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Human Rights Appeals in International Politics: Amnesty International's Urgent Action Texts

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Abstract
With the cooperation of Amnesty International, the authors are collaborating to digitize the complete set of Amnesty International’s Urgent Action bulletins from 1974-2007, to be available for public use (estimated 2015). Our process combines library standards for digitization and electronic collections, additional researcher-and practitioner-driven metadata and coding categories. The result will be a searchable, full-text e-archive, with potential for expansion of the data into a numeric data set compatible with other international data sources.

Background
• Permission for this project was granted by Amnesty International after extended communications since 2007 with staff from Amnesty International’s global headquarters in London, the U.S. branch of Amnesty International (AI-USA), and AI-USA’s organizational archives at Columbia University.
• Since the mid-1970s, AI has produced periodic, almost daily Urgent Action (UA) bulletins. These are shared with members of its UA network.
• The Urgent Action appeal technique was developed to address and attempt to prevent human rights violations involving suspected prisoner mistreatment in early stages of detention, including torture and disappearances.
• AI sends real-time notifications — one- to three-page alerts — to members who subscribe to its Urgent Action network, advising them to write quick messages directly to officials in violating governments on behalf of “individuals at risk,” and suggesting points to raise that include “concern” and sometimes cite relevant legal or normative principles.

The documents were housed in AI-USA’s file cabinets before shipping to Purdue for digitization.

Materials and Methods
A simplified account of the process:
• Library scans paper documents
• Political science coders use n/vivo software to import pdf images and code qualitative terms and document attributes, producing research data and digitization metadata simultaneously.
• Library incorporates search terms from terms created by the political science coders, supplemented by some shared descriptive data from AI.
• Library creates e-archive.
• Clark will use data for research on law and justice as reflected in human rights appeals (see next column).

Public e-archive will be posted through Purdue libraries.
• Paper documents will be returned to AI for physical archiving.
• Materials and Methods

The Political Science Coding Team at Purdue

Research Questions
• How have grass-roots, transnational appeals for justice changed as the specificity of international human rights laws and norms has increased?
• How can researchers, research libraries, and practitioners work together to use technology for preservation, archiving, and research analysis?
• How do human rights practitioners and others understand and carry out appeals for justice in the transnational realm?
• How did AI’s use of the Urgent Action technique vary across time and cross-nationally, and what effects did it have?

Next Steps
• Clark is currently using the documents as the basis for an empirical and theoretical study of appeals to justice in international politics.
• With additional funding, we hope to use the metadata to create a numeric data set for incorporation into statistical analysis of nongovernmental human rights activism.

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