Liking visuals and visually liking on Facebook: From starving children to satirical saviours

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The development of social media sites, such as Facebook (founded 2004) and Twitter (founded 2006), has changed humanitarian non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) media practices and subsequently altered the ways that supporters and publics are engaged.¹ This chapter focuses on a recent movement for NGOs to humour humanitarianism to achieve visibility on social networks, like Facebook. In particular, examining how visuals of humanitarianism have moved away from depicting starving children awaiting assistance towards satirical representations of 'saving' those in need. This chapter also contributes an understanding of how people participate in these differing narratives on Facebook with an analysis of interviews with young people (aged 18–35) in the UK.

Starving children

Since the 1970s, the images of extreme hunger communicated by NGOs have been widely criticised as overtly negative and representatively inaccurate, depicting starving children through a colonial gaze.² In 1989, the General Assembly of European NGOs adopted a new Code of Conduct on the 'Images and Messages relating to the Third World' (1989). The document called for NGOs to avoid using apocalyptic or pathetic images that fuel prejudices and promote a sense of Northern superiority (1989: 2). Despite the adoption of new codes, decades later, the representations of humanitarianism in NGO adverts still include isolated suffering children in need of a 'saviour'. Most notably, these representations are mobilised in daytime television adverts; using close up shots of skeletal bodies, habitually children, surrounded by flies.³ However, on Facebook, dominant images of starving children are now filtered by a structure that privileges content that users can 'like', 'comment' or 'share'. Facebook algorithms, along with the architects of Facebook, have now become the new 'gatekeepers' of humanitarian communication and NGOs have started to adapt their representations of humanitarianism. In particular, I propose that the Facebook 'like', and users' interaction online, changes the visual communication used by

contributing to the governance of visibility. I will explore these themes by using the UK Enough Food IF (2013) anti-poverty campaign as my site of investigation.

On the 23 January 2013, the Enough Food IF campaign was launched by a coalition of the largest leading humanitarian NGOs in the UK, including Save the Children, Oxfam and Christian Aid.⁴ The campaign broadly aimed to tackle extreme international hunger by rallying the British public to use their national citizenship to pressure their MPs, prime minister and chancellor to take political action on aid, tax avoidance, biofuels and government transparency. Due to a limited financial budget, the Enough Food IF campaign organisers predominantly communicated their messages across digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Enough Food IF Interview 2013).

The Enough Food IF campaign's Facebook page was launched the same day as the campaign. In the first twelve months, content published by the campaign received an average of 125 likes per post, totalling 52,217 and 77 shares per post, totalling 31,953. The Enough Food IF campaign's internal *Digital Insights* reported, 'Social media was the hero in this campaign. With strong engagement rates on content, social media was also the largest referrer [to the campaign website].'⁵ As a coalition, the Enough Food IF campaign organisers agreed to have a tight-loose control of their social networks. For the key moments, the launch in January, the UK budget stunt in March and for their rallies at the G8 Summit in June 2013, the steering group took tight control of their messaging, branding and media image. During these 'moments', the visual communication, which included videos, images and info-graphics, achieved the most interaction on Facebook. However, in the time between these 'moments', there was a loose arrangement of various NGOs (varying in size) authoring communication for the Facebook page each week, during these times the frequency of posts increased, however the circulation of the material reduced. This indicates that the coalition, who were advised by social media consultants, were better equipped at producing communications that fitted the architecture of Facebook.

Nick Couldry proposes that media research is often constrained by a focus on texts or audiences instead of the 'open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media'.⁶ While this chapter focuses on the practices that occur online, it is important to note that they are intertwined with wider open sets of actions. Couldry argues that practice theory can contribute to translating the hype of a 'digital revolution' by asking: 'What types of things do people *do* in relation to media? And what types of things do people *say* (think, believe) in relation to media?'⁷ This chapter explores the acts of 'liking visuals' and 'visually liking' on Facebook, to examine how Facebook structures both discourses and practices in humanitarian NGO campaigns. First, I analyse the act of 'liking' visuals on Facebook by examining the architecture of the social networking site, to understand how visibility of communications is governed and what actions are permitted. Here, visibility is explored using the work of Taina Bucher as a 'highly contested game of power in which the media play a crucial role'.⁸ Second, I address the act of visually 'liking' content on Facebook with reference to eight interviews with young British adults (aged 18–35) to investigate their actions

taken online and how campaign acts contribute to 'presencing' political engagement. I conclude with a discussion on how humouring hunger, to fit the architecture of Facebook, potentially pacifies the politics of poverty and humanitarian intervention.

