SAVE THE CHILDREN UK'S #BLOGLADESH CAMPAIGN AND THE CHANGE IN HUMANITARIAN REPORTING

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In 2010, Save the Children UK ran its #blogladesh campaign, organizing a media trip to Bangladesh to raise awareness of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Despite setting up the event like a conventional press trip, the aid agency rejected taking legacy media journalists in favor of "mummy bloggers" (women who blogged about the minutiae of family life) in order to achieve public awareness. While there, the women blogged, tweeted, and uploaded pictures to Flickr with the #blogladesh hashtag (Cooper, 2011, 2018). The trip ultimately reached 10 million people via Twitter and made mainstream British media outlets such as the ITV lunchtime news and Radio 4's Today programme. What might have seemed a one-off gimmick proved a critical incident for journalism in the way it disrupted the journalistic field. It galvanized British aid agencies' and journalists' previously symbiotic relationship over covering such stories, and it raised questions over control and co-option with outsiders and beneficiaries having the capacity to tell stories.

This chapter looks at #blogladesh and its successors—such as Oxfam GB's Twitter takeover (when a Syrian refugee from the Zaatari refugee camp took over the agency's Twitter feed for a day); Christian Aid's work with On Our Radar, a social media action group in which ordinary people were given SMS phones to report (Halstead and Powell, 2017; Cooper, 2018); and Islamic Relief's #Cakes4Syria/The Cake Campaign. Drawing on previous work (Cooper, 2011, 2018), it examines how much control aid agencies were prepared to cede to usergenerated content creators, and how the use of such content in fact often handed over more control to a professionalized and brand-conscious aid agency.

The incident: Save the Children UK's #blogladesh campaign

This chapter draws on interviews carried out for a wider piece of research into coverage of humanitarian crises (Cooper 2016, 2018). The data consisted of 100 interviews with aid agency press officers, journalists, and creators of user-generated content used during media coverage of humanitarian disasters. Additional interviews were then conducted. For this chapter, the most relevant of these were the 22 representatives of aid agencies interviewed both for that research, and subsequently. The aid agencies were all members of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), the UK's umbrella aid organization under which agencies join forces when there is a significant disaster. In general, those interviewed were the most senior member of the press office, or when relevant, the press officer specifically tasked to cover humanitarian emergencies, and, when available, the social media/ digital press officer as well.

The background to the #blogladesh campaign was Save the Children UK's desire to raise awareness for the MDGs summit in New York in September 2010, and to achieve 100,000 signatures for their Press for Change campaign. However, to interest journalists and the public in the substance of 10 UN-agreed goals was going to be a difficult proposition. Save the Children UK had recently appointed Liz Scarff as its first digital media manager and tasked her with finding innovative ways of using social media to promote Save's profile and campaigns. She attended the Cybermummy blogging conference in London in summer 2010 and believed she had come across as a useful resource for the agency's demographic.

"Mummy blogs" emerged in the early 21st century, with ordinary women detailing their day-to-day family lives, covering subjects such as weaning, the frustrations of parenthood, concerns over being a "good" or "bad" mother, and humorous incidents that had happened to them. Archetypes of modern motherhood were produced and consumed (Orton-Johnson, 2017); normative understandings about motherhood were contested (Friedman, 2013); and although mummy bloggers often came from privileged backgrounds, they provided a more variegated picture of motherhood than seen in traditional media, featuring mothers from gay and minority ethnic communities (O'Reilly, 2010). But what was particularly important was the emotional resonance that mummy blogging produced:

Personal mommy blogging is marked by direct emotional reciprocity among its participants, creating strong bonds of trust and support that bloggers characterize as meaningful friendship within a community. In practice, most personal mommy blog authors are also committed blog readers (and frequent commenters), and their alternations between these roles create non-hierarchical, tightly woven webs of interconnection marked by serial, mutual, and intimate self-disclosure.(Morrison, 2011, p. 37)

One of the pressing problems around coverage of humanitarian issues has been engaging the audience. What Moeller (1999) termed "compassion fatigue," Chouliaraki (2006) called the "anaesthetic effect" of perpetual stories of suffering, and Tavernor (2017) dubbed "transient compassion" all describe the struggle that aid agencies have had in ensuring that both media outlets and audiences pay attention to the stories that they promote, and take action.

