Shani Orgad

Underline, celebrate, mitigate, erase: humanitarian NGOs' strategies of communicating difference

Book section

Chapter Nine

Underline, Celebrate, Mitigate, Erase: Humanitarian NGOs' Strategies of Communicating Difference

Shani Orgad

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are amongst the central producers of representations of humanitarianism in the contemporary global mediated space. Their messages rely heavily on symbolically representing 'the other'—victims of atrocities, natural disasters and human rights abuses, and children and women in the global South—to elicit care, compassion, and action from audiences primarily in the global North. This paper expands debate on representation of distant suffering and international development by exploring how NGO practitioners' frames of thinking and understanding inform their communications practices and shape particular choices of how to portray difference and otherness. It examines four strategies employed by NGOs in their planning and production of communications of international development, humanitarian aid, and human rights abuses, namely underlining, celebrating, mitigating, and erasing difference. The discussion is based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 17 NGO professionals in 9 UK-based organizations, responsible for the design and production of international development, humanitarian crisis and human rights abuse communications, and analysis of 12 communication items selected by representatives of those NGOs.

Representation of 'the Other' in NGO Humanitarian Communication

Existing research focuses on how NGO communication of humanitarian emergencies and international development shapes spectators' understanding and judgement of distant others. It

explores how representations cultivate/inhibit relationships, distance/proximity, compassion and solidarity between spectators in the global North and 'beneficiaries' in the global South (e.g., Orgad, 2012; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2012; Fassin, 2012). Using visual and textual analysis, studies examine the patterns, formulas, modes, and conventions employed in NGO representations of distant suffering (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2012; Lidchi, 1993; Smith & Yanacopulos, 2004; Wilson, 2011). They show how depictions of distant others are rooted in colonial, racialized 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997, p. 232), while at the same time NGO communications have changed significantly over the years.

One change concerns the shift from 'negative' to 'positive' images of distant others (Benthall, 1993; Cohen, 2001; Dogra, 2006). Negative imagery depicts needy, passive, helpless, and vulnerable victims and often shocking and distressing images. Since the 1970s, this representational paradigm has been criticized as patronizing, orientalising, and dehumanizing. It has been argued that images of starving children with 'flies in their eyes' deprive people of agency and dignity, decontextualize their misery, and perpetuate a distorted view of the developing world as a theatre of tragedy and disaster (Cohen, 2001). Largely in response to this criticism, since the 1980s 'positive imagery' was encouraged: depicting distant others as self-sufficient, dignified, active agents, situated within their communities and social contexts, it is hoped, would contribute to telling a more complex story of social justice and progress, and to evoking solidarity with distant strangers based on justice rather than need and its relief (Orgad, 2013).

Another change consists of increasing adoption in NGO communication of neoliberal logic, market discourses, and corporate techniques and styles (Chouliaraki, 2012; Koffman & Gill, 2013; Richey & Ponte, 2011; Vestergaard, 2008; Wilson, 2011). It is linked to a move

towards 'post-humanitarian' communication: from communications demanding solidarity with vulnerable others based on pity, to articulation of this demand for solidarity as irony, based on a focus on 'us' in the global North rather than the other, and marginalizing questions about justice, global inequality, and the root causes of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2012).

Despite this large body of work whose review is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Orgad & Seu, 2014), most studies do not link analysis of representations to the actual thinking and practices that underpin their production by NGOs.[1] This chapter seeks to make this connection by juxtaposing analysis of NGO representations of otherness and difference, with analysis of accounts of the NGO practitioners who produce them to reveal some of the thinking and 'frameworlds' (Silverstone, 2007, p. 7) that underpin their communication strategies and practice.

The Study

The following discussion combines elements from two larger-scale analyses: (1) thematic analysis of interviews with NGO practitioners; and (2) semiotic analysis of NGO communications.

Interviews

The author conducted open-ended in-depth (1.5–2 hour) interviews in 9 UK-based humanitarian, human rights, and international development NGOs, with 17 NGO professionals engaged in planning, designing, and producing humanitarian and development communications. The sample

---

[1] For exceptions see Benthall's (1993) important, but now somewhat dated study; Cottle and Nolan's (2007) examination of how NGO communication strategies designed to raise awareness, funds and support, have been assimilated in the current, pervasive, and competitive mediated environment; and Dogra's (2012) study which seeks to establish a link between the NGO representations and the institutional dimensions that shape them.

included a mix of NGO size and longevity, positions/roles, levels of seniority, and departments (6 from communications and campaigns, 3 from fundraising, 4 from marketing and branding, 2 from media relations, and 2 from advocacy and policy).

