

Activating the audience in times of compassion fatigue

Interviewer: Stijn Joye

Ghent University, Belgium

Interviewee: Philippe Henon

UNICEF Belgium, Belgium

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In times of a growing occurrence of natural and technological disasters, civil society organisations in the field of relief help and fundraising, are increasingly facing difficulties in activating and sensitising the audience. According to the somewhat nebulous and still understudied notion of *compassion fatigue* (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001), an overexposure of audiences to (mediated images of) human suffering, results in a 'diminishing capacity to mobilise sentiments, sympathy and humanitarian forms of response' (Cottle, 2009: 348). For CSOs, audience participation in the sense of donating or organising fundraising events is however, vital to support and finance their operational activities, but it is also heavily dependent on media exposure and coverage.

Philippe Henon, press and communication manager of *UNICEF Belgium*, as well as the *Belgian Consortium for Relief Help*, reflects on the threats CSOs are currently confronted with in relation to audience activation and participation in the event of a disaster. This interview took place in 2009 and is part of a series of interviews with Belgian spokesmen of national and international CSOs that are working in the field of relief aid and development (see Joye, 2010).

The issue of compassion fatigue

Scholars are often referring to the issue of compassion fatigue in the case of disaster

reporting. When communicating on humanitarian crises, are you confronted with such a lack of interest and compassion on behalf of the audience?

Throughout the years, people have certainly become more passive or numb to the repetitive shuffle of stereotypical images such as starving children that so often pop up during disaster reporting. Some crises are also difficult to ‘sell’ to the audience because they are invisible and slumbering underneath the surface, or because they are related to civil war or domestic disturbances. The latter tends to show that people shirk their responsibility. Having said that, I immediately need to qualify the current climate of negativity by pointing towards the amount of charity donations we receive.

In my experience, people are still willing to give money and help the other in need, but more effort is needed to get the audience’s attention and raise compassion. It is difficult to foresee future developments, particularly due to the impact of the current financial and economic crisis, but we have some indications that people tend to react slower to our calls and the average amount of money donated has slightly dropped.

How are you then dealing with a potential threat of compassion fatigue?

In order to regain the audience’s attention, you need to be creative and look for alternative ways to communicate your message, alongside the traditional news media. At *UNICEF Belgium*, we are for instance working with ambassadors. These national celebrities are carefully selected and are asked to be the face of the organisation or of a specific campaign. While we are seldom successful in raising the interest of the popular magazines and mainstream talk shows with our standard press releases and conferences, the celebrity endorsed campaign is. This allows us to reach a much larger audience and it certainly pays off in terms of audience response. When an ambassador is interviewed, for instance, in a gossip magazine, we always notice a substantial increase in the number of visitors to our website. The downside of this is the fact that you lose part of your message as you inevitably need to make concessions to the format and the objectives of these mainstream outlets. In general, the message needs to be simplified and less detailed.

Another important issue is the tone of your message. To avoid compassion fatigue, you cannot just dwell on graphic images or negative stories alone. That would only result in audience reactions such as ‘nothing can be done’ or ‘it is hopeless, why bother to help?’ In other words, it is very important to strike the right balance between the undeniable negative nature of a disaster event and a positive message in the sense that there is still hope or that people’s contributions are genuinely making a difference, especially in the long run.

Audience participation and media exposure

How important is media attention in attracting funding and audience interest?

Media exposure is vital to our fundraising and relief help campaigns. In order to get the message across to the public, we are basically depending on the media. There are a number of factors that determine the amount of media attention such as, the proximity and intensity of the emergency event. News media are generally not keen on covering permanent or slowly developing crises such as famine or drought.

This is again an example of a situation in which you need to look for alternative ways to communicate. As mentioned earlier, celebrities are an effective means to break into the news and attract large audiences. In the case of a relief aid campaign, it is critical for us to reach audience segments and contributors that are external to our traditional supporters. The popularity of our seven celebrity ambassadors has proven to be very helpful in getting the *UNICEF* story closer to the general public. As such, they can advance not only the public's interest, but also their generosity and solidarity. In general, media exposure is important in attracting public interest and donations but we can also rely on the support of our regular contributors.

Next to press releases and the ambassadors, which other communication channels do you use to activate the audience?

In contemporary society, it is important to take advantage of social media, such as Facebook or YouTube, to mobilise the audience and to generate traffic to our main website. We also make use of short commercials. Some years ago, we had a lot of success with a 'fish out of the water' clip¹ that depicted the popular cartoon figures of the Smurfs during a bomb attack on their village. It supported a campaign that focused on the impact of war on children. Our initial idea was to use real life footage from warzones, but that would have been too shocking and at the same time repetitive, hence potentially resulting in compassion fatigue and audience inactivity. So, we took that symbol of a happy-go-lucky and carefree childhood, the Smurfs, to make our point. Although it was initially targeted to only Belgian audiences, the commercial was rapidly picked up by a journalist of *The Independent* and the campaign eventually attracted massive media attention from international media organisations, including *BBC* and *CNN*. In a sense, it was however confronting for us to realise that people were more touched and emotionally moved by fictitious cartoon characters than they are by real life images and people in need.

Email Address: Stijn.Joye@UGent.be.

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Note:

¹ URL for the YouTube clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa8MjjMajEA&feature=related>.