

Ethical Traditions in Humanitarian Photography and the Challenges of the Digital Age: Four Conversations with Canadian Communications Officers

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Abstract

As the production, content, and display of humanitarian images faced the requirements of digital media, humanitarian organizations struggled to keep equitable visual practices. Media specialists reflect on past and current uses of images in four Canadian agencies: the Canadian Red Cross, the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan, the World University Service of Canada, and IMPACT. Historically, the risk to reproduce the global inequalities they seek to remedy has compelled photographers, filmmakers and publicists in these agencies to develop codes of visual practice. In these conversations, they have shared the insights gained in transforming their work to accompany the rise of new digital technologies and social media. From one agency to the other, the lines of concern and of innovation converge. On the technical side, the officers speak of the advantage of telling personal stories, and of using short videos and infographics. On the organizational side, they have updated ways to develop skills in media production and visual literacy among workers, volunteers, partners, and recipients, at all levels of their activity. These interviews further reveal that Communications Officers share with historians a wish to collect, preserve, and tell past histories that acknowledge the role of all actors in the humanitarian sphere, as well as an immediate need to manage the abundance of visual documents with respect and method. To face these challenges, the five interviewees rely on democratic traditions of image-making: the trusted relationships, both with the Canadian public and with local peoples abroad, which have always informed the production and the content of visual assets. For this reason, humanitarian publicists might be in a privileged position to intervene in larger and urgent debates over the moral economy of the circulation of digital images in a globalized public space.

Keywords: humanitarian photography; humanitarian videos; humanitarian social media; Canadian Red Cross; Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan; World University Service of Canada; IMPACT

Introduction

‘We are both storytellers and connectors.’ This is how Sara Falconer, Director, Digital Communications at the Canadian Red Cross (CRC), explains the convergence of interests between historians and humanitarian publicists. The involvement of Communication Officers has become a feature of the work of the Canadian Network on Humanitarian History (CNHH: <https://aidhistory.ca/>). Initiated by historians, archivists, and NGO employees a decade ago, the network has fostered a variety of projects, from the recording of stories of retired workers

and volunteers, to the rescue of archives in danger, the preparation of exhibits and documentary films, the celebration of anniversaries, the writing of policy briefs, the visit of humanitarians in university courses, and the visit of historians to humanitarian conferences. For professional historians of aid and development, such joint ventures provide a unique way to find and create documents required to understand the actions and the words of as many of those involved as possible, in as many contexts as possible.

The five media specialists encountered in December 2020 for conversations on their uses of visual

communications work for some of the longest lasting partners of the CNHH and, indeed, the oldest NGOs of the country. Beside Sara Falconer of the CRC, founded in 1885, I met Rhonda Rosenberg, Executive Director of the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan (MCoS), founded in 1975, and her Communications Coordinator, Chinye Talabi; Stephanie Leclair, Senior Manager of Communications and Philanthropy at the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), which celebrates its centenary this year (2021); and Zuzia Danielski, Communications Director at IMPACT, a partnership formed in 1986 (as Partnership Africa Canada) devoted to the management of, in their own words, 'natural resources in areas where security and human rights are at risk'.

I discovered a remarkable convergence in their concerns, despite discrepancies in the size of their organizations, their sectors of activity, and the nature of their publics. This article presents their testimonies in the following order: how they learned their skills in humanitarian communications, how and why they adapted them to digital technologies, the distribution of power over the making and dissemination of images, the ethical principles involved in their visual practice and, finally, the concerns they share with historians.

Apprenticeships and Career Trajectories among Visual Media Specialists in Canadian NGOs

The course of the careers of all five publicists is marked by the history of the technical and institutional transformations of the media industry, from the decrease in size and number of newspapers, magazines, and news agencies, to the multiplication of online platforms, the deregulation of news outlets, and the increasing flux of digital content. Rosenberg, Danielski, and Falconer were initially journalists in printed newspapers. The publication for which Falconer worked, for instance, progressed towards online reporting; when she left to write freelance assignments for non-profit organizations, she soon found herself writing for digital platforms, composing blogs and Facebook posts. Six years ago, when the CRC offered her a permanent position, she welcomed the opportunity to further this experience with social media in a stable and innovative environment, committed to support new forms of communications.

