View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by LSE Research Online

LSE Research Online

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Shani, Orgad

Visualizers of solidarity: organizational politics in humanitarian and international development NGOs

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

Original citation:
Orgad, Shani (2013) *Visualizers of solidarity: organizational politics in humanitarian and international development NGOs.* Visual communication . ISSN 1470-3572 (In Press)

© 2013 The Author

This version available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/50080/
Available in LSE Research Online: July 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Visualizers of solidarity: Organizational politics in humanitarian and international development NGOs

Shani Orgad

To be published in *Visual Communication* (2013)

Abstract

Discussion of the visual politics of solidarity, in relation specifically to the representation of suffering and development, has been grounded in analysis of images. This paper seeks to expand this debate by exploring the organizational politics that shape and are shaped by these images. The paper is inspired by production studies in the cultural industries and draws on interviews with 17 professionals from 10 UK-based international development and humanitarian organizations, who are engaged in planning and producing imagery of international development and humanitarian issues. It discusses how power relations, tensions, and position-taking shape the arguments and choices made by NGOs producing images of suffering and development. I focus on two arenas of struggle about how to visualize solidarity: (a) *intra-organizational politics* – specifically tensions within NGOs between fundraising and/or marketing departments, and communications, campaign and/or advocacy departments, and (2) *inter-organizational politics*: the competing tendencies towards convergence, cohesiveness, and collective identity of the humanitarian sector, and competition, distinction, and divergence between organizations on the other. I show that NGOs' visual production is an area of conflict, negotiation and compromise, and argue for the crucial need for attention to organizational politics in the production of visual representations of distant suffering in order to uncover diverse and competing motivations, and the forces driving current humanitarian and development communications.

Keywords

NGOs, organizational politics, humanitarianism, positive/negative imagery, images of development, fundraising, interviews

Introduction

Public images of development, violence, suffering, and trauma call on their audiences – predominantly in stable western societies – to create 'a community of interest with the oppressed and the exploited', to use Arendt's (1973: 88) definition of solidarity. Considerable critical debate centers on how these public images conjure up ideas of distant others and of humanity, and cultivate solidarity with distant strangers at particular times and in particular places. Critics such as Boltanski (1999), Chouliaraki (2006), and Silverstone (2007) highlight the promise of visual representations to awaken social consciences, cultivate and enact solidarity, and consequently affect political change. They argue that spectators' encounters with visual representations of distant suffering, e.g. with news images of atrocities, or NGO humanitarian disaster appeals, create virtual communities of witnesses and constitute ideas of shared humanity and solidarity with distant others (Sliwinski, 2011: 5). However, for Cohen (2001), Linfield (2010), and Moeller (1999), and perhaps most notably Sontag (1977, 2004), the project of capturing suffering and violence visually is doomed to fail. The 'representational qualities [of images] always fall short' (Hunt, in Sliwinski, 2011, p. xii), are always insufficient, and inadequate to facilitate ethical relationship between self and other, and to cultivate solidarity.

Research shows how the cultural, political, historical, and discursive contexts and effects of visual representations of distant suffering shape, and are shaped by, power relations. Several studies highlight how visual representations of distant others - news depictions of humanitarian disasters, NGO imagery of development , are rooted in post-colonial discursive 'regimes of truth', which they in turn reinforce and transform, in the form of orientalizing and dehumanizing portrayals of victims and people in the developing world (Chouliaraki, 2006; Dogra, 2012; Lidchi, 1993; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004). Recent work (Chouliaraki, 2011, 2012; Dogra, 2012; Nash, 2008; Richey and Ponte; 2011; Vestergaard, 2008) demonstrates how global market capitalism, and especially neoliberalism, constitute the fundamental conditions and logic that underpin and shape humanitarian and development communication. This communication, particularly its visual aspects, reproduce and legitimize this logic as the only way to think and feel about, and act for distant others (Chouliaraki, 2011). The meanings of

solidarity and the possibilities for its creation are altered: 'solidarity becomes, ultimately, an effort to seduce these [western] publics into making a "profitable" choice, by picking the better brand' (Chouliaraki, 2011: 371).

This paper contributes to this critique by focusing on the organizational politics of the production of images in NGOs' communications of international development and humanitarian issues. It builds on production studies in the cultural industries involving mediated communication (e.g. Caldwell, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Miller, 1997) and on the small but significant research on NGO communication production (Benthall, 1993; Dogra, 2012; Lidchi, 1993; Cottle and Nolan, 2007). The analysis is based on in-depth interviews, conducted between February and May 2012, with 17 professionals in 10 UK-based NGOs.[1] The selected NGOs represent the two main branches of humanitarianism that historically have dominated thought and practice: the 'chemical' branch, of humanitarian emergency-focused organizations, and the 'alchemical' branch, which includes international development and human rights organizations which aim also to eradicate the root causes of suffering (Barnett, 2011). The latter tends 'to avoid the discourse of humanitarianism in favor of the discourses of relief and development' (Barnett, 2011: 10).[2]

The selection of interviewees was guided by an interest 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. It aimed at a mix that covered a range of sizes and longevity of NGOs, of positions/roles, levels of seniority and of different departments. The latter included fundraising, communications, campaigns, marketing, branding, media relations, and advocacy. Interviewees were assured confidentiality and anonymity; thus, in the analysis observations sometimes are generalized, and details of specific campaigns and communications that might identify speakers and/or NGOs have been removed.