'Liking' visuals

Architectures of action

The act of clicking a button to support a campaign or cause has been criticised widely, both within NGOs and externally, that 'clicktivism' is a downgrade of activism proper.⁹ The focus on the 'click' is an oversimplification of the many practices that take place in digital environments. Discussing the architecture of online spaces is not a new perspective.¹⁰ However, work on the architecture of social networking sites that address humanitarian campaigns has previously neglected to address who the architects are and the implicit ideology of their design.¹¹ I apply these fundamental questions to the social networking site Facebook as the starting point of this chapter.

Facebook was founded in the United States in 2004 as a network for Harvard University students to share 'social' information. In 2005, the network was open to other US educational institutions, corporate professionals and in the following year was made public.¹² Checking social networking sites has now become part of daily life; within the UK, twenty-four million people log on to Facebook every day.¹³ With the penetration of social networks into everyday life, NGOs now use online platforms as a tool to connect and communicate to 'networked publics'.¹⁴ In 2009, the introduction of Facebook 'pages' facilitated a space for organisations, including NGOs, to create public profiles. Facebook 'pages' mirror individual profiles, with the ability to publish content to a 'timeline' and interact as a 'friend' in a user's 'News Feed' (introduced in 2009).

Mark Zuckerberg, most visible architect of Facebook and CEO, states that 'the goal of the company is to *help people to share more* in order to make the world more open and to help *promote understanding* between people'.¹⁵ Zuckerberg articulates a philosophy that resonates with humanitarian values of helping others to create a better world with the promise to 'build richer relationships with the people we love and care about'.¹⁶ However, as will be explored in this chapter, the mechanics of Facebook differs from the ethos that Zuckerberg attempts to promote. I will examine three ways that the 'social' is constructed by the architecture of Facebook: 'liking', 'sharing' and having Facebook 'friends'. For each, I explore how their implicit ideology shapes participation in humanitarian campaigns.

Liking

Facebook aims to be a positive network, where 'users are constantly prompted to like, enjoy, recommend and buy as opposed to discuss or critique'.¹⁷ In 2009, the 'like' button was introduced as a way for users to acknowledge content and contribute to

the positivity of the network. To 'like' content and 'pages' is now the most popular action taken on Facebook; every day the 'like' button is hit 3.2 billion times across the world contributing to what some have termed a 'like economy'.¹⁸ Facebook's architecture scripts actions that conform to an 'affirmative atmosphere, in which people only agree and do not disagree or express discontent and disagreement'.¹⁹ Consequently, paradoxical relationships are produced when NGO campaigns, which protest *against* hunger, poverty and ultimately the status quo, communicate through Facebook. In the case of the Enough Food IF campaign, Facebook users were no longer confronted by images of a suffering child, which audiences may wish to 'dislike' but were invited to engage with poverty through visuals of satirical videos, smiling children and even cats engaging with the campaign.²⁰

While users have petitioned Facebook for a 'dislike' button, Zuckerberg has continually argued that to say something 'isn't good ... [is] not something that we think is good for the world. So we're not going to build that'.²¹ Zuckerberg attempts to silence the corporate agenda of Facebook and instead vocalises that its decisions are based on producing a network that 'is good for the world'. To ensure the positivity of the network, Facebook's architecture limits the interactivity of users. While Facebook users have the opportunity to choose the activities that they wish to participate in, they are confined by the architecture of Facebook to predefined actions. Users are directed to engage with communications by liking, commenting or sharing. In September 2015, while I was conducting research for this chapter, Zuckerberg announced that Facebook was working on a button for users to 'express empathy' because for some posts, users 'may not feel comfortable to "like" that post, but your friends and people want to be able to express that they understand'.²² Yet, as will be explored in this chapter, the architecture of Facebook is shaped by corporate actors who define the need for the social to be positive. On social networks, corporations aim to build 'positive' relationships with consumers, who will *endorse* rather than *reject* their brands. While news articles reported that Facebook was creating a dislike option, the button did not take the form of a 'dislike' button.²³ In 2016, Facebook launched a range of seven emoticons: 'Like', 'Love', 'Haha', 'Yay', 'Wow', 'Sad' and 'Angry'. The emoticons still privilege the 'like' button, which remains the primary button that users have to click to access different responses.

