Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge: Audiences’ Reactions and Moral Actions

Final Report

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This report presents the key findings of the three-year research project entitled: Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge; Audiences’ Responses and Moral Actions (‘KARMA’), launched in 2010 by Dr Bruna Seu and colleagues, Dr Shani Orgad and the late Professor Stan Cohen (LSE). This project was kindly funded by the Leverhulme Trust: reference grant number F/07 112/Y.

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The views discussed in this report do not represent the views of the authors, but are the expressions of the opinions and observations communicated during the focus group discussions. This notwithstanding, any analysis involves a certain amount of interpretation and particularly with qualitative data, can never be entirely objective.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global public sphere is full of information about the suffering of distant others. Information about humanitarian disasters, wars and human rights abuses are often transmitted within moments of them unfolding. Thus, the old refrain to justify inaction – ‘I didn’t know what was happening’ – is hardly credible. People know, but don’t always act on their knowledge. Very little is known about what such ‘humanitarian knowledge’ does to us, as ‘symbolic bystanders’, and what we do with that knowledge. To help fill this gap, this three-year Leverhulme Trust funded study ‘Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge Audiences’ Reactions and Moral Actions’, (KARMA) was launched in 2010 by Principal Investigator Dr Bruna Seu (Birkbeck), Co-Investigator Dr Shani Orgad (LSE) and Consultant (the late) Prof. Stan Cohen (LSE).

Purpose of the Study:

This study sought to investigate the UK public’s understandings and reactions to humanitarian and international development issues and their communications, as well as to explore how NGOs plan and think about their communications. More specifically, this study was designed to answer the following questions.

A. What are the moral responses and reactions evoked in audiences by humanitarian communications?

B. What socio-cultural scripts do people use to make sense of humanitarian communications and what are the ideological, emotional and biographical underpinnings of these responses?

C. How do people come to think and behave the way they do in terms of their biography and their own history of engagement with humanitarian issues?

D. What emotions are evoked by humanitarian issues and their communications and how do people manage them?

E. How do audiences’ responses to humanitarian communications relate to those intended by humanitarian non-governmental organizations?

F. What assumptions and what conceptions of lay normativity direct NGOs communications?
PHASES OF THE PROJECT AND DATA COLLECTION

Preparation Meeting
Ten NGOs were contacted and asked to provide two pieces of communications that were used in subsequent focus group and individual interviews with members of the UK public as explained below. The participant NGOs included, ActionAid, Amnesty International, Care International, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Concern Worldwide, Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), Oxfam, Save the Children, Plan UK, and UNICEF.

Phase 1: Gathering views from the UK Public

182 participants took part in twenty focus groups. The focus groups were conducted in neutral settings, with members of the public, recruited through a market research company. The focus groups represented an even spread across three groupings: socio-economic (A, B, C1, C2, D, E), age (18-24, 25-65, 65+) and family formations (single, non-cohabiting relationship, cohabiting/married, with children, without children) across same sex and heterosexual, and geographically diverse, urban and rural areas of the UK (London and the South East, North East and North West, Midlands, Wales and Scotland). See Appendix A for demographic details.
During this phase, participants were shown the communications selected by the humanitarian organizations (see Appendix B for images of these communications and appeals). Following this, they were asked about previous exposure to similar communications and consequent actions; the content and perceived message; thoughts and emotions in reaction to the appeal; sense of personal responsibility and ability to help; and motivations for responding positively, e.g. donating money (see project website for full interview schedule). All focus groups were recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

Two types of analysis were applied to focus groups data:

Thematic analysis was used to map the themes that emerged from focus groups with members of the public. It was also applied to interviews with humanitarian organizations.

Discursive analyses were applied to create typologies of:

a) Discursive, ideologically laden, repertoires and moral scripts informing audiences’ moral responses;

b) Models of normativity and moral scripts informing humanitarian organizations’ work.

These analyses also considered how the two kinds of typologies (a & b) relate and interact with each other;

Phase 2: Gathering views from Humanitarian NGOs

Seventeen individual interviews were conducted in nine UK-based NGOs representing emergency and international development organizations: DEC, MSF, Amnesty UK, Oxfam, Save the Children, ActionAid, Care, Concern, and Plan. We were interested specifically in ‘externally facing’ professionals who address the UK public and are actively involved in aspects of the production and dissemination of communications on international development and humanitarian issues. Thus, interviewees included practitioners engaged in planning, designing and producing humanitarian and international development communications, across three key clusters of NGO departments: (1) Advocacy and Campaigns, (2) Communications, Branding, Media, and ‘Public engagement’, and (3) Fundraising, Marketing, Individual giving. We aimed at a mix of sizes and longevity of NGOs, positions/roles, and seniority of individuals.

The goal of the interviews was to explore how professionals in these NGOs think about their practice and experience of planning, designing, production and dissemination of their communications about humanitarian and international development causes. The interviews were deliberately open-ended to allow practitioners to describe what they saw as most central, important, and/or challenging and difficult in their practice. Interviewees were asked to describe their roles and practices, in particular in selecting how to communicate humanitarian and international development issues to the public; their goals; factors influencing the design
of their communications - particularly textual and visual elements; their target audience; their interaction with the media; the short and long term effects they hope their messages to have; and the challenges and opportunities they anticipate in their communication, e.g. audiences' trust in the message. This deliberate open-ended, flexible interview design was chosen to encourage practitioner-led narratives whose content and structure were organised by the interviewees. The analysis followed the themes that interviewees stressed in their narratives. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; thus, in the report observations sometimes are generalized, and details of specific campaigns and communications that might identify speakers and/or NGOs have been removed.

**Phase 3: Deeper Investigation of individual responses and attitudes**

Thirty nine individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 members of the public selected from the focus groups. During this phase participants were asked to elaborate on the responses discussed in the focus groups and to reflect on their experienced feelings. More specifically, participants were encouraged to speak freely about their understanding and experience of responding to others’ and personal suffering, responsibility towards others, helping and being helped, and about any topic they felt was relevant to the discussion (see project’s website for full interview schedule). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised.

Participants were interviewed twice. 1The first interview followed the BNIM (Biographical Narrative Interviewing Method). The second interview, informed by the biographical data gathered in the first interview and focus group, followed a semi-structured interview schedule to further explore individual participants’ prosocial behaviour and attitudes towards humanitarian and international development causes. It also investigated how individuals’ attitudes and patterns of behaviours had developed through their lives.

Individual interviews were analyses through a BNIM type of analysis and a psychoanalytically informed data analysis to explore the relationship between individuals’ emotional reactions and their biographies.

**Only finding derived from the thematic data analyses are discussed in this report.**

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1 With the exception of 3 participants who did not attend the second interview.
**Intellectual Framing and approaches to data collection**

Using a psychosocial approach to public responses implies an interest in factors that come from outside (socio-cultural and political) and ‘inside’ (biography, emotional life, psychodynamics and conflict), and how these psychosocial factors affect and shape how members of the public understand, respond and act in relation to humanitarian, international development issues and their communications.

As researchers we found it useful to think about how people receive information from NGOs through the metaphor of a psychosocial prism. When information from NGOs reaches the public, people don’t receive it passively or in uncomplicated ways. The communication is filtered through a ‘psychosocial prism’ which contextualises the information and makes it meaningful. The prism is made of beliefs and attitudes originating from various sources: global geopolitical, national and local, personal biographies, emotional and moral. These provide filters through which the public understand and respond to humanitarian communications.