The interviews aimed at exploring the practitioners' thinking about their goals, experiences, and practices of communication planning, design, production, and dissemination. The discussion is based on thematic and discursive analysis of the interview transcripts, focusing on

interviewees' reflections on the production of visual imagery – a recurrent theme in all the interviews.

I conceive of NGOs as 'visualizers of solidarity' that offer spectators visual frames through which to imagine and to create bonds with the other. I explore the politics that shape and are shaped by NGOs' practice of 'visualizing solidarity' and provide insights into some of the institutional paradigms, power relations, tensions, and considerations that shape NGOs' visual representations, and which these representations in turn affect.

Organizational politics in the field of humanitarian and development communications

Like the cultural and creative industries, NGO communications center on 'the activity of symbol making' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 9), and there are comparable divisions and distinctions in the process of cultural production. However, in contrast to the creative industries, which are capitalist businesses mainly focused on making profit, NGOs are Not-For-Profit (NFP) organizations, but at the same time NGOs are dependent on the 'success' of their communications to raise funds. This dependency is reinforced by the current financial climate of scarce resources and fierce competition for money donations (see Orgad and Vella, 2012). Thus, although NGOs are NFP organizations, economics are a determinant of their operations, and, as mentioned earlier, the corporate logic, discourses, and styles have an increasing influence on their communications. In light of these similarities between cultural production in NGO communications and the cultural and creative industries, it seems useful to link these literatures to inform the analysis of NGOs.[3]

However, there are two important differences between the research of the cultural industries and that of NGOs' production. First, the primary activity of the creative industries is the production of mediated communication for commercial profit, while NGOs aim at a political, social, and ethical goal. Communication is a branch of NGOs' broader operations and organization, and is directed to eliciting care and compassion, and cultivating solidarity, often through financial transaction. Second, the study of NGO practice presented here is not interested in analyzing labor and its processes and logics, the social class of creative workers, or

creative and professional autonomy and exploitation, which is a preoccupation of much research on the cultural industries.

A central influence of production studies in the cultural and creative industries on the present analysis is the emphasis on how the mass-mediated symbolic goods that managers produce are bound up with organizational tensions and imperatives (e.g. Caldwell, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Miller, 1997). I show that the field of NGO production of humanitarian and development communications constitutes an arena of struggle between and among individuals, departments, and organizations for symbolic power. Despite a tendency towards 'institutional isomorphism', i.e. convergence among similar approaches to communicating about distant suffering (Dogra, 2012), my analysis of NGO professionals' thinking about their practice reveals the ongoing attempt to create distinction and difference. The interviews were characterized by practitioners' continuing relational constructions: the positioning of themselves/their organizations against colleagues/other NGOs (their positioning against other producers and institutions is beyond the scope of the present paper). The interview data suggest the contradictions and tensions within and between NGOs that characterize their work influence their visual production in significant ways.

Struggles over how to visualize solidarity take place within two (related) contexts. The first, 'intra-organizational politics', involves tensions between individuals and departments within NGOs; the second, 'inter-organizational politics', involves NGOs' interactions and relations with other NGOs. There are many other aspects of these politics whose discussion would require separate analysis and which are highlighted briefly in the conclusion as topics for future work.

Intra-organizational politics

Fundraising vs. Communications: Two parallel universes?

In his pioneering study of NGOs' communication of humanitarian aid, Benthall (1993) describes NGOs as arenas of competing interests and views. He observes that the NGO's most stressful internal tension is between 'the need to campaign and raise funds within the domestic

context…and the need to maintain an institutional ethos appropriate to the organization's "deprived" clientele and the professional practice of the field personnel directly concerned with them' (Benthall, 1993: 56). This ambivalence is highly central in the production of images of distant suffering. It is manifested vividly in the structural relations between the fundraising and marketing departments, and the communications, campaigns, and advocacy departments, and their conflicts over how to visualize the NGO cause and its calls for solidarity with distant others.

Fundraising is a professional operation whose primary goal is raising funds and ensuring diverse sources of income in order not to be dependent on one or a few donors (Benthall, 1993: 57). For most NGOs, donations from individuals are only one source of money; the percentage of funding provided by the public differs greatly among NGOs (for a detailed discussion of NGO fundraising and marketing operations, see Benthall, 1993: 56-9). Fundraisers and marketing professionals conduct market research and/or draw on research about donors and their motivations. In deciding about messaging, in relation either to a particular appeal or advertisement, or to the NGO's broader communication strategy, the fundraisers' major interests lie in the messages and imagery most likely to engage audiences emotionally and induce donations. As Benthall (1993: 78-9) explains: 'fund-raisers have to woo donors, play on their feelings as well as their thoughts, channel their concern into a particular commitment and loyalty to a particular "label"'.

Communications is an externally facing function whose stakeholders might include policymakers, foreign governments, civil service, partner organizations, the media, and the UK public. Its goal is to connect these stakeholders with the cause and work of the NGO through a range of communications activities and platforms including media appeals and campaigns and the NGO's online presence. The structure and composition of NGO communications departments varies greatly. Big organizations, such as Oxfam and Save the Children, have big communications teams, in usually separate departments but working closely with the campaigns and advocacy departments. In smaller organizations, the same person or team may be responsible for communications, campaigns/campaigning, and advocacy.