Sharing

Zuckerberg's public statements about Facebook emphasise the ability to 'share' content.²⁴ Similar to the act of 'liking' the ability to 'share' is framed as a positive act, whereby 'sharing is an expression of your caring'.²⁵ The ability to 'share' encourages users to contribute to a circulation of content which is monitored by Facebook. Christian Fuchs argues that Facebook's tracking of users' actions is a strategy that 'violates their [users'] privacy for economic ends'.²⁶ In the case of campaigning, the act of sharing campaign information is not new. For centuries, social movements

have distributed leaflets to strangers, neighbours and friends asking for their support. Sharing also goes beyond sharing communications. Activism is a shared activity, which involves a shared identity and common understanding of how to make or change the future. Yet, when the act of sharing is conducted through Facebook it differs. The act to 'share' content on Facebook contributes to data flows and, similar to the 'like' button, is 'instantly turned into valuable consumer data'.²⁷ While the act of sharing may echo traditional activist actions by contributing to a circulation of campaign material, the action also contributes to Facebook's implicit corporate agenda. Therefore, in the case of the Enough Food IF campaign, the NGOs requesting supporters to 'share' their content, is also a request for them to 'share' their personal data for 'corporate social media monitoring', although NGOs do not financially benefit from this transaction.²⁸

Facebook 'friends'

Facebook promotes all relationships between users as 'friendships', in contrast to other social networking sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, which use the term 'follower'. Corporate and charitable organisations producing 'pages' also occupy the position in users' 'newsfeeds', similar to a 'friend'. The architecture of Facebook promotes social exchanges between users, as well as 'pages', as socially valuable. Defining the connection as a 'friendship' implies that it is a reciprocal relationship that both find mutually beneficial.

By defining social connections as a 'friendship', both positivity and intimacy are implied. The positive connotations of 'friendships' are integral to the way Facebook's architecture structures positive sentiments. Friendship also implies a degree of intimacy whereby users wish to 'share' the personal in semi-public spaces. A user sharing the 'personal' again benefits the corporate agenda of Facebook, which is then able to capture intimate information that can be instantly sold to advertisers. Popular social networking sites that preceded Facebook, like MySpace (founded 2003), produced less intimate spaces, with users adopting pseudonyms and only sharing one or two images, whereas Facebook encourages users to 'log on and carry out their digital lives with their offline identities', proposing that 'the use of authentic identity helps people get the most value out of the site'.²⁹ Facebook promotes that the authenticity in self-presentation helps people to connect and contribute to friendships both on and offline.

In the case of the Enough Food IF (2013) campaign, supporters were encouraged to 'like' Facebook content and 'share' YouTube videos with their Facebook 'friends'. These ideologically driven actions were determined not by the NGOs themselves but by the architecture of Facebook. The adoption of commercial strategies in humanitarian communication has a long history. Visual communication used by NGO campaigns is often developed by external corporate branding organisations. While this signals a change in the communications produced, the NGO maintains control of the messaging of these materials. However, in the case of Facebook,

the architecture is imposed not by the NGO but by the social networking platform, which dictates both the type of communication produced and how users can respond to issues, such as encouraging people to 'like' global poverty.

Governing visibility

In the twentieth century the communication of humanitarianism was governed by traditional media powers, including mainstream newspaper and TV news editors. The power to govern visibility of contemporary humanitarianism in social networking environments shifts from traditional media editors towards 'technological mechanisms and algorithmic selections operated by large social media corporations'.³⁰ I propose that these algorithms and their producers, which dictate a set of rules, are the new 'gatekeepers' that NGOs have to negotiate to achieve visibility. While Facebook 'pages' facilitate a space for organisations to have editorial control and to directly publish their own communications, research conducted in North America shows that only 6 per cent of users return to a page once liking it.³¹ For communication to achieve visibility on Facebook, NGOs need to penetrate the News Feeds of Facebook users, where people spend the majority of their time online.³²

The Facebook News Feed was created in 2006 and is controlled by algorithms to contribute to the personalisation of users' experiences.³³ At the time of the Enough Food IF campaign, the News Feed was governed by the Edge Rank algorithm, which determined what was displayed in a user's News Feed by calculating:

1. The Facebook relationship between the NGO and the Facebook user. For example, how often the user interacts with the NGO, defined in the algorithm as the *Affinity*.
2. The type of content and how people have engaged with the content, classified as the *Engagement*.
3. And finally the *Time Decay* of the post: Facebook wants the News Feed to contain recent posts.³⁴

On 6 August 2013, Facebook announced that the Edge Rank algorithm had been updated to include more factors. However, users' interaction with the content is still valued in selecting material for the News Feed. In particular, older content can return to users' News Feeds if it is 'still getting lots of likes and comments'.³⁵ The visibility of content is dependent on these numerical interactions.