We were not exclusively interested in which communications made people give money to humanitarian causes. Rather we wanted to get a sense of the landscape of thoughts and feelings evoked by humanitarian communications and how they relate to audiences’ routine thinking and actions that constitute people’s ‘everyday morality’. Additionally, we are interested in what the data tell us about what factors foster or interfere with connectedness between public and the distant sufferer.

The term connectedness invites the psychosocial idea of being components parts of ‘the same thing’. It highlights continuities, rather than separateness, and the inextricability of always being geopolitically, socially, and psychologically interconnected to others.

It also refers to an on-going capacity for bearing the other in mind, which overcomes physical distance and separation.
Summary of findings

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

• Although the UK public give generously to one-off appeals for natural disasters, they struggle with maintaining an on-going and meaningful connectedness with humanitarian and international development issues. This implies that mobilising public empathy is a necessary but not sufficient first step for turning caring into action to alleviate suffering caused by humanitarian and development crises.

• The public’s connectedness with humanitarian issues can be sustained through appropriate emotions, understanding and familiar practices of care. These qualities are summarised in the 3’M’s model (Manageability, Meaningfulness, Moral Significance), proposed in this report.

• If psychosocial connectedness is not facilitated, people’s emotional, cognitive and moral channels, connecting them to suffering others, become blocked, and thus prevent them from engaging in humanitarian practices.

• In particular, the study identified the following four blocks to action:
  1. Emotional disconnection from humanitarian issues
  2. Cognitive distancing and prejudice
  3. Moral parochialism
  4. Distrust of and Resentment towards NGOs, and of 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 their organisations positively. They believe that on the whole the UK public trusts humanitarian and international development NGOs and the sector more generally.

• Comparisons between the data sets suggest that, although NGOs have become proficient at the ‘emergency model’ of communication with the public, NGOs’ knowledge of what would support longer-term public engagement with humanitarian and international development causes seems to be very limited by comparison.

• The dominance of the emergency model in current communications weakens NGOs’ efforts to develop and sustain the public’s long-term commitment to international development related causes.
DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE TWO DATA SETS

I. UK PUBLIC VIEWS

The data provide ample evidence that the British public is generous and engaged in helping others and that this forms a key part of their identity.

There is clear evidence that members of the public actively engage in caring for others in their community, and that they also respond emotionally and sympathetically to distant sufferers.

However, there are clear indications that the public experiences difficulties in establishing and maintaining a meaningful sense of connectedness with humanitarian issues and distant sufferers over time.

In particular, although physical and social distance can be an obstacle to the public's capacity to fully relate to distant sufferers, it is the ‘human’ and emotional distance from them that the public resists. Overall, monetary transactions are perceived to increase human distance between the public and the sufferers.

When talking about caring, overall people did not differentiate between caring for the near and for the distant sufferer, thus suggesting that when people imagine helping they apply local practices and principles of care to distant suffering. Often these principles and practices were expressed through concrete examples of care.

In short, members of the UK public think, talk and behave as if the world were a small village.

The data also suggest that the public desires different ways to relate to distant sufferers from what is perceived to be offered by NGOs.

Furthermore, the study revealed clear evidence of marked and widespread:

- Fatigue in relation to humanitarian communications
- Presence and persistence of particular beliefs about humanitarian causes
- Cynicism and despondency towards current models of humanitarian actions

In sum the data draw attention to the ‘troubled’ nature of the relationships between

a. The UK public, distant sufferers and humanitarian issues in general

b. The UK public and NGOs.

We explore the two sets of relationships separately, even though the two are interconnected.

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2 For more detailed information on these data see Seu, I.B. (2014) Public knowledge, reactions and moral actions in response to humanitarian issues, to be found at: http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychosocial/our-research/research-projects-current/mediated-humanitarian-knowledge-audiences-responses-and-moral-actions, under ‘Work in progress’
1.1. BIOGRAPHIES AND TRAJECTORIES

Complex people give complex responses.

This section briefly presents case studies of two focus group participants, Ingrid and Caroline, who were subsequently interviewed individually using a biographical narrative approach. The two particular participants were selected for several reasons.

First, a survey on their behaviour and attitudes towards humanitarian and international development causes would show no difference between them. Demographically, the two participants are very similar. Both belong to the same socio-economic group (C1) and are single parents of grown up children. Caroline is a pensioner in her late 60s and Ingrid, in her late 50s, has just been made redundant from an administrative job.

Second, in terms of attitudes and behaviour, both care and have cared about humanitarian issues over time, both donate to telethon and have supported NGOs through direct debits and other means (thus questioning current beliefs that people are either one-off givers or on-going supporters). Both feel that we ought to help both here and abroad whenever possible. Both dislike and resent NGOs to some extent, albeit for different reasons.

However, behind what appear as similar profiles in terms of donations, the case studies present two very different overall approaches/responses to humanitarian and development issues, different trajectories that established the overarching attitudes of the two women, and a complex interplay between emotional, cognitive and moral factors identified across focus groups.

Ingrid

Ingrid presents herself as ‘not particularly caring’ and having been selfish when she was young. Emotionally, she defines herself as ‘a bit of a cry baby’, easily and deeply affected emotionally by others’ suffering. Her overall mode of connecting to the distant sufferer is through identification, empathy and pity.

In her childhood she was overlooked (if not neglected) and often sick. She lost her father through parents’ divorce at 16, followed by her attempt at finding an alternative family through joining the army straight from school. Ingrid married and had children young. For years she denied the clear evidence of her husband’s unfaithfulness, until he left her, and their three young children, to be with another woman.

Ingrid’s overall narrative of her life suggests that life tends to catch her unprepared, and that she finds the external world unsafe and threatening. Ingrid’s overall strategy has been to look for safety within close and familiar boundaries, as she expresses here:
“I’m sort of very much in my shell […] home, home, home, home’s is where I’m safe.”

“It’s a scary old world out there isn’t?”

In relation to humanitarian issues she feels helpless and easily overwhelmed. This is consistent with her overall view of the world as a dangerous and unsafe place. She resents NGOs for bringing the world’s disturbance within the safety of her world, and for upsetting her.

“You hear these awful things going on in Africa… the children might go off to school and never see their parents again… when you try and relate it to your family… it’s just horrendous you just can’t get your head around it so… you feel so helpless… and then you turn off the news and these things are in your house you can’t, it’s difficult to turn away… so I just have to turn it off.”

Caroline

Caroline was brought up and has been actively involved in caring for others since she was young. She defines herself as “not a particularly emotional person but I’ve got a very strong sense of justice: I’m very concerned with social justice ”.

Her overall mode of connecting to the distant sufferer is ‘justice’ based, unemotional, political and ‘solution-based’.

She reports being a tomboy as a child. Her mother comes across as emotionally unavailable and distant, while her father was emotionally present. Caroline’s father died when she was 15 and her mother fell apart.

Caroline left home to go to university, joined Amnesty International and was involved in other pro-social activities. This was followed by about 10 years working abroad.

She sees herself as “a citizen of the world.” She says: “I’ve travelled a lot and seen how resourceful people are and how they cope with things.” She feels that humanitarian issues are always political. She watches many documentaries about world affairs, particularly those offering an analysis of the political situation.

