When do Opportunities become Trade-offs for Social Movement Organizations? Assessing Media Impact in the Global Human Rights Movement

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Abstract: This paper explores the dilemmas facing social movement organizations seeking to conform to institutional norms and expand their media influence. In particular, I examine the similarity in strategic decision-making of two key organizations in the Human Rights Movement. The analysis shows how *isomorphism* occurred as both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch adapted their organizational structures and advocacy efforts to the tastes, routines, and information demands of the global media. However, I also demonstrate that such pathways are disrupted as organizational *values* mediate the influence of isomorphism on the internal dynamics of organizations.
Keywords: Social movement organizations; media; human rights

Résumé. Cet article explore les dilemmes auxquels les mouvements sociaux institutionnalisés font face lorsqu'ils essaient de se conformer à des normes institutionnelles de manière à accroître leur influence médiatique. Plus particulièrement, j'examine les similitudes qui existent entre les stratégies de prise de décision de deux organisations clés du mouvement des droits humains. L'analyse explique comment un isomorphisme a pris forme, Amnistie internationale et Human Rights Watch ayant adapté leurs structures organisationnelles et leurs démarches de défense des aux goûts, routines, et demandes d'informations des média, à une échelle mondiale. Néanmoins, je démontre également comment de tels développements sont inégaux, les valeurs organisationnelles limitant l'influence de cet isomorphisme sur les dynamiques internes des deux organisations.
Mots-clés: Mouvements sociaux institutionnalisés; media; droits humains

> *[There is] a deep awareness in the movement, that our capacity to deliver an internal environment that is consistent with our external principles needs constant nourishment, and the possibility of slipping into conflict with our own values is quite marked when you become a very large employer with a very large budget with many more complex functions being performed requiring the engagement of many more competencies than when we started. (Amnesty informant #2, Female, September 14, 2003)*

In the sociological investigation of collective behaviour, scholars have paid considerable attention to the potential trade-offs faced by social movement organizations (SMOs) seeking funding (Jenkins 1989; O'Connor 1999; Minkoff 2002; Ostrander 2004). For instance, a central concern has been on the extent to which funding imperatives have moderating, or "channeling," effects on movements as they attempt to meet the demands and expectations of elite patrons (Haines 1984; Jenkins 1989; Bartley 2007). This dynamic, the argument follows, may diffuse dissent in favour of more traditional forms of organizing and political engagement. However, formal funding bodies constitute only one set of institutional actors that social movement organizations encounter in their pursuit of resources; organizations must also adjust their behaviour in response to a wide variety of key institutional actors. In this article I examine the dynamics that arose as human rights organizations responded to constraints put forth by the global media, an increasingly key institutional actor in the 1990s. Responding to Minkoff and McCarthy's (2005:289) call to make "*activist labor* [a] central focus of analysis," I examine how the specific institutional trade-off I outline here shaped the organizational ideals and practices of the human rights organizations as *workplaces*. That is, in the same way that attempts to garner funding shape organizations, to what extent do institutional constraints transform the internal dynamics of SMOs and the experiences of their "activist employees"?

Based on eighty-two interviews with current and former human rights practitioners at Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (Amnesty), and reviews of internal organizational documents at both organizations, news coverage, and other documents, I reflect on three closely related aspects of the process of transformation. First, I study the growing attention of the international media on human rights and human rights advocacy. During the early 1990s, as global interest in human rights took off, the two organizations began to grow and experience increased media interest in both human rights and nongovernmental organizations more broadly. Following this, I examine the degree to which this media focus influenced the organizational strategies of both

organizations. This new reality created an opening with the promise of greater exposure and influence. It also created a perception that they needed to transform their strategic operations to reflect the demands that accompanied this media interest. Finally, I show that while both organizations clearly identified the need to transform their strategy, there were important differences in the responses of the two organizations: the activist employees of HRW were under increasing pressure to change their work to adapt to this "mediatization," the activist employees at Amnesty experienced this less. I conclude that while the growing media attention transformed the advocacy of these important human rights actors, explicit organizational values mediated the effects of these changes on the internal dynamics of each organization. Thus, using qualitative data and employing organizational, social movement, and institutional theories, I seek to explain the processes whereby ideologically driven organizations do or do not conform to institutional expectations. In addition, I use this approach to demonstrate the possible effects of organizational change on the experience of employees within social movements.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE GLOBAL POLITICAL SPHERE

The starting point for the study is the observation that few movements have undergone the degree of change experienced by human rights organizations in the late 20th century. Indeed, what began in the post-WWII period as the determination of a few central individuals to enshrine the language and protection of international standards of human rights into international governance structures was, by the 1990s, transformed into an international movement of grassroots and professional, national, and transnational social movement organizations, dedicated to upholding these standards (Cmiel 2004; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Laber 2005). As a result, in 2008 a highly sophisticated human rights movement occupies a central position of relevance, stature, and influence among global political actors. As Jessica Mathews (1997:52–3) states, organizations which were "once largely relegated to the hallways" are now "able to push around even the largest governments."

The growing role of such social movement actors in the global political system, and the expansion of activism across borders more generally, has become a major preoccupation of scholars of social movements in recent years (Tarrow 2005; Smith 1995; 1998; 2002). Smith (1998:104–5) for instance, argues that the expansion of transnational social movements such as human rights "reflects a deepening of global civil society" that "promises to help break down … existing global in-

equalities." Transnational organizations are increasingly seen to act as transnational intermediaries between the worlds of local activism and international political realms (Tarrow 2005:43). In the case of human rights in particular, Sally Engle Merry (2006:38) argues that this role of bridging agent will determine the degree to which human rights ideas spread globally and "transform social life."

Organizational Values and Transformation in Social Movements

Like those examining domestic movements, scholars of global activism have also begun to examine how an influential position may transform organizations as they yield to resource imperatives and demands for accountability, legitimacy, and professionalism from key institutional actors (Welch 2001; Bob 2002; Barnett 2005). The same scholars suggest that such pressures may give rise to changes in priorities, strategies, and agendas of organizations and an accompanying set of changes to the roles and responsibilities of the activist employees whose work forms the basis of advocacy work (Ron et al. 2005; Barnett 2005; Bob 2002). The possibility that their "alternative" status is brought into question by such a transformation is commonly remarked upon in the study of social movements. Indeed, SMOs face contradictions when they attempt to balance financial imperatives with organizational values and movement support (Minkoff 2002).

