Navigating Metrics and Ethics in Digital Storytelling: Ethical Dilemmas for Humanitarian Communicators

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An honors thesis

submitted in fulfillment of the

requirements for the completion of the

Department of Communication Honors Program

University of Washington

2025

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates how humanitarian communications professionals navigate the ethical challenges of digital storytelling on social media. The study uses semi-structured interviews with eight practitioners from a range of international humanitarian organizations, including UNICEF, Save the Children International, and World Vision, who are currently working in the USA, UK, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Combining the in-depth insights from the interviews and relevant social media visuals and organizational documents, the research examines the pressures they face to produce compelling content that satisfies both ethical standards and organizational performance metrics. Findings show a persistent tension between representing individuals with dignity and meeting engagement benchmarks shaped by donor expectations and algorithmic visibility. Participants described the pressure to create emotionally provocative content (even when it risks sensationalism) while also trying to uphold internal ethical guidelines and global standards such as the *Sphere Handbook* (2018). Organizational demands, limited resources, and platform changes further complicate their ability to maintain ethical practices. Yet, practitioners are not passive in this process. They actively engage in strategies such as participatory storytelling, anonymization, and editorial restraint to protect

subjects and reframe what communicative “success” looks like. The study highlights how frontline communicators must constantly mediate between conflicting demands from stakeholders, social platforms, and ethical commitments. It concludes by calling for clearer ethical standards for digital humanitarian communication, more robust support systems for communicators, and a redefinition of impact metrics to better align digital storytelling with the humanitarian sector’s core values. This research provides practical insight for NGOs, donors, and content teams aiming to strengthen ethical storytelling practices in an increasingly digital and metrics-driven environment.

Keywords: Humanitarian communication, Digital storytelling, Ethical representation, NGO legitimacy, Social media engagement, Metrics-driven strategy, Stakeholder expectations

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Introduction

Humanitarian conflicts and escalating human suffering have intensified over recent decades, leading to a significant expansion of global humanitarian aid missions. According to UN estimates, the number of individuals requiring humanitarian assistance has surged from 235 million in 2021 to 363 million in 2025, underscoring the growing magnitude and complexity of contemporary global crises (United Nations OCHA, 2020, 2023). Today, tens of thousands of humanitarian aid workers operate across more than 80 countries, often within volatile environments, to deliver essential support (United Nations OCHA, 2020, 2023).

With this expansion of humanitarian operations, effective communication between aid agencies, donors, affected populations, the media, and the broader public has become increasingly critical. Scholars across communication, media studies, and humanitarian ethics have extensively explored the ethical dimensions inherent in humanitarian messaging, highlighting how evolving practices influence public perception and response to global crises. However, the rapid transition toward digital platforms and social media has fundamentally altered humanitarian storytelling. Organizations now frequently depend on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and views to gauge public sentiment and organizational effectiveness. While these metrics can significantly extend the reach of humanitarian messages, they also introduce ethical tensions: algorithm-driven platforms often prioritize emotionally charged or simplified narratives, potentially undermining nuanced and dignified portrayals of affected individuals.

On this note, there is some research that addresses emotional framing and the structural influences of media on humanitarian narratives. However, limited attention has been given to the

specific ethical dilemmas faced by practitioners in digital storytelling contexts. For instance, resources such as UNICEF's *Communication for Humanitarian Action Toolkit* (2015) and participatory storytelling frameworks offer ethical guidance but rarely consider the real-time pressures of maintaining organizational legitimacy and donor engagement alongside the ethical imperatives of dignity, agency, and accountability in digital representation. This disconnect highlights a crucial gap: how do humanitarian communicators themselves perceive and navigate these competing demands?

This study sets out to address this gap by examining the decision-making processes of humanitarian communication professionals engaged in digital storytelling. By emphasizing their perspectives, the research aims to bridge theoretical ethical frameworks with practical realities, offering actionable insights into balancing visibility, engagement, and ethical storytelling within the complex dynamics of algorithm-driven social media environments.

My interest in this topic comes from a personal connection to the humanitarian field. My dad has worked in humanitarian operations for most of his career, and I grew up seeing the kinds of challenges that come with trying to communicate clearly and ethically during crisis situations. I've also had the chance to live in different countries, including Cambodia and Spain, which helped me see how stories are told across cultures and how those stories can affect people's lives. Studying Communication at the University of Washington gave me a deeper understanding of how narratives shape public perception. This project reflects both my academic interest and my desire to engage in meaningful, hands-on work in disaster response and crisis communication here in the United States.

In order to uncover the historical scholarship in the field of humanitarian communication, this paper begins by defining the parameters of what falls under the umbrella term "humanitarian

communication." The word *communication* comes from the Latin *communicare*, meaning "to share" or "to make something common," referring to the transfer of information, meaning, or emotion from one place or person to another. *Humanitarian aid*, on the other hand, involves the mobilization of support to alleviate human suffering, protect life, and uphold the dignity of those made vulnerable by crisis—particularly during armed conflict and emergencies (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 2021). When paired together, *humanitarian communication* refers to the strategic storytelling practices used by aid organizations, media, and advocates to raise awareness, mobilize resources, and generate empathy for distant suffering. One scholar defines this term, more technically, as "the rhetorical practices of trans-national actors that engage with universal ethical claims… to mobilize action on human suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 2). This includes everything from traditional media coverage of famines, disasters, and conflict, to modern social media campaigns and donor appeals for humanitarian funding, some of which can be controversial and challenging to manage given the complex nature of the cultural contexts in each humanitarian crisis.

The literature review portion of this study follows the evolution of humanitarian communication techniques from the market-driven controversies of traditional, pre-social media forms through to the defining attributes of today's digital humanitarian storytelling. Then will come a brief introduction to the research area, unique to this study. Tracking history primarily through the lens of theoretical frameworks as outlined by Lillie Chouliaraki, Anne Vestergaard, and other contributing critical scholars who focus on legitimacy, representation, and technology, will best illustrate the causes and effects of narrative changes over time. This review will also incorporate common humanitarian standards in ethics, as they relate to the accountability system in place for humanitarian communicators. Finally, this review will identify the future of

humanitarian communication scholarship and the justification for this study, relying upon synthesizing recent developments in the concept and practices of the attention economy with the aforementioned theory specific to the humanitarian field.

Origin and Evolution of Humanitarian Communication

Humanitarian communication has consistently evolved in response to the dominant media formats and institutional influences of each era. Early humanitarian campaigns, dating back to the 19th and early 20th century, relied primarily on traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio, television appeals, and mailed brochures. As Adelman (2021) notes, "news became a global commodity" during this period, supported by growing literacy, cheaper print, and transnational cable networks (p. 374). William Howard Russell's reports from the Crimean War in the mid-1800s exemplified the powerful role of journalism in mobilizing public compassion and financial support, inspiring significant humanitarian efforts such as Florence Nightingale's nursing mission (Bunce, Scott, & Wright, 2019). As media continued to develop through World War I, influential publications such as *Red Cross Magazine* directly controlled their content and distribution, exemplifying a mission-driven approach that strategically aligned narratives with organizational humanitarian objectives (Irwin, 2013).

However, from its earliest days, humanitarian communication has fostered an uneasy mixture of empathy and estrangement. Victorian-era reporting and missionary photography often portrayed distant suffering through sensationalist, simplified frames, reinforcing an inherent divide between Western audiences and those afflicted (Curtis, 2015, p. 28, as cited in Bunce, Scott, & Wright, 2019, p. 10). Such representations reduced crises to one-dimensional narratives, casting victims as passive beneficiaries of heroic Western intervention. These reductive approaches to crisis coverage laid the groundwork for what reporter Elaine Sciolino calls a

“discouragingly contagious compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999, p. 3). When problems “can’t be easily or quickly solved,” Moeller goes on to explain, “attention wanders off to the next news fashion” (p. 5), leaving audiences “overstimulated and bored all at once” (p. 4).

Throughout the 20th century, humanitarian storytelling practices have been further crystallized into distinct communicative styles. The 1960s through the 1980s witnessed the prominence of "shock effect" appeals, marked by graphic imagery intended to evoke guilt and pity, as described and denounced by Lillie Chouliaraki (2010). These campaigns, although emotionally powerful, were often criticized for fostering compassion fatigue and dehumanizing those they portrayed (Lissner, 1979). In reaction to this critique, humanitarian communication in the 1990s shifted toward "positive image" appeals characterized by hopeful, empowering narratives emphasizing success stories. While this approach initially resonated widely, it was later critiqued for oversimplifying complex situations and masking the ongoing nature of humanitarian crises (Boltanski, 1999).