Michel Foucault, with reference to Jeremy Bentham's design for the panopticon penitentiary, stated that 'the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form', identifies the power relationships that are rooted in visibility and surveillance.³⁶ For Foucault, visibility is an apparatus of control that governs human behaviour. In the case of social networking environments, visibility is not a punishment

but ‘functions as a reward’.³⁷ For any interaction to take place, users and organisations need to be visible. Facebook dictates that only specific communications, which fulfil the algorithmic selection, will penetrate users’ News Feed and be granted a degree of visibility. Achieving visibility on social networking platforms is also a temporary status. Unlike the circular panopticon, where the threat of visibility is continuous, the Facebook News Feed is a linear space that is continually updated by the algorithm, with posts at the top being most prominent.

Transience of visibility

The Facebook algorithm calculates the ‘time decay’ of communication, privileging recent posts by granting them visibility as well as pushing them towards the top of the News Feed. Although the algorithm dictates what communication temporarily penetrates the News Feed, the user’s command of the space brings a further degree of transience to the visibility. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, discusses the practice of walking in the city, ‘the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces’.³⁸ Similarly, Facebook users scrolling through their News Feed can be perceived as ‘walkers’ temporarily experiencing spaces in flux, following fragments of stories encountered on their visual journeys. While photos, status updates and shared links may be visible to the user ‘walking’ their *individual* News Feed, the whole is not encountered and neither is the collective.

De Certeau positions the ‘walker’ who is ‘below the thresholds at which visibility begins’ in contrast to the ‘voyeur’ who has an elevated experience of the city, who sees the city as a whole and ‘allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god’.³⁹ The architectures of social networks, as discussed above, are not designed for the complexities of humanitarian politics but for consumerism.⁴⁰ Facebook users are prevented from the elevated view of the ‘voyeur’ who might read humanitarian communication as a complex process that maps across different inequalities (economic, social, gender, racial). Users encounter only fragments of humanitarian stories, which fit the commercial design of the platform. The process that commodifies the lives of people living in poverty, and the contextual politics, are excluded. However, as ‘walkers’ users are positioned as practitioners, who have the ability to participate in their News Feed as a site of practice.

The way in which technologies change the request for publics to act, but also the act itself, is critiqued in the work of Jodi Dean, Lilie Chouliaraki, Mirca Madianou and others.⁴¹ Although Chouliaraki does not focus on social networking platforms her analysis of post-humanitarian communication is relevant to the social media used within the Enough Food IF campaign. Chouliaraki discusses how the ‘technologisation of action’ has resulted in acts being simplified.⁴² She argues that online activism now promotes ‘effortless’ action, without the need for a sustained commitment to the cause. The actions promoted in the architecture of Facebook are

easy; 'sharing' a video or 'liking' a post is not a time-consuming or skilled activity. Chouliaraki further juxtaposes the ease of expressing 'solidarity' from the 'comfort of her living room' with the suffering of the 'distant other'.⁴³

Humanitarian NGOs promote these time efficient practices. In the Enough Food IF campaign, the time that actions would take featured prominently in the communications used. On the Save the Children website, for example, supporters were directed to follow the campaign on social media in 'two minutes' or take part in producing a YouTube video in 'five minutes'. Robert Hassan, in his work on network time, discusses the role of the clock in the development of what Nigel Thrift calls 'capitalist time consciousness', which shapes an instrumental view that 'takes the world largely as given and attempts to find means of living ever more productively and efficiently in it'.⁴⁴ Keith Tester proposes that audiences of mediated suffering rely on 'common sense humanitarianism'; this uncritical understanding of humanitarianism is needed to promote 'time efficient practices'.⁴⁵ Antonio Gramsci defined common sense as 'the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed'.⁴⁶

