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This particular article was inspired by my participation in the Big Sleep Out on 7 December 2019. The Sleep Out is an annual fundraiser that encourages members of the public to come together on a cold winter's night in December to sleep outside in Trafalgar Square, London. One thread running through the night was the importance of all the fundraisers and the donations they had raised. Indeed, several individuals who were previously rough sleepers, would introduce themselves between the celebrity performances to thank fundraisers for their continued monetary support. While I do not dismiss the fact that the money raised is important, I believe there are instances when it is necessary to resist the temptation of ironic solidarity.

I had two very sobering thoughts during the course of that night. The first: this was not a glimpse into another's reality. It was a privileged point of observation and sympathy designed to promote a feeling of doing good through consumerism. The second: walking only five minutes away from the secured venue, I overheard an altercation between some very drunken homeless individuals. Although I could not make out their entire conversation, I did overhear them talking about the event and the awareness being raised. That awareness, ironically, was for individuals in their circumstances, but they were not allowed within the gated premises. They were still the ungrateful and unworthy victims in our capitalist system. Let us not deceive ourselves on this: they were the spectacle that we didn't want to see.

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Cover image: Sacks of food prepared to enter Gaza strip at the Kerem Shalom border crossing Israel, 2008. Eddie Gerald / Alamy Stock Photo

ABSTRACT

This article discusses neoliberalism in the context of humanitarian communication with a particular emphasis placed towards the *self*. The neoliberal self combines features of entrepreneurship and consumerism with the contemporary discourse of 'doing our part'.

To combat such criticism, an argument has been advanced that we must be more open to the experiences, histories, cultures, and identities of individuals that are different from ourselves. This does not mean that we should accept injustice in the name of culture. This also does not mean that we should narrow our understanding of difference whereby problems of the other 'just happen to be'. It does mean, however, that dialogue is a crucial component of understanding needs and realising that not only does justice look different in other communities, but within our highly globalised and capitalist societies no problem is solely self-determined.

Self-reflexive knowledge that discloses the sources and limits of power is therefore a key factor in moving away from a system that requires one to be identified as poor. Crucially, what this article hopes to advocate is a form of communication that is centred on a normative ethics of care.

Introduction

At its simplest, humanitarian communication frequently calls upon Western audiences to care for, and act in solidarity with, distant others (Barnett and Weiss, 2008). Given that humanitarianism is seen as one of the most important of all ethical acts, communication within this field is a tool that is rightly under continuous scrutiny. From the early emergence of 'poverty porn' and shock-effect campaigns to the use of positive imagery that overlooked the agency of the sufferer, it seems as if no form of communication within this field will ever do justice to the suffering other (Orgad, 2017). Post-humanitarian communication is no different. The market logic used in this communication assumes that emotions belong within a moral economy of scarcity, whereby instrumentalising the self is now a profitable means of increasing donations. Shani Orgad (2012, p. 78) aptly states that humanitarianism has become an "ethics of click, donate and temporary grand gestures" based on a universal, common-sense definition of 'doing our part'. This common-sense approach does not rely on any particular political ideology, except for a reductionist understanding that people suffer, and we have a moral obligation to relieve suffering. Indeed, the focus of post-humanitarian communication is primarily on the neoliberal subject, who is constructed as a form of social capital advancing social change. This paper critiques this use of neoliberalism.

The first objective of this article is to outline how post-humanitarian appeals construct an ideal victim to convince Western publics to support their causes (Chouliraki, 2010). More specifically, this article examines how the tendency to view people in terms of one dominant identity (i.e. women and children from the Global South as poor, backward and illiterate) represents a gross misappropriation of the power dynamics between the Global North and Global South (Dirlik, 1994). Crucially, we live in a world where there is remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. Many of these persisting issues involve poverty, famines, violations of basic needs and liberties and the suppression of political freedoms, as well as worsening threats to the sustainability of our environment and social lives. All of these are issues that can be observed, in some capacity, in rich countries as well as poorer ones.

