Mediatized Humanitarianism: Trust and Legitimacy in the Age of Suspicion

Anne Vestergaard

Abstract The article investigates the implications of mediatization for the legitimation strategies of humanitarian organizations. Based on a (full population) corpus of ∼400 pages of brochure material from 1970 to 2007, the micro-textual processes involved in humanitarian organizations' efforts to legitimate themselves and their moral claim were examined. A time trend analysis of the prioritization of actors in the material indicates that marked shifts in legitimation loci have taken place during the past 40 years. A discourse analysis unfolds the three dominant discourses behind these shifts, namely legitimation by accountancy, legitimation by institutionalization, and legitimation by compensation. The analysis relates these changes to a problem of trust associated with mediatization through processes of mediation.

Keywords Humanitarian communication · NGOs · Legitimacy · Discourse analysis · Mediatization · Mediation

Introduction

"The advances in communication technology have heightened the interaction between global and local levels. […] The need to try to understand, to decode, to make sense of that information is greater than ever, all the more so because its sheer quantity and omnipresence cannot explain a world that is generally perceived as being more complex, more dangerous,

and beset by increasingly acute differences of identity" (Daccord 2005)

With these words, Yves Daccord, Director of Communication for the International Committee of the Red Cross, pointed to the challenges for humanitarian organizations which operate in a mediatized reality. A greater density of information relevant to humanitarian operations does not necessarily lead to more informed and engaged publics. On the contrary, as Daccord contends:

"The growing volume of information facilitated by the new communication technologies paradoxically renders communication more difficult and is tending to deepen the distrust of various audiences". (ibid)

The purpose of this article is to investigate how this relationship between mediatization and public distrust is reflected in the communicative strategies of humanitarian organizations. Assuming that such distrust puts immense pressure on the organization's need and ability to create legitimacy for itself, the article examines humanitarian legitimation strategies over the past 40 years.

The research design is based on the argument that legitimacy for humanitarian organizations is a question not only of the organizations' performance, but also of the perceived legitimacy of the three actors in the humanitarian exchange—the benefactor, the beneficiary, and the donor. Brochures from the Danish sections of three humanitarian organizations, Save the Children, Red Cross, and Amnesty International, were analyzed with a view to identifying shifts in discourses with respect to the relative prominence of actor types and the nature of their representation in the texts.

A time trend analysis stretching over a 40 year period was carried out by subjecting 400 pages of brochures to content analysis. The aim was to establish the relative

A. Vestergaard (✉)
Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark
e-mail: av.ikl@cbs.dk

prioritization of the three actors and periodizing patterns of distribution ("Actor Distribution Analysis" section). The time trend analysis shows that the distribution of actors has undergone substantial change over the period. The least prioritized actor from the 1970s brochures, namely the donor, has gradually gained prominence becoming by far the dominant participant in the 1990s and 2000s. A discourse analysis investigates the shifts uncovered in the actor distribution analysis, by examining, in depth, the nature of the actor representations at different points in time ("Actor Articulation Analysis" section). The discourse analysis shows that the shifts in actor distribution do indeed reflect essential changes in legitimation strategies employed at different points in the past 40 years.

Humanitarian legitimation efforts center on the organizations claim to act as representative for the Western public. This is a claim the basis of which has shifted in the course of the 40 years from predominantly moral legitimation, qualified on the basis of performance and structure toward increasingly pragmatic legitimation qualified on the basis of compensation. This development seems to reflect a gradual erosion of the cognitive legitimacy of humanitarian organizations as a consequence of audiences' loss of trust in mediated morality. The logic of contemporary brochures is no longer to gain legitimacy from the good these organizations do in places of need. The discourse that NGOs have employed in the past 20 years marks a distinct break with such legitimation.

The article is organized as follows: First, the section "Mediatization of the Humanitarian Organization" lays out the various ways in which the practices of humanitarian organizations are affected by their increasing reliance on mass media. It is argued that the profound effects of mediatization must be understood as a dialectic process of mutual constitution between audiences and organizations. This conceptualization allows us to consider a declining public trust as a central aspect of mediatization under "Humanitarian Organizations and the Problem of Trust" section. This section of the article develops the argument that contemporary audiences are skeptical of media content and that this skepticism is particularly challenging in the case of mediated moral appeal. For this reason, under the section "Humanitarian Organizations and the Problem of Legitimacy", it is argued that the legitimacy of humanitarian organizations is under immense pressure and a conceptualization of NGO legitimacy is outlined which focuses on the role of humanitarian organizations as representatives of Western publics. After having outlined the conceptual framework, the article turns to a presentation of the analytical framework and thereafter the analysis. First, under the section "Visual Text Analysis" actor representation in imagery is accounted for and subsequently, in greater detail, under the section "Verbal Text Analysis" the linguistic text is analyzed with respect to actor distribution and actor articulation as described above. Three distinct discourses are identified and

periodized under the sections "Legitimation by Accountancy", "Legitimation by Institutionalization", and "Legitimation by compensation" and this discursive development is subsequently interpreted as effects of audience pressure and skepticism under the sections "Negotiating the Relation to Beneficiaries" and "Negotiating the Relation to the Public".

Mediatization of the Humanitarian Organization

The article investigates how a reality which is saturated with the omnipresence of media is reflected in the practices of humanitarian organizations. To do this, it employs the concept of 'Mediation' (Silverstone 2006; Chouliaraki 2005; Couldry 2008) together with the concept of 'Mediatization' (Hjarvard 2008; Krotz 2007; Schulz 2004; Chouliaraki and Morsing 2010). Bringing these concepts together allows me to examine the relationship of mutual constitution between practices of mediated communication and public identity on the one hand, and to situate these practices within the historical context of the contemporary, media-saturated environment on the other.

Mediatization, broadly, refers to the '*process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic*' (Hjarvard 2008, p. 113) resulting in enduring changes to the character, function and structure of social institutions, and cultural processes. Institutions to an increasing degree become dependent on resources that the media control, and have to submit to the rules the media operate by in order to gain access to those resources.

Since the 1960s, humanitarian organizations have become increasingly dependent upon the mass media as an interface between themselves and stakeholders whose financial and moral support is vital for their existence (Tester 2001; McLagan 2006). This has discursive as well as non-discursive manifestations. Which humanitarian disasters find their way into public awareness depends in large measure on the practices of global reporting (Benthall 1993; Minear et al. 1996; Rothberg and Weiss 1996; IFRCRCS 2005). Global reporting is widely criticized for its fleeting coverage, pornography of images, ethnocentrism, and 'calculus of death', by which body counts are prime determinants of newsworthiness (Cottle and Nolan 2007; Seaton 2005; Moeller 1999). Humanitarian organizations, for their part, are reproached for adapting to these 'media logics' by letting the selection of beneficiaries be guided by media (and political) agendas and by staging aidwork for the purpose of remediation (Vaux 2006; Moeller 1999). In the discursive realm, as the number of NGOs grows and government support declines, competition for visibility is sharpened, and distinctiveness is made a key concern (Grounds 2005; Ritchie et al. 1998; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). Communicative practices become increasingly

professionalized, humanitarian staff come to include journalists and other communication specialists and humanitarian campaigns are designed and implemented by commercial advertising agencies (Vestergaard 2008). The reliance on the media increasingly pertains to more than mediating suffering, that is, bringing distant suffering into the living rooms of those more fortunate. It becomes about creating transparency and accountability, about corporate branding and the cultivation of brand communities (Bennett and Sargeant 2005; Ritchie et al. 1998; Vestergaard 2010).

It is my claim, however, that effects of functioning in a media saturated world extend beyond the adaptation to media logics. It involves also the influence of audiences which are transformed by media. In this way, I incorporate into my understanding of institutional mediatization the notion of 'mediation' according to which the social and cultural transformation "*in turn, transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood*" and where "*interpretations flow back into production and outward into general social and cultural life*" (Couldry 2008, p. 380, see also Chouliaraki and Morsing 2010). Mediatization thus understood is a thoroughly dialectic process of mutual constitution between humanitarian organizations and audiences which themselves continually undergo transformations without homogenous or isolatable causality. A crucial and decisive dimension of this dialectic is trust. Below an erosion of public trust is discussed as a particularly powerful factor in the mediatization of humanitarian organizations.