Campaigns/campaigning and advocacy include responsibility for political campaigning and/or policy and social change campaigning, education, and lobbying advocacy. One campaigns manager described the job as essentially 'making decisions about the political direction' of the NGO, in relation to its objectives of changing the power balance or the balance of views about a particular issue, and its political positioning vis-à-vis development, aid, and government.

A core part of fundraising teams' work with communications, campaigns, and/or advocacy teams, is the planning, production, and dissemination of communications addressing the public. This 'meeting point' can be contentious particularly in relation to decisions about particular messaging and visual presentation of campaigns and/or ads, appeals, and communication materials (e.g. newsletters). Professionals in all those departments are interested in engaging audiences. However, for communications, campaigns and advocacy practitioners, a major simultaneous concern is maintaining what they consider to be ethical representations of their 'beneficiaries' (another contested term) and enhancing the identity and ethos of the organization. This concern can be often in tension with fundraising's pressure to meet money donation targets.

The temporal orientations of these departments are often contradictory. Communications, and especially advocacy and campaigns, are interested in the long-term effects of their messaging, and particularly in the 'alchemical' branch whose ambition is to drive long-term social changes. Fundraising and marketing are more short-term oriented and their success is often defined by achieving immediate fundraising targets. This short-term temporality is captured by a marketing director's description of his team's goals as that of engaging the audience in a 'short conversation'.

This might seem a crude characterization of the structural divisions and relations within NGOs. However, this internal organizational tension emerged as very central to professionals' thinking and practice, and difficult to reconcile. A senior campaigns manager in one of the UK's biggest development NGOs described it as a split between 'two parallel universes':

> The public will see us in terms of our media work, our media advocacy work. But the

> public also will see us from our fundraising work. And there is not necessarily a correlation between [the two]…
> Fundraising is about the gravity of need…On the other hand, in campaigning and communication, it's not about the gravity of the basic need; it's about the gravity of the structural problem, which has to change, and therefore we approach you as somebody who might support the campaign: take action, use your voice – this is not about money, this is about justice.
>
> At the moment it's two parallel universes.

This tension and lack of dialogue between fundraising's emphasis on the gravity of the need and the interest of communications and campaigning in the gravity of the structural problem is inextricably intertwined with the 'negative'/'positive' imagery distinction which has animated lively debate in the NGO community over the last decades.[4] 'Negative imagery' depicts the victims as needy, passive, helpless, and vulnerable and often includes shocking and distressing images. Since the 1970s, this representational paradigm has been criticized as patronizing, orientalizing, and dehumanizing. It is argued that images of starving children with 'flies in their eyes' deprive people of agency and dignity, decontextualize their misery, and perpetuate a distorted view of the developing world as a theater of tragedy and disaster (Cohen, 2001). From the 1980s, largely in response to this criticism, the position of 'positive imagery' emerged, which strives to depict distant others as self-sufficient, dignified, active agents, situated within their communities and social contexts. It is argued that images should contribute to a broader, complex story of social justice and progress, and evoke the idea of solidarity with distant strangers based on justice rather than need and its relief.

Fundraising and marketing professionals tend towards stressing the gravity of the need and favor the so called 'negative imagery' of 'emaciated children' and 'flies-in the-eyes' (catchphrases used repeatedly by interviewees when referring to this representational paradigm). To support this visual preference, fundraisers often cite data from both in-house research and external sources (e.g. market and academic research), which frequently confirm

that it is the image of the emaciated child rather than the active, self-sufficient, empowered individual that is most likely to translate into emotional engagement and result in more successful fundraising. The ad agencies and marketing companies that many NGOs employ, reinforce this 'data-based' logic which often supports use of 'negative' representations. For example, various interviewees referred to the influence of Direct Response Television (DRTV), an advertising agency designed to elicit responses from consumers directly to the advertiser through telephone calls, websites, or text messages. It promises its clients, NGOs among them, 'cost-effectiveness' and an 'immediate and always measurable' response (www.drtv.co.uk). A fundraising manager describes the typical visual product DRTV designs for NGOs as a way of 'bringing people in': 'You have a direct ask. … It's normally a story about an individual, like a child who may be malnourished. Help a child like this child and give us £5 month now to help children like this.'

In contrast, communications, campaigns, and advocacy professionals tend to seek to promote more positive stories and use 'positive imagery' that presents people as agents and contextualizes their suffering. They describe their frustration and anger with the 'fundraising logic', when it is accorded greater power and influence over decisions about how to communicate and visualize solidarity since it can 'prove' success by showing responses to communications in the form of money donations. A communications manager in a humanitarian NGO described 'feeling sick' when she saw DRTV imagery of 'helpless dying babies' backed by figures of direct audience responses. Unfortunately, the current data-driven culture and poor financial climate makes objecting to and resisting this logic and visual approach increasingly difficult. A campaigns manager admitted that 'if you ask people to do something different and there's no data to support you then you are asking them to operate outside of their comfort zone'. While the job of campaigners and advocacy practitioners, by definition, is to force people out of their comfort zones, in a period of financial recession and increased public scrutiny this mission becomes almost impossible.

Fundraising and marketing professionals expressed a different reverse frustration with and criticism of their communications and advocacy colleagues and the approaches they advocate.

