You Hear Me, But Are You Listening? Reflections on researcher positionality and performative change in INGO representational practice.

Keywords:

Development, storytelling, representation, ethics, lived experience, INGO.

Abstract:

In their substantive work, Ademolu and Crombie explore the ethical complexities and implications of humanitarian storytelling for those mostly absent from debates on visual representations of poverty and find practical solutions to negotiate this responsibly. Ademolu is primarily concerned with the reception and impact of fundraising communications for UK African Diasporic communities, while Crombie focuses on the 'contributors', — those who feature in these materials. They both investigate the potential to shift power in representational practice by platforming the voices and ideas of disenfranchised communities who share their stories with INGOs around both process and portrayal. Within this frame, this article engages in a reflective discussion between the two, examining their respective research amid broader sector-wide calls for representational change, and how they navigate the messy realities and challenges that determine whether, and if so how, this change happens in practice. The impetus, experience and reception of their work seeks to incite a radical rethink, a dismantling of nominal and performative shifts of power among those involved in INGO content gathering and sharing, towards accountability-centred action. When taken seriously, this action will amplify the often-unheard voices who *should* be determining what it actually means to shift power dynamics in representational practice.

Opening Introduction

This co-authored article emerged from a series of engaging online discussions between Edward Ademolu, a Lecturer in Cultural Competency specialising in development communications and diaspora engagement, and Jess Crombie, a researcher and Senior Lecturer focusing on humanitarian narratives and their impact, with a background in humanitarian aid work. This special issue's central question, "We talk about shifting the power, but are we really shifting the practice?" provides an ideal platform to openly examine and ponder these previously private dialogues.

The conversation presented here was guided by jointly developed questions and then transcribed verbatim, barring minor removals of filler words for clarity. This discussion delves into the overarching themes of positionality amid practical shifts, bookended by an introduction to their work and concluding reflections on implementing transformative changes in representational practices.

Research and Personal Motivations

Edward

My research critically examines the relationship between Black British communities of African descent and the UK's international development sector, focusing on how poverty-alleviation international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) portray African poverty in fundraising communications. My work delves beyond visual representation, exploring implications for African diasporic identity and engagement in global development (Ademolu 2021). It contributes to discussions on international development's impact on British and Northern Irish Africans (Young 2012; Dillon, 2021), emphasising the influence of fundraising communications on African diaspora involvement in global development.

These discussions are part of broader societal changes influenced by the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and ongoing decolonisation efforts. They urge INGOs and the development sector to heighten their awareness of racism in visual materials (Warrington & Crombie, 2017; Ademolu 2023). My research, informed by personal reflections on my Black British-Nigerian heritage, is shaped by childhood observations of Comic Relief's 'Red Nose Day,' informing my views on how international development communications affect Black British communities.

Cameron's (2015) study on Comic Relief's 'Red Nose Day'[i] posed a challenging question: "Can poverty be humorous?" Despite the event's jovial tone and its history of encouraging charitable acts since 1985, my memories from the 1990s reflect a mix of amusement from comedic performances and a profound impact from stark portrayals of poverty in Black African communities. These vivid depictions featured malnourished infants in dire conditions, milkless mothers, and aid-reliant communities, influencing my perception of Africa and global Black Africanness as a child and heightening my awareness of stereotypes and cultural sensitivities.

Given this, I critically examine systemic oversights in development communications for UK-based INGOs. This involves addressing the historical marginalisation of Black African diaspora perspectives in visual storytelling and their importance in institutional decisions on race and representation.

Jess

My research focuses on incorporating the opinions, ideas, choices and preferences of the 'subjects' of humanitarian stories into the editorial process, and challenging audience perceptions of these individuals.

The act of creating INGO communications materials has been described as the "tangible instantiation of a triangular relationship" with the content created "to mobilise the power of those who fall into the category of viewer to act on the suffering of those who are rendered subject" (Drain 2020). At the core of my research is an acknowledgment that there are three main groups involved in the humanitarian editorial process – the makers (humanitarian agencies), audiences (donors, policy makers etc) and subjects (people with lived experience), and the uneven amounts of power that each group has to impact narrative.