Cottle and Nolan (2007) offered a sharp critique of humanitarian aid organizations’ increasing reliance on media to achieve their goals—while also being shaped by the very media systems they engage with. The subtitle of their work, “Everyone was dying for footage,” captures this tension. They examined how major aid organizations—such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, CARE, and Médecins Sans Frontières—have adapted their communication strategies to align with modern (mainstream) media logic. In a crowded and competitive field, these groups have begun to behave more like brands: using celebrities, crafting region-specific media content, and working hard to avoid controversy. However, Cottle and Nolan (2007) conclude that such shifts can compromise their mission and damage the ethical foundation of global humanitarianism.

Entering the 21st century, humanitarian communication strategies underwent another significant transformation driven by the rise of digital media, which include both online media (such as web materials), social media (such as X and Facebook), and video sites (such as YouTube). Campaigns such as Kony 2012, Product RED, and Live 8 illustrate the shift towards "post-humanitarian branding," marked by branded altruism and playful activism. These identity-based narratives position donors as central figures, fostering emotionally gratifying appeals that risk promoting narcissistic self-contentment and appropriating local voices within Western discourses of virtue (Chouliaraki, 2010, pp. 9–10). This pseudo-activism extended until around 2015, where scholarship tends to shift its tone towards what I describe as current era humanitarian storytelling. This will be described in detail in subsequent sections.

To clarify this historical progression and the associated narrative and ethical shifts, I have taken the liberty of organizing these stages into three distinct zones in **Table 1**. These zones (the 'Shock Effect Appeals' era, the 'Positive Image Appeals' era, and the 'Post-Humanitarian Branding Era'), largely adapted from Chouliaraki (2010), capture the evolving relationship between humanitarian communication strategies, media formats, and the ethical complexities inherent in each phase. **Table 1** outlines this evolution, providing examples of characteristic campaigns, key narrative styles, and the predominant ethical dilemmas associated with each era. By structuring the historical narrative in this way, this visualization helps contextualize contemporary practices within a broader trajectory, setting the stage for further analysis of current ethical tensions faced by humanitarian communicators.

Table 1

Trends in Humanitarian Media Production

Phase	*Time Period*	*Narrative Style*	*Key Characteristics*	*Negative externalities*	*Example Campaigns*

Shock Effect Appeals	1960s–1980s	Guilt & pity-based messaging	Graphic imagery, emotionally intense, victim-focused	Dehumanization, compassion fatigue	Ethiopia famine, Biafra war
Positive Image Appeals	1990s	Hopeful, over-promising	Smiling children, success stories, empowerment	Oversimplification, Little on-going support	Save the Children's progress brochures
Post-Humanitarian Branding Era	2000s~2015	Branded altruism, playful activism	Hashtags, influencers, donor-as-hero, identity-based appeals	Narcissism, shallow engagement, erasure of local voices	Kony 2012, Product RED, Live 8

Source: Author, based on descriptions and differentiations from Lissner (1979), Boltanski (1999), and Chouliaraki (2010)

Research Area

This project examines how communication practitioners in humanitarian contexts perceive and navigate emerging risks associated with storytelling strategies in social media environments, balancing ethical standards against platform-driven pressures. Specifically, it investigates the effects of these strategies, referred to here as *digital storytelling*, on the representation of crisis-affected individuals, considering implications for their dignity and agency.

Current literature highlights a significant gap regarding practitioner perspectives on ethical tensions introduced by digital storytelling. Although previous research extensively addresses emotional framing in humanitarian narratives (Chouliaraki, 2006) and highlights the market-driven orientation of humanitarian storytelling (Madianou, 2019), there is limited attention to how practitioners practically navigate these conflicting pressures on social media platforms. This gap is critical, as these communicators directly shape narratives influencing public perceptions and donor engagement while upholding ethical representation standards.

Theory & Future

A critical transformation in humanitarian communication has occurred through shifts in storytelling practices shaped by digital platforms. These narratives shape how Western spectators emotionally engage with suffering abroad, fostering a sense of pity and moral proximity to the situations that said narratives refer to (Chouliaraki, 2006). As organizations increasingly adopt social media as their primary storytelling tool, their legitimacy has become closely tied to visibility and engagement metrics. This has created dual pressures: while humanitarian agencies claim to uphold ethical accountability to crisis-affected communities, digitized feedback mechanisms are "directed to donors as evidence of 'impact'" (Madianou et al., 2016, p. 960) complicating efforts to serve both audiences effectively.

Formal ethical standards for NGOs, such as the *Sphere Handbook* (2018) and UNICEF's *Communication for Humanitarian Action Toolkit* (2015), offer structured guidelines emphasizing accountability, dignity, informed consent, and agency. The *Sphere Handbook* explicitly mandates communication practices that prioritize the dignity and autonomy of communities portrayed, discouraging exploitative imagery. Similarly, UNICEF's toolkit (2015) provides protocols for ethically navigating emergency contexts, including consent and safeguarding. Despite these established frameworks, practitioners frequently encounter challenges applying ethical guidelines within the rapidly evolving, metrics-driven social media context.

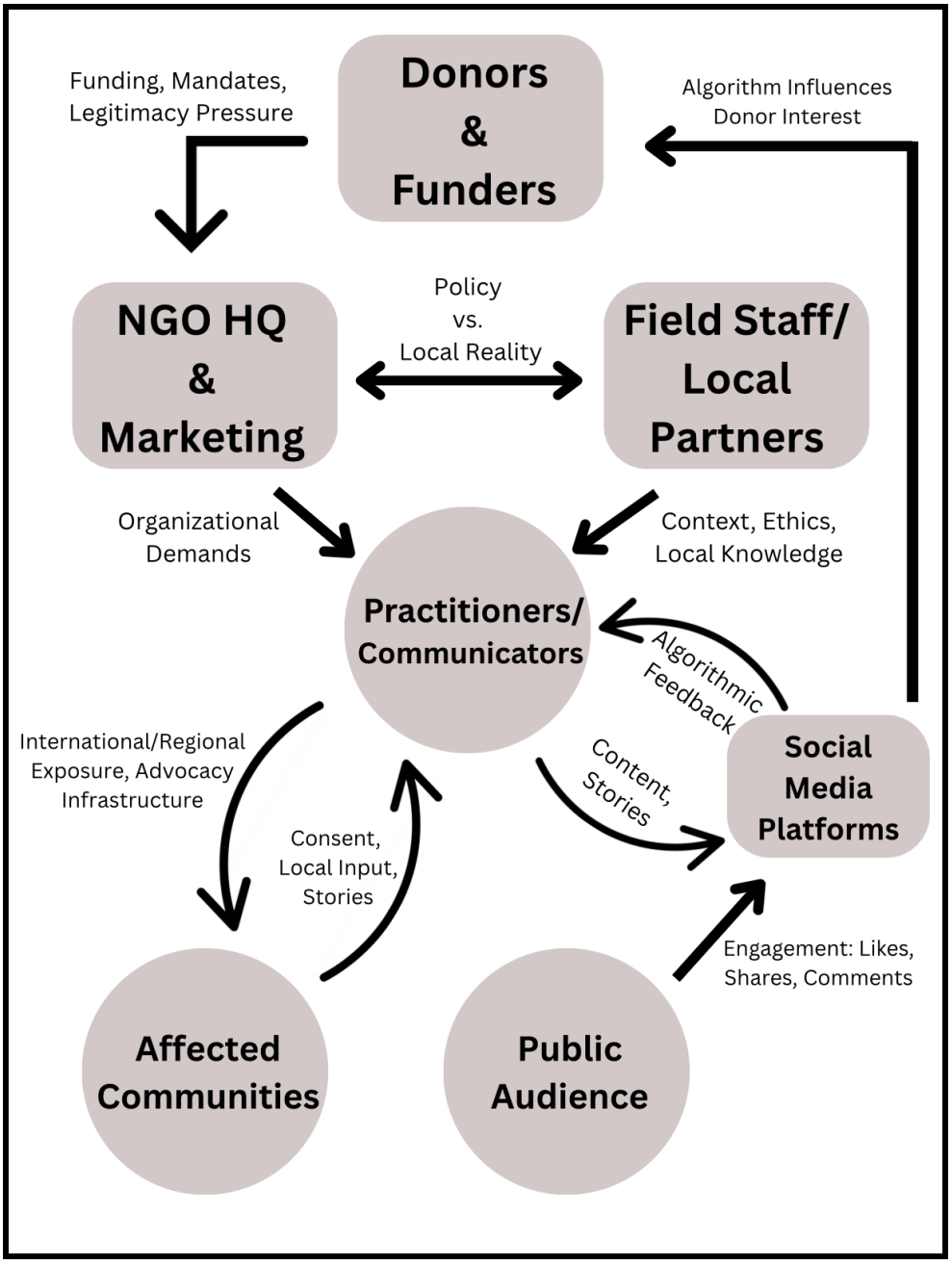
Humanitarian organizations on social platforms increasingly tailor their narratives to fit the aesthetic and algorithmic demands of those media. Visuals are chosen for their emotional impact: as Lee et al. (2022, p. 751) note, images "can convey a situation more vividly than text, [and] more effectively trigger a sense of immediacy and emotion". In practice, NGOs' Twitter and Instagram posts often favor highly affective scenes – for example, close‑ups of an individual

survivor or aid worker – because such frames reliably boost clicks and shares. This means that broad contexts or structural causes tend to be downplayed in favor of gripping personal anecdotes. Cooney-Petro (2019) shows how Instagram's interface and attention economy encourage aid workers to construct visually appealing "white savior" personas. These narratives, shaped to perform well within platform logics, prioritize the volunteer's imageability and optimism, often at the expense of narrative complexity or local contextual depth. As Sajir and Aouragh (2019, p. 553) caution, the result is often only fleeting sympathy: shocking images may "awaken a sense of compassion at first," but without deeper engagement they become merely a "perversion of compassion", reinforcing existing power hierarchies rather than motivating sustained solidarity.

