

# Communicating suffering: where do you draw the line?

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2015-7-16

***This article is by Polis Summer School student Alyssa Block on the guest talk by Polly Markandya, Head of Communications at Medecins Sans Frontieres***

[Polly Markandya @ Polis Summer School 2015](#) from [Polis Video](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Which issues do media organizations select for portrayal, and which do they ignore, and what does this selection bias say about the news media culture in which these decisions are made? How do perceptions about certain regions of the world or types of people affect audience reaction to viewing this suffering, and do they elicit or inhibit viewers to actively respond?

Polly Markandya from Medecins Sans Frontieres spoke to all of these questions as she relayed what she views as her responsibility as Head of Communications, and the role that her organisation [Medecins Sans Frontieres](#) plays in representing suffering in the media.

She challenged the idea of too much censorship, explaining that MSF's responsibility was to depict the realities they see and work with, even if they are unsettling. Instead she described the attempts made to establish a sense of connection between the people experiencing suffering and the audience- often done through emphasizing, a cultural, religious, or linguistic link.

One interesting distinction Polly asserted is the double-faceted project of working with these images, which involves first the taking of the images and second, their distribution. In order to take photos of people suffering in MSF clinics, meaningful consent must be obtained, which itself presents an arduous challenge, as linguistic barriers and perceived power relations can threaten to undermine a clear communication chain. In cases where the victim is physically or culturally unable to give consent, oftentimes it must come from (male) family members, which complicates the very notion of consent. Recognizing that the victims are also often suffering severe pain and agony is also something that photographers, the media, and NGOs such as MSF must take into account when selecting who and what to photograph.

And in regards to distribution, while Polly recognises a point at which publishing graphic images might cross the line, she was unwilling to sign the NGO code of conduct because she firmly believes that many issues are context-specific, and there are times when photos that are horrifyingly graphic and deeply disturbing are the most effective ways to illustrate the disconcerting reality of these situations. In these situations, one must just take responsibility for making these judgment calls, and be willing to defend them.

In her work with MSF, Polly pointed out how they try to avoid using images only depicting pain and distress and rather aim to use ones that convey the work that is being done to alleviate and address this suffering. She finds that this strategy of trying to re-humanize these people beyond their status as victims, and enable them to divulge their first-person accounts, can go a long way in transitioning from what she termed the "pity formula" towards a more informative coverage that reflects both the achievements of a project as well as the work that still needs to be done.

***By Alyssa Block***

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