Instrumentalism can be identified in contemporary humanitarian communication that directs supporters towards 'time efficient' actions online that promotes, perhaps due to time, a decontextualised problem of poverty and a solution (taking action with NGOs) as a given. These time-bound practices produce a transactional mode of engagement that does not require a sustained commitment to a cause. The success of the Enough Food IF campaign on social networks was not measured by the *quality* of the supporters' engagement with the issues (by analysing their YouTube Videos, Facebook updates or Tweets); instead the success was measured by the *number* of actions taken as an indication of public engagement. Jodi Dean defines a post-political formation of 'communicative capitalism' where the 'only thing that is relevant is circulation'.⁴⁷ The request by the Enough Food IF campaign for supporters to produce and circulate communications contributes to a 'massive stream of content, losing their specificity and merging with and into the data flow'.⁴⁸ While producing a 'flow' of communication acts as a catalyst for further 'likes', 'shares' and 're-tweets', the 'flow' has a pace, dictated by algorithms, that produces fleeting weak communicative affinities between supporters and/or NGOs, not shared political actions.⁴⁹ Facebook users individually interact with the NGO communication visible in their News Feed – the practice of 'following', 'liking' or 'sharing' are individual endorsements. Endorsements differ from exchanges, as the 'flow' of communication is linear, with the 'endorser' absorbing the politics of another, not exchanging their own understanding.

Visually 'liking'

Nick Couldry, in his theorising of media as practice, uses the work of Ann Swidler (2001) to develop the notion of 'culture' in terms of 'two types of publicly observable

processes ... first, *practices* themselves ... and, second, the *discourse* which, as Swidler argues, 'is not what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all'.⁵⁰ Consequently, Swidler, as well as Couldry, propose a new understanding of 'culture' away from internal 'ideas' or 'meanings' towards open practices 'notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character'.⁵¹ By analysing eight interviews with young people (aged 18–35), I investigate practices of participating in NGO campaigns through Facebook.

An interviewee commented that 'because its [visual communication] on Facebook, we're directed to "Like" poverty, which seems natural at the time' (Interview A). The act of 'liking' poverty, presented as 'natural at the time', illustrates that actions within the architecture of Facebook can be experienced as instinctive. Yet, the interviewee, reflecting on her actions, perceived that a paradox occurs when asked to 'like' poverty. These tensions are explored by discussing ways that visually 'liking' can be understood as a form of 'presencing' humanitarian action.

Participation as 'presencing'

People rarely self-identify as performers in everyday acts of self-presentation even though they frequently adjust or adapt behaviours to different social settings, situations and audiences.⁵²

Zizi Papacharissi, drawing on Erving Goffman, has argued that digital environments are conducive to online users participating in a performance of self-presentation.⁵³ By *adjusting* and *adapting* their behaviour, people present different 'faces' understood by Papacharissi as 'an information game' where information is concealed, discovered and revealed.⁵⁴ Building on Papacharissi's work on self-presentation, I wish to deploy Couldry's theory of 'presencing' to understand individuals' practices of participation in NGO campaigns and communication. Couldry defines 'presencing' as:

acts of managing through media a continuous presence-to-others across space ... oriented to a permanent site in public space that is distinctively marked by the producer for displaying that producer's self ... It responds to an emerging requirement in everyday life to have a public presence beyond one's bodily presence, to construct an objectification of oneself.⁵⁵

Similar to NGOs authoring communication that contributes to producing themselves as authentic and legitimate actors, individuals are 'presencing' themselves as campaigners of certain causes. Intertwined with individuals 'presencing' participation is the personalisation of politics and communications. Bennett and Segerberg define 'personalised' communication, for organisations or coalitions, which 'broker' action as involving 'opportunities for customisation of engagement with issues and actions'.⁵⁶ The customisation of engagement and 'presencing' of individuals as 'supporters' contributes to a practice of self-expression. By

organisations brokering action across social networks, which are increasingly reflectors of individual self-expression, the customisation of action has focused on visually 'presencing' the self.⁵⁷

The Enough Food IF campaign included several opportunities for supporters to visually presence their involvement in the campaign with Twibbons, visual petitions and YouTube videos, all of which, I propose, contribute to customising engagement that looks predominantly towards the 'self', rather than people living in poverty. The Twibbon was developed in 2009 by Storm Ideas, as a tool for users to customise their profile picture on Facebook and Twitter by adding a brand or charity's logo to show their public support for a 'cause'.⁵⁸ The Twibbon, now part of the architecture of Facebook, is a contemporary version of the traditional supporter ribbon, badge or car sticker.⁵⁹

