Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge: Audiences’ Reactions and Moral Actions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The UK public is emotionally responsive to humanitarian issues but fatigued and disillusioned.

Although the UK public give generously to one-off appeals to natural disasters, they struggle with maintaining an on-going and meaningful connectedness with humanitarian and international development issues. While mobilising public empathy is a crucial first step, it is not sufficient to turn caring into action to alleviate suffering caused by humanitarian and development crises.

1. THE PUBLIC’S CONNECTEDNESS WITH HUMANITARIAN ISSUES CAN BE SUSTAINED THROUGH APPROPRIATE EMOTIONS, UNDERSTANDING, AND FAMILIAR PRACTICES OF CARE.

It is essential that people find NGO communications to be emotionally manageable and furthering understanding. Equally, the public responses that the communications attempt to evoke should also be manageable and morally significant for the public.

These qualities are summarised in the proposed 3’M’s model.
1.1. Manageability

Arousing people’s emotions is essential for caring responses. These emotions must be appropriate and people need to be able to manage them. The public expects and accepts to feel sad and upset by humanitarian communications. However, the upset should have integrity of purpose. When perceived to be manipulative and exploitative, it leads to desensitisation and resentment towards NGOs. If the upset is not manageable, it is followed by switching off and further distancing from humanitarian issues. Although emotional management is to a large extent reliant on individual emotional capabilities, it can be bolstered by understanding.

1.2. Meaningfulness / Understanding

Concise and contextualised information enables people to understand distant suffering and their own appropriate response to alleviate it. People welcome this kind of understanding even when they feel overwhelmed by the amount and pervasiveness of humanitarian information. Being able to understand and contextualise human suffering caused by humanitarian crises makes it more manageable emotionally and clarifies what would be appropriate actions for the public to take.

1.3. Moral significance

When imagining how to alleviate human suffering caused by humanitarian and international development issues, the UK public tend to apply moral principles and practices of care they are familiar with. With the exception of humanitarian emergencies, the public wish for a relationship with distant sufferers that is not mediated by NGOs, is embodied and ‘humanly’ meaningful. This desire of the public differs considerably from one of the dominant models currently offered by NGOs through which members of the public are primarily monetary donors and NGOs are the main conduit in the relationship between public and distant sufferers. The discrepancy between the model offered by NGOs and the one wished for by the public increases a sense of alienation between the public and distant sufferers as well as between the public and NGOs.
2. FOUR BLOCKS TO PUBLIC ACTION:

Unless the connectedness\(^1\) based on the qualities described above is not facilitated, people’s emotional, cognitive and moral channels become blocked, resulting in:

2.1. Emotional disconnection from humanitarian issues,

2.2. Cognitive distancing and prejudice

2.3. Moral parochialism.

A further and crucial block relates to the public’s relationship with NGOs.

2.4. UK public’s relation to NGOs: distrust and resentment

The research shows a widespread public distrust of NGOs and strong resentment towards some of their marketing techniques and practices.

By contrast, overall, communications, fundraising and campaigns professionals in humanitarian and international development NGOs believe that the UK public view them and the work they do positively. They believe that, on the whole, the UK public trusts humanitarian and international development NGOs and the sector more generally.

Because of financial pressure and increased competition within the field, NGOs communications have become more geared towards raising funds from the public. NGOs’ communications with the public increasingly draw on similar methods and forms of advertisers and retailers of commercial goods. NGOs conceive of the UK public primarily as monetary donors and only secondarily as potential ‘supporters’ or ‘followers’ of their cause and ideas.

\(^1\)This psychosocial connectedness refers to being aware that one is always and inextricably interconnected to others geo-politically, socially, and psychologically. It also refers to an on-going capacity for bearing the other in mind, which overcomes physical distance and separation. For a full discussion of ‘psychosocial connectedness’ refer to Seu, I.B. and S. Orgad (2014) Mediated humanitarian knowledge: audience reactions and moral actions – Final Report. http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychosocial/our-research/research-projects-current/mediated-humanitarian-knowledge-audiences-responses-and-moral-actions
This predominantly fundraising-driven approach is proving detrimental. With the exception of humanitarian emergencies, the public is expressing widespread fatigue and resentment to being targeted as monetary donors. They feel dehumanised and manipulated. Crucially, as soon as NGO communications are perceived as advertising, the public disconnects from the humanitarian message.

If NGOs seek to build a sustainable relationship between the public, ‘beneficiaries’ and NGOs, that can develop and deepen over time, it is essential that NGOs revisit their view of the public, and predicate it on understanding of and respect for the psychosocial complexities of the public’s responses.

3. THE DOMINANCE OF THE EMERGENCY MODEL WEAKENS NGOS’ EFFORTS TO DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Both NGOs and the UK public regard the emergency model – typified in DEC appeals for one-off money donation to a humanitarian disaster as ‘successful’. It is seen and shown to be effective in ‘cutting through’ and diffusing many of the barriers to people’s response and reaction to messages about distant suffering. However, the dominance of the emergency model weakens NGO efforts to cultivate the public’s long-term awareness of and engagement with international development issues. More generally, the model of emergencies - immediate, urgent but short-term and fleeting messages - governing NGO practice, seems ill-equipped to deliver the message about long-term change and cultivate long-term commitment to humanitarian and international development causes.
RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these findings, the research suggests that it is urgent that NGOs reflect on their current practices. Key to rebuilding trust and to repairing the relationship between NGOs and the UK public are three areas for reflection and rethinking:

1. **Thinking differently about the public**

   NGOs would benefit from rethinking the public as made up of complex individuals and supporters of causes rather than predominantly as donors. Such rethinking would involve complementing current efforts geared at making the public donate money, with a better understanding of how the public understands and emotionally responds to humanitarian causes, and what moral principles govern their responses. Practically, this would mean developing communications with the public that are not predicated solely or necessarily on monetary donation, but involve interaction and two-way flow of communication that foster and help maintain long-term relationship with the public.

2. **Rethinking connection and connectedness**

   NGOs would gain from reconsidering the over-use of the emergency model to communicate about humanitarian and international development issues. Instead, they would benefit from seeking possible new models, forms and genres of communicating with the public that foster and support connectedness between the public and humanitarian causes which are sustainable over time. NGO communications should evoke manageable emotions, be cognitively meaningful and morally significant to the public.

3. **Rethinking NGOs’ role as mediators**

   The public’s views and responses suggest a need for NGOs to possibly rethink their role, from gatekeepers and money-collectors to channels facilitating public’s relationships with individuals and communities in the developing world, that build on the public’s existing practices of care and respecting the public’s psychosocial sensitivities and moral frameworks.
I: Current Model

A. Distant Sufferer
B. The Public
C. NGOs

The ‘hit and run’ Approach

II: Recommended Model

A. Distant Sufferer
B. The Public
C. NGOs

The psychosocial prism
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The Final Report, Interim Reports, and more information on the project can be found on the project website:
http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychosocial/our-research/research-projects/mediated-humanitarian-knowledge

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