly indicate the political and moral direction to be followed – a kind of secular pope who uses the "bully pulpit" of his office to promote the values of tolerance, democracy, human rights and good governance, as Kofi Annan did during his tenure (Tharoor, 2007, p. 37).

Some relatively simple actions, if implemented, would likely increase the reach and the political impact of the UN's flagship Twitter accounts.

Each day, unless something extraordinary happens, not more than one or two main stories / topics should be disseminated through social media. The timing of the postings across the different accounts should be adjusted to ensure maximum impact on the media and the general public across different time zones and continents. The overall number of daily tweets and retweets on the flagship accounts should be reduced to ensure that only high-quality content is published. As tweets' shelf life is very short, important messaging should be repeated at appropriate intervals. The Twitter accounts managed by different departments and offices of the UN Secretariat should be streamlined; the least effective should be closed. A more effective allocation of resources could be used to start engaging followers by replying to their messages.

The @antonioguterres account should be used more widely, to inform about all activities, speeches and statements of the Secretary-General. Although advisable, it is not necessary for Guterres to tweet personally or always in first person, but the account should be the go-to single medium to get to know everything about what the leader of the UN does and thinks.

Higher priority should be given to promote the UN Secretariat, which is the core of UN agency, i.e. the capacity of making things happen in the global political arena. Because of its unique position, the Secretariat is under a much heavier attack than specialized UN entities, which in most cases are not suffering comparable budget cuts. For the public, it is easier to understand what humanitarian actors do in the field than the intricacies of the Organization's political processes. Thus, it is crucial to tell the story of what the Secretariat does in order to create public support, and therefore indirectly exercise pressure on national governments to follow the Organization's lead on key issues – and to pay their assessments on time and in full.

Twitter accounts should be used to ensure quicker reaction to news and influence on the news cycle. For journalists, it is crucial to get reactions from the UN on breaking news in a timely manner. Digital diplomacy has accelerated the news cycle in an unprecedented way; if journalists do not receive reactions and information in real time, the UN's position about any given story is ignored. When this happens, the Organization loses the opportunity to lead the public narrative and becomes invisible as a global actor.

All tweets should use a more direct language. The global public expects the UN to point out the rights and wrongs of facts and situations, not to be vaguely concerned. Broadly speaking, all the Organization's communications should be finalized to support concrete 'real-world' political and diplomatic goals. Social media, as channels of direct communication with the global public, should always point to concrete actions that common people could take to advance specific agendas. To be relevant in the unforgiving contemporary global arena, the UN must urgently shift from targeting to tailoring communication, that is, from the formulation of messages that resonate with large and relatively indistinct global audiences to the devising of messages aimed at specific subsets of audiences (Manor, 2019, p. 121), to achieve precise communicational, diplomatic or political goals.

Although the UN' General Assembly is a democratic space where all member states have equal voting rights, neither all states have the same political and economic weight, nor the Organization has enough resources available for communication tailored to all nations; a limited number of countries are especially relevant to advance the UN agenda, because of their geopolitical relevance and/or their weight in the financing of the UN System. Instead of dispersing the scarce available resources in a myriad of indistinct global messaging, the UN Secretariat should focus its communication priorities on tailored messaging aimed to key countries, with a clearly defined strategy to indirectly influence their national political developments, in order to secure the support to the multilateral architecture and to contribute to hinder the rise to power of right-wing authoritarian leaders who would accelerate the mass-based disintegration process. The skilful use of UN's *shared* and *earned* media should be crucial in this effort.

The numeric results are not the main criteria to evaluate any organization's social media operations: social media metrics are tools, not a goal. To this date, it can be said, the UN Secretariat has not fully exploited the full potential of its Twitter flagship accounts to advance a coherent digital diplomacy strategy, aimed at attaining concrete political and reputational goals in the real world. A more focused and less cautious approach to social media communication should be envisaged to help the Organization to withstand the attacks and to strengthen its social legitimacy.

In the Twitter age, when all messaging is shouted and frenetic, discreet diplomacy and slow-paced communication risk to become invisible, and therefore irrelevant.

