

Understanding the current backlash against LGBTIQ+ rights through the lens of heteroactivism

A case study of the International Organization for the Family's transnational norm diffusion on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

A new generation of transnational anti-gender actors are framing themselves as human rights champions and protectors of the rights of the “natural family”. To better understand these actors’ norm diffusion, including their re-styling of anti-gender narratives in contemporary iterations of heteroactivism and its potential threat to LGBTIQ+ rights, in this article we analyse the social media tactics of a key transnational anti-gender actor: the International Organization for the Family (IOF). The analysis is focused on the organisation’s Twitter (now X) account and we draw on theories of network media logic, connective action, and connective emotions. Two periods of activism – the first a low-intensity period in 2021 and the second a high-intensity period in 2022 – were purposefully selected for the analysis. In this article, we identify differences between the two periods, noting that the period covering the flagship event, the World Congress of Families (WCF) in 2022, was markedly less LGBTIQ-hostile and adversarial than the first period. IOF thus appears to be inspired by heteroactivist frames during the WCF and abides by logic that should trigger user interaction and content spreading. The lack of interactions and engagement with IOF Twitter content in either period indicates the need for more research on which logics apply to anti-gender audiences. We discuss the findings and what they may imply in a context like Sweden, a country whose self-image as a global champion for women’s and LGBTIQ+ rights may make it ill-equipped to counter the onslaught of transnational actors’ norm entrepreneurial activities.

KEYWORDS: anti-gender, digital media, heteroactivism, LGBTIQ+, norm diffusion

Introduction

Decades of human rights advocacy have resulted in increased recognition of and strengthened protection for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) people (Encarnación, 2014; O’Flaherty & Fisher, 2008). This development is visible in international human rights instruments, as well as in national legislations. Ayoub and Stoeckle (2024: 60) have even argued that in the 2000s, LGBTIQ+ rights had become the “trademark of a consolidated liberal democratic regime”. Indeed, acceptance and support of LGBTIQ+ rights have emerged as synonymous with modernity and national development (Rahman, 2014).

Globally, Europe and European institutions have come to be particularly associated with formal and discursive recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights – both by actors supporting these rights and by their detractors – and such recognition has thus become an important node for transnational LGBTIQ+ activism (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2019). Furthermore, within Europe, Sweden and other Nordic countries have positioned themselves as exceptionally progressive and as global role models for LGBTIQ+ rights and the promotion of gender equality (Alm et al., 2021). Critical scholars have, however, challenged the image of a progressive Europe, highlighting the coloniality at play in such narratives (Bracke, 2012; Puar, 2007; Rao, 2020).

In recent years, previous human rights advancements have been contested (Encarnación, 2017; Velasco, 2023), including in liberal contexts where gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights have been a defining feature of the social policy arena (Datta, 2018). These attacks, and in many cases the successful rollback of human rights related to gender, sexuality, and reproduction, alongside attempts to curtail and defund institutions tasked with the protection of these rights, are the results of the targeted campaigns of anti-gender actors. Anti-gender actors rally around a rejection of “gender ideology” – a term coined by the Vatican in the 1990s to rebut the introduction of the notion of gender and increased recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in international human rights documents (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Albeit originating in religious conservatism, today, opposition to gender ideology constitutes a “symbolic glue” (Kóvats & Pöim, 2015) for a diverse range of actors. This includes faith-based organisations from across the religious spectrum, right-wing populist political actors, authoritarian governments, charities and foundations, as well as wealthy individuals and families such as Russian oligarchs and European aristocratic families that provide funding to anti-gender campaigns, (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Datta, 2021). These actors team up to fight against an array of issues, including abortion rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, gender studies programmes, and access to sexuality education (Hodžić & Bijelić, 2014; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Anti-gender actors depict gender ideology as a threat to what they perceive as “traditional values” or the “natural” world order – characterised by a privileging of “natural” families consisting of a married biological man and woman who produce children (Feder, 2017) – and have

successfully re-politicised the notion of gender by exploiting the anxiety and frustration caused by neoliberalism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Anti-gender actors are united by their antipathy for a constructed common enemy: a secular, inclusive, and pluralistic society where “LGBTI rights serve as a symbolic stand-in” for all that is detested (Ayuob & Stoeckle, 2024: 65). Butler (LGBTQ Cam, 2023) even argued that anti-gender actors are vilifying and targeting socially and racially marginalised groups in general, seeking to undermine a broader social justice agenda and the foundation for democratic, inclusive societies. Essentially, the anti-gender ecosystem’s ideational terrain appears to be expanding.

The increasingly successful campaigns contesting LGBTIQ+ rights across the world coincide with a change in advocacy strategies and tactics, as well as a restyling of key messages. A new generation of anti-gender actors are framing themselves as pro-human rights – particularly the rights of the “natural” family. This (full or partial) shift from an anti- to a pro- frame has been highlighted in recent scholarship on heteroactivism (Browne & Nash, 2017, 2020). Researchers have further noted how contemporary anti-gender campaigns appeal to both positive and negative emotions. Anti-gender actors skilfully combine presentations of themselves as acting out of love and defense of heterosexual families, with aggressive rhetoric against political opponents (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Campaign tactics also include transnational coalitions that transcend the Global South–Global North divide. These transnational networks can be traced to the American Christian right, but have now proliferated in Europe and the Global South (Bob, 2012; Kaoma, 2013). Contemporary contestations of LGBTIQ+ rights in a particular geo-temporal space thus result not only from local homophobia, but also from transnational norm contestations and the integration of local actors into conservative and illiberal transnational networks (Velasco, 2023; Weiss & Bosia, 2013).

Successful norm diffusion consists of multiple facets, such as building strategic coalitions connecting transnational, regional, and local actors, as well as developing and implementing effective campaign tactics (e.g., target-audience segmentation, channel-mix optimisation, and message framing). As such, it thus holds a much wider scope than what can be analysed in a single article. Nevertheless, in our quest to better understand anti-gender actors’ successful attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights – and more broadly, sexual and reproductive health rights – we seek to contribute by analysing one key transnational norm entrepreneur in the anti-gender ecosystem, and particularly the actor’s norm diffusion through digital media.