Caroline’s overall strategy has been to look outside of herself with curiosity and respect. She feels agentic and refuses labels of victim both for herself and distant sufferers.

At risk of oversimplifying things, there are some important similarities and differences between Ingrid and Caroline.

First, they seem to have two different points of entry into humanitarian and development issues: empathy and identification for Ingrid, politics for Caroline.
Second, both identify the need for context.

Ingrid, primarily connecting to humanitarian issues through emotions, feels that without the context she ‘can’t get her head around it’, identification is too treacherous and emotionally unbearable, and she is overwhelmed with helplessness.

Caroline, primarily connecting through politics and a strong sense of social responsibility, also wants context. This doesn’t have to be complex and verbose, but she thinks having the context is essential.

Third, they both dislike and resent NGOs.

**Ingrid** feels assaulted by the traumatic information – considering that ‘home’ is where she feels safe, and that the traumatic information penetrates this space of safety; that morally she feels she can’t ‘turn away’, and that she feels helpless, **her only option is to ‘turn off’**. She described her difficulties in scrolling down some internet information to get to the instructions through which she could donate and **seeing horrific pictures and how they are now forever in her brain**.

**Caroline** ‘switches off’ when she feels manipulated by NGOs – she feels that the emotionality in the communication is a way of manipulating people to donate and she resents this.

Caroline: When I feel that they’re trying to manipulate my emotions I switch off

Bruna: Why do you think they try to manipulate people’s emotions?

Caroline: I suppose, I suppose they think that’ll make them put their hand in the pocket, which I suppose initially it does but as I’ve said, later if you keep, you can’t keep hitting that same note, after a bit, you get a, you know, you get a hardening of attitudes and a backlash […] that’s when you want the political analysis, you know, well, you know, people can’t feed themselves ‘cause they can’t go to the fields because you know, the snipers for example, you need to know this, you know.

Summary and concluding remarks on the case studies

These case studies problematize the **drawing of simple causal links** between people’s apparent behaviour and deeper, more complex attitudes to humanitarian and development issues, and principles of altruism and social responsibility. They also present members of the public not as faceless statistics but as ‘real’ and complex people. Additionally, the richness and nuanced quality of people’s personal accounts contextualises the ‘broad brush’ findings from across the focus groups.
We argue that the differences, such as those exemplified by these case studies, are important in terms of fostering a sustainable connectedness between public and distant sufferers and longer term commitment to NGOs.

The biographical data gathered in this study offers the potential to begin to identify broad approaches in the UK public while profiling the complexities of the individuals. This could enable NGOs’ wanting to establish a different relationship with the public and foster their connectedness with humanitarian causes over time, to find diversified and appropriate ways of engaging members of the public.

1.2. UK PUBLIC – BENEFICIARIES RELATIONSHIP

Most participants differentiated between, and responded differently to, humanitarian emergencies and development issues. Overall, the former seemed to be received with less resistance by the public.

This is because in an emergency there is:

a) Evidence of usefulness of monetary donations.
b) Clarity of what is needed
c) Visibility of what can be achieved through aid.
d) Emergencies are perceived and responded to as discrete episodes expressing temporary needs and consequently making discrete demands.

In the case of poverty the problem is perceived to be:

a) on-going
b) not ameliorated by monetary aid.

One-off donations to natural disasters, particularly through telethons, were the only form of monetary donations that participants responded to positively. Telethons capture the kind of engagement most congruent with the emergency model as summarised by this extract.

Andrew: Commitment, that’s exactly right, not investment. But for a lot of people it’s a lot, I mean say there’s a massive flood, people need support and money and it’s a lot easier to say ³Q<oh well, I’ll ring this number and give now>Q. That’s going back to what I said about
Comic Relief: We have one night, I know people think it goes on for months around the year, but they have one night where they go “give us your money now,” and throughout the night they’re saying “we’ve got 25 million, 30 million.” It’s a lot easier for people to go “oh, it’s only a phone call” so they ring up and give their details, they pay and then they forget about it. I think a lot of people think like that and it’s a weight off their mind. They think “oh, I should probably give,” so then they do and then they think “oh, that’s all right, they’ll be fine now.”

Several factors contribute to make telethon the preferred form of monetary help:

- **the urgency and visibility of the sufferer’s need,**
- **ease of response** (both in terms of what is being asked of the donor and the ease of making that donation),
- **visibility and effectiveness of impact of the donation,**
- **the ‘feeling good’ factor** and
- **the capacity to then ‘forget about it’ – that is, to disengage**

Leaving aside the immediate effectiveness of telethons as a fundraising tool, Andrew’s quote, repeated in various forms across focus groups, provides important insights into the implication of the emergency model for the kind of relationships fostered by telethons and one-off donations, and the more problematic reasons why this model might be so successful.

The quote first highlights how lack of commitment in a key factor making one-off donations so attractive. It is in **this context of commitment not being required that the link between need and money is accepted by the public.** Indeed, the ease of **intervention and ease of disconnection** (whilst feeling good about disconnecting) is all part of this **fleeting connection with NGOs and distant sufferers** (“they’ll be alright now”). It’s a low maintenance relationship, because it doesn’t involve commitment. Importantly, the element of **cheap participation and the possibility of disengagement make this model universally attractive and very effective.**

**NGOs’ role** (both through the communication of the suffering and the delivery of the aid) far from being resented is **accepted and appreciated in this model.** If monetary donations is all that is desired then emergency model is unquestionably a successful way of approaching the public. Yet, as we will see, people are beginning to **build immunity to this model too.**
Emotions, Understanding, Everyday morality

EMOTIONS

All participants reported having strong emotional reactions to information regarding humanitarian and international development issues and overwhelmingly responded sympathetically.

Overall people accepted and expected to feel saddened and shocked by the knowledge of distant suffering, (in fact they responded with scorn and ridicule when they perceived a cognitive dissonance between the seriousness of the situation and its mode of communication), but some found the communications excessively traumatic and counterproductive

Despite the overwhelming expression of concern for distant suffering, and the generosity of response to humanitarian emergencies, the vast majority expressed an **inability and unwillingness to engage in a long term commitment and on-going relationship with distant suffering**. For some this was due to an unwillingness to make an on-going monetary contribution and a resistance to committing to on-going support of NGOs, but **many felt they didn’t know how to maintain a manageable connection with distant suffering**.

Those who did manage an on-going connectedness displayed an unemotional attitude underpinned by a mixture of duty, social responsibility and political awareness. For those displaying more emotional responses, an on-going connection with humanitarian issues was too disturbing.

*Genevieve:* I have to try and get it out of my mind because I could cry right now. [...] You know, terrible. Can a mother forget seeing her baby burned alive? It’s dreadful to read… I tell you, if I win the lottery I’d give them all money.

*Bruna:* Are you saying that perhaps it’s easier not read about it?

*Gita:* It is, isn’t it?, easier not to see it and not to read about it.

The input from **NGOs seemed to exacerbate** rather than ameliorate the situation as **participants felt that NGOs ‘dumped’ disturbing information on the public with no offered release apart from making disliked and disapproved monetary donations** or long-term support to the agency that most were not prepared to give.