Scarff believed that the mummy bloggers could cut through and provide emotional resonance: "Who could be more powerful to tell stories about children than mothers who have their own hopes and dreams for their own children" (Cooper, 2011, p. 32). However, the approach was not quite as naively "motherhood and apple pie" as that remark might suggest. While their Twitter handles—@mummytips, @porridgebrain, and @nixdminx—might seem homespun, Scarff had carefully selected three mummy bloggers who were already well established online and had been seen as pioneers in the field. The first, Sian To, ran a specialist parenting PR company, "As Clear as PR," and founded the UK's first parent blogger conference, Cybermummy, which drew hundreds of bloggers to the annual event; the second, Josie George, had a blog (Sleep is for the Weak) that reached number one on the Tots 100 Index of UK parents' blogs. Meanwhile the third, Eva Keoghan, had worked for the influential PR consultant Lynne Franks before working as a social media consultant and lifestyle blogger.

Scarff's idea was to run what amounted to a conventional press trip to Bangladesh—but without using legacy media reporters. The theory was that the mummy bloggers would not be dependent on an editor or media hierarchy to publish at times outside their control: they would be publishing to their audience via blogs, tweets and Flickr (the image-hosting service) to a clearly defined audience.

Scarff said she was clear to the mummy bloggers that while the agency wanted to raise issues around the MDGs to put pressure on the then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who was attending the MDG conference, she "didn't tell them what to write. They could say anything they liked – we gave up control." (Cooper, 2011, p. 33). The idea that agencies were ceding control of the story to others was a central narrative to this use of bloggers, and subsequent use of bloggers/influencers.

The use of the mummy bloggers managed to catapult a difficult-to-sell story higher up the news agenda. Within the morning of the launch, 40,000 people had been reached, and a full week before the bloggers were due to leave, the #blogladesh hashtag had trended on Twitter. By targeting celebrity supporters of Save the Children and asking them to mention #blogladesh, the hashtag got further traction.

While in Bangladesh, the mummy bloggers tweeted, took part in a webchat on the British Mummy Bloggers site, and blogged for Sky. By the time the three returned on September 7, 2010, 100 blogs had been written on the subject, 10 million reached via Twitter, and the parenting website Mumsnet had invited Josie George and Nick Clegg to a webchat. News outlets picked up on the story and interviews took place on Radio 4's Today programme, the ITV lunchtime news, BBC 5Live and the World Service. Scarff estimated the success had been because she had seen social media operating as a "niche community" in the way local and regional press had done previously (Cooper, 2011).

Why was #blogladesh a critical incident?

This chapter suggests that #blogladesh challenged the boundaries of reporting humanitarian crises. This challenge was not pre-planned in an obvious way, although it was conceived after aid agencies struggled to achieve media cutthrough around long-term humanitarian stories compared to the dramatic, visual crises that had occurred in the mid-2000s, such as the 2004 tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The #blogladesh campaign, centered on the MDGs, did not have the media narrative impetus of rapid-onset disasters. Yet the success of the campaign demonstrated fairly quickly that this represented a movement of boundaries for aid agencies and journalists.

Narratives around humanitarian crises have been extensively theorized, often focusing on journalists and audience reaction to such crises (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2012, 2013; Cottle, 2009; Cottle & Cooper, 2015; Franks, 2013; Minear et al., 1996). Recently, there has been more interest in the roles that aid agencies play in the coverage of such disasters and the symbiotic relationship that is often formed in the field between humanitarian actors and journalists. As Ryle (2000) puts it:

There is a high degree of complicity between aid workers and journalists. News reporters draw on aid sources to a greater extent than they would use a single source in other situations … Aid organizations, in their turn, are dependent to an unhealthy extent on journalists for publicity in order to raise money for their programs (p. 89).

Yet the success of the #blogladesh campaign in ensuring Save the Children UK's response to the MDGs reached the public consciousness by both social media influencers and mainstream media outlets challenged the idea that aid agencies needed to primarily or solely work with journalists to secure coverage for their campaigns or crisis coverage. A succession of trips (listed in the next section) showed a rush by other agencies to try to utilize this new approach to publicizing their causes. Agencies realized, after the success of the #blogladesh trip, that this was a new and interesting way to engage the public, particularly when the public relations bible PR Week (2010) published an approving dissection of the campaign.

The difference was that the bloggers were not trained journalists and did not therefore have to subscribe to traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and distance when reporting on the aid agencies. For example, in the promotional video made by Scarff for the #blogladesh campaign (Fieldcraft Studios, 2012), we see Josie George asking a mother, "What's the best thing about being a mother?," while Eva Keoghan seems close to tears as, talking of one of the women she met, she says: "She said her heart hurts, to see a baby so sick. So do ours." Morrison's (2011) "webs of interconnection" provided an emotionally affecting experience for those involved and reading, but it was not interrogation of the aid agency work or the MDGs.

The coverage also emphasized the charity blogger over than the charity beneficiary. As Josie George wrote:

It is hard to find the words here. I didn't take pictures. Just staying upright and breathing in the space of so much … so much horror, and horror it was, was the best I could manage.
(George, 2010)

The focus was on a personal experience rather than an analytic presence. Cottle (2000) has argued that while "ordinary voices" have been routinely used on TV news items, they have become what Beck (1992) calls "the voices of the side effects," symbolizing the human face of a news story. The particular issue with the mummy bloggers' accounts was that not only were they the potential "voices of the side effects," it risked the marginalized—the very subject of the story—fading into the background. Chouliaraki (2006) has noted that we live in a society where:

our own private feelings are the measure against which we perceive and evaluate the world and others … While news becomes part of this "culture of intimacy" it implicitly allows us to focus on our own sufferings and disregard those "others" outside our own horizon of care (p. 13).

This certainly seemed the case with the #blogladesh press coverage. A feature article in the Daily Express was headlined "Meet the Online Supermums!" (Stretton, 2010). While the 1,100-word article did articulate many of the key messages that Save the Children UK wanted to get across, it was framed in the context of the three "online supermums'" anguish at seeing the suffering. The feature writer quoted Josie George as reacting to their first visit to a Save the Children hospital:

It was extremely upsetting but I learned quickly that I had to cope with what I was seeing. I couldn't just stand there and look horrified … One little girl who had heart failure after developing pneumonia was gasping for air and her father was sobbing. I cried. These children are like my son.
(George quoted in Stretton, 2010, p. 40)

Similar quotes were found in a Sun article that was an extract from George's blog, which spoke of her "stomach start[ing] to twist and [her] head pound" (Pearce, 2010, p. 34) and a later Independent feature that included Sian To as "a new breed of cybermummy" (Manning, 2011, p. 20).

Journalism has continually been subject to tension between "detached, dispassionate observation" and seeking to "engage feeling" (Jukes, 2017, p. 35). This is not to say that emotion is absent from reporting. Instead, journalists tend to use ritualized forms of storytelling to "infuse" their work with emotion while keeping their own feelings under control—what Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) has called the "outsourcing of emotional labor" (p. 130). In standard journalistic practice, one of the first questions any journalist will ask is, "How do you feel?" As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) puts it: "News is dependent – for the drama and appeal of its narratives – on explaining the emotions of characters and actors and engaging the emotions of the audiences" (p. 9). The aid agencies had specifically positioned themselves as pursuing something different from standard journalistic practice by employing alternative voices, yet they found that engaging with such emotion-infused techniques worked. Wahl-Jorgensen (2015) has talked about how journalists' reaction to user-generated content has often been to segregate or co-opt such content in order to maintain their authoritative position. In the case of #blogladesh, the journalists chose to focus on the mummybloggers' story and portray them less as "reporting" on an issue than being a novel form of case study. Yet the mummybloggers' ability to report in real time, in this overtly subjective way via social media, also influenced the journalists. Two years later, Save the Children UK planned a similar event to raise awareness of the West African food crisis; this time Neal Mann, then Sky News's digital media editor, recorded his personal journey in a similar vein across Burkina Faso (Cooper, 2018).

Using social media to report beneficiary voices

Following the success of #blogladesh, Save the Children UK ran another trip with YouTubers for the #PassItOn campaign in 2011; Plan UK ran a Blog 4 Girls competition the same year, in which the winner was taken to see Plan's projects in Ethiopia; and World Vision hosted the #shareniger trip with mummy bloggers in 2012 and Tearfund's See For Yourself initiative for faith bloggers. The power of using new technology was initially seen as satisfying increasing demands that diverse voices be heard. It was clear, however, that the bloggers—mainly white and middle-class—were not fulfilling this mission. Instead, social media could be used to try to bring diverse voices to the fore.

Aid agencies then began moving beyond the use of bloggers to facilitate beneficiary voices. In such cases, aid agencies went beyond their traditional roles of primary source (Anderson, 1997; Schlesinger, 1990; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994) or gatekeeper (Beckett, 2009). Instead, they potentially became a type of mediator, using social media and to afford a voice to the previously voiceless.

One of the most significant moments post-#blogladesh was therefore when, on February 1, 2013, the Oxfam GB Twitter feed was handed over to Hasan Hariri, a Syrian refugee at the Zaatari camp in Jordan, for the day (Cooper, 2018). Hariri's tweets, which included pictures of his newborn baby, Leen, were retweeted by celebrities such as actor Stephen Fry and singer Damon Albarn. Oxfam counted it as a big success. Not only did it repeat the exercise a month later with members of Hasan's family, but the Guardian then asked Hasan to repeat the exercise several months later for its Syria liveblog day (see Owen, 2013).

The Twitter takeover dovetailed with the strengths of the #blogladesh campaign: the use of personal pictures by Hasan to illustrate his story. Just as George, To, and Keoghan posted personal photos and impressions for #blogladesh, Hariri's tweets were a mixture of his own life story and pictures of his family (see, e.g., Hariri, 2013).

#Cakes4Syria/The Cake Campaign: The rise of the social media influencer

With the changing focus of social media away from blogging toward networks such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Newman et al., 2018), aid agencies started to incorporate "ordinary" or non-agency voices through social media influencers for campaigns that straddled both press office and marketing. Like the bloggers, these were not formal NGO employees, survivors, or beneficiaries, but they were perceived as a step away from the mainstream media. In particular, the case study of #Cakes4Syria (later known as The Cake Campaign) is worth examining.

#Cakes4Syria was the brainchild of a 23-year old trainee solicitor and Islamic Relief volunteer from Bradford, Sibbat e Noor. In 2013 he came up with the idea of encouraging members of the Muslim community to buy £10 chocolate fudge cakes to be delivered to their door during Ramadan. The cakes, which were divided into 14 slices, were then shared with friends and family during the iftar meal, breaking the daily fast. The cakes were provided by another Islamic Relief volunteer, while a third, Abdul Basit Ali, set up a social media campaign with the #Cakes4Syria hashtag, allowing the idea to spread from beyond Bradford to throughout the north of England, raising £25,000 (Islamic Relief, 2013).

The comparison with #blogladesh is interesting. In both, the power of social media influencers was harnessed to raise the profile of a particular humanitarian issue. Islamic Relief, like Save the Children, benefitted from bloggers/influencers who had a strong following (mummy blogreaders; the Muslim community). In both, media coverage followed with a focus on the social media influencers—in the case of The Cake Campaign, the idea of local volunteers coming up with a novel fundraising idea that could be hashtagged and Instagrammed while bringing family and friends together (Bradford Telegraph & Argus, 2014; Griffiths, 2015; Ledger, 2015).

Both campaigns benefitted and exploited wider social phenomena. The rise of the mummy bloggers in 2010, personified by the success of Mumsnet (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013), aided #blogladesh. Similarly, The Cake Campaign coincided with the surprise success of The Great British Bake Off, a television programme dedicated to amateur bakers. The show had become a huge phenomenon, with three-fifths of adults baking at home once a week by 2013, compared to a third in 2011 (Rainey, 2013).

The difference was that Save the Children UK had come up with the idea of #blogladesh, while Islamic Relief co-opted a grassroots campaign to change their narrative around Syria. Instead of focusing on traditional frames of suffering and war, The Cake Campaign also allowed Islamic Relief to reframe their work around community and sharing. In 2014, Islamic Relief co-opted this as a national campaign with Abdul Basit creating a marketing and social media campaign that took it national, raising £300,000 (Islamic Relief, 2015) and reaching outlets such as The Daily Mail, ITV, and BT News.

The following year Islamic Relief employed Abdul Basit Ali as its web and social media editor. By 2018 he was running Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter sites for the Cake Campaign and recruiting nine food bloggers to help promote it, reaching 250,000 as a result (Interviewee 3, head of communications). As their media and advocacy manager put it:

> Not only is it an area of potential for NGOs to engage with supporters in a new and a personal way, it's also a huge potential negative, because as it becomes the industry standard, if you're not engaging with those channels of communication, you look like you don't care about your supporters, you look like you're not in touch with them. And if we don't engage with them on their territory, then their support will go elsewhere.
>
> (Interviewee 10, media and advocacy manager)

The success of The Cake Campaign meant that the press office had increasingly targeted Instagrammers before they became popular (for example, the hijabi model

Mariah Idrissi) and focused on ImFeed and Emel, the Islamic equivalents of Buzzfeed and Reddit, to attract Islamic Relief supporters.