The balancing act exists because social movement organizations generally differ from other not-for-profit groups in the centrality of their "principled" values. SMOs are "principled" in that their explicit goal is to bring about social change and equitable conditions in the *broader* society and often, though not always, they seek to reflect these values in their relationship to a variety of stakeholders.

Research on feminist organizations (Ostrander 2004; Matthews 1994; Reinelt 1994; Riger 2002; Morgen 1990) provides substantial evidence of how pressure to change, in response to external imperatives, forces organizations with principled values to walk what Minkoff (2002:33) calls, "a political tightrope." For instance, because of what Ostrander (2004:30) calls the "hierarchical construction of philanthropy," feminist organizations must struggle to maintain their principles of building "relationships and structures that challenge hierarchy." Studies such as these primarily examine the need for accountability to an organization's constituents and supporters. Increasingly, however, such organizations not only serve members and constituents but, as their numbers increase, they also employ large numbers of "activist employees," trained individ-

uals whose job is to bring about social change. As the introductory quote to this article suggests, part of the project of accountability may include the need to balance external imperatives of the organization with the interests of its employees.

MOVEMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

How organizations with principled values contend with the contradictions of operating in an organizational context that may shape their behaviours and principles to more closely match the specific institutional environment, and how these may come into conflict with the interests of their employees, is best understood through the sociological literature on new institutionalism. In the broadest sense, new institutionalism is interested in examining the ways institutional arrangements shape behaviour. Encompassing distinctive "business recipes" for successful ways of operating, "organizational fields" place important limitations on the range of choices available to organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 1983:148).[1] As a result, values, beliefs, markets, institutions, and other organizations within this field play a significant role in determining organizational reality and change.

Because organizational fields severely constrain the range of acceptable organizational responses, organizations come to resemble the other actors in their field through a process called "isomorphism" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). Even where organizations are embedded within a competitive environment, survival depends more on the mimicking appropriate organizational forms than achieving enhanced efficiency (Powell 1991:187). This process explains "organizational homogeneity," the limited organizational forms found in an organizational field (Hinings and Greenwood 1988; Powell 1991), and, in the case of social movement organizations, a tendency toward professional and formalized forms. Consequently, new institutionalism suggests that human rights organizations will adopt strategic modes of operating that meet the information needs of the media industry as they strive for organizational stability. If the media exerts enough influence, tactical homogeneity will emerge among human rights organizations.

While new institutionalism explains how specific pressures for organizational change emerge from within an organizational field, organizational change clarifies how organizations with principled values face

1. Powell and DiMaggio (1983:148) define the organizational field as "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products."

possible threats to their values system as they contend with institutional demands (Kelley et al. 2005; Kleinman 1996; Reinhart 1996; Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Rothschild 2000). For instance, increased hierarchy, professionalization, centralization, bureaucratization, and cooptation all may occur as principled value organizations adapt their organizational structures to suit key institutional actors (Tice and Markowitz 2002; Morgen 1990; Reinelt 1994). Highlighting the sometimes delicate balance that SMOs must achieve to stabilize funding and support, Tice and Markowitz (2002) point out the trade-offs invoked by such changes, including the persistence or creation of social hierarchies. Despite these dilemmas, the literature also suggests that the unique ideological role of principled values makes it easier to mediate institutional pressures (Alter 1998; Ferree and Martin 1995; Iannello 1992; Minkoff 2002; Reinelt, 1994; Thomas 1999; Yancey Martin 1990). The ability of principled values to resist isomorphic pressures, therefore, is an important consideration in understanding the pathways of organizational change.

Movements and the Media

In recent decades, scholars of social movements have focused on the increasingly important institutional pressure of the mass media and the extent to which successful media engagement is central to social movement outcomes. The marginal political position of social movement actors means they rely on the media to gain legitimacy, public support, and political influence (Gans 1979; Gamson and Meyer 1996). However, because social movements need the coverage of the media more than the media need social movements, activists must conform to the routines, formats, and interests of news outlets (Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986). In his study of *Students for a Democratic Society*, for instance, Todd Gitlin (1980) demonstrated how the media's reluctance to obtain information from alternative sources forced the movement to rely on increasingly adversarial protest tactics. Thus, conformity enables movements to attract attention and ultimately shapes the agendas and tactics of movement organizations (Ron et al. 2005).

The revolution in communications and information technology in the 1990s made widespread coverage of issues of global concern possible, and 24-hour media and online news reporting created a media "opening" for novel and rapidly produced information from all political actors (Gamson and Meyer 1996). At the same time, the proliferation of movement organizations meant activists, human rights organizations included, faced greater competition for media attention. Thus, while movements

now have more opportunity to publicize their message, there is greater pressure for them to respond to the needs of the media if they wish to remain relevant. In this article, I focus on the ways that greater engagement with the media shapes not only organizational decision-making but also the internal workplace dynamics of social change organizations.

METHOD

This article is based on qualitative research conducted, over the course of three years, in Ottawa, Canada; London, England; and New York, USA at the headquarters of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. I employed multiple data sources to triangulate the key variables. Specifically, I conducted 82 in-depth interviews, a review of internal organizational documents and related documents, and a media analysis of human rights.[2] Data collection began in March 2003 and was completed in October, 2006. Interviews included current and former activist employees and members of administration at all levels of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.[3]

In the following sections, I provide a brief history of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, their resources, structures, and culture. Following this, I describe and analyze the broader changes that occurred in relation to the global media's interest in human rights. I then look at how these organizations responded to this new reality. Throughout, I quote extensively from interviews and organizational documents to provide rich description of the events, people, and phenomena.

