
What does human rights look like?

The visual culture of aid, advocacy, and activism

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Introduction

Television viewers have all confronted at one time or another the searing gaze of an African child soliciting for donations to a humanitarian charity. The camera pans slowly across a sad landscape of red clay streets and makeshift homes until an older white man's voice can be heard describing the scene and asking for your assistance. This traditional fundraising strategy is common across the West and persists despite vocal criticisms that it demeans subjects, exoticizes poverty, and reinforces inequality. This mode of visual representation reflects humanitarian practice in an unflattering way and has deservedly received criticism, but it has also been repurposed to frame communications in other areas including human rights. As imagery becomes an increasingly prominent and a prior feature of global interventions, how nongovernment organizations (NGO) utilize photography becomes ever more relevant, prompting critical questions.

Is there a motivating logic to the use of photographs in human rights and humanitarian campaigns? Do certain modes of imagery correlate with types of crisis and organizational objectives? What reactions do organizations hope to provoke among their audiences through the use of photography in marketing and communication outlets? What trends and shifts can be identified in this regard? What can we learn about human rights and humanitarianism as fields of practice through an analysis of the visual expressions of their work? These questions focus attention on the bounded space in which many diverse sectors overlap: NGOs, journalism and photography, war and disaster, state power and geopolitics, as well as marketing and public relations. In an environment of competing interests and complex emergencies, visual media becomes a

lens through which to explore the representation of distant others as well as projections of self-image.

Given the rising prevalence of digital media in the twenty-first century, NGO communication expresses important qualities about areas of practice and provides a venue for critiquing NGO strategies. In an age when appearance and image are as politically relevant as action and impact, how human rights actors represent themselves visually matters tremendously. Human rights campaigns, for instance, demand more from the audience than charitable giving, which suggests that the gaze of the African child is misplaced. Human rights and humanitarianism may have similar orientations with respect to the protection of human dignity, yet cultivate distinct relationships with the public by virtue of the work they do. NGOs utilize visual media as a means to build constituencies of support for their issues and, thus, campaign material and photo essays constitute a unique venue for investigating the basis for these relationships and reflecting on the nature of the organizations themselves.

However, visual media in the service of human dignity also becomes a focal site for power and contestation. Since imagery captures the likeness of individuals and articulates suffering and repression, there is an inherent risk that through its production and dissemination, vulnerability is reproduced as indignity. In the very process of seeking support, frailty may be communicated through stereotypes and motifs that exacerbate humiliation. A central tension running through this process is the non-reciprocal and unequal relationship of donor to recipient, north to south, and comfort to insecurity. Human rights and humanitarian campaigns attempt to forge bonds of compassion and solidarity across great expanses of space, as well as across provincial moral chasms. If we are to be made to care about strangers – so much so that we will give of our time, money, or political capital in their assistance – a message must be felt and believed that relies on a cosmopolitan sensibility that expands our current conception of inclusion and community. How the stranger is represented in the photograph shapes moral sentiment as well as public attitudes of favor or distrust for human rights and humanitarian efforts.

While television brought these questions to a critical mass audience, the broadsheet newspaper was the first platform that forged this connection between the audience, NGO, and distant sufferer. And in today's new media environment, complexity abounds. Imagery no longer only serves strategic objectives, political, financial, or other; images provide a venue for NGOs to represent their own identity. Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, and Twitter hashtags are the battlefields and trenches for

massive media departments. Thirty years ago NGOs utilized fax machines to send out press releases and urgent actions. Social networks and digital technology have revolutionized NGO communications and raised the stakes significantly. An organization cannot be effective in its “real” work without a winning game plan for the placement, dissemination, and broadcast of the work. Media and information become both means to an end, as well as ends in themselves.

What does human rights look like? What does humanitarianism look like? Do the appearances of these fields accurately and appropriately reflect their foundational ideas, values, and norms? Aid, advocacy, and activism all have as their subject the dignity, respect, and concern for all human beings but despite these common objectives, each field has a specific orientation with respect to the origins of vulnerability and the alleviation of suffering. Human rights emerge from social struggle and legal institutions that mobilize structural reform as a means of checking the arbitrary exercise of power. Human rights empower individuals and groups to assert autonomy and self-determination. Humanitarianism, on the other hand, is an urgent response to provide relief to innocent civilians during conflicts and disasters. Humanitarianism, in its traditional form, seeks to avoid questions of politics and power by pursuing a neutral agenda, absent self-interest and beyond corruption. Translating these abstract values into visual images is not a linear or obvious process.

This chapter examines these issues by theorizing the relationship between NGOs, the global audience, and the subjects of photography. First, I outline the world of NGO photography by investigating its purposes, political economy, intended audiences, and content. Second, I explore the practices associated with the fields of human rights and humanitarianism in order to lay a foundation for understanding the goals and orientation that drive forms of communication. Finally, I identify ideal-type motifs for human rights and humanitarian campaigns that outline trends in visual culture of these sectors. Media savvy, across platforms of traditional and new media, determines political penetration and organizational viability and, therefore, presents a ripe venue through which to understand human rights practice. I will conclude with some thoughts about the potential for imagery transmitted across digital networks to serve as a bridge for constituting relationships of solidarity.

