Chapter 7

Humanitarian Media Events: On the Symbolic Conditions of Moral Integration

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ABSTRACT

When somewhere in the world disaster strikes, chances are that West-European NGO’s will put their hands together by launching national fundraising appeals. In these appeals, the media, public institutions and individual citizens are asked to contribute their share by donating a sum of money or, better still, by organizing their own fundraising activities. If all goes well, the appeal then soon acquires a festive character, as an entire nation interrupts its regular course of affairs to organize fundraising activities ranging from small family barbeques to widely broadcasted live shows. This chapter proposes to conceptualize these appeals as ‘humanitarian media events’, by drawing attention to some of their distinctively symbolic character. These theoretical reflections are then applied to the case of the Belgian appeal for Syrian refugees, launched in April 2013. This analysis consists of three components: the media, by comparing the coverage on Syria during the most important period of the appeal; the campaign, relying on in-depth interviews with campaigners and campaign material; and the audience, by drawing on interviews with audience members who organised a small-scale fundraising activity. This presentation thereby aims to develop a neo-Durkheimian, symbolic-cognitive framework to understand the nature and course of national humanitarian appeals, and the role played by a variety of social actors.

INTRODUCTION

When somewhere in the world disaster strikes, chances are that West-European NGO’s will put their hands together by launching national fundraising appeals. In these appeals, the media, public institutions and individual citizens are asked to contribute their share by donating a sum of money or, better still, by organizing their own fundraising activities. If all goes well, the appeal then soon acquires a festive character, as an entire nation interrupts its regular course of affairs to organize fundraising activities ranging
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from small family barbecues to widely broadcasted live shows. In this essay, I propose to conceptualize these appeals as ‘humanitarian media events’ by drawing attention to their distinctive features, in line with recent trends to broaden the notion of ‘media events’ (Liebes, 1998; Katz and Liebes, 2007; Dayan 2010; Couldry, Hepp and Krotz, 2010). In the first part I will sketch the theoretical contours of these events by identifying the symbolic preconditions that are required for these appeals to develop into fully fledged humanitarian media events involving the engagement of the organizers, the broadcasters as well as the audience. In the second part, I will briefly demonstrate these theoretical reflections by applying them to the case of the Belgian appeal for the Syrian refugee crisis, launched in April 2013.

TOWARDS A THEORY OF HUMANITARIAN MEDIA EVENTS

The Short Definition

In the last couple of years large-scale campaigns have been launched for a great deal of humanitarian crises, such as those caused by the South-Asian Tsunami in 2004, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2011 food crisis in East-Africa. While these types of appeals first emerged in the late 1980s, reoccurring once every three or four years as a matter of exceptional urgency, nowadays they have become a well-established routine with new campaigns being launched within less than a year. As I indicated briefly above, the appeals consist of a temporarily intensified cooperation of the NGOs that are active in the area-struck region. The fundraising aspect of this cooperation is structured into a special consortium or committee, which is chaired by the NGOs’ directors, and executed by the NGOs’ own employees. In the U.K., these appeals are organized by the ‘Disaster Emergency Committee’, and continental equivalents can be found in the Dutch ‘Giro 555’, and the Belgian ‘Consortium 1212’ (the latter two named after the appeals’ bank account).

While these NGOs do take the initiative in organizing such appeals, they remain strongly dependent upon the cooperation of large national media-organizations. Especially public broadcasters are as a rule involved and consulted from an early stage, and their decision to participate may influence whether or not the appeal is effectively launched in the end. In most cases, the appeals last for approximately one month, and culminate in a central event serving as the appeal’s zenith. Oftentimes this central event consists of a charity show with guest visits from celebrities, reports from the disaster-struck area, and continuous updates on the appeal’s success. On the same day, newspapers pay extra attention to the campaign and, to a lesser extent, to the disaster-struck area itself. The audience, of course, is also a key participating actor, as its members support the campaign by donating a sum of money or, better still, organize some small-scale fundraising activities themselves. And lastly, celebrities, public institutions and for-profit corporations help set an example for the audience by supporting such activities themselves, in the meantime making the most of it in terms of their public image (Driessens, Joye & Biltereyst, 2012).

It is precisely this widespread participation, from individual citizens to public institutions and the largest broadcasters and newspapers, that makes these appeals into events strongly reminiscent of Dayan and Katz’s notion of ‘media events’ as contemporary public rituals. Organised by well-established actors operating outside the media, they interrupt the everyday lives of many individual citizens and institutions by stimulating them to engage in the same cause. And although rather implicitly, these appeals gener-