Figure 1 maps the main players in humanitarian storytelling: donors, NGO HQ and marketing, field staff and local partners, practitioners, affected communities, public audiences, and social media platforms. It shows how funding pressures, organizational policy, local realities, and algorithm-driven engagement shape what stories get told and how. The diagram makes clear that practitioners sit at the center, navigating competing demands from above (funders and HQ), from the field, from communities themselves, and from the algorithms and engagement metrics of social media. Seeing how these relationships overlap and influence each other is key to understanding the ethical tensions discussed in this study.

Figure 1

Key Stakeholders in the pipeline of Humanitarian Aid



Source: Author

Representation and Voice from Vulnerable Communities

By contrast, the literature on representation and voice emphasizes the political and ethical stakes of these digital practices. Scholars warn that social‑media campaigns often privilege Western institutional frames at the expense of local agency. Kim (2022, p. 719) observes that

NGOs “advocate refugees in ways that homogenize and silence their voices,” reinforcing an institutional humanitarian imaginary that centers organizational legitimacy over local agency. These dynamics underscore the need for authentic participatory storytelling frameworks that empower rather than marginalize local voices. In other words, refugees are portrayed more as objects of aid than as narrators of their own experience. Cooney-Petro (2019) critiques how these branded performances not only center the aid worker but visually marginalize the people they serve. This visual framing turns affected individuals into narrative props, reinforcing representational hierarchies that exclude local voices from authorial control. Sajir and Aouragh (2019, p. 553) observe that digital images can even lapse into familiar colonial tropes. They note that some humanitarian photos “become manifestations of orientalist clichés that demobilize” affected communities. These examples highlight a broader power imbalance. Absent deliberate, participatory approaches, online storytelling tends to reproduce Western-centric discourses. Participatory ethics would instead call for content that is co-created with refugee or community voices, but without such approaches digital platforms often leave local perspectives unheard, reinforcing rather than challenging existing inequalities.

Building Legitimacy in the Current Media Context

Humanitarian storytelling continues to grapple with maintaining legitimacy through narratives tailored to donor expectations and visibility metrics. Organizations self-legitimize by showcasing effectiveness and relevance through narratives strategically designed to resonate with stakeholders. As Vestergaard (2013) argues, mediatized humanitarianism shifts the moral agency of action toward donors, placing NGOs in competition for attention in a crowded public sphere. This logic of visibility creates friction with ethical frameworks such as the Sphere Handbook (2018) and the Core Humanitarian Standard (2024), which emphasize participation,

informed consent, and accountability to affected communities. As Madianou et al. (2016) show, even digital accountability tools like feedback mechanisms often serve donor visibility goals rather than community empowerment. Practitioners, therefore, must navigate the tension between donor-driven performance metrics and the ethical imperative to represent communities with integrity and care.

Metrics-Driven Storytelling

Social metrics such as likes, shares, and views increasingly define organizational visibility, significantly influencing content strategy (Orlov, 2017, p. 10). Algorithms amplify emotionally charged content, privileging immediate reactions over nuanced narratives. Facebook's ranking algorithm, for instance, gives preference to content that receives reactions such as "like, love, sad, [and] anger" mirroring the emotional responses users are most inclined to choose themselves (as cited by Orlov, 2017). Such metrics create a self-reinforcing cycle, pressuring organizations to produce emotionally compelling material, potentially undermining dignified portrayals of crisis-affected communities. Thus, communicators face ethical dilemmas between maximizing algorithmic engagement and preserving nuanced, ethical storytelling.

Ethical Tensions in Digital Storytelling

Practitioners must frequently negotiate ethical dilemmas surrounding consent, dignity, and agency in digital narratives. Humanitarian storytelling risks reducing complex political, social, and cultural dynamics to oversimplified representations, perpetuating stereotypes and fostering moral detachment (Chouliaraki, 2013; Boltanski, 1999). Practitioners often employ internal editorial safeguards, anonymization practices, and community consultations to mitigate ethical risks. However, consent procedures remain challenging due to power imbalances and

cultural complexities, underscoring the ongoing tension between ethical storytelling and visibility pressures.

Gaps and Practitioner Perspectives

Despite theoretical insights, scholarship remains sparse on practical strategies and practitioner experiences managing these ethical tensions. Kim (2022, p. 719) emphasizes a gap within Humanitarian studies, showing how NGO's often advocate for refugees in ways that "homogenize and silence their voices" rather than supporting agency-driven narratives. While resources such as UNICEF's Toolkit (2015) and participatory storytelling approaches provide theoretical guidance, they lack detailed strategies responsive to the dynamic pressures of social media. Addressing this gap, this study focuses explicitly on practitioner decision-making processes, offering actionable insights to ethically navigate digital storytelling complexities.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

Q1. How do humanitarian communication professionals describe the ethical tensions they face when using social media to tell stories of crisis-affected populations?

Q2. How do social media metrics influence the narrative strategies and decision-making processes of humanitarian communicators?

Q3. What strategies are employed to preserve the dignity, safety, and representation of crisis-affected individuals in digital storytelling?

Q4: How do organizational mandates and stakeholder pressures (e.g., donors, state actors, internal leadership) shape digital humanitarian narratives?

Method

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate communication practitioners' experiences with ethical challenges in digital storytelling. A qualitative approach

was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of the meanings and interpretations that individuals ascribe to complex social phenomena. In this context, quantitative measurement would not capture the nuanced ethical tensions and legitimacy concerns inherent in storytelling practices. Qualitative inquiry was therefore appropriate for understanding practitioners' perspectives in their real-world organizational settings. The study design integrated two qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, to gather both personal narratives and visual evidence. As Creswell (2013) observes, using interviews alongside other qualitative data can enhance the validity of findings by providing corroborating evidence. Overall, the interpretive, multi-method design allowed the research to capture both practitioners' firsthand accounts and concrete examples of digital storytelling campaigns, aligning with the study's aim to understand how and why ethical challenges are perceived and navigated.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Justification and Design: Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, selected for their ability to elicit detailed insights while maintaining a flexible structure. Interviews enable participants to describe experiences and viewpoints in their own words, yielding rich, contextually grounded data. A semi-structured format was used to ensure consistency across interviews (through a core set of guiding questions) while allowing the interviewer and participants to diverge and probe emergent topics in depth. This balance was important given the sensitive and complex nature of ethical storytelling practices. The format provided enough guidance to cover key ethical issues (e.g. consent, representation) and sufficient openness for practitioners to raise unforeseen challenges.

Such an approach is well-supported in qualitative methodology: Creswell (2013) identifies one-on-one interviews as a key technique for exploring participants' perspectives on a

phenomenon, and other scholars note that semi-structured interviews offer both depth and flexibility in qualitative inquiry. Moreover, the use of interviews is common in humanitarian research. For example, Benson et al. (2024) conducted qualitative interviews with humanitarian practitioners to examine participatory digital health projects, and Sultana et al. (2023) relied on in-depth and key-informant interviews to study challenges in a refugee context. These studies demonstrate that interviewing experts and staff in humanitarian organizations is an appropriate and effective method for gathering data on practices and perceptions in the field.

Participants and Recruitment: A total of eight communication practitioners (already interviewed prior to this write-up) participated in the study. They were experienced professionals working in or with humanitarian organizations, holding roles such as Digital Communications Specialist, Communications Director, Media Manager, and Advocacy Consultant. The sample included individuals from a United Nations agency, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and a private consulting firm that works with NGOs. Their organizations varied in size and geographic scope (some operated globally, while others focused on regions such as South Asia, North America, or Europe) and they represented different areas of humanitarian intervention (e.g. child protection, emergency relief, public health). (See **Table 2** for an overview of participants' pseudonyms, roles, organization type, geographic focus, and sector of work.)

