Introduction

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Abstract

This article introduces you to the general themes and questions of this special issue. We argue that history and visual media have long been central to humanitarian communication, but that the overlaps between history, visual media, and humanitarian communication have seldom been addressed. A focus on those overlaps, we suggest, not only demonstrates that critical historical inquiry has much to offer for professional communication specialists, it also sheds new light on the workings, changes and persistence of humanitarian narratives over the twentieth century.

Keywords: humanitarian communication; visual media; historical communication; humanitarian narratives; public history

How important is history for humanitarian practitioners and institutions? Historians, carried forward by the enthusiasm for their work, typically argue for its central value. Fieldworkers and practitioners often have a different view. Their reference point is the present or the future, not the past. Humanitarian practitioners, argued John Borton a few years ago, would read little about the history of their sector, and 'for the most part' displayed 'a marked lack of historical perspective or appreciation for the value of historical knowledge' (Borton, 2016: 194). The fault lay not only with practitioners. Historians too had their share of responsibility: their jargon and over-theorizing, the focus on systemic critique, and a certain ignorance vis-à-vis the practical challenges of humanitarian work (Taithe and Borton, 2016: 216) would all add to a disconnect and foster the sense that a look at history was of little relevance to humanitarian practitioners.

Move the spotlight to humanitarian communication, and you get a different picture: here, history is everywhere. No website of any major humanitarian organization comes along without its own history section. On YouTube, humanitarian players provide an ever growing number of documentaries about their past and origins. Fundraising campaigns, mass mailings, and social media posts all point frequently to historical achievements.

Major aid organizations now also call on their branches to 'enhance the historical and cultural heritage' of their work 'in their communication activities' (Red Cross Council of Delegates, 2015), allow access to their audiovisual archives, or have established units for 'historical communication' within their headquarters.[1] Here as well, however, exchange and cooperation between professional historians and communication practitioners seems marginal at best and has only recently started to evolve.[2] New collaborative approaches between academics and practitioners, such as the initiative *The People in the Pictures* (Save the Children, 2017) or the Radi-Aid research report (Girling, 2018), a collaboration with the University of East Anglia, address many of the criticisms raised by the use of photography among aid agencies – including the lack of alternative representations and the White Saviour complex – and call for more visual ethics.

How could professional historical inquiry link up and connect to the work of communication practitioners? What common ground could be found? And what could they learn from each other? This special issue uses the past and present of humanitarian communication as a point of departure to begin a joint reflection on the possibilities and potentials of more collaboration. Our focus is particularly on visual media. Together, historians and practitioners discuss the role of visual media in

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humanitarian communication, ask how this role has formed out historically, and explore what changes it may be undergoing currently. The forum therewith seeks to build on recent efforts to improve and deepen the uses of history within the humanitarian sector (see Borton and Davey, 2015; O'Sullivan and Chéilleachair, 2019).

Visual communication is an important theme for humanitarian organizations. On the one hand, social media from YouTube to Instagram privilege pictures, making the practice of aesthetic seeing the typical form by which audiences and individuals engage with the work of aid institutions. On the other hand, as a growing scholarship on critical histories of visual humanitarian communication reminds us, the art of picture-making is not a new imperative, but a long established historical practice of humanitarian organizations. Recent edited volumes on the history of humanitarian photography (Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015) and the relation between the media and humanitarian action (Paulmann, 2019) have pointed to the long historical trajectories of visual communication activities and drawn attention to the historical entanglements between visual media and humanitarianism. Meanwhile, other historians, international relations scholars, and political theorists have shed much light on the visual politics of aid, including works on the innocent figure of the child to depoliticize controversial contexts and build empathetic responses to distant suffering (Burman, 1994; Campbell, 2012; Fehrenbach, 2015; Gigliotti, 2018; Gorin, 2015; Taithe, 2010), the dehistoricization and feminization of the refugee figure to overcome the politics of borders (Johnson, 2011; Malkki, 1996; Rajaram, 2002), or the contribution of visual media to ideologies embedded in humanitarian narratives, from the human rights framework to colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism (Briggs, 2003; Dogra, 2012; Lydon, 2016; Sliwinski, 2011).

In this special issue, we build on such scholarship by inquiring into the role that specific media such as photography, film, graphic materials, or museums play in humanitarian visual communication today, and what role they have played historically. Combining four historical essays with a number of joint conversations between historians and practitioners, we examine how, when, why, and in what shape humanitarian actors started to rely on visual media in the course of their history, what problems and dilemmas they faced, and what challenges they are up against in the present. Sonya de Laat's contribution on refugee photography analyzes Lewis Hine's reportage of the visually displaced in Europe between June 1918 and April 1919, published in the mass-circulated and popular *Red Cross Magazine* of the American Red Cross. Valérie Gorin's analysis dives into the early use of humanitarian cinema in the 1920s, during the pivotal period of 1919–23 and the first international humanitarian response in Europe, to show