**Cognitively meaningful; connecting through understanding**

Being able to contextualise the information and make sense of what is described in the communication seemed to make the emotional content more manageable, and to foster connectedness over time. For example:
Florence: I used to be really scared about hearing things, but I don’t now. I think I grew up as a person and started to embrace everything, so like if I see something on the news and I don’t understand it, I’ll ring up my dad and he explains it to me, so I understand.

For some participants, for example Caroline, communications without a minimum of contextualisation, is experienced as mechanistic and exploitative. Jonathan gives a very rich and detailed account of his cognitive and emotional reactions to reading one of the communications, from Amnesty International.

Jonathan: I saw that and I thought, I didn’t particularly think that was an amazing picture, but obviously, like, it’s okay, and then I turned over and saw the thing on the next thing, that artillery destroyer… At first I thought it was, like, fireworks or something, and then I read it and I was like, oh my God!!. That’s, like, a cluster bomb attack or something, isn’t it? And then you realise these people are running for their lives, and then that made me want to read all of this, and then what I realised is, as I was reading it, I didn’t feel like when I read these things. I didn’t feel like it was trying to get money out of me. I felt like it was trying to educate me, and so that made me want to read more. In fact, I didn’t finish reading all of it, because I didn’t have enough time, so if you’ve got a spare one, I’ll take it away.

Here we can see how the understanding gained through reading the communication strengthens and fosters connectedness between Jonathan and the distant sufferer. Although he is emotionally aroused by the information, he doesn’t want to switch off, but wants to know more.

Sustaining connectedness through known and valued practices

The study shows that although physical and social distance can be an obstacle to people’s capacity to fully relate to distant sufferers, it is the ‘human’ and emotional distance from them that the public resists.

Purely monetary transactions (rather than money itself) are perceived to be impersonal and to be transient thus increasing the human distance between the public and the sufferers.

Adrian: But (xx) as a charity is much less about giving money, because most of the time the people live in… it’s giving time. Yeah, giving time and effort, which can be a lot more rewarding, because when you give money at something, a lot of people said, you don’t know where it’s going, and it’s very easy to just throw money at things and just assume someone else will take it from there, but when it’s actually you engaging with the child, one to one, it’s a lot more rewarding and you feel like you are doing a lot more, better work.

Many participants had initiated or contributed to fundraising activities. Even though these resulted in money, the relational aspect of having the community/family/friends involved in a fundraising event, while holding the distant sufferer in mind, contributed to
a sense of a more ‘human’ relationship’ with the sufferer and a ‘connectedness’ that replicated familiar forms of caring.

Many participants talked of a wished relationship with the sufferer that was embodied, close, and relational.

Jonathan: I know other friends that have done this, that have gone to villages in Africa and like, say, help build a school or something, just for a couple of months, and I really feel that something like that is, it’s good for both parties, because you’re doing something, you’re giving your time and your effort, and probably your sweat and your tears as well, and there’s something physical that you can see, that’s come out of it, rather than just cash, into a big pot that you don’t know where it’s going.

Often participants compared money with giving ‘things’ which were charged with important symbolic significance.

Operationally, actually giving things to the distant other is impractical (e.g. costs and practicalities of shipping goods instead of using local resources, complexities of moving cargo across war torn borders or countries hit by natural disasters). Nevertheless, these suggestions speak of imagined and wished for relationships of care with distant sufferers, based on what is familiar and valued in participants’ lives.

Jonathan’s poignant phrase giving ‘your sweat and your tears’ speaks of a desire to connect with distant sufferers at a human level, through familiar modes. What is given in this case is literally part of oneself – this is how relationships are made in people’s minds.

In summary, when imagining how to relate to the distant sufferer, participants’ narratives displayed the following characteristics:

1. they use a language of care (rather than giving money) and are essentially relational (rather than transactional)
2. they speak of the sufferer as ‘needing more than money’ (hinting at the warmth and multi-layered nature of a caring relationship),
3. they involve wished for physical proximity (but not simulated)
Blocks to action

In contrast to the emotional, cognitive and moral factors that foster connectedness with distant sufferers, the study identified important blocks to connectedness and action to relieve distant suffering. In the absence of a concerted effort to foster connectedness through these three components, there is a closing down of these channels and their potential for cognitive, emotional and moral connectedness. There were many examples of sedimentation of affective and cognitive schemas/scripts through which the public relate to humanitarian issues and which interfere with responsiveness. Open channels then solidify into blocks:

Emotional blocks: ‘Turning away and switching off’.

Participants’ lived experience and their varying capacities for managing distressing knowledge plays a large role in determining what an individual might find emotionally manageable.

Alan: I can’t stand it, it hurts me so much I just flick away, it makes me feel sick in a way

What individuals judged to be ‘appropriate emotions’ and the motivation for evoking those emotions also seem to contribute to emotional blocks and resistance.

Hamish: Well, I don’t think it’s right, because they’re pressurising you. It’s like a guilt trip with you. Send you pictures of, like, young kids and all; you think, no, that’s…

Keanu: [the communication is] made for you to pity and put your hand in your pocket and give more than what you can afford.[…]

UM*: I feel… that’s what it is, isn’t it? It is a form of manipulation.

Keith: Blackmail more like.


Whilst for natural emergencies most participants expressed a sense of responsibility and willingness to help, with man-made and on-going humanitarian problems, participants’ responses were more ambivalent. The majority of participants believed that man-made problems were: endemic to the country in need, particularly in the case of African countries, that monetary or other kinds of interventions are futile and ill advised, and that the British public and government are not responsible or equipped to intervene.

An example of cognitive block is what a participant called ‘the Africa thing’ to refer to what
is quintessentially intractable in humanitarian causes, which is then used to justify not engaging with or responding to humanitarian crises.

Milly: “I think we’ve got used.. you know.. the Africa thing.

The use of Africa as shorthand captures these widespread perceptions of development and humanitarian problems, that ‘nothing ever changes’ and that humanitarian problems are intractable, chronic and stuck.

Hugo: they’ve been starving in Africa – I’m not being funny about it – since I were a kid. And, like, we’ve had Live Aid, Band Aid, whatever it is, but they’re still starving in Africa.

‘Common sense’ scripts of this kind were repeated across groups. They represent beliefs about the suffering other and the nature of humanitarian problems that, although decontextualized and often factually incorrect, circulate in public discourse and undermine connectedness.

**Moral blocks: Hierarchies of care and parochialism.**

When connectedness with humanitarian causes and distant sufferers is undermined, there is a closing down of connectedness into local care and people tend to prioritise blood ties or local communities. This is probably the best known of the four blocks and resonates with Peter Singer’s notion of ‘parochialism’.

### 1.3. UK PUBLIC – NGO RELATIONSHIP

A fourth block to action appeared to be related to a crisis in the relationship between NGOs and the UK public, referred to, with general animosity, in all focus groups.

Overall, participants’ comments made use of two distinct and contrasting models to characterise NGOs in positive and negative ways. Positive views of NGOs and their activities were expressed by descriptions of NGOs as Good Samaritan which, in ordinary parlance, is shorthand for pure altruism.

On the other hand, strong negative views were expressed in terms of accountability and the increased marketization of NGOs, what we have called ‘the Marketer’ model of NGOs. The two sets of views were not equivalent in their expression across the groups. Whilst negative views were continuously and consistently mentioned within and across different focus groups, the ‘Good Samaritan’ characterisation of NGOs only appeared in 8 comments.