Some fundraisers argued that their colleagues' emphasis on the need to communicate the long-term problem, and to look for ways to visualize complexity and context, was detached and ineffective at evoking solidarity and translating it into action (particularly money donation). In contrast to their colleagues in campaigns, and/or advocacy and/or communications departments, whose approach one fundraising manager described as 'too up in the clouds', 'theoretical', and idealist, fundraising practitioners consider themselves 'down-to-earth', and driven by pragmatism. A marketing director, critical of his campaigns and communications colleagues' approach of using images that show people in the context of their communities engaging in practical activities that contributed to the community, said bluntly that 'it is a highfaluting theory from lots of clever people who sit in conference rooms and talk to one another about theories'.

In sum, the *textual-visual* tension between the 'negative' and 'positive' paradigms of representations is bound up closely with and reproduces the *organizational* tension between fundraising/marketing and communications/campaigns/advocacy departments, and between their competing logics.

Can parallel universes meet?

The internal bickering within NGOs, bound by the struggle to visualize the NGO cause and the call for solidarity with distant others, pushes professionals from both sides to engage in a process of negotiation. A fundraising manager in a large NGO said that 'our mission is to bring it [the approach advocated by communications, campaigns and advocacy colleagues, which stresses complexity, long-term, and social justice] down from the stratosphere to land it in a world that fundraisers and communicators can actually work with'.

This view was expressed by most interviewees. Managers from both fundraising/marketing and communications/campaigns/advocacy sides engage in a continuous effort to 'balance out' between the negative imagery/pragmatic and the positive imagery/theoretical approaches, an attempt intertwined with the effort to achieve an organizational equilibrium between the NGO's different departments. Similarly to management in the cultural industries, management

in the field of NGO communications is typically an act of navigation, negotiation and compromise (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 81-3).

The process of achieving the right balance involves practitioners from various departments discussing and negotiating the components of a single image. For example, one fundraising manager showed me a PowerPoint presentation prepared for colleagues, in which he 'dissected' an image used by his NGO, analyzing each part in terms of what it achieved or failed to achieve. The success or failure of each element were framed within the competing rhetoric and arguments used by the departments involved: some aspects were shown as successfully promoting the communications/campaigns logic (e.g. showing individuals as active agents, promoting a message of social justice); others were shown as failing to elicit the kind of emotional engagement that fundraisers stress as required to engage donors.[5]

Another example of the effort to 'balance' the visual politics of an image is the 'hero' model. 'Hero image' is a web design term used in creative industries which has been appropriated by some NGOs. It includes of a set of visual features, such as eye level – the distant other in the image must 'look us straight in the eye' (a communications manager's phrase), a full length picture (no cropping of the body), and showing people in a family or a social context rather than alone and isolated. The hero image is a response to post-colonial criticism of 'negative' imagery and simultaneously seeks to avoid the pitfalls of over-positive imagery, which may be 'honorable' but is 'stepping too far back', in the words of one communications manager. He explained that:

> If I hire a photographer who hasn't worked in this sector before, the thing I always say is, you have to remember that people are heroes in their own stories. You are not the hero, I'm not the hero, they are the heroes in these stories. You need to reflect that when you tell these stories and be respectful of them - that is really fundamental to the way I look at this and think about it… we don't paint ourselves the outsiders in the heroes of this story.

Managers' 'balancing act' also refers to all the images across the NGO's communication (i.e. not

just a single image). For example, a communications manager in a humanitarian organization explained:

> ...if you look at our newsletter it's not all smiley happy faces on every page, it isn't. There are stories of children who died and things that don't work out so well…things that have gone wrong because we really think that's important. It's important that you be also honest about your limitations, honest about what doesn't work as well as what does, because people aren't fools and particularly the kind of people who support us, they're sharp, they're really smart, they're skeptical. They don't buy simple solutions.

The effort to achieve a balanced mix of 'good' and 'bad' stories and images within the NGO's entire communications was discussed by many interviewees. As the quote above shows, practitioners frequently framed the objective of achieving balance across an NGO's communications as both ethical (honest communication, 'truthful' representation of reality) and instrumental in building and maintaining trust relationships with supporters. However, as much as these attempt to reconcile positive and negative in a single image and/or an NGO's communications are driven by ethics or by concern for the NGO's relationship with the public, the endeavor to 'balance' the two types of imagery is an effort to reconcile the organizational tensions between the fundraising/marketing and communications/advocacy departments.

Inter-organizational politics

A second organizational politics that in significant ways shapes decisions in the process of visual production is between NGOs or inter-organizational politics. There seem to be two contradictory tendencies in this context: convergence, cohesiveness, and collective identity and competition, distinction, and divergence.

A united community

There is an ethos among practitioners and organizations of serving the whole humanitarian and international development sector. Similar to the creative industries, e.g. film and television, a range of trade crafts, rituals, discourses, and practices help to create an 'imagined community'

(Caldwell, 2008) of NGO communications producers. This community hosts regular meetings, conferences, and think-tanks (e.g. Bond, International Broadcasting Trust) to share ideas and debate cultural, technological, aesthetic, and ethical trends. Membership of 14 leading NGOs in the UK umbrella organization Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC), which launches and coordinates the responses to major disasters overseas by its member NGOs collectively (rather than their appealing individually to the UK public), reinforces the sense of a unified and cohesive field: indicatively, DEC's slogan is 'together we're stronger'. The dominant ethos of humanitarian action, of doing 'good', and of delivering the ethics of 'good' (Calhoun, 2010), in which all NGOs operate, functions as a fundamental cohesive logic for organizations and individual practitioners. The cross-organizational push for the sector's collective unity and adoption of a consistent communication frame is tied in with consistency as one of the foundational values of universal ethics: the notion that we should help one another on the basis of need, independent of specific relations, ties, or associations.

