Book Section:

Lugo-Ocando, J and Hernández-Toro, M (2015) Public relations and humanitarian communication: From persuasion to the creation of a community of equals. In: L'Etang, J, McKie, D, Snow, N and Xifra, J, (eds.) The Routledge Handbook of Critical Public Relations. Routledge Companions in Business, Management and Accounting . Routledge , 226 - 234. ISBN 0415727332

Public relations and humanitarian communication: From persuasion to the creation of a community of equals

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Introduction

Public relations has broadly sought to empower organisational actors (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen, & Voto, 2002; Ihlen, 2005; Radford, 2012) and its practice tends to be underpinned by functionalist/positivist approaches (Barquero Cabrero and Castillo Esparcia, 2011; Trujillo, & Toth, 1987), particularly in the Anglo-phone context (L'Etang, 2004, p. 18). This prevalent paradigm sees professional communication in non-profit organisations dealing with humanitarian causes as focusing in the interactions among the different stakeholders such as the media, donors and recipients (Beaudoin, 2004; Naude, Froneman & Atwood, 2004).

In this context, public relations is mainly understood as a set of actions that can help increase the legitimacy of organisational and institutional actors while, at the same time, promoting their efforts to build and manage multiple relationships with stakeholders (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Roper, 2005). This is an effort that ultimately seeks to support the channelling of resources and the acquisition of power and influence for mitigation of suffering. This last has been, generally speaking, the predominant approach for many practitioners in the humanitarian sector (Deegan, 2001; Wiggill, 2014a).

It is one that calls for public relations to support the aims of the organisation in the context of humanitarian communication (Holtzhausen, 2014; Wiggill, 2014b). Because of this approach, practitioners have focused their efforts in convincing people to donate to and support their organisations in their quest to deliver humanitarian aid. This by means of mobilising the media and public opinion so as to influence governments, corporations and individuals (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009, p. 123), while legitimising such calls for power and resources using the discourse of civil society (Dutta-Bergman, 2005, p. 267).

It is not, of course, all about cynicism. We do recognise that public relations does play a pivotal role in modern humanitarian communication, as some scholars as suggested (Kang, & Norton, 2004; Taylor, 2000). This function is now even more important as over the past few years the public in the West, as a whole, has become increasingly reluctant to engage with humanitarian efforts (Barton, 2010; Young-Powell, 2012); suffering from what some scholars have called "compassion fatigue' (Höijer, 2004; Kinnick, Krugman, & Cameron, 1996; Tester, 2001). The question then arises among many public relations practitioners as to what to do in order to restore their ability to mobilise the public in the wider context of humanitarian politics.

However, as we will argue in this chapter, this is the wrong question to ask as it only reinforces the power relations that led to the exhaustion of the traditional model of public relations practice dealing with humanitarianism. One which tends to be characterised by a utilitarian ethics (Bivins, 1987, p. 196; Bowen, 2005, p. 191) as it was historically developed in a commercial and profit-driven environment (Miller and Dinan, 2007) that seems at times incompatible with the objectives and aims of non-profit organisations.

Furthermore, by reproducing these practices in which the prevalent action is to foster a feeling of "pity for those suffering" – often packaged as solidarity – public relations has contributed to the "othering" of those who suffer. To us this is problematic as these "regimes of pity" (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2013) end up allocating more power to the observer while hindering the possibility of audiences and sufferers seeing each other as a community of "equals". In light of this, we question if this is in fact the role that professional communication ought to have in the context of these non-profit organisations.
Instead, we suggest that it is by means of creating spaces of dialogue that public relations can ultimately foster this "society of equals" (Rosanvallon, 2012) in which individuals can share perceptions of risks and vulnerability.

Indeed, "risk" is listed as one of the principles of dialogue in public relations (Pieczka, 2011; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012); the others being mutuality, propinquity, empathy and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 25). In so doing, we suggest, public relations can have a role in promoting more structural solutions to the challenges we face and finally leave behind, once and for all, the diminishing role of simply providing the rhetoric to justify temporary palliatives actions.

Scholars have already pointed out that humanitarian communication needs to reinvent itself so it stops being just about promoting “our” common humanity in the West and about highlighting “our” feelings for distant others (Chouliaraki, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2010) in order to achieve organisational goals such as donations and political influence. Indeed, one of the key paradoxes of humanitarian communication is that while it claims to speak the language of common humanity, nevertheless the spectacle of vulnerability that puts forward by means of professional communication evokes the language of power; ultimately reinforcing the existing global divides (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 29).