2. The media analysis was conducted during a joint project led by James Ron and in collaboration with Howard Ramos.

3. Amnesty's International Secretariat is composed of researchers, campaigners, fundraisers, and administrative and executive staff. Most research and activist campaigns are coordinated through the London headquarters. Although my interview sample included respondents from both the research and campaign offices, my analysis focuses on the largest section, Research and Administration, which works most closely with the group's substantive human rights issues. My sample includes 50 in-depth semistructured interviews with present and former employees from all levels and sectors of the IS. At Human Rights Watch, I interviewed 32 individuals, again with the most focus placed on those individuals in research and supervisory positions. Although I was not permitted access to the internal archives of either organization, at each organization I was generously provided with internal documents by members of the staff. I had more systematic access to annual reports at both organizations. At Amnesty I used publicly available annual reports dating back to 1967 and at Human Rights Watch I examined the annual reports dating back to 1991. In addition, I had access to ten years of financial documentation through the tax returns at Human Rights Watch.

Data

I. The Organizations[4]

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are two of the world's largest, most celebrated, and influential global human rights organizations. They share an approach to exposing global human rights abuses through a variety of sophisticated advocacy activities. However, as I outline here, they also have distinct historical trajectories, structures, funding arrangements, and organizational cultures.

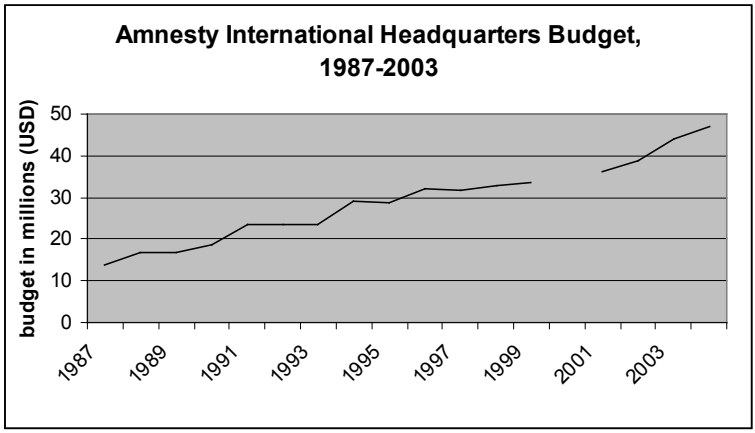
Amnesty

Amnesty International, formed in 1961 by British lawyer Peter Benenson, called on individuals to protest the imprisonment of men and women around the world based on their political and religious beliefs. Through a unique letter-writing strategy, Amnesty successfully began "naming and shaming" governments into releasing prisoners of conscience. By the end of their first year of activity, Amnesty International members were appealing for the freedom of 210 prisoners of conscience; a year later, 1,300 prisoner cases had been taken up and 330 had been released.[5] The employment of the activism of average, but concerned, individuals around the world has been central to the development of the organization into its current form.

An active and influential grassroots membership is, therefore, the organization's claim to legitimacy and the financial bedrock. Between 1981 and 2004, Amnesty membership grew from 250,000 to 1.8 million, with an impressive increase (from 250,000 to 1.1 million) in the decade 1981–1991.[6] Graph 1 represents the budget of the International Secretariat, the amount allotted to the central body by its national sections.[7] As this graph demonstrates, the Secretariat's income more than doubled between 1987 and 1996 (from USD$13,654,675 to USD$31,602,621) and continued to soar.

4. This section is not a substantive history of the activities, successes, or challenges of the organizations. Rather, these are histories of organizational development to delineate organizational culture and internal dynamics. In-depth historical background can be found in Stephen Hopgood (2006) and Jonathan Power (2002).
5. Amnesty International, *Annual Reports*, 1961–2003.
6. Ibid. Note that these are not exact figures. Amnesty reports only provide estimates of membership ("more than…")
7. Movement-wide income is unavailable. The amounts given therefore are slightly misleading as they represent only the amount allotted to the secretariat by the national bodies. Amnesty estimates that this represents about one-quarter of the movement-wide income.

Graph 1: Amnesty International Headquarters Budget 1987–2004



The centrality of membership to the organization's legitimacy, and the notion that individual members can wield power across borders, has imbued "the membership" with tremendous moral currency within the organization. A member of the senior executive emphasizes the still central role of membership to the organization despite the growing importance of other forms of activism:

> To say that human rights is universal is one thing but to demonstrate that you've got chapters in more than eighty countries around the world, you represent more than 120 languages … puts something [concrete] and human to this very abstract idea of universality. (Amnesty Employee #2, Female, September 14, 2003)

Ideas of membership and movement activism are, therefore, the foundation of Amnesty's dominant organizational culture and many activist employees describe these ideas as part of a "movement for human rights," viewing themselves as part of an alternative vision of organizing politics. The organization has historically downplayed the role of the International Secretariat as the professional wing of the organization, always attempting to define itself in terms of its mass base. This cultural feature is so powerful that a kind of selfless conviction is common among employees. For instance, few individuals seek professional recognition for their work and regularly give freely of their time. As an example of this tendency, when a suggestion was made that improvements needed to be made to the dilapidated building that housed the Amnesty's headquarters, one researcher commented, "I don't think one penny should be going to repairs on the building, individuals give their money to help

victims not so that we have comfortable chairs…" (Amnesty informant #3, female, September 16, 2003). Thus, deference to membership and the victims of abuse imbues the culture of the organization with a strong sense of selflessness among employees.

Human Rights Watch

Composed originally of former Amnesty members, the structure and ideology of Human Rights Watch (HRW) are, in part, a reaction to the historical development of Amnesty. It is not surprising, therefore, that Human Rights Watch's main advocacy strategy is to shame offenders by generating press attention and exerting diplomatic and economic pressure on them by enlisting influential governments and institutions. Today, HRW is a very distinct organization with structures, processes, and cultures that differ significantly from those of Amnesty.

Unlike Amnesty, HRW (originally Helsinki Watch) was created with funds from elite financial backers in the United States rather than from small, individual contributions. As Jeri Laber, the first director of Helsinki Watch and a former member of Amnesty, explains, individuals became frustrated with the laborious and sometimes slow Amnesty process; she writes, "it was hard to believe that [their efforts] would make a difference" (Laber 2002:86). HRW emerged with the ideal that power came from committed, knowledgeable, and influential individuals playing central roles in the human rights process, rather than from the letter-writing efforts of individuals.