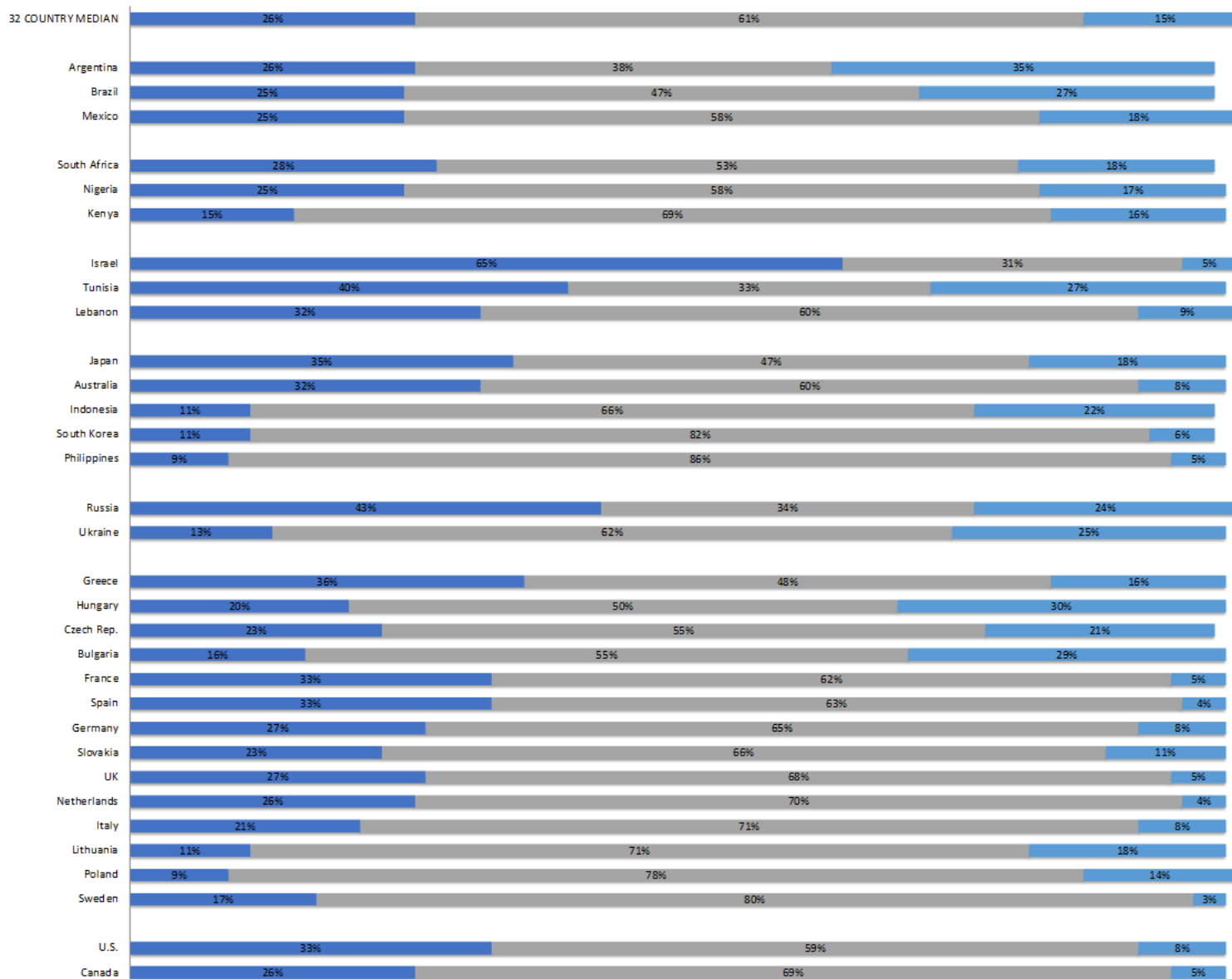


Annex I

Image of the United Nations in 32 Countries. Pew Research Centre's Global Attitudes Survey 2019.

