COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Contemporary discussion of humanitarianism is often intermingled with anxieties and hopes about communication, e.g., the role and effect of media reporting of humanitarian disasters on mobilizing care and action beyond borders, how humanitarian organizations communicate their messages and how this impacts on the image of the developing world and translates (or not) into moral actions, and the influence of the new media ecology, e.g. social media, crowdsourcing and networked citizen journalism, on disaster survivors and humanitarian workers. Within the consolidation of modern humanitarianism, communication has notably expanded as an expert domain and form of action directed to alleviating distant suffering. Reflecting and responding to the growing centrality of communication in the humanitarian field, over the last two decades or so a growing body of research has explored how forms of humanitarian communications shape and are shaped by humanitarian practices in the 21st century (e.g. Benthall 1993; Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2013; Cohen 2001; Cottle and Cooper 2015; Nash 2008). This chapter focuses on one of the key areas within the field of humanitarian communication, namely the symbolic construction of distant suffering (in image, text and sound) aimed at eliciting and fostering a belief in transnational action and commitment to care and assistance beyond borders. In particular, the chapter examines humanitarian communication produced by humanitarian Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) for raising awareness, mobilizing public and government agendas for humanitarian action, securing support and

legitimacy for their operations and raising funds from the public and major donors.[i]

The following discussion reviews two central approaches to the study of humanitarian communication, each illustrated by brief examples from my own research, followed by discussion of its contributions and limitations. The first approach, 'The ethical promise of representation', is focused on humanitarian messages – images and stories produced by NGOs and examines whether they deliver on their promise of advancing understanding and eliciting care and responsibility for others in need, beyond borders. The second approach, 'Humanitarian communication as a practice, in practice', studies humanitarian communication in two different sites: *production* – NGOs' planning, execution and dissemination of their communications, and *reception* – how audiences make sense of and respond to these communications. I conclude by arguing that humanitarian communication can be best understood by combining these approaches and highlighting their tensions as inherent to humanitarianism itself.

1. The ethical promise of representation

Overview

This body of work is animated by a normative belief in the ethical role and capacity of images and narratives of distant human suffering to cultivate a 'humanitarian sensibility'. It sees humanitarian communication as what Becker (1991 [1963], 145) calls 'moral enterprise'. NGOs are conceived of as 'moral crusaders': key agents producing and disseminating representations of social suffering in order to craft 'emergent formations of the global community' and produce 'cosmopolitan subjects [who] gain awareness of the suffering of

others and partake of a global humanitarian ethos' (Nolan and Mikami 2012, 55). Representations of atrocities and distant suffering, e.g. images, texts and audio-visual materials such as news reports and humanitarian appeals and campaigns, are examined and evaluated for their capacity to enable a better understanding of the conditions of distant suffering and exemplify and foster spectators' moral commitment to its alleviation. Drawing on the tradition of photography criticism (see Linfield 2010) semiotics and discourse, studies examine how certain textual and visual choices and discursive strategies in humanitarian appeals and campaigns, cultivate, or fail to cultivate, understanding of and care for faraway others in need. A key theme in this academic literature concerns the representation of difference and otherness, whose examination is influenced largely by postcolonial critique (Said (2003 [1978]); Pickering 2001) and critique of racial representations (Hall 1997). Depictions of distant others such as victims of humanitarian disasters are shown to be rooted in colonial, racialized 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997, 232), and often to symbolically infantilize (e.g. Dogra 2012; Wilson 2011), stereotype and dehumanize sufferers – symbolic practices that are argued to create and widen rather than bridge the distance between western spectators and far-away others. Other studies (e.g. Chouliaraki 2013; Koffman and Gill 2013; Vestergaard 2008; Wilson 2011) highlight the tensions and contradictions between the ethical promise of representing faraway others in need and the increasing adoption of neoliberal logic, corporate models, celebrity, branding and other market-driven models in humanitarian communication.[ii]