In the case of the Enough Food IF campaign, supporters were invited to add an IF logo to their profile image. Changing a Facebook profile image, the most visible part of the profile (due to the enforced public setting), is a practice of self-expression, which is typically temporary but contributes to a public archive of profile images, unless actively deleted. The visibility of the profile picture, along with the act of changing the image, which is publicised in 'friends' News Feeds, has the potential to raise awareness by reaching 'networked publics'.⁶⁰ In the interviews, Facebook was discussed as a way that supporters became aware of campaigns. One interviewee acknowledged that their awareness of the Enough Food IF campaign was 'through a friend's Facebook' (Interview A) and another was made aware of new campaigns 'on Facebook mainly, I'm not really signed up to any charity email lists' (Interview B). While raising awareness, the practice of adding Twibbons to profile pages also contributes to users identifying themselves as part of a movement. The practice of 'presencing' is a continuous 'project of the self' that requires users to take action to remain socially visible.⁶¹ However, users can only practice participation via a Twibbon for one cause at any one time. Traditionally, being part of a 'movement' is perceived as a sustained commitment until the goals of the campaign are met. However, the act of adding a single Twibbon for a given period contributes to conveying action that is a singular and temporary commitment.

Self-expression and mobilising 'friends'

The act of 'liking' content on Facebook is recognised by interview participants as a visible act that has the potential to address a public by penetrating the News Feeds of their 'friends'. Similar to Michael Warner's understanding of publics existing by participating in reading, writing and watching 'the discourse[s] that addresses them', the act of 'liking' was perceived as a semi-public act that calls a public into existence, whereby strangers meet by being addressed by a mutual friend's action.⁶² Interviewees understanding the potential for their actions to be visible discussed that the ability to engage with NGO communication online was normatively

positive. The interviews conducted indicated that young people perceive social networks as spaces to mobilise friends. One interviewee rationalised her action of 'liking' having the potential to make 'other people see it' and persuade Facebook 'friends' to also act:

I think because I know if you 'like' it or 'share' it – I think maybe even if you just 'like' it – it comes up on your feed that you like something and then it will come up on my friend's News Feeds – so hopefully other people will see it and be persuaded to take action. (Interview C)

Reflecting on her relationship with NGO communication on Facebook, one interviewee commented that although she would 'like' many posts by NGOs, she discussed being more selective with the NGO material that she shared. She wanted to only share content that would achieve interaction with her friends ('likes', 'shares' and 'comments') and that when communication achieved a lot of interaction, she felt that she was part of something bigger. However, typically the NGO communications that she has shared 'haven't got a massive amount of likes and comments and I think the problem is that only certain people will look at it – you know some of your friends on Facebook will look at it and others won't' (Interview C). The interviewee's reflection on her use of Facebook and her 'friends' reception of NGO communication illustrates how campaigns are only visible for 'friends' that are actively willing to 'look'. Returning to my earlier argument that users 'walk' their News Feed, the interviewee's reflection illustrates that another degree of visibility/invisibility occurs once the communication penetrates the News Feed.

Several of the interviewees had volunteered overseas as part of the government-funded Platform2 programme and discussed that by sharing their own stories and images of 'humanitarian' action, more of their friends had engaged with their personal encounters of poverty (Interviews C, D, E). The personalisation of poverty in this way echoes the mediation of celebrities' trips overseas, including a similar sentimental discourse, 'going to Kenya and seeing Kibera the large slum was heart-breaking' (Interview C). The sharing of volunteer experiences on Facebook is both a communicative act that raises awareness of the poverty that exists as well as an act of self-expression that contributes to identifying themselves as actors within a cause. Chouliaraki identifies a recent humanitarian turn to self-expression, as a key feature of new media, which is a 'practical response to compassion fatigue, the public's apathy towards traditional iconographies of suffering'.⁶³ However, self-expression and humanitarianism has a deeper heritage that dates back to the publication of early missionary work overseas that situate missionaries as benevolent actors. What has changed in recent decades is the tone of the communication that shapes self-expression. Previously, self-expression in relation to humanitarianism was presented as a sacrifice to the cause, with sober imagery of missionaries feeding people living in poverty. In contrast, missionary work and overseas volunteering is now promoted with imagery of smiling young people

conducting overseas 'development' that contributes to the personal growth and fulfilment of the volunteer, while also 'saving' those in need.

Although interviewees all agreed that sharing NGO communication on Facebook is normatively positive, each participant discussed being selective about what they chose to share. The self-imposed criteria were either feeling 'really strongly about something and I feel that I want to encourage other people to do it' (Interview B) or because they believe that their friends will interact with it (Interview D). However, one interviewee was conscious that 'I don't want to put it [global poverty] in other people's faces' (Interview B), implying that the act of sharing communication could invade friends' personal spaces.