A norm entrepreneur is an entity, such as an individual, nongovernmental organisation, state, or transnational organisation, that through targeted interventions attempts to alter social norms (Sunstein, 1996), seeking to move a norm or set of norms from initial introduction to internalisation, where the norm is taken for granted and perceived as natural (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The selected organisation, the International Organization for the Family (IOF), is known for its ability to bring together conservative activists from across the religious spectrum and right-wing politicians through its World Congress of Families (WCF)

events. Considering that anti-gender actors worldwide are inspired by – and in many cases directly connected to – the IOF, or the WCF in particular (Auoyb & Stoeckle, 2024), a study of the organisation's norm entrepreneurial efforts should provide important insights into transnational anti-gender content and tactics. The IOF's position as a central hub for global anti-gender campaigning is explored in greater detail in the case description section.

While interpersonal match-making arenas such as the WCF are central to the proliferation of anti-gender forces, digital tools and spaces are essential for spreading (dis)information and accelerating networking, mobilising, and organising. In our study, we particularly explored IOF digital media tactics on Twitter – in particular, the degree to which the organisation has adopted heteroactivist reframing tactics and digital media tactics known to facilitate user interaction and content spreading. Although cognizant of the broad scope of transnational anti-gender actors' norm diffusion, we focus on the IOF's framing of LGBTIQ+ rights on its iFamNews Twitter account.

Although this article focuses on a key transnational norm entrepreneur's norm diffusion, and thus primarily sheds light on diffusion tactics and content features of a node space targeting a wide and undefined global audience, we wish to emphasise that transnational norm diffusion always lands in a place where local anti-gender actors reconstruct it and provide local flavours (Boulila & Browne, 2023). We thus call attention to the growing presence of anti-gender rhetoric in Sweden, a country that has been lauded as an international pioneer for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights (Martinsson et al., 2016).

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The upcoming section details the study context, unpacking the fast proliferation of anti-gender actors and heteroactivism, after which we present our case – the IOF. Our analytical framework draws on theories of network media logic and the logics of connective action and emotional activation, which are briefly introduced prior to the section on the research method and material. Subsequently, results from the two analysis periods are presented and discussed, and reflecting on these results, we explore the influence of transnational actors such as the IOF in Sweden. The article ends with a discussion of the results and a warning against complacency vis-à-vis anti-gender actors' norm diffusion in Sweden and elsewhere.

Understanding the backlash

Although a nascent anti-gender movement emerged already in the 1990s, with the Vatican and other conservative religious actors voicing strong opposition to the inclusion of the term gender at UN conferences in 1994 and 1995, the movement has grown to include a wider range of actors, most notably right-wing populists who similarly share a disdain for liberal ideals. In Europe, anti-gender campaigns gained momentum in the 2010s and have since strengthened (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Graff & Korolzcuk, 2022). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, three factors have combined to create a perfect storm: the financial crises; established political parties' failure to shield citizens from neoliberal onslaught;

and the emergence of information and communication technologies. Assisted by modern communication technology, actors of different religious and political affiliations have successfully been able to form transnational networks dedicated to attacking gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights in international, domestic, and digital spaces, as well as securing vast funding for anti-gender campaigning around the world (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020).

Beyond factors such as conducive sociopolitical conditions in the early 2000s, digitalisation, and resource mobilisation, anti-gender actors' successful contestations must also be understood through their tactical diversification: Their attacks are strategic and opportunistic, launched in contexts where the political opportunity structures are aligned or resistance is perceived to be weak. In the international arena, some transnational actors such as C-Fam and the UN Family Rights Caucus are dedicated to (ab)using the UN mechanisms designed to advance human rights globally for attacking sexual and reproductive health and rights on the grounds that they threaten the "natural family's rights" (Velasco, 2023).

In national arenas, their tactics include – but are not limited to – targeting existing laws through strategic litigation, educating and training activists and policymakers, and creating conservative digital and non-digital media channels and flash campaigns in hotspots (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Successful campaigning also depends on claims of representing "local values" and supporting national sovereignty, presumably threatened by a morally corrupt Western elite that attempts to "colonise" the local space. Tactical diversification also includes attempts by anti-gender actors to expand their epistemic power by both attacking gender studies and feminist-inspired scholarship and producing a new body of knowledge around gender and sex – through establishing conservative think tanks that act as centres of alternative knowledge production, which can provide legitimacy to anti-gender claims (Korolczuk, 2020).

Anti-gender 2.0 – Heteroactivism

The notion of heteroactivism introduced in this article captures how actors resisting gender and sexual and reproductive rights have sought to distance themselves from violent homophobic rhetoric, instead reasserting the superiority of heteronormativity and the "traditional family" as the foundation for a healthy society. While researchers engaging with the concept of anti-gender have similarly noted how discursive repertoires that embrace notions of love and care – for the heteronormative (white) family – are exploited alongside attacks on gender and sexual rights activism (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020), Nash and Browne (2020: 9) have argued that heteroactivism is both a new ideology and a new form of activism, qualitatively different from the previous generation of anti-gender actors. Heteroactivism has developed into a multifaceted concept, and research on the topic seeks to illuminate the ways in which resistance to gender and sexual justice is interlinked with nationalism and politics of race, expanding the lens beyond an overt focus on the "far right" to include more mainstream actors (Boulila & Browne, 2023).

Heteroactivists' campaigning practices are heterogeneously opportunistic: By adopting a rhetorical toolbox from traditional human rights activism when advocating for human rights for families, as well as imitating some visual manifestations of LGBTIQ+ advocacy such as colourful, festive Pride-like events, the lines between them and traditional human rights actors have become blurred. Heteroactivists also use strategic self-victimisation, accusing liberal elites of attempting to silence pro-family activism. Any objection to heteroactivist narratives is constructed as a suppression and violation of their right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Heteroactivists thus attempt to trigger feelings of affect – such as fear, resentment, disgust, and hatred – using what has been described as “affective fictions”, including delusional beliefs that “natural families” are at risk of being eliminated (Hemmings, 2021). Strategic self-victimisation allows heteroactivists to present themselves as defenders of oppressed people, most notably families and parents.