Percentage of respondents who say they have a \_\_\_ view of the UN

Unfavorable Favorable Don't know

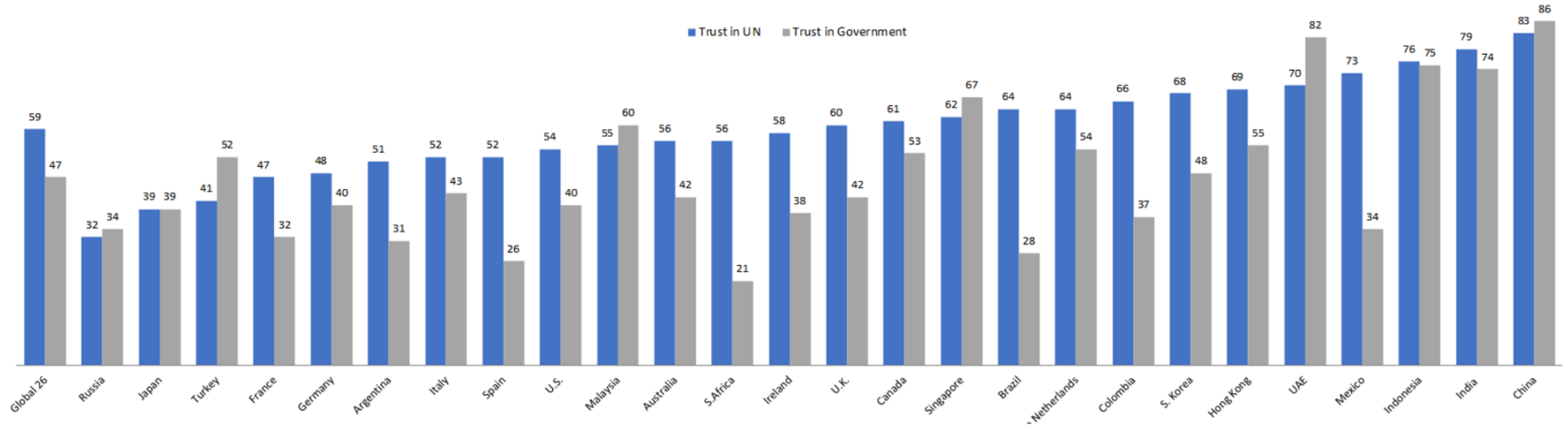


Survey of 34,904 respondents across 32 countries, interviewed from 13 May to 29 August 2019.

Results published on 23 September 2019.

Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/23/united-nations-gets-mostly-positive-marks-from-people-around-the-world/>

Trust in the United Nations and in National Governments in 26 Selected Countries. Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report 2019



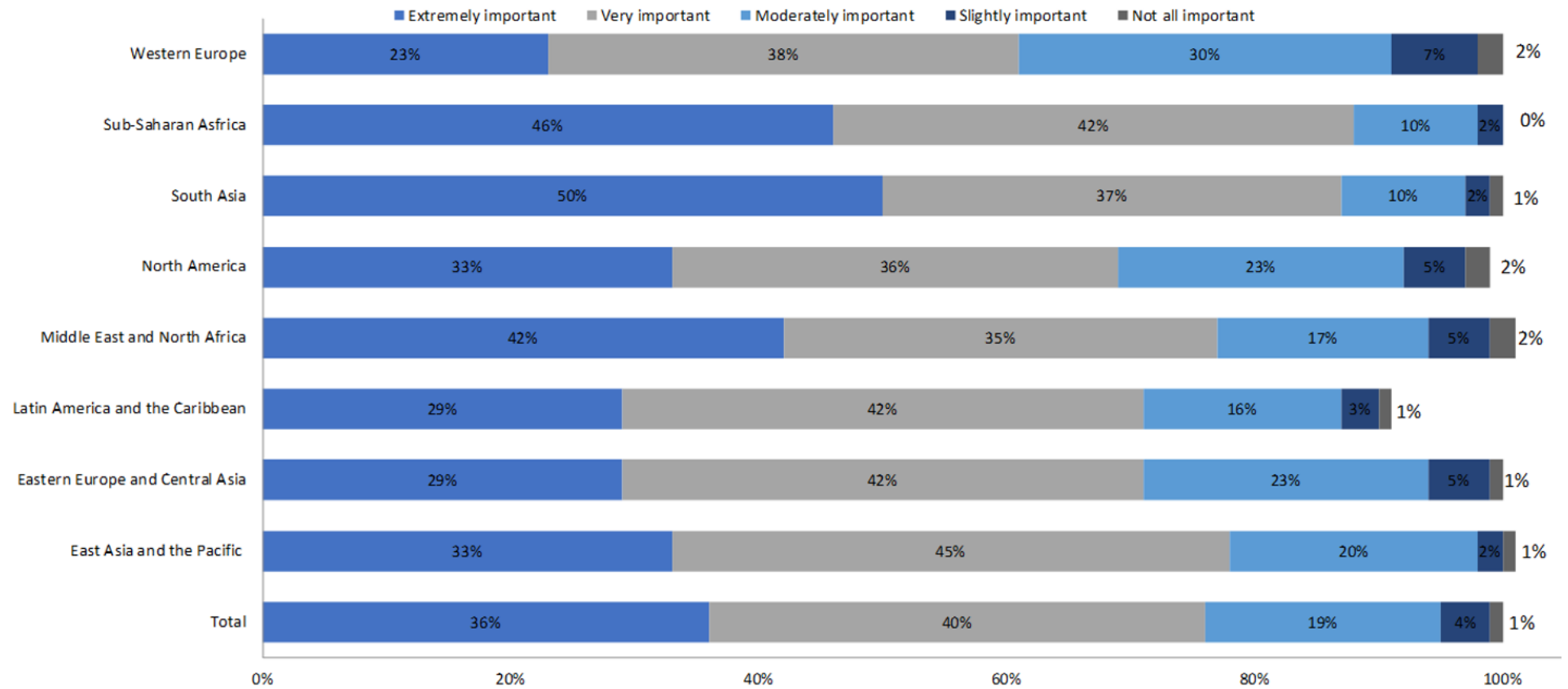
Online survey in 26 Markets, with more than 33,000 total respondents. Interviews conducted between 19 October and 16 November 2018.