Rather, the primary aim of this essay is to illustrate the point that a myriad of power dynamics underscores our global issues. Unless we appreciate that human beings need to be located against their cultural and historical backgrounds – with their actions interpreted through systems of meaning accredited to their environments – we not only misunderstand our benevolence but also do humanitarianism a grave injustice. Indeed, suffering within our complex world cannot be dismissed using the simplistic economic rationale of gathering donations, as beneath the images of distant sufferers and the amount raised through fundraisers there are real injustices and needs that must be adequately addressed. Thus, the hope of this discussion is to engage with contemporary debate and contribute to a rethinking of how market logic is used within humanitarian communication.

The Marketing of the Self

Narrative lies at the heart of humanitarian communication, specifically in instances of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) working in the Global South. These NGOs use narrative techniques to communicate messages to potential donors in the affluent Global North. Post-humanitarianism campaigns rely on this narrative to draw audiences into the appeal by highlighting problems caused by the suffering and how one can help ease them (Cameron and Haanstra, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2010). This shifts the focus onto the neoliberal values of selfhood, a sentiment perfectly captured by slogans such as "Will you transform lives today?" and "In a time of crisis, one small act can make you a hero". Within this section, this article will seek to elaborate on two main objections towards the reliance on neoliberalism within humanitarian communication. The first objection relates to the construction of an ideal victim, and the second focuses on what Chouliaraki calls "ironic solidarity".

Our first argument is consistent with an observation made by many scholars that, put simply, women and children predominantly constitute the face of distant suffering (Mohanty, 1984; Fahmy, 2004; Dogra, 2011). This assertion is given noteworthy credence in David Campbell's (2007) content analysis of photos published in newspapers during the Ethiopian famine of 1984, which uncovered that mothers and children were featured in humanitarian communication more than any other subject. In particular, most of these images relied on the subject looking away from the camera, having blank facial expressions and displaying a passive demeanour. The most obvious implication to draw from Campbell's analysis is that photography seeks to reinforce the viewer's sense of power as a stark contrast to the hopelessness of the subject. These images encourage empathy because not only is the connotation of the innocence of a mother and child one that we can resonate with, but these frames also maintain the "deserving poor" narrative in a manner that does not make the audience feel uncomfortable (Orgad, 2017; Ong, 2019). It is within this context that the women-and-children group becomes ubiquitous across all representational sites of humanitarianism and advocacy. However, not only is this thinking contested within post-colonial and feminist scholarship, but these essentialising images of third-world women and children also become familiar emotive symbols to Western donors and form a regime of truth (Mohanty, 1984, 1991; Fanon, 1993; Dirlik, 1994; Hall, 1997; Fahmy, 2004). As Campbell fittingly concludes, these visual displays convey a geopolitical perspective that "both manifests and enables power relations through which spatial distances between self/other, civilised/barbaric,

North/South, developed/underdeveloped are produced and maintained" (Campbell, 2007, p. 380).

Let us take a closer look at this discourse by using the example of the Nothing But Nets campaign run by the United Nations Foundation. This is a global campaign whose mission is to raise awareness and funds to fight malaria. In 2017, Nothing But Nets used the medium of virtual reality to narrate the story of an 11-year-old girl named Amisa, a refugee living in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Tanzania (United Nations Foundations, 2017). Amisa encapsulates all the features of a tragic hero, as far as the Global North audience is concerned. Although she is intelligent and driven, several personal tragedies pose threats to her and her family. The military has taken her father, and two of her six younger siblings have now tested positive for malaria. As a survivor of malaria herself, she is grateful to have moved into the camp, where she hopes her two younger siblings can also fight the disease. By constructing the ideal victim, NGO communication simultaneously controls the voice of the injustice and suffering. A case in point is summed up in the following form of gratitude expressed by Amisa in the VR:

> "I love learning. I want to be a nurse when I grow up. To help deliver babies and keep people safe. But I have to stay healthy if I want to stay in school. That is why I am so grateful to get our new mosquito nets. The health workers say that the nets help prevent malaria. I wish everyone here could have one." (United Nations Foundation, 2017)

