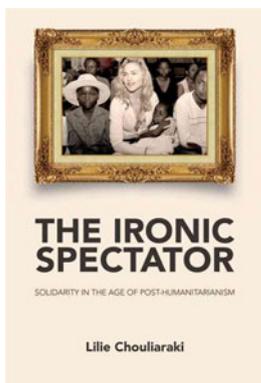


BOOK REVIEW



The Ironic Spectator

Lilie Chouliaraki*

Book review by Jean-Yves Clémento, ICRC Spokesperson for Eastern Africa.

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮

Humanitarian organizations and media are closely intertwined. As early as 1899, Gustave Moynier, the first president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), attributed the success of emerging humanitarian work to the new technology of his time – the telegraph – that revolutionized the speed of information. For Moynier, the telegraph allowed everyday spectators to know every detail of any event of war at the speed of light.¹

More than 100 years later, the Internet and social media have brought the speed of information to a level that Gustave Moynier could hardly have imagined. Humanitarian agencies have embraced innovation and new technologies, fine-tuning their communication strategies in order to better pass on their messages regarding the plights of those who suffer from armed conflicts or natural disasters, to convince important stakeholders and public opinion, or increasingly, to get funding. Over the last four decades, especially since the end of the Cold War, so as to attract money and the attention of the public, humanitarian organizations have developed increasingly sophisticated communication strategies using new techniques of marketing, advertising and branding, targeted appeals, and missions of Goodwill Ambassadors.

The Ironic Spectator by Lilie Chouliaraki provides a deep insight into this process of the “marketization” of communications of humanitarian agencies.

* Published by Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013. This book review was written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the ICRC.

According to Chouliaraki, three factors have led to this trend. First is the collapse of the big narrative since the end of the Cold War that has led to the celebration of the neoliberal lifestyle. By this, she means the increasing importance of the self and the effort to give people the impression that they can choose and buy whatever they want rather than to find ways to change the world and to look at solutions beyond immediate consumption. Secondly, due to an increasing number of actors and competition in the humanitarian sector, humanitarian agencies appear increasingly to be resorting to aggressive marketing techniques for fundraising. Nearly every week, we find a letter in our post box or an electronic newsletter in our emails asking for funding. Finally, the emergence of new media (the Internet, social media) has encouraged self-expression. Described by Manuel Castells as “mass self-communication”,² the Internet has allowed people who were previously mere consumers of information to become producers. This has facilitated the expression of emotions, according to Castells.

In her book, using examples from four realms – namely, public appeals, the use of celebrities, rock concerts and news production – Chouliaraki demonstrates clearly how the communication of aid has increasingly focused on consumerist attitudes and argues that it has fostered an “ironic” attitude among the audience. By “irony”, the author refers to “a disposition of detached knowingness, a self-conscious-suspicion vis-à-vis all claims to truth, which comes from acknowledging that there is always a disjunction between what is said and what exists” (p. 2).

The evolution of public appeals is analyzed in Chapter 3. Chouliaraki starts from the pictures of emaciated children published at the end of the 1960s during the Biafra conflict, which were used to appeal to the audience’s sense of indignation. The author then looks at the approach used in the 1990s of trying to portray a more positive representation of crises with pictures of smiling children. She ends with more recent modes of communication, sophisticated appeals that combine graphic animations with web links – for instance, the World Food Program’s “No Food Diet” campaign in 2006, which was aimed at exposing the fact that millions of people went hungry in the world despite huge amounts of food production. It compared, for instance, the regular diet of an American and an African family. Another example is the Amnesty International campaign of 2008, “The Bullet. The Execution”, which, through an animated cartoon, portrays the execution of a prisoner and calls for action. The main change over time has been a shift away from the photo-realism of the 1960s and towards campaigns that seek to establish links with the everyday reality of potential donors and to encourage the fulfilling of the self. All is encompassed in the logic of corporate branding to make them “buy a product”.

The same process is described in Chapter 4, in which the author analyzes the use of celebrities to promote a cause. Chouliaraki starts with the actress

1 Rony Brauman and René Backmann, *Les médias et l’humanitaire: éthique de l’information ou charité-spectacle*, CFPJ, Paris, 1996, pp. 15–16.

2 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 55.

Audrey Hepburn, who in the late 1980s, as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, travelled to countries affected by humanitarian crises to describe what she saw based on her own experience of being a mother and a post-World War II child. Her performance is described by Chouliaraki as a “de-celebrated altruism” and a genuine witness of the problems of the world. By contrast, Angelina Jolie, also Goodwill Ambassador but for UNHCR at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is seen by Chouliaraki as an emblematic contemporary figure. While Hepburn started her role as Goodwill Ambassador after her cinema career was over, Jolie did so at her peak and used it to promote herself. Rather than that of being a witness to a situation, according to Chouliaraki, Jolie’s contribution is mainly an expression of herself and her feelings.