Conclusion: Lessons learned from #blogladesh

Through critical incidents in journalism, as Zelizer (1992) notes, journalists frame the “hows and whys of journalistic practice” (p. 67). These events allow journalists to confront but also assimilate challenges to their authority and negotiate boundaries around what makes journalism and how other actors in the field react. #Blogladesh fulfills this definition of a critical incident because not only journalists but also their traditional source for humanitarian stories were affected by the way new entrants to the journalistic field and key aspects of boundary work came to the fore.

Such challenges often meet with resistance. While, at the time, journalists chose to perceive user-generated content and the use of actors such as mummy bloggers as a novelty, and as case studies rather than citizen journalists, there was long-term impact on all actors as seen by subsequent interventions. The Twitter takeover and The Cake Campaign saw both aid agencies exploring other ways to reach the public with humanitarian stories, while journalists themselves started to adopt the influence of the subjective in humanitarian reporting, as had happened in other areas of journalism.

So the disruption caused to the journalistic field with the introduction of usergenerated content and social media networks presented a new challenge not only to journalists, who found their role as bearing witness and breaking news challenged, but also to aid agencies, who continued to take a role in trying to frame the media agenda (Abbott, 2015; Beckett, 2009; Powers, 2015; Wright, 2018). When journalists could get first-hand witness accounts from the field via tweets, blogs, YouTube, and Instagram, the role of the aid agency as symbiotic intermediary, however professionalized, was challenged. The desire for “the whiff of authenticity” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 95) that UGC and social media gave was prized by journalists, and audiences responded positively to such material (Wardle & Williams, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010).

As revealed in the interviews, aid agencies began an inner reflection about how they could adapt to the use of this new form of communication, just as they had transformed themselves from “the natural culture of modesty” (Ross, 2004, p. 6) in the 1990s. The success of the #blogladesh trip devised by Save the Children UK had several consequences. As mentioned earlier, it challenged the previous symbiotic relationship between aid agencies and reporters in how they ensured humanitarian crises were covered. While aid agencies still saw journalists as the primary focus for communicating their messages, bloggers and later social media influencers were useful new entrants to the field, which meant that legacy media, while still a key conduit for information to opinion-formers and the public, were not the only ones.

Scholars have noted that since the widespread professionalization of aid agencies in the late 1990s, they have often sought to mimic journalistic work to maximize attention for their cause (Fenton, 2010). Waisbord (2011) has preferred to see NGOs’ actions as part of the more widespread professionalization of news-making to become “news shapers” (see also Manheim, 1998). As noted by Wahl-Jorgensen (2015), journalism has co-opted social media and user-generated content, in a time of media fragmentation. But agencies also embraced the idea of co-opting those with a ready-made following pertinent to their target audiences, such as mummy bloggers (Save the Children UK), faith bloggers (Tearfund), and social media users in the UK Muslim community (Islamic Relief). Even if legacy-media journalists could be interested in committing to a humanitarian story abroad, there were still hurdles to overcome, such as the mercy of a changing news agenda and the need for news pegs or case studies. These problems seemed less intense with bloggers, for whom the story could be framed around their personal experience and their personal timelines.

It also allowed aid agencies to claim they were allowing more diverse voices to be heard. There was a commitment to hear from “real” voices and, as CARE International (2013) put it, even “contrary opinions” (p. 2). For many, though, handing over more control to beneficiaries was not seen as practical or even in the best interests of the agency. The use of bloggers was seen as a "safe alternative." The bloggers, and later social media influencers, were not beneficiaries, and neither were they full-time journalists. Thus, like other forms of non-mainstream media, they were seen as more "authentic." Bloggers also tended to view being taken on a trip by an aid agency as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for which they felt immensely grateful. They frequently communicated this gratitude to their audience, rather than taking the "critical friend" approach of most journalists. However, the use of social media did allow beneficiary voices to be heard, as seen in the Twitter takeover. While, in the past, journalists and media organizations embraced social media, post #blogladesh, aid agencies were clear that they could not ignore its potential, however uneasy they might find the idea of unmediated voices.

By engaging with social media, they could co-opt and try to direct the stories that were told, ensuring that different crises were heard. It also made them more outward-looking, in recognizing that grassroots campaigns could be used. The move from #blogladesh—a campaign constructed by a digital media manager in an aid agency head office—to The Cake Campaign, in which an aid agency co-opted a locally inspired initiative, shows how aid agencies have adapted to incorporate social media work.

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