<u>Examples</u>

Part of my own work showcases this approach to the study of humanitarian communication. In a comparative analysis of three historical natural disasters - the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, the 1980s African famine and the 2010 Haiti earthquake - I show how, in contrast to early forms of humanitarian communication such as 18th century narratives and images of the Lisbon earthquake, contemporary humanitarian representations privilege privatized action rather than grand ethical and political narratives about global structures of injustice and the urgency to dismantle them (Orgad 2012). In line with others (Chouliaraki 2013; Koffman and Gill 2013; Vestergaard 2013), I argue that current humanitarian communications such as music video clips to encourage donations to humanitarian relief, which are produced and circulated in the 24-hour, consumer-oriented media environment, allow individuals (mainly in the west) considerable scope for defining their terms of engagement and fashioning of their relations to distant sufferers, but promote 'an ethics of click, donate, and (possibly) forget it' (Orgad 2012, 78).

In another study, Koffman, Orgad and Gill (2015) show how the expression of solidarity in humanitarian campaigns for the empowerment of girls in the developing world, is predicated on 'selfie humanitarianism': celebration of the beneficiaries' western 'sisters' refashioning of their self, through consumption, social media production, self-branding and self-gaze. We argue that such communication enables the coming together of western and 'southern' girls exclusively on the basis of the narrow terms and western discourse of 'girl power'. It fails to recognize and assist the other on her own terms. Another example of NGOs' adoption of market-driven models in their communication and their contradictory consequences is their exploitation of makeover

programmes to raise awareness of and mobilize monetary donations for humanitarian causes. Orgad and Nikunen (2015) show how NGOs such as the children's development charity Plan employ the makeover paradigm and formats as a way to offer a corrective to criticisms of failures of past humanitarian communication (patronizing, orientalizing and dehumanizing distant others) and address current pressures and critiques of humanitarian organisations, including scarce and limited resources, growing competition, public distrust of their efficacy and legitimacy, and disillusion with humanitarian aid. At the same time, we warn that in adopting the makeover paradigm, which is squarely situated within neoliberal values and individualized citizenship, NGO communication becomes little different from corporate communication promoting avenues for the pursuit of self-broadcasting and self-improvement.

Contributions and limitations

In today's extensive and intensive global mediated environment, representations play an ever greater role in making humanitarian issues visible, carrying huge ethical promise of informing people about the pain of others and converting their knowledge into action. They can spur the 'internationalization of conscience' (Ignatieff 1998, 11, cited in Cohen 2001, 169), and play a huge role in battling denial of suffering and global injustice (Cohen 2001). Textual and visual studies of humanitarian communication spotlight the significance of the symbolic in the construction of humanitarianism. They underscore the dependence of humanitarianism on images and narratives to achieve its goal. They demand that the proliferation of stories, voices and images of distant suffering - many produced by NGOs and circulated in the global mediated

sphere - are considered seriously and critically for their real potential to alleviate suffering.

Evaluating the particular features of the symbolic constructions of distant suffering in humanitarian communication holds NGOs accountable for the messages they produce, and demonstrates particular ways in which these messages can play a positive role in the humanitarian project. Particularly valuable is the critical attention in this research to the repetitive, structured biases and patterns in the selection of stories of humanitarian disasters and suffering (Cohen 2001; Cottle 2009). It demonstrates the damaging, long-term effects of representing distant suffering in narrow stereotypical ways, e.g. perpetuating views of the developing world as a theatre of tragedy and disaster (Cohen 2001), reinforcing the unequal relations between the west and the developing world, and perpetuating and prioritizing an 'emergency imaginary' (Calhoun 2008a) over concern with the long-term structural conditions underpinning global injustice (Orgad 2012).

However, this approach to the study of humanitarian communication has several tensions and limitations. Nolan and Mikami (2012) argue that in suggesting that humanitarian representations embody or should correspond with normative ideals of the duty of care, obligation and responsibility for distant others, critical analysis of the politics of these representations and whose interest and ideologies they serve is largely absent. Thus, the authors argue, this approach 'idealizes' humanitarian communication by reproducing the myth of humanitarian purity, i.e., the notion that humanitarian practice and action are separate from and should remain detached from politics, material conditions and 'instrumental rationalities' (Nolan and Mikami 2012, 60, drawing on Calhoun 2008b).