Humanitarian Organizations and the Problem of Trust

Publics do not merely take media content at face value. Rather than passively absorbing media content, consumers are aware of issues of authenticity and intention in media production and put to work important critical abilities enabling them to make inferences that go far beyond manifest content (Cohen 1994; Liebes and Katz 1989). Studies show a marked decline in trust in media and media content since the mid 1970s (Carlson 2002; Duffy 2003). Due to factors such as the increasing commercialization of media institutions, political spin, corporate PR, and in general the vanishing division between genres of information, entertainment, and advertising, the mediated public sphere is generally perceived more as a space for manipulation than a space for the negotiation of public opinion (Bakir and Barlow 2007). This distrust is a key challenge for humanitarian organizations, which must disseminate knowledge and appeals through the media. The consequences of mediatization—agenda setting, the staging of action, commercialized communication strategies etc—are likely to cause skepticism as to the sincerity of

humanitarian communication and ultimately perhaps, the humanitarian cause.

Humanitarian organizations have been increasingly haunted by suspicions as to the motivation of humanitarian action. They are accused of paternalism and of acting simply as the moral conscience of wealthy philanthropists and latter day imperialists (Darcy 2004; Tester 2010). Such critiques are bolstered by the intervention of the media, because the public visibility of humanitarian action renders it more sensitive to accusations of self-promotion both on the part of organizations, their employees and members and their supporters.

The mediated confrontation with suffering to which humanitarian organizations subject their audiences puts them in a fragile moral position, as witnesses without the ability to act directly on the circumstances inducing the suffering (Bauman 2001). According to Luc Boltanski (1999), to preserve dignity, as distant witnesses we must either find arguments to reject the moral demand or be committed to action. The Western public, he argues, suffers from precisely a lack of confidence in the possibility for action and therefore tendencies to reject the moral claim strengthen. This is the likely cause of common psychological and rhetorical defense strategies against the demand of the distant sufferer (Seu 2003; Cohen and Seu 2002; Vestergaard 2010). Distrust may serve as a defense strategy against the humanitarian claim and questioning the authenticity, authority, and appropriateness of humanitarian communication in the media may endorse reluctance to acknowledge the painful reality of distant suffering or the willingness to assume responsibility for alleviating it.

In a recent audience study on the response to humanitarian appeals, Cohen and Seu (2002) found that while audiences do not dismiss the appeals' underlying moral claim, a deep aversion to humanitarian appeals as such is common. Audiences carry out negotiations with their own emotional responses: they are aware of and resent being targeted as mere receivers and their emotions are filtered through socially constructed discourses that contain powerful contextualizations, if not disclaimers, disavowals, and denials. Audiences express feeling '*part of a beleaguered public audience that has to train itself to read between the lines of these texts and to defend itself against incessant attempts to get something out of its members*' (ibid: 198). The study revealed the common occurrence of anger toward the organization, a resentful sense of being patronized, unfairly treated, and—above all—manipulated. Cohen and Seu conclude that the undeniable truths of the message become irrelevant and its moral appeal undermined as soon as the audience feels that the information has been selected to emotionally blackmail them into giving money. At the extreme, they contend, this may delegitimize the message and the sender. Any shift in focus

from the content of the appeal to its imputed manipulation, may turn the relationship to the organization into a buffer zone, an extra layer by which audiences may distance themselves from the horrors of the information (ibid).

If distrust in these ways characterizes the audiences to which humanitarian organizations must appeal in order to insure continued moral and financial support, this puts under severe pressure the legitimacy of the humanitarian organization. Legitimacy is essential for humanitarian organizations because they take on the role as representatives. They represent those who suffer as well as those who want to help—be it governments or private institutions and individuals. The role of representative is a position of power; power to make claims and power to distribute resources and it is this position of power that makes humanitarian organizations so susceptible to criticisms of legitimacy, to reservations regarding their desirability, properness, and appropriateness.

Humanitarian Organizations and the Problem of Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a central concept in the corporate literature, where stakeholders' perception of social performance is increasingly perceived as one of the most vital assets of the corporation (Cornellisen 2008; Christensen et al. 2008). An organization is perceived as legitimate if it pursues socially acceptable goals in a socially acceptable manner. According to Suchman's formative definition, organizational legitimacy results from the organization's cultural embeddedness and is a continuous and often unconscious process in which the organization reacts to external expectations. It is the "*generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper and appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions*" (1995: 574). In the context of commercial corporations, moral legitimacy depends on moral judgments on the organization's output, procedures, structures, and leaders (Suchman 1995; Palazzo and Scherer 2006), and to a great extent this conception is adopted in the NGO literature. However, although the mission of an NGO is always 'to promote social welfare', the legitimacy of the individual NGOs is far from irrefutable.

Recent years have seen a growing questioning of NGO legitimacy, conceptualized as problems of performance (Biekart 1999; Fowler 1997), accountability (Slim 2002; Edwards and Hulme 1995; Saxby 1996), and representativeness (Pearce 1997; Slim 2002). How effective is the resource use of NGOs in terms of actually assisting those in need, and to what extent are efforts impartial rather than selective (Ossewaarde et al. 2008)? Does the NGO hold

itself accountable for consequences of its actions and to what extent does accountability go 'downward', to beneficiaries rather than just upward to those with power over the organization (Edwards and Hulme 1995; O'Dwyer and Unerman 2008; Unerman and O'Dwyer 2006; O'Dwyer 2004)? And finally, by what authority do NGOs speak on behalf of beneficiaries and are there problematic issues of power involved in this form of representation (Slim 2002)? While these questions are clearly important, this literature, however, fails to take as its starting point the fundamental difference between commercial organizations and NGOs. While the former presents *offers* to the public, the latter presents *claims* and in so doing the literature fails to take into account the legitimacy of the basic moral claim of NGOs: the extent to which the beneficiaries targeted are considered worthy of assistance and the extent to which the publics to which this claim is made, consider themselves liable. The literature more or less implicitly treats this aspect of NGO legitimacy as if part of such organizations' 'cognitive legitimacy', derived from a fixed moral base and thereby as taken for granted and not subject to stakeholder evaluation.

The article analyses the discursive legitimation of humanitarian organizations, exploring to what extent these can be understood as concerned with performance, accountability, and representativeness. It does so with a particular interest in how the basic moral claim of humanitarian organizations figures into strategies of legitimation.

Research Design

Analytical Framework

The article takes a discursive approach to understand humanitarian legitimation. As discussed above, mediated communication is the primary vehicle for humanitarian legitimation efforts and so communication artifacts are valuable sources for insights into the processes of mutual constitution between organizations and audiences in establishing legitimacy.

Rather than viewing NGO legitimacy as dependent on structural and procedural factors (Atac 1999; Saxby 1996; Pearce 1997), here it is understood as being socially constructed (Suchman 1995; Lister 2003) and an organization's management of legitimacy as in part a discursive task. The research design is based on the argument that due to the moral nature of the practices of the humanitarian organization, issues of legitimacy are complex and involve more than mere evaluations of performance. Legitimacy depends on the perceived validity of the moral claim; the

extent to which the beneficiaries targeted are considered worthy of assistance, and the extent to which the publics to which this claim is made are considered liable. I suggest that the perceived validity of each of the three actors in the humanitarian exchange—the benefactor, the beneficiary, and the donor—contribute to the overall perceived legitimacy of the organization and that the discursive management of legitimacy by humanitarian organizations can be understood as organized according to such a tripartite scheme of legitimation.