Interviews aimed at exploring practitioners' thinking about goals, practices, and experience of communication planning, design, production, and dissemination. They were open-ended to allow practitioners to describe what they saw as most central, important and/or challenging, and difficult in their practice. Interviews began by giving interviewees a broad description of the study's purpose (to investigate how NGO practitioners and the UK public perceive and experience humanitarian communication) and asking them to describe their role in the organization; subsequently, the interviewer's interventions were minimal.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified broad topics and the issues practitioners prioritized in their accounts. These themes were not prompted by specific questions; they were discussed in idiosyncratic order and manner by individual participants. Further thematic analysis was guided by interest in how practitioners account for their practices of representing 'the other', specifically the views, ideas, and claims that inform and are used to justify their choices of how to depict their 'beneficiaries'. Substantively, the analysis aimed to expand and complement previous research on humanitarian communication that relies heavily on analysis of mediated images and texts.

NGO Communications

The sample consisted of 12 communication items, including appeals, leaflets, and newsletters. Representatives from the participating NGOs were asked to select the communications items they considered to best represent their ethos and current work. This NGO-led selection of items

was used to create a sample that showcased the explicit intentions and goals of NGOs in communicating their cause. Using semiotic analysis of visual communication (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), and drawing on Hall's (1997) discussion of the signification of difference, the selected 12 items were examined for the ways they signify 'others' and the meaning potentials they generate.

For the present discussion, I combine selected elements from these separate analyses, aimed at demonstrating how NGO producers think about and explain representations of otherness and difference they produce, how this thinking informs their practices and, vice versa, how particular ways and modes of signifying otherness and difference in NGO communications are explained and justified—explicitly and/or implicitly—by their producers. I was looking deliberately for connections and similarities in the analyses of the two sets of data, for example, how remarks made by one or more interviewees about their practice of depicting of 'the other' was illustrated in the ways difference and/or otherness were communicated in the selected materials. Details that could identify speakers and/or NGOs were removed and the analysis does not explicitly link communications items and speakers from the same organization. Although this constrains specific comments about the differences between types of NGOs and professional roles, it enables reflection on NGO communication practices and patterns of thinking beyond individual organizations, affiliations, and specific remits.

Ultimately, I seek to offer a contextualized understanding of four strategies employed by NGOs in their production of humanitarian communications. Each strategy involves the mobilization of specific signifiers of social and cultural difference, underpinned by particular ethical and instrumental motivations. The distinction among strategies is analytical; they can overlap and can be used simultaneously within single messages or campaigns. I first explore the

strategy of 'underlining difference' at some length since (as I will show) it constitutes a point of reference for the formation and articulation of the other three strategies. The conclusion offers some overall observations about the relations among and implications of these four strategies.

Analysis: NGO Strategies of Communicating Difference

Underlining Difference

Underlining difference centres on marking otherness[2] and exploits cultural and social difference signifiers mostly from the colonial representational regime. A notable signifier of difference is dirt—used (in 5 of 12 items) in representations of children and women in the developing world in conjunction with familiar racial signifiers of cultural difference, connoting disorder and being out-of-place (Douglas, 1966). A UNICEF appeal to help children get off the street is illustrative of this strategy. Though the text refers to 190 countries where UNICEF works to help street children, its front cover shows a dark-skinned, Asian-looking child, possibly a boy (only the text inside the leaflet confirms it is a girl). The child is in the foreground of the picture, leaning on a bar, and framed by another two bars of what looks like a gate. She looks sad, bedraggled, and her face is pockmarked. The upper part of her body is naked, and her lower half is clad only in pants, which appear dirty. The child is standing in *contrapposto*, with one hand behind her back and the other to the fore in the centre of the picture—a posture reminiscent of iconographic connotations of suffering in Christian art. Her stomach is bloated, mud-spattered, and with a protruding naval. Her hair is matted and unkempt. She looks down, away from the camera, and her blank expression casts her as in a separate 'zone'—removed from the viewer.