However, studies of heteroactivism have not engaged with the role of media and digital media for spreading its gospel. By neglecting the role of (digital) media, an important factor behind heteroactivism's successful expansion has been left unattended.

The case: International Organization for the Family (IOF)

Within the contemporary ecosystem of anti-gender actors, the IOF, the organisation behind the World Congress of Families (WCF), stands out. Its mission statement – “(IOF) Unites and Equips Leaders Worldwide to Promote the Natural Family” (IOF, n.d.) – describes its *raison d'être* (to create a patriarchal, heterosexist world order) and its methods. The IOF's work is organised under four projects: WCF, *The Natural Family: An International Journal of Research and Policy*, the Emerging Leaders Program, and the Article 16 Initiative. The IOF thus constitutes a mothership for multiple anti-gender campaigns, engaging in organising public international meetings and smaller regional events through its WCF project, as well as closed meetings with like-minded government officials. Its efforts to infiltrate various policymaking bodies is an explicit strategy to gain influence. By training and connecting activists and leaders, as well as facilitating the establishment of new grassroots organisations, the IOF serves as an engine for the expansion of anti-gender forces (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024).

Several central anti-gender actors have been analysed by other scholars: the Vatican and conservative Catholic organisations (Buss, 1998; Garbagnoli, 2016), the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state (Edenborg, 2023; Stoeckl, 2023), and the American Christian right (Buss & Herman, 2003; Kaoma, 2013). Since the WCF meetings constitute a key networking event for anti-gender actors across the US, Europe, and other parts of the world, it has attracted significant academic attention (Buss & Herman, 2003; Evolvi, 2023; Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020). Yet, the IOF itself has, until now, only received limited academic attention. Considering that anti-gender actors around the globe are in many cases

directly connected to the IOF and WCF events (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024), our investigation of the organisation's norm entrepreneurial efforts is likely to elicit important insights for understanding the global backlash. The choice of IOF as a case is further motivated by its history of attacking both liberal legacy and digital media, as well as its more recent attempt to compete as a news provider for the global pro-family community through launching its iFamNews network. Through the launch of iFamNews, IOF is attempting to disguise their anti-gender norm diffusion as news and thereby piggyback on the concept of news, which at least historically has been understood as text that is rigorously fact-checked, well-sourced, and balanced. In essence, the IOF engages in media activism in three forms: activism *through* the media, activism *in* the media, and activism *about* the media (Mattoni, 2013).

Analytical framework

To analyse the IOF's iFamNews norm diffusion on Twitter, we employ the theorisation of heteroactivism, as well as selected social media theories.

While contemporary forms of heteroactivism offer numerous analytical entry points for studying norm diffusion in digital media, in this study, we primarily investigate two aspects. First, we explore the reorientation and reframing of the anti-gender soundbite, simplistically captured in the shift from anti- to pro-. To clarify, heteroactivism entails that the *anti* (-gender, -LGBTIQ+ rights, etc.) narrative has been replaced by, or at least expressed alongside, a *pro* narrative in support of the “natural”, heteronormative family (Nash & Browne, 2020). Second, we investigate the heteroactivist tactic of vilifying adversaries by positioning them as undermining the rights of the family, in order to mobilise supporters (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020).

Studying the 2019 WCF forum held in Verona, Kalm and Meeuwisse (2020) found that positive and negative emotions were used to both create and strengthen the feeling of a shared identity. The WCF speakers devoted much time to naming their adversaries or objects of hate – including generalised groups such as “feminists” or “liberals” and specific individuals such as the philanthropist George Soros. Kalm and Meeuwisse (2020: 317) concluded that the appeal to both positive and negative feelings feeds into a binary worldview, whereby actors and ideas are constructed as either good or evil, which in turn underpins the “moral justification of one's own movement and demonisation of the opponents' in order to strengthen the followers' indignation, courage and readiness to fight back”.

Within the scholarship of media activism, it is well established that digital media facilitates the spread of information and influences various audiences' readiness and willingness to take political action (Gerbaudo, 2012). With shrinking audiences and decreasing trust in legacy media, digital media has increasingly become the primary space in which battles over symbols, narratives, and discourses are fought.

Per the theory of network media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), logic is understood as encompassing the rules of the game, meaning the specific norms, rules, and processes that drive how content is produced, distributed, and used

on specific digital media platforms. The theory outlines how media logics differ in digital (social) media compared with traditional mass media: Digital media platforms are oriented more towards communities of peers and like-minded individuals, as opposed to geographically defined audiences. Thus, information on digital media tends to be targeted at and reach self-selected like-minded others, and less the general public. The distribution and popularity of content are influenced by the logic of virality, which is understood as a network-enhanced word-of-mouth strategy (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Only content that has a connective quality, and thus encourages users to pass it on to other like-minded actors, is likely to travel beyond a limited circle of already connected individuals. Self-motivated sharing can be explained by a piece's emotional valence and its ability to trigger emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2010). Content that triggers positive emotions such as amazement and awe, or even negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and anxiety, is more likely to get shared by users and perhaps even go viral. The role of (shared) emotions is also important in that they provide motivation for activists' engagement (Jasper, 1998). While the literature on social movements has tended to focus overtly on negative emotions, such as anger and moral outrage, as motivating collective action (Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2020), lately, researchers have highlighted the strong mobilising potentials of positive emotions, such as love and hope (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). The concept of connective emotions captures how virtuous (or vicious) cycles fuel sharing, where emotions become further amplified through being shared (George & Leidner, 2019). In short, one can reasonably suspect that the IOF's pro-family messages, coupled with an existential-threat narrative, cause emotional activation amongst like-minded people and are subsequently well circulated across the organisation's social media networks.

