Encouraging humanitarian assistance in conflict zones through animated public service announcements

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Abstract

Recent conflicts in parts of Eastern Europe, the middle East and Africa have resulted in increased numbers of Internally Displaced Persons due to their inability to reach the borders of their countries in pursuit of refuge outside affected countries. These humanitarian crises continue to reveal the rising, urgent and dire need for humanitarian assistance to the affected people. The coverage of events and humanitarian stories in areas of armed conflict is crucial in aiding relief organizations in expanding the scope of their humanitarian projects, as it conveys the magnitude of the crisis and the extent of the suffering, which can persuade donors to provide more aid to the needy. However, working in conflict zones is a significant challenge for humanitarian workers and journalists, as numerous deliberate and inadvertent attacks on aid workers and journalists have been documented in countries such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria, the Central African Republic, Ukraine, Ghana and Yemen.

Studies have demonstrated that one of the most effective ways of encouraging donors to take action is to use a single case of suffering as opposed to relying only on statistics. Other studies have also concluded that when affected persons narrate their own story, it is easier to convince the intended target to empathize with them (Chang & Lee 2010; Kim 2014). To mitigate some of the aforementioned challenges and to uphold the anonymity of affected people, this practice-led research paper proposes and argues for animated public service announcements as a potential effective medium for promoting humanitarian stories of people living in conflict zones. Through engaging with existing literature and discourses, and conceptually lensing the discussions on theories of animation and concepts on framing humanitarian appeal message, the study designs, develops and produces a first iteration of an animated Public Service Announcement text inspired by an actual event. It then rigorously analyses this text with the intention of developing it to an effective Public Service Announcement for potential humanitarian donors.

Author keywords

Humanitarian stories; Animated PSAs; fundraising donor aid; conflict zones; representations; framing humanitarian messages.

Introduction

Never before has the world been so generous towards the needs of people affected by conflicts and disasters, and never before has generosity been so insufficient (Miliband 2016:14).

Humanitarian and relief organisations continue to rely on support from individuals, governments and other donor entities to fundraise for their increasingly urgent and dire humanitarian projects. Many of these non-profit organisations are compelled to device novel ways of appealing to and attracting support from donors who may choose which entities to support. It is becoming increasingly important for media and marketing experts in these organizations to find new ways of delivering the humanitarian plea to their donors and to understand what makes these appeals effective and successful. In addition to the magnitude of humanitarian crisis facing relief organizations, working in areas of armed conflict presents numerous challenges and obstacles for humanitarian workers and journalists. Several deliberate and inadvertent attacks on aid workers and journalists have been documented in countries such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria, the Central African Republic, Ukraine, Ghana and Yemen.

Reaching people in need in war zones is another big challenge for relief organizations. In many instances, humanitarian organizations are prevented from delivering support materials to people in need. There are reports of assaults, kidnappings or killings of relief workers, whether intentionally or inadvertently (Patel et al. 2017:79-80). In this research, interviews were conducted with three humanitarian organizations, namely the "Gift of the Givers Foundation", the "International Organization for Migration", and the "Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization" to gather information on the challenges they face when covering humanitarian stories in areas of conflict. These organisations reported facing additional challenges. One is that the global financial crisis of 2008, which had a negative impact on the rate of support reaching humanitarian organizations. The three organizations reported an increase in the demand for humanitarian projects in most areas where these organisations operate and a lack of financial support. This deficiency has an impact on the number of projects im-

plemented each year, as financial support is regarded as the artery that feeds the various activities and relief programs carried out by these organisations. Also, in some situation, there is a lack of cooperation by the hosting governments or local authorities in the area where the projects are implemented, which makes the transportation of relief workers extremely difficult and in some cases a threat to their lives.

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We begin by briefly defining some key terms. The fundamental premise of animation is to display a series of static images that, when seen, give the illusion of movement. Cartoonists at the Zagreb School, however, strive to expand this description by emphasizing the creative and philosophical aspects of the craft. They say that animating is "to impart life and personality to a design, not by duplicating reality but by transforming it" (Wells 2013:10). Public service announcements (PSAs) are advertisements designed to enlighten a specific audience about certain concerns in order to increase awareness, draw attention, and urge action (Public service announcements 2015:2). Public service announcements may contain interviews, dramatizations, animations, and a variety of other visual and audio forms. The purpose of these announcements is also to inspire thought about certain issues in order to replace specific behaviours. PSAs are usually designed to be brief and concise for effectiveness.