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6 For more detail information on this please refer to Seu (2014b) *Public Perceptions of NGOs and Responses to Individual Humanitarian Communications*, to be found at:
and only in 4 out of the 20 focus groups. The data show deep public deep disillusionment and disappointment deriving from the recognition of the *Marketer* model being applied to and employed within the realm of humanitarianism. It appears to have negative visibility through flash cars, glamorous careers, inflated salaries, scandals. Agencies as marketers were viewed as greedy and self-serving, and NGO appeals and communications as self-advertising aimed at competing with other NGOs rather than ameliorating the plight of distant sufferers.

The data suggest that because of the expressed distrust in NGOs, and the lack of accountability and mismanagement of funds referred to by many, the damage to the NGOs’ relationship with the public cannot be simply addressed and repaired by NGOs demonstrating to the public their accountability of resource usage. Indeed, many participants blamed the size of the organisation for an alleged NGO’s disconnection from their original aims. These two kinds of disconnections – financial investment in the beneficiaries and a principled investment in the original values and aims of the NGO – were considered one of the key characteristics of the pure ‘business’ model. The intense and often passionate criticism of the *Marketer* model, and the distrust it engenders, were widespread and were expressed across all the demographic groups. This suggests that urgent attention should be given to the negative impact of this model on public trust and commitment to humanitarian NGOs and causes more generally.

### 1.4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS – UK PUBLIC

Two sets of polarities have criss-crossed the data from the UK public:

Short-term vs long-term engagement and responses

Natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies vs ongoing international development causes.

Many of the themes emerging from the data touch on these polarities.

For example, we have seen how monetary donations are not intrinsically signifiers of engagement and connectedness with humanitarian and development causes. On the contrary, data suggest that it is the fleeting participation and ease of disconnection that makes responses to humanitarian emergencies, in particular telethons, particularly successful.

If monetary donation is all that is desired, then emergency communication, provoking emotional arousal and ease of response, followed by disconnection, is proven to be the most successful. However, if NGOs wish to foster a longer term connectedness between

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7 for more detailed information refer to Seu, I.B., Flanagan, F. and S. Orgad (in press) *The ‘Good Samaritan’ and the ‘Marketer’: public perceptions of humanitarian and international development NGOs*. See also Seu, I.B. (2014b)
the public and humanitarian and international development causes, then the two case studies illustrate how short term responses tell us very little about members of the public’s complex and nuanced attitudes and understanding of both emergencies and long term development issues.

The data illustrate how public connectedness with humanitarian and international developmental causes can be sustained through three factors, summarised in the 3 ‘M’ model.

The 3 ‘M’ model.

In order to understand the complexity of responses, it is important to go beyond surveys data and gain deeper knowledge of both socially available scripts, broad brush attitudes and patterns of responses nationwide, and further insight into how attitudes to humanitarian issues fit into individual participants’ lives.

If it is desirable that a relationship between the public, the distant sufferer and NGOs should be sustained and deepened over time, it is crucial to know about these dimensions and the interplay between them.

The data from focus groups and individual interviews with members of the public suggest that people desire and respond to humanitarian knowledge that is emotionally Manageable, is Meaningful and furthers their understanding of humanitarian causes, and is Morally significant to them. This is captured by the 3’M’ model. We suggest that through these three characteristics, public connectedness with humanitarian issues can be sustained.
Manageability of emotions: Arousing people’s emotions is essential for caring responses. These emotions must be appropriate and people need to be able to manage them. While people expect and accept to feel sad and upset by humanitarian communications, individuals need to be able to make sense of the upset and to feel it has integrity of purpose. If perceived to be manipulative and exploitative, it leads to desensitisation and resentment towards NGOs. If the upset is not manageable and overwhelming, 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, and contextualisation.

In summary, humanitarian knowledge, recommended actions and communications should be:

1. Emotionally Manageable. Emotions are vital to connectedness, but connectedness is sustained only when the emotions involved are ‘appropriate’ and not overwhelming.

2. Cognitively Meaningful. Connectedness is sustained through understanding both the context of the suffering, and the individual’s potential helpful impact on the sufferer.

3. Morally significant. The connectedness wished-for by members of the public is based on familiar and valued practices and principles of care. The proportion of importance of these three channels varies from person to person, depending on many psychosocial factors, but they seemed to apply to all participants in different measures.

2. NGOS’ VIEWS

This part of the report discusses the main findings from a thematic analysis of interviews conducted between February and May 2012, with 17 professionals in nine UK-based NGOs. The discussion focuses on the perspectives and experiences of NGOs in communicating to the UK public on humanitarian and development issues.

The interviews with NGO professionals revealed individuals and organizations working under immense pressures and constraints including limited resources, financial cuts, public scrutiny and criticism, government pressure to demonstrate impact, and a work culture driven increasingly by data and auditing. The following discussion seeks to reflect on some of the ways in which these professionals talk and think about their practice within this context, and to highlight ways in which current approaches to communicating with the public might be strengthened and improved in the context of these rather turbulent times and taking account of the ongoing fundamental changes within the sector.

In analysing the interviews we identified three types of relationships that NGO practitioners considered central to their practice of humanitarian communication: (1) UK public and
beneficiaries; (2) NGOs and the UK public; and (3) NGOs and their ‘beneficiaries’. The term ‘beneficiaries’ was employed by most of the people interviewed, and is thus used in this report. The presentation focuses on the first two of these relationships, which were most prevalent in interviewees’ accounts. The third relationship between NGOs and affected communities was mentioned in only some of the interviews and was least discussed overall.

2.1. UK PUBLIC – BENEFICIARIES RELATIONSHIP

Representing far-away ‘beneficiaries’ to people in the UK

All NGO professionals reflected on the relationship between the UK public and ‘beneficiaries’, and their thinking about ways to strengthen it and make it more effective. The following comment from a Communications director exemplifies what emerged repeatedly in almost every interview:

'It's so far out of people’s realms of what is their reality that they can’t possibly begin to imagine.'

NGO professionals express a sense of a huge distance between the UK public and beneficiaries – a distance that it is their (the NGOs) goal to bridge or reduce through their communications. For instance, almost all interviewees talked unprompted about NGOs’ portrayal of ‘beneficiaries’, and how these depictions influence public perceptions of the developing world and the distance or proximity people feel in relation to beneficiaries.

On the one hand, there is a strong sense - which was highlighted in most of the interviews - of a weariness and fatigue with an over-rehearsed debate about how to depict the developing world and global poverty. A Communications director captured this feeling when he described the debate over how NGOs portray and ought to portray their ‘beneficiaries’ as ‘a very well-flogged horse’. At the same time, he, and most other interviewees, recognized the significance of this issue, and expressed their dissatisfaction with existing formulas, patterns and ways of representation. Some professionals even expressed a sense of crisis around how NGOs portray the developing world and communicate to the UK public issues of international development. For example:

People parody our advertising...We communicate generally in quite formulaic ways (Marketing director).

People think that nothing’s changed because we’re showing them that nothing’s changed. It’s a helpless story (Campaigns director).

It is important to note that when NGO professionals spoke of the challenges in engaging the public with their cause, or of a crisis of representation, they referred exclusively to long-term international development issues. There seemed to be a consensus that there is no problem engaging the UK public with and encouraging them to donate to
humanitarian emergencies. Fundraisers in particular emphasized that non-complex emergency is a ‘successful' model - a much simpler story to tell, where there is no (or hardly any) gap between the message and people’s response (measured solely by monetary donation), compared to issue-led stories, for example, about poverty.