This collective humanitarian mission and the motive to save lives make professionals reluctant to admit that competition informs and affects their work. Most interviewees claimed not to consider any of the other NGOs operating in the UK or globally as competitors. They preferred, as a fundraising director in one of the UK's largest NGOs described it, the vague and generalized notion of 'competing for people's time, attention, and wallets'. A communications manager in a small NGO described her and her colleagues' reluctance to admit that they were in competition: 'We would use the word "competitor" in a nice, in a small "c" kind of way'. Many professionals, like this interviewee, use the plural 'we', speaking 'on behalf' of the sector, reflecting a strong sense of, or a desire to belong to, a united professional (imagined) community.

The tendency towards unification and a collective identity is expressed vividly in the field of NGOs' visual production. Several NGOs and particular professionals support the explicit call for the sector to adopt a unified, consistent framing of global suffering and poverty representations. This plea is led by Oxfam UK, Bond, WWF and UK Aid, (e.g. 'Common Cause', 'Finding Frames'), in a series of publications urging a radical collaborative and collective

transformation of the frames that NGOs (as well as the media and the UK government) employ in their communications: from a transactional short-term approach, underpinned by what they call 'negative values', to a 'positive value'-based framing oriented towards in-depth engagement with global poverty. Oxfam UK is one of the UK's biggest and most respected charities. It is regarded historically as a standard-setter in global poverty communication and policy (Benthall, 1993). Thus, this call for unity and consistency in NGOs' communications approach (led by Oxfam UK's campaigns, advocacy, and communications departments) constitutes a significant professional reference point that sets standards of judgment and conduct about the visualization of solidarity. Similarly, the Progressive Development Forum, a UK-group that seeks to reframe the debate away from aid, charity, and philanthropy towards global justice and the structural causes of poverty, has called for the NGO sector to 'cease to be so British and "polite", and instead … [to] enter into open criticism of NGOs and to challenge those that are beyond the pale in their distortion of the agenda' (Tran, 2012).

These institutional forces and pressures may in part be responsible for the visual isomorphism that Dogra (2012) identifies, and that many professionals, such as the fundraising manager from a large UK NGO, quoted below, confirm:

> One of the things that's often interesting about [appeals such as] Haiti appeal is [that] there's often almost one defining image… that just gets played out time and time again, and the British Red Cross might have taken it one time around, and it becomes a DEC poster, and it's a news picture that everybody's using.

A field marked by distinctions

It is against the strong similarity among NGOs' imagery and convergence of visual frames, and against the broader cross-organizational push towards unity and consistent messaging, that these organizations engage in an ongoing attempt to create distinction and difference. Because these organizations work on very similar issues and areas, address and compete over the same audiences, and consider that they belong to a community bound by the same codes of conduct - and a 'universal frame' as one branding manager put it, they struggle continuously to

distinguish themselves from, and in relation to, other NGOs. 'We are always trying to think about distinctiveness', said one fundraising manager.

The most central and contentious visual issue in relation to which NGO practitioners continuously position themselves in a bid to distinguish themselves from other NGOs, is the portrayal of distant others. Mirroring the intra-NGO politics described in the previous section, so too in the inter-organizational sphere, the positive/negative imagery dichotomy constitutes a central point of reference around which and through which power struggles among agents are articulated. One communications manager referred to the debate surrounding positive/negative imagery as 'a very well-flogged horse', suggesting perhaps that the arguments evoked in relation to this (constructed) dichotomy have become a regular rhetoric that is related more to the establishment of the structural relations within organizations (as already shown) and between NGOs.[6]

Most professionals, especially from communications, campaigns, and advocacy departments, from both the 'chemical' and 'alchemical' NGOs, see their organizations' approach of depicting distant others as progressive and ethical, having learnt the lesson of the 'flies-in-the-eyes' imagery that dominated past communications. They criticize those NGOs that take the 'easy route' to tugging at the heartstrings (a communications manager) and succumb to the 'fundraising logic' (a campaigns manager). Several communications managers and campaigns managers expressed anger - even disgust - at the 'shitload of backsliding' and the 'going backwards', referring to the use by some NGOs of stereotypical, dehumanizing depictions of starving babies and helpless victims. The debate is highly normative; rejection of the 'negative' visual frame is largely accepted as the ethical, progressive, and appropriate approach. It is not surprising, therefore, that those professionals who identify their organizations' communications with what is considered 'negative' and 'contentious' imagery, are in the minority and are quick to defend and explain it as different from the highly-criticized 'flies in the eyes'-type imagery .

It is interesting that those who cast themselves as progressive, and censure the use of 'negative' images and those that defend their use of 'negative' imagery use similar reasoning to

justify the ethicality and appropriateness of their organizations' visual approach. This emerges from the following. The first statement is from an interview with a communications manager in a large humanitarian organization; the second is from a brand manager in a large international development NGO. (The emphases in these accounts are added.)

