

Mediated humanitarian knowledge: audiences' responses and moral actions

New project launched in January 2011

Dr Bruna Seu (Birkbeck, University of London) along with colleagues Dr Shani Orgad and Professor Stan Cohen (LSE) are pleased to announce the start of their new project on public responses to humanitarian communications. They are joined by their new research officer, Dr Frances Flanagan (based at Birkbeck).

The project will explore public understanding and reactions to humanitarian communications, including campaigns about international development issues and humanitarian appeals. The project team is interested in how people make sense of the images and narratives of distant suffering that agencies generate and how ideologies, emotions and biographical experiences shape those responses. We will also study how agencies plan and think about their communications.

The problem behind the project

The contemporary global public sphere is full of information about the suffering of distant others. Information about humanitarian disasters, civil conflicts and human rights abuses are often transmitted within moments of them unfolding. Thus, the old refrain – “I didn’t know what was happening” – is hardly credible. People know, but don’t always act on their knowledge. We know very little about what this knowledge does to us, as ‘symbolic bystanders’, and what we do with that knowledge.

This study will advance understandings of the psychology of cognition, perception, attention, and denial. It will also contribute to debates about what constitutes a ‘moral response’ and ‘moral action’ to distant suffering, and how these issues relate to bystander passivity and socio-political engagement.



Questions the study is aiming to answer

1. What are the public’s immediate responses to humanitarian messages and what do people do with their knowledge?
2. What kinds of motivations and influences inform their actions? How do people justify and explain their responses?
3. What biographical and emotional factors might facilitate or discourage moral action?
4. How do the public’s moral responses correspond (or not) with what humanitarian agencies hope for, and with their thinking about the communications they produce?

Data collection

The study will draw on methods from cultural, psychosocial and media studies. There are three main phases to the research:

1. A series of 18 demographically representative focus groups throughout the UK (total 162 people);
2. Interviews with members of humanitarian agencies, which will allow for an investigation of the relationship between the production and reception of humanitarian messages; and
3. A series of in-depth one-on-one interviews with audience members.

Mar 2011 – June 2011	Focus group interviews with members of the public across the UK
January 2012	Interviews with agency representatives
Feb – Mar 2012	Action research meetings where research findings are fed back to agencies
December 2012	Follow-up individual interviews with a sub-sample of the focus groups participants
March 2013	Second round of action research meetings with agencies
December 2013	Third round of action research meetings with agencies

At each stage, information will be fed back to agencies about the findings of the research in a series of action research meetings. Agencies will be contacted approximately three months in advance of each stage where their involvement is required (dates shown in bold above).

Meet the research team:

Dr Bruna Seu, Principal Investigator, Birkbeck

Dr Bruna Seu is Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London and a practicing Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist for over twenty years. For the last ten years, she has researched public responses to mediated news of Human Rights abuses, both in the UK and Spain, thanks to the support of a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship, Nuffield Fellowship and Birkbeck College Research grants. With time, these have evolved into an interest in the issues of moral and social responsibility and how these relate to constructions of self and other in prosocial behaviour.



Dr Seu has used a psychosocial approach in bringing together psychological work on altruism, psychosocial understandings of denial as well as psychodynamic and discursive readings of emotional responses. She has published on these subjects in Psychological and Human Rights journals and is currently completing a book on *Bystanders to Human Rights abuses; a psychosocial investigation*. Dr Seu is also part of the International Empathy Network and is currently writing with Professor Lynne Cameron on psychosocial and psychodynamic aspects of empathy and reconciliation. She has also published on women's shame, research methodologies, psychotherapy and discursive critiques of therapeutic practices, including two edited books: *'Who am I? The Self and Ego in Psychoanalysis' (2000)* and (with Colleen Heenan) *Feminism and Psychotherapy: Reflections on contemporary theories and practices* (1998).

Dr Shani Orgad, Co-Investigator, LSE

Dr Shani Orgad is a Lecturer in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She writes and teaches on the representation of suffering, war and conflict in the media. She is particularly interested in how the way these issues are represented is changing in today's global age.



Dr Orgad explores these issues in her forthcoming book on *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (Polity Press) and in articles that she published on the media coverage of natural disasters, the Gaza war, and terrorism.