The analytical framework builds on the Analytics of Mediation, the aim of which is to explicate moral implications and political agendas involved in the semiotic constitution of suffering (Chouliaraki 2006). The Analytics of Mediation is a framework for studying television as a mechanism of representation that construes human suffering within specific semantic fields where emotions and dispositions for action are made possible for the spectator. It posits that choices over how suffering is portrayed, that is, where, when, and with whom suffering is shown to occur, always entails specific proposals to the spectator for engaging with the sufferer. In this way, it is both the representation of the sufferers themselves—the agency and humanization with which they are symbolically endowed—and also the system of other agents that operate in relation to the scene of suffering which affect audiences' orientations toward the suffering. The interaction of benefactors and the kind of ethical responsibility which obliges them to act, equally contributes to humanizing the sufferers and moralizing the audience (Chouliaraki 2005). This analytical framework is applied to the investigation of humanitarian brochures which, unlike news reports, are organized around and delimited by this system of actors and directed specifically toward humanitarian action. The legitimacy of a humanitarian organization is understood as being constituted by the legitimacy of the organization's relation to beneficiaries and donor publics. At the same time, following the Analytics of Mediation, the social identities and relations that are set up by humanitarian discourses are understood as constraining the identities and relations that are possible and imaginable for the audience that is addressed. In this way, the discourse not only legitimates the organization, but at the same time both reflects and constructs particular moral dispositions for the audience.

Bringing together the notions of mediation and mediatization allows me to examine the relationship of mutual constitution between practices of mediated communication and public identity on the one hand, and to situate these practices within the historical context of the contemporary, media-saturated environment on the other. More specifically, the notion of *mediation* allows me to treat appeals as evidence of shifts in the public identity of the organization (in terms of legitimacy) as well as that of the audience. The notion of *mediatization* adds a historical dimension to this, making possible an evaluation of how organizational practices of communication, and the identities they project, are changing across time. The shifts in public identities constructed in appeal texts over time can then be understood as resulting, at least in part, from their embedding in a technologically saturated environment which is marked by lack of public trust and an ensuing need for legitimacy.

Data

Taking the Danish sections of three of the largest international humanitarian organizations, The Danish Red Cross, Amnesty International, and Save the Children, as examples, I analyze all brochures published by these organizations during the period 1970–2005. The medium and genre of the brochure is chosen because this is the legitimating device par excellence of such organizations. It is a medium, which is independent of media gate-keepers, allows for rich information, offers itself for contemplation, and as such it invites explicit legitimization to a significantly greater extent than other mass outlets such as newspaper and TV ads. It is characteristic of the humanitarian brochure genre that it always presents the three actors in the humanitarian exchange: the donor, the benefactor, and the beneficiary variously distributed across blocks of verbal text, imagery, and graphics.

The data set consists of brochures collected from The Danish Royal library, the archives of which contain all small print materials published in Denmark since 1697. Brochures are defined here as printed publications of 1–20 pages length and the archives contained 130 such brochures from the three organizations in the period 1970–2005. Brochures were defined as appeals if they contained an explicit call for action, be it donations, membership or voluntary work, and the archives contained 66 such brochures. The corpus of appeal brochures amounts to a total of ∼400 pages, relatively evenly distributed between the three organizations. The dataset thus constitutes the full population of appeal brochures from the Danish Red Cross, Danish Amnesty International, and Danish Save the Children Fund in the 40-year period.

Method

Taking a discursive approach to legitimation strategies, the article examines representations of the three participants in the humanitarian exchange; the beneficiary, the benefactor, and the donor. As it is its ambition to place the examination of humanitarian legitimation in the historical frame of mediatization, the article develops an experimental methodology which combines a quantitative time trend analysis ("Actor Distribution Analysis" section), to open up and

Table 1 Coding frame for actor distribution analysis

Coding frame	
Category	Coding rule
Beneficiary	Referents associated with the scene of suffering
Benefactor	Referents associated with the humanitarian organization
Donor	Referents associated with audience, including implicit subject of imperatives
Coding unit: topic (grammatical subjects of main clauses)	

structure the large historical data set, with a discourse analysis ("Actor Articulation Analysis" section), which makes possible the unfolding of the particular discursive changes of which the trends are indications. In this way, the time trend analysis both motivates and corroborates the discourse analysis.
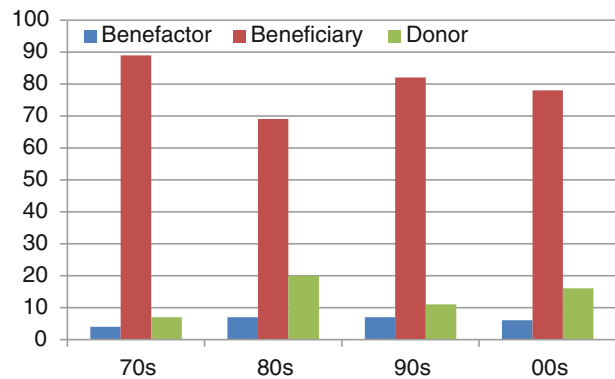
Actor Distribution Analysis

The quantitative time trend analysis maps out the relative prioritization and prominence of the three actors. To establish which actor is placed centrally in the text, this analysis draws on the linguistic notion of 'sentence topic' (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The frequency with which an actor referent is placed in sentence topical position is considered indicative of its centrality to the discourse. For each sentence in the 400 pages of brochure material, the referent occupying the position of main clause grammatical subject (topic) is assigned to either of the actor categories, 'benefactor', 'beneficiary', and 'donor' where the benefactor category includes any referent related to the organization and its work, the beneficiary category to any referent related to the situation of need and finally, the donor category includes all reference to existing donors and to the audience as prospective donors (Table 1).

This analysis results in calculations of the proportion of topical representation of the three actors in the appeal texts. The proportions are taken as indications of the relative centrality of the actor to the legitimation strategy employed.[1] In this way, the quantitative actor distribution analysis enables the uncovering of patterns and shifts on the basis of a dataset which includes all brochures from the three case organizations during the period in question.

Actor Articulation Analysis

Rather than basing our understanding of shifts in legitimation discourses solely on quantifications of the degree to

---

[1] For the sake of analytical clarity, the analysis does not take into account the relative visual salience of a given sentence in the organization of the brochure.

Fig. 1 Visual actor distribution per decade (%)

which each actor is represented, discourse analysis allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of these representations. In the *actor articulation analysis*, brochures which exemplify typical actor distribution patterns as uncovered in the time trend analysis, are analyzed in depth. By investigating the nature of actor representations, the legitimation discourses with which these patterns are associated are identified.

Representations of the *beneficiary*, the people in need, can be oriented toward either 'documentation' or 'affinity'. 'Documentation' involves the representation of beneficiaries with a view to authenticating beneficiaries' need or authenticating the results of the organization's work. 'Affinity', on the other hand, is a mode of representing beneficiaries which serves to create a sense of kinship, with a view to extending audiences' sense of responsibility to distant localities. Representations of the *benefactor*, that is the organization's self-representation, includes reports on the organization's objectives and ideology, accounts for its working procedures and its performance: effectiveness, cost-efficiency, expertise, and experience as well as for its organizational structure: its management, its membership mandate as well as its legal mandate. Finally, representations of the *donor* are constructed either as options for action or reasons for action. Options for action are provided through descriptions of how the audience may contribute to the work of the organization, by way of donations, membership, and different types of activism and volunteer work. Reasons for action, on the other hand, are sometimes made manifest but more commonly embedded in the subject positions created by the brochure texts. Reasons for action may be other-oriented or self-oriented and may be framed in positive terms, providing motivations for action, or in negative terms, disarming arguments against humanitarian action.

The very limited literature on humanitarian communication tends to focus on visual representations of sufferers (Lissner 1981; Smillie 1995; Lidchi 1999; Campbell 2004).

In the following, as a short prelude to the verbal discourse analysis, I will first provide an overview of the brochure imagery for each organization in terms of actor distribution as well as articulation. Subsequently, I will present the more detailed analyses of the verbal text.

Visual Text Analysis

Humanitarian brochure imagery overwhelmingly prioritizes the beneficiary, at all times and across organizations (Fig. 1).

There are, however, marked differences in the nature of beneficiary representations between the three organizations. For *Save the Children*, imagery throughout the 40-year period consists of photos of children, predominantly close-ups of smiling children (Fig. 2). Approximately a third of these photos depict children who are being taken care of, sometimes getting fed, but mostly receiving medical care.