Table 2

Research Participants from Various Humanitarian Aid Organizations

ID	Job_Title	Location	Experience (Years)	Specialization/Area	Sector	Interview_Date
1	Digital Communication	Kathmandu, Nepal	~20	Advocacy, Digital Storytelling	Humanitarian	May 7th, 7:00am

		Specialist					
	2	Chief of Comms & Advocacy	Kathmandu, Nepal	20+	Crisis Comms, Advocacy Strategy	Humanitarian	April 28th, 7:15pm
	3	Photo Director	Federal Way, WA, USA	21	Visual Storytelling, Photography	NGO	April 23rd, 2:00pm
	4	Senior Digital Marketing Manager	Federal Way, WA, USA	~8	Digital Marketing, Social Media	NGO	May 13th, 1:30pm
	5	National Director of Student Engagement	Spokane, WA, USA	20+	Outreach, Organizational Culture	Private/ NGO	April 28th, 2:00pm
	6	Senior Global Media Manager	London, UK	10+	Media Relations, Conflict Zones	Humanitarian	May 9th, 3:00pm
	7	Chief of Comms & Advocacy	Dhaka, Bangladesh	6+	International Advocacy, Comms	Humanitarian	April 27th, 9:00pm
	8	Communications and Advocacy Specialist	Not Specified (Protection)	9	Child Protection, Social Media Management	Humanitarian	May 9th, 12:00pm

Source: Author

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with digital storytelling in humanitarian settings. Initial contacts were identified via professional networks and public profiles (e.g. LinkedIn, organizational websites), and then a snowball sampling strategy was employed whereby early informants referred the researcher to other qualified participants. This approach of combining purposive and snowball techniques is

commonly used to reach knowledgeable experts in humanitarian communication (as reflected in Benson et al., 2024).

All participants received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose and procedures, and they gave informed consent before taking part. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided aside from the opportunity to contribute to research on improving ethical practice.

Interview Procedure: Interviews were conducted between April and May 2025 via Zoom, given the international distribution of participants. Each interview lasted approximately 35–65 minutes. An interview guide was used to ensure key topics were covered, structured around the study's four research questions (e.g. questions about ethical tensions, influence of social media metrics, strategies for dignity in storytelling, and organizational pressures). However, the semi-structured guide allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or explore new examples raised by the interviewee. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure data quality, the researcher reviewed each transcript while listening to the recording, correcting any transcription errors and redacting any identifying information (e.g. specific names of individuals or sensitive organizational details).

Participants' identities were anonymized in the transcripts; each was assigned a code or pseudonym, and references to their organizations were generalized (for instance, *large international NGO* instead of the specific NGO name) to protect confidentiality. Throughout the interview process, ethical safeguards were strictly observed. Interviewees were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. The study protocol and materials (recruitment email, consent form, interview guide) were reviewed and

approved by the University of Washington's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection began. All data were handled in compliance with ethical guidelines for research with human subjects: recorded audio and transcripts were stored securely (in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher), and only de-identified quotes are used in reporting the findings.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis Approach: Data from the interviews and accompanying visuals (provided by the interviewees) were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the widely-recognized framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's approach was chosen because it offers a clear, systematic process for coding and theme development, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate different types of qualitative data.

Adhering to their six-phase procedure, the researcher first familiarized himself with the data by reading all interview transcripts and case content multiple times and taking initial notes. Next, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset. In practice, this meant open-coding each transcript line-by-line in NVivo qualitative analysis software (QSR International, 2024) and similarly coding segments of campaign text or imagery that related to the research questions. Each code represented a meaningful feature of the data (for example, a code might be "informed consent process" or "audience engagement metrics" depending on the excerpt). After coding, the analyst searched for themes by grouping related codes and examining how they could form overarching thematic categories.

Themes were essentially patterns that captured something significant about the data in relation to the research questions. The candidate themes were then reviewed against the data to ensure they were coherent and grounded in the participants' accounts and content examples. This iterative review involved checking that each theme was supported by multiple quotes or pieces of evidence and refining the theme definitions as necessary. Once the thematic structure was satisfactory, the themes were defined and named more succinctly, and a narrative analytic report was produced (the final phase). Throughout this process, memos were written in NVivo to reflect on emerging insights and potential researcher bias, and the coding scheme was discussed with an academic supervisor to enhance reflexivity and rigor.

In sum, data analysis followed a rigorous thematic approach and intentionally combined evidence from interviews and visual analysis. This analytic strategy yielded a set of well-substantiated themes addressing research questions, providing a cohesive picture of how humanitarian communication practitioners perceive and navigate ethical challenges in digital storytelling for organizational legitimacy.

Limitations

The study faces the difficulties of tackling a complex and multidisciplinary topic with a global scope. Importantly, the interview sample size (eight participants) limits the possibilities for generalization. The practitioners that I conversed with are busy people, but those who made time for this study were kind and generous enough to engage in 40–80 minute focused conversations despite their extremely tight schedules, after a full-day's work, and in the face of difficulties in the field due to federal funding cuts. The depth of their candid conversations and the richness of detail help compensate for the limited number of interviews. Moreover, geographic bias may be present, as practitioners predominantly represented organizations

operating in South Asia, Europe, and North America, neglecting diverse contexts such as Latin America or Sub-Saharan Africa. The qualitative nature of the research, while rich in detail, restricts the breadth of comparative analysis that larger, quantitative studies might provide.

Contextually, platform-specific limitations posed significant challenges. Engagement metrics vary considerably across platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, complicating standardized analysis of their impacts on narrative strategies. Thus, metric impact had to be generalized, notwithstanding the nuanced differences between each algorithm that alter their usage, utility, and risk. Additionally, cultural nuances around storytelling and consent significantly influenced responses, highlighting a need for culturally sensitive frameworks adaptable across diverse operational contexts.

Future research could address these gaps by employing mixed-method approaches, larger and geographically diverse samples, and comparative analyses across different platforms and cultural contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies might offer insights into how evolving platform algorithms continuously reshape humanitarian storytelling.

Findings

This section presents the primary themes I've identified across eight semi-structured interviews with humanitarian communication professionals. Guided by the study's research questions, the following four categories each contain 2-3 major themes anchored in participant responses.

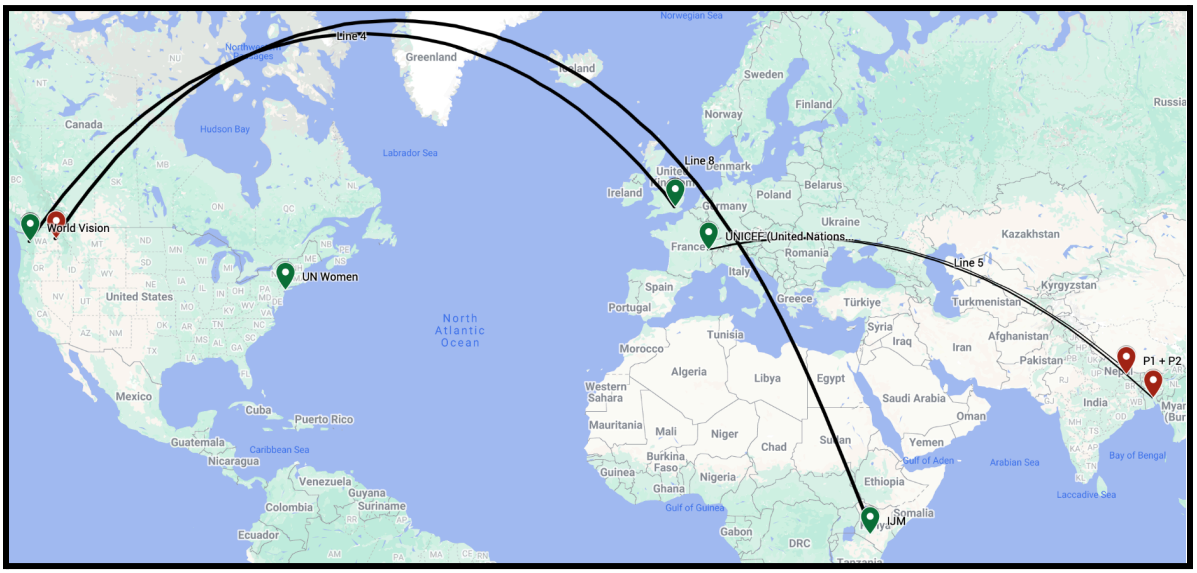
The findings highlight the difficult terrain practitioners navigate: working under political pressure, negotiating audience engagement metrics, and maintaining ethical standards in the portrayal of vulnerable populations. Rather than treating ethical decisions as isolated dilemmas with standardized and singular rules or standards, participants described a dynamic process of

negotiation: between personal conviction, organizational policy, and the platform logic of social media.

To contextualize the scope of the study, **Figure 1** provides a geographical map of the organizational headquarters and fieldwork sites associated with the interview participants. These range from international NGO offices in London, New York, and Geneva, to regional and country teams based in Kathmandu, Dhaka, Federal Way, Washington. This visual illustrates the global and multi-layered nature of the communicative challenges explored in this chapter.