In 2008 Dr Orgad won an LSE Teaching Prize for Outstanding Teaching Performance. Her other areas of research on which she published in books and journals include narrative and media, internet and new media communication, health and new media, and gender and media. Her previous book, *Storytelling Online: Talking Breast Cancer on the Internet* (2005), focuses on the use of the internet in the lives of women who suffer from breast cancer.

Professor Stanley Cohen, Consultant, LSE

Professor Stanley Cohen is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at LSE, from which he retired in 2006. He taught courses on crime, deviance, social control, and human rights and was one of the founders of the *Centre for the Study of Human Rights*, a new interdisciplinary programme of teaching, research, and public outreach.



Professor Cohen has written widely on criminology, delinquency, deviance, mass media, social control political violence, social problems, torture and human rights. Many of his books have become classics in sociology and criminology: *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long Term Imprisonment* (1971), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Making of the Mods and Rockers* (1972) and *Visions of Social Control* (1985). The concept of "moral panic" has now passed from academic to popular usage. The subtitle of his influential 2001 book, *States of Denial* (2001), points towards the wider subject of the new Research Project: *Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*. Professor Cohen is also working on other projects "Commissioning the Truth: Constructing Memories about Social Suffering" and "Human Rights and Criminal Justice Policy." In 1987, he was elected as a member of the British Academy; he has Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Essex and Middlesex; in 2009 he received the Outstanding Achievement Award from the British Society of Criminology.

Dr Frances Flanagan, Research Officer, Birkbeck

Dr Frances Flanagan is a postdoctoral Research Officer at Birkbeck, a position funded by the Leverhulme Trust project grant. She is working under the supervision of Dr Seu and her duties include the preparation of study materials, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis and preparation of reports and research papers.



Dr Flanagan is a historian and lawyer with several years experience working for an NGO in the human rights sector. Her research interests are in the history and cultures of activist organisations (including nationalist, human rights, humanitarian, environmental and indigenous organisations), the memory of war and political violence in the twentieth century, the history of emotions, transitional justice and the uses of the law as a response to historic wrongs.

She has taught undergraduate and postgraduate students in history and law and has been a senior scholar at Hertford College Oxford and a Marshall Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research. She is currently writing a book on the memory of political violence in the Irish nationalist movement, to be published by Oxford University Press.

‘Doing Denial’

Expert research from Bruna Seu into audience responses to human rights campaigns

Dr Seu has been researching audiences’ moral responses to distant suffering for many years. Her approach is based on developing a rich understanding of the stories people tell about their moral worlds and in so doing to reveal the collective pool of narratives that exist in our society for talking about the boundaries of moral responsibility. It is a ‘real world’ approach, which - unlike mainstream experimental studies of altruism - grapples with the complexities of the cultural, ideological and biographical contexts in which people’s moral decisions are made.¹

A fundamental finding, also relevant to the current project, is that almost all audiences feel they need to justify themselves in their decision not to act in the face of human rights campaigns, thus suggesting an implicit adherence to humanitarian moral imperatives, but also the existence of factors interfering with this imperative becoming action. It is hoped that by knowing more about these factors, it will be possible to devise better campaigns that move audiences to action.

¹ Seu, Bruna, ‘The ‘Anti-Social’ Nature of Prosocial Research; A Psychosocial Critique,’ *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4/9 (2010), 651-662.

Vocabularies of denial

Dr Seu’s research has identified a range of recurrent excuses and justifications for this passivity, including self-preservation, switching off, not understanding, demand fatigue, arguments about ‘human nature’, parochialism, fatalism, ‘little me’ and self-preservation. These excuses tend to be cited in combination by audience members, rather than relied on individually; people spin their own complex ‘webs of denial’. Psychological discourses and psychobabble, in particular, have become an integral part of the vocabulary of everyday excuses, with ‘human nature’ being frequently put forward as an explanatory concept by people seeking exoneration for their failure to act.²

Audiences use sophisticated rhetorical and discursive moves to effectively neutralize appeals and justify inaction. In research undertaken in the UK and Basque country, Dr Seu identified three common repertoires of denial that audiences use to shift the moral gaze from themselves to agencies:

Attacking the way the message is conveyed

Audiences frequently position themselves as ‘savvy’ consumers, justifying their non-responsiveness to campaigns as an act of resistance to manipulation. They focus on the technique and style of the campaign rather than on its substantive content, using words like ‘twist’, ‘force’, ‘extract money’ to characterize campaigns as the products of cleverly devised marketing strategies.