NGO photography and visual culture

Dating back to Oxfam appeals for famine relief in Nigeria in the late 1960s, photojournalism has played a central role in communicating an

ethical cause to a broad audience. At the time, journalists were flown into the secessionist region of Biafra by a European public relations firm on retainer by the rebels. In order to sway global public opinion to their plight against the government, images of starving Igbo people were disseminated in mass media.¹ These photos spread through the mainstream press because they were captivating as news stories, bringing the world to the West with visually arresting images. Foremost, photojournalism serves a purpose as a graphic conduit for news. Instead of relying on the “rational information relay” of text, photos demand the viewer use context clues, assumptions, associations, and memories to extract the story from the image.² Photographs of human suffering provoke visceral emotional responses that supplement the deeper investigation of text in communicating a complex storyline. Imagery of atrocity grabs the audience immediately and distills the details, history, and context of a story into a single frame.

In an important sense, this model developed a generation ago suited both NGOs and news outlets similarly. Humanitarian organizations then were essentially start-ups, struggling to conduct outreach and cultivate a donor base for their operations. Media outlets, then and now, balance the mission of publishing “all the news that’s fit to print” with the commercial imperatives of selling ad space and moving units. Journalism dictates tread carefully between “if it bleeds, it leads” and the “breakfast cereal test.”³ Reportage from wars, disasters, and famines generate atrocity photographs that posed a problem for publishers: the merit of the stories carried their own weight but readers respond inconsistently to coverage of gruesome events. While graphic imagery of suffering may attract readership and boost sales, there are still ethical considerations to weigh regarding time and place appropriateness for certain kinds of news and images. Yet this linkage, and the symbiosis it permits, is being challenged by evolutions in both the media and NGO sectors.

As traditional print media and photojournalism face a changing environment of digital and citizen journalism, coupled with diminished budgets for foreign reporting, photographers have increasingly partnered

¹ Joel R. Pruce, “The Spectacle of Suffering and Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia,” in *Media, Mobilization and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering*, Tristan Anne Borer, ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

² Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, 1st edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 314.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

with NGOs.⁴ No longer are NGOs simply using the product of photojournalism – now they have significant media departments of their own, retain their own staff photographers, and provide a worthy outlet for the work of freelance photographers. A strong current in photojournalism is the imperative of shedding light on untold stories of desperate plight and hidden abuse. In other words, photojournalism is endowed with a social purpose shared by human rights and humanitarian NGOs.⁵ It is fair to say that their relationship is shifting yet remains synergistic in crucial ways; parasitic, but with roles reversed, still angled toward coaligned goals. This being the case, NGOs can exert more control over the process and the product. However, human rights and humanitarian NGOs have distinct needs for visual imagery based on their particular goals and orientation toward the public. Conceptualizing their divergent purposes advances the argument for unique motifs.

A primary rationale for utilizing visual imagery in NGO campaigns is to raise money to support operating expenses. This is the oldest and most persistent reason for an organization to communicate its message to a broad audience: “Look at what we do and who we help. You can help too.” By grabbing the attention of a public preoccupied with daily life and other distractions, humanitarian NGOs focus on imagery that “tugs at the heart strings” rather than challenges the intellect. Pictures on an aid appeal poster, direct mail piece, or television commercial need not explain the reasons behind the suffering or the causes, which meshes well with humanitarianism generally. All that matters in humanitarian aid is that some individual is suffering, regardless of why or where. From the perspective of the viewer/donor reacting to sadness and grief, coming into contact with desperate imagery and giving money to a cause is a humane moral gesture of participation in prevailing norms about assistance and inequality.

Human rights organizations, however, are confronted with a different set of considerations. On the one hand, human rights NGOs need money to operate too, though the relationship cultivated between human rights organizations and the public is not merely one of donor-recipient. Human rights NGOs require supporters to act on behalf of the organization, to legitimize their work, and to make it possible for advocacy to have political impact. Human rights advocates, at the behest of a trusted NGO, send urgent letters to elected officials, sign petitions, and attend

⁴ James Estrin, “When Interest Creates a Conflict,” *New York Times Lens Blog* (November 19, 2012), <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/19/when-interest-creates-a-conflict/>.

⁵ Ibid.

rallies in support of a cause. Creating a culture of action and engagement demands that NGOs motivate audiences in a different way because they expect a different sort of response. It may be sufficient to provoke empathy and compassion to solicit donations from viewers, but in order to mobilize a public to engage in action, the organization must marshal a different set of emotions and memories from its supporters.

Instead, human rights NGOs use images to make deeper, more rational appeals to (in)justice, hope, and resistance. To attract human rights advocates, organizations get the audience riled up, stirred, and inspired to action. Emphasizing fairness and dignity, NGOs project advocates as ordinary heroes who can save lives and right wrongs. Trafficking heavily in the moralizing language of good and evil, the advocate is the modern incarnation of social justice champion and social movement crusader. Coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s, the human rights movement is infused with the spirit of 1960s resistance and its culture of hope and change. Generationally, human rights advocates draw upon memories of activists and events that shaped their own moral and political outlooks: King and Gandhi, the defeat of Apartheid, and fall of the Berlin Wall. However, as this chapter demonstrates, the visual culture of human rights has yet to arrive at an appropriate expression of its work, yet to articulate for itself what advocacy is in itself and how to represent the action visually.

Essentially, transnational advocacy exists at the intersection of human rights and humanitarianism: NGOs working on *behalf* of distant others while adopting the persona of a grassroots movement championing the rights of their own group. Human rights advocacy is not an insider practice, which is why it shares space with humanitarianism. However, it is also not purely outsider work for its appeal to universal concepts like “humanity” and “dignity.” Human rights advocacy is neither in the aid business nor the social movement business. It is neither and both, but also a third thing in its own right – but that third thing does not have a unique visual identity.