In addition to journalistic experience, the five Communications Officers brought some form of academic training to their understanding of the role of humanitarian images. A few years ago, Sara Falconer registered in the new university programs in 'Media and Information' of Western University of London, Ontario. Stephanie Leclair's background is in linguistics, and it

prepared her to see 'power, privilege and language' in visual media. Moreover, humanitarian publicists carry practices of visual communications from one agency to the other. Zuzia Danielski arrived at IMPACT with experience in handling photographs of social justice, gained from work at the Nobel Women's Initiative where she helped put together an exhibit dedicated to gender violence in the Congo, 'Beauty in the Middle' (Nobel Women's Initiative, n.d.) (Figure 1). Having observed during that event how telling images could move people, she was ready to help her new employer to undergo a transition from text-based products to the regular use of images of quality, chosen economically for the stories they told.

Overall, Communications Officers learn much of their trade on the job. According to Leclair of WUSC, 'conversations to better use visual media' and 'embed them in other products' never stop. From their immediate predecessors, they inherited specific traditions of 'community engagement' with visual media. The CRC, for instance, offered Falconer the opportunity of transnational exchanges on the use of social media with the more experienced British and US partners in the Red Cross movement. Since then, the CRC has shared its own experience with other national Red Cross organizations. In 2017, in Bangkok, Falconer attended the triennial gathering of Communications Officers of the whole Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Global Communications Forum. The five officers also follow the practices of 'companies who do this very well', as WUSC Communications Officer, Stephanie Leclair, mentioned. She also keeps abreast of scholarly reflections on development communications (Clost, 2014; SAIH, 2021), which she uses in the 'training of volunteers away from perpetuating stereotypes about "white saviorism"'. At MCoS, Rhonda Rosenberg borrowed ideas of 'media literacy' elaborated by the Association for Media Literacy. She encountered their 'key concepts' when encouraging young people involved in MCoS anti-racist workshops to enter the annual video competition of the National Film Board of Canada (National Film Board, 2009: 21–2). The very work of 'myth busting' of humanitarian images, she adds, is one that is itself well done itself by using visual media.

Adaptions of Visual Practices to Digital Technologies

In recent decades, the transition from paper-based communications to the many platforms of digital and social media transformed uses of images in unexpected and often indefinite directions. Still convinced that visual content 'performs best', to use the words of Falconer, the Communications Officers are constantly



Figure 1: Selected by Zuzia Danielski, IMPACT. 'Sewing Studio'. 'Residents gather inside a makeshift sewing studio in the village of Mangango, on 3 March 2014. SOFEPADI [Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral / Female Solidarity for Integrated Peace and Development] initiated the sewing workshops to provide psychosocial and economic support in an area of North Kivu where sexual violence had been on the rise due to armed conflict between the Congolese forces and rebels.' Danielski, who worked to prepare the physical exhibition in London in 2014, witnessed first-hand the impact of the pictures on the visitors. Source: Pete Muller/Prime for the Nobel Women's Initiative exhibition 'Beauty in the Middle', www.beautyinthemiddle.org/.

adapting their visual practices to the transformations and additions of media.

In 2012, the CRC investigated the way 'emerging trends in social and digital spaces were shaping the ways that Canadians were responding to disaster and interacting with the organizations that could help them' (CRC, 2012; 2018a: 2). At the time, the four agencies all worried that public trust in their work could be weakened by the multiplication of channels of communications, the small size of the screens on which their messages were increasingly received, and the reduction of the length of time the public spent to watch their messages. Like the CRC, they embarked on a simplification of their visual image, using uncomplicated and consistent logos, colors, and typefaces, as well as 'major rebranding' (CRC, 2018b). Talabi led the production of a brand guideline for MCoS which aimed at consistency and continuity (MCoS, 2017), and Leclair updated the 'brand guide' of WUSC in the same direction, including a lexicon of terms to speak of the uses of media (St-Pierre, n.d.; WUSC, n.d.).