Retrieved from [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf)





### How Important Is It that Countries Work Together Towards Common Goals? Survey Globalization 4.0 – The Human Experience (2019)



Survey methodology: 10,069 participants across 29 countries; samples stratified to ensure representation across 8 world regions. Interviews carried out online on 4-17 January 2019.

Retrieved from [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_globalization4\\_Jan18.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_globalization4_Jan18.pdf)

Annex IV

The 10 Tweets with Highest Engagement Posted on Selected United Nations Accounts\* (1 January – 30 September 2019)

United Nations @UN

A kind message 🌟  
A smile 😊  
A like 👍

This #SaferInternetDay, take the time to be kind online and make a big difference to someone's day.

#ENDViolence online. [uni.cf/safer-internet](http://uni.cf/safer-internet)

7:51 AM · Feb 5, 2019 · TweetDeck

20.3K Retweets 42.6K Likes

Very positive messaging.  
Total engagements: 65,263

United Nations @UN

"The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you."  
-- @GretaThunberg at UN #ClimateAction Summit. [bit.ly/2i2M7pn](https://bit.ly/2i2M7pn)

0:45 150.9K views

6:51 PM · Sep 23, 2019 · Twitter Media Studio

9.9K Retweets 37.2K Likes

Moderately negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 47,361

United Nations @UN

Being kind is a powerful way to make our schools and communities safer. @BTS\_twt is helping @UNICEF spread kindness to #EndViolence in schools. [uni.cf/2zHQFp7](https://uni.cf/2zHQFp7)

2:04 5.0M views

BTS ❤️ show the power of love and kindness  
Violence in schools is normal. But it shouldn't be. By choosing respect, support and kindness, we can make our communities safe and supportive. Take the time to support someone who needs it.

From UNICEF

11:08 PM · Jul 30, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

12.6K Retweets 31.8K Likes

Very positive messaging.  
Total engagements: 44,749

António Guterres @antonioguterres

I'm deeply concerned by the fires in the Amazon rainforest. In the midst of the global climate crisis, we cannot afford more damage to a major source of oxygen and biodiversity.

The Amazon must be protected.

6:13 PM · Aug 22, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

7.9K Retweets 21K Likes

Very negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 29,140

António Guterres @antonioguterres

Welcome to New York, @gretathunberg!

The determination and perseverance shown during your journey should embolden all of us taking part in next month's #ClimateAction Summit.

We must deliver on the demands of people around the world and address the global climate crisis.