(1) You have to ask yourself if it's the *truth* and it's okay to show this starving black child with their ribs sticking out. If there's a *car crash* and there's a *dead kid*, hey, that's a good story, let's get this dead white kid on the front page of the newspapers! You're never going to fucking see that, that's not going to happen. Why doesn't it happen? Because that paper would be absolutely vilified. You need to ask yourself the question if this is about *telling the truth*, why is it okay to take one view about what you do in the UK and another view when… portray[ing] beneficiaries [in the developing world].

(2) You know, *emergencies* can be undignified occasionally and that's human. … if you need to scream at someone to *get a fucking ambulance,* would you say that? Yes, you probably would. Does it respect the person that you're asking to do that? Possibly not. If you need to carry someone who's badly injured but might not have all their clothing intact would you do that if you needed to do it within the timeframe to save their life? Yes, you would. There are some times when you have to do that thing *informed only by your humanity* and yes, it's a challenge. W*e never fabricate*, but we would frame it in a way that would do just that and it's uncomfortable sometimes. Yes, … it is important for us to change our perception of people in the south or people in countries where they're less fortunate than us, you know, you don't, I don't believe in a universal frame.

These professionals are from 'competing' disciplines – communications, and branding/fundraising - and from competing organizations, and they defend opposing choices about how to visualize suffering and evoke response. However, they use similar reasoning to justify their NGOs' different views about what and how to visualize suffering. Both situate the

visual representation of suffering in the context of emergency – the symbol of moral purity and suffering and of altruistic response underpinning humanitarianism (Calhoun, 2010); both suggest aid to alleviate suffering should be unconditional, based on the principle of 'common humanity', and consistent with being 'here' (the UK) or 'there'; and both ground the visual choice to show (2) or not (1) 'vilified' (1) and 'undignified' (2) imagery in the ethical, reflective (journalistic) principle of truth-telling.

Articulating one's approach of portrayal of suffering against those of other NGOs constitutes a battleground on which broader fundamental distinctions between NGOs are articulated and formed. The following remark from a campaigns manager in one of the largest international development NGOs is illustrative:

> Maybe you have those people who still do the 'flies-in-the-eyes' stuff at some level because that's actually truthful, or because that's what they're interested in. They're not interested in social change. They're only interested in palliative care.

In contrast to those NGOs that 'still do the flies-in-the-eyes stuff', this campaigns manager constructs his NGO's ambition as one of propelling systemic social change and restoring global justice. The visual politics of his NGO are a central space in which and through which he can reaffirm the broader structural distinction between the alchemical branch of humanitarianism, with which he associate his NGO's political program of 'social change', and the chemical branch (which he regards as inferior) whose interest is palliative care.

Another central albeit latent area of distinction and tension which shapes organizations' visual politics is the size of the organization. Some large and well-resourced NGOs, such as Oxfam and Save the Children, were described by one communications manager as 'big mega-brands in the aid and development sector, which dominate, and will always be a reference point'. These organizations tend to position their communication effort and, specifically, their visual identity within the broader field of public communication rather than the narrow, crowded field of NGO communications. A campaigns manager in one of these 'mega-brand' NGOs tellingly aligned his organization's brand/communication project identity with that of Apple:

> Just as Apple resolved that complexity-utility paradox, we need to resolve the paradox, and it's something about hopelessness, charity, having to rely on this idea of suffering. It's a very blunt tool with which to hammer people over the heads to get a response out of them. There are babies suffering, there are babies dying… it's very aggressive and dogmatic and that's a symptom, that's not the cause.

The influence of corporate players and brands, such as Apple or Sky, and of marketing theories, was mentioned by professionals working in big NGOs. Smaller NGOs seem to operate with the sense of a narrower market, of UK-based humanitarian and international development NGOs. Their sources of influence and points of reference were often either the bigger players in the humanitarian field, and/or think-tanks and research from humanitarian-related organizations such as IRIN, IBT, and Bond (of course, big NGOs presumably also check on what their competitors are doing but their not mentioning them as a source of influence functions to establish their own position as 'senior' and 'big' and thus unaffected by what others in the field do).

NGOs –mostly, though not exclusively, smaller and younger ones –are affected by other NGOs in another important way. Some interviews revealed how practitioners' anxieties over criticisms from colleagues in other (often larger) NGOs of their organization's visual communications, affect decision making - especially if the communications is potentially controversial. For example, one communications manager related how her NGO's campaigns manager

> …was really worried about [a new campaign], worried about how her peers in other international development charities would talk to her about it.
> I find that a bit sad... Let's be proud of what we do and not get wrapped up in worrying about, like, how we're going to be seen by a small group of people.

Of course, anxiety about other organizations' reception of one's own organization's communications is not unique to the humanitarian and development NGO field. However, the field's structural characteristics, and the transformations it undergoes, seem to exacerbate this disquiet. The community of the people working in NGOs on communications and fundraising is

small; there is demand from some leading figures and organizations in the sector for collective NGO community responsibility; there are various fora in which organizations' communications are scrutinized and openly criticized and this analysis and critique are becoming more visible. All these aspects are set within the context of the greater difficulty to fundraise during a recession, and the frequent movement among the NGO community which means that today's colleagues might be tomorrow's counterparts/competitors. These and other inter-organizational aspects permeate and shape decision making and design processes in very specific ways.