The image recalls and reproduces racialized representations of the 'unwashed poor' such as in nineteenth-century imperial soap advertisements. Soaps

---

[2] For a useful distinction between otherness and difference, see Pickering (2001).

apparently had the power to wash black skin white as well as being capable of washing off the soot, grime and dirt of the industrial slums and their inhabitants—the unwashed poor—at home, while at the same time keeping the imperial body clean and pure in the racially polluted contact zones 'out there' in the Empire. (Hall, 1997, p. 241)

The UNICEF appeal for a £2-a-month donation carries a strikingly similar message, promising the spectator in the global North to 'put it right' and rescue the child from her backward society, while keeping the spectator 'pure' and safe in the 'zone of contact' (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 141)—the mediated encounter with the suffering.

However, Hall (1997, p. 268) observes that 'what is declared to be different, hideous, "primitive", deformed . . . is at the same time being obsessively enjoyed and lingered over because it is strange, "different", exotic', thus licensing 'an unregulated voyeurism'. This fetishist voyeurism is enacted by presenting the viewer with a second image of the same child inside the leaflet. It is a close-up 'demand' picture (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) of the child, photographed from below, looking from inside the picture frame at the viewer (similar demand images are used in six other items in the sample). The close-up accentuates the child's 'primitiveness', while her unwashed, unkempt hair, dark-coloured dirty face render her exotic, strange, curious, and to be gazed at.

Similar representational practices of 'othering' are evident in other NGOs' representations (in the sample, and more broadly, see, e.g., Dogra, 2012; Wilson, 2011). But practitioners appeared reluctant to acknowledge this. Most interviewees regarded such 'negative images' of passive helpless victims as exploitative, dehumanizing, and inadequate. Almost all interviewees were denying of their and their organization's employment of such representations,[3]

---

[3] This discourse functions to perform a reflexive response to post-colonial criticisms of this regime of representation that dominated NGO communications in the 1980s (see Orgad, 2013).

while some accused other organizations of doing so. A communications and campaigns manager commented:

> You see some organizations . . . putting out quite deliberately shocking images of dying children . . . It does raise, I think, an important question about, how for the public, those traditional aid modalities are perpetuated, the deserving poor, the sense of 'other' with no agency of change or ability to change. And the sense of an endless pipeline of aid, being pumped full of money at a time when many communities in the west are increasingly marginalised if not suffering. (interview 1).

Furthermore, most practitioners failed to recognize that this approach is not exclusive to 'negative imagery'. Half of the sample included 'positive images' which employ signifying practices that perpetuate otherness. For instance, an ActionAid 'cold mailing' brochure depicts three women, identified in the caption as a 9-year-old Guatemalan girl, her grandmother, and her mother. The figures are framed by wooden poles at their sides and stand behind three wooden bars. The child is in the centre of the picture and is standing on a bar with the other two standing on either side on the ground, making the child appear taller by some 5 or so inches. The women look at the girl with pride; the girl is smiling, and looking confidently towards a horizon beyond the frame. The message is clear: the girl is taller, that is, more advanced and better off than her mother and grandmother; she can look towards a future, out of the bars that symbolically imprison her mother and grandmother, while they can look only at her. The text below the picture quoting the mother reinforces this message: 'I send my daughter to school so she can do much better for herself, so she can have a brighter future than me'.

Although a 'positive' colourful image of three smiling characters connoting hope and optimism, it is replete with racial and stereotypical signifiers: all three figures are reduced

visually to a few, simple, essential characteristics: they are dark skinned, with dark eyes, dark

hair tied back, barefoot ('primitiveness'), dressed in the same pleated skirts ('traditionalism'),

against a backdrop of a horse or cow and rich tropical foliage ('exoticism'). The mother is in a

somewhat sexually evocative posture; she wears a revealing chemise and has a hand to one of

her breasts—a depiction that exploits deep-seated practices of sexualizing and fetishizing 'the

other'.

Some NGO practitioners did (albeit implicitly) admit to their own and their

organization's use of practices that accentuate otherness in similar ways. Three explanations

and/or justifications were provided for this representational strategy. First, it constitutes part of

the habitus within the NGO communications professional field; 'it's kind of what we know to

do', a certain way of thinking and set of practices internalized by individuals working in this

industry more through experience than active learning. A campaigns manager observed:

> [It is] very, very depressing. But that's where we are at the moment. And the NGOs
>
> themselves are culpable for that. You know we've had, 50 years of just churning out the
>
> same message about gravity of need, need, need, need, need; and the way to respond to
>
> that is give, give, give, give money. (interview 12).

