
The Leverhulme Trust

Awards in Focus

Minding the gap between knowledge of humanitarian disasters and audiences' moral responses

The contemporary global public sphere is full of information about humanitarian disasters which are transmitted within moments of them unfolding, making audiences virtual bystanders of distant suffering. Thus, the old refrain –“I didn't know what was happening” - is hardly credible. People know, but don't always act on their knowledge. Indeed, we know very little about what this knowledge does to us, as “symbolic bystanders” and what we do with that knowledge. Both the humanitarian community and social sciences cannot apprehend why “what everybody knows” does not lead to commensurate moral response and action.

In particular, we have very little knowledge of audiences' immediate responses to humanitarian messages and how they connect to their everyday morality; what kind of broader moral scripts and narratives inform people's attitudes and actions? What vocabulary of justifications and excuses do they use to make sense of their responses to humanitarian messages? What biographical and emotional factors might facilitate or discourage moral action?

We also need to understand how audiences' everyday morality and the way they receive humanitarian messages correspond (or not) with what humanitarian agencies hope for and their thinking about the communication they produce.

To bridge the gap between knowledge (audiences knowing about distant suffering) and action, we need empirical evidence of how audiences make sense of humanitarian messages. There is a need for a more complex approach to understand the relationship between messages and their reception.

This is what this project is about: the relationship between audiences' immediate responses to particular appeals, and pre-existing, broader, everyday moral scripts that guide

people's actions.

The study will break down the disciplinary divide between cultural and media studies of humanitarian messages and psychological studies of audiences' reception. This, we believe, is key to gaining a fuller understanding of the interactions between the particular problems each discipline has been concerned with to date.

We will interview members of the public both in focus groups and individually; investigate the relationship between humanitarian organisations' production of their messages and audiences' reception; and will work in close collaboration with 5 humanitarian organisations through interviews, action research meetings and feedback workshops

The study will contribute to the conceptualisation of the links between mediated knowledge embedded within broader cultural discourses and power structures, and the psychology of cognition, perception, attention and denial. It will also contribute to a critical

understanding of what constitutes moral response and action and how these link to lay morality, bystander passivity and social and political engagement. Finally, the project aims to understand the operation of humanitarian organisations as producers of mediated knowledge about distant suffering.

The study will employ an innovative mixture of intellectual approaches and methods in data collection and analysis: social and discursive psychology and psychoanalysis, media and communications and sociology and states of denial to explore the complex sets of relations described above.

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