Amisa neatly exemplifies a common binary construction of the Global South girl, one where she is both a victim and a tool for development. This binary permits the Global North audience to view her as worthy of attention and help (Fahmy, 2004; Dogra, 2011). One crucial element of this doctrine is that these stereotypes of the Global South victim emphasise a few memorable and straightforward characteristics that reduce everything about the person to those traits, thus exaggerating and simplifying identities and freezing these individuals in time (Mohanty, 1991; Hall, 1997; Dogra, 2011). Needless to say, this article is not promoting that we must dismiss the fact that some of these women and children in the Global South do suffer severe forms of violence. However, it is equally certain that not all women and children in the Global South need saving by the West (Mohanty, 1984; Fahmy, 2004). This article is also not objecting to the descriptive use of a universal grouping of characteristics for political science purposes. For instance, it is perfectly acceptable for women and children from the continent of Asia to be descriptively characterised as 'women and children from Asia'. As Chandra Mohanty (1991) similarly contests, the problem with this universal projection arises when the women and children from Asia become a homogenous sociological grouping that symbolises a shared history of suffering and oppression. In this case, we simultaneously say far too much and too little (Mohanty, 1991; Dauphine, 2007). Indeed, this homogenising projects a simplistic account of innocent victims of problems that 'happen to be'. These constructions ignore structural issues, they permit the dynamics of power to remain in the dark and, most importantly, they romanticise the notion of saving (Dirlik, 1994; Cameron and Haanstra, 2008; Mason, 2011; Ong, 2019).

This brings us to the second objection of neoliberalism, which focuses on Chouliaraki's notion of irony. Chouliaraki (2012) uses a discussion of ActionAid's Find Your Feeling campaign to highlight the epistemic shift in humanitarian communication from a politics of pity to one of ironic solidarity. What I find most intriguing about this account is the analysis of how the pleasures of the self have now come to shape our ethical motivations. As mentioned previously, the context of the suffering is almost irrelevant to the construction of the worthy victim. Indeed, returning to the example of Amisa, at no point is any attention paid in the VR experience to the complex terrain around Tanzanian refugee camps and the remnants of the Burundian Civil War (1993–2005), which caused many to flee their homes. This is crucial because the neoliberal form of post-humanitarian communication is concerned with calling upon us as moral actors to help (Chouliraki, 2010). However, it is almost impossible to expect anyone to respond to a call that remains founded on an incomplete understanding of the sufferer's needs. The outcome of this neoliberal portrayal is that the feeling of the self becomes the focus of the intervention (Chouliaraki, 2012). Instead of engaging debates, or a deeper understanding of our complicities in preserving global injustices, we confront a barrage of resistances and common-sense assertions so widespread that it hinders the formation of counter-hegemonies (Foucault, 1984; Tester, 2010; Nash, 2018).

It is important to briefly halt the current argument to highlight a theoretical discussion of the panopticon (Kapoor, 2005). Panopticism refers to the phenomenon of self-policing and is a concept first introduced by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Under the watchful eyes of the community, participants will perform roles agreed upon by an audience (typically the elites within society) by living up to an expectation or carrying out a socially warranted duty. The panoptic character implies that power relationships are used to determine our social norms. This affects how people interact and how information and knowledge are conveyed and exchanged. Foucault uses this logic to conclude that a society's members end up self-disciplining; that is, the society will internalise socioeconomic, cultural and patriarchal codes to establish agreed-upon moral norms (Foucault, 1984; Hunt, 1993). Prima facie, when we 'do our bit' for society – either by clicking on a hyperlink, creating a GoFundMe page, buying ethically, hosting a bake sale or taking part in a sporting event – we feel that we have fulfilled our moral duty (Mason, 2011). Indeed, our current social norms accept these actions as a promise of moral

redemption in exchange for minimal effort, and this becomes our common-sense norm for enacting social change (Baaz, 2005; Tester, 2010). Through this form of communication, the audience is encouraged to focus on the self and what they can do, as these particular acts of consumption or solidarity are not selfish but are instead about helping to ease suffering (Brough, 2012; Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015). Post-humanitarian communication then becomes justified through the doctrine of consequentialism. Therefore, we are morally obligated to act because doing something is always perceived as better than doing nothing.