Human rights advocacy is graphically discordant, failing to express a clear vision of itself to its multiple audiences: donors, states, supporters, and journalists. Failure to express a distinct visual identity and form is a symptom of deeper issues that need to be addressed. The concern at the heart of this critique is that human rights advocates project an image of themselves that is out of sync with who they really are. Busy borrowing from others, human rights organizations transmit a vision of themselves that is inaccurate and disingenuous, forging a false relationship with the audience and undercutting the salience of their message.

The proliferation of visual imagery in the digital realm and the preponderance of new media bring these questions to the fore. Human rights NGOs reach out to audiences across multiple platforms and rely largely on lucid graphic representation, rather than on lengthy texts, as was once the case. Web users are targeted through banner advertisements, email solicitation, and social media engagement. The first point of contact is visual. Before knowing anything about research methodology, country of origin, or mission statement, the audience's first association is what it sees, which means the impact of the NGO's initial impression is won or lost on optics. As instrumental as it may sound, appearance simply matters. Without an effective visual strategy, the most rigorous, most damning campaign work is in vain. The next section offers definitions and distinctions to differentiate from among the work of aid, advocacy, and activism, before delineating the distinct aesthetic motifs that emerge from these sectors.

Demystifying and disaggregating aid, advocacy, and activism

Humanitarian aid

Humanitarianism is a transnational pursuit focused on providing minimal support for vulnerable populations during moments of crisis. But humanitarianism is not practiced within one's own society. When serving or aiding the disadvantaged locally, we call that by another name: charity. An important sense of distance is built into humanitarianism that works to project compassion abroad. In this way, any form of humanitarianism is interventionist, as it necessarily travels across borders and involves individuals and organizations from one country in the affairs of a second country. Being from outside, these actors aim to be in-country for a relatively short period of time to address the problem at hand and return home. This quality can be construed either negatively or positively: either short-term emergency response is adequate and useful, or it can be perceived as insufficient, leaving reconstruction efforts up to weak states to handle alone. Humanitarians confront impossible scenarios and are forced into the unenviable task of making decisions and compromise: "These compromises are inevitable and are part of the price of doing business – even when that business is saving lives."⁶

⁶ Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 6–34.

The occupation of saving lives can take many forms. Humanitarians are the world's social workers, placing bandages over wounds rather than curing infections.⁷ They are not revolutionaries and in most cases are not reformers. These actors aim to provide only the most basic goods and services to those when all else is lost. Humanitarians respond to emergencies brought out by (largely) unpredictable events that civilians, especially poor ones, are not prepared to handle: violent conflict, natural disasters, epidemic disease, or a confluence known as complex humanitarian emergencies. This type of emergency arises when the outbreak of conflict disrupts life, systems, and markets. Institutions break down. Provisions become scarce. Normalcy is evasive. Insecurity thrives.

Humanitarians arrive on the scene of a complex emergency not to resurrect institutions or assist with market correction (sometimes having the effect of further disrupting both). Despite new trends in political advocacy, humanitarians are not preoccupied by the causes of suffering and therefore do not attempt to address them. Humanitarians deal mostly with the visible symptoms of subterranean problems, for better or for worse. Humanitarianism is a transcendent calling engaged in by individuals who sacrifice and risk a great deal to help others. Yet humanitarians are not gods and confront a concrete world of pragmatic considerations, resource limitations, and state power. In order to navigate the treacherous mundane world, humanitarians have identified certain limitations and established a set of guiding principle to inform their work and carve out space in which to operate.

Principle and purpose matter tremendously. Principle provides security and legitimacy to humanitarian actors even in the hyperpolitical context of war. Legitimacy and trust is crucial here because heads of state have good reason to be suspicious of foreign actors intervening during tenuous times. Sovereignty provides the basis for excluding any kind of actor from entry, but humanitarian principle is a free pass that endows the actor with leverage to work based on mission alone. If states derive their legitimacy from external recognition and domestic consent, nonstate actors must pursue legitimacy through alternate venues. Altruistic motivations and principled objectives provide cover and justification for nonstate actors, situating humanitarians as safe, apolitical partners in conflict mitigation and disaster relief.

⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

Humanitarians must be seen as disinterested and noncorrupt from a political perspective; their involvement serves humanity, a universal imperative outside of power. “Neutrality” is the central tenet in the humanitarian lexicon and is most closely tied to the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The first humanitarian NGO, ICRC was created along with the first Geneva Convention in 1864, tasked to monitor International Humanitarian Law and serve as neutral arbiter of humanitarian norms during war. Constructing humanitarianism and humanitarian space in this way creates “a space where ethics can operate in a world of politics.”⁸ During warfare, the claim of neutrality is more pronounced and more controversial, and refers specifically to the prohibition against taking sides; the alternative being to provide aid only to one side or the other. Neutral humanitarians assist wounded soldiers on both sides of the conflict, even if the battle is itself between unequal parties, one suffering more and one more egregiously violating humanitarian norms. Humanitarians pledge to serve all equally and have no opinion on the status of the conflict in progress. As an idea that declares what humanitarians *do*, neutrality also by default circumscribes what they *cannot do*.