Framing the humanitarian appeal message

Chang and Lee (2009:2913) define framing as the way in which a message is presented to its intended recipients. Kim (2014:708-709) proposes that there are two overarching approaches to communicate humanitarian messages which appeal to the potential donor's motivation. The first is what Kim calls altruistic appeals, which entail expressing concern for others. These messages emphasize the good effect of helping others and that assisting others should not be tied to the benefit of the donor; as a result, altruistic donors tend to be more concerned with the welfare of others than themselves. Kim terms the second approach as an egoistic appeal, these target people's self-interest. Kim proposes that egoistic givers concentrate on the rewards that will arise from their support, indicating that they are more concerned with their own welfare. Some of these benefits may include avoiding punishment, lowering taxes, or earning the appreciation of others (Kim 2014:708-709). Both approaches to message framing have their advantages and disadvantages when they are delivered to potential donors, and there is a lengthy debate about which one is more effective when presenting the humanitarian appeal. Kim's study (2014) also concludes that concrete and specific cases elicit a stronger response from donors compared to abstract and generic statistics.

Chang and Lee identify four components that they argue should be included in every humanitarian message. These include, "Clear and moving headlines, body copy, vivid case stories, and statistical evidence of a public issue to capture attention, elicit sympathy, and motivate giving" (Chang and Lee 2010:196). These four elements are also central to any successful production of Public Service Announcements. Chang and Lee's study (2010:198, 199, 212, 215) also identifies two ways to frame humanitarian appeals, positive framing and negative framing. These two can be likened to Kims (2014) altruistic and egoistic appeals. Positive framing, they note, emphasizes the positive outcomes of the donor's assistance. An example would be an appeal with an overall tagline such as 'with your donation, we can change the lives of the poor'. Negative framing approaches emphasize the negative outcomes of ignoring the donation request. For example, without your donation, dozens of poor people may lose their lives. The conclusion of the aforementioned study is that negative framing is more successful than positive framing since it might boost donors' emotional engagement and empathy when presenting humanitarian scenarios.

Humanitarian and aid organizations employ media campaigns, including shocking ones, to sway public opinion to support their cause. Darren Dahl (2018:89) argues that the traumatic images used in "shock advertising" demonstrate the victim's suffering in an effort to elicit viewer compassion. Shock advertising can be understood as a declaration that intentionally violates the social values and personal ideals of a targeted audience in the context of a charity in order to emotionally engage them. To demonstrate the severity of the issue to the public and elicit the intended response, these campaigns are highly emotive and often intentionally hostile towards viewers. The sensitive nature of the humanitarian appeal, which may be expressed by vivid visuals of someone's suffering paired with slogans, statistics, or information, plays an active role in conveying the message and convincing the intended audience (Albouy 2017:5).

Animation's Value Proposition in humanitarian PSAs

In the context of the aforementioned challenges faced by humanitarian and aid organisations and considering their fundraising needs and objectives, this section discusses some selected value propositions that animation, as a medium, can contribute to facilitate effective humanitarian media campaigns in order to attract funding from potential donors.

Honess-Roe (2011:2196), notes that "[...] envisioned information is easier to understand and retain", and that "much factual information is communicated more efficiently via animation than the spoken word". In addition to this convincing argument, human beings have been socialised to communicate effectively through story telling. Animation, alongside other forms of visual storytelling, offer the possibility of envisioning the spoken word. Instances that are characterised by a lack of existing live footage or photographic evidence, such as those experiences by humanitarian and relief organisation's media campaigns or instances in which accessing such footage would be too dangerous for either journalists or members of the relief organisations would benefit significantly from designing and narrating these media campaigns

using animation. As Honess-Roe notes above, animation can give life to spoken words and aid in visualising these events for a more effective or emotionally engaging experience from potential donors. Animation can play an important role when the story's protagonist requires anonymity. Although there are techniques in live action and photography that can be used to conceal the identity, voice and exact location of victims of conflict, these can be breached using contemporary software and technologies. Moreover, some of these techniques, such as masking the persons face or distorting their voice could potentially distance the viewer. Animated PSAs could be a more effective alternative to tell these stories powerfully in order to elicit empathy.