'Visual assets,' says Falconer of the CRC, 'do not have the same role on all digital platforms.' For instance, using analytics to monitor the effectiveness of an image on different digital media, her team finds that Twitter lends itself better to infographics illustrating tips, Instagram to

longer texts, TikTok to more spontaneous and less polished images. Website and social media, in general, call for more infographics in order to communicate complex information. The communications personnel of humanitarian agencies has changed accordingly: the CRC national communications team now includes a graphic designer; WUSC also employs a graphic designer, as well as a new 'digital engagement officer'; MCoS actively supports current workers to develop computer skills.

In May 2016, when a forest fire forced 80,000 residents of Fort McMurray, Alberta, out of their homes and destroyed ten percent of the city, Falconer learned just how effective digital communications could be in times of emergency. The CRC had already established a good network of relations with individuals' social media accounts for the purpose of fundraising and public information. Within days of the start of the conflagration, they were using these digital relations to operate a system of '24/7 safety management'. A hundred thousand people came to the CRC via Facebook and Twitter to inquire about shelter, a six thousand percent increase in traffic. In addition to the flurry of urgent questions and answers, registrations and individual electronic money transfers used the same channels. 'Alberta is still on my mind,' Falconer said about the

CRC use of social media. Five years later, even if the families of Fort McMurray are less visible in the national media, the CRC continues to use the same channels of information with the local population for the ongoing tasks of recovery. When another emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, obliged MCoS member organizations across the province to replace physical events with virtual communications – on a scale never seen before – Tilabi and her colleagues organized meetings to exchange skills in the use of digital platforms. Like Falconer, she foresees that a sudden ‘repositioning’ born in an emergency will have changed MCoS’ use of virtual media irredeemably.

The Localization of Image-Making

In this new context of digital communications, the five humanitarian officers have understood that short and personal stories on videos offer a powerful way to reach the public they want. The CRC team has added a ‘video talent’ specialist; WUSC expanded the use of videos as a medium to tell the stories of volunteers; and MCoS launched a series of ‘talks about diversity’. Leclair thinks that ‘intentionally offering our public the possibility to produce visual media enables them to see us as accessible; it makes it easier to get the message out about who we are and how people can be involved.’ She explains how some of WUSC platforms increasingly support the sharing of stories between the people involved in the work of the organization. Such new forms of localized image-making often benefit from longstanding traditions within each humanitarian agency.

In the production of small video stories, for instance, the NGOs call on trusted relations in their fields of action: ‘We are in communities for a long time,’ says Danielski of IMPACT, ‘and we have this luxury.’ Her organization is the smallest of the four, and she takes pictures during her own travels. At WUSC, Leclair and her colleagues encourage employees on the site, local partners, international volunteers, as well as recipients, to record their work and experiences, and to work on the ‘initial curation’ of images and videos. All the while, WUSC is mindful of the distinct possibility of excluding people who lack access to digital media. This NGO, which has long specialized in the training of collaborators from marginalized communities in the Global South, encourages the professional development of communication officers locally, and has helped open up opportunities for them in radio and visual media. At any time, WUSC works with ten to fifteen people, in the African countries where they have offices, whose job is fully or partially devoted to communications. They support a virtual community of practice for colleagues and volunteers in the African continent who are involved in the

production of what Leclair calls ‘behavior-changing communications’. WUSC shows the same consideration for local practices when they hire professional filmmakers and photographers especially to report in dangerous situations: they try to find local professionals, select them with a real commitment to empowerment, and ensure that the people photographed will be respected by assigning a field employee trusted by the local community to accompany the image-makers (Figure 2).