Humanitarian principle attempts to locate humanitarian practice in a realm beyond politics where actors operate with full latitude, free from accusations of bias. If these principles work, it is because they present NGOs as “innocent by association.”⁹ However, there is marked dissent within the humanitarian community arguing that apolitical humanitarianism is an abrogation of the humanitarian imperative itself – a naïve and irresponsible way of approaching harm reduction and emergency relief. This debate has provoked splintering within the movement over the past fifty years and spawned organizations with different blends of politics and humanitarianism. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) is most notable among them. Notions of testimony and witnessing are introduced to mold humanitarianism into a more aware and shrewd endeavor. As has been the case many times, if humanitarians are there to help and can be counted on for their silence, then all the more likely they are to be manipulated. The balance of neutrality and politics in humanitarian principle is a fragile, paradoxical blend, “part confidence trick and part self-delusion.”¹⁰ To the extent that neutrality, impartiality, and independence personify a “moral purity” that humanitarians strive

⁸ Ibid., p. 34. ⁹ Ibid., p. 34. ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

for, the very pursuit of nonpolitical engagement as a worthwhile, achievable end should be called into question.¹¹

Human rights advocacy

Human rights advocacy is the practice of promoting the rights of others, guided by the internationally recognized system of norms designed to support and protect human dignity. In common parlance, to advocate is to support or recommend or to speak on behalf of an issue or a person. An advocate is the actor who performs this role (consider the work of a legal advocate in a courtroom). “Advocacy” refers to the practice itself and the term captures a central programmatic and ordered quality essential to our comprehension of the subject. Advocacy occurs across the ideological spectrum and in wide-ranging issue areas including the environment, animal welfare, firearms, food, and innumerable others. Advocacy is not a random occurrence or stand-alone act, but an institutionalized, systematized, and habituated performance. On the global level, a well-developed and growing sector of actors participates in advocacy and shapes its work and the way it is perceived by the international community.

To understand advocacy as such, I believe, corresponds to the way the word is used in ordinary language, as well as the way it is used by both scholars and practitioners of human rights advocacy. Furthermore, and crucial to an honest representation, advocacy is practiced by advocates *on behalf of* others. In their seminal study of these issues, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink operate with this assumption but fail to problematize it all when they plainly write that “advocates plead the cause of others or defend a cause or a population.”¹² The very constitution of transnational advocacy networks hinges on representation of one group by another.

We commonly speak of human rights advocates as those who advocate for the *cause* of human rights, but advocates are ultimately concerned with the human beings whose dignity composes “the cause.” Excluding the human object of human rights advocacy ignores a key dimension that differentiates this act from that which addresses animal welfare or ecological threat. Advocates for human dignity are confronted by a distinct

¹¹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, 1st edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), p. 224.

¹² Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 8.

set of ethical considerations that neither animals nor Earth present. Foregrounding the human object of human rights advocacy draws crucial attention to the ethical considerations that should guide the practice. Failing to do so abstracts away from the human dimension, creating opportunity for exploitation. This matters because issues pertaining to representation run through human rights strategies particularly due to the reliance on information and media.

As a core strategy of NGOs, the concept of information politics was designed to describe the activity of transnational advocacy networks. Processes such as framing, agenda-setting, labeling, categorizing, exposing, researching, reporting, monitoring, explaining, or persuading outline the terrain for the political use of information. Each of these verbs identifies a range of ways in which advocacy groups utilize information and knowledge to their advantage. By shaping discourse and narrative, advocates leverage publicity as a key political device. In a world of geopolitics dominated by material considerations, moral agents have normative tools at their disposal. While it is true that advocacy campaigns at times use divestment strategies or boycotts to assert their forcefulness, the coercive potency of information has proven to be the advocate's most effective weapon.

In practice, this weapon takes diverse shapes. Amnesty International (AI) is known for its strategy of "naming and shaming," which works precisely as it sounds. By exposing abusers and publicizing their wrongdoings, Amnesty invites embarrassment on the regime. Abusive states operate comfortably so long as their deeds go unknown. If a political prisoner is thrown in jail without due process and tortured, but his whereabouts remain a secret, those responsible are free to act with impunity. By calling violators by name on the global stage, Amnesty leverages this exposure, pressuring abusers to cease their practices. This works because no heads of state like to be called torturers or perpetrators of genocide.

Reason also suggests that this use of information may have a direct effect and perhaps a deterrent effect on future abuse, if regimes would prefer to avoid labels of this nature. Ultimately, questions of reputation may have material effects (perhaps being labeled a torturer makes a state a less preferable trade partner); and this is not unintentional. But, the organization's use of information in this way is essentially the closest it can come to flexing power against a sovereign state. Amnesty's method has proven to be extremely effective in discrete circumstances in which their supporters can focus on singular cases or events. In more diffuse

situations or more complex conflicts, naming and shaming has a variable rate of return,¹³ which is why subsequent organizations have built on this approach.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), for instance, utilizes its own version of information politics with quick, reliable research and high-level deployment of its reports. Instead of AI's mass approach, HRW seeks the attention of major media outlets and policymakers, specifically in the United States. By casting themselves as an indispensable source of information, they in turn shape the debate, which influences decision-making and outcomes. Distinctly, MSF bears its own relationship to information politics manifested in the priority of "bearing witness." Similar to both AI and HRW, bearing witness refuses to permit secrecy and impunity and insists on such by being present in conflict zones. Healthcare professionals, on behalf of MSF, that operate with a coherent system of ethics are uniquely positioned to bear witness and attest to crimes due to their neutral stance and humanitarian outlook.¹⁴ MSF is distinct in its ability to straddle the fields of human rights and humanitarianism due to its political commitments to bear witness and testify. Also worth noting, the financial independence of MSF avails the organization to pursue its agenda with full latitude, which has a positive impact on its potency and influence. In the final account, it is this seeming reliability that all human rights advocacy depends on for its fortitude: information politics embedded in unquestionable moral authority.