Likewise, Luc Boltanski (1999) has argued that the legitimacy of current humanitarian communication is not simply a problem of appeal but also a problem in the very relationship between humanitarianism and politics. Consequently, to explore this argument, one would need to examine not only the current role but also the potential of public relations to generate the emotional/rational frameworks of understandings that is required. Thus, there is a need to discuss the actions, discourses and narratives that could allow the audiences to relate to the suffering and their tragedies in a different way and therefore confer to public relations an alternative role in the evolving framework of international humanitarian communication.

Discourses of humanitarianism

Overall, one of professional communicators’ main aims, in the context of neoliberal discourses and humanitarianism, has been to foster regimes of pity as frameworks of understanding (Kamat, 2004, p. 155), while focusing in deploying campaigns to attract resources (Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009, p. 123) that can help to sustain the bureaucracies and activities of the NGOs that make use of public relations (Polman, 2010, p. 162). These regimes have been traditionally achieved by media and relational campaigns that put forward specific representations to allow spectators to link on an emotional level with those who suffer.

However, the contemporary communication of solidarity in the West faces a turning point in which the separation between the public logic of economic utilitarianism and the private logic of sentimental obligation towards vulnerable others is becoming blurred. For Lilie Chouliaraki, this transformation in the aesthetics and ethics of solidarity reflects a wider mutation in the communicative structure of humanitarianism. It is a turning point leading to what she calls post-humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 12). By this she refers to how humanitarian communication have moved from emotion-oriented to post-emotional styles of appealing and how it now tends to engage with practices of playful consumerism (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 107).

In the post-humanitarian scenario, as she explains it, there is no longer the theatrical element in which the encounter between the spectator and the vulnerable other meet as an ethical and political event. Instead, she continues, the spectators and the victims of tragedy and suffering meet in a mirror structure where this encounter is reduced to an often narcissist self-reflection that involves people like "us" feeling good about mediated performances of compassion. The end result is the marketisation and corporatisation of public messages coming from international Non Profit Organisations (NPOs and NGOs) and other actors campaigning on behalf of those who suffer (Dogra, 2012, p. 140). Any radical alternative to this dominant utilitarian ethics of solidarity, Chouliaraki argues, needs to start by reclaiming the "theatricality" (2013, p. 171) in the public realm.

However, we ought to remember that this "theatricality", which is often so present in humanitarian and development public relations and marketing communication practices, is nevertheless articulated from a position of power. That means that those living in the nations and working for the corporations that created this suffering in the first place (Churchill, 2003, p. 14) are mostly in control of the resources and heavily influential in dictating the agenda of the organisations crafting the policies and palliatives that aim at addressing these humanitarian crises.

David Spurr (1993) typified these as the "incoherencies" created by the legacy of colonial humanitarianism. This is because they keep conferring power to those with the resources to stage media events and campaigns. Those event and campaign managers then highlight the suffering of others and therefore mobilise the media and their publics around the agenda of the centres of power. As a result, public relations campaigns mainly address the consequences – that is inequality in the distribution and access to wealth (Dorling, 2011; Lansley, 2012; Piketty, 2013; Wilkinson, and Pickett, 2010) – but not the causes of suffering and exclusion. For example, for all Bono's campaign for alleviating poverty he has remain strongly committed to taxes that favour the rich (Neate, 2014).

It is in this context that we can argue that public relations dealing with humanitarian communication needs to reinvent itself if it is "to overcome the narcissist and increasingly corporate discourses of solidarity" (Chouliaraki, 2013). Therefore, for those working for NPOs, multilateral organisations or foreign governments, the main challenge is to re-invent their practice. So far this last has been restricted to making sure that communication efforts focus on appeals to bring about quantifiable outcomes; donations, cause-related marketing (CRM), political leverage, an acceptable measure of policy-change and overall a certain type of public engagement; by which we mean public participation at the different levels of decision making and decision taking (Rowe & Frewer, 2005, p. 251). Consequently, humanitarian organisations are making use of professional communication to turn the suffering of others into a spectacle/commodity to be exchanged for donations, support and political leverage. This is, in our view, both ethically wrong and operationally counterproductive on the long run.

Little support for change

One of the key problems that public relations practice faces in addressing these issues is that NPOs cannot be easily placed in any ideological or institutional camp (Lewis and Kanji, 2009, p. 51) and public relation scholars have been at pains trying to figure out how to approach NPOs. At times they are predominately conceptualised as activist, and therefore seen as belonging to a more complex network or social movement (Kang & Norton, 2004; Rondinelli & London, 2003). In these cases, public relations faces the challenge of reconciling donors who provide the financial support with the flammable rhetoric of the NPOs and the social movements in which they are inscribed (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007, p. 901). Hence, public relations practice in the context of these organisations cannot be considered just as conduits of rhetorical efforts aiming at gathering resources, since, in the end, NPOs are not commercial or corporative activities.

