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Article

Public Legitimation by “Going Personal”? The Ambiguous Role of International Organization Officials on Social Media

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Abstract

International organizations increasingly use social media to target citizens with an abundance of content, which tends to stylize officials across ranks as the “personal face” of institutional processes. Such practices suggest a new degree of access to the every day of multilateralism that has traditionally taken place on camera and with the aid of diplomatic discretion. What is more, in these practices the intuitive truth of images on social media often blends with a more credible expression of emotional states—such as enthusiasm, sympathy, anger, or shame—which facilitates the legitimation of international organizations as credible agents of shared values and norms. At the same time, however, such personalization arguably suggests a problematic dependency on the credible conduct of international organization officials as it might undermine institutional claims to depersonalized “rational-legal” authority in international politics and local arenas of implementation alike. Also, it aggravates existing problems of decoupling action in global governance from its political symbolism, because international organizations use social media by and large to communicate “top-down,” despite claiming a more personal mode of communication among peers. To illustrate this argument, the article takes on content shared by leading officials of the UN, the IMF, the WHO, and the WTO on Twitter.

Keywords

digital diplomacy; echo chambers; emotional labor; global publics; international organizations; self-legitimation; social media

Issue

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1. Introduction

International organizations (IOs) like the UN, the WHO, and the IMF face an increasingly complex and assertive societal environment (Bexell et al., 2021; Copelovitch & Pevehouse, 2019; Dingwerth et al., 2019; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). For decades, they have learned to co-exist with—and partly accommodate to—successive waves of politicization in which transnational advocacy for more effectively addressing cosmopolitan concerns such as human rights violations, environmental degradation, or global inequalities played a leading role (della Porta, 2007; O’Brien et al., 2000; Zürn et al., 2012). More recently, right-wing populism has come to prominently address IOs as linchpins of such progressive “global-

ism,” making IOs powerful symbols on both sides of a deepening cleavage between cosmopolitan (or “liberal”) and anti-cosmopolitan (or “anti-liberal”) orientations in many Western societies (Hooghe et al., 2019b; Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Strijbis et al., 2018).

Such politicization has spurred scholarly interest in the popular legitimacy of global governance—i.e., the extent to which citizens consider an IO’s authority to be appropriately exercised (Bexell et al., 2022; Dellmuth et al., 2022; Sommerer et al., 2022; Tallberg et al., 2018). The main focus in this literature has been on the sources of legitimacy beliefs (e.g., Dellmuth et al., 2022; Ghassim et al., 2022), while the way IOs communicate vis-à-vis a wider public has found much less attention in the field of IO studies and beyond (exceptions include Capelos

& Wurzer, 2009; Dingwerth et al., 2019; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018; Gronau & Schmidtke, 2016; von Billerbeck, 2020). This is unfortunate, as the way IOs address their “legitimizing communities” (Symons, 2011) is arguably key to understanding the dynamics of IO politicization if not the future trajectories of global governance in broader terms.

Strikingly, most IOs now rely heavily on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for reaching out to citizens directly (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). These platforms have important advantages for political communication but also pose new challenges such as a highly competitive economy of attention and the fragmentation of audiences driven by the networked curation of content and selective exposure (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2017; Conover et al., 2011; Garrett, 2009; N. Hall et al., 2020; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Williams et al., 2015).

This contribution focuses on a specific aspect of such communication: the remarkable presence of IO officials, who take center stage in how IOs communicate in digital spheres. While IO press releases have focused on textual reports of major meetings and visits for some time, social media accounts of IOs now provide a constant stream of news and images that gets their users closer to how officials across ranks do international governance every day—be it in terms of their own statements, organizing intergovernmental negotiations, meeting with the various stakeholders of global governance, or supervising global policy programs on the ground. According to the main argument developed in this contribution, such “personalization” of IO digital communication facilitates as well as challenges how international authority is articulated and, by implication, (self-)legitimated towards a wider (digital) public.

