2

Unlocking the Gate? How NGOs Mediate the Voices of the Marginalised in a Social Media Context

Glenda Cooper

At the Live 8 concert in 2005, pop star Madonna provided one of the seminal images of the day: dressed all in white, she held hands with a young Ethiopian woman called Birhan Woldu (Carr-Brown et al., 2005). As a young child, Woldu had been the icon of the 1984–5 famine, with her emaciated form appeared in the BBC's news coverage of Ethiopia – and most famously at Live Aid 1985 to the soundtrack of The Cars' 'Drive'.

By 2005, Woldu was not only a symbol of hope but also, as the video was replayed, an uncomfortable reminder of the kind of imagery that had been used widely at the time by both journalists and aid agencies to shame the developed world into helping those affected by the famine (Bristow, 2005). The disquiet such images caused among NGOs sparked the *Images of Africa* report (van der Gaag and Nash, 1987) carried out by Oxfam that talked of 'truly pornographic' imagery of those affected by the famine, and which ultimately led to the Red Cross Code of Conduct in Disaster Relief of 1992.<xen>[1]</xen> Along with the imagery, there were also few attempts to hear the marginalised voices of those most affected by such crises. Even the report by Michael Buerk, which alerted the wider world to the horrors taking place in Ethiopia, used only two voices: Buerk himself and a white Médecins Sans Frontières doctor (Cooper, 2009).

Today the conclusions of the Red Cross Code of Conduct – that those caught up in disasters should be portrayed as dignified human beings and not 'hopeless objects' – may seem self-evident. Moreover, the crasser nature of some of the NGOs' fundraising and messaging in the 1970s and 1980s (Benthall, 1993) has been challenged, though Dogra (2012) makes a powerful case for the continuing decontextualisation of poverty in NGO imagery. Others have examined ongoing issues of difference and distance in how NGOs portray 'the marginalised' in their communications materials (Orgad and Seu, 2014). Indeed, many NGO media officers feel responsibility to ensure they do not perpetuate the idea of their organisations as ‘speaking’ for the marginalised.

While Dogra and Orgad studied how NGOs attempt to facilitate a more equal portrayal of the marginalised via advertising/fundraising, this chapter instead focuses primarily on NGOs’ media messaging – how they interact with journalists to ensure the marginalised are treated with dignity, and how they also attempt to give the marginalised a voice through the means of new technology. For some NGOs, this has meant taking imaginative new approaches: Oxfam GB’s ‘Twitter takeover’ when it allowed a Syrian refugee to write unmediated tweets on its account; Save the Children’s #hiddencrisis link-up with the social media news agency Storyful; and Plan UK’s trip to Ethiopia accompanied by a blogger rather than a journalist. In such cases, the NGOs are going beyond their traditional roles of primary source (Anderson, 1991, 1997; Schlesinger, 1978; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) or gatekeeper (Beckett, 2009). Instead they become a mediator, using social media and inexpensive technology to afford a voice to the previously voiceless.

However, occupying such a new role is not an easy task. NGOs have found themselves caught up in a rapidly changing media age. Their media offices have had to adapt quickly to rapid-onset disasters, and political controversies in the so-called 1440-minute cycle (Bruni, 2011) that new technology has generated. Learning how to educate staff and beneficiaries in these new media environments has not proved straightforward.

‘Communicating real voices’

This chapter draws on face-to-face semistructured interviews<xen>[2]</xen> with staff from media offices of the then 14 members of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)<xen>[3]</xen> – the umbrella organisation that brings together aid agencies in times of large humanitarian crises. Not only are members of the DEC the leading aid agencies in the UK but they also represent a range of size, approach, background and capabilities. For example, at the time of the interviews carried out for this chapter, one agency had only two members in its press team, while another had a diverse media and PR team and a separate ‘global media unit’ coordinated by the UK office with partner offices abroad. In the event of an emergency, response to the news story can be passed seamlessly from the UK, US and Australia, facilitating international 24-hour coverage.

In the interviews, participants were asked similar questions about their approach to media coverage, interaction with beneficiaries, and if and how that had changed in recent times. As part of their mission statements, evaluation policies and media work, DEC members emphasised the need to include marginalised voices. There was a commitment to hear ‘real’ voices – and even, as CARE International puts it, ‘contrary opinions’ (2013: 2). The past, where agencies spoke for survivors and beneficiaries of donations from such agencies and the public, was no longer seen as acceptable (Action Aid, for example, prefers to use the word ‘rights holder’ instead of beneficiary). Instead, aid agencies made clear their intention:

> [It’s about] being rooted in the lives of real people, telling the true story, communicating real voices. (Christian Aid, 2009: 1)

> The voices and views of minority, disenfranchised and other groups with perhaps contrary opinions should also be heard and considered. (CARE International, 2013: 2)

While this was a laudable aim in theory, however, many of the agencies involved were grappling with how to do it in practice.