Human Rights Watch does not have a membership-based structure. Instead, it is a centralized bureaucracy funded largely by foundation grants and major gifts. The main headquarters are located in the Empire State Building in New York, where it employs close to 200 staff members. There are also 13 small regional field offices in major cities around the world. The majority of grants are provided to HRW by the Ford Foundation, the Open Society, and the MacArthur Foundation.[8] The organization has established an endowment fund and holds an annual celebrity dinner as a major fundraising event. Though competition for funds has been a preoccupation for the organization, HRW's annual budget figures over time reflect growth; between 1979–2003 for example, HRW's budget grew from US$200,000 to US$26,462,566. Much of this growth occurred during the 1990s; revenues for HRW grew from US$4,400,251 in 1989, then nearly doubled in the 6 year period between

8. HRW, *Annual tax returns;* HRW *Annual Reports*, 1996–2005 and HRW, *World Reports*, 1989–2003

1997–2003: from US$13,930,199 to US$26,462,556.[9] Lacking the membership-based structure from which Amnesty derives its legitimacy, HRW's legitimacy is largely based on the accurate reporting and the timely delivery. Unlike Amnesty, HRW has no ability to mobilize mass membership (with the exception of a small number of committee groups in the US whose purpose is largely fundraising). In part because of this, notions of social movement activism are less present in dominant organizational discourses. Similarly, there is less connection between activist employees' self-image and the ideas of activism discussed in the section on Amnesty. Although the dominant image of the organization is not as strongly activist oriented as Amnesty, according to one executive, the value-based selection process still attracts individuals drawn to the idea of a social change organization: "[employees] tend … [to] be relatively leftist and egalitarian. They are in many ways what's left of the '60s sensibility. So it's a very difficult group to manage" (HRW informant #11, Female, February 23, 2003). In this way, despite the fact that HRW attracts a highly professional and often career-oriented workforce, it also recruits those attracted to the principled values of the organization.

HRW's connection to the legal and journalistic traditions also plays an important role in the organizational culture by infusing the organization with a degree of professionalism and professional competitiveness characteristic of these occupations. Moreover, the organization's reliance on securing large grants within an increasingly competitive marketplace serves to accentuate these characteristics. As a result, though many of HRW's employees are strongly committed to their work, HRW's organizational culture lacks the sense of selflessness that is apparent at Amnesty. Names and personalities are made public by HRW and individual researchers are often highly publicized individuals. Consequently, there are many more accolades for the professional role at HRW.

II. Human Rights in the Media

> *If I go back to 1990, when I took this job … in the press, whether in the newspapers or in the news, the word 'human rights' didn't come up very often. Now, fifteen years later … it's very difficult to open a newspaper and not find the word human rights at least once, if not a few times. (Amnesty informant #13, Female, October 2, 2003)*

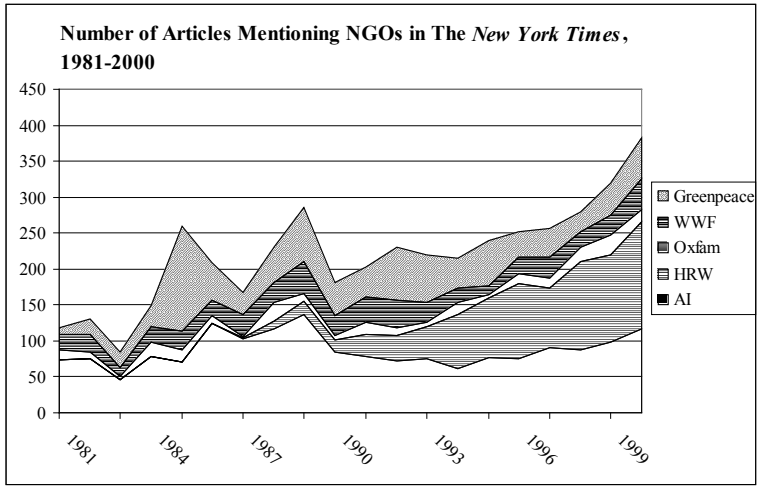
Beginning with the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the latter of half of the 20th century was a period of great optimism for human rights advocates. There was a global political shift

9. HRW, Annual tax returns

as human rights became one of the leading global political discourses. Of particular note is the convergence of the growing importance of the human rights discourse with the revolution in communications and information technology and the media's growing interest in human rights. Making widespread coverage of issues of global concern possible, 24-hour media and online news reporting created new demands for novel and rapidly produced information. The abundant media opportunities available to the human rights movement held the promise of a more powerful movement, able to affect change in both national and international arenas; it also made the media a powerful actor in the institutional field of human rights organizations, beginning early in the 1990s.

That the media's expanded coverage and their increased focus on human rights provided the movement with larger openings for publicity is apparent in the following graphs. Graph 2 shows the increasing media interest in international nongovernmental organizations during the 1980s and 1990s. The graph plots the number of international nongovernmental organization (INGO) mentions in the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2000.[10] The graph demonstrates that during the specified period, western news sources were increasingly likely to include news stories related to INGOs. This increasing willingness to publish news mentioning INGOs provides some evidence of the growing opportunities in the 1990s for human rights organizations to get their message into the media.

Graph 2: Mentions of NGOs in the *New York Times* (1981-2000)



10. For reasons of comparison, human rights, environmental and humanitarian organizations are all included. Four of the five (Amnesty, Greenpeace, Oxfam, and World Wildlife Fund) were chosen for inclusion because they are cited by the Edelman Survey (2006) as the four top trusted "brands" in the UK.

