

Pictures of suffering – do we have to choose between impact and dignity?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/12/05/pictures-of-suffering-do-we-have-to-choose-between-impact-and-dignity/

2013-12-5

Is showing a tragic portrait of people in the developing world the only effective strategy to call for action and funding from people in donor countries? Can't we change the perspective toward victims in crisis? Polis reporter Asuka Kageura gives her response to the Polis Media Agenda Talk by Brendan Paddy, Head of Communications at the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), who was speaking in a personal capacity at LSE.

Brendan Paddy said that giving dignity to the representation of victim is not easy when NGOs need to provoke the empathy of an audience to collect the funds to physically help victims.



Not an image Brenda Paddy would have chosen – but it was effective in raising funds

He personally prefers positive or neutral images—such as a man re-cultivating a damaged farm. But the reality is that a naked, dark-skinned, isolated malnourished child with the text “Donate now” draws more attention from people. This ‘*poverty pornography*’ makes him uncomfortable. Showing this “typical” picture, he asks:

“To what extent do you accept this moral imperative to do whatever you have to do to raise the money and actually spend to help them? ... To what extent is there journalistic imperative to tell the truth even if it is uncomfortable? Why do we end up with the headline saying ‘Africa is starving again?’”

Paddy is against the idea of “Whites in shining armour,” and tries to recognize disaster victims as “dignified human beings,” not hopeless objects. He tries to select imagery that manages to portray people with stories, to help NGOs make better choices, and to engage with colleagues having to make these

difficult decisions.

However, in contrast to our concern about the possible negative effects of this imagery, the actual response of people who are in these “captured images” can be rather positive and even empowering. Paddy, in his talk, shares the story of a little boy “Joshua,” a survivor represented for Philippines typhoon appeal.

This 11-year-old boy was washed miles away by the flood waters and lost his mother and sister. When a journalist told him that his picture was used for the appeal, he was delighted saying that “he felt like he has done something to make a big difference to his community and many people.” These people can be strong, empowered agents, unlike our pessimistic objectifying view toward them.

The most difficult task of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of disaster is to rebuild displaced lives through long term support. Any country that experienced massive disaster struggles from recovery because as more time passes, the less attention and funding people give, slows the recovery process. The DEC tries to sustain interest by providing anniversary reports of supported areas, about how donations are used, and, how things have improved since then. This more long-term approach is Paddy’s ideal, what he believes in and hopes to be the dominant paradigm in the

future of the field.



Image from latest DEC campaign

This report by Polis Intern *Asuka Kageura*

Polis reporter Priyanka Deo interviews Brendan Paddy in our weekly Media Agenda Talk questionnaire:

What is your favourite social media platform?

I think I do like Twitter best because I find that it's a really great way for me to get information from a lot of different sources with people I am interested in who are doing interesting work and share the things they are doing & reading. [Twitter] is a great source of intelligence for me for that reason, and it also has a community based feel to it. There are a lot of journalists and a lot of people thinking about and working on

issues as well so I find that the place to be.

Where do you get most of your news from?

I still use a lot of conventional news but it is mostly online; including the BBC, The Guardian, The Telegraph, and the New York Times. However, I now also do read a wider variety of things because of Twitter such as blogs, and more non-mainstream media stuff which includes, and let's be honest about it... more American stuff.... Twitter is full of it!

What is something you could wish you could change about the media industry?

Professionally, I wish there was a way that I could work with media to tell really compelling stories of what happens after the cameras move on. For example, you have a huge disaster, there's this intense interest, people give a lot of money, we do a lot of work in really tough circumstances, and then the only reason media will come back to that story is if they think we f**** it up. I would love to come back and say, that this was really hard, we didn't achieve all that we wanted to achieve, but we did do some stuff here that was really good, and we did other things which

did not work but were really interesting...and further discuss this with the media.

Do you think that social media is making us smarter or dumber?

It can be sort of an echo chamber, but honestly, it has expanded the range of people I engage with and the sources of information I use. In that sense, I think for me personally, it has been mostly upside.

What are the current news issues or stories that you are following?

The big one that has been a bit below the radar is what is happening in the Central African Republic. It is a really poor country where there has been a coup and now there is a really messy war that is threatening to break down along ethnic and religious lines. If that happens, we are in a really bad place to do much about it because a lot of my member agencies have strong presence there and if war goes the way we think it might go, getting access would be really hard.

Interview by Priyanka Deo.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science