The category of moral authority constitutes the foundation of human rights advocacy and makes possible the very use of a politics of information. Stephen Hopgood suggests, "Crucial to being recognized as [a] legitimate [moral authority] is not what is said but the identity of who says it."¹⁵ Power is derived from this authority, rather than from direct coercion. Separate from other forms of authority, in order to obtain and retain the moral position "it must claim a certain objectivity in speaking for the truth."¹⁶ Knowing this, AI, HRW, MSF, and others work tirelessly to protect themselves against the accusation of corruption that might

¹³ Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, "Sticks and Stones: Naming and Shaming the Human Rights Enforcement Problem," *International Organization*, 62, 4 (2008): 689–716.

¹⁴ Joelle Tanguy and Fiona Terry, "Humanitarian Responsibility and Committed Action: Response to 'Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action,'" *Ethics & International Affairs*, 13, 1 (1999): 29–34.

¹⁵ *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

taint their moral authority. Corruption, partisanship, or ideological commitments would undercut the moral high ground imbued within the language of universal human rights and, therefore, render impotent advocacy campaigns from the outset.

Pragmatically, this requires an organization's leadership to be wary of the origins of funding, to give fair treatment to all parties in a conflict, and to be certain of the information on which they base their calls and actions. Moral authority will certainly be challenged – by those very targets of campaigns, the abusers, and the rogues – as having a Western bias, being an arm of the American government, or the product of a Zionist conspiracy. In this tense and fluid context, human rights advocacy NGOs demonstrate a capacity to be effective when guided by these basic tenets. These are not carved in stone, but merely evolved through the experiences of central organizations and, therefore, are apt to change over time. Thus far, this formula has been successful in elevating human rights into the mainstream discourse of social justice claims on the global level. It is crucial to account for the way in which global media and digital networks provide invaluable conduits for the transmission of human rights norms.

Lastly, human rights advocacy contains an inherent connection to transnational action. The relationship between the Western advocate–subject and non-Western victim–object is shaped by distance and fraught with complex power differentials. That advocates opt to engage in human rights issues in another country – often instead and at the expense of local struggles – says a great deal about the politics of human rights. Transnationality raises pervasive questions about what a truly global, truly grassroots human rights movement would look like. By way of a loose definition: when we talk about human rights advocacy, we talk about a patterned practice, structured around professional NGOs, in which masses of ordinary people support campaigns that seek to protect and uphold the dignity of other people.¹⁷ In this way, advocacy borrows heavily from humanitarian action in the insistence on acting as surrogates for others. Therefore, when masses of ordinary people act as their

¹⁷ The notion of “support,” though, must also be unpacked because sometimes campaigns are supported literally through letter-writing efforts and the like, but increasingly support for advocacy is more loosely defined to capture the public reputation of an organization. The notoriety of an NGO matters when it engages in elite-level lobbying, to leverage broad, positive recognition and deploy it as political pressure.

own advocates we do not call it advocacy per se; instead, we generally employ a unique term with its own history and cultural associations.

Human rights activism

Activism is distinct from advocacy in that, as a practice, it articulates charges against an instrument of power directly by those affected, without proxy. The absence of an intermediary is an essential difference between advocacy and activism, for many of the reasons introduced in the process of defining humanitarianism above. Colonial histories and persistent inequalities inject suspicion into relationships constituted and justified by acting for the benefit of others. Good will and noble intentions do not go far enough to overcome the political obstacles presented by interlocutors in this sensitive area. Human rights advocates are conscious of their vulnerability to accusation and, influenced by humanitarianism, assume an apolitical persona. Distancing themselves from politics, advocates defend their interventions as expressive of the universal values that underwrite human rights norms. This articulation permits an opening for advocates to engage on “policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their ‘interests.’”¹⁸ Activism, on the other hand, sidesteps accusations of paternalism altogether as activists assert their own claims and pursue their own interests, often in the face of great risk to their physical security. Delineating among these practices provides a basis for theorizing about the role of subject and object in human rights advocacy.

Alex de Waal wrestles with these issues as well, suggesting a typology of activism that explains particular variations.¹⁹ From a critical perspective, de Waal’s attempt seeks to “step outside the bounds of the human rights movement and loosen the shackles it has on our political and moral imagination”²⁰ and by doing so, determine how human rights in its organizational form (advocacy) relates to human rights in its social movement form (activism). De Waal models his “primary movement” after the American civil rights movement. A primary movement is “overwhelmingly a mass movement of individuals, mobilized in order to pursue their interest and claims.”²¹ Primary human rights movements

¹⁸ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, 9.

¹⁹ Alex De Waal, “Human Rights Organizations and the Political Imagination: How the West and Africa Have Diverged,” *Journal of Human Rights*, 2, 4 (2003): 475–94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 476. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 477.

are distinct from “second generation” and “third generation” movements that take place in professionalized organizations that cultivate relationships with powerful states, rather than oppose them. Primary movements are activist movements. Second and third generation movements are advocacy movements. These designations matter because they each carry with them unique politics that are too often conflated, obscuring important spaces of struggle and contestation.