Much of my career has been spent in the 'maker' role - which I typically conducted to fulfil a pre-written brief which detailed whose stories were valued, and what these individuals needed to say to fulfil the narrative expectation. However, the people I was speaking to rarely fitted these briefs so neatly and were often unwilling to contort themselves into the required characters. They would instead tell me how they wanted their story to be told, question my approach, challenge me, or try to subvert the narrative to their own political views in both obvious and subtle ways. As one young woman told me; "I want to take the photos, not be an object" (Crombie and Warrington 2017, 55). But these subversions did not fit into the role of the story as part of a much-repeated formula for inducing audience engagement.

This formula has been described as a "humanitarian imaginary", a "configuration of practices which use the communicative structure of the theatre in order to perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others in the West" (Chouliaraki 2012, 45). In other words, humanitarian agencies re-produce these subjects in such a way that the narratives reinforce what Homi K. Bhabha has described as the on-going and enduring legacy of colonial productive power; "crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practises of racial and cultural hierarchization" (Bhabha 1994, 67). The question now is how the humanitarian sector can shift from "disempowering narratives that ascribe pity to aid recipients and heroism to aid providers, to ones that align with what affected citizens…value: independence and agency, equity and shared values, partnership and progress." (Saez and Bryant 2023, 30).

Conversational Sharing

JC: In the context of this special issue, I was thinking about this idea about who is deciding what a power shift means. I often go into my research projects with the partner UN body or INGO having one idea about what making a power shift means, me with another, and then when I go and talk to the contributors, they have a third way. So, we're all coming at it from our own perspectives and with our own experiences and agendas and assumptions.

EA: In light of that reflection, how would you define shifting power?

JC: In my practice, shifting the power means shifting who gets to make editorial decisions about narrative. What happens at the moment is that editorial powers are shared in boundaried ways, most commonly limited to contributors being asked to communicate their experiences by answering a set of questions written by the INGO. Instead, power shifts are about those with lived experience being involved in editorial decision making, all the way from the point of story production into the editing process and up to final decision making.

EA: Power shifting, to me, embodies a fundamental reconfiguration of how influence and decision-making operate within our representational practices. It's about dismantling entrenched hierarchies and ensuring that marginalised voices, like those of diaspora communities, hold genuine sway in shaping narratives and policies. This isn't just about

token gestures; it's about substantive, systemic change that fosters true diaspora-inclusivity and accountability. It's also thinking about our positionality and how that influences the extent to which transformative shifts in power are possible.

JC: On the positionality point, I spend a lot of time thinking about this and how my background intersects with the contributors with whom I work. The thing I worry about the most is whether my well-meaning attempts at change will still end up being disempowering.

As an example, when I worked with UNHCR to develop their ethical communication guidelines the input group, which was made up of people who had lived experience of being a refugee, critiqued my decision not to use the word 'dignity' in the document. They explained that a loss of dignity on multiple fronts was a key effect of their refugee situations – and that it was important for the guidelines to acknowledge this. I had made the decision to remove it as my experience of this term was of INGO professionals deciding on behalf of affected populations what dignity looked like in storytelling, and I didn't want to perpetuate this behaviour. But I realised the irony of my actions – while attempting to prohibit UNHCR from making decisions on behalf of refugee populations, I had done exactly that myself.

I think a lot of people reading this would, if they were being honest, recognise that this decision making on behalf of others is still a day to day part of humanitarian narrative creation. It's hard to change the attitude that we the INGO staff are in one role – that of expert decision makers - and you the subject are in another – that of the well, a subject - and that those roles are not immutable and fixed.

EA: Your insights really got me thinking. When advocating for African diaspora groups, there are complexities due to my personal background differing from the communities I study. While I connect with them racially and culturally, there are still differences in, say, not necessarily identifying with the extremities of poverty as portrayed in fundraising material or having family with that experiential base that can create a disconnect with their lived experiences.

