

Why don't people act when they know about suffering? (guest-blog)

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Will You Help?

Thanks to modern media everyone in Britain knows that there are people suffering from famine, war and deprivation around the world. From Haiti to Australia they are shown the suffering – so why don't they do anything?

“It is striking how little we know about how the public makes sense of humanitarian communication, and what happens in the gap between knowledge and action: why despite the fact that people know they don't always act on their knowledge?”

This is the critical question posed by my colleague Dr Shani Orgad after taking part in a symposium hosted by Plan UK entitled 'Unnatural disasters: Compassion versus complexity in the media's reporting of humanitarian emergencies'.

Here's her report.

The discussion focused on challenges and opportunities for humanitarian agencies and the media in covering disasters, distant suffering and aid.

ComRes presented highlights from a survey that was commissioned by Plan UK on the UK public's views of media coverage of humanitarian disasters, and about action taken in response to media coverage and/or charity fundraising appeal.

Panelists Jon Williams, BBC World News Editor, Brendan Gormley, CEO of DEC, Tim Large, Editor at Reuters AlertNet, Dame Ann Leslie, Foreign Correspondent at the Daily Mail and myself, were invited to reflect on the survey findings and on the more general question of 'compassion versus complexity' in media's coverage of humanitarian issues.

The event was well attended, mainly by people from NGOs who deal with advocacy, campaigning and communication of humanitarian disasters and development. It is encouraging to see that there is such an appetite for reflexive and self-critical discussion of communicating disasters and suffering. It is also an important space for dialogue (and expression of some disagreements) between NGOs and the media.

It is striking how little we know about how the public makes sense of humanitarian communication, and what happens in the gap between knowledge and action: why despite the fact that people know they don't always act on their knowledge?

Academics and practitioners make many assumptions and claims about what 'effective' communication of disasters and suffering is, what makes people aroused and engaged, and what mobilizes people to act. But we need grounded evidence to support or challenge these claims, and to better understand what my colleague, [Dr Bruna Seu](#), calls 'doing denial'. We will then be better equipped to develop ways to battle denial, inform and engage audiences.

The ComRes survey is a welcome report in this vein. One of the most interesting and reassuring finding from their survey was that 68% of the respondents said that they disagree or strongly disagree that media coverage of

humanitarian disasters is distressing and that they try to avoid it.

It calls into question the claim we hear so often about saturation, overflow of information and the patronizing idea that people cannot take on many distressing images or cannot pay attention to more than one big event at the same time.

That said, quantitative surveys have their limits, and the bias of social desirability can explain why, for example, 58% people in the ComRes survey said that media coverage is often too sentimental or sensationalist, when it should report the fact. Admitting that sentimental stories move us, and elicit our response seem undesirable.

We need more nuanced understanding of what people think and feel when they come across the ongoing flow of images and stories of suffering and humanitarian disasters. This is what we aim to do, with demographically representative focus groups, in our joint LSE-Birkbeck College research on [Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge Reactions and Moral Actions](#).

This report by Dr Shani Orgad, a senior lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE

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