This problem is manifest in the almost exclusive emphasis in studies of humanitarian representations on the latter's role in improving spectators' understanding and inspiring their care and action in the form of demonstrating, signing petitions, and engaging in actions addressed to political institutions in order to reduce the suffering of the unfortunate. This emphasis is notable in Luc Boltanski's (1999) seminal book *Distant Suffering*. Boltanski (1999, 18) recognizes that monetary donation 'makes the sacrifice made to benefit the unfortunate clearer and more easily calculable', but insists that this is a lesser and weaker form of humanitarian response and is incapable of facilitating development of a politics of pity. While this promotion of 'speaking' rather than 'paying' is significant and productive normatively, it reinforces a separation between humanitarian practice and action and the material conditions of NGO communications. For NGOs, raising money is often the primary goal of their communications in campaigns and appeals. Regarding monetary donation as separate from and antithetical to a 'pure' or 'appropriate' humanitarian action, is detached from the political economy of humanitarian communication and humanitarianism more broadly.

Relatedly, Orgad and Seu (2014b) criticize the favouring of cosmopolitanism in the analysis of humanitarian communication as a normative yardstick against which to evaluate the ethics of representations. We argue that dismissing other potential meanings and sentiments (e.g. national solidarity) that humanitarian communications may evoke in appealing for the public's help for distant sufferers, is problematic. It reproduces nationalism as the binary opposition of cosmopolitanism and fails to recognize its appeal and significance for people's sense of belonging, formation of bonds of solidarity, and democratic public life (based on Calhoun 2007).

Thus, studies that focus on the ethical promise of humanitarian communication draw, often exclusively, on ethical norms, to make claims about the ideal goals and desirable responses to this communication (Orgad and Seu 2014b). They foreground a concern with what humanitarian messages *should* be about, but not what they *have* to achieve, and about how people *ought* to respond to mediated messages, but not how they *do* respond. Thus, they often fail to provide convincing answers to the 'million dollar question' which entertains both the humanitarian community and scholars, of why the knowledge produced by NGOs and the media about humanitarian disasters and suffering does not always lead to commensurate moral response and action.

A final weakness of this approach to the study of humanitarian communication is its tendency to homogenize both producers and receivers. There is little recognition of the diversity within and between NGOs as producers of representations and little, if any, recognition of the diversity of ethical positions, dispositions and responses that these representations elicit from diverse recipients.

The second approach, which is outlined next, seeks to address some of the limitations and gaps in the first.

2. Humanitarian communication as a practice, in practice

<u>Overview</u>

This approach stresses the need to study humanitarian communication as a practice within the forces that condition and shape it. It moves away from an interest in discourse to practice as socially situated: the *making* of

communication within the changing conditions of NGO operations and the media environment, and its *reception* by certain audiences at certain places and times. Empirically, it has two central strands. The first is focused on investigation of the processes and strategies in the *production* of humanitarian communication by NGOs, situated within particular organizational, political, economic, and cultural conditions.[iii] The second, *reception,* draws on the tradition of audience research in media studies and is based on empirical examination of how audiences at particular times and places receive, negotiate and respond to humanitarian communication in its various forms and genres. In what follows I provide an example from my own research to illustrate each of these strands and then discuss their contributions and limitations.