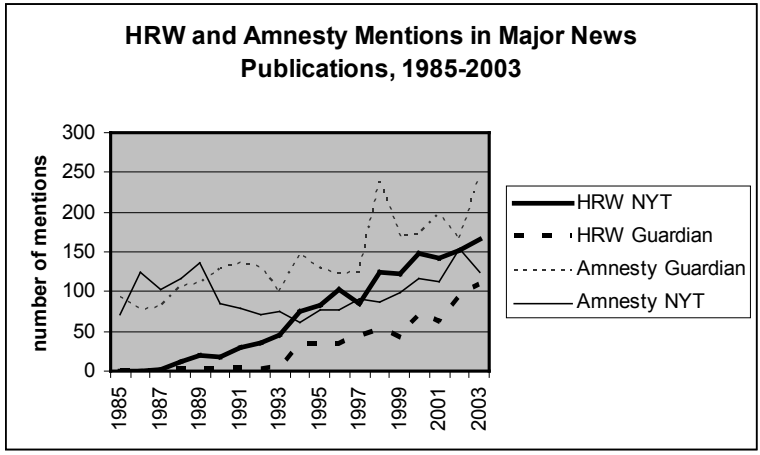
While Graph 2 demonstrates the greater tendency for coverage of nongovernmental organizations generally, with specific reference to human rights, Graph 3 provides stronger evidence of this trend toward the coverage of human rights in the media.[11] The graph plots the number of mentions of human rights in prominent weekly western news sources between 1981–2000. These data demonstrate a steady increase in media mentions of human rights (particularly following 1995), supporting the position that there was a growing media interest in human rights during this period. In the 1990s, this trend was particularly pronounced: the number of human rights mentions in the weekly publications rose from between 50–100 mentions to a high of over 250 in the *Economist*.

Graph 3: Number of Articles Mentioning 'Human Rights' in Major News Magazines, 1981-2000

Finally, further evidence suggests that Amnesty and HRW themselves were of growing interest to global media outlets. Graph 4 lays out the number of mentions of HRW and Amnesty in major news publications between 1985–2003. For Amnesty, the graph demonstrates that having achieved dramatic increases in coverage in the 1980s, Amnesty's coverage in the media began to decline or level off early in the 1990s, particularly in the *New York Times,* which is a major news target for Human Rights Watch. Even in the *Guardian*, a British-based newspaper, Amnesty had begun to lose ground in their media coverage to other organizations. In contrast, the coverage of HRW (a more media-oriented organization), rose steadily after its formation in 1988. Indeed, Amnesty adjusted their strategies in response to increased competition, a strategy that appears, in Graph 4, to have paid off later in the decade.

11. *New York Times* accessed through Lexis-Nexis database, collected August 23, 2004.

GRAPH 4: HRW and Amnesty Mentions in Major News Publications, 1985-2003



III. Strategic Response: Isomorphism and Media Strategy

The centrality of media as a tool for leveraging influence against policy-makers while simultaneously demonstrating effectiveness and legitimacy to the broader public, has meant that media targets became central focal points for strategic decision-making for human rights organizations in the 1990s. As evidence of this, in this section I will show how both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch moved toward the development of sophisticated media strategy as a central tactic.

Amnesty

> *Getting media coverage is not an end in itself, but is essential for Amnesty to effectively campaign for change, promote a culture of human rights, attract members and raise money.*[12]

Amnesty International has always placed importance in the role of the media for achieving their goals. Amnesty's first annual report, for instance, stated

> it was through the generosity of the London *Observer* that Amnesty was launched on May 28, 1961. Without the help of this paper and the others Amnesty would not be the established movement that it is today.[13]

Despite this, membership activism has always been the hallmark of the organization, not savvy media techniques. Reflecting the evidence dis-

12. Amnesty International, ICM 1995 Circular XVI: Moving forward in the media — a worldwide media strategy for Amnesty International AI Index: ACT 81/01/95

13. Amnesty International *Annual Report* 1961–62

cussed above, Amnesty found that media work was taking on renewed importance. A former press officer from the 1970s–1990s, remarked on the shift. On the one hand, he commented, "a huge change occurred with the development of 24-hour news … which relates to having to feed a much larger demand for news." Reflecting the wider interest in human rights, he commented,

> by the late eighties … major news outlets were starting to do their own investigative reporting on human rights which was certainly not a feature in the '70s or early '80s. In that period what most agencies were using were stories from Amnesty International with no independent allocation of resources on their own. (Amnesty Informant #29, Male, August 23, 2004)

This meant Amnesty was not only "working with a completely different media structure," but was also being challenged by other information providers on previously unquestioned claims (Amnesty Informant #29, Male, August 23, 2004).

In an attempt to reaffirm itself as the authority on human rights in the media, Amnesty set out the challenges for the organization's media work in a series of documents. The reports underline the necessity of appearing more relevant. One document lists a main concern as, "AI is not leading the media debate on human rights."[14] They quote a media observer in the analysis who states that

> "my impression of AI is that it has a very important role but not much relevance to journalists in the field. While you list people getting jailed you never analyze the trend, so the score goes to Human Rights Watch on that one.…"[15]

Further in the document the authors suggest that "AI's message is boring" and that needs to be more "creative" and "media friendly."[16] Their recommendation is to first, to review the news program and "eliminate work that isn't newsworthy."[17] Further on, they cite Amnesty members' comments that they "need to be seen and heard in crises or we won't be relevant to today's world."[18]

In the mid-1990s, Amnesty undertook a massive tactical shift, overhauling their press strategy and dramatically increasing the production of news releases, a more media-oriented product. A review of annual pub-

14. Amnesty International, ICM 1995 Circular XVI: Moving forward in the media - a worldwide media strategy for Amnesty International AI Index: ACT 81/01/95 p. 6
15. ibid. p. 7
16. ibid. p. 21
17. ibid. p. 21
18. ibid. p. 21

lication numbers for both background reports and news releases demonstrates how Amnesty began producing fewer Amnesty International background reports while increasing their production of Amnesty International news releases in 1993.[19] In 1991, Amnesty produced almost 1000 background reports but by the year 2000, this number had fallen to less than 600. The trend for news releases was quite different. In 1991, Amnesty issued fewer than 100 news releases. In 2000, this number skyrocketed to almost 600 news releases for the year. This dramatic tactical shift constitutes a significant change in Amnesty's conceptualization of an effective method of bringing about change in the 1990s.

Human Rights Watch

During the 1990s, HRW developed a strategic media-oriented approach that, by the late 1990s, no longer simply followed the international agenda, but often reframed world events from a human rights perspective for international media outlets, governments, and others. Like Amnesty, therefore, one of the most important institutional factors shaping HRW in the 1990s was the international media's appetite for human rights news. HRW was thus able to bring greater attention to its cause, influence decision-makers, shape the human rights debate, and secure funds.