In the case of *Red Cross*, imagery is overwhelmingly dominated by photos of women with children, in largely decontextualized close-ups. Red Cross as well as Save the Children imagery rarely depicts suffering and never the context of suffering—for instance by showing refugee camps, scenes of war or devastation, or situating their portraits in such a scenery. Instead, these organizations depict suffering exclusively by way of bodily expression—occasional faces that show despair or emaciated bodies. In sharp contrast, representations of beneficiaries from *Amnesty International* are consistently contextualized—the suffering body is always located. During the 1970s and 1980s, by far the dominant type of Amnesty imagery is drawings which depict the beneficiary in a scene of suffering showing imprisonment, isolation, torture, and hanging. Over time, photographic portraits gain prominence and these are consistently printed along with names and histories of the individuals that are portrayed. Mid-to late 1980s the imagery employed by Amnesty changes in several ways and a much more diverse visual appears. In 1985, alongside the more traditional, dismal Amnesty drawings and portraits, the first 'relief' photo appears, showing the reunion of a political prisoner with his son, along with the story of his incarceration and Amnesty's advocacy for his release. From then on, Amnesty brochures contain always a mix of 'before' and 'after' imagery, both of which are always associated with the specific story of the individuals that are portrayed (Fig. 3).

From the early 1990s, Amnesty's visuals start using a more active representation of beneficiaries, imbuing it with protest and resistance (Fig. 4). Similarly, and perhaps most remarkably, the Red Cross brochures 10 years later show the introduction of the male figure into beneficiary representation, which has previously, as mentioned, been cleansed of anything but women and small children. In addition, occasional examples of visual representation of scenes of suffering occur, as in Fig. 5 shown below. These reconfigurations of the beneficiary seem to reflect growing critique that was raised against the 1970s and 1980s humanitarian pity figures as being condescending.

With respect to actor distribution, important shifts take place in Amnesty and Red Cross, gradually developing from exclusive representation of sufferers, to inclusion of the other parties in the humanitarian exchange. From 1980 onwards, the Red Cross increasingly has made visual self-
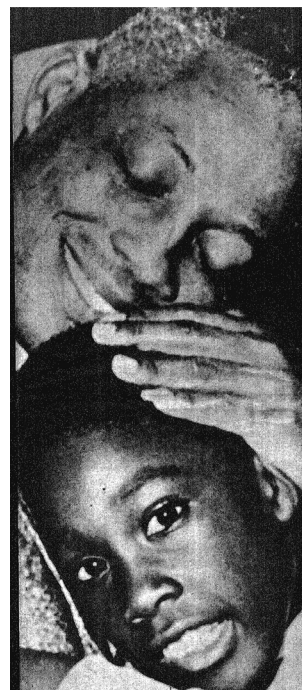

Fig. 2 Save the children 1975

Fig. 3 Amnesty International 1985

Fig. 4 Amnesty Internaional 1989

Fig. 6 Red Cross 1996 (Danish news anchors)

Fig. 5 Red Cross 2001

Fig. 7 Amnesty 1986 (Queen of Denmark)

reference, such that some representation of the organization is eventually included in almost every single photo of beneficiaries in the shape of a logo, a red cross van, logoed bag of flour etc., with the effect of tying all beneficiaries to the organization and their relief efforts. In a sense, this renders all RC photos 'after' photos and, of course, gives Red Cross as an immensely high visual brand prominence. Finally, for both Amnesty and the Red Cross, from the late 1980s onwards the brochures come to include images of 'donors' either by way of celebrities or images of civilian 'activists' (Figs. 6, 7).

Three points to be investigated further emerge from the visual data: First, visual representations of suffering have at

all times been rare in humanitarian appeals and are most often decontextualized. Second, a re-articulation of the beneficiary figure seems to take place in the 1990s and 2000s. And third, where in the first decades of mediatized humanitarianism, humanitarian imagery was almost exclusively concerned with beneficiaries, gradually we see an expansion of actors in the visual domain. In order to understand these semiotic developments, in the following analysis, I investigate the verbal text of the brochures with
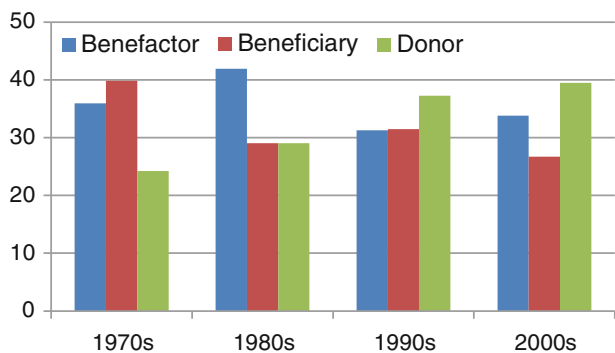
Fig. 8 Proportion of actor representation per decade (%)

a view to examining in which wider discursive developments the visual semiosis partakes.

Verbal Text Analysis

In the following, I present first the quantitative results of the actor distribution analysis, which show the relative prominence of the three actors in brochure text at different points in time. Subsequently, I identify and describe three dominant legitimation discourses in the actor articulation analysis.

Actor Distribution Analysis

The actor distribution analysis, the results of which are displayed in Fig. 2 below, reveals marked shifts in actor prioritization over the 40-year period. The analysis shows, first, that the beneficiary category does not have the overwhelming priority in terms of verbal representation that was characteristic of the visual representation. In the brochures from the 1970s, however, the beneficiary is marginally dominant (40 %) and has substantially higher representation than at any other time in the period. The benefactor category, the organization's self-representation, has considerably higher representation in the 1980s than at any other time and was, during the 1980s, by far the dominant actor (42 %). The donor category, which was the least prominent actor in the 1970s, shows a steady and robust increase over the period, making it the dominant actor in the 1990s and 2000s.[2] From the 1970 to 2005 the degree of donor representation has increased from 25 to 39 % (Fig. 8).

The substantial differences in actor proportion at different points in time suggest that significant discursive shifts are taking place during the period. The shifts in actor distribution can be seen as reflecting a shifting

---

[2] An OLS regression was performed which showed the same tendencies.

Fig. 9 Save the Children 1973

prioritization of the actors, from a relatively greater focus on beneficiaries in the 1970, across a greater focus on benefactors in the 1980s to, finally, a clear donor dominance in the 1990s and 2000s. In the following, I examine these developments as shifts between discourses which are, relatively speaking, beneficiary-oriented, benefactor-oriented and donor-oriented, and typical for the approximate periods of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990–2000s respectively.

Actor Articulation Analysis

In order to understand the sources and implications of the observed shifts in actor distribution, the brochure material is subjected to discourse analysis. Three dominant discourses are identified, which reflect the actor distribution patterns identified above.

Period	1970s	1980s	1990s–2000s
Actor orientation	Beneficiary oriented	Benefactor oriented	Donor oriented
Legitimation basis	Accountancy	Institutionalization	Compensation

Below, I refer to these as 'legitimacy by accountancy', 'legitimacy by institutionalization' and 'legitimacy by compensation'. Although, of course, at any given time these discourses coexist, they dominate in each their time period, roughly equivalent to 1970s, 1980s, and 1990–2000s respectively.

Legitimation by Accountancy (1970s)

Discourse analysis of 1970s brochures with high beneficiary representation reveals, perhaps contrary to expectation, that in cases where the beneficiary is strongly represented, this tends to be not with a view to creating affinity with the sufferer, to help bridge the psychological, cultural, and geographic distance between donors and beneficiaries. Rather, the strong representation of the beneficiary tends to be part of a legitimation by performance reporting discourse. This discourse is prominent in the beginning of the period investigated, roughly the 1970s, and subsequently disappears entirely from the humanitarian brochures.

The extract from the 1973 Save the Children brochure in Fig. 9 below, presents a typical example of the legitimacy by accountancy discourse.