Figure 1

Geographic Distribution of Interview Participants



Note: This map illustrates the locations of each humanitarian participant's organizational base (green) and their fieldwork regions (red). Lines denote distance between participants in the field and their NGO Headquarters.
Not pictured: P8 (for security reasons)

Each of the following sections is structured around a few core themes, supported by anonymized direct quotations and, where relevant, visual examples of communication outputs. These include representative social media campaign posts, illustrating the aesthetic and narrative decisions

practitioners make under pressure. Following this, the discussion synthesizes the structural forces at play (donor influence, audience response metrics, and organizational mandate) into a working model of the ethical field humanitarian communicators inhabit.

RQ1: Ethical Tensions in Social Media Storytelling

Participants had no trouble recalling within their content the many ethical dilemmas that they've experienced, conceptualized by real experiences in the field with vulnerable populations (commonly referred to as "rights holders" by the participants). Two themes were especially prevalent in the coding of these interviews related to these quandaries. These being the situational balance between representation and protection, as well as an acknowledgement of the relationship between consent and exploitation.

Balancing Representation and Protection: Several participants articulated the difficulty of crafting emotionally resonant stories while maintaining the dignity and safety of subjects. Even when content was powerful or visually striking, several interviewees described walking away from its use due to concerns over re-traumatization or exposure. One participant mentioned, "If the [country office] felt uncomfortable with the story, we just wouldn't run it" (P8, 27:21) while another emphasized "We never publish images unless we have complete sign-off" (P8, 25:29).

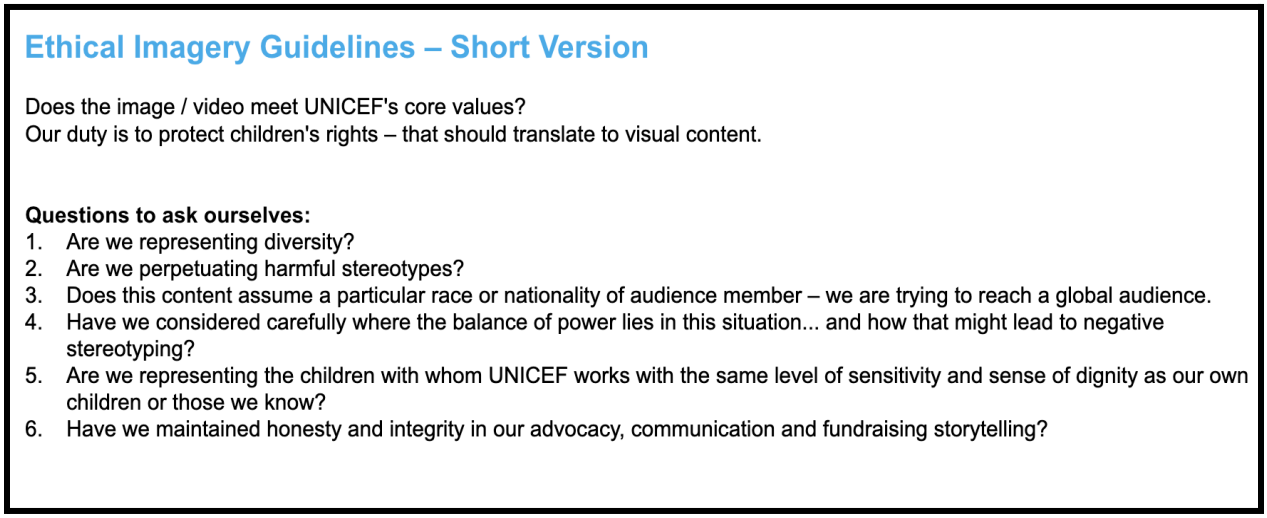
This process of restraint was often grounded in personal ethics, not just institutional policy. While some described detailed review systems (legal, communications, and protection staff), others spoke of something like a "gut check" where practitioners deferred to their individual discomfort as part of the discernment process.

One participant framed this well:

> We always start with the one starting point, which is: just imagine the situation—whether you're telling a story or writing a tweet—that the child you're talking about was your own child or a child from your family. Would you want to see them a certain way? Would you want to talk about them a certain way? Would you want to protect them a certain way? - *P1, 24:33*

Figure 2

Ethical Imagery Guidelines – Short Version



Note: This visual, excerpted from P1's emergency communications training, summarizes six critical questions used by their organization to guide ethical visual storytelling. It provides a practical tool to help communicators align their content with their organization's core child protection values.

Consent and Exploitation: Participants made clear that consent in humanitarian contexts is rarely straightforward. While most organizations use written consent forms, several respondents questioned whether these truly reflect understanding, especially in situations involving language barriers, power dynamics, or aid dependency.

Participants emphasized that consent in humanitarian storytelling is rarely as clear-cut as signing a form. While most organizations employ formal consent procedures (often written and

translated) many interviewees reflected on the power asymmetries, cultural complexities, and social risks that undermine the ethical sufficiency of such processes.

One participant explained how consent can become a transactional byproduct of aid distribution: "What do we really have that person's consent to? Because the exchange feels like, 'I want to give you this vaccine, but can I also take a picture of you for our global annual report?' (P8, 16:43).

Another participant recounted a particularly harrowing example from their time with their organization in Iraq, where even strict adherence to consent protocol failed to protect the subject from post-publication harm:

> She signed the consent form […] but when the husband found out, he threatened to divorce her and move to another refugee camp. We immediately removed the image […] and not just that one, but the entire set. Because what if it shows up in Sweden six months later in a fundraising campaign? The reputational risk would be devastating […] and more importantly, we'd have failed her. - *P7, 40:00–41:30*

Figure 3

Organizational Digital Advocacy Post

Note: This figure highlights the educational crisis for girls in Afghanistan. The subject's identity is protected through anonymizing techniques (side angle and face mask), as discussed by participants among the many strategies to produce ethical storytelling (#LetMeLearn campaign, 2023)

This case illustrates how consent is not only a question of individual will but of social power. Even when a subject appears to freely grant permission, their choice may be constrained by unseen familial or cultural forces. Participant 7 went on to acknowledge the contradiction in the Iraqi example noted above: "My initial reaction was, 'It's not up to this man.' But in her environment, I am diminishing her rights if I insist on that" (P7, 41:30).

These reflections challenge the assumption that legal consent automatically translates to ethical consent. As a result, many practitioners rely on community consultations, local staff input, and personal judgment to supplement formal procedures. P2 stressed the importance of context sensitivity:

> You can have all the ethical standards in the world […] but in a really conservative society, it's challenging. A couple of weeks later, we'd get a hysterical call: "My daughter is all over social media in Afghanistan. Take it down." - *P2, 29:12*

Figure 4

Example of Anonymized Storytelling

Note: This video, posted to Youtube in 2022, tells the story of a handful of nameless and faceless Afghan girls who have been forced out of schooling following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Their identity has been concealed due to greater risk of exposure from social media.

For the woman addressed in the quote above, "informed consent" might've been established at one point, but clearly the information shifted in a way that reasonably caused her to shift her tone. Fortunately, some participants described using consent forms as conversation starters rather than endpoints (i.e. building relationships before pressing "record."). Others emphasized deferring to local staff or community leaders when unsure.

RQ2: Influence of Social Media Metrics on Storytelling Decisions

Every participant I spoke with recognized that social media metrics have changed the way humanitarian stories are told. What gets posted, how it's framed, and whether it gets seen at all is often shaped by algorithms and engagement data. These three themes were prevalent in the coding process: First, participants described tension between performance metrics and storytelling integrity. Second, many explained how they resist letting metrics take over. Third, most described using visual and structural strategies to help ethical stories still reach people.

Challenges of Metrics Over Substance: Participants openly acknowledged the use of metric data (likes, shares, clicks) as a big component of their organization's social media campaigning. Many brought up the fact that metrics were often the most commonly referred to indicator of organizational success in their communication. However, this description was not universally accepted or rejected as a positive development, with some disagreement about how much these insights should influence content. "We have a social media team in HQ that is kind of obsessively analyzing our audience behaviors and responding to what they are looking for", one participant noted (P2, 33:39).

Another participant, P4, held a more positive view of social media engagement metrics. She saw them not as superficial indicators, but as a way to understand what stakeholders truly connect with and to refine content accordingly. This contrasts with other participants who were more critical of metrics and their influence on communication strategy.

> We look at every metric known to man. The quality metric that we focus on for social media in [*our organization]* is engagement rate […] are they sharing it or are they commenting on it enough that it's showing that they actually consumed that content […] We don't want to just put something out there for the sake of it. Like we want to know that it's resonating. - *P4, 12:46*

On the other hand, several participants admitted distaste with the growing pressure on them to chase engagement even when it conflicted with the organization's position. Interviewees spoke of internal tensions between marketing teams, who pushed for viral content, and field staff, who prioritized accuracy and dignity. P8 mentioned, "If I felt the conflict in Sudan wasn't getting a lot of engagement, it didn't mean that I would allow it for me to say […] I'm not going to talk about this anymore" (33:39).

