

# Can the media (or celebs) make you care? (A review: "Fram" at the NT)

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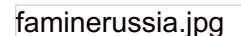
Tony Harrison's new play, [Fram](#), at the [National Theatre](#) reminds us that celebrity humanitarianism goes back a long way before Sir Bob, Bono and George Clooney. This rambling verse drama tells the story of:



*the famous Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen who, with his suicidal companion, Johansen, makes a bid on foot for the North Pole in the 1890s. Though incompatible, they share a bear fur sleeping-bag through the long winter. Nansen, still haunted by Johansen's ghost, is appointed to the League of Nations. As a figurehead of Russian famine relief in 1922, he conducts the first celebrity campaign, searching for means, however shocking, to make people care.*



This flawed but fascinating drama brings to life a very 21st century dilemma. We live in a world where globalised digital communications mean that we know about all the horrible things happening on our planet. From Darfur to Tibet, ignorance is no excuse. But can the news media really convey the complex reality? and can it compel us to do something about what we see/hear/read? This is the theme of [Polis](#)' work next autumn on humanitarian communications. So I was intrigued to hear the onstage argument put by one campaigner from Save The Children working to relieve the Russian famine of 1922 as she welcomed the potential of new technology:



*"What would happen to the world if lantern slides could be projected into people's home while they were having tea?  
If those acutalities could be seen by the whole nation surely it would mean an end to the horrors of starvation?"*

But as another character points out: "They might simply switch it off". And even if they watch the horrors, how do you counter 'compassion fatigue'?:

*"The next time there are millions of starving mouths to feed  
you'll need to boost the voltage to give the shock you need  
to waken up the conscience, and the next time even more  
shocking illustrations of a famine or of war.  
You have to face it, most people hate to look  
at horrors..."*

Harrison's play develops its theme until it becomes itself an appeal for compassion for victims of contemporary horrors. It's at this point that it starts to creak under the weight of too many ideas jumbled up in a moral maze. As a play it is not helped by repetitious and often drab over-writing. But as a theatre for debate about humanitarian communications it certainly provokes.



Let's hope Polis can continue the argument next year. Contact us at [polis@lse.ac.uk](mailto:polis@lse.ac.uk) if you want to know more.

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