In Chapter 5, Chouliaraki analyzes the increasingly sophisticated use of rock concerts to promote a cause. She contrasts Live Aid, held in 1985, an event almost spontaneously organized to denounce the effect of the famine in Ethiopia, with Live 8, ten live concerts organized in 2005 to focus on the end of debts in the developing world. While the first concerts of the 1980s were aimed at alluding to a common humanity, the latter used several techniques such as online petitions and digital screens aimed not only at funding but also at raising awareness, and policy change during the G8 meeting at Gleneagles. For Chouliaraki, the two events are emblematic as they show an increasingly strategic use of rock concerts – not just as a call for saving the world, but also as a way of drawing attention to pragmatic and measurable objectives.

In Chapter 6, Chouliaraki describes the evolution in the production of news from the central role of journalists in their function as witnesses to crises (for instance, during the earthquake in Tangshan, China, in the 1970s) to the multiplication of voices that appeared through the use of live blogging after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. The main point Chouliaraki makes is that the multiple voices give not only the opportunity to have a broader range of points of view, but also that the mix of posts from professional journalists, activists or simple citizens in a dispersed narrative structure, cloaked in layers of emotions, makes it increasingly difficult to find the truth, to establish facts from purely emotional texts. Chouliaraki convincingly argues that people have increasingly turned into spectators more interested in doing good for themselves than for others. This trend is described as “post-humanitarian” behaviour. The “spectator’s” attitude is moving from pity to irony and narcissism. By clicking on the “donate” or “like” button, one can give the impression of becoming an activist who does good and feels good rather than being a real “cosmopolitan citizen” who is interested in distant strangers and in the complexity of the world.

I see the trend of “marketization” of communications in my daily experience as a spokesperson for the ICRC. The “donate” button appeared in 2013 on the front page of the institutional website of the ICRC, and the link between communication and fundraising is becoming narrower. There is also a growing use of social media, mainly Twitter, by several heads of the institution that illustrates a growing personification of humanitarian communication. However, in an institution like the ICRC, humanitarian communication remains

very sober and focused on fostering an environment conducive to respect for people affected by conflicts, on facilitating access to them and on promoting international humanitarian law rather than on attracting money.³ Modest public appeals and key diplomatic gatherings remain more important than aggressive public appeals. In his travels, the president of the ICRC, Peter Maurer, speaks more of the humanitarian situations and contexts at issue than of himself. ICRC presidential missions have broader objectives than pure fundraising. Even if used, graphic animation remains limited.

While Chouliaraki's research gives us a good insight into the marketization trend, her book is arguably too focused on one category of humanitarian agencies: broadly speaking, Western agencies that have based their communications mainly on funding or pure public advocacy. It would be interesting to see further research on the impact of the "marketization" trend on the narratives of other humanitarian institutions, such as the ICRC, that are mainly seeking their funding from States and not from private donors, and which do not only rely on public communication to convince. It would also be worth carrying out research on non-Western organizations, for instance on faith-based aid agencies, which are becoming increasingly important players in the humanitarian field, especially in the Middle East and in some East African countries, and to see how the marketing trend influences them.

Despite the evolution described in her book, Chouliaraki remains a positive advocate for the potential of humanitarian communication to raise awareness and to make the audience genuinely cosmopolitan and engaged, as long it uses the virtues of theatre, meaning to operate "by distancing the spectator from the spectacle of the vulnerable other through the objective space of the stage (or any other framing device) whilst, at the same time, enabling proximity between the two through narrative and visual resources that invite our empathetic judgement towards the spectacle"⁴ – in other words, to keep communications at the right distance while still managing to invite spectators to have emotions and judgement, feelings of pity, indignation, fear, guilt or sympathy, and to act.

In my opinion, Chouliaraki's book shows that what is at stake is the credibility of and the trust towards humanitarian organizations. Too much marketization, reconstruction of reality and promotion of the self and emotions will inevitably lead to exaggerations in narrative, mistakes, loss of credibility and, in the end, compassion fatigue. While I do not think that the trend towards the promotion of the self, and the pursuit of feeling good, is new, the quest for individualism has maybe never been so high. The challenges for humanitarian agencies are to adapt to new communication techniques, to interact with a more active audience, and to remain credible. What is essential in humanitarian communication is to pursue an honest quest for truth and realistic moral engagement. If humanitarian organizations follow only the marketization trend,

3 See ICRC, *ICRC Prevention Policy*, Geneva, 2010, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-4019.pdf.

4 *The Ironic Spectator*, p. 22.

feeding consumerist culture and instant gratification, they risk losing their credibility and, more importantly, the trust both of the public seeking to help and of the parties to the conflict. *The Ironic Spectator* is a good warning that reminds us of the necessity of a solid moral engagement based on knowledge of the complexity of environments, and their historical, political and structural backgrounds. Such an understanding of contexts where aid is delivered is the bedrock of needs-based advocacy and of action beyond quick consumption and online activism.