Despite this, most research on NPOs and professional communication has concentrated on assessing how well the functionalist postulates, approaches and frameworks translate to the circumstances surrounding these organisations. This is noticeable, for instance, in Holtzhausen's (2014) study of South African NPOs where relational and corporate identity management theories are examined. It is also present in Wiggill (2014a, 2014b) who analyses the applicability of two way symmetrical communication and relational theory to NPOs, also operating in South Africa. Crisis and issues management approaches are also tested and subsequently prescribed to those NPOs facing reputational problems in other scholarly work (Sisco, Collins, Zoch, 2010).

Despite the fact that many public relations scholars and practitioners remain of the view that NPOs are not that different from for profit organisations in relation to their professional communications needs there are, nevertheless, some distinctive approaches. Indeed, Hume and Leonard work (2014) suggest, contrary to more traditional voices, that there is a link between NPOs distinctive nature and more "specific management needs". For them, it is problematic to prescribe to NPOs functionalist approaches or basic principles of "traditional strategic management" (Hume & Leonard, 2014, p. 2). This is an area that calls for further research.

What is more, the changing environment, characterised by geo-political multi-polarity, digitalisation and fragmentation of audiences, is remodelling the way NPOs interact with the external world. Society in general is interlinking in different ways and that is challenging public relations practice within organisations and corporations in relation to the need to change the current social paradigm (Dinamarca, 2011, p. 79). Jeremy Rifkin (2009) refers to the emergence of an "empathetic civilisation" in order to highlight how the world is becoming more emotionally and rationally interconnected. In this context, some public relations scholars allude to the challenging times and climate to highlight the forces driving the reconfiguration of NPOs into sustainable organisations (Holtzhausen, 2014, p. 286). Other scholars refer to these "social enterprises" (SEs) as "creating a new milieu of initiatives, which necessitates more study" and different approaches" (Pang, Mak & Lee, 2011, p. 295).

However, the key problems remains: the fact that "professionalisation" of NPOs ultimately weakens their transformative potential as it "bureaucratises" them as a whole (Corwall, 2007, p. 476); and that professional communication has contributed overall with this process of bureaucratisation. They do so by aiding the domestication of NPOs to be compliant with the prerogative of the neo-liberal status, hence making these organisations part of the flourishing outsourcing industry in the area of humanitarian aid. This is despite the fact that they were originally conceived as promoters of social change (Lewis and Kanji, 2009, p. 13).

Within public relations, these utilitarian views remain prevalent. This continues despite a vast historical critique recorded against functionalist approaches (Cheney and Christensen, 2001; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996; Pieczka, 1996) and historical revisions of the role that public relations has played in reinforcing power structures (Burt, 2012; Dinan & Miller, 2013; Miller & Dinan, 2007). This functionalist perspective remains embedded to the organisational domain as the essential focus or locus of this scholarship (Edwards, 2012, p. 13).

The obsession with the organisational domain is partially rooted in concerns about the financial sustainability of NPOs (Wiggill, 2014a, p. 278) – for example, in terms of "who will pay the bills"? Not surprisingly, a great deal of attention from scholars and practitioners is put upon those stakeholders "who matter financially" (the donors) and upon designing more efficient fundraising campaigns (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Kang & Norton, 2004; Swanger & Rodger, 2013).

Certainly, while public relation scholarship on NPOs focuses on analysing in detail the causal links of survival/sustainability relationships and survival/sustainability-communication, the study of other NPO stakeholders has received little attention. For instance, the recipients of help as a category has been overlooked by research in this area (Lugo-Ocando, Kent & Narváez, 2013, p. 286). Consequently, many scholars looking at NPOs' professional communication tend to underplay the essential role that other stakeholders, such as communities and individual sufferers, can have in shaping policy and action. Indeed, under the current media arrangements – reinforced by public relation practice – those who suffer are not seen as equals (Lugo-Ocando, 2014, p. 125). Instead, the prevalent assumption is that of accessing resources that can then trickle down from wealthy donors to the hands of the NPOs who manage them according to their own worldviews. These donations are then presented as a charitable gift and not as a gesture of reciprocal responsibility of the donors towards those who are suffering.

At this point is worth making reference to Marcel Mauss' anthropological notion of potlatched; a gift-giving feast practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States (1954). For these communities, the gifts must be reciprocated and if not, then the recipients lose face. Moreover, an unreciprocated gift makes inferior the person who has accepted it. In the context of foreign aid, this translates that those in receipt are given no possibility or opportunity for reciprocation, "in a sense they have received a gift for which they are unable to reciprocate: they are then potlatched" (Pawlett, 2013, p. 60), and hence they have become inferior.