Examples

Production

Based on interviews with professionals in 10 humanitarian NGOs, and building on the few, but significant existing studies on NGO communication production (Benthall 1993; Dogra 2012; Lidchi 1993; Cottle and Nolan 2007), my study (Orgad 2013; Orgad and Seu, 2014a) shows how competing interests and views, and structural relations and divisions within and between NGOs, shape the production of humanitarian communication in significant ways. The choices NGO practitioners make among disasters and issues, and how, when and to whom to communicate about distant suffering, are deeply embedded within inter- and intra-organizational politics and depend crucially on the pressure to raise funds and survive in a climate of scarce financial resources and fierce competition. In particular, as observed also by Davis and Sireau (2007) in their study of the Make Poverty History campaign, there is a major division within NGOs between 'marketing-led' and 'campaign-led'

professionals and departments. The former tend to prioritize simplified messages, which 'tug at the heartstrings' for short-term eliciting of money donations; the latter often argue against these practices and favour communicating the gravity of the long-term structural problem. Nolan and Mikami (2012, 60) argue that such tensions between 'value rationalities' and 'instrumental rationalities' in the humanitarian field (Calhoun 2008b) are 'produced by, and are part of, the material conditions within which humanitarian communication is performed'. However, they (Nolan and Mikami 2012, 61) rightly warn that simple labelling of certain groups and actors involved in humanitarian communications as 'ethical' and others as 'instrumental', downplays the extent to which both are driven by and draw on both ethical *and* instrumental motives and objectives.

Thus, observing the processes of NGO production and attending to producers' accounts reveal the multiple and, often, contradictory goals, objectives and target audiences of humanitarian communication. Whereas study of the ethical promise of representations focuses exclusively on the latter's (assumed) effect on 'spectators' and, particularly western spectators, research on the production of humanitarian communication shows that communication is often targeted to several audiences - specific audiences within the general public (individual donors), major donors, governments, and even (albeit indirectly) other NGOs. For example, in my study (Orgad 2013) some practitioners referred to anxieties over criticisms from colleagues in other (often larger) NGOs of their organization's communications, affecting decisions about how to design campaigns and what messages to select.

An important feature revealed by this research is the significance of self-reflexivity and introspection within the humanitarian field and its impact on

the production of humanitarian communication. The planning and production of messages and images of distant suffering are considerably affected by NGOs' awareness of criticism of their practices, and their efforts to respond to these criticisms and to the intensely competitive and mediated global market in which they operate. For example, a campaigns director explained his NGO's communicative approach as grounded in acute awareness of the colonial 'baggage' of NGO representations and a deliberate effort to offload it by celebrating beneficiaries 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' (cited in Orgad 2015, 124). Alex de Waal (1997, xvi) argues cynically that the humanitarian field 'appears to have an extra-ordinary capacity to absorb criticism, not reform itself, and yet emerge strengthened'. While, in line with de Waal, NGO practitioners' self-criticism of communication practices could be seen as merely ritualistic and rhetorical, my reading of their accounts highlighted how this self-reflexivity could be productive insofar as it informs the development of changing modes of representation within humanitarian communication, for example, the move away from imagery that deprives victims of agency and dignity (e.g. children with 'flies in their eyes') to depictions endowing them with some agency.

Reception

In a nationwide study based on 20 focus groups with members of the UK public, we investigated public responses to humanitarian communications (Seu et al. 2015; Seu and Orgad 2015). We looked at both the emotional reactions

and cognitive responses to humanitarian communications produced by NGOs, and the cultural, ideological and biographical 'scripts' that people draw on to make sense of these communications. One of the important and more surprising issues that emerged repeatedly in the focus groups was audiences' strong emotional relations to NGOs and their workers as agents of humanitarianism. In contrast to an idealized view of NGOs as 'Good Samaritans', the majority of participants expressed very negative views of NGOs, seeing them as 'Marketers' - a view associated with organizations' inappropriate use of funds, employment of marketing techniques and transactional mentality: 'Participants expressed a deep disillusionment and disappointment deriving from the recognition of the Marketer being applied to and employed within the realm of humanitarianism' (Seu et al. 2015, 12). Audiences' perceptions seem to echo and reproduce the historical tension between 'value rationalities' and 'instrumental rationalities' in the humanitarian field (Calhoun 2008b). They have a strong expectation (which many scholars studying humanitarian communication seem to share) that NGOs should be driven by 'traditional'/nostalgic principles of charitable 'good doing' and altruism, and deep disappointment (also shared by many scholars) that this does not happen.