Scholarly literature on transnational advocacy networks (TANs) reinforces the distinction between activism and advocacy. For Keck and Sikkink, TANs form out of the desire of indigenous activists to leap-frog their own state, utilize devices on the global level to bring pressure downward, and see their objectives realized. This is the essence of the “boomerang effect.”²² Domestic social movements working to change their own societies forge transnational networks as force multipliers in their struggles. The relationship between activists and advocates in this schema is one of mutual benefit at best and mutual exploitation at worst. Transnational NGOs have an interest in being seen as an essential component in domestic struggles, particularly in the global South, while local activist movements often lack resources that TANs can bring to bear. This is true among activist movements in the North as well as in the South. In the North, consider the American civil rights movement’s engagement with the global human rights regime²³ as an example of a “primary movement” that sought transnational recognition. Charli Carpenter’s research on issue emergence and NGO gatekeepers attests to this symbiotic relationship.²⁴

Given the centrality of “moral authority” and “moral purity” in human rights and humanitarianism, the ethical dimensions of practice in these fields must be subjected to scrutiny. As powerful and visible as NGOs are, is it insufficient to simply project morality and assume that it is so. Organizations must be held accountable for their engagements: to donors, states, and the global public. Means and ends matter here. In order to meet reasonable standards of legitimacy, the methods NGOs use in their work must uphold the values they purport to serve. The exploration of visual imagery is one expression, one venue, in which means and

²² Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*.

²³ Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁴ Charli Carpenter, “Studying Issue (Non)-Adoption in Transnational Advocacy Networks,” *International Organization*, 61, 3 (2007): 643–67.

ends *should* coincide. If, through the use of imagery, NGOs impugn dignity rather than defend it, then the moral positions that they aspire to may be compromised. If images objectify their human subjects rather than empower and exalt them, then human rights and humanitarian actors have fallen prey to the very systems against which they struggle.

Power and competition shape the market for moral behavior, but these forces often go unnoticed.²⁵ Determining a “logic” for the deployment of NGO photography pins ethical consideration against rational, strategic objectives. However, it is my contention that human rights and humanitarian actors must resist instrumental trade-offs. It may be beneficial to traffic in pitiable images of poor children, for instance, because an emotional audience may be inclined to give money in greater amounts. But if this practice is deemed to be exploitative, then it undercuts a humanitarian’s reason for being. Respect for the recipient–object of aid or advocacy appeal must be central to any media strategy. To address this directly, the final section seeks to identify visual motifs that NGO communication converge around and judge how these motifs accommodate the principles and practices of human rights.

Three motifs: desperation, determination, defiance

Based on this reading of the social practices of aid, advocacy, and activism, we would expect that capturing these distinct missions in photographs would produce divergent motifs.²⁶ For instance, advocacy organizations would want to personify strength, resistance, and solidarity, while humanitarian NGOs would desire a less antagonistic frame by evoking empathy and compassion. Drawing on emotional narratives of helplessness, the needy subject requires charitable assistance from affluent viewers. Human rights advocacy presents a different posture marked by a rougher edge and a confrontational attitude appealing directly to notions of (in)justice.

Depicting each of these areas visually, then, requires asking complicated questions: Should the subjects in frame be represented as suffering and pitiful or resilient and determined? Are these individuals shown faltering in desperate squalor or struggling forcefully against an abusive

²⁵ Clifford Bob, “Merchants of Morality,” *Foreign Policy* (March 1, 2002), www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2002/03/01/merchants_of_morality.

²⁶ I have collected representative examples of these motifs on a webpage, to supplement the text: www.joelpruce.com/threemotifs.

regime? Ultimately, the use of imagery provokes and circumscribes a range of possible responses while projecting a persona for the NGO at the center of the campaign. A survey of media products of human rights and humanitarian NGOs bears at least three prominent motifs that serve as identifiable articulations of the organizations that produce them: desperation, determination, and defiance.

NGOs have seized on photojournalistic accounts of crisis since Oxfam became active on the Biafran famine fifty years ago by literally reprinting images from the newspaper in their own appeal advertisements. The use of depictions of starving African children began in this moment due to the synergies between a humanitarian organization and the work of photojournalists. Both honed in on several particular qualities of these photos that make them iconic: blank, staring eyes, bodily damage, and the innocence of childhood. Making eye contact with a figure caught in frame draws in the viewer and personalizes the suffering. Witnessing knobby elbows and skin stretched tight across bones further humanizes suffering by locating it on a body that we all possess. Finally, the trope of childhood innocence adds an extra dimension of emotional personalization. Child vulnerability and helplessness is a circumstance that all viewers can relate to: not because of an experience with famine (presumably the viewer sits comfortably somewhere far from crisis), but because even outside of the context of famine, children depend on parents and communities for full support, and audiences latch on to that notion inherently.

However, while the photos of starving African children have proven useful in humanitarian campaigns to raise money and awareness, there is persistent sensitivity among observers that the icon has morphed into stereotype that informs bad policy and harmful interventions. This motif emerges out of the necessarily unequal and nonreciprocal nature of humanitarianism. The imagery used to communicate the values of humanitarianism gives comfort to postcolonial critiques about humanitarianism as imperial and disproportionately focuses on hopeless Africa, personifying the whole continent as child-like and disease-ridden. As the image below makes clear, while this motif originated in coverage of African crises, it holds true for circumstances throughout the developing world.

