

Empathy cultivation through citizen journalism? A counter to compassion fatigue

This paper examines the ability of the “Humans of New York” (HONY) social media feed to cultivate empathy for the subjects in viewers. While a body of literature suggests that negative images of suffering may provoke compassion fatigue in the audience, this paper is interested in whether images and accompanying captions that allow the viewer to connect with the subject can cultivate empathy.

Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon largely studied in health care professionals, whose repeated exposure to suffering can lead to a secondary traumatic stress response that results in lessened feelings of compassion over time. Media scholars have applied this idea to the effect of negative news coverage, and particularly negative images, on people’s ability to experience compassion. Sontag (1977) asserted that “‘concerned’ photography had done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.” Moeller (2009) likewise suggested that constant exposure to disturbing, violent images leads people to lose their ability to feel empathy for others. Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron (2016) conducted an empirical study of compassion fatigue and concluded that “the nature of contemporary coverage may contribute to emotional fatigue with society’s problems.”

The problem with compassion is that it engenders pity, which implies a power differential in the relationship between the viewer and the subject. Empathy, on the other hand, creates a connection not based on looking down on, but understanding another. Schudson (2013) suggested that journalists could play a role in creating “social empathy,” through “stories that—often in a human-interest vein—inform citizens about neighbors and groups they may not know or understand.”

This study analyzes comments by social media users on a selection of HONY photographs to identify emotional themes. The feed features images of people in New York and other locations around the world, exposing viewers to a glimpse of fellow humans in a way that shows their common humanity, rather than their suffering, which may create the possibility to cultivate empathy. Previous research on HONY has suggested that the creator of the feed specifically uses captions that feature the subject speaking directly to the audience (Roberts, 2017), and frames that make his subjects seem like his presumed audience (Perrault & Paul, 2018). While others have pointed out problems with the portrayals in the feed “masking structural patterns of exploitation or oppression” (Erdener, 2016), this study seeks to understand the response of the audience and to explore whether there is evidence for compassion, empathy, or other emotional responses.