The evolution of HRW's media strategy and the internal consequences of their choices began early in the 1990s. Characterizing the shift toward a media strategy as "significant," the following excerpt from an internal report summarizes the change in approach from an earlier period:

> In recent years, HRW has developed a reputation not only for conducting research in the field during emergency situations, but also for quickly turning that research into press releases or short reports. This is a significant shift from an earlier time when HRW researchers were encouraged to return from the field, process their research, and consult with others about conclusions and recommendations before making their findings public … the quick turnaround of material in response to news cycles may allow HRW to have a greater impact than would normally be the case.…[20]

This shift encouraged attempts to remain innovative and HRW has, in part, achieved this by offering products and analysis that are not found elsewhere. As this member of the communications team explains, HRW has developed a value-added media approach that evolved in response to the growing salience and proliferation of human rights knowledge:

19. See note 4. These data were used previously in [name of article withheld]

20. Human Rights Watch. November 2003. "A Review of HRW's Emergency Response During the Iraq Crisis January — July 2003"

> … we have changed what we do, the way we do it. We do it faster, we do it with analysis, not just Human Rights Watch says X human rights abuse is bad. We try to be the ones to tell journalists that something has happened, rather than tell journalists that something they know has happened. (HRW Informant #16, Female, June 15, 2005)

Like Amnesty, the shift in the mid-1990s was clear; HRW made a dramatic reassessment of their publication strategy in the early 1990s. In 1991, they produced over 120 long-format reports, but in 1995, they produced fewer than 60 and this declined to less than 40 in 2000.[21] Thus, while the 1980s was characterized by a dramatic increase in the publication of long-form reports, this changed in the 1990s. Unfortunately, there are no good records of more media-oriented short reports or news releases until 1997, when the HRW website began cataloguing them. However, the trend toward shorter reports occurring at this time supports the qualitative evidence above that the organization made a conscious shift to producing more media-oriented materials.

For HRW, which depends on major donations from individuals and foundations, the need to appear current and relevant is paramount. Accordingly, their media strategy is closely linked to fundraising concerns. For example, this senior executive member states: "Our reputation depends on the very high quality of media materials we produce, and our ability to raise funds depends on that reputation" (HRW Informant #11, Female, February 23, 2003). Because HRW's funding relies on the donations of wealthy individuals and foundations that expect results, their task is to maintain an image of credibility and currency. Using a recent example, this member of the communications team explains how fundraising efforts and media are closely linked:

> If there is a report on rapes and sexual violence in Darfur you want to look for the right moment to put it out. We put it out right before a major donor's conference as a way of saying that abuses are still happening in Darfur … we're very sophisticated in how we plan who gets what message and what the press work is for. (HRW informant # 26, Female, June 8, 2005)

It is not surprising, therefore that HRW's expenditures on fundraising salaries reached almost 15 percent of the total spent on salaries in 2005.

Like the growth in individuals dedicated to working on fundraising, HRW also made a significant shift toward individuals working with the media. Of 78 staff members in 1990, only one person, the press director, was dedicated to working with the media. In contrast, by 2005, there

21. See note 4. The data was obtained by coding the number of yearly publications in HRW's catalogue of publications.

were 11 full-time employees in the communications department, as well as specific posts dedicated to dealing with the press within regional divisions.[22]

III. "Media Stars" and "Activism as Usual": Explaining Divergences in the Experiences of Activist Employees

Both organizations clearly responded to the increasing pressure created by the media opening in the 1990s. But while HRW and Amnesty responded similarly to isomorphic media pressure at the level of media strategy, unique internal cultures meant that the degree to which these changes were perceived as a dilemma was quite different at each organization. As a result, the impact of this strategic shift was felt differently by activist employees at Amnesty and HRW. While Amnesty demonstrated some angst over the decision and its impact, members of the executive at HRW were unapologetic for the impact — if they wanted HRW to be successful in its endeavour, the promotion of some skills over others was necessary.

Human Rights Watch

HRW's aggressive media strategy has made it one of the most effective and respected human rights organizations in the world. However, this approach also has important implications for the internal working dynamics at HRW. In particular, this trajectory reshaped the role of the ideal human rights employee into one defined by his/her ability to become a "media star," an employee focused on an aggressive, speedy approach to information-gathering, and willing to expose him or herself to danger.

HRW's media strategy creates tremendous pressure on researchers to perform. For example, a recent internal report points to an association between the pressure that comes from the perceived need to attract media attention during high profile investigations, and feelings of "failure" among researchers:

> The pressure to do 'real-time reporting'… created enormous [and] unnecessary stress on staff, and some worried that this pressure increased the risk of error … researchers also reported feeling extreme pressure to produce quick releases, without any appreciation 'for the time and effort it can take to get things right and double-check information.' Some expressed their 'dismay at the pressure from [the Communications office] to behave as if we were war correspondents.… We got the feeling that we were failing because we weren't sending quick releases regularly.[23]

22. HRW *Annual Report*, 1990–2005

23. Quoted in "A Review of HRW's Emergency Response During the Iraq Crisis," January 2003.

HRW's response to its institutional environment creates pressures to achieve individual attention from the media, which often results in the aggressive pursuit of media focus. For example, this researcher comments on the change from previous years to a new emphasis on aggressively seeking journalists' attention:

> It was actually a code of conduct for us in the old days that you didn't talk to journalists.… The rule was that any quote came from New York, it never came from us. And in general we went to the field and did research and didn't talk to journalists about our findings until we had had a chance to come back, process the whole body of our research, and discuss with our director what it was that we were going to conclude and say. Now you would be laughed at if you turned down any press opportunity in the field … because the press is viewed as one of the major tools that we have to influence policy. (HRW Informant #32, Female, June 30, 2005)

This emphasis on individual visibility in the media is commonly manifested in the promotion of "media stars" within the organization. For instance, on this tendency a researcher comments, "Human Rights Watch has the unfortunate habit … of promoting stars. They're looking for the soundbyte." This senior program director concurs, arguing that:

> There's a culture here of everyone's a cowboy, everyone wants to 'get the goods.' And certainly the ones who get the goods are the ones who are the stars. And so, everyone sees that and knows that if they look like they're not handling it very well that's not necessarily going to be the way to build [their] career here. (HRW Informant #23, Female, June 14, 2005)