Others still, reflected more of a middle path, discussing how difficult it is to create content that both resonates with audiences and holds ethical substance. They expressed that metrics such as impressions and reach may show that a post circulated widely, but they do not always indicate that it was understood or valued. P7, for example, described how pressure to adapt to fast-changing digital trends, like the shift from 90-second videos to 60, then 40, and now under 20 seconds, often conflicts with the depth required for meaningful communication. These

constraints can make it nearly impossible to convey complex issues like public health or education in a way that does them justice. “It’s very funny when they come and tell you that you have to produce a 20-second long video explaining the importance of vaccination for children under five […] That is impossible. We have really complex realities in the field.” (P7, 51:07).

Participants noted that the digital playing field often rewards emotional simplicity, urgency, or visually dramatic content, leaving complex or ongoing crises underrepresented. As one described it, engagement has become “a proxy for legitimacy”, but one that often fails to align with ethical priorities.

Resistance to Metrics-Driven Storytelling: Despite acknowledging these challenges, many participants described ways they pushed back against the pull of performance analytics. Several resisted posting content that might go viral if it meant compromising on ethics.

> I want to evoke a response in people […] what I don't want is for people to feel revulsion or to feel pity […] There's a huge temptation when you're doing it as a job, and the job is to raise money […] people get treated as objects. - *P3, 34:11*

Others challenged how success is typically measured on social media. Instead of focusing on how many people liked or shared a post, they described valuing the kind of feedback that showed the message actually made people think or act. One practitioner explained:

> We're putting much more store on comments and different forms of engagement so that our audiences are more active […] so that they internalize the content […] rather than do something kind of passive and almost kind of second nature. - *P2,*

50:38

She added that even within her organization, there's a divide between those chasing big numbers and those who care about deeper impact: "There are plenty of people in [my organization] who still like the big numbers of the likes. But there are enough of us who are going for more meaningful engagement." (P2, 51:17).

These insights show how ethical communicators are not passive victims of the platform but are active negotiators of its logic. They are actively working to subvert or reinterpret metrics where possible.

Importance of Visual and Structural Strategy:

Nearly all participants agreed that visuals remain essential. They emphasized their purpose, not just for engagement, but for clarity, credibility, and accessibility. P8 emphasized this: "If I found a relevant image, I'd add it. I didn't like doing text by itself." (33:40). These images, in addition to aesthetic related selection, are chosen to inform, contextualize, or validate the story being told.

Some organizations now encourage teams to use templates or layout guides to optimize posts for mobile devices and short attention spans, ensuring that ethical stories aren't just worthy, but also clickable. Participants described this as a form of resistance, using the platform's rules to elevate slower, more responsible storytelling.

RQ3: Strategies to Preserve Dignity, Safety, and Representation

After identifying the shift and modern problems that exist in the field of humanitarian communication, I asked the participants to share their navigation strategies through the various aforementioned ethical dilemmas. Their responses brought up two themes that represent much of

what the participants shared across organization and context. The first is that there has been an expansion of safeguarding principles that ensure greater protection for the communities on display. The second is related to new capacity for these organizations to take a more participatory approach to allow for greater self-actualization of people living within these crisis areas.

Editorial Safeguards and Anonymization: Participants consistently described internal processes designed to protect vulnerable individuals (especially children) from unintended exposure. These included name changes, geographic vagueness, and case-by-case risk assessments.

> We always try to change children's names and also adults' names as well, especially for sensitive stories. [...] If we are using a child's photo or parent's photo, then we won't use the real first name, and we wouldn't give the location. [...] We try to only do one of those things in the triangle. - *P6, 16:30*

These protocols reflect what some described as a "triangle of risk," in which organizations deliberately limit identifying details to reduce potential harm. "We also do risk assessments as well for the different cases […] if they are particularly sensitive." (P6, 18:00).

Empowerment and Participatory Framing: Rather than speak on behalf of communities, several practitioners described attempts to hand the mic to local voices, particularly to young people.

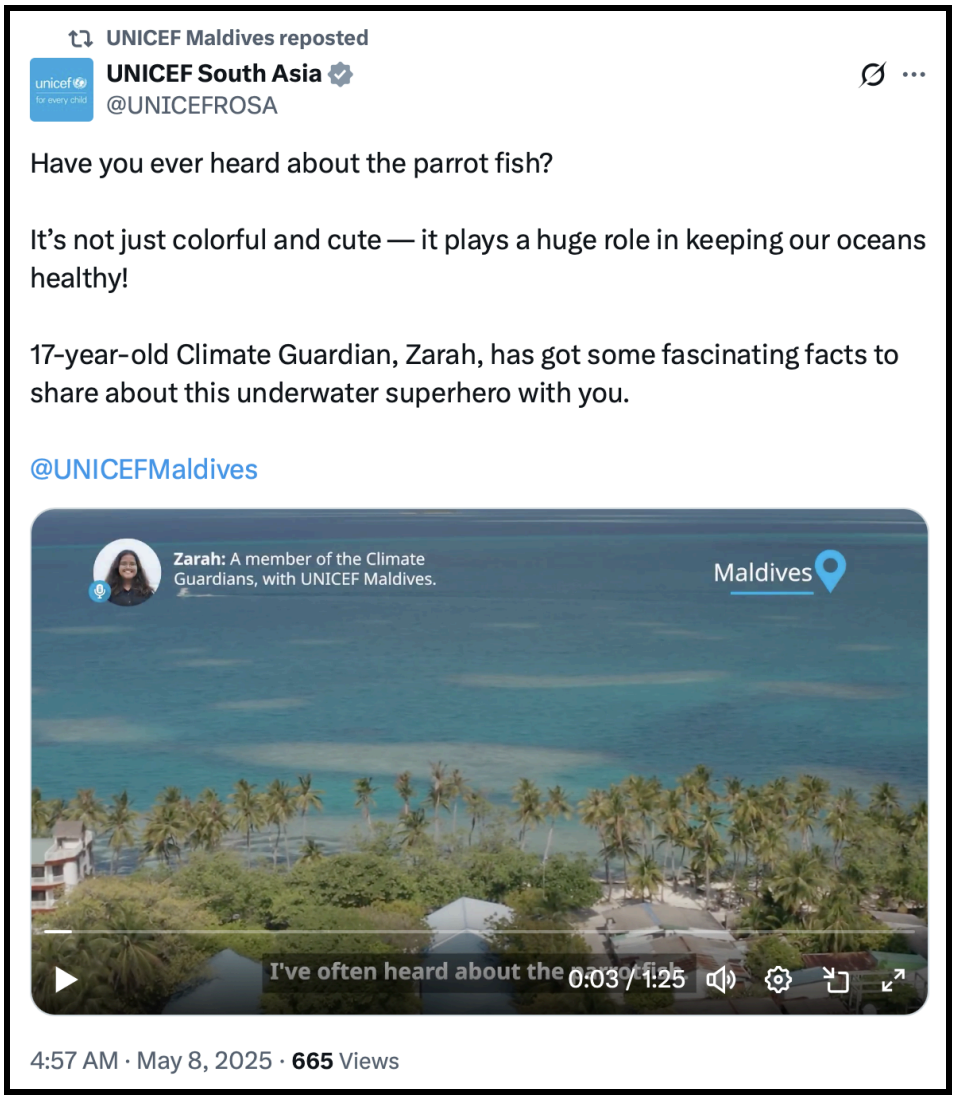
> There is a strong call to all of us in the communication family at [*my organization]* to put young people […] at the heart of everything we do. So rather than talk to them

and talk at them, listen to them, bring them into the conversation and let them share our messages in their own way. - *P2, 13:43*

We've got some really nice examples [...] where we hand the reins over to young people. We give them the information, try to get them excited and passionate and indignant about the importance of children's rights—and then let them run with it. - *P2, 12:52*

Figure 5

Youth Advocacy on X



Note: This visual, provided by P2, provides an example of local youth involvement in humanitarian issues. Zarah is a member of the Climate Guardians, which is a group of young people with whom the organization in South Asia works and supports in Maldives.

These changes show a move toward more inclusive storytelling, where communicators help others tell their own stories instead of speaking for them.

RQ4: Organizational and Stakeholder Pressures Shaping Narratives

Somewhat connected to the previous three sections, this last question focuses primarily on the responses that participants gave related to the restriction on their creative freedom,

coming from non-beneficiaries (i.e. anyone who is not a direct member of the community that has a humanitarian presence). Two themes emerged from their reflections: 1. A certain light-footedness that was required of geopolitical, cultural, and social identities present within donor groups. 2. The personal toll on these practitioners emerges from greater stress between these groups.

