The myth of giving as good: Charitable giving represented as an end in itself

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between viewers and beneficiaries of televised charity fundraising campaigns of various types has been researched and theorised in various ways, perhaps most influentially by Boltanski (1999) and Chouliaraki (e.g. 2006). In this article, I focus on an aspect of this relationship foregrounded by Boltanski: the degree to which viewers are encouraged to consider it possible to take action to prevent the suffering they are presented with. I draw on the concept of myth (Barthes, 2009) in order to study the degree to which fundraising is imbued with additional meanings, while other potential actions are obscured. Importantly, I apply these theories to an under-researched genre of charity communication: the intra-national telethon (in this case, the 2011 edition of the BBC's 'Children in Need'). I complement analysis of this programme with that of a series of focus groups carried out in the fortnight following this broadcast with groups of people who have different professional and voluntary relationships with UK-based charities. I apply Rhetorical Discourse Analysis (Arribas-Ayllon et al., 2013) to the data because of its unique focus on accounts as a pervasive social activity; in both mediated and spoken charity discourse, the request for money and the response (or lack thereof) to such requests requires the constant production of justifications.

The analysis presented here forms part of a larger project, which examined how beneficiaries of charities are represented in a UK intra-national media text and in focus group discussions in the same period (November 2011). The UK regards itself as a charitable country. In the year 2011–12, 55% of the population made donations to charitable causes in a typical month (Dobbs et al., 2012: 4). Yet only a small percentage (17%) of private donations were made to overseas Charities Aid Foundation (2012: 13). While the idea of charity for many people, and certainly for many researchers, seems to be tied up in a paternalistic, imperialist narrative, in which the rich West gives to the poor East (Burman, 1994: 30; Burnell, 1992), this is not, in reality, what most charitable giving consists of. Meanwhile, other modes of action such as meeting face-to-face and giving practical help are engaged in less frequently than giving. In 2011–12, for example, only around 25% of people formally volunteered in a typical month (NCVO, 2015). This raises the question: why donate to a national charity? That is to say: how are UK citizens encouraged to donate to UK-based charities over other possible modes of action? The present paper primarily addresses this question, by focussing on how viewers of a national telethon called 'Children in Need' (henceforth CiN) are called upon to respond to the suffering they see (by donating

money) and how viewers and potential viewers of this programme position themselves in relation to this request.

1. Literature review

The overarching analytic focus for this paper, and for the project on which it is based, is the concept of 'distance' between people (in this case, primarily donors and beneficiaries), a concept that unites many of the existing studies on the relationship between people who suffer and those who view their suffering. While it intuitively makes sense that the experience of encountering suffering face-to-face is radically different from viewing it on television, the extant literature has attributed this difference to the greater degree of distance between the viewer and the viewed in televised encounters. Boltanski's seminal 'Distant Suffering' (1999) foregrounds this idea, but his thesis has largely been interpreted as referring to the mediated interactions that take place between viewers and sufferers on different continents (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006). In the present study, I extend the notion of distance to include not only physical distance between viewers and sufferers, but metaphorical types of distance, such as the extent to which action to alleviate this suffering is perceived as realistic.

Bilandzic (2006: 333) describes the metaphorical distance between viewers/readers and viewed/read as *perceived* closeness/

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distance. One of the two aspects of perceived closeness is what she refers to as *mediated* closeness, which marks the viewer's engagement in the narrative, which is dependent on factors such as the skill of the storyteller. This concept is similar to what others have called 'immersion' or 'transportation', in which readers of a given book or viewers of a film or television programme become so engrossed in the life of the character/s in these texts that they lose awareness of their own lives and become less critical of what they are viewing (Green and Brock, 2000: 701). According to Cohen (2001), there are four key ways in which viewer/readers respond to a given character when they are immersed in a narrative. Firstly, they respond emotionally, sharing in the feelings of the character. Secondly, they take on the perspective of that character in terms of their thoughts and attitudes. Thirdly, they partake of the goals or motivations of the character, feeling happy when these goals are achieved and frustrated or upset when they are not. Fourthly, viewer/readers become absorbed in the text to the extent that they lose awareness of themselves and of their status as observers (2001: 256).

It is this fourth element of 'mediated closeness' that becomes problematic when applied to a text like CiN. Viewers' emotional and cognitive sharing in the lives of sufferers, and especially the wish for them to achieve their goals, would be a desirable outcome for charities seeking to garner donations. However, the ultimate goal of encouraging viewers to take some form of action, such as to donate money, would be hindered if viewers lost the sense of themselves as having a separate role in relation to beneficiaries. For Boltanski (1999), it is the engagement in the lives of suffering others that is ultimately important, and this can only happen if their suffering is apprehended as being part of the real lives of the viewers. It is orientation towards action that, he argues, separates the experience of engagement in a real story from that of immersion in a fictional one (1999: 153).