The crucial point to be taken from the above analysis is the idea that the wealthy Global North donors 'do their part' is, therefore, a fabricated narrative; it is one that continues to be reiterated in a form of fiction passed on from politicians, the media, the public and NGOs (Tester, 2010; Mason, 2011; Brough, 2012). Against this background, we take pride in the philanthropic notion of us helping them and 'doing our bit'. Indeed, it is certainly not an accident, I think, that my earlier objections to context and needs can be overlooked using this simple assertion of 'doing one's part'. Rather, this form of 'doing one's part' is graciously summed up by an NGO worker interviewed by Orgad:

> "The most important thing is the work we do is good; increase in funding means we can do more work and that is the most important thing – and people on the ground, are they interested in these ridiculous intellectual discussions about how they're being portrayed and your post-colonial theory from Sussex? Thank you very much! They're much more interested whether you get them some food or not." (Orgad, 2017, p. 104)

Undoubtedly, many will agree that his is a compelling argument. It is widely accepted that it is absolutely frustrating to live in a world where millions are dying unnecessarily from a lack of nutrition, medical attention or social care; where women and girls are denied education simply because of their gender; where certain communal practices breed acute misery; and where millions of individuals remain below baseline levels of absolute poverty. Donations provide quick solutions to reducing these frustrations, and falsely lead us to think we are doing good. Indeed, common-sense humanitarianism ultimately sustains itself based on the premise that we all want to be seen as doers, as active participants working towards changing our global order for the better (Tester, 2010; Brough, 2012). Undoubtedly too, the money raised through donations will do some good, but it will also project a false understanding of the world. Yet, the central concern is that the current debates focus too heavily on the projection of the self and self-transformation. Here, the individual is not expected to invest time and effort in learning about the plight of those they seek to help. Nor is one supposed to articulate claims in political terms regarding, for example, how resources should be spent or how to bring about sustainable change.

Instead, the focus is on how much one can raise and how one can feel like a better person. In essence, these neoliberal fictions harbour the false illusion of the affluent, self-sufficient and modern Global North individual whose donations will change the world (Mohanty, 1984; Dirlik, 1994).

This narcissistic, inward form of post-humanitarian communication acts only as a BAND-AID® hiding the fundamental structural inequalities and our complicity in perpetuating injustices.

From rhetoric to action: Uncovering the power of humanitarianism

As discussed in relation to panopticism, every society has their own common-sense norms that influence individuals' choices. People approve of behaviour that conforms to the dictates of their morality and disapprove of conduct that violates established norms (Foucault, 1984; Hausman, McPherson and Satz, 2017). Those who violate common-sense norms based on the 'doing our part' narrative typically experience guilt or shame. However, what is the point of circulating images that require people to be identified as poor and dismiss the complexities of our global power relations? The answer is not to stop NGO communication or fundraising efforts, but rather lies in a more sophisticated understanding of our actions and non-actions.

In his conception of power, Bourdieu suggests that power is culturally and symbolically created and continuously re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure that he calls 'habitus' (Hunt, 1993; Bourdieu, Translated by Peter Collier; 2020). The critical point in his analysis is that habitus is not fixed or permanent, and thus can be changed. Indeed, attempting to tackle current stigmatisations without challenging the underlying economic and social inequalities is futile. Put simply, the crucial point here is that changing the world for the better will inevitably involve carrying out the task of clarification, contextualisation and analysis (Shome and Hegde, 2002). This clarification does not promote superficial readings of representation, whereby we all begin discussions by stating you are a person with X identity and Y beliefs and Z history. Put another way, it is unlikely to hold out on the promise of constructing a perfect solution to the issues around representation. This has been, and perhaps will always be, a matter of endless debate. However, what this article hopes to advocate is a form of communication that is centred on a normative ethics of care. As a practice, the ethics

of care responds to needs, and builds mutual concern and trust amongst individuals (Hopgood, 2008; Barnett, 2008). It is not the same as benevolence or the narcissism advocated through neoliberal values.

Rather, relationships of care must be reciprocal and built on a mutual understanding of needs. As post-colonial scholarship has reiterated, venomously, in recent debates, there are significant dangers inherent in perspectives that believe it is self-evident that all human beings have some interests in common (Spivak, 1988; Dirlik, 1994; Shome and Hegde, 2002). Through open dialogue, this mutual understanding can be captured to prevent a strict imposition of alien beliefs and practices on supposedly 'backward' cultures (Sen, 2000). Similarly, Virginia Held provides a comprehensive analysis of the ethics of care and aptly captures the position that I hope humanitarian communication will begin to seek, whereby "to be a caring person requires more than the right motives or dispositions. It requires the ability to engage in the practice of care, and the exercise of this ability" (2006, p. 49). This is desirable in working towards building more authentic relationships of learning and moving away from the commodification of suffering for short-term benefits, a sentiment that must be captured in all forms of humanitarian communication.