To begin with, such personalization suggests a new degree of access to the performance of global politics that has traditionally taken place *on camera* and in a mode of diplomatic discretion. In this context, the intuitive truth of images blends with a more credible expression of emotional states—such as enthusiasm, sympathy, anger, or shame—by individual officials and as part of their “emotional labor” (A. R. Hochschild, 2012) on behalf of an abstract institutional structure. Social media arguably better afford officials to display emotional states vis-à-vis a broader audience of citizens directly. Thus, their increased presence online facilitates the public legitimation of IOs as credible agents of shared values and contributes to the public recognition of IOs as legitimate actors.

However, there are important ambiguities of such “personalized” communication of IOs, such as the sublime but notable tension of a more personalized self-presentation of IOs with their own claim to “rational-legal” authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). What is more, observers have already noted a danger of problematic “trivialization” of IO public communication that trades a new focus on personal performances

and credibility at the expense of institutional transparency in terms of “hard facts” about decisions and actions (Krzyżanowski, 2018). While conclusive evidence is still lacking, intuition suggests that the new emphasis on the individual officeholder might aggravate existing problems of global governance, such as the lamentable de-coupling of political symbolism from action and the increased fragmentation of political communication online.

With this line of argument, my contribution directly speaks to the overall theme of the thematic issue in multiple ways. In keeping with the introduction, I understand publics as spheres of political communication, legitimation, and contestation, with powerful institutions as important actors as well as addressees, common claims of public interests, and an audience that chose to selectively expose to and process such communication. Regarding its most relevant dynamics, my argument foregrounds how a specific technology of communication—social media—affords and affects the legitimation of an increasingly relevant type of public institutions—IOs—while, at the same time, renegotiating the extent to which their legitimation shifts boundaries of the private and the public, by “personalizing” institutional communication.

After briefly illustrating what I mean by “personalization” in IO social media communication, my argument evolves in three steps, each expanding on one of the aforementioned claims. First, personalization is part and parcel of officials’ “emotional labor,” that is the professional performance of emotions such as joy, compassion, grief, and determination in public. Through emotional labor, IO officials help to legitimize IOs as credible and responsive agents working for a better world. Second, the socio-technological conditions of social media communication are key to understanding how such personalization has become a plausible strategy of institutional communication, shifting its emphasis on the individual official’s emotional performance to go viral. Third, such personalization may backfire in various ways—by trivializing international politics, disappointing expectations of “real” action, playing the game of populism, or fostering fragmentation—thus calling for a more comprehensive investigation of IO digital communication as well as its impact on how global governance is discussed in networked public spheres.

2. International Organization Digital Communication and Its Personalization

Communication departments of many IOs have been remarkably active in digital spheres of communication for years now (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2020; Groves, 2018; Hofferberth, 2020; see also Aue & Börgel, 2023). Virtually all of them created their own websites early on and a recent study on the institutional development of IOs from a global perspective even declared an active webpage to be an operational criterion for the respective

IO to be relevant for a systematic investigation of this organizational field (Hooghe et al., 2019a). There is more notable variation regarding the regular use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, or Instagram—platforms that can be categorized as social media to the extent they allow users to connect with others by setting up unique profiles and sharing user-generated content (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Gillespie, 2018). By the end of 2021, a recent survey of Facebook and Twitter profiles for a selection of 50 IOs found a total of 486 Facebook pages and 946 Twitter handles run by these organizations (Ecker-Ehrhardt, in press). Only 10 did not actively use Facebook, while seven did not run any official handle on Twitter. In fact, only very small and or highly specialized organizations did neither tweet nor post (Ecker-Ehrhardt, in press).

One of the most active IOs on social media for more than a decade has been the UN. In early 2022, the UN Social Media Team—located at the UN Secretariat’s Department of Global Communication—had 23 posts responsible for managing 166 accounts on 14 different social media platforms (in order of relevance: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Flickr, Medium, Youku, Weibo, Tumblr, TikTok, WeChat, Snapchat, and Pinterest) while many more have been run by other parts of the organization. As of May 2023, its main English Twitter handle (@UN) has about 16.2 million followers alone, while the respective account on Facebook (@unitednations) has about 7.4 million. Notably, respective numbers for other major organizations in this field are substantially lower but still suggest an enormous reach: For example, the Twitter handles @IMF and @NATO have a fellowship of about 2.1 million and 1.8 million, respectively. After the pandemic, @WHO is even followed by about 12.2 million. Such numbers add up to an immense amount of total online engagement because the content is promoted across digital platforms: For example, fighting against misinformation on Covid-19, the UN’s Verified campaign alone generated about 660 million video views in 2020 and now serves those responsible as a “flagship example of delivering on the objectives of the UN global communications strategy of leading the narrative, inspiring people to care and mobilizing action” (UN, 2021, p. 9).