In promoting such a model employee, management places emphasis on a particular set of characteristics. Outlining what it takes to become a star and the pressure this places on individuals who have difficulty achieving this ideal, this program director comments:

> [T]he star in the organization [is] the one who brings the whole media crew and goes to the mass grave … talks to the press the whole time [they're] doing the research. It's completely different than what we would have done in the past. We would have thought that that was actually *not* professional to do that. But, it's the way that things are done now and [they're] a star.… But the other researchers who … see what it takes to be a star … it means that they feel pretty hopeless that they're not only fighting these horrific [situations] … they feel a certain hopelessness that they can't even get the support of the organization behind them. (HRW Informant #23, Female, June 14, 2005)

As part of this media equation, my research also indicated that being a media star requires a willingness to expose oneself to greater personal risk. One of the most revealing quotes on the connection between HRW's media strategy and its impacts on researchers' working conditions came from an Amnesty respondent who followed HRW into a field location as HRW researchers were preparing to leave. She commented:

> [They expose themselves to] … an incredibly high level of risk, an incredible high pressure to get coverage every time. I kept hearing stories about a Human Rights Watch worker having to actually deliver a press release — not just … presenting a press release from the field but then having to get in the trunk of a car to get out of the country. It's absolutely insane. (Amnesty Informant # 49, Female, June 15, 2005)

Similarly, an internal report makes it clear that the increased focus on risk is closely linked to the need for media attention:

> by putting researchers under such pressure to 'get the goods,' the organization is pushing staff to take greater and greater security risks. (HRW Informant #13, Female, February 30, 2003)

This degree of pressure is not completely pervasive within the organization. It also depends, to a large degree, on one's director or the geographic division. For example, this researcher suggests that she only feels minimal pressure to achieve high profile media coverage:

> I haven't felt pressure to do that. It's maybe that I haven't been around long enough and I haven't seen that. (HRW Informant #26, Female, June 15, 2005)

At the same time, however, suggesting the degree to which this expectation has simply become part of the job as the organization has increasingly adopted a media-based approach, she comments:

> [But] having an article published in the New York Times is great.… I feel like it's part of the job to be known by the media and to be a good source for them and to be quoted by them because it means that our work is getting out there. (HRW Informant #11, Female, February 23, 2003)

Reflecting an emerging form of internal stratification, one effect of this focus on media stardom is that activist employees, who can meet media expectations, gain respect internally and possess authority. Their opinions are, therefore, taken more seriously. On this tendency, this researcher comments:

> [HRW] has all the disadvantages … of the big personalities … and the bright people in the spotlight.… I think they like it for people to become

> researchers until they grow in reputation and status until they are [*name of prominent researcher*] — until they're signature people, until they are names that are recognized as experts. (HRW Informant #13, Female, February 30, 2003)

Similarly, in response to a question about whether she felt comfortable voicing her opinions in staff meetings, this researcher commented:

> Oh, God, no way. But I also haven't been here very long … this is an organization where all of the power has to do with seniority, length of time you've been here and your proven ability to 'bring home the goods.' No, not at this stage. Maybe later. (HRW Informant #11, Female, June 23, 2005)

The tendency toward star promotion encourages a level of competition that did not exist previously. Moreover, this tendency is readily encouraged by upper levels of management and the communications team. For example, this respondent explains:

> [E]very week there's a press roundup where there's a packet that goes out [to staff] and has every media outlet in the world where Human Rights Watch was mentioned…. But, I mean, there are other ways besides, directly sent down from the core or your director [who is] the culture of the core, putting together these press packets and seeing who is quoted. Moreover, it is now a daily responsibility of the communications department to check their "traffic" in media publications using an online database. (HRW Informant #11, Female, June 23, 2005)

When I asked one member of the executive about one of these commonly cited "stars" she replied,

> Well, she was good at getting in the *New York Times*, but actually not great. She missed a lot of opportunities. (HRW Informant #11, Female, February 23, 2003)

The organization's shift toward an overwhelming media strategy is a shrewd approach to maximizing issue coverage while maintaining organizational stability. It also signifies the need to reorient not only resources, activities, and outputs but also individual profiles for this task. Like the focus on accountability among strategic stakeholders, the concern of many activist employees was that media orientation focuses too much attention on the ability of individuals or programs to garner media attention.

Amnesty

In the literature on institutional isomorphism, organizations conform to the norms and models in their institutional environment, a process im-

mediately clear in Amnesty's relationship to the media. In contrast to the eager acceptance of the media strategy and its implications for employees at HRW, Amnesty's reaction was a controversial and tempered progression. Indeed, the evidence of Amnesty's strategic transformation should be balanced by the fact that extensive consultation and debate over the media strategy took place, with many staff and members worried that Amnesty "should not turn into a news agency with its priorities dictated by the media."[24] Moreover, there was strong resistance to the idea that Amnesty would "follow" the news agenda. For these reasons, the impact of Amnesty's strategic shift on the organization's internal dynamics is less immediately clear.

The most apparent connection relates to the internal controversy surrounding "crisis responses." When regional situations become human rights "crises," such as those that have arisen in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Darfur, Amnesty rapidly mobilizes internal human and financial resources. The organization states that in situations of crisis, it will "[r]espond rapidly, flexibly and creatively to human rights crises."[25] According to their internal policy documents, the process requires that they "reorganize internally as needed to respond to the crisis; respond to crises through diverse mass communications media."[26] In this way, Amnesty's need to appear relevant and to remain in the lens of the media in relation to contemporary geopolitical dilemmas was embodied in a clear organizational policy. Interviews with members of Amnesty's executive confirmed this evaluation in the logic behind their strategy as one member of Amnesty's executive member observed

> You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn't give a rat's ass about Mauritania. You don't put a press release out on that. (Amnesty informant #2, Female, September 14, 2003)

By enacting the "crisis response" strategy Amnesty addresses genuine human rights crises, and simultaneously addresses the concerns of critics and members that it was no longer relevant.