New media – New opportunities?

One of the primary methods aimed at giving marginalised people an opportunity to speak was through the use of social media. Each of the agencies interviewed was clear that social media was now an integral part of its communications strategy. The most commonly cited trigger for this was the 2010 Haiti earthquake. This was dubbed the ‘first Twitter disaster’ since initially news about the quake broke via social networking sites (Brainard, 2010), and in the aftermath much of the fundraising came about via social media. According to Twitter-tracking service Sysomos, some 2.3 million tweets included the words ‘Haiti’ or ‘Red Cross’ between 12 and 14 January 2010. The Twitter account for the Red Cross, which had been adding 50–100 followers a day before the quake, suddenly added 10,000 new followers within three days. During that time, donations to the Red Cross exceeded $8 million (Evans, 2010). Twitter was not the only social media network to prove its effectiveness. Oxfam America's Facebook fanbase jumped from 35,000 to 250,000 during the Haiti earthquake, helping to raise $1.5 million within 48 hours (Byrne, 2010).

The result of this surge in attention was what one agency dubbed a 'post-Haiti pressure' on all agencies to get involved. Those DEC agencies that were not on Twitter before Haiti, for example, say that they have now all established a presence there. There has also been a division of approach between employing press officers to specifically tackle social media and incorporating it into general job descriptions. So, for example, Oxfam now insists that social media is integrated into all press officers' work, while the British Red Cross had two officers whose work was specifically to deal with social media. The main emphasis for media work in 2014 was Twitter – one agency described it as 'the professionals' network' (i.e. the best way to capture the attention of journalists) – while Facebook was 'the supporters' network'. Other social media explored by press offices of agencies included YouTube, Instagram, Audioboo and Google Plus (as of early 2014).

The integration of social media has had several effects on aid agencies. First, it has accelerated the change in work patterns: while the days of an NGO press office working nine to five had already long gone, most have reorganised on-call strategies and rotas since Haiti. One senior media officer had discovered (to their astonishment) that none of the digital team had out-of-hours working in their job description. Traditional ways of evaluating media hits had also changed, as agencies tried to judge whether social media or traditional media hits were more valuable.

> I do think that the whole Twitter generation has kind of thrown our old fashioned understanding of evaluation and reach, because it only takes one Stephen Fry to retweet what we've has said, and boom, you've got five million, you've reached five million people. (Interviewee A – digital press officer)

> If you get on the 10 O'Clock News, you get everything else as well … If we got a Huffington Post piece, plus a nice audio slideshow on the BBC website, we wouldn't turn that down, but it isn't going to get the reach that we require. (Interviewee B – senior press officer)

Most agencies went on to admit they had little sense of how effective their use of social media was, and that there were also sometimes unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved:

> There will be times, like the Invisible Children campaign [KONY2012], there will be times when something will just take off and I don't think you can replicate that. Everybody wants that. 'Ooh, it'll go viral'. No, it won't bloody go viral. A sneezing panda goes viral. (Interviewee B)

> 99 per cent of those conversations on Twitter are Agency A talking to Agency B talking to Agency C. Is that useful? I'd brutally say it's a waste of f***ing time. (Interviewee C – press officer)

During the DEC Syria appeal, one of the tools the committee used was a live Twitter Q&A under the hashtag #decqs.<xen>[4]</xen> Stuart Fowkes, an Oxfam media officer seconded to the DEC press office,<xen>[5]</xen> sent out the following tweet, not entirely in jest: 'If anyone who doesn't work for an aid agency could ask us a question about Syria using #decqs in the next 2 hours I will love you forever' (https://twitter.com/stuartfowkes/status/315070173168144384).

Meanwhile the kinds of disaster that are privileged by the use of social media also tend to be the rapid-onset events: exactly the ones that commentators and NGOs have complained that journalists spend too much time on already (CARMA, 2006; Franks, 2006; Moeller, 2006). Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Flickr lend themselves to the dramatic over the chronic; the 'success stories' of social media tend to be crises like Typhoon Haiyan and the Haitian earthquake rather than the East Africa famine.