Such virality according to common engagement metrics is arguably based on various tools of digital communication. For example, IOs have successfully employed their own hashtags as important “soft structures” of storytelling (Papacharissi, 2016) and to garner affiliated “hashtag publics” (Rambukkana, 2015) for a long time (Pamment, 2016). In 2020, the UN-promoted hashtag #ClimateAction successfully generated about 35 million engagements (likes, shares, and comments; UN, 2021, p. 12). Additional tools include the use of celebrities and influencers as important “force multipliers” on social media. To illustrate, the K-pop group BTS repeatedly spurred massive user engagement with UN accounts online—such as in the case of their speech calling for

the younger generation to care for sustainable development at the 75th UN General Assembly, which drew about 485,000 likes on Twitter and more than eight million views on YouTube (see BTS, 2020a, 2020b).

In two related ways, Twitter communication of major IOs may serve to illustrate the remarkable emphasis on the personal presence and performances of individual officeholders (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Maronkova, 2016). To some extent, such “personalization” has been first of all part and parcel of a more general trend to enhance and diversify IO public communication in general and social media presences of IOs more specifically: In addition to the main “institutional” accounts (e.g., @UN) and its bodies (e.g., @UNHumanRights) or agencies (e.g., @UNEP), a large number of accounts communicating on behalf of the organization now belong to specific offices (e.g., @UN_PGA of the current president of the UN General Assembly) or even individual office holders *ad personam* (e.g., @antonioguterres of the UN Secretary-General or @volker_turk of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). These accounts are quite successful in reaching out to the public on social media as well: Antonio Guterres has about 2.1 million followers, the Director-General of the WHO Tedros Adhanom has 1.9 million, Jens Stoltenberg of NATO 822 k, and the IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva at least about 284 k. The personal account @NOIweala of WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala even surpasses @WTO considerably in terms of followership (2.1 million compared to 547 k).

By implication, individual office holders’ personalized way of representing their organization on social media has become a regular part of their every day as it is now an eminent feature of IO social media communication. Figure 1 provides a sample of Twitter communication of these handles, illustrating what content their followers are likely to receive as part of their daily social media diet. In late April and early May 2023, such diet contains a significant share of reporting on how IOs’ leading officials have facilitated cooperation among important stakeholders in global governance—such as governments, businesses, and civil society—by meeting up, shaking hands, and speaking as well as carefully listening to what their representatives had to say. The first tweet of Okonjo-Iweala (Figure 1, top left) shows how such content often looks, combining three images from the multiple “photo ops” such events typically provide. Followers of these Twitter accounts also received video footage in which the respective officials directly addressed a broader audience in a speech—as in the case of Tedros Ghebreyesus’ tweet (Figure 1, top right), where he promotes a WHO (2023) report as part of the WHO Global Action Plan on Promoting the Health of Refugees and Migrants. Beyond such content, these IO officials regularly provided content that claims a more personal access to their every day, for example, by celebrating personal relationships with colleagues and joint engagement for global governance (Figure 1,

center row). Regularly, the fine lines between private and professional roles blurred when communication linked personal experiences to organizational matters—for example, a commitment to “climate action, climate justice and a better, more peaceful world” (Figure 1, bottom left), the appreciation of mothers as “greatest role

models” (Figure 1, bottom mid), or an openness to all those of “potential, peace, love, hope” (Figure 1, bottom right).