Narrative Expectations: Practitioners described how communications must carefully navigate pressure from donors, governments, and member states. Public neutrality, particularly within the UN system, or political restrictions or threats, often conflict with the expectation to "speak up." P8, alluded to this in describing one of the most tense times in her work experience: "Why aren't you saying anything about this?" or "Why won't you say who? Why won't you say Israel did it?" Those are the questions that we would get asked. That's quite difficult… because you're like, I can't say anything." (P8, 29:28)

> Let's imagine I am in Somalia and the government in Somalia doesn't want me to speak about violence and children—but I know that I have to. What should I do? I called my regional office. [...] So when the government complains, I can say, 'This is coming from our region, not my country office.' That gives me a buffer to keep communicating. - *P7, 34:45*

These quotes reveal the diplomatic maneuvers required to address sensitive issues while maintaining operational relationships, political safety, organizational risk mitigation and protection of both communicators and community members.

Emotional Impact on Practitioners: The emotional toll of this tension surfaced repeatedly. Monitoring audience comments became, at times, psychologically overwhelming.

> Sometimes it was difficult to read the comments. [...] People would respond with horrific images—kids being killed, homes bombed. That's difficult because I don't disagree with them. But I'm just a human. I'm doing my job. [...] This Instagram page is not going to solve the issue. - *P8 28:16*

This quote underscores the personal burden of front-line digital communication during global crises. Beyond content strategy, practitioners must balance ethical storytelling, organizational safety, and psychological well-being. **Table 3** below illustrates how these tensions manifest in their evaluations of social media as a net positive force in humanitarian communication.

Table 3

Practitioners Ranking Social Media Net Impact (Positive) in Humanitarian Communication

ID	Location	Specialization Area	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Kathmandu, Nepal	Advocacy, Digital Storytelling									⚫	
2	Kathmandu, Nepal	Crisis Comms, Advocacy Strategy									⚫	
3	Federal Way, WA, USA	Visual Storytelling, Photography					⚫					

4	Federal Way, WA, USA	Digital Marketing, Social Media										●
5	Spokane, WA, USA	Outreach, Organizational Culture					●					
6	London, UK	Media Relations, Conflict Zones								●		
7	Dhaka, Bangladesh	International Advocacy, Comms									●	
8	Not Specified	Child Protection, Social Media Management								●		

Source: Author and Interviewees
Note: Each ranking is taken from the participant's closing statement when asked "on a scale from 1 to 10, how confident are you that social media is a net positive tool for humanitarian communication?"

While the responses are mixed and sampling is limited, the responses that each practitioner produced reveal noticeable patterns by region and role. Most notably from my analysis, these differences align with specialization. Practitioners whose roles are deeply digital or media-focused tended to rate social media higher (e.g. P1, P2, P4 all 8–10), whereas those in traditional or mixed roles were more moderate (P3, P5 around 5). For instance, P4 (social media specialist) emphasized only positives ("90% of our stories are about hope"). This stands in stark contrast to P3 (photo manager), who explicitly noted that social media "can be a ten and...a zero" indicating that he views the positive impact to be generally equal to the negative, hence picking a midpoint of 5. Similarly, P5 (educator/outreach) likened social media to "a knife in a surgeon's hand", splitting her answer at 5.

Regionally, practitioners in South Asian contexts saw social media as crucial outreach. P1 and P2 highlighted its role in mobilizing youth and raising awareness in large, diverse populations, hence their high rating of social media as a net-positive tool. By contrast, it was

apparent that the U.S.-based humanitarian communicators exhibited wider variance. One factor may be organizational culture: A practitioner part of a dedicated social media team (P4) is fully invested and thus sees only gains, whereas a veteran photographer (P3) and a faith-based NGO communicator (P5) are verbally more attuned to social media's downsides.

Discussion

In grappling with the ethical tensions of humanitarian storytelling on social media, this discussion synthesizes the insights from eight practitioner interviews through the lens of key theories. Building on the findings section, this section weaves the four inquiries into the conversation but does so intermittently. Subsequently, this allows the reflection to be centered on the most meaningful analysis, implicitly responding to these research questions around post-humanitarian communication, communication ethics, and organizational legitimacy.

The practitioners' reflections reveal a balancing act between visibility and dignity, between the pull of engagement metrics and the push of ethical principles. They also highlight how organizational and platform dynamics shape narrative decisions, often in ways that echo the literature on the politics of representation and global/local power dynamics. What follows is my breakdown of the state of their responses in light of the literature.

Ethical Storytelling in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism

Contemporary humanitarian communication exists in a "post-humanitarian" era defined by branded campaigns, social media virality, and a blurring of marketing with morality. Scholars like Chouliaraki (2013) observe that NGOs now often engage audiences through "branded altruism" and playful activism, portraying the donor or supporter as a hero. Iconic and infamous examples, from the viral Kony 2012 campaign to Product RED, exemplify this trend of identity-based appeals that invite shallow engagement and can erase local voices. Our

interviewees are keenly aware of these dynamics. They described how social media has become integral to humanitarian work, yet noted that leveraging these platforms for good often entails ethical compromises. One of the communications officer's that I spoke with frankly admitted, it is "really difficult to bridge the gap" between a distant crisis (e.g. "someone…in a refugee camp") and "a potential donor in the U.S. who's never had to experience something like that". Unlike local causes (a neighborhood surrounding a child battling illness) where emotional connection comes naturally, global humanitarian issues require crafting narratives that make far-away suffering feel real.

So humanitarian communicators are tasked with showing the harsh realities of disasters and conflicts that will spur the public into action, without crossing the line into an exploitation of the rights holder. It appears as though social media is adding many layers to the internal conversations around these ethical dilemmas. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter amplify stories to global audiences in seconds, which is a huge opportunity for awareness. However, short form social media content can force complex human stories into bite-sized posts, risking nuance and context. This challenge specifically highlights Chouliaraki's (2013) notion of post-humanitarian communication, where marketing imperatives increasingly blend with humanitarian goals.

Several interviewees admitted they sometimes simplify or dramatize a story to fit platform trends, even if it doesn't capture the whole truth. The core principle they strive to uphold is authenticity: keeping the person who lived the story at the center. The story "must remain paramount" in its authenticity, even as technology changes how we share it. This means communicators try to let people speak for themselves whenever possible and avoid editing out the context that makes a story genuine. This remains quite a difficult path to navigate. Every

tweet or photo caption involves weighing ethical considerations against the potential to engage supporters.

Tensions Between Metric Performance and Dignity:

A major tension that emerged from our interviews is between gaining visibility for a cause and preserving the dignity of the people portrayed, all under the pressure of metrics. In the humanitarian world, success on social media is often measured in likes, shares, views, and donation clicks. Organizations hunger for posts that "go viral" to boost fundraising and public awareness. The communications officers we spoke with understand that gripping content (e.g. a sorrowful face of a child, a dramatic before-and-after story) usually performs best by these metrics. Yet, they feel uneasy about what it takes to achieve those numbers. One participant candidly noted that the posts that get the most engagement are often the ones that make her personally uncomfortable – posts that feel too much like "poverty porn." This creates a moral dilemma: do they post emotionally charged, even voyeuristic content to meet campaign targets, or do they hold back out of respect for the subject?

This dilemma is intensified by how social media algorithms work. Platforms inherently reward content that triggers strong reactions. In fact, a former Facebook executive admitted that the algorithm is designed to hit users with content that provokes shock and anger (Kendell, 2022). In practice, this means posts that are sensational or heartbreaking are more likely to be boosted on newsfeeds, reaching more people. Our interviewees are acutely aware of this reality. Some confessed feeling pressured to "post what performs well" even if it borders on exploitative, because otherwise their important stories might be ignored. They described an implicit tug-of-war between their conscience and the statistical dashboards. These practitioner experiences underscore concerns raised by Madianou (2019) about how the logic of visibility on

social media incentivizes emotionally charged content. Unlike Madianou (2019), there was a greater resignation to this market-driven dynamic than I had anticipated. Rather than uniformly resisting the algorithmic pressures, many communicators described adapting their strategies, reluctantly or pragmatically, to meet engagement benchmarks, revealing how ethical compromises are often framed as necessary trade-offs for organizational survival in a competitive attention economy.

At the same time, humanitarian communicators are guided by ethical standards that stress human dignity. Many organizations have signed on to codes of conduct that urge avoiding images or messages that stereotype or sensationalize suffering. These guidelines serve as a moral compass, reminding communicators that the mission isn't just to gain eyeballs at any cost. For instance, if an image is highly likely to grab attention but strips a person of dignity or context, several interviewees said they would decide against using it, even if it means fewer clicks. They are trying to redefine what "success" means in communications, looking beyond vanity metrics. Some suggested using more empowering narratives (e.g. survivors helping others) that might not be as shocking but still engage supporters in a respectful way. This ongoing tension between visibility, dignity, and metrics doesn't have easy answers, but it forces communicators to continually reflect on the purpose and impact of each post.