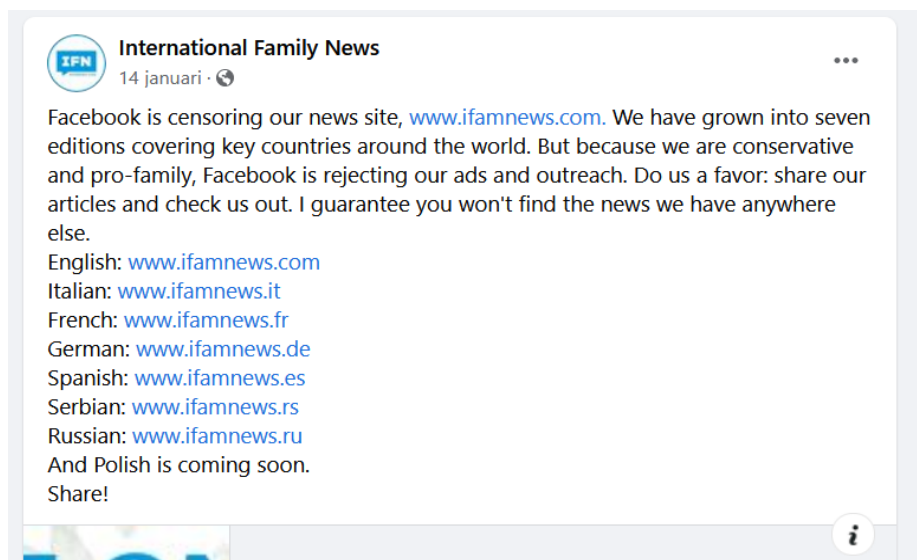
Furthermore, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have conceptualised a logic of connective action, emphasising the importance of shared social identification and "personalised action frames" for (viral) spread, mobilisation, and appropriation of a campaign across groups and borders. Easy-to-personalise action frames, exemplified in broad discourses, such as "We are the 99%", and popular memes travel fast over personal networks and connect users. Frames that are easy to adopt and adapt to local circumstances are better equipped to travel widely across digital networks and among users who may initially have little in common. In short, the logic of connective action suggests that the IOF's anti-gender agenda is more likely to proliferate if tweets include personalised action frames and hashtags for easy identification. Finally, contemporary norm diffusion is also greatly facilitated by the structural properties of digital media spaces and, in particular, algorithms. Algorithms are employed in the attempt to provide both what a user is actively looking for and material from like-minded actors, and they thus contribute to popular anti-gender materials proliferating and reaching global anti-gender audiences.

These theories all provide useful analytical entry points for examining the degree to which the IOF appears to harness factors associated with content spreadability, which in turn influences how far and well the IOF's agenda travels through the anti-gender ecosystem and beyond.

Method and material

The IOF's propaganda machine ranges from traditional lobbying and networking in closed and semi-closed spaces to activities in large public global events such as the WCF. The IOF also runs a number of digital media channels: IOF Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (now X), VK for its Russian market, as well as an iFamNews website, with iFamNews Twitter. The different digital media accounts do not appear to play equally important roles in norm diffusion, as their activity levels vary greatly. For example, the Facebook page was semi-dormant in 2021 and 2022, due to failure to comply with Facebook's publishing guidelines (see Figure 1). The IOF also has a main, but seldom updated, English website that appears to function primarily as an access point to its various channels. IOF further has an organisational Twitter account (ProFamOrg, n.d.) that primarily features reposts of the IOF president Brian Brown's tweets, and the account appears to have been dormant in 2022 between 18 August and 13 October. Due to the many channels, a thorough analysis of the IOF's entire norm diffusion infrastructure is beyond the scope of a single article.

FIGURE 1 News statement from iFamNews shared on profam.org and Twitter



Having no access to IOF's traffic data on various platforms, and hence not knowing which digital space generated the most traffic, we decided to analyse the channel where the IOF was most active – its English iFamNews Twitter account (iFamNewsEN, n.d.). This channel is used for pushing the IOF's anti-gender news to a global audience. News, however, is also provided in a number of other languages (French, Italian, German, Polish, Russian, Serbian, and Spanish). As providing news in multiple languages is a significant investment and must be resource-demanding, it is not unreasonable to argue that iFamNews is valuable to IOF.

Two samples: Business as usual versus heightened activism

The study design entails examining the IOF's activities during two purposefully selected phases; the first covers a period of business as usual, and the second captures a period of heightened activism. By choosing two distinctly different periods, it is possible to compare and contrast the organisation's digital practices and strategies.

The first period, 1 June–31 August 2021, witnessed several small but newsworthy events directly related to the IOF's anti-gender agenda. These included the EU Parliament declaration of the EU as an "LGBTIQ Freedom Zone" in response to Poland's "LGBTIQ-free zones" and the EU's pushback against Hungary's anti-LGBTIQ+ law banning any portrayal of homosexuality and sex reassignment in education material and television programmes. The first period also included the Pride month. The second period featured an event for which the IOF was expected to engage in intense activism – the fourteenth WCF organised in Mexico City 30 September–2 October 2022 – as it is both IOF's flagship event and no WCF had been held in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The dataset for this period thus stretches from 27 September–20 October 2022 to include all tweets related to the WCF.

In order to isolate the IOF's norm diffusion efforts and ensure a manageable amount of data, only original iFamNews tweets were included; thus, the occasional retweets of like-minded individuals and organisations were not included. The empirical material analysed comprises 94 tweets from 2021 and 40 tweets from 2022. These tweets typically contained an image and a brief introduction of the corresponding iFamNews article, followed by a link to the full-length article. All tweets were saved as screenshots to capture any hashtags and interaction data at the time of capture. We acknowledge that the interaction data are skewed in favour of older entries, which have had a longer time to accumulate likes, shares, and comments, but most interactions are, however, typically concentrated around the publication date.

Guided by the analytical framework, we developed and tested a codebook. Each tweet was coded on the following aspects:

1. Assessment of the tweet's overall valence. Items containing expressions of frustration, disapproval, anger, disappointment, lack of trust, or confidence were coded as negative, and items expressing joy, celebration, and hope were coded as positive. Items that contained both positive and negative elements and had a neutral-sounding heading were coded as balanced. Assessment of tonality (positive/negative) was guided by Russmann's (2018) framework.
2. Guided by the role of connective emotions, the content was coded on antagonism and the presence of an identified concrete adversarial entity, as well as the type of adversaries, divided into three categories: named individuals (a politician or religious leader, etc.); groups/organisations/laws/social policies (EU, trans people, law reforms, etc.); and ideologies and social phenomena (feminism, liberalism, etc.).
3. With the study's explicit focus on the backlash against LGBTIQ+ rights, tweets were coded based on 1) the presence of references to LGBTIQ+ content, and 2)

differentiation in terms of tonality of the portrayal of the various sub-groups in the community. A heteroactivist-inspired approach would generate a completely or partially sanitised or polished framing of the IOF's anti-LGBTIQ+ agenda.