In fairness, this visual motif is increasingly being called into question among NGOs and this critique primes the field for a shift in trends. It does, however, reflect many regressive principles that inform humanitarianism, which demonstrate an inertia and inability to evolve. The

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Desperation motif relies certainly on the sense of urgency and emergency of humanitarianism, and the nonjudgmental care for those who truly are in desperate predicaments. Highlighting desperation in the photographed subject has the reflexive effect of focusing the viewer on her own status, affluent or otherwise. In doing so, the moral compulsion to give and to help is evoked and humanitarian practice is set in motion. While limited in many significant ways, the Desperation motif also has a role to play in the translation and cultivation of humanitarian sentiment to a mass audience.

The Determination motif is an adaptation that, I suggest, forecasts new directions in NGO practice and use of imagery. Visually, these photographs utilize eye contact and personalization reminiscent of the early humanitarian appeals. Captured in frame are recipients, but they are not sickly and desperate. Instead, the recipient of aid is depicted as empowered, capable, and determined to overcome obstacles of crisis and underdevelopment. She is a partner in humanitarian aid, not merely a passive patient. There is a greater sensitivity to avoid old stereotypes about poor, riddled Southerners in need of help from rich, white saviors. Remaining is a focus on children and women, but not as helpless victims. This assertion confronts the persistent critiques of aid as “throwing good money after bad.” Representing aid recipients as trustworthy partners in bringing about a remedy to global poverty and suffering combats donor fatigue. The determination motif correlates closely to transformative notions of political humanitarianism practiced by organizations utilizing a rights-based approach – one that conceptualizes vulnerability in political terms and seeks remedy through institutional change. This new turn in the visualization of humanitarianism aims to confront the troubled history and checkered track record of the aid sector, while also suggesting new approaches to practice.

Neither desperation nor determination adequately captures human rights principles and practices. It is insufficient for human rights NGOs to rely on dated tropes about sadness and grief associated with stereotypical humanitarian imagery. Human rights is inherently *not* about charity; not even “good” or “political” charity. Human rights imagery should reflect notions of strength, empowerment, and resilience that approximate the core values of the movement itself. But more so, human rights communication demands an articulation of essential notions of collective action and solidarity with others. Since the demands of human rights organizations are higher, individuals must be engaged in a different way. This is a marketing issue in one respect, but also one that should reflect

the integrity of the movement and the moral authority that it seeks. How can average people be moved to care about and then act on behalf of individuals or groups on the other side of the world? It is one matter to ask for a meager donation and it is quite another to ask for action.

To represent this, the defiance motif expresses the powerful potential for groups of people acting together to affect societal change. The images may appear angry or threatening, but not violent. Human rights advocacy situates itself alongside the civil disobedience tradition as indicated. Human rights action deploys information politics as a tool for masses of average people to use against decision makers; therefore the quantity of supporters pictured is important. Large public demonstrations symbolize awareness and mobilization. Marching, crying out, and holding banners, visual imagery of human rights advocacy focuses more on the actors than the recipients, so to speak (imagine an equivalent for humanitarianism in which the donor is pictured giving money). Human rights communications would be well served in fact to take as its object the audience itself, rather than the anonymous stranger whom the audience is asked to save. Finally, imagery of collective action in turn helps solve collective action problems. Communicating to the audience that there is already an engaged group of advocates may help the more reluctant viewer to overcome fear of the free rider problem.

Implications

Public relations efforts of human rights NGOs serve the purposes of recruitment, fundraising, mobilization, and general outreach. The way an organization presents itself impacts how its reporting and documentation efforts resonate with the audience and pressure elites and office holders. Human rights organizations in the twenty-first century are concerned with their image and identity for the way in which these seemingly superficial elements have consequences of the “real” work of advocacy. Brand management is as much an imperative for NGOs today as it is for multinational corporations and, therefore, the ways organizations project themselves visually are central to their communications operations.

Against this backdrop, visual media converge on several distinctive motifs and the three above are not exhaustive, but they do present a typology of narratives that human rights and humanitarian actors create and traffic in. The motifs are expressions of how the organizations see themselves and want to be seen by the audience. Each reflects broader trends in global engagement and communication strategy, as well as

slowly evolving NGO sectors. However, given this account of aid, advocacy, and activism, it is not clear that the motifs fit human rights practices well. Human rights advocacy in particular has not generated its own visual culture, as much as it has borrowed from cousins and neighbors.

Advocacy is not aid in that it is a practice that purports to stand in solidarity with the other, rather than in a charitable relationship of donor–recipient; the desperation motif is therefore not appropriate and miscasts advocacy efforts. Advocacy is also not activism – and I believe this distinction is crucial – because advocacy is a practice inherently based on external, often transnational, support for the other along human rights lines. Activism is undertaken by subjects claiming their own rights and recognition without proxy. The defiance motif co-opts the moral force and psychological persuasion of activism and transmits those feelings among the audience to draw them to advocacy projects. The human rights campaign contains two faces: home-grown movements struggling for their own futures and the transnational community based in the affluent West that wants to help. These are each distinct spheres of action and remain furthermore distinct from humanitarianism. Human rights advocacy occupies the space in between, balancing the ethical and political demands of self and other. This tension is present in the media products of advocacy organizations, which brings us back to conclude with a modified version of the question we asked at the outset: What should human rights look like?