Navigating the well-meaning liberal trap feels like moving through a 'Third Space,' where transformation is possible, yet I often feel unheard. Being taken seriously as a Black researcher within INGOs presents challenges, especially advocating for diaspora communities not directly impacted by the issues INGOs focus on. On the flip side, individuals like yourself [JC] may have more freedom and influence to push for change within this system. This exploration of our positions, the traps we face, and the potential for change opens up fascinating discussions on power dynamics within humanitarian narratives.

JC: I see these traps and the difficulties of navigating this Third Space playing out in my work. This is anecdotal – but what colleagues and I have observed during interviews with UN or INGO staff is that white staff, when interviewed by a Black or Brown researcher, are less honest about biases they may recognise in themselves and less willing to admit to racialised imbalances in power. Conversely Black or Brown staff, when interviewed by a white researcher, are also less honest but in a different way, presenting a watered-down version of the opinions they may have, and even seeming fearful of sharing their real feelings. I think both groups are acting to protect – both themselves and the researchers - and out of fear, for real or imagined consequences.

And if you look at this as a microcosm of what is happening in terms of conversations about change within the sector, you can see that there is widespread fear and protectionism, which is of course an inhibitor of change.

And of course there is another inhibitor to change, the recognition that we are the only sector that will cease to exist if it performs well. A strange kind of realisation!

EA: Absolutely, your thoughts really hit home. So, if my proposals pan out completely, it raises questions about my ongoing relevance and legitimacy—a kind of identity and purpose crisis. Your perspective brings up crucial points about our work's nature and long-term impact, forcing us to rethink our mission and explore new ways to contribute. Perhaps it's a chance to shift focus towards addressing emerging challenges or advocating for broader systemic shifts. It's a complex but fascinating scenario that deserves careful thought as we navigate the changing landscape of our advocacy work.

JC: One of the last questions I wanted to discuss is how pragmatic should change be? I'm really interested to hear your thoughts because I spend a lot of time with people whose main argument is to dismantle the entire INGO structure. But I wonder what we can do within the existing system? This necessitates compromise, which can be hard, but my work often focuses on what you can do to create change while acknowledging the systemic flaws. What do you think about this idea of pragmatism?

EA: Navigating the practical side of things can be pretty challenging. I find myself wrestling with putting reflections into actual strategies that INGOs can use, given all the complexities they face. Sometimes, my focus on research can overshadow the real-world challenges INGOs deal with. I'm all about pushing for real change based on solid insights, but INGOs often prioritise immediate needs over long-term goals. The feedback I get often points to this gap between theory and what's doable on the ground. INGOs struggle to turn ideas into action within their setup, which shows how diaspora issues sometimes take a backseat in the grand scheme of things. It's a tough balancing act, trying to blend big-picture ideas with the practical realities INGOs face every day.

JC: It is… I wonder if it would help to think about how we as a sector are educators. This isn't the way that a lot of INGOs think of themselves – but while we are engaging audiences and asking them for their actions, we are also inadvertently educating them about the people and locations which feature in the stories. Recognising this means that you can then move your strategic objectives from being audience led (responding to what existing audiences say they want, or show you they want with their actions, which inevitably leads to a repetition of what has come before), to being audience leading (showing them something new in a way that is engaging, as you would do when educating anyone). This shift necessitates the seeking out of diverse opinions from the two groups we are working with, as it means also recognising that they too are part of your audience base.

EA: Looking closely at grassroots levels, especially within UK diaspora groups, INGOs must prioritise shifting power in their visual messages. It's not just about the emotional impact on these communities but also the financial effects on INGO support. My research reveals a link between dissatisfaction with portrayals and decreased financial backing. Some prefer private remittances over supporting INGOs like 'Save the Children' or 'Oxfam' due to

problematic campaigns. Participants often express feeling dehumanised or misunderstood, leading to hesitance in financial support. In contrast, remittances offer control, letting them decide where funds go and track impact closely. This emphasises the need to correct misrepresentations for genuine community engagement and support.