4. Based on suggestions that easy-to-personalise action frames and hashtags greatly facilitate content spread, tweets were mined for the presence or absence of frames and hashtags.
5. Finally, each tweet's interaction data (i.e., the number of shares, likes, and comments) were recorded.

Our main focus is to better understand the iFamNews tweets' features, as they have the potential to travel widely with the help of users, unlike static news articles on the iFamNews website. However, we extend the analysis to include the full-length articles linked to in order to explore two conspicuous patterns identified in the body of the tweets. First, the strong presence of an adversarial aspect in the tweets triggered our curiosity concerning what and who were identified as opponents. Second, the conspicuous absence of references to the LGBTIQ+ community in the tweets caught our attention, in particular since LGBTIQ+ issues have been interpreted as "a symbolic stand-in" (Ayuob & Stoeckle, 2024: 65) for all that anti-gender actors detest. The full-length articles were thus analysed, but solely for the purpose of capturing 1) what and/or who are identified as adversaries, and 2) whether the absence of references to the LGBTIQ+ community in the tweets was also reflected in the full-length news items, as well as whether the tonality in the framing of the community's different sub-groups varied. The 2021 and 2022 material were handled the same way: We first coded the tweets separately, followed by the focused content analysis of the full-length articles.

The minimalistic design of tweets inevitably results in the use of abbreviations, which carries with it the assumption of audiences' pre-existing knowledge. Similarly, the interpretation of tweets relied heavily on the authors' *a priori* understanding of the field's key actors and current areas of contestation, as well as hotspots across multiple contexts.

Results

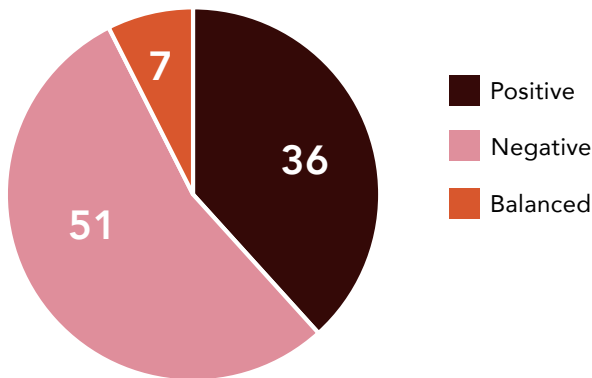
This section presents the results from 2021 and 2022 separately. Although the section contains some summative statements, the key takeaways from the results are primarily presented in the discussion section.

The summer of 2021 – The everyday business of delivering anti-gender news

In this period, the IOF's tweets were predominantly negative in their overall tonality (see Figure 2). The body of the tweets was dominated by a negative emotional lexicon, containing, in varying degrees, expressions of strong frustration, anger, and disappointment. One of the first tweets of the time period – from 2 June – serves as an example of the style. The tweet caption, "Abort the child

with Down’s syndrome, says the animal Richard Dawkins”, is accompanied by a picture of the famous Oxford professor. The reference to abortions and the negative labeling of the evolutionary biologist were likely meant to trigger negative emotions.

FIGURE 2 Distribution of the tonality of IOF tweets, 2021



Comments: n = 94.

The most notable exception amongst the predominantly negative-toned content is a recurring tweet that summarises “good news” from around the world. Throughout the studied months, the same generic tweet reappears multiple times (see Figure 3). These tweets, nine in total, all link to an iFamNews article that contains a long list of anti-gender forces’ achievements in the areas of law reforms, local and national public policy, and public opinion around the world. Had these norm-conservative wins been celebrated individually and advertised in separate tweets, the overall tonality of the period would have been markedly different. Thus, the overall negative tonality over the period was perhaps not due to a shortage of “good news”, but rather the result of an editorial choice. In keeping the overall tone negative, audiences are more likely to feel that the anti-gender agenda is under attack.

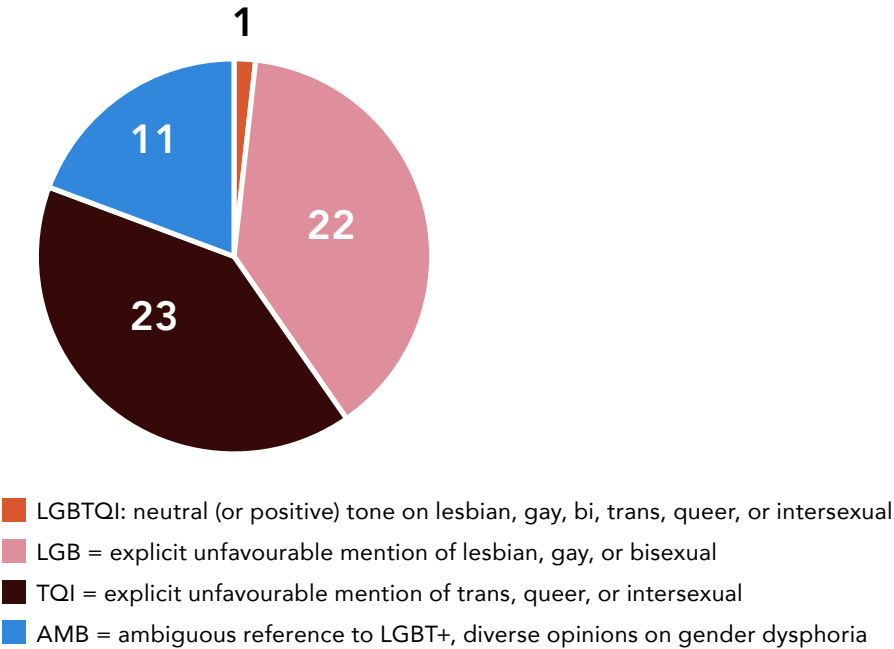
FIGURE 3 Screenshot of a repeat tweet welcoming anti-gender news



In terms of interaction, IOF tweets do not appear to trigger any significant audience interaction; they are not liked, shared, or commented on to any significant degree. Most tweets generated between six and eight likes. The tweet that generated the most interaction (17 likes) was posted on 11 August 2021; it praises a moral win in Ireland – “Let’s celebrate Ireland, where euthanasia has been stopped”. However, this tweet was not widely shared (six shares). The top-shared tweet, from 24 June 2021, states that the IOF president Brian Brown had spoken at the launch of a new Georgian pro-family movement (seven shares). Only nine of the tweets were commented on, and no tweets contained an easily personalised frame. All tweets were accompanied by “#profamily #prolife #naturalfamily” to increase their accessibility amongst like-minded actors and algorithmic diffusion.

