

Audience Engagement in UNHCR Social Media Stories of Displaced People: Emotion and Reason in a Global Public Debate

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Abstract : Social media has changed how public opinion is shaped by enabling more diversified and inclusive participation of audiences. New online forums provide spaces in which governments, NGOs and other organizations can create content and receive feedback. These forums are sites where debate can constitute public opinion. Studies of audience engagement can give an understanding of how different voices from the civil society participate in debates and how discussions can reinforce or bring into question established societal beliefs. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, produces audio-visual stories about displaced people for global audiences on social media platforms. The availability of many views in these forums can give insight into how dialogues regarding transnational issues are formed. The public sphere, as defined by Habermas, is a discursive arena where reasoned debate can take place. Habermas' concept is combined with theories on celebrity advocacy, and discussions about the role and effect celebrities have in raising public awareness for humanitarian issues. The personal and public lives of celebrities often create emotional engagement from their fans and other audiences. In this study, quantitative and qualitative methods have been used on YouTube comments for uncovering how emotion and reason are constituted in a global public debate on celebrity endorsed UNHCR stories of displaced people. The study shows that engagement intensity is not equally distributed between comment threads; comments presented as facts or emotional claims are often supported by recourse to intertextuality, and specific linguistic strategies are used to put forward emotional and reasoned claims regarding individual and group identities. The findings from this research aim to contribute to an understanding of audience engagement on issues of human survival and solidarity in a global social media public sphere.

Keywords : emotions, engagement, global public sphere, linguistic strategies, reason, refugees, social media, UNHCR

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