Conclusion: 'it's almost like a common humanity'

This paper sheds light on the organizational politics that underpin the choices made by NGOs about how visually to depict 'the oppressed and the exploited' (Arendt, 1973: 88), and how to call on spectators to act in solidarity with them. It is hoped that this discussion will be a reminder that organizational politics, and specifically internal competition among departments within the same organization, and among different organizations, significantly affect the images available and possible, and the claims they make in the public space. Studying the production of visual representations of distant suffering is crucial to shed light on their producers' diverse and competing motivations and the struggles that drive the current humanitarian and development communication field.

I have argued that NGO visual politics are closely intertwined with organizational tensions and imperatives and have sought to show some of the ways in which NGOs' visual work constitutes an area of conflict and negotiation. I focused on two arenas of the struggle over how to visualize solidarity with distant others: intra-organizational politics, that is, the structural relations and tension between departments within NGOs, and inter-organizational politics or the relationships among different NGOs.

I conclude by contextualizing the organizational dynamics and tensions that I have described, by referring to some of the broader forces structuring NGO's current work experience and visual practices, particularly the shift towards 'post-humanitarianism' (Chouliaraki, 2011, 2012), and

trends towards marketization and corporatization of humanitarian communication.

Chouliaraki (2010, 2012), in her account of contemporary humanitarian communication, which pays close attention to visual aspects, describes a shift to 'post-humanitarianism': from the claim made by humanitarian communications of solidarity as grounded in a morality of pity, to solidarity based on a morality of irony. It is not surprising perhaps that most NGO professionals I interviewed do not (at least not explicitly) identify themselves or their NGOs with this shift. However, analysis of the intra- and inter-organizational tensions that emerged from their accounts sheds light on some of the institutional politics that may have been involved in driving this shift.

Chouliaraki (2010, 2011) argues that in the current humanitarian field solidarity has become instrumentalized as a profitable choice that consumers are invited to make. From an intra-organizational perspective this can be seen as the triumph of the fundraising logic. However, my analysis suggests that the story is more complex. The shift towards 'post-humanitarian' communication and the commodification of solidarity can be seen as a product of the continuous negotiation between fundraising and its adversarial logic, a compromise product of the 'balancing act' between the competing forces within NGOs. Fundraisers 'give up' on depicting the gravity of need: negative images of helpless, passive victims are increasingly absent from the public space (though some NGO practitioners predict there will be further resort to them – and especially during recession). The focus of contemporary humanitarian and development images seems to have shifted to 'us', the supporters, in the west (Chouliaraki, 2012; McAlister, 2012; Orgad, 2012). However, the fundraising logic would seem to have triumphed insofar as solidarity is being sold as a commodity, a brand, to consumer audiences. In turn, communications, campaigns and advocacy professionals are making concessions related to their desire to tell the big story of 'justice not charity' and of a structural change, and resorting to the post-humanitarian logic (and its attendant visuality) which does not demand engagement with 'bigger-than-self' issues (Darnton with Kirk, 2011). However, demands by communications, campaigns and advocacy professionals to eschew dehumanizing, stereotypical depictions of distant others are (at least partly) accepted.

At the inter-organizational level, the push towards the sector's adoption of a consistent frame that avoids the pitfalls of the 'negative imagery' paradigm, and the calls led by large influential NGOs, such as Oxfam UK, for a stronger sectoral sense of collective effort and responsibility, arguably (among other factors) have driven the move towards a more positive and cheerful tone and style which characterizes contemporary post-humanitarian communication. At the same time, increasing similarity between NGO images and messages and organizational isomorphism, compounded by increased competition for resources, have pushed NGOs to look for ways to distinguish themselves and their visual identities.

I have shown that some of the big NGOs situate themselves in the broader public space, and see themselves as competing generally for the consumer's attention and money and not with other NGOs working in the humanitarian field. In order to compete in the market they have adopted its logic and communication styles. The incorporation of corporate and consumerist discourses, styles, and logics in humanitarian communication is reinforced by NGOs' use of advertising agencies and marketing companies to help in the design, execution, and dissemination of their communications.

Continuous negotiation of and attempt to reach balance between these various institutional forces and pressures within and between NGOs (and between NGOs and other agents, although this is not developed in this paper), result in what one campaigns manager described as 'almost like common humanity':

> It [the campaign] came from that thinking: this isn't about, it's not about desperation and the desperate, great poverty, people; it's about inspiration: inspiring people to act, inspiring people to give, … it was really trying to move the profile, the brand profile and fundraising communication away from where it's been, in this desperate great need and all of that. The idea was [to]… focus on the supporter, because it was about: if this supporter got inspired by what he or she has seen and his or her involvement in the organization then...
>
> It's about …it's almost like a common humanity.

Thus, intra- and inter-organizational politics have contributed to the transformation of 'common humanity', the core notion underpinning humanitarianism, into its 'almost like' version. The strained expressions on the faces of many interviewees when speaking about their communications production, and particularly depiction of suffering and sufferers, suggest that they are highly reflexive and often critical of the shift of which they are 'culpable'(the word used by a campaigns manager). The 'almost like' humanitarianism does not quite live up to the original ideal of 'common humanity' but NGOs struggle to find better viable alternatives.