This observation (elaborated later in this interview) alludes to a second explanation for

the continuing use of such practices by NGOs, namely that they are believed effective for

fundraising. Practitioners referred to an unwritten but widely shared 'formula': the more the

communication, and especially the imagery, convey 'the gravity of need' (as in the quote above)

through practices of othering and victimization, the more it is likely to 'pull at the heartstrings'

and generate a response (money donations). While practices associated with the depiction of 'the

gravity of need' were derided as unethical and their employment by NGOs as a 'shitload of

backsliding' (communications manager, interview 15), they were also considered to 'work', and interviewees referred to pressure from NGO fundraising departments to use them (Orgad, 2013).

A third justification offered by some practitioners for representational practices that emphasize otherness is ethical: presenting the other's extreme vulnerability and underlining radical differences from the spectator, some argued, are crucial for stirring spectators' consciences. A media director defended the ethicality of depicting naked, malnourished children:

> I think within the context of many cultures it will be offensive to show them [children in the global South] naked. But I don't believe that you shouldn't show a very, naked or . . . a very malnourished child. I do believe people need to see those images because it's shocking and that's a reality . . . I think that part of our job as advocating on behalf of children means that we should also show the awfulness of what children have to endure, and I don't think we help them by . . . putting a wall between that reality and the general public . . . if we filter it because we think by doing so that's in the best interests of the child, then we lose some of our actual function, which is the outrage on behalf of children. (interview 7).

Thus, although most NGO practitioners appeared reluctant to acknowledge the legitimacy and use of the strategy of underlining difference in their communications, analysis of their communications and their own accounts reveals its continuing salience.

Celebrating Difference

Celebrating difference is a deliberate reversal of underlining difference. It is rooted in rejection of the wider representational paradigm of (racialized) othering in NGO communications since the 1980s and 'inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term . . . It tries to

construct a positive identification with what has been abjected' (Hall, 1997, p. 272). Specifically, celebrating difference seeks to eradicate the much-derided (by NGOs and critics) historical depictions of 'emaciated babies' with 'flies in the eyes' and replace them with 'positive images' that depict and revere distant others as self-sufficient, dignified, and active. A campaigns director explained his NGO's approach as a response grounded in acute awareness of the colonial baggage of NGO representations and a deliberate effort to acknowledge and celebrate distant others in their own right and on their own terms:

> They [the NGO's beneficiaries] are not victims, and we, the NGOs, tell about victims, and we should be talking about heroes. That's a nice way of putting it. . . . It actually lauds them . . . You've got to be careful of the noble savage sorts of . . . there's the kind of colonial thing about it. (interview 2)

A Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) Pakistan floods appeal (2011) illustrates this strategy. Three men (with several blurred figures in the background) are waist high in rushing flood waters. They are in the prime of life. The picture shows only men—a 'corrective' response to criticisms of infantilizing depictions of women and children as a condition for identification as '100% victims' (Cohen, 2001). The men are shown wading through the water—a depiction that endows them with agency and categorizes them as deserving of pity (Chouliaraki, 2006). The man in the middle is bearded, dressed in white traditional robe, and is carrying a very young child, whose back and bare buttocks are shown: we assume he is the child's father. This conjures up one of the universal symbols of humanity in Western imagination: fatherhood.[4] In this composition, bearded and moustached men wearing traditional Muslim robes, signifiers that in mainstream media are associated with largely negative meanings (terrorism, 'primitivism', etc.), are reversed to construct a positive identification. The man in the middle looks at the camera, his

---

[4] See Chouliaraki (2006, p. 124) for a similar argument about motherhood.

demand for compassion and help reinforced by captions in black, white, and red capitals, above and below the picture—'DEC PAKISTAN FLOODS APPEAL/MILLIONS STRICKEN BY FLOODS/PLEASE HELP NOW DEC.ORG.UK', occupying a third of the frame. The sepia brown photograph and the use of light and shade add dramatic effect that endows the image with out-of-the-ordinariness and urgency.