The more forward-looking NGOs try to counter this by thinking creatively. For example, the Save the Children UK's 2012 campaign #*hiddencrisis* aimed to raise awareness for the West African hunger crisis. The stories of the victims had not had much traction in the media. This campaign was specifically planned as a Twitter event; the agency took Neal Mann, who was the then Sky News digital media editor and who has a huge Twitter following, out to Burkina Faso and linked up with Storyful, the self-proclaimed 'world's first social media news agency', to plot Mann and Save the Children's journey across the country. There was not a sufficiently strong ‘news peg’ to capture the attention of the mainstream media but it generated interest in social media because of the opportunity to follow it in real time.

This interest was not always necessarily positive, particularly when James Ball, a journalist at *The Guardian*, started a row on Twitter describing it as disaster or Twitter tourism and tasteless.<xen>[6]</xen> However, it does show aid agencies going beyond their conventional role as source or gatekeeper, and actively using new media tools to try to alter the conversation and interact with their audience.

Different voices?

As we see through such examples as the Instagram pictures of Hurricane Sandy or the first person accounts from Haiti, the framing of stories through social media is unapologetically personal . Unlike the familiar arguments over objectivity in mainstream reporting, user-generated content has privileged the subjective (Allan, 2004; Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Thorsen and Allan, 2014; Wardle et al., 2014). Supporters of this kind of personalised approach claim it is a move away from what Chouliaraki (2006) has called the ‘anaesthesia’ of traditional disaster reporting. Focus groups consistently respond positively to UGC, seeing it as more authentic, real and emotional (Williams et al., 2010, 2011).

There has been effort by forward-looking NGOs to provide a platform for ‘different’ voices. For example, in March 2013, the Oxfam GB Twitter feed was handed over to Hasan, a Syrian refugee in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, for the day. His tweets, which included pictures of his newborn baby Leen, were retweeted by celebrities such as Stephen Fry and Damon Albarn, as Hasan talked about Leen and the joy of swapping a tent for a caravan – because when you live in a caravan you can lock it with a key and stand upright inside it. Those who saw it were impressed:

> What made it work really well, was it was clearly unmediated, his English was good, but you know, there was lots of mistakes, but that added to the sense of realness of it. (Interviewee B)

As well as Hasan’s freedom to write what he wanted, there was the use of ordinary, everyday pictures displayed for a wider public – his children sitting in a tent, his newborn baby. On one level these should be ‘private’ pictures – taken by private individuals. But the division between private and public is increasingly being diluted (Becker, 2011; Wardle and Williams, 2008). As privacy theorist Helen Nissenbaum (2004: 119) points out, the fundamental problem here is a breakdown in what she calls ‘contextual integrity’. Privacy means different things in different situations, and that privacy is violated when people do not respect two types of contextual norm – those of appropriateness (what information may be shared), and those of flow and distribution (whom the information is shared with). With sites such as Twitter and Facebook, this problem can easily arise. There are not the divisions in social relationships that there are in real life, or what Grimmelmann (2009) refers to as a ‘flattening’ of relationships. And when this flattening of relationships is taken further and pilfered by the media, then those contextual norms are transgressed.

There are also concerns from a security point of view about whether beneficiaries have full understanding of the implications of sharing information in this way. As Vincent Lusser of the International Committee of the Red Cross said, ‘our colleagues in Kabul have to think that what happens in Afghanistan can affect our colleagues elsewhere in the world’. (2006). This is equally true of survivors, who may be putting themselves in danger, as one agency press officer put it:

> Informed consent in this day and age includes making sure that the person giving it is aware that their identity could well be seen worldwide, and that their government might well become very quickly aware of what they’ve said. There’s no getting away from the fact that in the internet age things like that are a lot, lot more important than they were perhaps 30 or 40 years ago, where the chances of a story even reaching a remote outpost in a war-torn hellhole were minute, these days the chances are very large that they will. (Interviewee D – Head of media)

While many of the other agencies were positive about the Hasan Twitter takeover, or similarly said that encouraging beneficiaries to record their experiences either with phones or via cameras distributed by NGOs was to be commended, some were reluctant to encourage this. In the main they saw such endeavours as impractical and ineffective compared with the traditional method of aid agencies interviewing beneficiaries themselves and processing quotes for journalists.

> It’s generally field staff and people who have been seconded [on our Twitter account], it’s not necessarily press officers … we haven’t gone that far yet [with a Twitter takeover], but I think we should be. (Interviewee E – head of news)

> I think some of the material was lovely – but I wonder how much investment was made, what was used and the benefits really were for the kids involved. (Interviewee F, emergencies press officer)

Many saw the 140 character limit on Twitter as a problem because of the limited space for nuance. Most harshly it was dismissed as a ‘novelty package’. Only one agency press officer admitted that they were nervous about what might actually be said: ‘It’s a risk – opposite to most of our work where it’s about controlling the message’ (Interview G – press officer).