Despite the formal and informal consultation policies, employees at Amnesty explained that the focus on media attention during crises responses had important implications for staff morale and interdepartmental conflict. The result of elevating some geopolitical crises over others, some argued, is the development of animosity surrounding the "sell-ability" of certain programs and regions and, by extension, the individuals

24. Amnesty International, ICM 1995 Circular XVI: Moving forward in the media - a worldwide media strategy for Amnesty International AI Index: ACT 81/01/95 p 10

25. Amnesty International, Integrated Strategic Plan, 2003.

26. Amnesty International, Integrated Strategic Plan, 2003

associated with them. The substantive issues of interest to members of the executive and the fundraising team were seen to be more highly valued. As this member of the fundraising unit commented,

> [I]t's difficult to tell them no … that's not fundable. It's a great project and we just don't have the money. The word we use internally is, that's a really 'sexy' country or not. Nepal is a sexy country and that's what makes it fundable. (Amnesty Informant # 25, Female, October 20, 2003)

The researchers are aware of this problem and one of them explains:

> That's why we have a fundraising team, that why we have a media team, and that's why we have good PR. And that's why our work is not done, considering the victims in the country, but considering the media opportunity in the country, and internationally — if we can show our face, if we can show our name, that's fine, we can work on the issues.… And that's why you hear less about Ivory Coast … you don't hear us on the forgotten prisoners.… If we succeed financially, if we survive probably one way or another, but the human cost is going to be enormous.… (Amnesty Informant # 3, Female, September 18, 2003)

Thus, activist employees expressed concern that Amnesty's need to invoke the crisis response policy creates a special status for those whose regional specialization falls outside of the eye of the media. The unintentional result of such policies is the creation of an animosity between those programs that get covered, generate resources, and are considered "areas of interest" and those that do not. Employees pointed to the staff handbook as evidence of the impact of this policy and the creation of special status positions for those working in the crisis response teams. The handbook specifies that overtime will be provided to members of the crisis response teams, and cover the cost of meals and transportation related to this overtime work. It states that "these arrangements can only help to alleviate some of the stresses associated with a high level of activity during a crisis response period."[27] Employees who are not members of crisis response teams view such policies as special treatment for conditions that they experience on a daily basis: overtime, being on "standby," high stress, late hours. This inequity promotes resentment and conflict and detracts from teamwork. Some employees suggested that if an individual resents other programs, he or she is less likely to work cooperatively, and more likely to view him or herself in competition with others for resources.

Significantly, while Amnesty's approach may have resulted in some interdepartmental conflict, it did not create the issue of media stars that

27. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Staff Handbook*. 2002. No page.

has arisen at HRW. This may be attributed specifically to the ongoing internal discussions that the organization must not elevate the status of individual employees. Emphasizing the deep roots of selflessness, the notion of "freedom from distinction" is a profoundly influential concept at Amnesty. This is most evident in individual recognition: individual staff names are not made public and are not published on reports. Thus, running counter to the individualism vaunted at HRW, the organizational culture of the IS minimizes the prominence of individual employees and, in so doing, attempts to minimize hierarchy and support the concerns of members and victims. Like the headquarters of Amnesty itself, which is meant to hold an unremarkable place in the "Amnesty movement," a flattened hierarchy exists in which individual employees are considered to hold equal status. This value is also communicated by the IS policy of "self-servicing" which means individuals of all levels conduct their own support work such as copying, answering the phone, typing etc.

Because of these cultural features, individuals do not become known in the media and, consequently, their performance is not measured by media success. While I found some evidence that the media is increasingly a daily concern of employees, I found no evidence that media attention resulted in competitive, aggressive, or risk-taking behaviour. Although the media has clearly become an important actor in Amnesty's institutional environment, there are important elements of Amnesty's culture that mediate the process of isomorphism as it affects activist employees. In this way, supporting the findings discussed earlier, Amnesty's unique culture buffers this very important institutional pressure.

Conclusion

I set out in this article to understand how the attempts of human rights organizations to garner media attention invoked dilemmas for the organizations and shaped the experiences of their "activist employees." I began with the premise that as a result of "isomorphism," organizations who share an institutional environment react in similar ways in order to ensure stability, to compete, and to increase impact. I posited that because social movement organizations, such as those in the human rights movement, are guided by "principled" values, the organizations may face "trade-offs" in choosing to conform to the expectations of major institutional players. This is an increasingly relevant question given the emergence of more and more social movement organizations staffed entirely by paid labour, alongside the assertion that such organizations act as "laboratories of democratic citizenship" (Alexander et al. 1999:453),

embodying their explicit principles of social change in the form of equitable internal relations (Lofland 1996).

I have argued here that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were powerfully shaped in similar ways by the global media opportunities that were presented to them throughout the 1990s. Like other studies (Minkoff 2002; Ostrander 2004), I found that for Amnesty, this opening did present trade-offs and their reaction reflected their internal organizational culture. Consequently, changes to Amnesty's organizational strategy had few implications for the daily working dynamics of their activist employees, other than to encourage ongoing debate. In contrast, with its focus on professional distinction and timeliness, HRW readily embraced an aggressive media strategy that encouraged "media stars" to emerge in a culture of aggression, competition, stratification, and risk-taking. At the level of organizational strategy, isomorphism was clear, but this did not carry the same implications for the activist employees at each organization. The differential impact of the same institutional pressures at the level of activist employees can be explained by the unique organizational cultures at Amnesty and HRW.

I put forward the idea that principled values are important conscience meters for an organization: organizations that espouse values of justice and equity to the broader society are more likely to be conscious of their internal dynamics. I found that employees and management of the organizations are, in fact, conscious of the possible contradictions they face, but they did not always uphold these values within their own organization. Instead, the contradiction was often noted but viewed as inescapable or at least an acceptable trade-off. Thus, whether institutional pressures are perceived as inescapable dilemmas is largely contingent on the values and culture of the organization. However, this study does support earlier findings that, like financial imperatives, media pressures transform the ways in which social movements choose to bring about social change and the people who are deemed capable of this task. This shift has the potential to limit the pool of those interested, qualified, and appropriate for political activism as well as the range of effective methods.

As the activities of some human rights organizations have crossed boundaries they have found themselves in a position of influence but also of considerable compromise. In this article, I have examined the specific pathways, costs and dilemmas involved in social movement success and subsequent organizational change.

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