This image belongs to a genre that NGOs use frequently: 'hero image'. The term, borrowed from the creative industries, refers to a set of features such as eye level—the distant other in the image must 'look us straight in the eye' (interview 15), full-length picture (no cropping of the body), and people in a family or social context rather than alone and isolated (Orgad, 2013). A communications director explained:

> If I hire a photographer who hasn't worked in this sector before, the thing I always say is, you have to remember that people are heroes in their own stories. You are not the hero, I'm not the hero, they are the heroes in these stories . . . we don't paint ourselves, the outsiders, as the heroes of this story. (interview 15)

Heroic depictions of subjects are sometimes reinforced by quotes that 'give voice' to the other describing her devastation and emergence from suffering thanks to personal agency. Out of the 12 items in the sample 7 use such quotes to try—as interviewees explained—to 'personalize' the issue and create identification with the other as a particular human being in need. However, these quotes often reverberate Western neo-liberal values: in their emphasis on the individual and her agency, self-resilience, and empowerment, and their adoption of a 'makeover paradigm'—a narrative of individual transformation through self-discipline—they may fail genuinely to acknowledge and respect difference (Orgad, 2012), a point I return to in the conclusion.

Mitigating Difference

Mitigating difference also seeks deliberately and explicitly to eschew the symbolic marking out of otherness and its association with victimhood, helplessness, backwardness, and disorder that historically characterized NGO communications. Rather than foregrounding distant others' difference, the mitigating strategy tries to soften the other's (perceived) difference by 'balancing' signifiers of social and cultural difference with signifiers of Western culture.

A representational practice frequently used by NGOs to mitigate difference is the inclusion of a 'mediator'. Several practitioners described using images of aid workers and/or celebrities in their communications as 'proxies' that help 'create affinity and closeness' (interview 11), offer 'a bridge' (interview 11), and 'make connections for people [in the UK]' (interview 7). For example, the front image of a Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) insert aimed at recruiting new donors shows a naked black baby lying on a camp bed in what looks like an improvised field hospital. The baby appears vulnerable; she stares wide-eyed at the viewer. These signifiers of difference and otherness suggest the baby's total helplessness and passivity and demand pity; they belong to the colonial regime of representing others discussed earlier. However, the baby is being examined by a black woman wearing jeans and a white shirt bearing the MSF logo, which identifies her as a doctor. A stethoscope seen on the bed next to the baby in the foreground of the picture—an iconic tool of a doctor in Western medicine—represents help from someone like 'us'. The doctor's hand is on the baby's belly and since their skin colours are similar, it is difficult to distinguish the outlines of the doctor's hand and the baby's body—a visual convergence that symbolically represents the humanitarian ethos of a common humanity. The text to the left of the image anchors (Barthes, 1977) the photo's image and 'fixes' (Hall,

1997) its meaning with the notion of 'common humanity': 'Angolan? Mozambican? Colombian? Rwandan? Haitian? Human.' Thus, elements of the 'underlining difference' strategy are 'balanced' by signifiers relating to the figure of the woman doctor that are familiar to spectators in the global North.

Mitigating difference seems to have emerged as NGOs' reflexive response to criticisms of the limitations and pitfalls of the other two strategies. Underlining difference is seen by most practitioners as damaging and largely unethical (although still used to varying degrees). It represents, in Silverstone's (2007, p. 480) terms the 'too far': 'the representation of the other . . . as beyond the pale of humanity . . . an example of the irresponsibility of distance'. Using imagery that highlights otherness in this way is also argued by some to repel audiences and fail in its ambition of connecting audiences in the global North with distant others in the global South. As a communications director put it: 'People . . . they're turned off by stuff that looks depressing or, god forbid, worthy, you know. Worthiness is something we try and avoid' (interview 11).

The second strategy, celebrating difference, is seen by some practitioners as also too far, in the sense that it fails to convey the relevance to and resonance with 'the other' to the spectator's life; 'it's so far out of people's realms of what is their reality that they can't possibly begin to imagine' (interview 3), explained a communications director. It is 'too up in the clouds' (interview 9), 'stepping too far' (interview 15), and, thus, practitioners argued, ineffective at connecting spectators 'here', in the global North, to distant others 'there', who demand their compassion and action.

Mitigating difference emerges as a 'third way' among these two strategies. It seeks to communicate difference in ways that practitioners believe (on the basis of intuition, experience,

and some research they cited) to be relatable to the UK audiences whose lives are so radically

different from those 'others'. In the attempt to move away from representations of difference that

evoke 'worthiness'—a term used by the above cited interviewee (interview 11), echoing

Victorian discourses of deserving and underserving poor—NGOs modify difference in the

'original' image. Their communication effort is geared towards 'making the other less other', as

put by the same communications director (interview 11).

However, this drive to lessen otherness, compounded by other pressures and factors, may

have pushed NGOs to blur or sometimes completely omit the other in their communications.