Again, this sample does not claim to be representative, especially considering that Twitter is just one of many platforms IOs tend to now employ for communication

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala @NOIweala

Kudos to African MSME's in the digital space trying to break into world markets! Met with some impressive entrepreneurs in Nairobi! Thanks to the Honorable Minister of Cooperatives and MSMEs Minister @CsChelugui and his staff for organising a very interesting engagement

8:32 PM · May 5, 2023 · 18.1K Views

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus @DrTedros

Every person, regardless of their background or circumstances, has the right to quality health services, and to a healthy and dignified life. Here are examples, compiled by @WHO on how to ensure #HealthForAll migrants and refugees: bit.ly/3Biap2d

7:27 PM · May 10, 2023 · 145.3K Views

Kristalina Georgieva @KGeorgieva

Thrilled to be reunited with my fellow UN family @antonioguterres and @AminaMohammed, in Nairobi, discussing global challenges, and working together to find solutions.

3:07 PM · May 5, 2023 · 25.4K Views

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus @DrTedros

Thank you to the incredible people who I have the privilege to call my colleagues. For more than three years, the people of @WHO have laboured day and night, under intense pressure and intense scrutiny to help countries bring #COVID19 under control. I'm immensely #ProudToBeWHO.

8:42 AM · May 6, 2023 · 188.5K Views

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala @NOIweala

Always a delight to spend time with you @Lagarde!

Christine Lagarde @Lagarde · Apr 14

I was delighted to meet with my friend Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the @wto in Washington, D.C. for the #IMFMeetings.

1:56 AM · Apr 15, 2023 · 47K Views

António Guterres @antonioguterres

Will future generations look back on our actions with happiness & gratitude — or with disappointment & anger?

I want my great-great-granddaughter to know that I never stopped fighting for climate action, climate justice and a better, more peaceful world.

time.com
Antonio Guterres' Climate Change Letter to His Great-Great Granddaughter
The U.N. Secretary-general knows our future generations will hold us accountable.

5:40 PM · Apr 21, 2023 · 274.7K Views

Kristalina Georgieva @KGeorgieva

My mother taught me to love, to dream big and to see the best in people — she like mothers worldwide, are the greatest role models. To all who celebrate, Happy Mother's Day!

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus @DrTedros

There is nothing more precious than spending time with new life. Potential, love, peace, hope — all these attributes and more are wrapped up in this beautiful wonder.

@davidvolodzko, you, your wife and your daughter are always welcome back at @WHO

David Josef Volodzko @davidvolodzko · Apr 24

In Geneva we had a very special doctor's visit with one of my favorite Tigrayans — @DrTedros, whose grandpa skills came in handy when he was able to instantly calm my daughter.

Figure 1. Selected tweets from personal handles of top officials of four major IOs (UN, IMF, WHO, and WTO). Note: All tweets are archived and searchable at Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org>). Sources: Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2023a, 2023b, 2023c); Georgieva (2023a, 2023b); Guterres (2023); Okonjo-Iweala (2023a, 2023b).

and previous research has rightly pointed to the many peculiarities of platforms regarding their specific features and usership (e.g., Bossetta, 2018). However, despite such limitations, the sampled tweets illustrate a broader class of content shaping the imagery of global governance on social media. It arguably pushes the public enactment of professional roles to a new quality of personal closeness and co-presence in terms of sharing authentic emotional states with other users on Twitter and beyond. Implications of such “personalization” for the (de)legitimation of international governance are still insufficiently theorized, so I take on theories that might help to capture the role of emotional expressions for IO legitimation in the next section, before turning to the socio-technological conditions of their employment in digital communication.

3. International Organization Officials’ Performances as Emotional Labor

IOs gain legitimacy as “community organizations” (Abbott & Snidal, 1998) representing as well as advocating shared norms and values. They are recognized as “moral authorities” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005) if such efforts credibly serve the normative aspirations of their audience and become contested if not (Ignatieff & Appiah, 2003; Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Ex officio, IO officials are deemed important in both ways: as representatives of shared values as well as norm entrepreneurs (Fröhlich, 2014) that are expected to show leadership—internally and externally—in representing/promoting community norms and values with a necessary degree of personal authenticity and integrity.