Organizational tensions

Various interviewees discussed the tensions within their NGOs between fundraising, and communications and/or advocacy and campaigns departments. They explained how this tension within the NGO often ‘gets in the way' and affects the way the NGO communicates. Specifically, interviewees described a tension between, on the one hand, a short-term orientation, emphasized by fundraising and marketing professionals, which tends to push for portrayal of beneficiaries as needy and vulnerable, based on the assumption that such depictions ‘pull at the heartstrings’ and translate into money donations. Such portrayals are driven by immediate short-term goals of raising awareness and raising money.

On the other hand, campaigns and advocacy professionals have a long-term orientation, focused on changing perceptions, nurturing a different imagination of development, and dispelling myths, which tends to emphasize the need to depict beneficiaries as situated in the contexts of their communities and engaged in activities geared towards improving their situations. Most of the people we interviewed feel that this tension between opposing orientations and ‘logics' of these departments is very difficult to reconcile. A senior Campaigns director described it as a split between ‘two parallel universes':

At the moment it's two parallel universes. …There are attempts in many NGOs, including my NGO, to try and bridge that a little bit. […] but even though we would like at this point to change it, the results and the data tell us that it [long-term communication of development issues that does not focus on severe neediness] doesn’t work.

A few people were of the view that, in light of increasing financial pressures, their and other NGOs are resorting to emergency communication – short-term, urgent, often very emotional, shocking communications focused on severe neediness and vulnerability – at the expense of the long-term model of communication.

‘Un-mediating’ the encounter with beneficiaries

Practitioners across the different departments described how, as a consequence of these internal and external pressures, they invest efforts in fostering and strengthening the relationship between the UK public and beneficiaries in new innovative ways, as a crucial basis of their operations. In particular, a recurring theme in the interviews was professionals’ efforts to symbolically create a sense among UK audiences of ‘being
they’ – as if they shared the time and space of beneficiaries. The following quotes refer to this endeavour of NGO communications:

If I were able to achieve just one thing it would be to take all the people in the UK and show them real poverty in the global south (Communications director).

We made a film in 3D … because we really wanted people to feel that they were in the village… really try to make feel that they were in there, in the hut. (Communications director).

2.2. UK PUBLIC – NGOS RELATIONSHIP

How the UK public perceives NGOs: Trust and disillusion.

A second central relationship that was discussed in all of the interviews is that between NGOs and the UK public. There seem to be contradictory perceptions among NGO practitioners of the relationship between their NGO and NGOs more generally, and the UK public. On the one hand, most professionals believe that the UK public generally views NGOs and the work they do positively. They described trust and loyalty as central aspects of audiences’ relations to their own NGOs, and to the humanitarian and international development sector. The following is a typical comment expressing this view:

The audience … they’ve got a lot of trust in [our NGO], and other big NGOs and the like. They trust you guys know what you’re doing, and you spend the money as you see fit (Fundraising director).

On the other hand, practitioners admitted that there was a problem – some even spoke of a crisis - in the way the UK public relates to NGOs and international aid. For example:

We have disillusioned people by overselling (Communications director).

[Make Poverty History]… essentially you made a promise that cannot be delivered; although it was a very catchy thing, very inspirational. But actually you realize… that kind of works against you, doesn’t it? After one year we disbanded; poverty isn’t over yet… and poverty cannot be ended because it’s too complex (Campaigns director).

Like in the above quote, almost all professionals that we interviewed reflected on the public’s perceived disillusion with international aid and the general intensified scrutiny of NGO operations and practice following campaigns such as Make Poverty History.
The journey

As a consequence of the public’s perceived disillusion with and distrust of the humanitarian aid sector, professionals described the efforts they and their NGOs invest in building and/or rehabilitating the relationship with the UK public. Specifically, almost all interviewees described the relationship they seek to build with the UK public as a ‘journey’. The metaphor of taking supporters on a journey casts the NGO-public relationship as one that grows, matures and endures over time. Interviewees often used the idea of a journey to suggest an alternative to the ad-hoc emergency-related communications that NGOs produce, and as an alternative to the fundraising-driven approaches and ‘transactional’ engagement activities which end quickly.

Yet here too, there is a tension, which is connected to the tension mentioned earlier, between short-term and longer-term orientations of departments within NGOs. On the one hand, there is a desire among NGOs to develop a long-term relationship with the public, and NGOs are actively looking for ways that might enable that. On the other hand, the short-term model of communication – associated mainly with emergency appeals, is frequently seen as more powerful and effective. A Marketing director captured this when he described one of his team’s goal as engaging the audience in a “short conversation”; ‘if there are too many layers of thought and analysis that can get in the way’ he said, ‘that works against us’, ‘we [therefore] need to be a short conversation’. This often involves converting an ongoing long-term issue into a snappy, fleeting communication that conveys urgency and a short-term solution (and that fits the news media formats), but lacks complexity and discourages audiences’ long-term engagement.

It seems particularly interesting and important that several interviewees used the metaphor of a journey combined with more explicit language of intimacy and connection with the public, as a way of explaining the need to repair a ‘broken’ relationship and regain the public’s trust in their NGOs, and in humanitarian aid more broadly. They emphasized that the ‘journey’ with the public has to be based on ‘tuning in’ to audiences’ needs and wants. The following comment from a Branding director in an international development NGO nicely illustrates this:

> It’s about them [audiences] believing in us [the NGO] and what we give them by way of a communications experience that will bring them back to us…that will make them love us I suppose in hippy terms.[…] We need people to give us money. We need our business to work. It’s what we add on top of that that will make us memorable, that will create this love in our audiences, that will bring them back to us.

This Branding director describes the NGO’s goal as making the UK public love the NGO; and alludes to the attempt to win back its audiences’ loyalty. Thus, there is recognition, at least among some professionals, that something has gone wrong between NGOs and the public and that the relationship needs to be repaired.
As the first part of the report on the findings from audience research shows, this is an important recognition and it is positive that some NGOs already recognise that there is a problem in their relations with the public. However, while the effort to engage the public and sustain their commitment over time is no doubt crucial, the model that some NGOs seem to have adopted to achieve this raises some critical questions.

**Avoiding challenging and too disturbing information**

More than half of the interviewees suggested that taking the public on a ‘journey’ and creating intimate (e.g. ‘love’) relations with them implies the need to avoid challenging them or discomfiting them, at least initially. As the relationship with the public develops, it can cope with more difficult feelings and information, but it is important that they are not introduced in the opening phase. For example:

> We’d love to help them [audiences] see that they can be political without it threatening them; that takes time. So yes, we would, and we do that so we don’t whip people against money, in other words, softly introduce the notion that they can actually make change politically, but lots of people don’t feel that comfortable with it (Branding director).

> [We want to] appeal to the feeling, to the emotion; but not to the, not to the emotion that is about guilt or shame… – you don’t want them to have that feeling; you want to touch on the positive feeling (Campaigns director, emphases added).

> …but not in a judgemental way, it’s saying to [our audience]…you have the agency to help do something about that. So I don’t know that it would be layered with guilt actually and that’s certainly not how we’re trying to position it (Communications and campaigns director, emphasis added).