This strategy I call 'erasing difference', which is discussed next.

Erasing Difference

Erasing or eliminating difference involves degrees of symbolic exclusion of the other and

replacement by a visual and/or textual focus or reframing on 'us', spectators in the global North.

Chouliaraki (2012) argues that this tendency has become increasingly salient in recent NGO

communications:

> The presence of the vulnerable other tends . . . to recede in contemporary humanitarian
>
> genres. Appeals shift towards a focus on 'us' rather than the other, or represent this other
>
> in aesthetic genres associated with new media fiction—computer games or advertising.
>
> (p. 179)

The images included in an Action Aid child-sponsorship booklet demonstrate this

strategy. Page 3 is a full-page close-up image of a girl. The subtext in small font identifies her as

'Sallimatou Diallo, age[d] three, Kegneto Peulh village, Senegal'. She is round-faced, suggesting

she is well nourished, and looks well kempt and neat. She is appealing and her prettiness

conforms to Western heteronormative beauty. Her hair is braided and she wears earrings and a clean sky-blue tee shirt which contrasts with her dark complexion. She looks straight at the viewer and her eyes seem to be smiling although her mouth is closed, suggesting she is posing for the photograph mimicking old-fashioned portrait photos of children in the West. The photo and the girl's pose emphasize mainstream Western notions of childhood in advertising and popular culture rather than cultural specificity and tradition. The background (albeit blurred, since the focus is on the girl's face) shows a line of washing—a recognizable symbol in Western advertising of cleanliness, tidiness, and happy childhood.

The image depends for its meaning on being read intertextually, not in relation only to Western advertising and popular culture but also significantly in relation to other images of the global South. The signifiers of cleanliness and tidiness contrast starkly with dirt, a central historical signifier of otherness (as discussed in relation to the first strategy). Unlike the figure in the UNICEF appeal analysed earlier whose gender is ambiguous, the earring and the braided hair clearly identify Sallimatou as a girl. The Afro coiffure of the 'dancing girl'—the iconographical symbol of black people as 'childlike and happy-go-lucky' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 103)—is 'restrained', 'tamed' and neatly braided.

To the left of the girl, in childish cursive English handwriting are the words 'our world', forming an almost symmetric graphic with a longish tail on each side, alluding to Sallimatou's ability/potential to learn to read and write and become a functional member of *our* world, in the global North. The writing is in English, the language of *our* [Anglo-Saxon] *world*. The visual composition of this image and its relation with the caption construct the clear message to UK viewers: she might be *our* child. She could be a member of *our* world. Unlike the UNICEF image, which constructs a sharp distinction between the viewer 'here' (in the global North) and

the suffering child 'there', this Action Aid image erases this distinction, succumbing the message to the values and terms of 'our world' in the global North. While the distant other is shown visually, the message centres on us, viewers, rather than her. It exhibits Silverstone's (2007, p. 47) powerful critique of 'the elision of the different to the same': denial and/or reduction of difference and its legitimacy in the contemporary media space.

In some current NGO representations, efforts to remove connotations of otherness eliminate the distant other altogether, replacing her with the figure of the viewer (the potential supporter/donor). Action Aid's postcard, part of its 2011 What a Feeling campaign, is illustrative. The front of the postcard is a photograph of a delighted Caucasian woman in her early 40s set against a wallpaper designed like gift-wrapping paper. She is wearing casual, non-gender specific black jeans, and a bottle-green tee shirt. She looks excited, endorsed by a multi-coloured caption on the right side of the picture, bearing the message 'What a feeling'—reminiscent of slogans for cosmetics or foodstuffs, and echoing the emphasis in consumerist-psychological language on emotional satisfaction. The reason for her happiness is not immediately obvious. In the top right corner of the photo we note the cause: Act!on Aid (and the playful inversion of the first 'i' to form an exclamation mark intensifying the focus on 'I' rather than the other). The back of the postcard provides text describing her as: 'Silvia, Supporter of Action Aid and a force of nature', suggesting it is her charitable action, stemming from her (maternal, Victorian) 'goodness', that 'force of nature', that has promoted her blissful state.