A core competence for effectively doing so is arguably a credible performance of emotional states that certify an authentic commitment to those values and norms. The concept of “emotional labor” is helpful for theorizing the performative quality of officials’ expressions (Tompea, 2021). In the famous definition of A. Hochschild (2012, p. 7), “emotional labor” denotes the “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display.” Such management can be authentic to varying degrees, for which Hochschild has coined the twin concepts “surface acting” and “deep acting.” In the case of the former, a person intentionally enacts emotional states that are not actually felt, thus emotions remain superficial; in the case of the latter, a person displays “a real feeling that has been self-induced” (A. Hochschild, 2012, p. 35), a competence “diplomates and actors” are said to do best and “small children” to do worst (A. Hochschild, 2012, p. 33).

In both cases, emotional labor implies several related and intrinsically complex tasks, including the empathically emotive sensing of others’ affective states and the strategic employment of emotional expressions (Guy et al., 2014). Sociologists suggest that such emotional labor is essential for understanding organizational life in

and beyond public administrations, defining very much how leaders successfully cope with motivational issues inside the organization (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). More important for my argument, however, is the external relevance of emotional labor, that is to make outside stakeholders accept organizational claims to authority. From the upper echelon of institutional power down to the rank-and-file bureaucrats in direct interaction with citizens, public administrations are concerned with being credible by controlling emotional states to some extent—not least to successfully claim “rational-legal authority” by strictly following “the rule of formal impersonality...‘without hatred or passion’” (Weber & Tribe, 2019, p. 611).

However, public service increasingly requires competence to treat citizens beyond mere fairness and courtesy and to listen to their concerns as part of the job (Guy et al., 2014; Macnamara, 2018). Showing compassion has been found to be a key capability for spurring institutional trust, for example, in case of public emergencies (Malecki et al., 2021; Mastracci et al., 2014). Relatedly, scholars have discussed at length the eminent role that public officials can play by performing acts of remorse, regret, and apology to influence public perceptions of institutional failure and restore public reputation as responsive to public concerns (Benoit, 1997; Capelos & Wurzer, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2006). For the international realm, scholars of so-called “emotional diplomacy” have argued that the credible display of emotional states such as anger, sympathy, or guilt by official representatives (as well as citizens) can have a huge impact on relations between societies, for example, as in the case of Israel and Germany after the Holocaust (T. H. Hall, 2015). Remarkably, some research on organizational leadership of UN senior officials has already pointed to the eminent role of “emotional intelligence,” suggesting that “leaders are expected to be sensitive to the needs of their constituents and subordinates, to show concern, understanding and respect” (F. Hochschild, 2010, p. 30).

In line with this reading of IO officials’ performative role, the personalization of IO public communication arguably suggests a new relevance of their emotional expressions for credibly representing shared values and norms (including public responsiveness) to successfully claim and legitimize a role as “global governors” (Avant et al., 2010).

4. The Socio-Technological Conditions of Social Media and Personalization

According to the main argument developed here, social media is where the imagery of IO officials’ emotional labor increasingly takes center stage. Officials’ emotional expression has always played some role in international diplomacy (including IO communication) as well as domestic realms, for example during election campaigns of political candidates (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Relatedly,

news organizations, in general, tend to select and frame politics with a focus on individual personality and action, thus arguably gratifying such communication of political events or institutions in order to attract audience attention and broaden public resonance (O'Neill & Harcup, 2020). However, in the digital world, institutions face new incentives for employing emotional expressions of officials if directly addressing citizens by means of social-media-based “digital diplomacy” (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

On social media communication goes “many-to-many” and is largely based on a logic of virality in terms of a “network-enhanced word of mouth” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1248). Production of content is cheap; hence networks are characterized by an abundance of voices and viewpoints, making attention a scarce resource. However, competition for attention “invite[s] affective attunement, support[s] affective investment, and propagate[s] affectively charged expression” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 308; see also Hansen et al., 2011; Veltri & Atanasova, 2017). Consequently, the current usage of digital communication by larger IOs such as the UN suggests a privileged targeting of an audience that is hoped to empathically connect with a moral cause such as humanitarian aid, human rights, or sustainable development (Bouchard, 2020; UN, 2021).

