

Back to basic

By Rebecca Bengtsson¹

In academia there is an increased wish to see more analytical attention being paid to images and visual communication, and one reason for this is the rapid changes that have taken place in terms of how images are disseminated throughout the world, and in particular in times of crisis. The constant live coverage of events in the world, both by the media and by citizens, is considered to put a new kind of pressure on policymakers and might in turn lead to faster decision-making. It is also putting pressure on the audience, requiring them to question the images they are exposed to – are they real or fake? Photographs and moving images are an important element of the international public sphere, and it is fascinating to think of what one single image can say: how many different meanings it can have, and what it represents - all is in the eye of the beholder. Images still have the possibility of ‘shocking’ the viewer and the affective transitivity of images as described by Sontag do have its political uses. (2003, 2004).

My own engagement with visual communication and the media came with an interest in politics and development that eventually brought me to the field of Communication for Development. I did not realise at first that this was where I would end up. Following my bachelor degree I started working as a freelance journalist, photographer and consultant, which I did for a few years. After having worked with communication for a UN agency, I felt the urge to further my academic career and stumbled across an interesting Master’s programme titled Communication for Development.

I juggled my Master’s ComDev degree studies at Malmö University with work as a freelance journalist and communication specialist and educator for a number of non-profit organisations and UN agencies, eventually becoming a teacher and student facilitator on the programme. The ComDev experience opened up a new world, where I enhanced my understanding of the use and advantages of communication for social change and development. The interdisciplinary programme allows for innovative approaches to research and education, which truly challenged me to think about how I can adopt academic theories in my work as a communication practitioner.

Which brings us to where I stand today. On the one hand, I have recently started carrying out my PhD in Media and Communication Studies with Helsinki University, researching the impact of images on policy-making in the international arena, with a main focus on conflicts and refugee crises. On the other hand, I am working with media analysis and communication for an international mission in Palestine: a combination I expected to be difficult, but actually productive and challenging. While my doctoral study may be slightly on hold apart from reading a large amount of articles and books, I am certain that being in the field will enrich my academic research.

For my PhD I will be exploring the ways in which citizens and policymakers are no longer idle receivers, but to a greater extent participants in the production of a new media discourse, by creating, sharing and commenting on images, mainly online and particularly in times of crisis. Governments, media organisations and other players in policymaking often do not have

sufficient time to strategize around incidents before images reach the public sphere, either through the traditional media or via other, informal, channels. Given this new media ecology, there is an increased wish to see more analytical attention being paid to images and visual communication as well as a need for understanding this emerging discourse.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is one under the constant scrutiny of international media, and an often-debated issue among policymakers and the international community (Cottle, 2006).

Every day, images and videos from the Occupied Territory make their way around the world, mainly focusing on clashes at checkpoints, lack of education, or children suffering – all of which exist, but hardly represent the full picture. Most of the many organisations operating in Palestine follow suit. In their outreach work, especially that which is aimed for a European or North American audience, the objectifying and victimising of women and children tends to take the front seat. (Enloe, 2000; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011)

For a project I am carrying out as part of my current position with TIPH² in Palestine, aimed at highlighting the situation for children living close to the Israeli settlements in Hebron, I thought it would be nice to slow things down and move away from the digital, fast flowing world of online media. The project idea is not a particularly innovative or sophisticated one – it is actually quite simple: 30 children and 60 disposable cameras³. Similar projects have been carried-out several times before, in various formats – all across the world. But there is a beauty in the simplicity that these kinds of project offers: it is a relief to offer participants a sense of quiet, a short break in the hectic and conflicted city that is Hebron, through the analogue approach to photography in a world where the media and the international community are struggling to keep up with the digital world.

I have asked the children to photograph their realities living in one of the most conflicted cities in Palestine with analogue, disposable cameras. And they are so patient. Even though most of them have digital cameras or smart phones at home, they are really invested in this project and are looking forward to putting their work on display for their families to see. In our meetings, we talk about their approach to the cameras and to photography – what and how did they feel when they were taking photos themed 'happiness'? What are the things that make them angry? Why? We use the images to break cultural hurdles and language barriers. And we laugh. We talk about their future in between discussion on composition, angles and lighting. What do they want to do when they enter adulthood?

Through this project, the children are producing their own narrative, and not only living by the one dictated by policymakers, the international community or world media, and I find myself thinking that this is what Communication for Development actually comes down to. It is exciting to use the images to facilitate a dialogue that might not otherwise happen, and in return hopefully encourage social change, be that through the opportunity for children to express themselves through art, giving them a platform to discuss their future, or simply teaching them about how to use a camera as a tool for expressing their emotions. Rather than putting the children on display in an adult narrative, they are themselves deciding what they want to show the world (and I am looking forward to evaluating these observations and bringing them into my research once the project is completed).



A few of the photographs taken by the children living near the settlements in Hebron.

Eventually, it all comes together – my doctoral research, the practical fieldwork, projects such as my current one with simple disposable cameras, and image analysis. The combination makes for the ultimate media convergence - an experience that will enrich my analysis of images and videos of communities living in conflict in my future research.

To have a platform such as *Glocal Times*, open, approachable and allowing for a mix of established academics and newly graduated master's students to take equal place in the discussions on Communication for Development is refreshing and offers new dimensions to the research field. I am looking forward to reading and contributing to *Glocal Times* for another 10 years to come.

References

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² [The Temporary International Presence in Hebron](#) (TIPH) is an international observer mission working in the city of Hebron in the Occupied Territory. The six member countries (Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey) fund the mission.

³ The project is part of the media outreach programme of the mission. The children were chosen on the basis of their living situation. Many of the families are living near settlements and are particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse.