

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**

“The portrayal of humanitarianism has, to say the least, dramatically changed in 50 years”

*Entretien avec Pierre Micheletti et Bruno-Georges David*

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From pictures of famished children in Biafra to those of victims of the Sulawesi tsunami, have portrayals of humanitarianism changed very much? Above all, do these images help capture the reality of humanitarian action in people’s minds or do they only camouflage it to better “sell” a cause? These are questions that we asked both Pierre Micheletti and Bruno-Georges David to better understand the constraints and drifts of communication in humanitarianism.

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**Humanitarian Alternatives** – *What is your analysis of the changes in the symbolic representation of humanitarianism – transmitted to us through the images transmitted by NGOs – and its portrayals in the last 50 years, that is to say, the general public’s mental representation of humanitarian action?*

**Pierre Micheletti** – With regard to public image, the first thing that comes to mind is the present diversity of today’s audience as compared to, say, 1968, when the portrayal of humanitarianism was mainly conveyed by mainstream Western media and for an audience that was transitioning out of the colonial era. Today, we no longer enjoy the full claim of producing images and symbols. I can paraphrase the philosopher, Régis Debray, in saying that to get a roughly balanced view of a humanitarian emergency, one must watch CNN, then Al Jazeera... and a true representation lies somewhere in between.

**Bruno-Georges David** – I develop this idea that, historically, NGO communication campaigns have been run by the North for the North, that is, by humanitarians and journalists who, to stimulate awareness, return from the South bringing back images for the North. But still today, our main rationale remains “North-North”, all while knowing that our economy and the media are essentially Western-based. Of course, other news agencies have sprouted in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe – I am thinking of the Sputnik news agency or RT, the former TV network Russia Today – but they have an uphill battle to tend with, because their news very often provoke controversy, especially in the West. It seems to me that humanitarianism in France, as depicted today in the media, is stuck in a North-North rationale. This was seen again with the recent tsunami in Indonesia, when pictures were transmitted mainly from well-known Western news agencies.

**H.A.** – *In short, between the portrayal of humanitarianism that was given in Biafra and the one now offered in the aftermath of the recent tsunami in Indonesia in Sulawesi, isn’t there a huge difference?*

**P.M.** – Let me explain my logical point of view by differentiating the images produced by the North for Western public opinion from those produced by the South, where editorial opinions, points of view, and accounts are different. I’m interested in what I believe I know best, and what I’ve been totally immersed in it for fifty years, that is, in writing reports in France on humanitarian disasters for a Western and European audience. Yet over the years, I’m not so sure

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very much has changed. The journalist Olivier Weber has pointed out certain obstacles. For one, there's an addiction process. The general public demands, if we are not careful as providers, ever-greater doses of powerful images, much like what happens with any obsessional habit. So where are our limits? Because casualties are subject to a double standard: Haitians killed in the 2010 earthquake, or a boy washed up on a beach in Turkey are given center stage in pictures, when such attention would never be given to flood victims in Arles or to landslide victims in the Alps. This poses an ethical problem, which I believe is central to our NGOs, and which is linked to not having respected the main principle of humanitarian action, one of humanity, on which the ICRC is based, namely, neutrality, impartiality, independence, etc. It is through our shared outlook on humanity that we can claim the right to intervene in a foreign country. This is achieved by rising above cultural differences, borders, and political divisions. The same thing must therefore apply when we report. There can be no double standard, nor asymmetry in the way we portray others.

**H.A.** – *Yet in the last 50 years, NGOs have not failed to question themselves and to question their use of images. Humanitarianism's past has been far from straightforward, far from absolute. There have been developments that have inevitably impacted these images and, must these too be called into question...*

**B.-G. D.** – Indeed, there are events that precisely indicate when NGOs made certain changes in their practices. But before going into that, I would like to return to the “double standard” mentioned by Pierre Micheletti. I would rather speak of “double penalty” to describe, on the one hand, the fate of the people we are reporting on, and on the other hand, our portrayal of it. For not only are these people in actual distress, but, additionally, the portrayal of them traps them in this condition. Typically, the pictures we have of Africa and, by extension, of Africans themselves, show us that they have no escape route. That is, we could test this by putting a white and a black peasant side by side, and ask people which of the two is the most likely to pull through. It's a safe bet to say that most will consider that the black peasant will be unable to, because he is despondent, whereas in actual fact perhaps, he may be a farmer who is simply supporting his family or his community. The French NGO CCFD [Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development] has been campaigning against this bias to break open stereotypes in humanitarianism, as well as all the assumptions and mental preconceptions on the life, the culture, and the conditions of those we portray in pictures.

That being the case, I believe that the original premises of humanitarianism, as conceived by the French Doctors in particular, have undergone a type of genetic mutation, when we compare their achievements with ours today. The work carried out by humanitarians in Biafra, which, since then, has given meaning to all humanitarian action, was based on personal relationships carried forward by a sense of humanity, not by technology, structures, or institutions. Never in the history of humanitarianism have there been better communicators than the first French Doctors. In fact, they took upon themselves the role of witnesses and advocates through journalism. They landed in places where no one else had set foot, bringing back pictures and testimonials. There was no gap between what they observed and what they communicated to the public at large. Today, we no longer inform, but rather we communicate, and the one has nothing to do with the other. Communication voluntarily distorts, since that is its very purpose. That's to say, it either embellishes a situation or magnifies a disaster. Advertising does this admirably. It creates a problem so that you'll buy an item to resolve it. Is your wooden floor easily scratched? I can offer you the best product to prevent that from happening. Does your home collect dust? I have a vacuum cleaner to sell you, etc. All advertising and communication techniques are based on this problem-solution combo.

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What upsets everything, and this is my opinion supported by studies, was the tsunami of 2004-2005, when it dawned on humanitarians that things would not be like they were before, that their spoken word would no longer be exclusive, but would also be shared by aid beneficiaries, local actors, and even people who had absolutely no involvement in the system. The communication environment that was created during this disaster substantially altered the relationship between NGOs and their audience.

I would like to technically clarify my thinking. The implicit bond between a name brand and its customers, and the one that binds a humanitarian organisation to its donors are not identical. A brand connects with its customers through a type of seductive logic that the customer accepts, within certain unwritten limits often tied to cultural and time-related specificities. NGOs do not use seductive logic, nor do they attempt to charm donors, but they seek to persuade us that their interventions and their pleas for advocacy have merit, when an issue has not been addressed, partly addressed, or badly addressed. This other implicit bond is created through the transmission of information. But today, these two types of implicit bonds have intersected due to closer connections with businesses, and to professionalisation, the extreme competition between NGOs and media services, the need for fundraising, etc. NGOs have now begun to parrot the type of communication used by enterprises, and they now follow the same seductive logic that exists in all other spheres of activity. The upshot is that they have now gradually dispensed with the rationale of news information systems they modelled themselves on simply because there is no more room for it.

This is a trend that I have strongly condemned. We cannot portray a child, victim of a tsunami or of Ebola, in a 15-second ad. In principle, this is simply impossible and humanly unacceptable. But this rationale is the only outlet available today. A 15-second spot on television – even for free – or 140 characters on Twitter, or “like” on Facebook are now able to give us an update of world events, when these services are just meant for advertising. The portrayal of humanitarianism has, to say the least, dramatically changed in 50 years, going from, say, a picture that Pierre could bring back from an intervention at the other end of the world, all the way to a picture that a correspondent, often unfamiliar with the subject, will publish without ever having set foot in that place. And the media can publish it in a matter of seconds. Media services won't wait for the humanitarian volunteer to return home so that they can gather his testimony before distributing the picture. All of this has radically changed the way in which communication in humanitarianism has been carried out, and this, for me, has nothing to do with what happened in Biafra and what we recently witnessed in Sulawesi.

**H.A.** – *In other words, in the early days of the humanitarianism, the humanitarian French Doctors were describing real life. Today, we wonder whether they are not distorting it to somehow impress donors by displaying something horrific with images that are shocking, to say the least. Do you perceive a difference, a misrepresentation, between these portrayals and the realities of humanitarian action?*

**P.M.** – I would tend to believe that in large NGOs there is a type of restraint on the unbridled use of pictures. In most of them, a communication campaign must be approved upfront by their board of directors and these comprise politically-minded members who can reasonably monitor what their communication departments are inclined to publicize.

This brings me to mention that I agree with Bruno-Georges David's historical analysis. He says that photographic portrayals are first meant to denounce and to inform, rather than to persuade and to market. Nevertheless, I have two remarks. As we look back to Biafra, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that that period was a break from what I would call, “photographic silence” that

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dates back to the Second World War. There was then a near-total blackout on what had happened in the extermination camps, and for that reason, people like Kouchner, whose family was deeply branded by the Holocaust, declared that they would refuse to see new tragedies unfold in the absence of media coverage. Yet, in the photographic reporting of the Biafran conflict, I would make a distinction between the intent and the political exploitation that accompanied this work at the outset. This is what I would call “fundamental ambiguity”. I believe that the reporters and photographers, in good faith, intended to denounce, but politicians in power at the time, namely de Gaulle, relished having these pictures printed in the French and European press. This is because, in sustaining the aftereffects of the Fashoda Incident with Great Britain, denouncing what was happening in Nigeria would weaken the British and the redrawing of the borders of the colonial era could be therefore imagined. In other words, providers of information who were humanitarians themselves, no matter how willing they were to communicate first and foremost, what they produced was subject to a certain amount of distortion or misrepresentation, just like what is happening now in communication.

In addition, and this is not unrelated to what I have just said, we must not lose sight of the global economics that prevail in today’s humanitarian world. Taking the year 2017, we spent 27 billion dollars in distributing humanitarian aid. About a quarter came from private funds, which, for the most part, were the fruit of NGO marketing. Unsurprisingly, these moneys may be siphoned off for photographic portrayals for reasons due to marketing or just plain narcissism. But let’s not forget that NGOs may be forced into this, since we’ve seen that their financial requirements have grown very significantly since 2012. And in one respect, we must admit that NGOs have done their utmost to bring a quarter of private funds to government funding and thus finance new emergencies. In other words, they must scramble to compete with media services in their quest for funding, wherever it may be found. And this may be questionable.

**H.A.** – *It is important to point out the spiraling needs for funding. What are the other reasons for this? We know that today, professional communicators without any humanitarian experience are being hired away from communication agencies and other private companies to handle NGO communication. Does this pattern result in higher costs?*

**B.-G. D.** – When the 2004 tsunami hit, the surge of communication that followed was not solely from NGOs. The technical aspects and the scope of the disaster that affected the entire globe – since the casualties came from everywhere in the world – were such that everyone, everywhere, was caught up by this event. We must recall that, at that time, from television announcements all the way through to nursery schools, donations and goods were being collected for the victims. In a way, humanitarian aid slipped through the fingers of humanitarians during this South-East Asian tsunami. Humanitarians had not even started their fundraising when they were asked what they were going to do, and were told what they had to do. They were no more humanitarians in kind than international civil security personnel. This global disaster shows us the extent to which humanitarians have been dispossessed of their own viability, with emotional and business considerations outweighing all others. Billions of dollars were raised, when many fewer were actually needed. The images were spectacular, true, but a very plain-talking humanitarian would have dampened people’s spirit at the time. Since then, the humanitarian system has changed its model. We now have “business models”, where funds are needed to deliver humanitarian aid, and to collect this money, there needs to be communication. This is an industrial model. By the term “genetic mutation”, I am referring to GMOs being overtaken by humanitarians, or to humanitarian aid switching from being organically managed to being uncontrollably industrialized. Industry needs the media, communication, and publicity.

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In the beginning, no humanitarian ever asked himself whether money or communication was required to take action. He told himself that he would carry out his relief operations, disseminate information, and then raise money to carry on. Nowadays, the opposite is true. We launch communication campaigns to finance projects. We end up with mechanisms that are totally out of sync from a political and organisational point of view, not to mention an ethical one. We have NGOs from civil society who lack funding, whose sole means of existence – speaking of those who still have a sprig of decency – depend on public calls for donations, and who thus compete with UN agencies that are funded by member countries. But in the public mindset, this creates what I believe is a disastrously confusing situation that will drive the humanitarians themselves – not the UN agencies – straight into a wall. Because the day people realise that the system is flawed, their trust will be shattered, just like what we have begun to see in politics, the media, and the business community. People will no longer take any credence in an action merely as it is described, considering that there is a gap between the reality of that action and the way it has been described. They therefore feel betrayed.

We all know that advertising is an illusion, that it represents impossibility. In my opinion, humanitarians must overcome the “isn’t possible” attitude in their work. They have gotten themselves tangled up in mechanisms beyond their control. Not admitting this won’t let them off the hook, but rather it must be said that humanitarians lack the arm room to disseminate information as it should be, apart from a television newscasts where they only have one minute to talk about a topic that a whole evening should be devoted to. This is no longer possible! NGOs should be promoting advocacy in this regard, but this is truly risky business because it can backfire. It is hard to imagine Nestlé blaming its industry that it would not be organically based, or L’Oréal admitting that animals are used to test its products. But I believe that decent humanitarians today would admit that they find themselves caught up in a system where the manner of portraying suffering has become unbearable. A person in great danger does not pose for advertisers! It is intolerable to see the homeless pictured in a 4x3 photograph in the subway. Just imagine a Chinese person taking a snapshot of one of us in a wretched condition and that snapshot ending up as a poster in the Beijing subway with the mention: “Help the poor French who can’t make ends meet”.

**H.A.** – *What should be considered in order to restore or reinforce decency in the use of images and portrayals? Should this come from the increasingly influential NGOs of the South, where communicating has taken on a new dimension?*

**P.M.** – Undoubtedly we need to take an interest in the way these NGOs communicate. However, we fall back on a dimensional problem insofar as NGOs in the South mobilise only 0,4% of the annual budget of global humanitarian aid. So even if they do have more decent practices, they will not, by themselves, carry enough weight to overcome the bias displayed by most of these portrayals.

It is also noteworthy that the natural tendency is for donors to give more generously to environmental disasters than to conflicts. This important fact helps us understand Bruno-Georges’ comments on the 2004 tsunami, and also on the recent earthquakes in Sulawesi and those in Nepal in 2015 and Haiti in 2010. Making a donation is much easier in these types of emergencies, than in conflicts, because the donor is wary of conflicts. And these conflicts, in fact, have fundamentally changed in that, by a very wide margin, they are now non-international in scale. And people wonder how necessary it is to donate money for conflicts that they are ill-informed about. It may be for this reason that communicators are driven to write up Manichean reports of certain situations to overcome the reluctance of donors. This means, simply stated, the

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power of the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are on opposite ends of the spectrum, backed up with images of the bad guys overtaking the good guys.

And I would like to add to what Bruno-Georges mentioned on the changes of the last fifty years. With the decentralised use of images and the development of technological inventions, anyone with a mobile phone nowadays can take photos or shoot a film showing unbearable scenes, display them immediately on the Internet, where they will be picked up by the media. This has nothing to do with NGO communication, yet it has in some way been impacted.

Finally, the 2004 tsunami indeed represented a turning point, as I mentioned, and it is also because during this disaster, the media claimed to position itself as a contributor to humanitarian action in a fully uncontrollable way, without using any of the ethical filters that normally prevail in humanitarian organisations. It was the image for the sake of the image, communication for the sake of communication, in the name of some sort of a well-meaning desperate call for money, independent of any needs analysis. As a result, it took a major NGO like MSF to ask people to stop donating. This solution was not any better, as I explained at the time<sup>1</sup>.

I felt, and I still do, that MSF's quasi-monopolistic hold should be restrained, because it doesn't take into account the frailties of many other NGOs.

**B.-G. D.** – Pierre is right in referring to the media, when it took on the role of intermediaries during the 2004 tsunami. When the media called for donations, it went beyond its role and field of expertise. In addition to this huge undertaking, other companies also participated in collecting money to mount humanitarian operations in Sri Lanka or Banda Aceh, to the extent of their own interests. Humanitarian rationale was totally lacking, and the effect was catastrophic for NGOs.

It is only by changing the modes of communication that humanitarians will be able to definitely restore the link, now weakened, with donors, because, too often, they are taken as consumers. The “Slow information” that Americans are working on is a fundamental. Rather than maintaining a state of emergency at every moment in time, we need to decelerate the communication process with donors and give them more substantive and more instructive food for thought. We must get away from advertising as an instant process of communication based on the problem/solution set, because the job of a humanitarian is not that. Otherwise, the NGOs will mechanically end up being managed and perceived as name brands. Donors will drift among different NGOs in response to a campaign or an incentive, whereas the mission of NGOs is not “to create trends” or “styles”, but to intervene over the long term.

In concrete terms, I believe that a code of ethics, identical to the one that applies for the press, would be decisive for independent NGOs. It would send a strong signal to people to explain that NGOs are not reporters, nor communication agencies, nor advertising agencies. Their time and their answers are different. If we cannot find a way to differentiate them, then we will go surely head into a wall. Because at the moment, the so-called professionalism of expert communicators lends itself to confusion. Spin Doctors only reason in terms of efficiency and performance, actually purely neoliberal concepts.

I call NGO boards to take up the leadership in communication. The dichotomy created in NGOs between executives and the boards of directors, because executives are deemed to be experts, is deadly. The same is seen in journalism, where it has been necessary to dissociate

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Micheletti, “Solidarité avec les ONG”, *Libération*, January 11, 2005, [www.liberation.fr/tribune/2005/01/11/solidartie-avec-les-ong\\_505784](http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2005/01/11/solidartie-avec-les-ong_505784)

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executives from business owners, but as there are no “owners” in NGOs, it is up to the boards of directors and leading administrators to regain control. Portrayals form just one aspect of the “alarming pity” that communicators have been exploiting.

**Interview by Boris Martin, Editor-in-Chief**

*Translated from the French by Alain Johnson*

### Biographies

**Bruno-Georges David** • Consultant and Head of the Communications Department of the Social and Solidarity Economy of the School of Information and Communication Skills (EMI), Bruno-Georges was previously Director of Communication and Development of Secours Islamique France and held the same position at Action Against Hunger. He is Founding President of the association Communication Sans Frontières, creator and founder of the Grand Prix of Communication Solidaire and of Observatoire de la Communication Solidaire. He is also a member of the steering council of *Humanitarian Alternatives*.

He was previously Managing Director of BDC M & A, Managing Partner at TBWA/Corporate, CEO of ABDC.EU and he held various positions at Publicis: International Director, Deputy Worldwide Account Director, CEO and Chairman at Publicis Russia and CEO of Publicis Poland. He currently teaches at Paris I Sorbonne (CELSA) and Paris XII (UPEC) and has just published the book *ONG, compassion à tous les rayons?* at VA-Éditions in the Antidoxa collection (see the section “Culture”).

**Pierre Micheletti** • He joined Médecins du Monde in 1987, and was President of the organisation from 2006 to 2009. He has been teaching since 2009 at the Institute of Political Studies of Grenoble, where he co-directs the Master’s degree programme, “Policies and Practices of International Organisations”, and at the Faculty of Medicine, where he runs the degree programme, “Health-solidarity-precariousness”. Since 2015, Pierre has acted as Vice-president of Action Against Hunger. He is the author of many books, essays, novels, and stories, including his most recent, *Une mémoire d’Indiens. Récit d’un médecin du monde*, recently published by Éditions Parole (see the section “Culture”).

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