At the same time, social media affords “social grooming” (Dunbar, 1998), that is, sharing gossip to strengthen social bonds by reaffirming one’s and others’ commitments with shared norms and responsibilities. Over time, humans have developed many tools for expanding the outreach of “social grooming” activities beyond the time-consuming task of checking others’ backs for lice, with social media as one of the more recent but transformative socio-technological inventions (Donath, 2007). Symbolic acts such as expressing gratitude, condolences, or congratulations are typical ingredients of “social grooming” on social media—and are now widely performed by governmental agencies vis-à-vis organizational stakeholders (DePaula et al., 2018). For IOs, social media thus provide immense opportunities for self-legitimation, if IO-officials’ “social grooming” successfully strengthens bonds with a broader usership.

Notably, social media afford the immediate and direct communication of visual content, which allows one to more credibly claim authenticity by providing, for example, timely visual evidence of human suffering (Bleiker & Kay, 2007; Freistein & Gadinger, 2020; Geis & Schlag, 2017). Similarly, authenticity as an added value of visualization is important for understanding the significance of emotional states displayed in the public realm. As psychologists have long argued, we intuitively assume the non-verbal expression of emotional states to be the hardest to fake (Fox & Spector, 2000). Thus, IO officials that know how to (deeply en)act emotional narratives of concern, grief, and commitment may significantly contribute to more effective self-legitimation of IOs as “moral authorities” by providing credible visual representations of emotional states on social media.

5. The Multiple Ambiguities of Personalized International Organization Self-Legitimation

Are there significant consequences of such self-legitimation based on IO officials’ presence and performances that call for more scientific engagement with these practices? While we do not know yet, intuition suggests important ambiguities regarding how such personalization might spur institutional legitimation but also how such legitimation might actually reflect a problematic decline of public accountability.

To start with, IO officials’ increasing presence on social media may arguably go some way toward overcoming the widely lamented remoteness of international governance. Thus, it may create social legitimacy of specific IOs and contribute to the legitimation of global governance despite widespread contestation of the “liberal international order” (Hooghe et al., 2019b; Ikenberry, 2010; Zürn et al., 2012). For example, imagery suggesting the passionate attentiveness of WTO officials vis-à-vis stakeholders (e.g., Figure 1, upper left), should have some “representational force” because “being seen to listen is now itself an act of public engagement” (Di Martino, 2020, p. 133). In much the same way, UN officials pledging to consistently care for how future generations will look back on the UN’s current commitment to “fight for climate action, climate justice and a better, more peaceful world” (Figure 1, bottom left) might even restore some public confidence in the accountability of global action. Finally, the self-representation of WHO staff as authentically being “#ProudToBeWHO” (e.g., Figure 1, center) might contribute toward understanding international civil service as joyful, relatable, and interesting. Thus, personalized communication may also help to make the respective organization a better place to work, as the demand for emotional labor as part of the every day of leading officials might have an immense impact on organizational culture as well as individual job satisfaction across ranks (Guy et al., 2014; Hedling, 2023). However, intuition suggests that consequences might be much more complex and contradictory.

5.1. Depoliticizing Trivialization

A focus on personality in the public sphere may make IO officials more relatable; however, it potentially fosters a trivialization of public discourse. Important information about decisions, actions, and impact of IOs may be displaced by superfluities—as has been lamented, for example, regarding the self-presentation of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg when sharing his fandom for David Bowie (Maronkova, 2016). Others have uttered similar concerns, for example, regarding EU social media communication (Krzyżanowski, 2018). Much more systematic empirical research is needed, addressing whether and how personalization really increases the proportion of what is deemed “non-political content” and whether this fosters a

depoliticization of IOs. Much (if not most) of IO officials' current public performances on social media might arguably be directly related to political goals, decisions, or actions and does not fit the bill as clearly—as the sample of tweets shown in Figure 1 nicely illustrates.