> Leprosy can be controlled by applying simple and cheap procedures. A total of 36,109 non-contagious patients have been under continuous treatment. Of these, 34,623 are cured, while 1,486 are still under treatment. A total of 4,877 contagious patients have been under treatment for more than 5 years, Of these, 3,076 have been rendered negative—that is non-contagious—while 1,801 are now less contagious but still undergoing treatment.
>
> In Waimahu, 18 lepers, in Haiteriee Besar 30 lepers. In the school in Amahusa, 7 children have just been found to be infected. And so on so forth in the hundreds of Maluku campongs. How many more will be contaminated? One must expect ten to twenty children and adults for every thousand people. A horrifying amount were it not for the imminent Save the Children Campaign in Indonesia. (Save the Children 1973)

As the extract shows, the beneficiary is represented in the exact locations and numbers of children who have been under treatment and cured of leprosy through Save the Children. There is no individualized representation of neither the beneficiaries nor their benefactors and as such, this brochure does not work to create affinity with the sufferers or those who help them. In the words of the brochure, the representation of the beneficiary serves as

"*evidence*" that large scale leprosy can be "*controlled*", given "*persistent*" and "*systematic*" work. The representation of beneficiaries quantifies past achievements of Save the Children and testifies to the continued need for their efforts. Similarly, the extract below from a 1970 brochure from Danish Red Cross, lists the beneficiaries of the organization's activities (partial translation included) (Fig. 10). This is the only form of representation beneficiaries have in the brochure. While the legitimation by accountancy is less pronounced in Amnesty International, also here we find quantifications of performance during this period as in '*out of the 20,000 prisoners of conscience, for whom Amnesty has fought since its beginning in 1961, more than 15,000 have regained their freedom*' (Amnesty 1979).

The 1973 Save the Children brochure cited above, includes an eyewitness account from a well-known Danish novelist and while this account stands out in the material as an opportunity to create proximity through a subjective point of view, interestingly, it is not used for the purpose of affinity.

> "A quarter of a million? It cannot possibly be any of these, as healthy and round as they appear, as delightful to look at. The adults approach one with a trustful openness and sorrowless cheer".

The eyewitness accounts of his encounter with a beautiful landscape with charming inhabitants and thus employs a rather objectifying, colonialist gaze lending beneficiaries neither voice nor agency and maximizing rather than reducing moral distance (Silverstone 2006; Hall 2007).

Legitimation by Institutionalization (1980s)

While the benefactor, the organization's self-representation, is relatively prominent throughout the 40 years, it peaks in 1980s and subsequently declines. The benefactor-centered discourse of the 1980s places its legitimation efforts in a frame of institutionalization. Rather than accounting for performance and results, what seems to be at stake is the reliability of the organization, not least its reliability as mediator in a field that is increasingly politicized and problematized as such. The political is excluded not only explicitly in the self-representation and implicitly in the depiction of action, but, as a consequence, also from the reasons for action that this type of brochure is able to offer. These reasons for action center on the psychological pain of the sufferers rather than their physical and structural causes.

The 1985 brochure '*Save the Children needs new friends*' exemplifies the benefactor oriented discourse. In this brochure, the beneficiary is largely absent. The suffering is not substantiated or exemplified in any way but identified in a single phrase "...*millions of children*
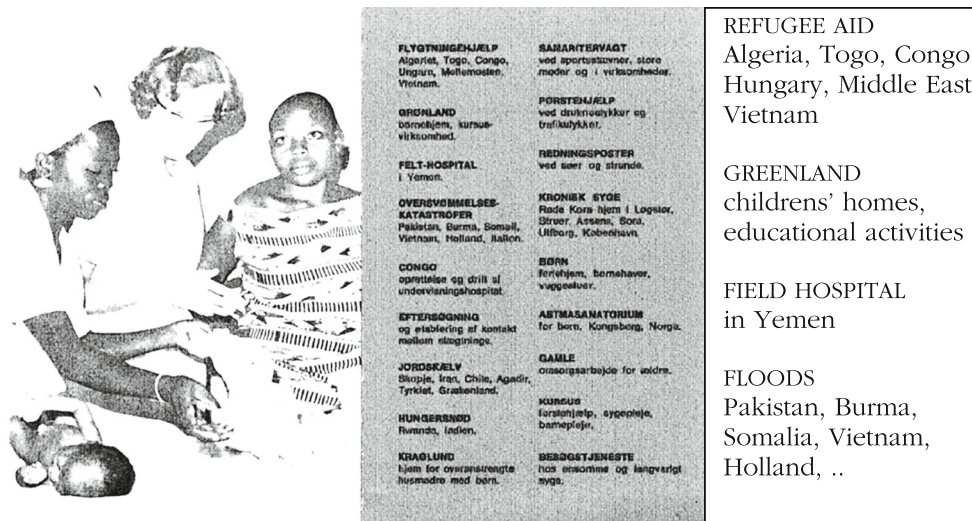
REFUGEE AID
Algeria, Togo, Congo,
Hungary, Middle East,
Vietnam

GREENLAND
childrens' homes,
educational activities

FIELD HOSPITAL
in Yemen

FLOODS
Pakistan, Burma,
Somalia, Vietnam,
Holland, ..

Fig. 10 Red Cross 1970

continue to be in distress". The donor is present in the text only through options for action listed in the tick box of the return slip. Even the brochure's donor address '*become a Save the Children friend*' is disassociated from the cause, the children in need, and associated solely with the organization itself. The brochure provides no further motivation for action than to do as celebrities, photos of which fill one of the brochure's four pages.

Rather than present the organization's cause, the suffering it strives to alleviate and provide the audience with reasons for action, the benefactor discourse focuses on organizational self-representation. Brochures from this period are dedicated to insisting on the independence and impartiality of the organization, elaborating on their '*apolitical*', '*nonreligious*', and '*private*' nature, their historical foundation, their practice of addressing need '*regardless of nationality, race, color and religion*'. These brochures describe the organizational structure of the organizations, their dependence on voluntary work, and international collaborations. Thus, it seems evident that the primary function of this discourse is to present the organization as reliable and professional, while simultaneously not creating the impression of a bureaucratic body which is out of reach. As a 1981 Amnesty brochure insists: Amnesty is not '*a large bureaucratic colossus with exquisite offices and expensive administrations around the world's metropolis. Amnesty is a housewife in Brovst, a doctor in Tønder, an office worker in Odense, a worker from Rødovre and you…*"

Focusing so strongly on institutional characteristics, the humanitarian cause is largely bracketed out in this type of discourse. Although Amnesty is arguably the most political of the three organizations in that it picks out and publicly shames perpetrators in the attempt to create structural changes, the discourse of the Amnesty 1981 brochure is not one of denunciation.

> Around the world over a million people are imprisoned. Afraid, forgotten and lonely. They need to know that they have not been forgotten, that they will not remain powerless and alone—but that there are people who will work for their release… Amnesty International wants to do that.

Human rights, justice, and indignation do not enter this discourse. Rather, the problem of prisoners of conscience is represented here as an emotional one—in the somewhat quotidian register of emotions, '*afraid, forgotten and lonely*', recognizable to the audience and mirrored in the brochure image depicting the quiet despair of a man crouching on a prison bed.

Legitimation by Compensation (1990s–2000s)

The most remarkable development revealed by distribution analysis, is the steady and substantial increase in the prioritization of the donor category over the course of the past 40 years. In the donor-centered brochures, the information about the organization which was so strongly in focus during the 1980s has fallen away entirely or is secluded to small print on the back pages of brochures. Commonly, contrary to the institutionalizing nominalizations in 1980s brochures, the institutionalized nature of working procedures is suppressed behind a 'we': '*we go out, talk to the victims, families…*', '*what we see and hear is collected into reports which we send to the governments…*', stressing collective agency while suppressing standards and

Fig. 11 Danish Red Cross 2007

procedures. The shift reflects not only an increased but also a transformed preoccupation with the donor. In brochures which give less priority to the donor, its representation tends to be in terms of options for action. In the donor-centered material, however, options for action are in fact either reduced or back-grounded and replaced by a strong focus on reasons for action, which take the needs of the donor as their starting point.