Attacking the recommended action

Audiences cast themselves as expert assessors of campaign strategies, deeming the actions recommended by human rights agencies as naïve, ineffectual, wasteful or superficial. Some people even go so far as to accuse agencies of being indirect/unknowing supporters of the perpetrators. By using this strategy, audiences justify their decision to not give as reasonable, moral and even, in some instances, morally commendable.³

Audience relationships with campaigning agencies

The third repertoire, ‘Shoot the messenger’, highlights the ways in which audiences excuse their passivity by shifting the focus from the message to the trustworthiness of the messenger.⁴ Agencies were thus positioned as manipulative and self-serving and as bad administrators of funds thus constructing audiences as being in need of protection from them and justified in not responding to their appeals.

The current project aims to map out the vocabulary of excuses and denial, but also to identify successful humanitarian practice that does not engender the types of resistance described above.

² Cohen, S. and Seu, B., (2002), ‘Knowing enough not to feel too much: Emotional thinking about human right appeals’ in M. Bradley and P. Pedro (eds.): *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*. London: Rutgers University Press; Seu, Bruna, ‘Virtual Bystanders to Human Rights Abuses – a Psychosocial Perspective’, in T. Cushman, (2011), *International Handbook of Human Rights*, Routledge (forthcoming).

³ See ‘Doing denial’: audience reaction to human rights appeals’, *Discourse & Society*, (2010) 21(4), 438-457.

⁴ See ‘Shoot the messenger; denial, malignant positioning and passivity in response to human rights appeals’ forthcoming in *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Oxford University Press.

‘Doing Denial’ How do audiences respond to human rights campaigns? Insights from Bruna Seu’s earlier work (cont.)

Emotional responses to campaigns: shame and guilt

Information about horrific human rights abuses stirs up complex emotional reactions, but are these the reactions that humanitarian organizations would like to provoke with their appeals? Do these emotions lead to action? Dr. Seu’s findings suggest the need for a psychosocial framework to understand better the complexity of audience emotional reactions. It is crucial to contextualize these reactions both intra-psychically (i.e. as provoking reactions internal to the individual psyche) and socio-historically (i.e. as part of current understandings of emotional subjectivity and what is acceptable to provide as a justification). Putting it simply, it is important when communicating distressing information to the public to be mindful not to go over a threshold of what is manageable emotionally in order not to engender resistance to the information. Equally, it is important to know more about the ways in which psycho-babble has been integrated in the vocabulary of denial. This project aims to understand better where those emotional thresholds are.

Worryingly, Dr Seu’s research also suggests that while human rights campaigns engender strong emotional reactions, those reactions are rarely directed at the suffering ‘other’ and are instead overwhelmingly oriented toward the self. Audience responses moved from generalities and stereotypical discussions about social and political conditions ‘over there’ to complete self-absorption with ‘how does this material make *me* feel’. Provoking intense emotions in campaigns thus seems to come with a significant risk of backfire: most participants in Dr Seu’s study resented the moral nagging and guilt inducing tone of such messages, and concentrated far more on the *technique* (the ‘tricks’) by which their guilt was induced rather than to the guilt inducing *content* of the message.⁵

Implications

Dr Seu’s preliminary work reveals a striking level of audience self-absorption in their engagement with human rights campaigns. The suffering victim seems to play a very marginal part in the way they respond, with far more emotion being directed at campaigners themselves than at the victims. The idea that it is necessary for audiences to build an edifice of self-protection from agencies is pervasive, and it is clear that agencies’ adoption of commercial marketing strategies and shock tactics designed to provoke guilt and shame comes at a price.

The present research will build upon these initial findings, and will contribute to a range of policy-focused strategies designed to assist agencies in better fostering audience engagement and action.

⁵ See ‘Your stomach makes you feel that you don’t want to know anything about it’: desensitization, defence mechanisms and rhetoric in response to human rights abuses, *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 2, no. 2, June 2003, 183-196.