In many instances, advocacy campaign materials attempt to sidestep pitfalls by eschewing images that contain individuals. For instance, consider the impact of a photograph of a bombed-out Syrian city block as it stands in for the human beings who once lived there, now dead or homeless. Inanimate objects, like a shelled concrete high-rise, refugee camp tents, or ashes from a razed village all represent the human toll without exploiting the human beings at the center of such destruction. Infographics are another device NGOs use to represent their work through visualized statistics or documentation that communicate details about abuse while evading criticism about the use of atrocity photos. These mechanisms can be effective but it is not reasonable to expect human rights actors only to utilize images devoid of human faces – human faces remain at the heart of human rights work and it is beholden on innovative thinking to conceptualize advocacy in a way that respects human subjects and effectively and accurately depicts the work of NGOs.

As mentioned at the outset, the transformative impact of digital technologies on the human rights sector magnifies the essential character of this debate over visual culture. The shift in scope and scale in terms of diffusion of graphic media is unprecedented and thrusts questions of appearance and optics to the fore of strategic thinking. “Real” human rights work is only as good as its resonance. And in as much as the new media environment presents new obstacles and pressures to engage across multiple platforms, there are also opportunities to deepen the penetration of human rights norms and strengthen the affiliations audiences have with the global human rights movement.

Solidarity as a concept has been particularly elusive, yet the emergence of global, digital social networks has provided new tools through which to cultivate relationships of equality and mutuality. It has been said that the technological capacity to witness distant suffering is one meaningful symptom of globalization that carries with it moral obligation to on behalf of the suffering subject. Overcoming provincialism and nationalism, visual media possesses the potential to contribute to a cosmopolitan foundation for the recognition of sameness and inclusion across traditional boundaries. NGOs should serve as conduits for borderless politics due to their position as key transnational civil society actors and for the way that such a perspective expresses what advocacy is and what it looks like in practice.

Furthermore, social networks provide a unique platform through which to forge relationships of solidarity. We could envision strategies that connect the experience of witnessing distant suffering to actions that express solidarity, for instance with the use of hashtags. When audiences can see the struggle of other groups in distant lands, NGOs can play a role in translating watching into acting. However, the same sorts of questions presented in the visual context carry over into other discursive outlets. Constructing communities of solidarity with hashtags risks accentuating power differentials present across networks. For instance, when the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag was started by Nigerian activists to raise awareness for a mass abduction, Western followers began weighing in and crowding out local voices.²⁷ Patterns of activity such as hashtag advocacy demand the same kinds of sensitivity and solidarity and must not simply be assumed into existence.

²⁷ Jumoke Balogun, “Dear World, Your Hashtags Won’t #BringBackOurGirls,” *The Guardian* (May 9, 2014), www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/09/nigeria-hashtags-wont-bring-back-our-girls-bringbackourgirls.

Finally, due to the fundamental role of information and media in human rights, the advent of digital technology only improves the tools available to advocates, and this is as true in the visual realm as in any other.²⁸ Partnerships and projects that utilize satellite imagery and surveillance equipment for human rights purposes have proliferated over the last decade, evidencing a trend certain to continue. NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Enough Project, WITNESS, and Videre each have sophisticated new programs that develop software and hardware to apply in the field. Devices and applications improve our ability to monitor and document abuse, revitalizing naming and shaming strategies.

Conclusion

I propose these questions at a moment when the global human rights community is undergoing a thorough self-assessment amidst the shifting sands of American decline, rising powers, and miscellaneous instabilities. Envisioning a movement that acts more symbiotically with indigenous movements and organizations, rather than as gatekeeper and benefactor, requires a new approach to visual representation as well.²⁹ Prioritizing solidarity is key to this new vision. Visually, this requires featuring victim/survivor/stakeholder as equal partners. The determination motif begins to take proper steps in this direction but retains the residue of desperation tokenism, as if a communications officer took seriously critiques and merely did the opposite. Now photographs are happy instead of sad. But rather than merely reacting, the visual culture of human rights must be proactive to capture solidaristic political engagement in which actors stand shoulder to shoulder with recipient groups, in relationships of assistance and support. Photographs would represent advocates as humble and deferential to the communities they hope to help rather than as saviors and heroes.

In place of the defiance motif that triumphs advocates as liberators, I propose a fourth 'D' motif: dissident. If human rights advocates are to

²⁸ Alexandra C. Budabin and Joel R. Pruce, "The Strategic Logic of Media Advocacy: New Modalities of Information Politics in Human Rights," Working Paper (2014).

²⁹ Cesar Rodriguez-Garavito, "The Future of Human Rights: From Gatekeeping to Symbiosis," *Sur: International Journal of Human Rights* 11, no. 20 (June 2014), <http://conectas.org.br/en/actions/sur-journal/issue/20/1007380-the-future-of-human-rights-from-gate-keeping-to-symbiosis>.

stand in true solidarity with the objects of their work, then advocates must consider themselves as dissidents. This posturing would truly take up the mantle of Mandela and King, who were scorned and imprisoned for their activism and targeted by the state for their views and for their actions. Assuming the role of radical, human rights advocacy would do well to reclaim the subversive position of human rights champions of the past in order to transcend the self–other divide that plagues twenty-first century interventions. Advocacy as dissidence asserts the insurgent nature of the cosmopolitan claim that human dignity matters everywhere. The presence of a global network of human rights defenders upends traditional assumptions of international affairs by challenging sovereign power and structural sources of abuse. An aesthetic transformation must accompany this new platform that communicates a sense of rebellion and threat. Rather than using tired narratives from charity or social movements, the visual culture of human rights should blaze new terrain because the politics of information in a digital age are not limited to words and slogans: pictures possess power as well.