Deep preparatory processes often help mitigate the invasive nature of professional lighting and cameras. According to Falconer, this approach has led to arresting photographs of families at Fort McMurray, which ‘captured much in a moment’ (Figure 3). The families in the picture were glad of what their public image looked like; they were also reassured by the CRC standard approval forms which oblige a periodical review of the consent. It is in the same spirit of reciprocity that WUSC and IMPACT organize ‘community showings’ of images on the locations where they were taken, like IMPACT did in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is a way, comments Danielski, of knowing the ‘major implications’ the many photos and videos have, and to ensure that we are not misrepresenting the situation.

Dedicated to multicultural actions within the communities of Saskatchewan, MCoS works in a similar fashion with people in schools, refugee, diaspora, and Indigenous organizations of the province. One of its most powerful images – of a pile of folded garments accompanied by the slogan, ‘Only laundry should be separated by colour’ – came from an activity invented by teachers in a local school brainstorming about possible activities for Black History Month (Figure 4).

In the four NGOs, the shared and local nature of image-making is linked to a wider commitment for the increased leadership of recipients of humanitarian aid. For WUSC, the training and increasing role of local employees in making images is part of a larger and older trend of fostering south-north relations. In each of WUSC’s fifteen local offices in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and South America, there is now a person responsible for communications. Similarly, over the past year, the CRC has created a unique program of training for ‘digital volunteer specialists’ across the organization. Falconer attributes the size and the originality of the program to established strengths of the organization: a network of volunteers who donate according to their individual experience and availability (Glassford, 2018), as well as what she calls the ‘scalable’ nature of an organization created to face disasters at home and in the rest of the world. She adds that within the CRC, the internal communications which have long been used for training, exchanges, and encouragements, between paid employees and volunteers of the central



Figure 2: Selected by Stephanie Leclair, WUSC. Student researchers with the International Seminar participate in an interview. 'As part of WUSC's International Seminar to Malawi, student researchers from Canada, Malawi, and the Dzaleka Refugee Camp interviewed young refugees to identify the barriers and opportunities for greater youth economic self-reliance in refugee contexts. To protect the identities of interviewees, the local photographer hired to cover the event took photos from strategic angles that ensured the interviewee's identity would not be revealed' (Leclair).

Source: © Mphatso Dumba/WUSC, Malawi, 2019.



Figure 3: Selected by Sara Falconer, CRC. Fort McMurray 2017, Alberta fire response. This is one of the pictures that was made possible by the trusted relationships CRC volunteers had established with the family in the picture.

Source: Canadian Red Cross.

and local offices, have also undergone transitions between print and digital platforms.

Renewals in the Ethics of Making and Dissemination of Humanitarian Images

As the makers of humanitarian images seek to give a better voice to all actors, the content and the use of these

images on digital platforms is the object of renewed discussions. Existing technical and ethical guidelines have been rewritten to address the audiences and creators of social media and they have been distributed more widely. The principles and advice revolve around the composition, clarity and interest of the pictures, and warn against alterations of visual assets (CRC, 2018b: 86). They gauge the appropriateness of the content in the



**Only
laundry
should
be
separated
by
colour.**

#MarchOutRacism

Racism: Recognize it... Reject it!



March 21: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Figure 4: Selected by Rhonda Rosenberg, MCoS. Poster designed by MCoS for Black History Month, based on an idea developed by teachers in a partner school. This is one of the items still most in demand at MCoS.