how cinema participated as a set of communication practices convergent with transnational activism and advocacy. Sönke Kunkel tracks the much neglected history of Red Cross museums throughout the twentieth century, showing that the newer approach of public history may open a productive line of inquiry on the history of humanitarian communication. Finally, Dominique Marshall's piece explores the history of the Canadian International Development Agency, examining and reflecting on the uses and impacts of its 'Photo Library'. The four historical essays are sided by conversations with communication practitioners or image-makers that revolve around the present challenges of humanitarian communication. The Canadian photographer Stéphanie Colvey, who has worked with various humanitarian and development agencies, shares her insights into photographing people on the move.[3] MSF's Maria Guevara, Senior Operational Positioning and Advocacy Advisor, and Marc DuBois, former Head of Humanitarian Affairs Department, discuss the idea of 'speaking out' and its entanglements with *témoignage* and eyewitness strategies. Rainer Schlösser, spokesperson of the Association of the Red Cross Museums in Germany, provides insights into current practices and challenges of museum work within the Red Cross movement. Finally, Sara Falconer (Director, Digital Communications at the Canadian Red Cross), Zuzia Danielski (Communications Director at IMPACT), Rhonda Rosenberg and Chinye Talabi (Executive Director and Communications Coordinator, respectively, at the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan) and Stephanie Leclair (Senior Manager of Communications and Philanthropy at the World University Service of Canada) explore past and present traditions in the visual communication of Canadian NGOs.

Two overarching goals and concerns shape the discussions following in the essays and conversations. One point this forum would like to put forward is that professional and critical historical inquiry does have a fundamental institutional significance for humanitarian organizations. Professional inquiry, it is true, often focuses more on the ambivalences, failures, or points of controversy in the history of humanitarian action and thus differs from the self-serving institutional histories and forms of history marketing that put the 'past glories' (Wylie, 2002) of such action front and center. But there is a certain value in a critical and independent focus. If today's concerns over the humanitarian use of the image in terms of identity, reputation, and publicity are legitimate, a critical historical perspective helps to deepen understanding of the representational dilemmas confronted by humanitarian organisations since their early years and the ambiguities and indexical potentialities offered by the mechanical image. Critical

historical inquiry also helps to overcome institutional blinders and offers spaces for reflection about core problems of humanitarian communication, including the ethics of image-making or the problems of agency, ideology, and power relations embedded in practices of image-making. At its best, the work of professional historians may thus contribute to shaping humanitarian communication into a reflected practice that is aware of the traditions and historical pathways that inform the work of communication officers these days, as well as the power dynamics embedded in the visual economy of aid.

A second goal of this forum is to provide a better understanding of the specific workings of different visual media in humanitarian communication. The essays assembled here offer a comparative look at four different media: photography, film, graphic materials, and museums. Harnessing diverse methodological approaches to the variety of those visual formats (de Laat and Gorin, 2016; Kurasawa, 2015; Lenette, 2016), each of the contributions asks how the specific logics, demands, languages, and aesthetics of those media framed historical ways of presenting, seeing, and engaging with suffering.

One important finding emerging from those inquiries is that each of those visual media – including the individuals behind them – shaped, changed, and generated their own humanitarian narratives. The research presented here therewith not only shows that humanitarian narratives are always 'situated narratives' that are shaped by the specific media forms through which they are formulated; it also reminds us that humanitarian communication is a multilayered and multifaceted endeavor that involves a wide range of actors, practices, and forms of narration. This way, the essays assembled here invite a critical reflection of the guiding paradigms of distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Kennedy, 2009) and post-humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki, 2013), while also adding nuance to more recent scholarship on current communication strategies involving irony, self-reflection, and/or narcissism in humanitarian representations (Koffman et al., 2015; Schwarz and Richey, 2019).

Thinking historically about visual humanitarian communication has much to offer for professional communication specialists. On the other hand, dialogues between historians and practitioners should not be a one-way street and may also open productive feedback channels into the history profession. The essays and conversations following provide several examples for such feedback loops and should therefore be read as an invitation to practitioners to extend and deepen their conversation with historians.

Notes

1 See for example the ICRC audiovisual archives: https://avarchives.icrc.org/; or the Oxfam archives donated to the Bodleian Library: https://archives.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ (accessed 4 January 2021). The Headquarters of the German Red Cross has established a unit for 'historical communication' within its communications department.

2 New collaborative approaches between academics and practitioners, such as the initiative The People in the Pictures (Save the Children, 2017) and the Radi-Aid research report (Girling, 2018), a collaboration with the University of East Anglia, address many of the criticisms raised by the use of photography among aid agencies – including the lack of alternative representations and the White Saviour complex – and call for more visual ethics. (Radi-Aid was a satirical campaign (2013–17), initiated by the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH), that gained substantial attention on social media for raising awareness on stereotypes used in humanitarian appeals and narratives.)

3 This online exhibition is available on the website of the journal.

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