Of course, there are many reasons why NGOs have come to favour this communications approach and relation to the public. Some interviewees cited research that suggests that people are put off by disturbing messages and images and that this type of information causes people to switch off, rather than get engaged. In addition, importantly, underlying this approach is the increasing pressure to raise funds. NGOs seem to have learnt from the consumer market - interviewees mentioned companies and brands such as Sky and Apple from which they gain inspiration for their communications and campaigning models and strategies. They learnt from these companies that in marketing their product (which one practitioner compared to food) they must not challenge or discomfit audiences – as these quotes illustrate so vividly– they should approach their audiences softly and gently and elicit positive feelings.

Consequently, communication of humanitarian and international development causes, which essentially is about confronting spectators with the misfortune, injustice and unequal conditions of far-away others, appears to stand for something quite different in the imaginations of some NGO professionals today. Rather than an uncomfortable and,
potentially, even disturbing encounter aimed at eliciting compassion and assistance, several professionals described their effort as a **cautious attempt to engage the UK public in caring about and for beneficiaries** by eliciting positive emotions and emphasizing equality, **comfort, pleasure and ease**, ultimately, in order to create what one Fundraising director called a ‘win-win situation’, whereby both donors and NGO are satisfied and ‘feel good’. We conclude by questioning whether this approach and the models of communication and the ‘journey’ that it supports, do indeed create the ‘win-win situation’ that this Fundraising director described.

### 2.3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS - NGOs

Based on the analysis of interviews with NGO professionals, **four limits** to the ‘journey’/communications model of UK public-beneficiaries and NGO-UK public relationships were identified.

1. **SIMULATING PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY IN NGO COMMUNICATIONS:** There was a prevalent notion among NGO professionals that understanding and caring for beneficiaries is conditioned upon ‘getting closer’ and becoming their intimate. Professionals therefore seek to create through their communications a sense of intimacy and closeness between viewers and the far-away ‘beneficiaries’. The problem with simulating proximity and intimacy with the ‘other’, through examples such as reality-TV type campaigns or 3D films is that it reinforces the idea of physical closeness to beneficiaries as idealized, while obviously NGOs can’t actually enable audiences (watching at home) to achieve this.

2. **SEEKING A PLEASURABLE ‘JOURNEY’:** The model of taking the public on a journey with NGOs that was described by interviewees, overall seems to favour pleasurable, comfortable and non-threatening relations. This type of ‘soft’ and pleasurable journey is geared towards containment and even erasure of negative emotions, such as rage, indignation, shame and guilt – those emotions, that propelled past successful humanitarian campaigning, advocacy and communication (as well as fundraising) and remain pivotal to future humanitarian communication.

3. **LACK OF RECIPROCITY BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND BENEFICIARIES, AND NGOs:** The (mediated) journey offered to audiences with beneficiaries and NGOs is non-reciprocal: supporters are invited to go on a ‘journey’, but the relationship with NGOs and with beneficiaries is not truly two-way. The forms of interactions supporters are offered with NGOs, and with beneficiaries, are currently rather limited, and focus on (one-way) monetary donation.
4. **TENSION BETWEEN LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM ENGAGEMENTS**: The current communication models that NGOs seek to develop struggle to reconcile the desired long-term dimension of the ‘journey’, with the short-term fleeting forms of emergency communication. The preference is for emergency-oriented genres and forms, mainly for fundraising reasons. A considerable part of NGO communication is comprised of ad-hoc, short-term appeals for monetary donation, that focus on short-term, low-intensity relations with beneficiaries and the issue. These types of appeals for one-off money donation to a humanitarian disaster are seen as ‘effective’ in ‘cutting through’ and diffusing many of the barriers to people’s reactions to messages about distant suffering. However, in the long run, the dominance of the emergency model weakens NGO efforts to cultivate the public’s long-term awareness of and engagement with international development issues.

3. **COMPARISON OF DATA SETS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this section we bring the analyses of the data sets into dialogue with each other to identify synergies and discrepancies. It addresses the last of the project’s research question: how do audiences’ responses to humanitarian communications relate to those intended by humanitarian organizations? The Recommendations contained in the final section are based on this comparison.

**Short term vs Long term**

There seems to be agreement between NGOs and the UK public on the effectiveness of the model currently used by NGOs to communicate to the UK public about humanitarian emergencies. NGOs successfully manage to convey a sense of emergency, providing information on sufferers’ immediate needs, and showing effective ways of responding to humanitarian emergencies, including what the UK public can and should do. This, coupled with ease of intervention and fleeting connection, makes emergency communications, telethons in particular, successful in engaging audiences and enabling them to act through donations.

However, although the element of cheap participation and the possibility of disengagement make this model universally attractive and effective, we identified signs of a developing public immunity to this model. Emergency ‘inflation’ in NGO communications reinforces audiences’ sense of being bombarded with messages demanding that people help, and promotes fatigue, resistance and withdrawal.
The 3 ‘M’ model

This study highlighted how the UK public responses are more complicated than what NGOs seem to assume.

Manageability of emotions: Arousing people’s emotions is essential for caring responses. These emotions must be appropriate and people need to be able to manage them. Overall, members of the public are willing to accept and manage difficult feelings, in contrast to NGOs’ tendency towards using non-threatening ‘gentle’ approach and efforts to avoid challenging or discomfiting their audiences.

Meaningfulness: Concise and contextualised information enables people to understand distant suffering and what would be an 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 appropriate actions for the public to take.

However, emergency-oriented genres and forms of communications generated by NGOs most often translate into short-term and often decontextualized appeals for monetary donations that foster a short-term relation between the public and humanitarian issues.

Additionally, while NGOs’ emphasis is on simulating symbolic closeness between the UK public and beneficiaries, members of the public expressed their appreciation of NGO communications that they felt educated them (without necessarily making them symbolic ‘intimates’ of far-away people).

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 that 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, that is personal, embodied and ‘humanly’ meaningful. NGO efforts of simulating proximity and intimacy with the ‘other’ fit in with and feed the public’s desire for an embodied, close relation to those far-away others whom they help, while accentuating and highlighting that actual closeness between giver and receiver is impossible. Furthermore, 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.
Blocks to action

In the data from the UK public we identified an important connection between the factors fostering connectedness and blocks to action that map onto the 3 ‘M’ model.

We found that emotionally unmanageable humanitarian knowledge leads to emotional disconnection and self-protective defensiveness.

In terms of understanding and action we found that, without enabling contextualisation, connectedness is blocked through the use and reinforcement of social scripts and common sense beliefs – e.g. ‘the Africa thing’ - that distance members of the public from sufferers.

Finally, without the offering of actions that are morally significant to the public, actions are blocked through increased parochialism.

We identified a 4th block to action in the problematic relationship between NGOs and UK public. This was the area of most marked discrepancy between the two data sets.

The Humanitarian Triangle

The forms of interactions that supporters are offered with NGOs, and with beneficiaries, are currently rather limited, and focus on monetary donation – a frustration that was vocal in the focus groups.

The following is a schematic representation of what happens between the three key actors in the humanitarian dynamic: distant sufferer, NGOs, the UK public.
The standard setup is that NGOs inform the public about the needs of the distant sufferer inviting the public to respond to the distant sufferer via the NGO.

