

Are we in a post-Humanitarian world?

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Polis has hosted a symposium (yes, we're that kind of think-tank) on the state of humanitarian communications. About a dozen speakers ranged widely across the world of charities, aid, international media, suffering, photojournalism, morality and much more.

This report by Polis intern Eli Lipmen tries to capture the wealth of thinking on display.

The optimistic view is that Aid organizations and non-governmental organizations provide an important function in civil society by serving those in need, those who have suffered from human rights abuses, from natural and manmade disasters, and from inequity. The positive argument says that these organizations help progress a common sense of humanity in the world. However, are they fulfilling this role in society anymore, or have they lost their mission, forgoing ethics and social responsibility to compete in a global mediated market of suffering?

Scholars from the disciplines of media, communication, law, business, and philosophy came together to discuss the issues of humanitarian communications in an increasingly globalized, cosmopolitan and corporate media age at a symposium sponsored by the LSE's media think-tank POLIS, and the Copenhagen Business School. The scholars highlighted an industry at a crossroads, a field of paradoxes where competing forces of power, social change, ethics, emotions, branding, corporate media, and social responsibility intertwine to re-define the role of humanitarian communications in society.

Is humanity empty?

Professor Costas Douzinas of Birkbeck College Department of Law opened the symposium by asking whether humanity can ever be united around a common cause, if human rights is just a symbolic gesture, and if humanity is "voluntary imperialism of the new world order".

Professor Douzinas saw no hope for Humanitarianism because power and morality are always intertwined, delegitimizing humanitarian campaigns because their underlying aim is to bring 'civilization' to the 'nonhuman' in others. He saw no difference between these activities of the post-modern Western world and those of missionaries in the 17th and 18th century.

While Professor Douzinas saw 'humanity' as a tool of separation, Dr. Kate Nash of Goldsmiths College Department of Sociology saw the potential for humanitarian communications to build a popular cosmopolitan solidarity across nations – a common humanity. Her thesis came out of the relative failure of the 2005 "Make Poverty History" campaign, an important attempt that brought peoples from around the UK together to construct an extraordinary solidarity that transcended the 'nation'.

Dr. Nash argued in support of the important role the media played in constructing this national solidarity, creating the emotional identification for a positive and popular project that leveraged the sense of common humanity. Dr. Nash proposed a framework where the media embody this voice of extraordinary solidarity, organizing the nation towards a common mission and more than just a critique of humanity.

The Power of Celebrity and Images

Dr. Nash regarded nationally recognized figures – either elected leaders or celebrities – as useful as ambassadors for the West and as spokespersons for the humanitarian projects. The power of celebrity and images was a theme echoed by Dr. Eric Guthey of Copenhagen Business School and Professor Luc Bovens of the LSE.

Dr. Guthey focused on the power of the business celebrity in humanitarian causes through the image of Bill Gates as the "Billanthropist", arguing that it is appropriate for successful businessmen to involve themselves in humanitarian projects. The image of Bill Gates on the cover of the Economist with a young boy in Africa evokes an

image beyond a public relations or branding strategy, but represents an image of what it means to be human in a corporate society. Dr. Guthey found that the very nature of celebrity is to be human and these images provide a powerful reminder that these celebrities can use the media's focus on them to champion humanitarian causes.

Professor Luc Bovens described the importance of imagery from a more ethical perspective in the context of photojournalism. He focused on the need for photojournalists to maintain public trust in their images. But this can easily be eroded through the manipulation of images in a digital age, posing subjects or presenting them out of context. For Bovens, this came down to the issue of truthfulness on the part of the photojournalist in presenting an image without using people merely as a means to an end.

He drew a line between the basic human drive to look at an image of horror, which plays against our desire to maintain dignity of a subject and revulsion against capitalizing on another person's grief or misfortune. These constraints influence humanitarian communications today as photojournalists balance the public's trust against an obligation to truthful and comprehensive reporting.

CSR, 'Newsroom NGOs', & Post-Emotional Humanitarian Communications

The symposium took a different tact when looking at the influence of social responsibility on corporations and corporate media and marketing strategy on NGOs. While both Professor Mette Morsing of the Copenhagen Business School and Dr. Natalie Fenton of Goldsmiths College saw a blurring of the line between corporations and humanitarian campaigning, they saw the potential for positive social change in our globalised age.

Professor Morsing looked at the influence of global civil society on shaping corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies, sometimes forced by online and offline communities of transnational actors to 'do the right thing'. Corporations now compete to demonstrate to globally concerned consumers their willingness to take action on international humanitarian concerns.

Professor Morsing raised concern that companies who enacted these CSR campaigns risked public over-exposure followed by critique of hypocrisy. Public mistrust of companies could arise if they see CSR policies as a cynical ploy to increase profits, particularly when profits trump humanitarian or environmental concerns.

Just as corporations are becoming more 'humanitarian', NGOs are becoming more corporate, argued Dr. Fenton. She conducted research on NGOS that found a phenomenal increase in media activities with trained journalists working directly for the NGOs media department to enact publicity strategies both for campaigning and for fundraising purposes.

Dr. Fenton called the pressure to provide the news industry what they want, "news cloning," and found it hugely problematic because it favored those with the resources to pay for professionals to fulfill the normative agendas of journalism. She said that if NGOs continue to play into the framework of mainstream news by further blurring the line between them and journalists, they would fail to fulfill their role in society to mobilize governments and citizens around a common cause for justice.

Professor Lilie Chouliaraki further problematised the dynamic highlighted by Dr. Fenton by outlining the ethical implications of media campaigns conducted by these increasingly commodified humanitarian NGOs. She considered the idea of a "post-emotional humanitarian style of communication" that bypasses the traditional emotional link with the suffering individual and engages us in a more transactional relationship instead.

Is there a future for humanitarian communications?

Despite the criticism by most of the scholars of humanitarian communications as a "field of paradoxes", Professor Chouliaraki concluded the symposium with the belief that NGOs, civil society, and corporations had the power and the will to mobilize citizens and governments to enact change. Whether the focus was on NGOS, corporations, photojournalists, or the audience, this was a message echoed throughout the day, despite Professor Douzinas's original conjecture that "humanity is empty".

This report by Polis intern Eli Lipmen.

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