The communicative strategy of erasing difference emerged as the result of a series of pressure on NGOs and changes in the cultural politics and workings of humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2012). The interviews with practitioners reveal that, paradoxically, the impulse to erase difference is partly a reflexive ethical response by NGOs to criticisms of the inadequacies

of the representational paradigms that governed their earlier work and their constructions of difference and otherness. In reducing or eliminating 'the other' in their communication, NGOs are attempting to avoid the pitfalls of orientalizing, dehumanizaing practices of othering by turning UK audiences' eyes inwards:

> [We decided to focus] on the role of the supporters; focusing on the people but on this end rather than the people at that end. . . . It came from that thinking: . . . it's not about desperation and the desperate, great poverty; it's about inspiration: inspiring people to act, inspiring people to give. (campaigns director, interview 12)

Erasing difference also came out of NGOs' endeavours to address the problem of UK audiences' lack of interest in and empathy with social and cultural difference, claimed by fundraising practitioners and borne out by some NGO in-house research. A fundraising director explained the rationale of a campaign he helped to design that focuses on UK supporters (rather than beneficiaries):

> The idea is that *it's someone like me*. So I'm sat at home in my house in [a name of a town in the UK] and this TV advert comes on and *I'm not seeing foreignness*, *I'm seeing someone like* me and I'm engaging in that story because I would probably behave in that way.
>
> . . . it's a much better strategy—we hope—to take one of those people [UK supporters] and go: well, look, we're going to drop you into this situation and see how you react and your reactions will be much better at *communicating to people like you* than ours would. (interview 10, emphasis added).

As a consequence, somewhat oddly, NGOs, whose communication task is to communicate social and cultural and difference, are focusing inwards. 'I would like this [my

NGO's communications] to be as much about who *we* are in this country . . . as [about] *their* suffering' said a campaigns director (interview 2, emphases in original), adding that the goal of his work is 'finding *our* own new voice' (emphasis added).

Conclusion

Analysis of humanitarian representations juxtaposed by producers' accounts of the thinking that underpins their communication practices reveals a paradox. On the one hand, NGOs seek to spotlight cultural and social differences to convey need and deprivation and to elicit compassion and action from audiences in the global North. Thus they continue, with some variations, to draw on colonial and racialized 'regimes of representation' of difference (Hall, 1997). On the other hand, they want to obliterate difference, stress similarity and commonality with (global North) spectators, and promote an ethos of 'common humanity'—a desire driven concurrently by ethical and instrumental (to engage their audiences) motivations. This paradox propelled the development of four communication strategies which often are employed simultaneously, in overlapping and contradictory ways, and are intertwined with organizational, cultural and financial tensions, ambivalences, and struggles that characterize NGOs' work (Orgad, 2013). While NGO practitioners often stress the importance of an internal coherence in their organizations' messages (Dogra, 2012), and in the communication within the humanitarian sector more broadly, the analysis suggests a field characterized by tensions, contradictions, and lack of coherence. Indeed, organisations such as Oxfam UK, Bond, WWF, and UK Aid urge, in a series of publications (e.g., 'Common Cause', 'Finding Frames'), a radical collaborative and collective transformation of the frames that NGOs (as well as the media and the UK government) employ in their communications: from a transactional short-term approach underpinned by what

they call 'negative values', to a 'positive value'-based framing oriented towards in-depth engagement with global poverty.

However, whilst the strategies discussed present a range of approaches to the symbolic representation of difference in humanitarian communication, and are cast by practitioners as reflexive responses to critiques, there are some notable absences. First, despite NGO rhetoric about 'giving a voice' to their beneficiaries, their voice is largely missing. As the analysis shows, the 'underlining', 'mitigating', and 'erasing' strategies often emphasize Western notions, values, and understandings, failing to recognize the specific concrete meanings of the other's difference and their irreducibility or attend to how 'the other' wants to express her/himself. New media technologies, and especially social media, promise to challenge the absence of others' voices by enabling marginalized groups to express themselves on these platforms. However, as Cooper (2014, n.p.) argues, the gate is yet to be unlocked: 'While NGOs are clear that beneficiary voices have to be heard, there is still reluctance and nervousness about how best to achieve this'. While the focus of the debate on social media is on voice in its textual/oral sense, the concept of visual voice—the capacity of the other to express herself visually, and for her voice to be acknowledged—holds great promise, particularly with the expansion of mobile telephony allowing individuals to photograph themselves and publish these pictures online. Humanitarian NGOs are important 'feeders' of public imagination of 'the other' in the global media space, and thus, consideration of the significance and signification of voice—both visual and textual/oral—and seeking ways to allow it through their 'gate' seem a crucial task.