NGOs want the public to relate to distant suffering, but the public perceive NGOs as wanting to mediate this relationship. This is not just in terms of NGOs telling the public about distant suffering (which the public gets through other media), but also as offering themselves as conduits for channelling the public responses (particularly monetary) back to the sufferer. This model is resisted and distrusted.

This model also involves a highly targeted interaction with the public, perceived as primarily instrumental, and little NGO engagement with the public’s complexities. We have called this the ‘hit and run approach’, which the public perceives as dehumanising. This mode of relating to the public echoes what Finding Frames call the transactional approach that keeps ‘the public at arm’s length’. The public negative perception of this is encapsulated in the ubiquitous comment: ‘all they want is my money’.

Due to financial pressure and increased competition within the field, NGOs communications have become ever more geared towards raising funds from the public. NGO communications with the public increasingly draw on methods and forms similar to those of advertisers and commercial retailers. NGOs conceive of the UK public primarily as monetary donors and only secondarily as potential ‘supporters’ or ‘followers’ of their cause and ideas. This predominantly fundraising-driven approach is proving detrimental. With the exception of humanitarian emergencies, the public in our study expressed 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.

The study suggests that an alternative, more relational, model (labelled Model 2) would be more desirable:

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This relational model is predicated on ways of **building relationships that people are familiar with**, and is in contrast with the current overwhelmingly transactional model, which is perceived as de-humanising.

Although this might appear anachronistic in a world ostensibly shrunk by technology and social media, people (literally) think in terms of the world as a small village. As such the model is rather simple, but it can be read as an **attempt to understand the Other through imagining and recreating familiar modes** – e.g. school reports, personal letters of thank you, keeping in touch, going back to visit.

Hence **the humanitarian triangle becomes a site of reproduction of social values – a space where people rehearse values associated with being a good person.** In this context money is perceived as an inadequate, dehumanising and vilifying option.

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, predicated on the understanding of and respect for the psychosocial complexities of the public's responses.

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 the fostering of long-term commitment to humanitarian and international development causes.
4. 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:

**Thinking differently about ‘the public’:**

NGOs would benefit from rethinking the public, from seeing them primarily as donors to seeing the public as made up of complex individuals and supporters of causes. Such rethinking would involve complementing current efforts geared at making the public donate money, with a deeper understanding of how the public understands and emotionally responds to humanitarian causes, and the moral principles that 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. It is essential that people find NGO communications to be emotionally manageable and furthering understanding. Equally, the responses that the communications attempt to evoke should also be manageable and morally significant for the public.

There is room for reflecting on what seems to be NGOs’ move towards a ‘cautious’ and ‘soft’ approach in addressing the public. NGOs’ important historical role as agents of social transformation may suggest the benefits of other approaches to addressing the public that best convey and support this role.

**Rethinking connection and connectedness:**

NGOs could gain from reconsidering the over-use of the emergency model to communicate about humanitarian and international development issues. Instead, other models, forms and genres, which foster and support connectedness between the public and humanitarian causes which is sustainable over time, might prove more beneficial in the long term. These communications should evoke manageable emotions, be cognitively meaningful and morally significant to the public.

**Rethinking NGOs’ role as mediators:**

NGOs would benefit from considering alternative communication approaches which represent beneficiaries with dignity and sensitivity, but do not seek to simulate intimacy with and physical proximity to them. 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 global south, that build on the public’s existing practices of care and respecting the public’s psychosocial sensitivities and moral frameworks.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In line with our conclusions and recommendations, we have identified two areas that would benefit from further research.

1. The two case studies presented in this report illustrate how short term responses tell us very little about members of the public's complex and nuanced attitudes and understanding of both emergencies and long term development issues. Further investigation of this type is needed into factors fostering the UK public's connectedness with humanitarian and international development causes, so that the connectedness could be sustained over time.

2. Further investigation is also needed into the factors that could enable a different and more constructive relationship between NGOs and the UK public. In particular, research into what could rebuild public trust in NGOs, as well as a more detailed understanding of the desired model of relationships in the humanitarian triangle, would be highly beneficial.

The biographical data gathered in this study offers the potential to begin to identify broad approaches in the UK public while profiling the complexities of the individuals. This could enable NGOs' wanting to establish a different relationship with the public and foster their connectedness with humanitarian causes over time, to find diversified and appropriate ways of engaging members of the public.
APPENDIX A:

Focus Groups – Demographic details

To enable identification of the focus group from which the data originated, all participants from group A were given a pseudonym beginning with A, all participants from group B one beginning with B and so on.

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Appendix B: NGO Communications Appeals

The following are images from the 11 NGO communications packages that were used during the focus group interviews with members of the UK public.

1. Oxfam

[Image of an Oxfam flyer with a picture of a child and a message about devasting hurricanes]

Devastating hurricanes are about to strike the world’s poorest people – we need to act urgently to save them.

Dear Mr. Barrow,

“This time it is worse – much worse. The only thing I was able to save was my one year old son. Emanuel, told and schemed.

His morning, last words were about the terrible hurricanes. But not this time again and again last year – an awful disaster that lasted or totally ruined 1,000 people.

Now, as I write these words to you, hurricane season has begun again around the world. Desperate people in developing countries are facing a tremendous challenge to recover the inmates of food, water, deadly illnesses and destruction that will follow. We have to help them get ready to withstand this daunting catastrophe – and I want to show you how we can.

(continued...)

Be Humankind Oxfam

2. Save the Children

[Image of a Save the Children flyer with a picture of a child and a message about enough is enough]

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
Relentless bombing is killing a child every three hours.

How many more must die before this stops?

We have to act now.

Text ‘CEASEFIRE’ to 018199

Save the Children

[Image of a Save the Children flyer with a picture of a child and a message about enlisting help]

[Image of a Save the Children flyer with a picture of a child and a message about affordable and easy]

[Image of a Save the Children flyer with a picture of a child and a message about affordable and easy]
3. Disasters Emergency Committee

4. Plan UK
5. Actionaid

What you can do about poverty

Around 87 million children don’t even go to primary school.

6. Actionaid
7. Doctors Without Borders (MSF)

8. UNICEF
9. Save The Children

FIRST THE LAYER OF FAT UNDER THE SKIN BREAKS DOWN. THEN MUSCLES START TO WASTE AWAY. WITHOUT NOURISHMENT THE LIVER, SPLEEN AND KIDNEYS BEGIN TO FAIL. THE VITAL ORGANS, IRREPARABLY DAMAGED, CONTINUE TO SWELL AND FINALLY STOP WORKING ALTOGETHER. THIS IS HOW STARVATION COULD KILL 400,000 CHILDREN IN NIGER.

Poor rain and high food prices have left Niger on the brink of a food crisis. Without aid, an estimated 400,000 children could die this summer. Save the Children have people on the ground, but we need your help. Just £30 could save a child through one of our treatment programmes. Please make a donation today.

Call 0800 8 595 023 or visit savethechildren.org.uk

10. Amnesty International

Amnesty International UK
FREEPOST NAT201123
Hampstead
Hertfordshire
NW3 2XZ

Please use your liberty—
to promote life

“The struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma is a struggle for life and dignity”

Aung San Suu Kyi
11. Actionaid

Sponsorship starts with...

12. Amnesty International

SOME PEOPLE CAN NEVER FORGET THE HORRORS THEY WITNESSED.