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Communication

Communication comes from the Latin word *communicare*, to “make something common” or “share,” and it means to share information between people and transfer information from one place to another. Humanitarian communication refers to a specific form of communication (related to humanitarian crises, relief operations, and so on), and to communication during humanitarian emergencies.

Humanitarian communication occurs when humanitarian actors, from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to international organizations, communicate (i.e. through campaigns, appeals, and stories) to create awareness and encourage response to humanitarian crises. It is a form of communication that aims to establish emotional relationships and reactions, and its purpose is to mobilize interest and/or action. In this sense, humanitarian communication defines a form of “proxy humanitarianism” that can mobilize the use of celebrities, “humanitarian ambassadors,” and so on (De Lauri 2016). Lilie Chouliaraki defines humanitarian communication as “the rhetorical practices of transnational actors that engage with universal ethical claims, such as common humanity or global civil society, to mobilize action on human suffering” (Chouliaraki 2010: 108). She argues that it is a form of communication that creates and reproduces ethical and political relationships to distant others, and thus informs both the ways in which we witness the vulnerability of these others and the ways in which we are invited to feel, think and act towards them (Chouliaraki 2006, 2010).

There are ethical dilemmas and academic analyses surrounding the field of humanitarian communication (Nolan and Mikami 2012), especially in relation to the choice of images, texts, and sound used in such communication. Communicators have a responsibility to ensure that all narratives reflect and protect the dignity of those portrayed.

Humanitarian communication also refers to systems or ways of sharing information and collaboration and interaction during emergencies. Information

communication technologies (ICTs) and mobile phones have become defining components of 21st-century humanitarian response operations. ICTs determine the ways in which people collect and share information, connect and interact with each other and the world, and the ways people work together during humanitarian emergencies. The internet and mobile connectivity have enabled real-time communication. Applications based on this connectivity have revolutionized when and how we communicate. Humanitarian organizations, agencies, and individuals within a variety of areas in the emergency domain are pioneering efforts, exploring strategies, and finding best practices in humanitarian communication. They cooperate with private corporations and voluntary technical organizations to access basic data and resources, and to set up comprehensive information infrastructures.

The ability for everybody who is connected to engage in humanitarian communication during crises creates new opportunities and challenges. When a crisis strikes, affected communities and the diaspora tend to rapidly set up their own communication rooms using mobile apps or social media to exchange more or less qualified information.

There are no accepted definitions or requirements for how one should apply traditional humanitarian principles to communication to be able to call it humanitarian communication.

Three criteria have been identified (Raymond, Card, al Achkar 2015) as decisive and required for communication activities to be considered truly humanitarian:

1. Those engaging in communication are either crisis-affected populations or organizations, or those assisting the affected populations.
2. The communication activities uphold the four core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.
3. The fundamental purpose of humanitarian communication activities must be to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of the crisis.

ICT-supported humanitarian communication, like all humanitarian communication, needs guidelines to handle ethical dilemmas (Meier 2015). Our digital reality is allowing communication to evolve at an incredible speed, with possibilities and opportunities for more and better communication, but it also increases the risk for misuse of information, especially in situations of vulnerability that occur in humanitarian emergencies.

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Corruption

There has been a dramatic increase in the volume, cost, and length of humanitarian assistance provision since 2007, in large part because of the protracted nature of crisis (OCHA 2017). Humanitarian interventions are, for different reasons, more prone to corruption than regular development assistance and incidents of corruption more often go unreported (TI 2010). Paul Harvey (2015) argues that humanitarian aid agencies are reluctant to talk about corruption in the fear that it could undermine public support for aid in donor countries, as well as impact local aid relations and increase tension within societies.

Humanitarian interventions take place when there is a need to respond to an urgent or accumulated need for humanitarian assistance to support victims of conflicts and disasters and to save lives, as well as to negotiate access to and upholding of human rights. There are many types of interventions, ranging from responses to a natural disaster such as an earthquake or a flood, responding to an armed conflict that causes acute or consistent shortages of, for example, food, water, and medicine, and engagement with warring parties of influential groups that might block delivery of aid or deny all or part of the population access to services. The urgency to reach groups in need of assistance can lead to a larger willingness to accept a degree of corruption to get supplies to those in need. With large amounts of assistance shipped into