Second, in all four strategies of communicating difference there is limited problematization of the current global order.[5] Acutely aware of the colonial baggage and other criticisms of their representation practices on the one hand, and under enormous pressures to

---

[5] See also Wilson (2011).

raise funds on the other, practitioners admitted that the communications they produce seek to create a sense among their UK audiences of 'gaining' something from caring and acting about distant others. Representations of the other's helplessness and vulnerability that *underline difference* are argued to seek giving viewers a sense of their own agency (interviews 4, 7, 9, 10); communications that *celebrate difference* are seen as educational and as helping viewers to realize their identities (interviews 2, 4, 15, 16) and 'have a clearer sense of themselves in the world' as one campaigns manager described it (interview 2); representations that *mitigate difference* are seen also to give viewers a sense of agency and to foster their self-identity through an emphasis on the similarity between 'us' and 'them' and their avoidance of making spectators feel too upset or guilty (interviews 1, 3, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16); and messages that *erase difference* are considered to give viewers a sense of pleasure and good feeling, congratulation for their generosity (interviews 4, 5, 10, 12). The contemporary marketing-driven, competitive, mediated environment, and the immense pressure on and scrutiny of NGOs internally and by the UK government and media, the public and global actors (Orgad, 2013), seem to have pushed NGOs to stress in their communications reassurance, comfort, and sustenance rather than disruption of the existing social order. Representations of oppression and exploitation that potentially might be disturbing to spectators are consequently being obscured.

Humanitarian NGOs' communication seeks to invite audiences in the global North to make an 'imaginative leap' (Cohen, 2001, p. 183) to the lives of distant others that are radically different from their own. At a time when NGOs seem to be engaged in serious self-critique and analysis of their practice as symbolic producers of difference and otherness in a global world, they might benefit from a rethinking of how symbolically to mobilize difference and otherness to better facilitate the symbolic leap between 'here' and 'there', 'us' and 'them'.

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana.

Benthall, J. (1993). *Disasters, relief and the media*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Boltanski, L. (1999). *Distant suffering: Morality, media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. London: Sage.

Chouliaraki, L. (2012). *The ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Cohen, S. (2001). *States of denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Cooper, G. (2014, January). *Unlocking the Gate? How NGOs Mediate the Voices of the Marginalized in Social Media Context*. Paper presented at the annual MeCCSA conference, Bournemouth, UK.

Cottle, S., & Nolan, D. (2007). Global humanitarianism and the changing aid field: 'Everyone was dying for footage.' *Journalism Studies, 8*(6), 862–878.

Dogra, N. (2006). 'Reading NGOs visually'—Implications of visual images for NGO management. *Journal of International Development, 19*(2), 161–171.

Dogra, N. (2012). *Representations of global poverty: Aid, development and international NGOs*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.

Fassin, D. (2012). *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present*. Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices*. London: Sage.

Jewitt, C., & Oyama, R. (2001). Visual meaning: A social semiotic approach. In T. Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis* (pp. 134–156). London: Sage.

Koffman, O., & Gill, R. (2013). 'The revolution will be led by a 12 year old girl': Girl power and global biopolitics, *Feminist Review, 105*(1), 83–102.

Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.

Lidchi, H. (1993). *'All in the Choosing Eye': Charity, Representation and Developing World*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. London, Open University.

Orgad, S. (2012). *Media representation and the global imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Orgad, S. (2013). Visualizers of solidarity: Organizational politics in humanitarian and international development NGOs. *Visual Communication, 12*(3), 295–314.

Orgad, S., & Seu, I. B. (2014). The mediation of humanitarianism: Toward a research framework. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 7*(1), 6–36.

Pickering, M. (2001). *Stereotyping: The politics of representation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richey, L. A., & Ponte, S. (2011). *Brand aid: Shopping well to save the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Silverstone, R. (2007). *Media and morality: On the rise of the mediapolis*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Smith, M., & Yanacopulos, H. (2004). The public faces of development: An introduction. *Journal of International Development, 16*(5), 657–664.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). Semiotics and iconography. In T Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.),

    Handbook of Visual Analysis (pp. 92–118). London: Sage.

Vestergaard, A. (2008). Branding the humanitarian: The case of Amnesty International. *Journal*

    of Language and Politics, 7(3), 200–216.

Wilson, K. (2011). 'Race', gender and neoliberalism: Changing visual representations in

    development. *Third World Quarterly, 32*(2), 315–331.