5.2. Populist Temptation

The increasing contestation of liberal IOs by right-wing populism has fueled scholarly interest in the ideological underpinnings of populism and its narrative focus on juxtaposing an inaccessible liberal elite with the populist leader and its embrace of a personalization of power (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). A trend of IO communication to emphasize the “personal face” can in some way be read as a strategic response to populist contestation. At the same time, it arguably reaffirms the populist disdain of “faceless bureaucratic machineries,” by shifting focus on the individual officeholder and her or his personal leadership. Consequently, it arguably undermines IOs' claim to rational-legal authority, which is very much based on claims to “depersonalize” international politics (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005, p. 164). Alluding to the personality of organizational leaders ultimately triggers questions about the extent to which personal backgrounds and preferences fairly reflect the complex realities the respective organization has to address and accommodate, a tension which can become substantially aggravated if moving from the national to global institutions.

5.3. Rhetorical Entrapment

Relatedly, officials' display of emotions can arguably bolster claims of moral authority as they can backfire if disappointed. Along the lines of what Schimmelfennig (2001) has called “rhetorical entrapment,” T. H. Hall (2015, p. 28) has argued that “disengaging from an emotional performance mid-display because it had become costly would render it insincere.” Thus, personalization leaves organizations vulnerable to the many tensions officials' personal conduct—private or professional—can introduce to credibly performing organizational norms and values (Coombs, 2007; Hearit, 2006). Prominent cases in the IO organizational field include allegations of corruption (oil-for-food at the UN), patronage (Paul Wolfowitz's “Rizagate” at the World Bank), sexual harassment (Ruud Lubbers at UNHCR), sexual assault (Dominique Strauss-Kahn of the IMF), or organized sexual exploitation and abuse (UN peacekeepers). One may add the scandal surrounding the previous UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, who left the post years before; however, “the affair became an international scandal, precisely because Waldheim had been Secretary-General of the UN...holding the organization retroactively responsible for the selection of a Secretary-General with a highly dubious moral stature” (Lehmann, 2011, p. 7).

5.4. Organized Hypocrisy

What is more, those at the receiving end of IO governance regularly use social media to complain or call for action—after all, web 2.0 is defined by affording a new level of access and interactivity (see also Aue & Börgel, 2023; Schlag, 2023). Notably, social media have been positively received as promising tools for making public administration more dialogical, while also disappointing respective hopes for deliberative democratization (Knox, 2016). Adding to this more general theme, the social media presences of IOs are instructive. They are performative by suggesting attention if not a willingness for dialogue, but they are very much an empty gesture to the extent no one seems to listen nor respond on behalf of the IO anyway. This arguably holds true if alluding to officials' personal (co-)presences on social media, suggesting that the respective IO somehow acknowledges and buys into the more horizontal mode of communication among peers. Such empty gestures arguably contribute to the overall problematic decoupling of symbolic performances and political action that haunts international governance across issue areas (Lipson, 2007). A proliferation of more personalized forms of IO (self-)legitimation adds to such hypocrisy a new layer of symbolic deception.

5.5. Personalized Costs of Institutional Failure

On a personal level, the aforementioned ambiguities imply immense challenges for the individual official who is supposed to constantly project the self as part of (personalized) institutional communication in general and to credibly perform emotions more specifically (Hedling, 2023). After all, an organization's failure to consistently deliver on its values and promises may undermine officials' personal reputations if it is attributed not to institutional constraints but a lack of truthfulness of the individual IO official. For example, if confronting the personalized commitments of UN leaders to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and civil employees (Figure 2, left), many critics inside and outside the UN will remember how its leadership repeatedly sent strong signals of being personally “outraged,” “appalled,” or “sickened” by such cases in the past, while still failing to effectively prevent or sanction them (Westendorf & Searle, 2017). Relatedly, such failure comes with immense cognitive and emotional costs for the individual employee, the more these are supposed to personally perform organizational commitments that they can assume to remain largely symbolic and not matched by organizational action. By implication, emotional labor also increases employees' need for strategically coping with institutional failure in order to keep functioning—and a matching obligation of organizations to reflect on the ambiguities of personalization for those employees who are supposed to provide the “human resources” (Mastracci, 2022).



Figure 2. Two tweets from UN handles. Note: All tweets are archived and searchable at Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org>). Sources: Guterres (2019); Jan met de Pet (2018).