A 1996 Amnesty brochure illustrates the discursive framing—and the dilemma—that is characteristic of the donor appeal in the 1990s and 2000s. The brochure heading '*We have some pictures you don't want to see…*' and '*some pictures you ought to see*' points to the core problem of mediated suffering, namely that it is painful to be a powerless witness to distant suffering and that most people would prefer to avoid it. Amnesty, in this statement, takes on the uncomfortable responsibility of bearing witness to the unbearable on behalf of the reader, but at the same time opens up a discourse of responsibility or civic duty in the second statement '*some pictures you ought to see*'. This is the tension that characterizes the humanitarian discourse of the past 15–20 years; the tension between audiences' reluctance to respond to distant suffering which widely goes under the name of compassion fatigue on the one hand, and the moral imperative that humanitarian organizations represent and which to some extent is integral to the cultural fabric of the audience. The donor-centered discourse takes this tension as its point of departure and tries to offer the audience a solution

to the dilemma it places them in. This discourse does not try to bridge the distance between sufferer and spectator, does not account for the work of the organization, nor commit to action having any impact on the physical reality of suffering. Rather, these brochures place their moral claim in an exchange-logic, where the focus is on offering the audiences something in return for their attention, their money, and their moral discomfort. There are two dominant types of donor-oriented discourses, which, although very different as we shall see below, frame the moral claim of suffering as something audiences must be compensated for, one in terms of a material reward, the other in terms of a moral reward.

Legitimation by Material Compensation The material compensation discourse is prominent in the 1990 and 2000s although considerably less so in brochures than in newspaper and TV ads (Vestergaard 2011). This discourse builds on an exchange logic, where altruistic sacrifice is no longer required.

A 2007 brochure from Danish Red Cross '*Support Red Cross while on the phone*' is a typical example of a branding partnership between a humanitarian and a commercial organization, in this case a telephone provider (Fig. 11). The audience is offered the purchase of a red mobile phone and a subscription at moderate cost under the framing:

> "The struggle to save lives never ends. Year round, the Danish Red Cross moves into emergencies all

over the world. This work is entirely dependent on voluntary contributions and now you have an opportunity to support the aid work. At the same time you get a great offer. You receive a telephone for 101 kroner. Of these, 100 go directly to the Danish Red Cross. At the same time you support the aid work by 24 kroner every month without extra cost to you" (Red Cross 2007)

The representation of the beneficiary is limited to a series of photos of children. The verbal text is equally shared between institutional information about the Red Cross and details about the 'deal' that is offered. The humanitarian organization in these cases outsources its brochure space to the commercial partner; the commercial partner buys advertising and branding value and the donor buys a telephone with a moral attribute. With morality as the unique selling point in this type of advertising, both the 'donor' and the commercial partner purchase moral capital in the exchange. At the same time, though sources of support for the humanitarian organization, neither is required to confront himself with the reality of distant suffering or the uncomfortable dilemmas and uncertainties associated with it.

Legitimation by Moral Compensation The legitimation by moral compensation discourse focuses on donors' reasons for action, and implicitly, reasons to be reluctant about action. The motivation for action in this discourse is not tied to any form of 'making a difference'—in fact, commitment to action having any kind of impact on beneficiaries is hard to come by during this period. As stated in a 2005 Red Cross brochure: '*There are many reasons to become a member. One of them is of course the satisfaction of knowing that the concern for fellow human beings is being transformed into concrete action*'. The impact of action here is on the donor. He is offered a moral benefit in return for his attention and money and the brochure provides no further information about this '*concrete action*'.

Two themes of resistance underlie the discourse, namely the vanity of actions and the vastness of suffering. If suspicion of claims about impact abounds, be it the impact of the individual donor's actions or those of the humanitarian organization, a frequently used alternative is to resort to the symbolic value of action. The above-mentioned 2005 Red Cross brochure '*Welcome to a global network*' quite literally exemplifies the construction of humanitarian action as symbolic gesture as a way to address a perceived vanity of action. Rather than accounting for the work undertaken by the organization, the brochure includes a lengthy discussion of the symbol of the Red Cross and the psychological significance of this symbol. Part of this discussion reads '*the Red Cross is also the sign for among other things*

your concern for victims and political prisoners who suffer in the hidden, without the attention of the surrounding world'. In this brochure, the sign of the Red Cross refers not only to the work of the organization and the hope it installs in sufferers, but also to the care of the donors behind the organization. This care, the emotional state of the donor and the significance of his care to the beneficiary itself is brought center stage in the appeal: '*For them it means a lot to know that people in happier circumstances have concern for them*'. If audiences suspect that mediated action always stays within the realm of representation and have doubts that humanitarian organizations have more than a fleeting influence on the social world, the donor may be left with the perception that his feelings of outrage, compassion or empathy in fact cannot be transformed into a changed reality for the sufferers. Such skepticism seems reflected in the donor-centered appeal's reference to the importance of the concern itself, the suggestion that simply by caring, we can make a difference to those who suffer.

The mere vastness of suffering that audiences are confronted with via the media is a challenge for humanitarian organizations, who must find ways to make audiences feel some sense of responsibility for the particular instances of suffering, which constitutes their cause. In addition, mediation also renders numerous the witnesses to the suffering and in this way it becomes impossible to single out responsibility; responsibility to whom and by whom. The moral compensation discourse addresses this problem, articulated as an issue of anonymity. The 2005 Red Cross brochure acknowledges the problem '*Like you are much more than a membership number, so the people in a refugee camp are more than a mere statistic. They have names and histories*' indicating that it is not only the anonymity of the sufferers that is at issue, but also the anonymity of the audience as a mass of donors, whose stake in and value to the cause is merely defined by their financial contribution. The Amnesty 1996 brochure addresses the same need to single out the donor as an individual: '*as an Amnesty member you will still hear about violence, suppression, and genocide and maybe still feel powerless and insignificant in this world we live in. But you will be one of more than a million ordinary people throughout the world, who make an effort to protect human rights.* When offering to deanonymize the sufferers, however, Amnesty does this by reference to the individual's relation to them: '*You will know some of the victims. They will no longer be part of a big anonymous mass. They will be people with faces, names, families, jobs and lives*'. The donor-centered discourse thus holds no attempt to discursively preempt the anonymity that it addresses by trying to bridge the distance between sufferer and witness, as it might have done by providing '*faces, names, families, jobs and lives*'. What the absence of such efforts seems to indicate is that the

objective of this discourse is not so much to establish a relation, an affinity, but rather to offer members of the audience the opportunity to step out of the mass and come into being as acting subjects.

The discourse of moral compensation in these ways introduces a new focus on the donor not only in terms of prominence, but even more so, in terms of the subject position it constructs. Where previously the donor was represented primarily in terms of options for action, this new donor-centered discourse engages with the donor's presumed emotional response to distant suffering. This is not a sentimental discourse of compassion, indignation, shame or narcissism, but a meta-discourse, which thematizes its audiences' response to appeals, presumed feelings of inefficacy, inadequacy, and indignity when faced with suffering that is outside of their immediate realm of action. The reasons for action that grow out of this discourse are centered on the ability of the humanitarian organization to render subjects out of its audience, to provide them with moral agency. The trajectory of the humanitarian appeal over the past 40 years, then, can be construed as a movement from an appeal that simulates the unmediated confrontation with suffering and asks the audience to imagine the singular suffering—as-if confronted with it face to face—to a form of appeal that asks the members of audience to imagine themselves as singularized, as moral subjects with the ability to make a difference in the world. Rather than committing to relieve the suffering of distant others, these types of appeals, then, offer to relieve the moral suffering of the humanitarian audience. This is not an entirely homogenous trajectory, however. Among others, an alternative compensation discourse exists, as we have seen, which has abandoned the claim to any kind of relation between sufferers and donors altogether and legitimates its demand instead by material compensation.

Negotiating the Relation to Beneficiaries

It is a key finding from the examination of 40 years of brochures from three humanitarian organizations that suffering plays such a small role in the brochures. Attempts to legitimate humanitarian action through the creation of affinity between the audience and potential donor are extremely limited at all times. To the extent that affinity is targeted, it is almost exclusively in imagery and even here the physical reality of suffering is absent, beneficiaries instead represented in 'positive imagery', with smiling children, facing the camera, as if lifted out of their misery. Operating outside affective registers of compassion, indignation, guilt, and shame, these are images which create affinity by allowing the audience to recognize themselves and the humanity they share with the

beneficiary and which, in so doing, suppress the—potentially alienating and dehumanizing—differences which position the audience as benefactors and the portrayed as beneficiaries at their mercy.