For the purposes of the present study, therefore, 'mediated closeness' has been replaced by my own concept of '*representational* closeness / distance'. In representational closeness/distance, what counts as closeness and distance is reversed when compared to 'mediated closeness'; distance results from the suspension of viewers' reality, and closeness is experienced whenever there is a sense of connection between the reality of the people they observed and their own lives. In other words, closeness occurs when viewers are invited to see a beneficiary as someone that they might have a social relationship with, rather than as someone whose perspective could replace their own in the narrative. *Representational* distance can be operationalised by considering how realistic depictions of suffering others are and the extent to which viewers are encouraged to respond to the suffering of those that they see. It is the latter which forms the focus for the present article.

When considering distance as something that is minimised when action in relation to others seems most possible, it at first appears that the suggestion that viewers give money (a specific and for the most part highly achievable action) would bring about a sense of closeness between donors and beneficiaries. However, as I argue below, there are some aspects of the way in which this request is made and celebrated that in fact brings, rather, a sense of distance between them. Specifically, I argue that the climaxes of the celebration of fundraising are moments at which the focus is no longer on outcomes for beneficiaries, although these are clearly part of the equation. I refer to Barthes (2009)[1972]'s concept of myth in order to clarify how the celebration of giving as a sign might foreground the experiences of donors, whilst appearing to celebrate outcomes for beneficiaries.

When reading any type of sign, there are at least two possible levels of meaning to decode: the sign's denotative or literal meaning, which is widely understood, and its connotative or associated meanings, which are culturally-specific and depend on how that thing is represented. For example, the sign:

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uses a continuous line to roughly approximate the shape of a human heart. It denotes a heart, but the connotation attached to it in western culture is the idea of love. It is not necessary to understand or to remember (a) the link between the physical responses that accompany loving someone and the human heart, or (b) the link between the shape of this symbol and that of the human heart, in order to make the connection between this symbol and the concept of love.

Barthes argues that there is a third level of meaning associated with some signs; in addition to denotative and connotative levels, there is an ideological or mythical level of meaning (2009 [1972]: 138). This level of meaning is created by a given society, where it usually serves the interests of those in powerful positions by making ideological interpretations of the world appear natural and eternal (2009 [1972]): 148, 168). At the same time, aspects of the sign that were once meaningful are obscured and changed into a gesture (2009 [1972]: 146). For example, a picture of a black soldier in an army uniform comes to evoke the greatness of a nation, while his specific characteristics and individual history are ignored (2009 [1972]: 146). Such signs function as myths. Barthes presents a number of examples of signs that function as myths, including detergents. Detergents and soap powders, and advertising for them in particular, naturalise a number of ideas about how one should operate in society. For example, they assume that one should be interested in appearances and strive to be better than others. This myth is perpetuated by offering before and after views, one of which is 'whiter' and appears self-evidently more desirable.

Of course, connotations can be created not only by depicting certain objects or people, but by the way in which these figures are represented (van Leeuwen 2001: 98). In other words, grammar, as well as lexis, creates meaning (2001: 98). In the present article, I refer to issues of visual representation only briefly, using images illustratively rather than for analysis. I use the technique suggested in 'iconography' (e.g. Panofsky 2006 [1939]), of using others' interpretations to determine what can be said to be a myth, rather than taking my own reading as evidence (van Leeuwen 2001: 101).

2. Research design and method

The broad purpose of the research on which this paper is based was to examine discourses of charitable giving in the UK, that is to say, the ways of knowing and speaking about this subject that create and limit opportunities for understanding it in this society (Candlin 1997: ix; Foucault 2002; Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 94). My review of the literature revealed a notable gap in the consideration of intra-national charities. Most of the extant studies on charitable giving in the social sciences in general are concerned with inter- rather than intra- national giving (e.g. Hoijer 2004; Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Seu 2010). While these scholars refer to Boltanski's (1999) notion of 'distant suffering' in their analysis, they are often imprecise about what this notion means. The present study addresses this gap by considering the types of 'distance' indicated by Boltanski (such as the more subtle separation of spaces for use by different groups and the different roles taken up by members of these groups) in an intra-national telethon.

A Children in Need broadcast was selected as focus for this study because it is the only UK telethon devoted to raising money exclusively for UK citizens, and its only annual telethon (Comic Relief, another biannual telethon raises money for both UK-based children an those elsewhere in the world). BBC Children in Need is broadcast on a Friday night in mid-late November each year, and represents the culmination of a series of fundraising efforts carried out both