Organizational and Platform Pressures

Beyond personal ethics, our study found that humanitarian communicators operate under significant organizational and platform pressures. Internally, organizations often expect their communications teams to deliver quick and tangible results. Interviewees spoke about managers fixating on monthly engagement numbers, fundraising targets, and follower counts. One communicator described feeling like a "content factory" for the fundraising team, expected to

pump out gripping stories constantly to feed multiple social channels. This internal pressure can sometimes push staff toward ethical gray areas. For example, using a distressing image because a supervisor insists that "shock value" is needed for a campaign. The tension here is that individual communicators might want to take a more measured, respectful approach, but organizational goals and timelines demand otherwise. As a result, some interviewees admitted they've struggled to say no when higher-ups push for a certain story angle or more dramatic visuals to boost engagement.

On the external side, social media platform changes and algorithms create their own pressures. A striking example came up about Facebook's news feed algorithm changes. In 2018, Facebook decided to favor posts from friends and family over those from organizations, causing nonprofits' organic reach to plummet (Phillips, 2018). Suddenly, many NGOs saw their posts reaching only a fraction of their followers, jeopardizing online fundraising. One interviewee recalled how their team had to scramble when these changes hit – they either had to pay for ads or watch their messaging get buried. The feeling of being "at the mercy" of tech companies' decisions is very real. When Instagram tweaks its video priorities or Twitter (X) changes its content policies, humanitarian storytellers must adapt quickly or risk invisibility. Our participants talked about trying to keep up with trends (like the rise of TikTok) and format shifts, often with no additional resources. They face the challenge of making serious, sensitive content fit the mold of ever-changing social media trends.

All of this amounts to *a pressure cooker environment*: the platform dictates the rules of engagement (through algorithms and features), and the organization demands results. Communicators are caught in the middle, needing to be savvy digital strategists without compromising on ethics. It's a tough balance, and it has led some to advocate for diversifying

their outreach (for example, also using email newsletters or community events) so that everything isn't dependent on the whims of social media platforms. There is an ethical boundary that many practitioners actively defend, even within this pressure cooker environment. Contrary to critiques like Chouliaraki's (2010), which emphasize how humanitarian communication has become increasingly governed by a "logic of spectacle" that commodifies suffering for Western audiences, my findings complicate this narrative. While practitioners are indeed embedded within a visibility economy, they are not passive executors of its demands. Several of my interviewees described moments where they intentionally resisted platform incentives (such as refusing to post visually sensational content, even when it promised higher engagement) because doing so would have conflicted with their local ethical norms or the dignity of the people they serve. I believe that this analysis strengthens Chouliaraki's theory by adding a layer of agency and reflexivity to the role of the communicator as a key stakeholder in the humanitarian communication pipeline. Ethical resistance, however constrained by the market or platform, is a useful feature of digital humanitarianism that deserves attention.

Global-Local Dynamics of Representation

Our findings also highlight the complex dynamics between global and local perspectives in humanitarian storytelling. Often, the people creating social media content for an international NGO are based in a headquarters or a country different from where the story is unfolding. This can lead to a disconnect: what resonates with a Western donor audience might not ring true to the local community in the story. One interviewee from an NGO's Africa regional office shared that a campaign slogan crafted by the European HQ felt patronizing to people on the ground in Kenya. It was a sobering reminder that tone and messaging need to be tuned to cultural context. A recurring point in our interviews was the importance of involving local staff and even the story

subjects themselves in the content process. Several participants said they now consult colleagues in-country to double-check if an image or phrasing is appropriate and respectful before posting. This helps avoid embarrassing missteps where a well-intentioned story might unintentionally offend or misrepresent the people it's about. This growing emphasis on involving local colleagues and checking for cultural resonance reflects broader scholarly critiques such as Kim's (2022) call for more equitable storytelling practices that resist Western-centric narrative framing.

Another aspect of the global-local tension is whose voice gets to tell the story. Traditionally, crisis narratives have been told about people in vulnerable situations, but not by them. This power imbalance is gradually being addressed. Some humanitarian communicators are trying to shift from speaking for communities to amplifying the voices of those communities. For example, an interviewee mentioned a project where refugees were given cameras and social media access to share their own stories directly, rather than having an aid worker narrate it for them. This kind of approach can foster more authentic representation, though it comes with challenges like training and ensuring safety. Scholars like Kim (2022) emphasize that such shifts toward community-led storytelling are not just best practices but necessary correctives to historically Western-centric approaches that have dominated humanitarian narratives. The literature also underscores this shift: many organizations now avoid demeaning labels like "beneficiary" or "the vulnerable" and use more empowering terms that imply agency. Our interview data supports this trend – participants noted that even small word choices can either reinforce old stereotypes or help change them. They strive to portray people as active agents (survivors, rebuilders, community leaders) rather than passive victims.

Language and translation issues further complicate global-local representation. Stories often have to be translated into English (or another major language) for global fundraising,

which can flatten out culturally specific nuances. One communicator shared how a survivor's quote in Arabic lost some meaning when translated to English for a Twitter post, illustrating how easy it is to inadvertently misrepresent intent. Additionally, obtaining truly informed consent across different languages and literacy levels is an ongoing struggle. As highlighted by one participant, getting "meaningful consent" may require in-depth, culturally aware conversations through translators (something that is hard to do in fast-moving emergency situations). Our participants recognized that communities in the Global South might use social media differently or not at all, which affects how stories should be shared or even whether they should be on social media in the first place. In summary, communicators are learning that ethical storytelling isn't one-size-fits-all globally. It demands humility and collaboration with local voices to represent people fairly and accurately.

Practical Implications for Communicators

Reflecting on these findings, there are several practical lessons for humanitarian communicators who want to navigate ethical tensions more effectively. Below are some key implications and suggestions that emerged from our discussions and the literature:

Prioritize dignity and consent: Always ensure the people featured in stories have given informed consent and understand how their story will be used. Wherever possible, give them a say in how they are portrayed. This aligns with emerging sector standards calling for accurate, respectful communication that preserves people's dignity and agency. Communicators should treat subjects not as passive "beneficiaries," but as partners in storytelling.

Balance emotion with context: Emotional content drives engagement, but don't sacrifice context for the sake of shock value. Strive to include background information that educates the audience about the broader situation, not just a heart-tugging image or quote. Before

posting, ask if you would be comfortable if you or your family were depicted that way. This gut check can prevent the most egregious cases of sensationalism and help maintain respect.

Redefine success metrics: Encourage your organization to look beyond likes and shares as the only measures of success. For example, track qualitative feedback or long-term engagement (like volunteers recruited or petitions signed) that result from a story. Internally, make the case that a post can be worthwhile even if it doesn't "go viral," as long as it reaches the right people or inspires action consistent with your mission. By broadening what counts as impact, you reduce the pressure to resort to clickbait. As the *Core Humanitarian Standard* update suggests, fundraising and publicity efforts should "not compromise the organisation's mission and values".

Develop ethical guidelines and training: Given the fast pace of social media, having a clear set of internal guidelines can help communicators make tough calls on the fly. These might include do's and don'ts specific to your context (e.g. no photos of patients without consent, no language that infantilizes communities, etc.). Regular training and discussions on ethical storytelling can keep the team alert to issues. Importantly, create an environment where staff can push back if they feel a piece of content violates ethical standards. Support from leadership here is crucial – communicators should know that saying "this post feels exploitative" will be taken seriously, even if it means reworking a campaign.

Empower local voices: Whenever feasible, involve people from the affected community in creating and vetting content. This could mean hiring local storytellers, using user-generated content (with permission and guidance), or collaborating with field staff to shape narratives. Not only does this practice lead to more authentic stories, it also builds trust with communities. It

moves organizations toward the ideal of being “client-led” in their narratives, not just client-centered, which ultimately makes storytelling more ethical and impactful.

Advocate for structural change in market forces:

Finally, communicators should not simply adapt to platform dynamics, rather they should advocate for structural change. This means engaging funders, leadership, and peers in honest conversations about the costs of chasing virality at the expense of effective humanitarianism. However limited each individual may feel, it remains imperative to push for the reallocation of resources toward alternative forms of outreach (community events, podcasts, newsletters, other slower narrative formats), as a resistance against aid that is beholden to algorithmic incentives. Where possible, advocate for new KPIs (key performance indicator) that reflect the mandates that your organization has declared in their mission statements. By naming and challenging the market-driven pressures that shape the humanitarian media landscape, communicators can play a role in shifting norms across the sector. As this research shows, ethical resistance is already happening behind the scenes. The next step is to make that resistance more visible, more collective, and more influential.

By implementing these approaches, humanitarian communicators can better align their social media strategies with their ethical values. The challenges are real, from algorithm changes to donor expectations, but a clear commitment to ethical storytelling can guide decision-making. In an age where a single tweet can spread worldwide, taking the time to respect the people at the heart of each story is essential, not merely optimal. The discussion above shows that while there are no perfect solutions, being reflective and principled in humanitarian communication leads to more trustworthy and effective storytelling in the long run.

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