This research shows that it is impossible to infer how audiences might respond to humanitarian communication on the basis of analysing texts and images. In particular, whereas the study of representations places major emphasis on the impact of the how sufferers and scenes of suffering are constructed on spectators' understanding and ethical responses, our study demonstrates that this is only one, and not necessarily the most significant, element that shapes audiences' responses to humanitarian communication. How NGOs' choices and strategies in representing humanitarian causes will affect audiences'

understanding and responses will importantly (though not exclusively) depend on the variety of sociocultural and biographical resources on which audiences draw to make sense of these images and stories.

Contributions and limitations

The practice-based study of humanitarian communication is nascent compared to the sustained critique of representations. It offers a complex and in-depth understanding of the changing conditions of NGOs and the media environment within which the production and reception of humanitarian communications are situated. It moves away from normativity to studying how the mediation of humanitarianism is produced, experienced, affected and negotiated (Orgad and Seu 2014b).

In a time of increased demands for academic research to (re)connect with public life and for its analysis to bear on society, listening to producers and audiences, and understanding what moral frameworks or 'scripts' guide them, and what they resist and why, seems an urgent task. Research that relies solely on analysis of the outcome of communication – e.g. campaigns or appeals designed by NGOs, runs the risk of producing critique that is not sufficiently sensitive to the conditions of the production and reception of this communication. One NGO communications director whom I interviewed criticized research that focused exclusively on the textual and visual analysis of humanitarian communication, saying: "[if you] think what we [NGO communication practitioners] do is so influential and that it's us that's keeping Africa poor because of the way we portray it, well, possibly you've spent slightly too long in the sociology department!". Of course, resistance to research-informed knowledge by practitioners is not unusual and studying NGOs' practice does not guarantee that the knowledge produced by the

research will be endorsed by practitioners. However, for scholarship potentially to inform and influence humanitarian communication practice, it is crucial that it is grounded in an understanding of the economic, material, organizational, political conditions of NGOs' work.

Also, studying NGOs' processes of production illuminates the considerable ethical variations and disputes that mark the humanitarian field and its subset of communication, at both the individual and institutional levels (Nolan and Mikami 2012, 65) – an aspect often overlooked by studies of representations. These latter tend to treat humanitarian communications as a more or less coherent domain, which exhibits trends such as increasing corporatization, instrumentalization, and adoption of market logic and techniques, and has a limited sense of the tensions underpinning these trends and their imbrication in organizational structures, e.g. between the immense pressure for short-term fundraising (by marketing and fundraising departments) and the ambitious long-term goals of advocacy and education (by campaigns and advocacy departments)(see Orgad 2014).

Audience research accounts for the diversity of people's responses to humanitarian communications in particular places and times. It challenges implicit ideas of 'good' and 'bad' representations and desirable and 'undesirable' or 'inappropriate' ethical responses. It reminds and warns us that while sometimes it may be useful to question the moral virtue of feelings generated among people, we should be extremely cautious of assuming that they are liable to be gratuitous, inauthentic, insufficient or inappropriate. Instead, we should focus on exploring the varied ways in which those feelings serve to express and shape people's 'lay moralities' and moral behaviours (paraphrased from Orgad and Seu 2014b, 18).

Studying how people receive and make sense of humanitarian communication provides much-needed evidence-based explanations for the seeming discrepancy between media and NGO communications and calls for compassion and action, and audiences' lack of commensurate response. For example, our audience study (Seu and Orgad 2015) proposed several mitigations to four barriers we identified to audiences' actions in response to humanitarian communication, namely (1) emotional disconnection, (2) cognitive distancing and prejudice, (3) moral parochialism and (4) distrust of and resentment towards NGOs. .