As alluded to in the previous section, LGBTIQ+ issues were surprisingly absent from the body of the analysed tweets, which led us to explore the full-length articles. Over the three months studied, only ten tweets (approx. 10% of the total tweets) containing explicit references to the LGBTIQ+ community or Pride were posted. Six out of these targeted trans persons and trans-related healthcare using negative emotive language. Our subsequent exploration of the full-length news items linked to revealed, however, that the other groups under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella had not disappeared from the IOF horizon entirely (see Figure 4). Rather, all sub-groups received similar attention, and the framing was predominantly negative. Yet, some of the more blatantly negative and discriminatory frames were found in relation to the trans community and transgendered individuals. Furthermore, as the Summer Olympics took place in Tokyo during the same period, the sample contained several negative tweets about trans women athletes and the perceived threat to women’s sports.

FIGURE 4 Tonality of news items mentioning the LGBTIQ+ community, 2021



The studied tweets’ strong focus on adversaries prompted a more in-depth analysis of this aspect of the iFamNews material. Both the single tweets and full-length articles were highly conflict-laden, making direct or vague references to opponents; few tweets, and none of the full-length articles linked to, failed to identify at least one and sometimes multiple adversaries. Although many tweets identified a particular adversary, our analysis of the full-length news items elicited a more detailed overview of the IOF’s hit list. Key adversaries were the so-called Left in general, progressives, and the “WOKE Left” in particular. However, both the tweets and the full-length articles often proceeded to name specific individuals perceived as threats. Together, the tweets and full-length articles reference no less than 15 specific individuals (with Joe Biden, George Soros, and Ursula von der Leyen being the most frequently mentioned individuals) and 92 different entities,¹ as well as a number of ideologies and social phenomena.²

Altogether, the overall emotional tone was predominantly negative in the first period, and the body of tweets had a clear adversarial focus. Our analysis of the full-length articles further exposed a clear preoccupation with adversaries across sociopolitical and geographical spaces. Indeed, the diversity and sheer number of identified opponents successfully conveyed a message of anti-gender actors being surrounded by hostile forces in a wide range of sectors, including religion, politics, public administration, academia, and civil society. The negative tonality of the tweets, including the discriminatory framing of the LGBTIQ+ community and trans persons in particular, perhaps indicates that the IOF’s iFamNews has not been inspired by heteroactivism to any significant degree.

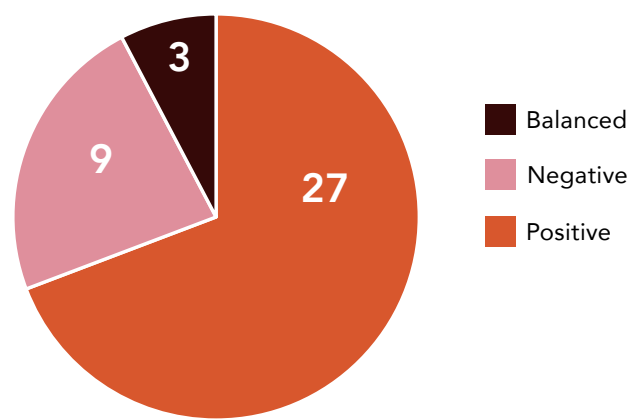
However, other features in the material could be interpreted as reflective of a heteroactivist re-styling. Firstly, the LGBTIQ+ community was largely invisible in the body of tweets, despite the intense visibility around LGBTIQ+ rights during the Pride month, as well as EU institutions’ firm rejection of Polish and Hungarian political homophobia. Secondly, the preoccupation with actors perceived as threatening the anti-gender agenda and the apparent strategy of conveying opponents’ proliferation across sectors and contexts convincingly establish a sense of threat to the “natural” world order.

Although all tweets are accompanied by three hashtags to contribute to accessibility and diffusion amongst like-minded people in the anti-gender ecosystem – and many tweets identify hostile adversaries, likely to cause emotional activation – the iFamNews style and articulation of the anti-gender agenda, including its challenges, did not trigger any significant interaction. Generally, users did not share, like, or comment on the tweets. Whether the low interaction was a result of the content’s overall negative tonality, lack of easily personalised action frames, or some other feature is difficult to determine.

The World Congress of Families, 2022 – A time of heightened activism

The second period, 27 September–20 October 2022, was strategically chosen to cover the IOF flagship event, the WCF, which was held in Mexico from 30 September–2 October, and the first after a two-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike the previous period, most of the tweets were coded as having a positive tonality (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5 Tonality of tweets posted, 2022



Comments: n = 40

In this period as well, all tweets were accompanied by the same hashtags as in 2021 – #profamily #prolife #naturalfamily – but surprisingly, not a single hashtag referred to the WCF. Tweets again did not contain easily personalised slogans. All full-length news items linked to also contained the following request:

The WCF 2022 material encourages followers to spread the message. Every time you shared this content you helped us reach one of the more than 10 million people who were in person or online at the event. Now is the time to continue sharing the voice, content and other resources for strengthening families which will be available at familiamx.org. (posted on iFamNews, 4 October 2022)

Despite our selection of a period during which the IOF and its followers were expected to be in a state of heightened activism, and despite the content being predominantly positive, tweets were even less liked, shared, or commented on compared to those published in 2021. Many tweets had no interaction, that is, no likes, shares, or comments. The tweet with the most interaction (posted on 13 October) was shared four times; it covers a cardinal's visit to the Houck family, which had nothing to do with the period's main IOF event – WCF 2022.