Each of the interview participants were asked to watch humanitarian NGO video clips and images during the interview and comment whether they would interact with the communication if they had encountered the imagery on Facebook. All participants rejected the imagery of a starving child, interpreting the image as 'negative' and 'repetitive'. Visuals of children smiling were generally perceived as 'positive' imagery and were a result of people already receiving international aid. Several interviewees commented that they would share the 'What has aid ever done for anyone?' and believed humour 'works':

I think humour is a good way to engage people, it wasn't used in a way to make it seem lighthearted – so I think it draws you in more – obviously everyone likes to laugh and I think positive images are always going to work much better than negative images because people see it as something different. I think it definitely works. (Interview C)

Interviewees understood humour and 'positive' imagery as 'working' due to it being 'something different'. The attraction to 'new' communication as a result of it being 'different' indicates that there is a perceived need, by audiences, for humanitarian communication to be continually changing if it is to 'work'.

Satirical saviours

Since 1985, Comic Relief has been producing telethons that include a juxtaposition of comedy performances alongside emotive pleas to help people living in poverty. Yet, the use of humour in the narratives of global poverty produced by NGOs has a much shorter history. Since 2005, in the era that Chouliaraki defines as 'post-humanitarian', the humouring of poverty has been used intermittently in protest campaigns (Make Poverty History), fundraising appeals (Comic Relief) and in educational campaigns critiquing NGO representations (Radi-Aid).⁶⁴ The humorous narratives have included self-reflexive critiques of the NGOs' own fundraising practices, subverting the traditional emotive plea, dramatic music and starving child. According to Cameron, using humour in public engagement, in particular for

protest and education, has the potential 'to work as a hook to attract initial public interest in serious issues ... [and] promote a sense of hope that change is possible'.⁶⁵ The humouring of hunger, which parodies the traditional narratives of poverty and humanitarian action, has gained large online audiences. 'Africans for Norway', a spoof charity single that asks Africans to send radiators to Norway because 'Frostbite kills too', has been watched by nearly three million YouTube viewers (published online 6 November 2012).⁶⁶ As a result of NGOs' desire to produce communications that circulate across social networks, the visuals used by campaigns have radically changed. The adoption of digital environments with implicit rules has challenged NGOs to produce satirical narratives of global poverty. The iconography of a starving child, who still remains a dominant focus in televised NGO adverts, is replaced on social networks by 'likeable' content.

The Enough Food IF campaign's Facebook communication that achieved the most 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments' is a satirical video that asks 'What has aid ever done for anyone?'.⁶⁷ Save the Children UK produced the video, which is directed by Paul Weiland (*Blackadder* and *Mr Bean*) and includes the actors Peter Serafinowicz, Joanna Scanlan and Matt Berry. The video was introduced by the organisation in a colloquial and friendly tone:

Hope you all had a great and eventful weekend! We certainly did – without giving too much away, it involved going undercover at an anti-aid rally and documenting what really goes on behind the scenes ...

The short video, less than three minutes long, was published on 18 March 2013, two days prior to a UK budget announcement, a key 'moment' in the campaign that asked for the UK government to spend 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) on international aid. The question posed in the video resonates with the public scepticism on the value of aid. Henson *et al.* conducted an analysis of Mass Observation diaries on the topic of aid in 2008, which showed that people in the UK 'tend to be much better at picturing aid "failure" than aid "success"'.⁶⁸ The video mimics a popular skit from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), that ironically asks, 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' with the conclusion being that they significantly developed society. Similarly, in the Enough Food IF video, British characters are on their way to an anti-aid rally, determined to campaign against aid even after their discussion on the bus about the many 'successes' of international aid. The video satirises traditional NGO protest action, with the characters participating in a demonstration, singing their protest song and holding placards displaying their anti-aid messages, including 'Make Aid History' in the same font as the 2005 Make Poverty History logo.

The larger audiences that humorous narratives of global poverty have achieved online illustrate that laughter can be a successful 'hook' for audiences to click and watch. However, the way in which social suffering is represented determines the type

of engagement provoked and contributes to the social relations formed between the North and the South.⁶⁹ Thomas Hobbes, writing in England in the mid-seventeenth century, developed a theory that humour was based on superiority over 'the defects of others' and that laughter was thus the 'roar of the victor'.⁷⁰ The premise for the 'What has aid ever done for anyone?' video is that the characters on the bus are both dim-witted and ignorant about the value of international aid. The humour is revealed in the incongruity of their determination to campaign an anti-aid message even after their discussion about how aid is:

Providing 2 million people with clean water and sanitation, enabling 5 million children to go to school, vaccinating over 80 million children against killer diseases, helping people dying from preventable illnesses, nearly eradicating polio, and responding to 32 natural disasters across the globe in the last year.