What's Next?

Edward

In international development communication, the marginalisation of Black African diaspora communities remains a critical issue. This is rooted in historical biases such as colonial legacies, discriminatory policies, limited representation in decision-making bodies, cultural misunderstandings, and institutional barriers (Dillon 2021; Ademolu 2023). Although continental Africans contributing their stories to fundraising campaigns have started to benefit from initiatives promoting their voices, diaspora communities lack similar efforts. As a result, they are often either excluded or depicted superficially in communications targeting UK audiences. To address this, we must recognise and value diaspora perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and foster inclusive strategies.

Despite not being the individuals depicted in fundraising campaigns, UK African diasporic communities still experience a profound psycho-social impact (Young 2012). They navigate a delicate balance, oscillating between feelings of ethnoracial affinity and detachment when faced with depictions of African exigency and the Black African Other, highlighting the complexity of their experiences (Ademolu 2021). Addressing these challenges centrally involves promoting diverse representation in decision-making roles and fostering transformative shifts in power dynamics. This includes implementing inclusive decision-making processes and cultural competency training within institutions. Such initiatives facilitate understanding, identify biases, promote inclusivity, and cultivate respectful communication.

Collaborative partnerships with diaspora communities are vital for co-creating authentic narratives that truly reflect their experiences. Empowering these communities as communication stakeholders promotes meaningful engagement and drives impactful outcomes. Continuous feedback from stakeholders ensures effective resonance and facilitates positive change in development communication. Additionally, partnering with academics, especially those from African diasporic backgrounds, is crucial for addressing diaspora issues comprehensively. Their expertise, evidence-based solutions, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative learning significantly contribute to developing effective communication strategies, ensuring accountability, and assessing impact within INGOs.

INGOs should avoid treating African diaspora audiences as secondary considerations and instead focus on addressing important issues like racial identity, cultural sensitivity, and meaningful representation in their communication strategies promptly. Procrastination is detrimental to maintaining representations of Africa(ns) that prioritise and safeguard the psycho-social wellbeing of diaspora communities. This approach is essential for truly embracing and effecting transformative shifts in power dynamics within the development sector.

Jess

I would suggest that the process of unpicking the narrative humanitarian imaginary requires dismantling and remaking the core roles of maker, audience and subject.

For the makers this means relinquishing not just power but also the assumption of greater knowledge. This can be destabilising in the way that we discuss in our conversation, nobody wants to be made redundant, but creativity and change lies in the recognition that there are multiple forms of expertise and finding ways to bring these together.

Audiences need reinvestigating – seeking out and listening to new groups in the way that Edward describes, as well finding out new information about existing audiences. Amref Health Africa recently carried out a test to see how their audiences responded to fundraising appeals created by people with lived experience. They were told that "it's good to see the old paternalistic model of charitable donation give way to a realisation that Africans are capable of making their own decisions about how to help their community." (Crombie and Girling 2022, 25). This surprising, and pleasing response shows an appetite for change from existing supporter bases.

And for the people in the stories this means being fully involved in decision making, truly heard and never rendered an object. In one of my studies participants from Niger shared this Hausa proverb: "a song sounds sweeter from the author's mouth" (Warrington and Crombie 2017, 60). It serves as a helpful reminder that being involved in sharing your experiences isn't just about a singing your song, more fundamentally it's about also being able to author that song and therefore control your own narrative.

Closing statement

Our dialogue stresses the imperative for INGOs to undergo substantial shifts in their representational practices. These narratives are not mere stories; they mould perceptions, affect funding, and shape societal attitudes. We must prioritise marginalised voices and experiences through meaningful, inclusive strategies that go beyond performative gestures. This means challenging stereotypes, valuing diverse perspectives, and fostering empowering partnerships in development communication. These changes are not just ethically crucial but also strategically vital for INGOs to genuinely engage and impact the lives of those they serve.

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[i] https://www.comicrelief.com/rednoseday/