This matters, both in ethical terms and in professional communication practice within NPOs. Indeed, over the years practitioners have had to deal increasingly more with an "ironic spectator" (Chouliaraki, 2013) who is reluctant to participate in this type of engagement. These spectators are either sceptical or suffer from "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999) and thus refuse to engage with issues that, to them, perhaps seem too recurrent, too detached, or both. Under these circumstances, traditional communicative action, in the form of propaganda, is no longer a valid way to engage with these matters.

Many professional communication practitioners working in NGOs have known and experienced this for some time (Kurzyp, 2013; Pohl, 2014; Seu, Orgad and Flanagan, 2012). However, organisational cultures and day to day pressures mean that many professionals keep approaching the problem in functionalist terms. That is to say they think about strategies to re-engage with the public in the same utilitarian ethical terms. It is true that some of these approaches have been successful and have given some new impetus to humanitarian causes, such as the Make Poverty History campaign (2005). However, these experiences are nowadays a rarity with a temporary effect that ultimately only temporarily delays scepticism and compassion fatigue. Overall, public's engagement with the suffering of others has decline together with the ability to mobilise private support to their causes, at least in terms of accessing funding (Stoddard, 2001). In view of this scenario, traditional public relations functionalistic approaches and practices have become increasingly more "inadequate".

Overcoming paradigms

Overall, public relations needs to re-think the nature and purpose of what it does in the context of humanitarian communication. In so doing, it requires to rethink the objective of public engagement, re-focusing instead in developing a community of equals. By this, we are referring to the fact that these professionals can no longer deliver the attention of the audiences following traditional approaches as in an age of multiplying media, political disillusionment, and time-scarcity. This is no longer plausible. Instead, as some authors have pointed out, there is a need to develop what they call "public connections" (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007, p. 5). These connections – or forms of engagement – will require, however, a level playing field that allows some equality in the communication by means of assuring transparency and accountability between the organisation and the stakeholders.

This means going beyond the narrow organisational objectives of mobilisation and resources allocation – as important as may they seem at that moment – so as to be able to foster a relationship space in which spectators and sufferers do not see each other as distant parties but as equals in terms of citizenship and humanity. This space should be understood as a different type of regime of empathy defined not only by emotionality but also, and above all, by rationality. Something that we believe can not only help turn around the declining trend in public engagement with these causes but also create new forms of commitments in terms of public participation and resource allocation.

This rationality has precedent in our times and derives from the notion of risk that led in the 20th century to the creation of the welfare state. This was well summarised by John Rawls in his classic A Theory of Justice (1971), when he suggested that when individuals assume the possibility of risk destitution and suffering as their own, then they are more willing to accept a collective action and responsibility. This, rationale can use the notion of shared risk to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect among the different stakeholders. Consequently, this understanding of "risk" needs to be able to accommodate a "plurality of distinctions" (Luhmann, 1993, p. 16).

Therefore, professional communication in relation to humanitarianism needs to be able to communicate risk effectively in a way that allows donors and recipients of aid to appreciate the situations as a challenge for both parts. This is not by assuming "risk" in terms of fear – as used by governments and corporations to advance particular agendas (Klein, 2007) – but as a rational and paused understanding that the individuals on the other side of the screens are equals, and that therefore we could all be exposed to similar tragedies. This notion of risk is still, to a certain point, utilitarian as it aims at reducing potential pain. Nevertheless, it does convey an important amount of empathy that allows those suffering to de-potlatched and those in the West to feel a shared sense of responsibility.

In this context, the appeal for donations would not be done in the terms of a "gift" derived from pity coming from the powerful, but instead would have to be articulated as a moral "retribution" for the suffering and pain that our own Western society has caused in the first place by means of its own consumerists patterns and historical structures of colonial power. Indeed, let us not forget that in modern times the social production of wealth is followed by the social production of risk in the way the earlier is distributed (Beck, 1998, p. 29), consequently the function of humanitarian communication should address the distribution and wealth from a rhetorical and dialogical perspective.

This, of course, goes against the utilitarian notion of public relations practiced in corporation and commercial environments, which tends to be obsessed with "organisations" and "systems". That sees the public solely as potential commodities for which relationships and communications are means of extractive specific outcomes. More importantly, it will need to be a new rationale that recognises that NPOs are not commercial entities but social agents for change. Therefore, those working in them need to embrace the implementation of regimes of empathy by means of collaborative agreements. These agreement need to allow a dialogue that can help to deliver distinctive frameworks of rational and emotional understanding for civic engagement and political action. In so doing, professional communication can help to create a space in which all parts see each other as equals and engage in a negotiated construction of reality. This in turn can support the establishment of a more permanent relationship between the spectators and those who suffer by transforming both into stakeholders in equal terms and with equal rights. Doing so will provide, we believe, a different type of legitimacy to the role that public relations plays in the context of humanitarian communication.

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