light of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (MCoS, 2017: 4). When it comes to social relations around the images, they underline the importance of proper consent and obeisance to local laws, and demand that the mutual relation between the photographers and the photographed be acknowledged. They insist on displaying strength over vulnerability, hope and resilience over despair, as well as gender and age diversity; they point at the dangers of exploitative and compromising pictures, especially when it comes to children (IMPACT, 2018: 2, referring to UNICEF Guidelines; Rosenberg, 2020). They state the humanitarian agencies' responsibility, to select 'honest and empowering images', in the words of Falconer, 'for Canadians who can't see the world through their own experience' and for the peoples it attempts to influence,

according to Leclair. At IMPACT, Danielski works with images that counteract usual depictions of mining as 'awful', and its workers as 'victims', to show instead that such work can be an 'opportunity for agency'. This means 'visuals that don't stigmatize subjects, are respectful, and preserve the dignity of the people portrayed' (IMPACT, 2018). At WUSC, Leclair's colleagues stay clear from manipulative images of children, for instance, by 'intentionally focusing on images that are of use for the individuals they serve': teachers and community workers.

Note on the Visual Communication of Histories of Humanitarian Agencies

At many points in these conversations, the interests of Communications Officers and historians of visual

communications came together. Sara Falconer recalled how, in 2015, ‘because the history of the values and principles of the Red Cross is such an important part of our brand’, she participated in the ‘Canadian Red Cross Digital History Project’ which asked Canadians to share ‘their own Red Cross artifacts or items that have been part of their lives’. The result, a virtual exhibit of 120 objects around which to tell ‘120 years of the Canadian Red Cross’ (CRC Digital History Project, n.d.) showed images – from hospital feeding cups, to scouts badges and field radios – selected and described after a tremendous volunteer effort. In 2017, when IMPACT (then Partnership Africa Canada) went through a reorientation of its mandate, visual and textual historical materials, gathered by an intern of the CNHH supervised by Danielski, helped to reflect on the promises and limits of past actions.

Among humanitarian agencies, the proliferation of digital images has called for a revamping of the systems of documents’ archives and management which are of great interest to historians. Ahead of the others, the CRC has already hired two specialists of ‘digital assets’ to organize a central repository. All employees of the CRC were asked to send images collected on the job, and each asset was linked to a revamped process of consent from the people depicted in the images. The cataloguing of more than a hundred thousand assets to this day allows for a more systematic use of visual documents, and for a more ethical monitoring of their use.

Finally, the renewed predilection of Communication Officers for the collection of individual visual testimonies meets the need of historians of humanitarian aid for local histories unavailable in annual reports and official correspondence. In 2019, the CNHH collaborated with the Local and Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERN) to train emerging Canadian researchers on their way to fieldwork in refugee camps, to identify and preserve documents of historical importance (LERN, 2020). Inspired by the habits of work of WUSC, LERN fieldwork relies on themes and methods selected by refugee-led organizations, such as Tanzania’s DIGNITY Kwanza and the Network for Refugee Voices, in collaboration with more traditional agencies such as Oxfam, CARE Canada, and Oxfam-Québec.

Conclusion

Historians and sociologists who observe that ‘social networks have given birth to an intermediary public space beyond nation states’ often lament the negative impact of social media on public life: an Americanization brought about by the hold of the United States on the largest platforms, the dissociation of information from local peoples, as well as the lack of honesty allowed in

unregulated spaces (Béaud and Noiriél, 2021). Similarly, many veteran humanitarians worry that the creation of virtual publics and producers for fundraising and advocacy might have weakened NGOs roots among local communities of donors and recipients, in favor of richer and more powerful citizens. Exploitative and unequal visual practices frequently thrive in such environments (Herriman, 2021).

These interviews with five humanitarian Communications Officers has shed light on parallel and more constructive trends. The CRC, WUSC, MCoS, and IMPACT have long inhabited the ‘intermediary public space beyond nation states’ (Béaud and Noiriél, 2021). Their transnational experiences in the production and dissemination of images, provided ethical and organizational codes and habits of work to face the flurry of images released on digital media platforms. Eager to maintain the hard-won trust of the public for the honesty and humanity of their work towards vulnerable people, these Communication Officers seem to have kept a better hold on the quick and indeterminate development of new media than other institutions. In this way, they might have much to offer in the wider reflection on the role of visual media in the global communications of the future.

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