5.6. Polarized Fragmentation

Finally, there are unclear consequences for the degree to which the personalization of IO communication will contribute to the inclusiveness of public debates. Much has been written about a “digital divide” (Norris, 2001), which may arguably spur fragmentation among digital “haves” and “have-nots” the more relevant political institutions—including IOs—shift their attention of providing relevant information from offline to online spheres. Less overtly, however, practices of personalized communication might further add to the widely noted fragmentation of digital spheres per se. On social media users can more deliberately choose what to receive and share, enhancing the chances that a self-selective “echo chamber” emerges out of a process of “selective exposure” and algorithm-based filtering (Sunstein, 2018). For example, negative emotional campaigning (typically with strong visuals and testimonials) that went well offline in the past (a famous example is the tobacco control campaigns; see Dunlop et al., 2014) seems to be much less effective online because users simply turn off if confronted with messages they do not like (Hamill et al., 2015). Similarly, the enhanced personal display of emotions by IO officials might contribute to the more credible promotion of (liberal) norms and values. At the same time, however, such display may arguably foster the fragmentation of online communication up to a point where IO communication only reaches cosmopolitans that already share promoted norms and values—and joyfully consumes personal performances of IO officials feeling reassured

about what is right or wrong in the world (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2021). For those concerned about past military interventions or current support for Ukraine, NATO officials mourning the death of pop-cultural icons such as David Bowie (Maronkova, 2016) might not change much, despite spurring skepticism that NATO aims at diverting public attention away from more sinister actions. Similarly, for those fearing that an inaccessible globalist elite is planning the end of “Western civilization” by means of global migration governance, seeing UN officials joyfully cheering a Global Compact for Migration might just prove the ruthlessness and disrespect of such “globalist parties” for what normal folks hold dear (e.g., Figure 2, right). Nevertheless, chances are good that only the most politically active of those critics will continue to self-expose to such performances of IO officials. More moderate sceptics, however, will presumably tend to completely avoid them. Thus, emotional performances might ultimately work towards fragmentation, curtailing the reach of IO communication overall, including the less personal messages informing about what the respective IO does or does not do. Such impact of the personalized forms of IO (self-)legitimation would be detrimental to the most important role of IO public communication in times of “post-truth” (Adler & Drieschova, 2021): to provide credible information across ideological camps to make a global consensus about collective action possible and to legitimately act on behalf of such consensus by means of institutionalized coordination and implementation.

6. Conclusions

The everyday routines and performances of IO officials are now an essential part of how international authority is visualized and communicated vis-à-vis online publics. As argued in this contribution to the thematic issue, such imagery may effectively enhance the public recognition of IOs as credible guardians of shared values and principles as it may undermine normative claims to represent “depersonalized” rational-legal authority, to care for public transparency or to buy into a more horizontal mode of democratic dialogue. At the same time, material conditions of networked communication may effectively limit the reach of such legitimation practices, because skeptics can easily avoid their reception. Thus, personalization may even fuel a process of fragmentation, which has been widely received as detrimental to normative standards of deliberation as well as political accountability. Are these consequences real and significant? While we do not know yet, they call for more scientific engagement with public self-legitimation of IOs in general and practices of its more personalized forms more specifically. Fortunately, the methodological toolbox of IR has remarkably been filled with complementary approaches to address this challenge: Qualitative research can provide an in-depth analysis of the textual means and imagery of personalized representations and may thus greatly contribute, for example, by working towards a comprehensive typology of “personalized” practices in and of IO social media communication. Participant observation and interviews can further help to reconstruct such practices inside IO communication departments as well as the extent to which these practices force officials to cope with the inherent challenges of constantly projecting oneself online. Quantitative analysis of social media content can help to generalize about the trajectory of personalization as well as the causal conditions of sharing and commenting on respective content online. Finally, experimental research focused on the impact of personalization can dig into ways people perceive respective content and whether it is effectively used to form or update individual beliefs in the legitimacy of IOs. Thus, further research can go beyond the careful description of such practices itself, as legitimation research (too) often does. It can (and should) aim at more comprehensively investigating its reception by online publics as well as its structural impact on how such crowds give meaning to international authority in terms of legitimacy.

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