The figure of the beneficiary has considerably lower representation in the verbal text than in imagery and here too it is very rarely located in any kind of geo-political context. Very little information about the specificities of causes adopted by organizations are included in humanitarian brochures. Elaborations on the nature of suffering, its context, causes, and consequences are scarce as are particulars regarding the character of the need. Keeping depictions of suffering within the realm of the psychological renders them recognizable for the audience, thus facilitating identification rather than alienation as the physical reality of suffering might do. It backgrounds the difference between recipients and audiences, but in backgrounding difference it by necessity simultaneously backgrounds the very reasons for the humanitarian organizations' work. However, including scenes or symbols of war and devastation, would draw humanitarian organizations into the political realm, inviting questions about the veracity or feasibility of the humanitarian principle of a-politicality. Amnesty International, a human rights organization whose practices are overtly political, stands out by systematically including context in imagery as well as language.

In terms of visual representation, as we have seen, the figure of the beneficiary is being renegotiated in the 1990s and 2000s. Both Amnesty International and Red Cross are abandoning representations of beneficiaries as passive recipients, introducing empowered beneficiaries as well as male figures in discursive landscapes that were previously occupied exclusively by women and children. This new beneficiary figure seems to grow out of a wider critique of degrading and condescending representations of especially Africa and can be seen also as a response to questions as to the utility of humanitarian aid which, according to skeptics' discourse, pours endless resources into populations who do little to help themselves. No similar re-articulation of the beneficiary figure can be found in verbal representations, however.

Negotiating the Relation to the Public

The greater attention to the beneficiary in the 1970s, rather than a discourse of affinity, belongs to a legitimacy-by-accountancy discourse, where the beneficiary is represented as quantifications of the performance of the organization. The brochure material suggests that in this period, legitimacy was constructed by accounting for the effectiveness of the organization's work in absolute and strictly

local terms, suggesting that the organization's authority and the appropriateness of its objectives were to a great extent taken for granted. In subsequent years, the performance reports were marginalized and in most brochures completely omitted. With the decrease in representation of the beneficiary, in the 1980s, a new discourse gains prominence, namely the legitimation-by-institutionalization discourse. A focus on the institutional nature of organizational practices, entirely absent from the earlier material, develops, making explicit organizational structure, mandate, procedures, and ideology. The discussed erosion of trust offers an explanation of the abandonment of the accountancy discourse. The introduction of the institutional discourse testifies not only to the need to speak from a position of professionalized ethos, but indicates also a new concern with the organization as representative. This points to a destabilization and beginning negotiation of the relation between the humanitarian organization and the public.

The remarkable increase in donor representation throughout the period is a reflection of the relation between the humanitarian organization and the public coming under scrutiny. Still greater priority is given to the representation of the donor, not only in terms of options for action but to a much greater extent in terms of reasons for action, which played no significant part in the material from the 1970s and 1980s. In confronting the problem of reasons for action, there emerges a marked tendency to direct attention to problems associated with the mediation of suffering and the moral dilemmas of the distant witness, her sense of inefficacy and moral discomfort. The legitimation-by-compensation discourse which dominates the material of the past 20 years, rather than committing to making a change in the social reality of beneficiaries, focuses on this moral discomfort and offers the donor a benefit in exchange for his donation, in the shape either of relief of his moral suffering or in the shape of a consumer advantage.

In this way, the problem of trust that can be argued to haunt contemporary humanitarian organizations prohibits them from taking it upon themselves to lay out the reasons for action that underlie their own work, their ideological foundation and raison d'etre. The accountancy discourse, which we observe in the 1970s can be understood as reflecting a strong legitimacy in the humanitarian field, resulting in, in the vocabulary of Suchman (1995), high degrees of cognitive legitimacy with respect to the essence of the individual humanitarian organization. The focus of brochures from this period then, is to build consequential and procedural legitimacy. The discourse we can see developing in the 1980s, on the other hand, seems to indicate that prior structural legitimacy is being eroded. The appropriateness of the institutional make-up of humanitarian organizations is no longer taken for granted

and efforts to (re)build structural legitimacy take priority over efforts for consequential legitimacy. This strategy, again, is abandoned and the discourse we see developing from the 1990s onwards seems to reflect a radical loss of moral legitimacy. This does not mean that contemporary humanitarian discourse has lost its moral dimension. On the contrary—never before were questions of morality addressed, probed, and scrutinized as in the past 15–20 years. The moral legitimacy of humanitarian organizations, however, is no longer taken for granted and in trying to adapt to the skepticism of audiences, contemporary legitimation strategies come to a great extent to target pragmatic legitimacy by nurturing the self-interest of donors.

Discussion

The development in humanitarian discourse that we have seen in the brochure material testifies to a troublesome negotiation of relations, which seems to respond to skepticism and mistrust in audiences.

From the examination of 40 years of humanitarian brochure material, it emerges that it is not and has never been the suffering of the distant other which is used to legitimate the humanitarian cause in this genre. Reluctance to depict suffering today, then, cannot be ascribed simply to increased mediatization and compassion fatigue. It precedes these cultural phenomena and is a problem which is bound to the process of mediation itself.

Legitimation discourse does, however, increasingly oust the beneficiary in both visual and verbal modalities, first to the advantage of self-representation and later to the advantage of the donor. While the visual in recent years shows indications of a renegotiation of the relationship to beneficiaries, endowing them with a new empowerment, the verbal instead focuses on empowering the donor. In this way, each modality addresses a separate skepticism, that of humanitarian action as colonialist and patronizing, and that of audiences being powerless and fatigued. This mistrust in the motivation and effectiveness of humanitarian action is addressed not by trying to reinstall trust in the authority of humanitarian organizations to determine where, how and why to help sufferers, but by nurturing the symbolic relations between the humanitarian participants on a moral dimension rather than pragmatic one. There is a sense in which the ploy to empower both donors and beneficiaries contributes to the same movement away from a discourse that is centered on the asymmetric power relation between beneficiaries and donors. By offering donors reasons for action that are self-oriented and little to do with having an impact on the lives of others, the compensation discourse

removes humanitarian legitimation from patronization. At the same time, by acknowledging the self-orientation of donors it reduces the implication of hypocrisy. In this very move, however, the relation between donors and beneficiaries becomes instrumental, beneficiaries turned into objects in donors' utilitarian projects. The endeavor to discursively do away with power asymmetry comes to entail a glossing over also of the resource asymmetry, which is the very raison d'etre for humanitarian action, and the locus of the political with its potential for durable social change.

Conclusion

Examining the brochures, whose purpose, at least in part, is to legitimate the humanitarian organization vis-a-vis the general public and potential donors, it becomes clear that the core aspects of legitimacy as defined in the NGO literature—performance and accountability—have gradually become irrelevant over the past 20–30 years. The logic of the brochures is no longer to get legitimacy from the good they achieve in places of need. The discourse that NGOs have employed in the past 20 years marks a distinct break with such legitimation. What we can observe seems to be a gradual erosion of cognitive legitimacy leading eventually to a radical loss of moral legitimacy. The need to regain their ground vis-à-vis skepticism in audiences has forced legitimation strategies into a discourse which is organized around a logic of exchange.

I have suggested that what drives the development from performance through institutionalization to compensation-based legitimation is a wading of public trust to which the humanitarian organizations are subject. The incorporation of audience demands to a great extent grows out of mediatization through the requirement to compete for public attention and recognition in a crowded public sphere, just like mediatization is a crucial factor in the development of the public distrust itself. In this way, to understand the consequences of mediatization for humanitarian communication, it must be understood as a dialectic relationship. Through this relationship, mediatization results in two paradoxes: First, in the quest for visibility, the identity of the organization in fact falls out of sight. Although the moral agency of the donor comes to play a central role in recent years' humanitarian communication, the ideology and morality that the organizations represent do not. As we have seen, ultimately the consequence of the adaptation to public distrust is that humanitarian organizations refrain from taking a stance and assuming the role as moral educators, leaving their proposals for engagement with distant suffering in a moral vacuum (on the notion of moral education in the media, see Chouliaraki 2006). Second, the

desire to steer away from patronizing representation, potentially objectifies beneficiaries and renders the relation apolitical. These profound effects of mediatization on humanitarian organizations cannot be understood fully without paying attention to the dialectic relationship between organization, media and the public, which mediation involves.