However, my analysis of the intra- and inter-organizational politics suggests that there are counter-responses to post-humanitarianism from specific practitioners, departments, and NGOs. The campaigns manager in a large NGO who rejected the short-term low intensity relation to distant suffering promoted by the 'palliative care' approach, tries to develop an alternative to post-humanitarian communication and its instrumentalization of solidarity. Another NGO campaigns manager, frustrated and angered by the data-driven work culture that supports the 'fundraising logic' of showing an 'emaciated child', is struggling within her NGO and in forums within the sector, for a different type of communication and messages about solidarity, which are 'outside the comfort zones' of her fundraising colleagues. Smaller NGOs may find it more difficult to resist the post-humanitarian trend, although many of their professionals are intensely aware of its dilemmas, ambiguities, and dangers.

Finally, it is useful to mention some interesting and potentially important aspects that emerged from the data which for reasons of space have been touched on only briefly or not included. They are: the ways in which organizational histories shape and inform the positions that organizations take towards visual representation of suffering and development; the influence of NGOs' interactions with external producers, such as advertising agencies, involved in the production of imagery and the media; the impact of stakeholders, such as NGOs' major funders, on the politics of NGOs' visual representations; and the influence of government pressure on NGOs to demonstrate 'impact' in a work culture increasingly driven by data and auditing, and public scrutiny, criticism, and public distrust of NGOs (Orgad and Vella, 2012).

A final issue revealed by the interviews which would be an interesting topic for future work is that of NGO practitioners' relation to and with academic scholarship. NGOs take an interest in academic debate and critique, with the latter often stimulating passionate responses and criticisms that inform their thinking about and practice of producing visual representations. I hope that this article will be of interest to both the NGO and academic communities, and will contribute to fostering closer dialogue between the two.

Notes

[1] The interviews were part of a 3-year project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, conducted with Bruna Seu, Birkbeck College, on 'Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge: Audience Responses and Moral Actions'. It also involves large-scale audience research, focus groups, and individual interviews with members of the UK public.

[2] Despite efforts since the 1990s to dissolve the distinction between the two (Slim, 2010), it still exerts a hold on people's imaginations and NGO operations (Barnett, 2011).

[3] In addition, it is interesting to note that a common feature in the career trajectory of NGO communications practitioners is previous work experience in the cultural industries, e.g. as journalists, television producers, and producers in the entertainment industry.

[4] For a detailed discussion of the historical context of this struggle, see Cohen 2001: 178-9.

[5] In order to respect the interviewee's anonymity, I cannot discuss this example more specifically, however I hope what I have written is sufficient to demonstrate one way in which the process of negotiation that leads to the visual 'balanced' model takes place.

[6] This observations draws on a similar observation made by Miller (1997: 187) in relation to tensions within advertising agencies

References

Arendt H (1973) *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin.

Barnett M (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Benthall J (1993) *Disasters, Relief and the Media*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Boltanski L (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Caldwell J T (2008) *Production culture: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Calhoun C (2010) The idea of emergency: Humanitarian action and global (dis)order. In: Fassin D and Pnadolfi M (eds) Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions. Cambridge MA: Zone Books, pp. 18-39

Chouliaraki L (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.

Chouliaraki L (2010) Post-humanitarianism: Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(2): 107-126.

Chouliaraki L (2011) "Improper distance": Towards a critical account of solidarity as irony. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14 (4): 363-381.

Chouliaraki L (2012) *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cohen S (2001) *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cottle, S and Nolan D (2007) Global humanitarianism and the changing aid field: "Everyone was dying for footage." *Journalism Studies* 8(6): 862-878.

Darnton A with Kirk M (2011) Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty. Available at: http://findingframes.org/report.htm (accessed 30 January 2013)

Dogra N (2012) *Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

Hesmondhalgh D and Baker S (2011) *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. London: Routledge.

Lidchi H (1993) "*All in the Choosing Eye": Charity, Representation and Developing World*. PhD Thesis, Open University, UK.

Linfield S (2010). *The Cruel Radiance*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

McAlister E (2012) Soudscapes of disaster and humanitarianism: Survival singing, relief telethons, and the Haiti earthquake. *Small Axe* 16(3_39): 22-38.

Moeller S D (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Misery, War, and Death*. New York: Routledge.

Miller D (1997) *Capitalism: An ethnographic approach.* Oxford and New York: Berg.

Nash K (2008) Global citizenship as show business: The cultural politics of Make Poverty History. *Media, Culture & Society* 30(2): 167-181.

Orgad S (2012) *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity.

Orgad S and Vella C (2012) *Who Cares? Challenges and Opportunities in Communicating Distant Suffering: A view from the Development and Humanitarian Sector*. London: Polis.

Richey L A and Ponte S (2011) *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Silverstone R (2007) *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis.* Cambridge: Polity.

Slim H (2010) Dissolving the difference between humanitarianism and development: The mixing of a rights-based solution. *Development in Practice* 10 (3-4): 491-494.

Sliwinski S (2011) *Human Rights in Camera*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Smith M and Yanacopulos H (2004) The public faces of development: An introduction. *Journal of International Development* 16(5): 657-664.

Sontag S (1977) *On Photography*. London: Penguin.

Sontag S (2004) *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin.

Tran M (2012) Is the faultline among NGOs over the future of development deepening? *Guardian Poverty Matters Blog,* 17 August. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/aug/17/faultline-ngos-future-development (accessed 30 January 2013).

Vestergaard, A (2008) Branding the humanitarian: The case of Amnesty International. *Journal of Language and Politics* 7(3): 200-216.