The use of live action footage or photography can be disturbing in certain situations and may end up subverting the intention of the relief organisation's media campaign objectives. Such visual material may expose viewers to extremely violent and disturbing scenes when documenting and narrating stories of wars and armed conflicts. This could result into an unintended consequence of losing and/or distancing some sensitive viewers in the target market. Using actual live action footage or photography can, in some instances, have the unintended effect of presenting locations such as damaged buildings and infrastucture, events such as violent attacks and in certain shots people such as refugees and corpses of victims in a generic and similar way. These kinds of representations could also have an effect of distancing or numbing the viewer. Animated PSAs could potentially offer a design solution to these challenges by curating these images without appearing to deliberately manipulate them and by individualising what may be construed as generic and similar.

Charles Forceville (2015:67) contends that, "If it is the live-action film's job to present physical reality, animated film is concerned with metaphysical reality - not how things look, but what they mean". He further proposes that animations enable the designer to lend a 'subjective perspective' to the story through visual metaphor. In some instances, and depending on the events, narrative and objective of the humanitarian media campaign, it may be more effective to use metaphors, imagery and other non-literal techniques to tell a compelling, emotionally engaging and effective story. These are strengths of the animated narrative as animation, due to its techniques and processes offer affordances that amplify and effectively apply metaphors, imagery and other non-literal storytelling techniques. These characteristics of animation enable the animators to portray plot themes that may be challenging to achieve with other formats of visual representations such as live-action and photographic material.

Honess-Roe (2011:217) asserts that animation can convey profound meanings and concepts by explaining difficult-to-achieve aspects or events compared to using other formats such as live-action and photography footage. Animation due to its fluidity, agility, style, context and format can also visually represent and capture abstract and non-visual events such as human feelings, memories, dreams, internal thoughts and internal conflicts more effectively, without disrupting suspension of disbelief. Visual ques, colour, shapes, movements and metaphors can be used in more dynamic ways to almost 'literally' represent some of these difficult to achieve events such as pain, frustration etc.

In a space where several humanitarian and relief organisations are competing for a finite pool of potential funders and volunteers, it is important to find ways to be novel in order to stand out and be different to the majority so that these media campaigns can be noticed. Majority of media campaigns use live action media in cases where motion picture is a preferred outcome, or photography where the target audience is inclined to this. Many use radio campaigns and other forms of aural campaigns. In the contemporary space in which the internet, social and other digital media platforms are gaining credence and popularity, the animated medium can provide this differentiation or novelty that would potentially enable a campaign to receive the desired outcome and stand out from the rest.

Methodology

In his seminal paper "Research in art and design" (1994), Christopher Freyling convincingly argues for the validity of practice research in the Art, Craft and Design fields. He grapples with questions of what research is, what it involves and what it delivers and discusses three overarching research categories which are: research into art and design, research through art and design and research for art and design. This study positions itself within Freyling's second category i.e. research through art and design and follows a practice-led research methodology. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009:7) contend that research-led practice is a complementary term to practice-based research and that "scholarly research can lead to creative work" (Smith and Dean 2009:7).

The *golden thread* integrated a practice-led orientation, with a research-led thematic, which came to constitute the animated PSAs conceptual design. Connecting both the various approaches and methods herein was made possible by leveraging an inductive approach, where meanings derived from collected / relevant data (Creswell 2014:232-233) were sustained as a kind of persistent meta-synthetic activity experienced between moving between researching, conceptualising and making. As observed by Hawkins and Wilson (2017:83) practice-led research can contribute to research knowledge when the "work is challenging, probing, bringing into question or testing a conceptual model" (Hawkins & Wilson 2017:83). As already mentioned, the study begun by interviewing three humanitarian organizations: the "Gift of the Givers Foundation", the "International Organization for Migration" and the "Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization" to gather information on the challenges they face when covering humanitarian stories in areas of conflict. The study then engaged with conceptual and theoretical literature on framing the humanitarian appeal message as well as theories on animation and animated documentaries. These culminated into the production of the first iteration of an animated PSA titled *Child's Dreams: Between Dreams and Reality* which was premised on a transcript of an actual event provided by one of the humanitarian organisations mentioned earlier.