Another way?

One way NGOs have started to incorporate ‘ordinary’ or non-agency voices is with the use of bloggers. These voices are not NGO employees, are not survivors or beneficiaries, but are perceived as a step away from the mainstream media.

The impetus for this was the success of Save the Children UK’s 2010 ‘blogladesh’ campaign fronted by three ‘mummy bloggers’ (a popular term for mothers who blog about the minutiae of family life). Instead of taking journalists on a press trip, the charity took Josie George (who then wrote the blog sleepisfortheweak.org.uk), Sian To (mummy-tips.com) and Eva Keoghan (nixdminx.com) to Bangladesh to raise awareness of the upcoming Millennium Development Goals conference. While out there, the women blogged, tweeted and uploaded pictures to Flickr with the #blogladesh hashtag.

The innovative strategy appeared to have paid off for Save the Children. The powerful chat site Mumsnet invited Josie George to join a web chat with the deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, and the campaign was picked up by the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme and the ITV lunchtime news. Such high-profile media targets had been reached for minimal outlay: Liz Scarff, organiser of the #blogladesh campaign, estimated that the whole event had cost around £5,000 – mainly on transport to get the women there (Cooper, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the success of the #blogladesh campaign led to a spate of copycat trips – Save's *Pass It On* in 2011 which utilised YouTubers; Plan UK's 2011 Blog 4 Girls competition; World Vision's *ShareNiger* with mummy bloggers in 2012; and Tearfund's 2013 See For Yourself initiative. With #blogladesh, the normality of the women and their ability to relate to beneficiaries was emphasised. As Scarff put it, 'Who could be more powerful to tell stories about children than mothers who have their hopes and dreams for their own children?' (Cooper, 2011: 32).

Yet the bloggers were not so different from the journalists they were replacing. They tended to be – although not exclusively – white, middle class and privileged. For example, the #blogladesh mummy bloggers were all women who had previously worked in PR or had writing experience: To had a specialist parenting PR company, George ran a weekly writing workshop for other bloggers, and Keoghan, who had originally worked for the PR consultant Lynne Franks, now worked as a social media consultant. #ShareNiger used To again, while #PassItOn, organised by the same consultancy, Fieldcraft, used Christine Mosler, a freelance copywriter and photographer, who blogged under the name Thinly Spread; primary schoolteacher Lindsay Atkin, whose son was a prominent YouTuber; and political blogger Tracey Cheetham, who was also a local councillor and a director of Eclipse PR. Tearfund's bloggers all had to have a faith, as Tearfund is a faith-based agency, but one was a copywriter turned ordinand, another a cartoonist and the third an academic. Plan UK's blogging competition in association with *The Guardian* in 2011 was won by the blogger (and filmmaker) Waiki Harnais who had been brought up in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ford, 2011).

Experienced as many of these writers were, they had not been trained as journalists, and did not therefore subscribe to journalistic norms of objectivity and distance. In the Tearfund trip to Uganda, Tearfund blogger Liz Clutterbuck wrote of her discomfort after a fellow blogger featured a photo of her with a local child: 'I felt like I was a throwback to the 19th century – a well-meaning white female missionary cuddling an African baby' (Clutterbuck, 2013). Well intentioned as this was, this 'personalisation' does not always have the desired effect of breaking down the 'us and them' dichotomies. When news stories traditionally involved 'ordinary' people in the years before social media, the result was often an opening-up of access to individuals rather than social groups or organisations. Such case studies were usually talking in a personal capacity about their own experience as opposed to a more analytic role (Manning, 2001). Cottle (2000) argued that while ‘ordinary voices’ were often routinely accessed into TV news items, they become what Beck calls ‘the voices of the side effects’ (cited in Cottle) – to symbolise the human face of a news story. While Cottle was talking about TV interviews, his argument could equally be applied to blogging and social networking:

> Television news positions ordinary people to symbolize or (literally) stand for ordinary feelings and responses to the consequences of environmental risks not to articulate a form of ‘social rationality’ much less discursively challenge ‘scientific rationality’. With too few exceptions the discursive play of difference and contending rational accounts is preserved for other, non-ordinary voices. (Cottle, 2000: 31–32)

While #blogladesh blogger Josie George did get to meet Nick Clegg, much of the coverage was focused on the experiences of the women involved, and an attempt to make an emotional bridge between the mothers they met at Save the Children projects in Bangladesh and women back in the UK who read their parenting blogs. The blogs that the women sent back from Bangladesh often focused heavily on the bloggers’ own thoughts and feelings. It became as much about their own ability/inability to deal with the powerful nature of the sights they were exposed to as the sights themselves:

> It is hard to find the words here. I didn’t take pictures. Just staying upright and breathing in the space of so much…so much horror, and horror it was, was the best I could manage. (Josie George, sleepisfortheweak, 2 September 2010)

> What does it take to be authentic and genuine? It’s not just a matter of being yourself, sometimes things find you that resonate and make you reconsider not just who you are, but what you think and feel and say, and write. And of course what you do. Bangladesh is one of those rare experiences that makes you re-examine and question humanity and as you try and go to sleep, yourself. First on the agenda is the assimilation of this place, which is hot, busy and chaotic. How do I even begin to make sense of all this? (Eva Keoghan, Nixdminx, 1 September 2010)

Such blogposts started changing the emphasis from charity beneficiary to charity blogger. As a PR (and journalistic) approach, it produced some powerful writing that undoubtedly captured the media's attention, but it risked the marginalised fading into the background again. Chouliaraki has noted that we live in a society where

> our own private feelings are the measure against which we perceive and evaluate the world and others … While news becomes part of this 'culture of intimacy' it implicitly allows us to focus on our own sufferings and disregard those 'others' outside our own horizon of care. (Chouliaraki, 2006: 13)

So while we may look at a Facebook page and click 'Like', or watch video tributes on YouTube and read tweets from refugees, this does not mean the distances between the marginalised and the developed world onlookers are being overcome.

Conclusion

> The question is whether the international humanitarian community is willing to listen and put the voice of the survivors at the centre of their priorities and plans. (Gormley, 2014: 83)

Despite the investment that NGOs are increasingly making in new media, many remain unclear about what they are doing or trying to achieve – symbolised by the fact that many were still working on social media policies. While in their policy documents, NGOs reiterate that beneficiary voices have to be heard, there is still reluctance and nervousness about how best to achieve this most effectively. There have been some imaginative efforts, as outlined in this chapter, to harness the power of new media and ensure that it is used to overcome the distancing effect of traditional media, yet many still see traditional media as the most effective way to spread their message.

The current trend has been to embrace the use of bloggers as a 'safe alternative'. While the bloggers are not beneficiaries, they are not full-time journalists and thus – like other forms of non-mainstream media – are seen as more 'authentic'. For aid agencies, they are often chosen because they have a large number of guaranteed 'followers' – and are likely to blog and update on several occasions if not every day, instead of supplying just one final piece. The difficulties of a media trip with conventional journalists – at the mercy of a changing news agenda, and the essential need for news pegs or case studies – appear less intense with bloggers for whom much of the framing of the story is their own personal experience.

Added to that, these bloggers can be overawed at the opportunity that they are being given and tend to respond with gratitude to the aid agency for taking them, and frequently inform their audience of this, rather than taking the 'critical friend' approach of most journalists. Waiki Harnais, for example, summed up her trip to Ethiopia with Plan as follows:

> Overall, everywhere we went, we noticed Plan had quite a strong presence in these communities, from health centres to schools and youth projects, all built by Plan and most handed over to the community. Although it was clear that the people in these communities still needed more help and support, it was very inspiring to see the difference that Plan is making in their lives … I am hoping that you will be touched by some of the things you have read in this post, and will visit the Plan website to find out more about how you can help these communities. (Harnais, 2011)

By utilising bloggers, the consequence can be that NGOs, wittingly or not, are effectively becoming more, not less, efficient gatekeepers in telling stories.

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<en-group type=“endnotes”>

<en><label>1.</label> In particular, article 10 of the code reads: “In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects”. See more at http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/#sthash.Zc43Lkvq.dpuf.</en>

<en><label>2</label> These interviews were conducted in 2012–2014 as part of a wider PhD project.</en>

<en><label>3</label> The DEC is an umbrella organisation that brings together agencies in times of large humanitarian crises. It currently consists of British Red Cross, Christian Aid, World Vision, Oxfam, Tearfund, Plan UK, Action Aid, CAFOD, Concern Worldwide, Islamic Relief, CARE, Age International and Save the Children UK. Merlin (a previous member) and Save the Children announced in July 2013 they were to merge.</en>

<en><label>4</label> The full Q&A can be read at https://twitter.com/search?f=realtime&q=%23decqs&src=hash.</en>

<en><label>5</label> During DEC appeals, member agencies send press officers from their own office to the central DEC office.</en>

<en><label>6</label> https://twitter.com/jamesrbuk/status/203873386030563328; https://twitter.com/jamesrbuk/status/203873518805454848.</en>

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