Needless to say, reasons for changes in humanitarian discourse over the past 40 years are multifold. Changes in political climate and wider governance structures have an impact on what is considered legitimate just as broader processes of globalization, commercialization, and individualization affect the practices of humanitarian institutions in numerous ways. While not attempting to establish any direct or isolated causal link, this article interprets changes in humanitarian communication against the background of mediatization and points out the profound challenge for humanitarian organizations of having to navigate a mediatized landscape of distrust in their attempts to position themselves as legitimate representatives for the Western public in engaging with distant suffering.

References

Atac, I. (1999). Four criteria of development NGO legitimacy. *World Development, 27,* 5.

Bakir, V., & Barlow, D. M. (2007). *Communication in the age of suspicion: Trust and the media.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bauman, Z. (2001). *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bennett, R., & Sargeant, A. (2005). The nonprofit marketing landscape: Guest editors' introduction to a special section. *Journal of Business Research, 58,* 797–805.

Benthall, J. (1993). *Disasters, relief and the media* (p. 267). London: Tauris.

Biekart, K. (1999). *The politics of civil society building: European aid agencies and democratic transitions in Central America.* Amsterdam: International Books and the Transnational Institute.

Boltanski, L. (1999). *Distant suffering. Morality, media and politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Campbell, D. (2004). Horrific blindness: Images of death in contemporary media. *Journal for Cultural Research, 8,* 1.

Carlson, D. K. 2002. Trust in Media. 17 sep. Retrieved August, 2006 from http://www.poll.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=6802&pg=1.

Chouliaraki, L. (2005). Spectacular ethics. *Journal of Language and Politics, 3,* 2.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering.* London: Sage.

Chouliaraki, L., & Morsing, M. (2010). *Media, organization and identity.* London: Palgrave.

Christensen, L. T., Morsing, M., & Cheney, G. (2008). *Corporate communications: convention, complexity, and critique.* London: Sage.

Cohen, J. R. (1994). Critical viewing and participatory democracy. *Journal of Communication, 44,* 98–113.

Cohen, S., & Seu, B. (2002). Knowing enough not to feel too much: Emotional thinking about human rights appeals. In M. Bradley &

P. Petro (Eds.), *Truth claims: Representations and human rights*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Cornellisen, J. P. (2008). *Corporate communication*. London: Sage.

Cottle, S., & Nolan, D. (2007). Everyone was dying for footage. Global humanitarianism and the changing aid-media field. *Journalism Studies, 8*, 6.

Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling. *New Media and Society, 10*, 3.

Daccord, Y. (2005). IRCR communication: Generating support. *International Review of the Red Cross, 87*, 693–705.

Darcy, J. (2004). Human rights and humanitarian action: A review of the issues, background paper prepared for the Workshop on Human Rights and Humanitarian. www.odi.org.uk/rights/Publications/HPGBackgroundPaperforIASC.pdf.

Duffy, B. (2003). *Who do we trust?*. London: Ipsos Mori.

Edwards, M., & Hulme, D. (1995). NGO performance and accountability: Introduction and overview. In M. Edwards & D. Hulme (Eds.), *Non-governmental organisations: Performance and accountability*. London: Earthscan.

Eikenberry, A. M., & Kluver, J. D. (2004). The marketization of the nonprofit sector: Civil society at risk? *Public Administration Review, 64*(2), 132–140.

Fowler, A. (1997). *Striking a balance: A guide to enhancing the effectiveness of non-governmental organisations in international development*. London: Earthscan.

Grounds, J. (2005). Editorial: Special issue on charity branding. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 10*, 65–67.

Hall, S. (2007). The west and the rest. Discourse and power. In Tania Das Gupta (Ed.), *Race and racialization: Essential readings*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *Introducing functional grammar*. New York: Edward Arnold.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The mediatization of society. A theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. *Nordicom Review, 29*, 2.

Krotz, F. (2007). The meta-process of 'mediatization' as a conceptual frame. *Global Media and Communication, 3*, 256–260.

Lidchi, H. (1999). Finding the right image: British development NGOs and the regulation of imagery. In T. Skelton & T. Allen (Eds.), *Culture and global change*. London: Routledge.

Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1989). On the critical abilities of television viewers. In E. Seiter, et al. (Eds.), *Remote control: Television, audiences, and cultural power*. London: Routledge.

Lissner, J. (1981). Merchants of misery. *New Internationalist, 100*, 23.

Lister, S. (2003). NGO legitimacy. Technical issue or social construct? *Critique of Anthropology, 23*, 2.

McLagan, M. (2006). Introduction: Making human rights claims public. *American Anthropologist, 108*, 1.

Minear, L., Scott, C., & Weiss, T. G. (1996). *The news media, civil war and humanitarian action*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Moeller, S. D. (1999). *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. New York: Routledge.

O'Dwyer, B. (2004). The construction of a social account: A case study in overseas aid agency. *Accounting, Organizations and Society, 30*, 279–296.

O'Dwyer, B., & Unerman, B. J. (2008). The paradox of greater NGO accountability: A case study of Amnesty Ireland. *Accounting, Organizations and Society, 33*, 7–8.

Ossewaarde, R., Nijhof, A., & Heyse, L. (2008). Dynamics of NGO legitimacy: How organizing betrays core missions of NGOs. *Public Administration and Development, 28*, 42–53.

Palazzo, G., & Scherer, A. G. (2006). Corporate legitimacy as deliberation: A communicative framework. *Journal of Business Ethics, 66*, 1.

Pearce, J. (1997). Between co-option and irrelevance: Latin American NGOs in the 1990s. In D. Hulme & M. Edwards (Eds.), *NGOs, states and donors: Too close for comfort?*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Ritchie, R. J. B., Swami, S., et al. (1998). A brand new world for nonprofits. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 4*, 1.

Rothberg, R. I., & Weiss, T. G. (1996). Introduction. In R. I. Rothberg & T. G. Weiss (Eds.), *From Massacres to Genocide. The media, public policy and humanitarian crises*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.

Saxby, J. (1996). Who owns the private aid agencies? In D. Sogge (Ed.), *Compassion and calculation: The business of private foreign aid*. London: Pluto Press.

Schulz, W. (2004). Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept. *European Journal of Communication, 19*, 1.

Seaton, J. (2005). *Carnage and the media: The making and breaking of news about violence*. London: Allen Lane.

Seu, B. (2003). Your stomach makes you feel that you don't want to know anything about it: Desensitization, defence mechanisms and rhetoric in response to human rights abuses. *Journal of Human Rights, 2*, 2.

Silverstone, R. (2006). *Media and Morality on the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Slim, H. (2002). By what authority? The legitimacy and accountability of nongovernmental organizations. *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance., 4*, 23–25.

Smillie, I. (1995). *Alms Bazaar: Altruism under fire—non-profit organisations and international development*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Suchman, M. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review, 20*, 571–610.

Tester, K. (2001). *Compassion, morality and the media*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Tester, K. (2010). *Humanitarianism and modern culture*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Unerman, J., & O'Dwyer, B. (2006). Theorising accountability for NGO advocacy. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal, 19*(3), 349–376.

Vaux, T. (2006). Humanitarian trends and dilemmas. *Development in Practice, 16*, 3.

Vestergaard, A. (2008). Humanitarian branding and the media. The case of Amnesty International. *Journal of Language and Politics, 7*, 3.

Vestergaard, A. (2010). Identity, integrity and humanitarian appeal. In L. Chouliaraki & M. Morsing (Eds.), *Media, organisations and identity*. London: Palgrave.

Vestergaard, A. 2011. *Distance and suffering. Humanitarian discourse in the age of mediatization*. Unpublished PhD Manuscript. Copenhagen Business School.