

TED: marketing or movement?

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Here is the text of what I said at the [TED talk](#) last night about James Nachtwey's campaigning photography. I confess I left the meeting much more sceptical about TED and Nachtwey's work than I was when I first agreed to the talk. It was a healthy exchange of views but it was clear that the TED people do not like anyone to be remotely critical of their work.

TED TALK

I am a huge advocate of journalism with a purpose.

I am someone who argues – along with people like Clay Shirkey and Charlie Leadbeater – that new technologies offer the potential – at least – for us to bring communications and activism together.

My book, *SuperMedia* argues that the journalism should now be networked – it should build in public participation throughout the process.

And here let me quote from a review in the Financial Times by veteran journalist John Lloyd of my book which sums it up:

“We can glimpse a world in which those burning to say something can now say it...Those wishing to bear witness to horrors or marvels can have their words and pictures broadcast. Those outraged by suspected official or corporate malfeasance can find tools to probe, then expose. It all adds up to a considerable empowerment: if it does not yet – and I hope never will – dethrone the practice of journalism as we have known it, it may well propose the democratic possibility of making heroes of us all.”

But while we should be excited by the possibilities we should also remember our history and think critically of the reality of the changes.

At my media think-tank Polis at the LSE and the London College of Communications we have been looking at media change. We have been particularly interested in how it changes in relation to humanitarian and development communications. We have put on a series of events and done research on how NGOs and journalism is mediating these issues.

Photography – stills and moving imagery – has been central to the humanitarian journalism mission – and I use that word deliberately.

Put incredibly simply, photography has over the last century of so permitted us the illusion of knowing about suffering, disaster and conflict around the world.

From the US Civil war to Abu Ghraib, photography proports to present us with a reality that calls upon us to act.

Put very crudely – humanitarian photography showed us a world away from us, but brought close by familiarity and fear.

But mass media imagery can distance as much as connect – because we consume the mediated reality rather than confront the human condition it represents.

This is especially true of traditional mainstream mass media news.

It formulises reality so much that by its very presence it announces that it is a functional mediation not a direct relationship or a political act.

The recent history of this imagery can be very crudely put into phases.

There was the post-holocaust use of imagery as a declaration of horror and a statement of moral certainty.

During the 60s and 70s this was transformed by televisual imagery into an enaction of suffering. The imagery of the Vietnam war and then classically the imagery of famine in Ethiopia showed us things that our rulers had kept hidden. It played out a dual drama of the politics of imperialism or post imperialism and liberal humanism.

This was the period of shock – of Oxfam campaigns and BBC footage of fly-blown black babies with their ribcages poking through like cadavers. It led to the cynicism of the fly-eye count. It led to a seven minute Michael Buerk film about the Ethiopian famine that had only two voices – one was Michael's – the other was an Aid worker. The subject was not allowed to speak about the political realities of what was happening to them.

This was never good enough. An emotional appeal will only raise emotional reactions. Emotion is not the same as empathy and certainly not the same as politics or action.

That is why NGOs sought in the 80s and 90s to combine this with reason and marketing. They corporatized compassion and politicised morality. Instead of shocking you with emotional imagery they appealed to your sense of

injustice and your logic. They showed you pictures of black farmers saved by new wells or young smiling girls given literacy by white Western NGOs.

They said to the Western publics “come and Make Poverty History”.

So we all went to the concerts, signed the petitions and our politicians signed agreements.

But they did not make Poverty history. Now when they appeal to us we are sceptical.

We are in a post-humanitarian world where irony must be part of the appeal. (And irony is not necessarily a ‘bad’ thing). No longer can campaigners simply assert moral superiority. Now we must share the ethical power with the public.

This is what new media can do for us. It can turn a one-way appeal for reason or compassion into a two-way or three-way dialogue that can even include the subject – the victim.

News imagery can insist that we consider what we see. The photographer by selecting and showing demands that we think and perhaps hopes that we act in response. New media allows us to empower the consumer to be an agent of activity or change.

Nachtwey’s photograph’s do not give his subjects a voice. They do not change anything. But connected to citizens in the North connected to citizens in the South, then they might have lasting impacts.

That is what journalism must do as it seeks to claim the attention and participation of the public – that is what photojournalism can do – it can allow people to understand and connect with photography like Nachtwey’s – but it can also allow the citizen here in the West and in the South to create or connect to their own representations. The job of media organisations should be to connect and to network these peoples.

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