The merits of the practice-based study of humanitarian communication notwithstanding, its emphasis on specificity and situatedness in particular times and places is also one of its main limitations. Every NGO has idiosyncratic characteristics, related to its orientation (e.g. emergency or development-focused), size, history, practices, work culture, specific individuals, finances, and so on. Making generalizations or applying findings from one NGO at a particular time to humanitarian communication in general, may be difficult if not impossible. Similarly, audiences' responses are diverse and complex, and any analysis risks reducing this complexity and making generalizations about things that may not be easily generalizable.

Conclusion

To conclude, I suggest that humanitarian communication is best understood by combining the two approaches discussed in this chapter, to allow a contextualized understanding of this communication, situated within the conditions and pressures experienced by the NGO sector (organizations and individual practitioners), and the conditions and contexts of audiences on the receiving end of this communication, and grounded in the actual content and

forms of the communication. As I argue elsewhere (Orgad and Seu 2014b), enhancing understanding of the links between the different 'sites' of humanitarian communication – representation, audience and production, is critical in order to evaluate the influence of this communication and how it can better support and contribute to promoting humanitarianism. The point is not that any single study can or should fully account for these multiple sites, but rather that analysis of any of these 'sites' should be always informed by and respond to understanding what happens in the other sites.

For example, using visual analysis of NGO campaigns and appeals, I examined strategies and practices that NGOs employ in their communications and juxtaposed them with analysis of NGO practitioner accounts of how and why they make specific choices about communicating their messages (Orgad 2015). Linking the analysis of representations to their producers' practices and dilemmas enables what I believe is a better situated and informed critique of humanitarian communication, insofar as it dissects the actual components of this communication while explaining the actual practices, thinking, tensions and constraints that underpin its production. For instance, one of the strategies identified from analysis of NGO representations was what I called 'erasing difference': removal of the distant sufferer from the image/text and her replacement by a visual and/or textual focus on 'us', spectators in the global North. This trend in humanitarian communication is noted in other textual and visual analyses, especially Chouliaraki (2013). The advantage of putting a practice approach in dialogue with analysis of representations is a better understanding of why some NGOs employ this strategy, which seems contradictory to the humanitarian outward focus, and how they see the consequences of this strategy. Interviews with practitioners revealed that 'erasing difference' responds to a dual - ethical and instrumental - pressure. On

the one hand, in reducing or eliminating 'the other' the NGO is attempting to produce a more ethical representation of suffering, that avoids orientalizing and dehumanizaing the other by turning UK audiences' eyes inwards. At the same time, it seeks to tackle audiences' lack of interest in and empathy with distant suffering and responds to fundraising pressures by appealing to audiences by showing them 'someone like me', i.e. people who are similar to rather than different from them. Practitioners reflected on some of the possible limitations of this strategy, but suggested that in particular cases it proved instrumental in engaging new supporters with their NGO's cause and raising funds.

Thus, combining the representation and the practice approaches invites considering the ethical and the instrumental together rather than thinking about them in terms of either/or. The former stresses the ethical demand of humanitarian communication – to foster understanding, care and action; the latter focuses on the material conditions and the instrumental and ethical motivations involved in the production and reception of humanitarian communication. Recognizing that the tension between the ethical and the instrumental ('value rationalities and 'instrumental rationalities', Calhoun 2008b) as inherent to humanitarian communication and humanitarianism more broadly, in my view is the basis for a more informed and effective critique which is simultaneously sympathetic to the agents involved in the production and reception of this communication and demands them to reflect on its limitations and improve it.

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Notes

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[i] In this chapter I delimit the discussion to communications (e.g. campaigns, appeals) produced by NGOs to elicit response to humanitarian issues and crises. For discussion of other forms and aspects of communication, e.g. media reporting, and media-NGO relations, see: Cottle and Cooper, 2015.

[ii] For a discussion of this trend see Chouliaraki's chapter on post-humanitarianism in this volume.

[iii] This includes the study of NGO-media relations and how they impact on the production of representation of suffering and its dissemination. I do not discuss this aspect here, for studies see Wright, Cottle and Nolan…