Analysis and Insights from the first iteration of the Animated PSA

The first iteration of the Animated PSA is titled *Child's Dreams: Between Dreams and Reality*. It is a two-and-a-half-minute animated PSA set in a desolate destroyed town. The

narrative's protagonist and only character in the story is a boy of about five to seven years whose voice over narrates the events. The story skilfully and creatively transitions between the desolate town, his lonely home and the hospital in which he is admitted after his home is destroyed, which is the protagonist's reality, and his dream world, which is a manifestation of his fantasies and wishes. The story opens in the fantasy world set by a beach as the protagonist is fishing. Through his voice over, he tells us that fishing and photography are his favourite activities and expresses his wish to live in a world without war, like other children. The fantasy world is positively framed throughout the narrative while the real world is framed in the converse. Here's a link to the animated PSA: https://vimeo.com/778893804.

As the first point of contact with potential donors and volunteers, the title of the animated PSA certainly needs some reworking so as to streamline it and to make it appeal more to its target market. The words in the title need careful consideration and curation to include key words that can immediately grab the attention of the target audience by calling them to action. As it currently reads, the choice and arrangement of words in the title are neutral and passive, and may not immediately pique the attention of the target viewer. In a space awash with competing content, the title needs to stand out. A title such as 'Stop the war: give children a future' or 'Every hour, war destroys a child's life' could pique the interest of potential donors. Streamlining the title could also entail reframing it to eliminate repetition of words and avoiding having it read like a logline.

Technically and narratively, the animated PSA could use the affordances of the animated medium more creatively to push the boundaries of representation. As Honess-Roe (2011:217) intimated, animation can represent and convey difficult to achieve events. Since the PSA has only one character throughout the story, animation techniques could be used to create dynamism and alternative focus points by representing the protagonists feelings, memories, dreams, internal thoughts and internal conflicts either visually or through imagery. Animation, for instance, could allow the audience to either literally or metaphorically journey into the protagonists heart, stomach, brain or injuries to visually externalise and represent pain, suffering, loneliness, frustration and other internal emotions that are often difficult to convey if other media such as live action and photography are used.

The world of the story may also seem implausible as it is currently represented. Although the protagonist mentions his family, the audience does not get to see them. No other people or animals are seen either in the real world i.e. the hospital, home, streets or in the fantasy world. Although the sense of isolation may elicit empathy from the viewer, suspension of disbelief may be disrupted if no other people seem to be in the protagonist's world either in his fantasy or his real world or both. There may also be a lost opportunity for emotional en-

gagement by not including other people that the viewer could relate to or identify with. Showing a variety of people experiencing similar struggles and difficulties as the protagonist or even a pet in the protagonists world could broaden the Animated PSAs appeal to a broader and more diverse audience.

The wall-to-wall music may need a rethink as it could potentially distract the viewer from the events unravelling in the story. The choice of this sound track seems apt for setting the mood and tone of the narrative, however, it could potentially be counter productive to a fully immersive emotional engagement. Moments of silence or those that focus on diegetic sounds in the scene could, in some instances, be as powerful if not more effective than wall-to-wall music.

The punchline at the end of the PSA reads, 'children deserve a world without wars, so let's work together to make that a reality: with your support, we can realize their dreams. This is a powerful call-to-action punchline that has the potential to elicit empathy from the viewer. However, the PSA does not, in its narrative, offer ways in which the viewer can contribute to making the world a better place for children affected by wars. It also does not clearly articulate what kind of assistance it is seeking from the viewer. As identified in the section on the principles of framing humanitarian appeals, statistics are also essential in contextualizing and showing the magnitude of a problem. These aspects would need to be included in the second iteration of the PSA for it to be effective in achieving its objectives of eliciting financial support and attracting volunteers from its target market.

Conclusion

This practice-led research paper has proposed and argued for Animated Public Service Announcements as a potential effective medium for promoting humanitarian stories of people living in conflict zones. The study begun by interviewing three humanitarian organizations to gather information on the challenges they face when covering humanitarian stories in areas of conflict. The study then engaged with conceptual and theoretical works on framing the humanitarian appeal message. In this section, concepts such as altruistic and egoistic appeals, positive and negative framing and other techniques and approaches that elicit a strong response from donors were discussed. All these informed the production of the first iteration of an animated PSA which was premised on a transcript of an actual event provided by one of the humanitarian organisations. The paper finally analysed the first iteration of the Animated PSA discussing some of the insights gleaned from it and proposing points to be considered and included in subsequent iterations of the Animated PSA. Although these were not exhaustive, they will improve the second iteration which will then be viewed by the humanitarian organisations for their input in producing and designing the third iteration.

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