Applying Hobbes's theory, the laughter in the clip is provoked by the 'superior' audience witnessing the 'defective' view of the anti-aid campaigners. The humour of the video is contingent on the audience already supporting, or adopting during the clip, the pro-aid position of the Enough Food IF campaign.

Hobbes's theory of humour as depending on superiority is challenged in the work of Robert C. Solomon, who proposes 'laughter as the great leveller, beyond contempt or indignation, antithetical to pretention and pomp ... to avoid the supposed bad taste of enjoying the Three Stooges [a 1920's American comedy group] we encounter the much greater danger of taking ourselves too seriously'.⁷¹ Hobbes and Solomon are absolute in their divergent theories about the uses of laughter, yet both approaches can be identified in NGO communication. Solomon's claim that the authors of the comedy in truth laugh at themselves can be identified in many of the NGOs' self-reflexive narratives of the work that they conduct. Yet, NGOs are specifically only self-reflexive on their public engagement activities with people living in the global North. NGOs deconstruct and satirise development fundraising adverts: the 'caring' celebrity, the emotive music and their use of 'African' children, but not their development project work in the field.⁷²

The focus by the NGO sector to only parody their public engagement work, in an effort to further engage the public, produces a communicative feedback loop. NGOs are inviting audiences to be part of the game, using their cynicism to acknowledge the inferiority of their communications. Although the humorous narratives address public cynicism, the social relationship between the global North and people living in poverty remains the same. In the case of the Enough Food IF video: celebrities remain the dominant voices, the people living in poverty are not only silent but are now also invisible, and the NGOs' work in the field is still promoted as providing the gift of clean water, sanitation, education and, more generally, 'saving people's lives'. The agency to be the comedian, and to tell the joke, holds implicit power and often the same framework of stereotypes are used without subversion. People living

in poverty are imagined, as in the Enough Food IF video, as passive, hungry and helpless – in need of campaigners in the UK.

John Cameron argues that ‘in the context of low levels of public engagement in the global North with issues of global injustice, the strategic use of humour is a risk worth taking.’⁷³ However, I argue that the current use of humour in humanitarian communication deflects attention towards celebrating a temporary subversion. Humanitarian NGOs’ adoption of humour in the context of their public engagement work can be understood in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the carnival as folk-humour. For the carnival only suspends dominant hierarchies, it is a ‘celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.’⁷⁴ The carnival, like the humour used in NGO campaigns, does not permeate all spaces. It achieves visibility only when ‘permitted by the culture which is operating these hierarchies as norms, [which] leads us to see carnival’s long term effect as constraining rather than liberating’⁷⁵ Humanitarian NGOs satirise their communication practices on their own terms. While they offer a degree of self-deprecating humour, by parodying their communication traits of starving children, celebrities and dramatic music, this rarely results in a change in how they communicate poverty more widely.

Conclusion

While digital interactions can be archived, the rapid change in users’ Facebook News Feeds contributes to NGO communication occupying only a temporal position of visibility. The architecture of Facebook, in particular the algorithmic selection of the News Feed content, is both the ‘gatekeeper’ and ‘governor’ of visibility. The implicit ideology of Facebook to be a network of positive sentiments has produced a new code of conduct for NGOs. To achieve visibility, humanitarian communications need to be ‘likeable’, which has resulted in NGOs changing their visual communications. However, while the communication becomes visible to a wider audience, people living in poverty still remain invisible within humorous communications that rely on the same framework of stereotypes.

Time-based actions are promoted by NGOs as a ‘moment’ to act, which is both quick and immediate. The commercial ideology of the Facebook platform promotes transactional and numerical modes of citizenship, in which public engagement is quantitatively measured by NGOs, similar to fundraising campaigns.⁷⁶ In doing so, action is orientated towards ‘endorsements’ of NGO-produced communication, not communicative exchanges between publics or people living in poverty. Everyday practices on Facebook contribute to users ‘presencing’ themselves as actors within NGO campaigns. My interviewees identified Facebook as a space of mobilisation. The visibility of their actions, such as ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ NGO communication, contributes to establishing support for a campaign. Users’ self-expression of compassion on issues of global poverty has also taken a turn towards the ‘positive’ with participation being conveyed as ‘joyful’.

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