It is true that arguments made in the last few paragraphs have represented a move towards a normative understanding of humanitarian communication, and on that basis, may be criticised for being too generic. However, before ending this discussion, let me highlight a practical example of post-humanitarian communication that perfectly captures the perspective being advanced.

At the end of 2004, there was a significant international humanitarian response to assist those suffering in the aftermath the Indonesian earthquake and the Indian Ocean tsunami (Redfield, 2008). Following this, there was a moral outpouring of donations ushered in by the international community. At the height of this moral commitment, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) announced that they would no longer be seeking donations for this specific cause because they had already far exceeded their fundraising goals and any further donations would have been worthless. They understood their limitations; despite the tremendous suffering from the natural disaster and the huge levels of destruction, there was relatively little disease. The organisation instead used their communication to ask contributors to allow funds to be redirected to less well-publicised projects. Following the analysis of Peter Redfield, it is fair for us to understand that suffering will, unfortunately, always continue; however, by halting fundraising, MSF understood their role and power within humanitarianism (Redfield, 2008). Indeed, without ignoring the importance of economics, the usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do; it is an instrumental tool to help us achieve long-term substantive freedoms (Nodding, 1986; Sen, 2000; Hopgood, 2008; Aristotle, Ross and Brown, 2009). It is important then to emphasise this instrumental use of wealth, as there are plenty of other significant influences on our lives. Rather, the impact of wealth on our lives is surely contingent upon other factors. Therefore, what is particularly admirable from this account of MSF's actions is their rejection of our norms around common-sense humanitarianism, that confuse charitable donations with the alleviation of widespread institutional destitution, which often promises far more than it can ever deliver.

Fundamentally, it is safe to say that post-humanitarian communication that relies on the construction of solidarity and celebrates the neoliberal self-gaze fails to highlight the radical differences and inequalities between the Global North and Global South, and injustice and global exploitation more broadly (Chouliaraki, 2010, 2012; Brough, 2012). Failure to address problems around the self as an expression of care for the Global South 'victim' results in the acceptance of the general commodification of social relations, which prevents a complete understanding of suffering or injustice within our global society (Tester, 2010; Dirlik, 1994; Shome and Hegde, 2002; Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015). Indeed, it is common, but often a mistake, for NGO campaigns to advance the view that social change flows directly and immediately from the exposure of donors' fundraising efforts. Instead, social change presents the biggest gap between rhetoric and behaviour. Post-humanitarian communication may promise and promote rhetoric advancing change but translating this into sustainable action takes time. Admittedly, it is indisputably easier and more appealing to accept post-humanitarian communication. Nonetheless, it is difficult to understand why this should be regarded as a criticism of the position advanced in this article, rather than as a sharp critique of the need to change our common-sense understanding of humanitarianism: a change that is sorely needed if we are to maintain humanitarianism as the ultimate ethical act (Barnett and Weiss, 2008).

Conclusion

To summarise, this article has focused on the implications of using neoliberal values of the self within post-humanitarian communications. It has been argued that instead of producing outcomes that allow vulnerable individuals to gain greater control over their injustices, the social relationship maintained through this narrative requires the beneficiary to be reduced to a reflection of their plights. Such neoliberal portrayals view Global South beneficiaries as homogeneous entities of unfortunate problems that just happen to arise, when in reality, in our globalised world, our actions and consequences remain profoundly interconnected (Dirlik, 1994; Chouliaraki, 2010, 2012). Indeed, the rhetoric of just 'doing one's part' is

commonly employed to provide short-term technical solutions without seeking to challenge or contest our norms or understanding.

In essence, beneath all the victim narratives and neoliberal selfhood, there are real people whose suffering deserves to be recognised, not because they are working towards an education or are children or women but because humanitarianism demands it. If humanitarianism is the ultimate ethical act, our communication must respect humanity as an end in itself (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). Such ends are linked to the idea that we have obligations to others, which include helping others through an ethics of care that moves beyond mere benevolence and that is founded upon dialogue of mutual understanding to achieve long-term solidarity – a sentiment that must be reflected within humanitarian communications.

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