9:47 PM · Aug 28, 2019 · Twitter Web App

4K Retweets 20.1K Likes

Moderately positive messaging.  
Total engagements: 24,261

United Nations @UN

"We are deeply concerned that the latest restrictions in Indian-Administered Kashmir will exacerbate the human rights situation in the region" -- @UNHumanRights spokesperson

0:28 157.0K views

From UN Geneva

5:08 PM · Aug 7, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

8.4K Retweets 14.3K Likes

Moderately negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 22,898

UN News @UN\_News\_Centre

Before India & Pakistan face-off over Kashmir, 'the @UN has a responsibility. This is why the United Nations came into being in 1945, to stop this type of thing from happening,' Pakistan's Prime Minister told #UNGA on Friday.

1:42 PM · Sep 27, 2019 · TweetDeck

5.3K Retweets 14.6K Likes

Neutral messaging.  
Total engagements: 20,231

António Guterres @antonioguterres

I'm saddened & strongly condemn the shooting of innocent people as they prayed peacefully in mosques in New Zealand. I express my deepest condolences to the victims' families. Today and every day, we must stand united against anti-Muslim hatred, & all forms of bigotry & terror.

1:00 PM · Mar 15, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

4.5K Retweets 13.4K Likes

Very negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 18,074

António Guterres @antonioguterres

The climate emergency is the battle of our lives. We need #ClimateAction. Now.

0:21 1.3M views

4:50 PM · Jun 13, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

5K Retweets 10.9K Likes

Moderately negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 16,037

António Guterres @antonioguterres

Deeply saddened by the news this morning of the plane crash in Ethiopia, claiming the lives of all on board. My heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of all the victims — including our own @UN staff — who perished in this tragedy.

5:24 PM · Mar 10, 2019 · TweetDeck

2.9K Retweets 9.1K Likes

Very negative messaging.  
Total engagements: 12,097

\*@UN, @antonioguterres, @UN\_Spokesperson, @UN\_News\_Centre

### Analysis of the 100 Most “Liked” Tweets Posted on Selected UN Twitter Accounts\* (1 Jan. – 30 Sept. 2019)

Images	Videos	Pictures, info-graphs/GIFs	SG in pictures / Videos	Mentions and/or pictures of influencers/public figures	Mentions of UN entities
Yes: 75 No: 25 <sup>46</sup>	Yes: 42 No: 58	Yes: 34 No: 66	Yes: 38 No: 62	Greta Thumberg (9 tweets); Nelson Mandela (3); Angelina Jolie (2); Adama Dieng (2); others (6 public figures, one tweet each).	UN (9 tweets); UNICEF (3); UNHCR (3); UN Environment (2); Others (6, one tweet each).

Tweets aligned with DGC 2019 comm. priorities <sup>47</sup>	What priorities	Tweets related to current events	Events
Yes: 61 No: 39	Climate (46 tweets), Gender (7), Youth (5), Humanitarian (5), Peace & Security (3).	Yes: 78 No: 22	Climate Summit / UN Reports / SG’s travels related to climate / SG comments on events (34 tweets); Other SG’s travels (10); UN Days (9); Ramadan / Eid Mubarak (4); Venezuela crisis (2); Kashmir crisis (2); Massacre in New Zealand (2); Notre Dame cathedral fire (2) Plane crash in Ethiopia (2); Other events (11, one tweet each).

Call to political and/or state action	Call to personal action and/or engagement	Affirmation of ethical and/or moral values	Values
Yes: 51 No: 49	Yes: 28 No: 72	Yes: 60 No: 40	Tolerance/ Solidarity/Compassion/Kindness/Diversity (25 tweets); Climate Action/ Environment defence (15); Gender Equality/Feminism/Women’s empowerment (7); Human Rights/Democracy/Freedom/Peace/Social Justice (6); Education (3); Others (4).

\*@UN; @antonioguterres; @UN\_Spokesperson; @UN\_News\_Centre

<sup>46</sup> All tweets without images were posted on the @antonioguterres account.

<sup>47</sup> The United Nations Department of Global Communications had eight communications priorities for 2019: climate, sustainable development, peace and security, humanitarian assistance, human rights, youth, gender and the UN reform.

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