The LGBTIQ+ community was even less featured than in the previous period, with only two tweets referring to the community. One claims that German kids would learn to be gay from kindergarten onwards (12 October 2022), and the other equates acceptance of “transgenderism” with nihilism (17 October 2022). Furthermore, our analysis of the full-length articles generated no additional items. In short, the LGBTIQ+ community had almost vanished from the discourse.

Additionally, compared with the previous period, preoccupation with adversaries was significantly less conspicuous in 2022. A handful of tweets identified the same main culprits: President Biden, the Democrats, the Left, and various types of legislation. The content analysis of full-length news items did not elicit a lengthy hit list as in the 2021 material.

With tweets significantly more positive and less adversarial in 2022, the second period was markedly different. Only two items were openly discriminatory to LGBTIQ+, and full-length articles contained no additional hostilities towards the community. Furthermore, although the tweets and full-length articles were not analysed comprehensively in terms of their framing of other social constructs, such as the family, there was an unmistakable love and care discourse throughout the 2022 period. In particular, WCF 2022 videos, documenting keynote speakers, supporters' engagement through “marches for life”, endorsement, and so on, were characterised by displays of joy, conviction, and celebration. The tweets and full-length news items, including the linked videos, were tantamount to a love letter to “the natural family”. Moreover, the second period also contained no violent homophobic rhetoric. Indeed, the overall discourse was different enough for us to suspect that the editorial team was either different or had been given a new editorial heteroactivist-inspired policy to follow during the WCF. The identified discursive shift, combined with what should have constituted a period of heightened activism, did not, however, spark audience interaction. Indeed, interaction levels were even lower than in 2021.

Discussion and key takeaways for rights defenders

Overall, the digital media tactics of IOF iFamNews did not produce the results suggested in some of the reviewed literature. Indeed, the low interaction with tweets in both 2021 and 2022 indicates that regardless of the tonality, presence of adversaries, or homophobic rhetoric, audiences did not like, share, or comment on the tweets. The lack of interaction is particularly interesting considering the strong presence of adversaries in the 2021 material, which should have triggered emotional activation and desire to support the anti-gender agenda. Indeed, the literature on social media logics, connective emotions, and the role of emotion in mobilisation suggests that the IOF's form of heteroactivism-inspired content should be rewarded in different ways, such as interaction and recirculation of content. Yet, our analysis presents a contrasting picture. Returning to our question in this article concerning the role of transnational norm diffusion in attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights, the toned-down homophobic vitriol and lack of audience interaction – particularly the lack of user-driven sharing – constitute good news for rights defenders across the world.

However, based on the fact that the IOF spends considerable organisational resources to maintain a multilingual news service, this study's results should not be interpreted as a sign that the analysed material does not circulate through other modalities, including algorithmic diffusion. Our study simply indicates that the IOF's anti-gender news does not appear to achieve circulation and accumulate readership through the social media giants such as Twitter and Facebook (the IOF was banned from Facebook at the time of this study). It is our hope that this result can inform and motivate scholars to cast a wider net and examine a broader set of social media platforms other than the usual suspects, and thereby contribute another piece to the puzzle – how anti-gender content travels in digital spaces.

Returning to the key finding that heteroactivism-inspired digital media advocacy by an anti-gender giant seems to fail, we would like to reiterate that the result should not be interpreted as a sign that such content does not spread wide and far. Through other scholarly work, we know that transnational actors' norm entrepreneurial advocacy work often inspires local anti-gender actors, who in turn draw on, adapt, reframe, and co-construct such messaging to fit their local context.

Here, we find it particularly interesting to focus on Sweden, a country branded as an exceptionally women-friendly and LGBTIQ+-inclusive welfare state (Martinsson et al., 2016) and which is thus supposedly well equipped to withstand transnational anti-gender campaigns. Similar to what Lund Engebretsen (2022) has observed in the Norwegian context, this self-image has likely contributed to the limited attention (outside of academia and affected rights defenders) to transnational anti-gender norm-entrepreneurial activities in Sweden – resulting in wishful thinking along the lines that anti-gender politics, as observed in countries such as the US and Hungary, are unlikely to take hold here.

Although extrapolating one study's findings to a different context can be challenged, there is a considerable body of research that details transnational anti-gender norm diffusion and the impact of American Christian Right actors around the world (Bob, 2012; McEwen, 2023; Kaoma, 2013). In Europe, anti-gender campaigns have expanded beyond socially conservative contexts to countries historically perceived as unreceptive (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In Sweden, anti-gender rhetoric in public discourse has increased since the 2010s (Gunnarsson Payne & Korolczuk, 2021), and local conservative religious actors, right-wing nationalists, and conservative opinion leaders have been instrumental in introducing the notion of gender ideology and driving an anti-gender agenda in Sweden. Anti-gender messages are also advanced by some politicians, primarily from the ethno-nationalist Sweden Democrats and the Christian Democrats (Westerlund, 2021). Two broad sets of issues have primarily been in focus recently: gender research, gender studies, and norm-critical pedagogy in schools; and the undermining of support for trans persons (Gunnarsson Payne & Korolczuk, 2021; Westerlund, 2021). These topics are pushed both using heteroactivist frames and more old-school antagonistic anti-gender campaigning. For example, FAMILJENförst Foundation constructs their criticism of gender-confirming healthcare as love for (heteronormative) families and children (FAMILJENförst, n.d.), while others deploy highly adversarial anti-gender rhetoric, including threats and harassment against gender studies scholars and feminist and LGBTIQ+ activists.

