

Reinventing storytelling with the help of Covid-19?

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Storytelling is now well integrated into the communication techniques of humanitarian organisations. So much so that the English term has taken its full place there beyond its Anglo-Saxon area of creation. The author, a doctoral student, postulates here that the current pandemic could – should? – help to reinvent it. In short, it is perhaps now that the future ways of telling the world and its suffering are being invented.

Stories of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to dominate our everyday media screens. These stories highlight the plight of the most vulnerable, they speak of our shared humanity and responsibilities, and the complex realities facing the humanitarian community. Yet, what is the role and potential of storytelling in the post-Covid-19 world?

With the devastating and the more long-lasting social, economic, and environmental impacts of Covid-19 yet to be fully confirmed, the ways in which humanitarian actors choose to tell the stories of the pandemic and its most pressing challenges become vital for the long-term. In my current doctoral research interrogating storytelling practices of relief and development organisations, I examine the potential of storytelling to bring to the forefront diverse voices or perspectives in engaging with multi-faceted challenges of a crisis¹. Building on this, I argue that, within the context of Covid-19, what is necessary for humanitarian storytelling is for multiple narratives or a plurality of perspectives to be integrated, including the voices of the most vulnerable as well as those of local partners, policymakers, researchers, and humanitarian actors. As humanitarian actors look towards the post-Covid-19 period, it is important to use storytelling as a way to create dialogue between these diverse and often conflicting voices, in engaging with issues that are difficult or overlooked.

The importance of storytelling

Covid-19 is both highlighting and deepening existing inequalities within and across countries². While the impacts of the pandemic are being felt world over, it is the most vulnerable who will bear the brunt of many of the challenges. The United Nations (UN) has also warned of the dangers of the pandemic in hindering progresses made in areas such as reducing poverty and hunger among some of the most vulnerable communities³. Further compounding these vulnerabilities is the impact of the pandemic on humanitarian funding, leading donors and humanitarian agencies to re-organise their work and priorities in the short- and long-term⁴, which can also impact the work of communications. Within such

¹ Within this article, the notion of storytelling is broadly focused upon. It refers to various forms of public communication products or material centred on aspects of storytelling that are produced and published by organisations working in the humanitarian and development sectors. Such stories are important for raising public awareness on the work of these organisations, mobilising funds and political support, and as advocacy tools. These stories can take various forms, including text-based stories, photo or video stories.

² United Nations, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19*, April 2020, <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/UN-framework-for-the-immediate-socio-economic-response-to-Covid-19.pdf>

³ United Nations, "As Covid-19 reveals widespread inequality, joint action is key to preserve development gains, Secretary-General warns at Economic and Social Council Integration Segment", 6 July 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/ecosoc7021.doc.htm>

⁴ B. Ramalingam et al., "Responding to Covid-19: Guidance for humanitarian agencies", ALNAP, London, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/responding-to-Covid-19-guidance-for-humanitarian-agencies>

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contexts, the stories humanitarian actors tell of the post-Covid-19 period would need to differ from those told previously.

Broadly, storytelling within humanitarianism serves diverse functions. Stories are key to sharing knowledge and creating awareness among the wider public on the impacts of a crisis and humanitarian responses. These stories would also usually centre on affected individuals or communities and capture the impact of humanitarian aid on their lives. At the same time, the power of such storytelling lies in its ability to connect people, and generate empathy and understanding for the distant sufferer. Such functions of storytelling will remain important for fostering solidarity and in raising awareness of the vulnerabilities of the post-Covid-19 period.

In examining the role of storytelling, lessons could be drawn from scholarly debates on humanitarian communication and mediated messages of crisis, although much of this scholarship focuses on appeals, imagery, and storytelling during and in the aftermath of conflicts and disasters. A key scholarly debate is on the fundraising versus advocacy objectives of humanitarian storytelling⁵, with a distinction drawn between “negative” and “positive” representations of the vulnerable sufferer. Early humanitarian messages were critiqued for their “negative” representations, where the vulnerable were portrayed as passive and helpless victims in need of saving from the West⁶. Such representations, lacking individualising features of the vulnerable and portraying suffering in plain reality, were seen as dehumanising, and were aimed at emanating feelings of guilt, shame, and sympathy from Western publics towards the distant sufferer⁷. They were, however, regarded as effective for meeting short-term fundraising objectives of humanitarian organisations⁸. Yet, the danger of such storytelling lay in creating stereotypes and in telling a singular, incomplete story of catastrophe⁹. Thus, much would be needed to ensure that such stereotypical and undignified representations of the vulnerable are avoided in post-Covid-19 storytelling. And this is perhaps one of the virtues that this unprecedented crisis will have had.

Positive representations, avoiding fatigue and misrecognition

In contrast, “positive” representations of humanitarianism would emphasise the empowered, hopeful, and resilient nature of the vulnerable. Depicting the vulnerable as determined, hard-working, and deserving of help, has almost become a familiar trope adopted in humanitarian storytelling¹⁰. But continuing to portray the vulnerable sufferer in this way, with dignity, and with agency, would be significant for bringing their voices or perspectives to the forefront.

However, humanitarian actors should be wary of the tendencies of “positive” representations to oversimplify and gloss over suffering. Such oversimplification can lead towards a misrecognition of the action, needs and realities on the ground, and in turn, to inaction and a suspicion where everything seems as if taken care of¹¹. A further factor to be wary of is the risk of compassion fatigue for repeated stories centred on suffering, from among Western audiences, who would usually contribute towards humanitarian causes. Within the current climate, there is a possibility that this fatigue would be further worsened, given the economic impacts of the pandemic on Western audiences themselves. Therefore, in telling the post-pandemic stories, portraying “need with dignity” will be even more important, where there is a balance between showcasing successes, ensuring the dignity of the

⁵ See also, in the present issue, the article from François Sennesael, “Distorted representation of the Other, neglected modernity and truncated partnerships: why humanitarian advocacy must be decolonised”, p.128-141.

⁶ Shani Orgad, “Visualizers of solidarity: organizational politics in humanitarian and international development NGOs”, *Visual Communication*, 12/3, 2013, p.295-314.

⁷ Lillie Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism: humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity”, *International journal of cultural studies*, 13/2, 2010, p.107-126, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29265/1/Post-humanitarianism%20%28LSERO%29.pdf>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This notion of creating stereotypes and the singular story is drawn from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a single story” [online] TED, 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript

¹⁰ Nandita Dogra, *Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs*, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012, p.131.

¹¹ Lillie Chouliaraki, “Post-humanitarianism...”, art. cit.

vulnerable, and highlighting their needs¹².

Multiple narratives of the vulnerable

As humanitarian actors look towards storytelling in the post-Covid-19 period, however, there is also the need to rethink objectives of storytelling for engaging with some of the more complex and multi-faceted challenges that will have been created or amplified by the pandemic. The hardest hit communities are those facing multiple forms of challenges and inequalities. Refugees and displaced persons, the conflict-affected, communities in fragile States, and the poor and the marginalised, are among the most affected by the pandemic. The UN also recognises that “women and men, children, youth and older persons, refugees and migrants, the poor, people with disabilities, persons in detention, minorities, LGBTI people, among others, are all being affected differently”¹³. Therefore, recognising diversities that exist within communities and groups is also important within storytelling, for understanding the different vulnerabilities and contexts. In bringing to the forefront these diverse perspectives, multiple narratives of the pandemic begin to emerge.

Using digital media to amplify everyday vulnerabilities

United Nations agencies, international organisations, and other humanitarian agencies from across the world are already using innovative and engaging methods of storytelling as part of their public communication efforts around the pandemic. Many of these storytelling methods incorporate texts, images, and short videos, thus making these stories visually enhancing. For example, this year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched an art contest for young people, and thereafter transformed the winning entries into animations. These drawings and animations depict themes of kindness for and solidarity with refugees in the time of the pandemic, and are accompanied by short reflections by the artists¹⁴. The UN in Argentina is highlighting everyday individual acts of kindness amidst the pandemic through short video clips¹⁵. In Sri Lanka, UN agencies are using social media platforms, particularly, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to share stories of everyday heroes, using the hashtag #HumansOfHopeSL¹⁶.

What is significant about such initiatives is that they move beyond familiar forms of humanitarian storytelling that focuses on communicating impacts of humanitarian efforts, to instead provide a platform for a plurality of perspectives to be expressed on themes relevant to the organisations’ work. The use of online media platforms can help these stories reach a wider segment of audiences, and allow for greater engagement with the public on these vulnerabilities. The short and simplistic nature of these stories means that they appeal to diverse audiences. Furthermore, engaging local communities and empowering them to tell their own stories can contribute towards more authentic storytelling that can foster a sense of credibility for the work of the organisations on the ground. At the same time, by publishing the accounts of these individuals in the first-person format can help them take ownership of their narrative, thus further empowering local communities.

¹² The phrase “need with dignity” is drawn from the work of Nandita Dogra, *Representations of Global Poverty...*, op. cit., p.131.

¹³ United Nations, “Covid-19 and human rights: we are all in this together”, April 2020, p.2-3, https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/sites/www.un.org.victimsofterrorism/files/un_-_human_rights_and_covid_april_2020.pdf

¹⁴ UNHCR, “Young artists drew a world where kindness defeats Covid-19 – we animated it”, 22 July 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2020/7/5f0ec22c4/young-artists-drew-world-kindness-defeats-Covid-19-animated.html>

¹⁵ United Nations, “UN Argentina highlights everyday heroes spreading solidarity amid pandemic”, <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-argentina-highlights-everyday-heroes-spreading-solidarity-amid-pandemic>

¹⁶ United Nations, “UN Sri Lanka highlights everyday heroes spreading solidarity amid pandemic”, <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-sri-lanka-highlights-everyday-heroes-spreading-solidarity-amid-pandemic>

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Integrating perspectives of experts

In the immediacy of the pandemic, donors and humanitarian organisations have been working towards preventing the spread of Covid-19 especially among conflict-affected communities and fragile States¹⁷. The UN has also scaled up its efforts and commitments towards addressing urgent socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. However, the World Bank has estimated that the pandemic will lead to one of the worst global recessions since the Second World War¹⁸. This will push people into extreme poverty, while further exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, including in food security, gender inequalities, access to basic services and social protection systems, and issues of justice and human rights.

Highlighting the voices of the experts is also essential for sharing knowledge of such vulnerabilities. For example, through its *Humanitarian Law and Policy* blog, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) highlights perspectives of diverse experts, including personnel from within the humanitarian community and researchers¹⁹. These blog posts discuss key challenges of Covid-19 within conflict-affected States and communities, and offer key insight. Emphasis, however, must be placed on drawing insights and knowledge from experts across sectors and disciplines. Focus should also be on engaging with local or country-level experts. This would be essential for ensuring that country-specific solutions are offered through such storytelling.

Integrating missing perspectives of local partners

Creating awareness of and engaging with some of the more long-term challenges, such as human rights, justice, and protection implications of the pandemic can be complex. It is amidst such instances that the incorporation of a plurality of perspectives stands to gain further value. The *UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19* places emphasis on recognising and working closely with national governments, local communities and other local partners in implementing measures for addressing the far-reaching vulnerabilities²⁰. This, however, should not be just the focus of programmatic functions of humanitarian organisations, but should also be reflected in humanitarian storytelling. The perspectives of local government personnel are largely missing in humanitarian communication. A distinct example can be drawn from the initiative of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) *First person: Covid-19 stories*, a series of video stories where diverse individuals share their insights on the impact of the pandemic on the world of work and their country responses so far²¹. Importantly, these video stories feature government officials, business owners, personnel from international and non-governmental organisations, essential workers, young people, and students, among others, from across the world, thus bringing forth diverse and distinct perspectives on some of the key challenges facing communities. Integrating the perspectives of local governments as well as other local partners can help demonstrate a sense of partnership between humanitarian agencies and local stakeholders and further establish credibility for humanitarian efforts. This would also be important for avoiding the “white saviour” trope in humanitarian storytelling.

In the post-Covid-19 world

Bringing these diverse perspectives of the vulnerable, local partners, and humanitarian actors into dialogue with each other is challenging. They require investments in time and finances. There is value to

¹⁷ NRC, “The humanitarian impact of Covid-19 on displaced communities”, 30 April 2020, <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/the-humanitarian-impact-of-Covid-19-on-displaced-communities>

¹⁸ World Bank, “Covid-19 to plunge global economy into worst recession since World War II”, 8 June 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/Covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>

¹⁹ ICRC, “Covid-19 and conflict”, *Humanitarian Law and Policy*, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/category/special-themes/Covid-19-and-conflict>

²⁰ United Nations, *A UN framework...*, op. cit.

²¹ ILO, “First person: Covid-19 stories”, <https://www.ilo.org/Covid-19-stories/en>

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gain from integrating multiple narratives within storytelling in the post-Covid-19 world. They will help bring to the forefront the multi-faceted nature of the challenges facing the humanitarian community, while allowing the vulnerable and local communities to tell their own stories can also help empower them. Integrating the perspectives of local governments is particularly useful for engaging with some of the more complex challenges of the pandemic. Yet, in producing such forms of stories, what is also essential is that the country context is considered in understanding whose voices or perspectives should be integrated. This would require working closely with local partners and other local stakeholders. At the same time, it is imperative that humanitarian actors ensure that such integration of multiple narratives within storytelling do not bury the voices of the most vulnerable among other wider perspectives, thus contributing towards producing more inclusive stories that can help foster credibility and solidarity in the post-Covid-19 era.

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