While Swedish anti-gender actors imagine the threat of “gender ideology” as coming primarily from actors within the country – notably feminists, politicians, and civil servants (Edenborg & Gunnarsson Payne, forthcoming) – the influence of the transnational anti-gender discourse is nevertheless visible through the adaptation of messages and tactics developed within the WCF and similar spaces. Some transnational groups have also intervened directly in Sweden; the American anti-gender legal advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom International, for instance, has provided technical and financial support in Swedish legal cases since as early as 2004. Such cases include one (unsuccessful) case aimed at challenging abortion rights by opening the possibility for conscientious objection for midwives, as well as a (successful) case defending a Pentecostal church pastor, Åke Green, who was accused of hate speech against homosexuals. The Green case has been identified as one of the Alliance Defending Freedom International's first engagements in legal processes abroad to avert an outcome that could be used as a precedent by American courts in the future (Morris, 2006). Furthermore, representatives from the Christian Democrats have participated in conferences arranged by the Alliance Defending Freedom International and the Political Network for Values (Söderin & Linderöth, 2019).

Against this brief contextual backdrop, how can one understand IOF's impact on the debates in Sweden? The far-right party, the Sweden Democrats, is an important driver of anti-gender rhetoric at present, drawing inspiration from the anti-gender ideational terrain and alternating between homonationalist and heteroactivist discourses (Liinason, 2023). Like the IOF, the Swedish Democrats have been paying increasing attention to trans issues, and its representatives have

strongly opposed a project wherein drag queens read stories to children at local libraries, using both heteroactivist discourse (“protecting” children from grown-up notions of gender and sexuality) and highly adversarial rhetoric. Recently, a representative of the Swedish Democrats went as far as suggesting that a famous drag queen involved in the project should leave the country, thereby advocating for a similar solution often proposed for Muslim migrants (Lindahl, 2023). Swedish Democrats’ members of parliament have also sought to discursively align with trans-exclusionary feminist organisations, a global strategy amongst anti-gender actors, arguing that trans rights constitute a threat to women.

Similarly, iFamNews (23 February 2023) recently covered an opinion piece written by several Swedish women’s organisations criticising a proposed legal reform to make the Swedish Family Code more inclusive of non-normative families. The women’s organisations – to the apparent delight of iFamNews – critiqued the proposed substitution of the words “mother” and “father” with the gender-neutral “parent” or “parent giving birth” as undermining a biologically determined motherhood. This example illustrates the global circulation of heteroactivist discourse, enabling norm entrepreneurs such as the IOF to advance their cause by drawing on debates in Sweden.

Against this backdrop, our study offers some important insights for right defenders in Sweden. First, anti-gender actors appear to adopt increasingly confrontational and adversarial tactics against publicly identified targets, alongside heteroactivist pro- frames. In a consensus-oriented cultural setting such as Sweden, the combative tactic may pose a challenge to rights defenders. Second, known anti-gender actors’ public social media channels may appear inconspicuous regarding contentious issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights, as their audience already shares their positions on these topics. Their treacherously toned-down public front may help them appear less threatening to actors outside rights defenders and scholarly circles, which in turn may make mobilising against their messages significantly more difficult. Third, despite the low interaction with the IOF’s digital news content, its and other anti-gender actors’ reframing of their messages along heteroactivist pro- narratives and their adversarial focus are better adapted to the logic of the digital media landscape than previous anti-campaigning – and are thus potentially more dangerous.

Concluding remarks

This study was motivated by a desire to better understand how heteroactivism-inspired digital media content facilitates transnational norm diffusion of an anti-gender agenda and backlash against LGBTIQ+ rights. Our point of departure was that academic neglect of anti-gender actors’ norm entrepreneurial efforts in self-controlled digital media channels leaves this type of activism poorly understood and perhaps undisturbed. This study of the IOF’s iFamNews English Twitter account, which supplies the anti-gender ecosystem with pro-family news, indicates that a toned-down hate rhetoric and conventional media tactics intended to maximise user interaction and spread of content, such as presenting

clear adversaries and fueling strong emotions, rendered little rewards in terms of triggering user interaction, including circulation. Our study contributes to heteroactivism scholarship by broadening the current understanding of the (in) effectiveness of heteroactivism-inspired digital media campaigning in traditional social media spaces.

However, with enough examples establishing that anti-gender actors engage in circulatory exchange globally, and considering that Sweden is both an active recipient and contributor, there is an urgent need to keep probing into these actors' overt and concealed tactics, in both public and clandestine spaces. We hope that our study could be used as groundwork for more exploratory work, in particular targeting more secretive and concealed transnational digital flows. Our call for action is simple: In the same way anti-gender campaigners have analysed and adopted rights defenders' *modus operandi*, the research community must trace and analyse anti-gender actors' tactical diversification in and outside of digital media spaces to better understand their currently winning hand.

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Endnotes

1. Examples of adversarial entities: the Left, liberal politicians, progressive/Left-leaning bishops, clerics and theologians, progressive school curriculum/districts/boards/principles, all EU institutions, Facebook, the “woke” mob, US/left/woke media, the UN & the UN family, pro-LGBT NGOs, Left-leaning companies, heretics, “Catholic” officials in Washington DC, George Soros-funded proj. & org., Democrats, Democrat cities and/or state, the “woke” Guardian, Leftist intelligentsia and intellectuals, the Democratic Party, Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality of the European Union, the Matic Report, trans athletes and their supporters/allies, critics of the Catholic church, New Zealand’s abortion legislation, the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus, Christians not living by the word and diluting Christianity, EU legislation on abortion, the pending Equality Act, LGBT extremists and lobbyists, the trans movement, supporters of gender reassignment surgery, the International Olympic Committee, the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, radical feminists, woke mobs, German courts, homosexual lobbyists, the “lavender mafia”, homosexual rapists inside the Church, enemies of Christ, German public health authorities, the European Court of Human Rights, the American Medical Association, international elites, the Clinton Foundation, the woke gods, the leftist racists/looney legislators, Pride supporters (major corporations, government entities, universities), Hollywood.

2. Examples of adversarial ideologies and social phenomena: new totalitarianism, liberalism, wokeism, Marxism, creeping/silent Communism, LGBT ideology, LGBT propaganda, gender theory, (left-wing) gender ideology, critical race theory, cancel culture, EU sexual rights agenda, transgenderism, EU/ECHR’s ideological colonialism, Big Tech censorship, commercial surrogacy, Westernisation, immorality of Western culture, libertarianism of Soros, radical left-wing agenda, radicalisation of corporate America, government tyranny, ungodliness, indoctrination of children, gender transition, and other plagues.