

A study on Humans of New York and its Humanitarian Impact

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A study on Humans of New York and its Humanitarian Impact

This research aims at studying Humans of New York (HONY) as an aid during humanitarian crises, and its impact on humanism. Humans of New York, a photography blog started by Brandon Stanton has become a worldwide phenomenon as it successfully fuses in photography, short-form narrative, and the interpersonal dynamics of the social media. (Girard, 2014) HONY was started as a photography project by Brandon Stanton in 2010 with the goal of photographing 10,000 inhabitants of New York City and forming an exhaustive catalogue of the same. ‘Somewhere along the way, I began to interview my subjects in addition to photographing them. And alongside their portraits, I'd include quotes and short stories from their lives.’ – Brandon Stanton.¹ (Stanton B., n.d.) HONY has over twenty million followers on social media with 17,891,801 likes on its Facebook page itself (as on August 31, 2016). With its worldwide outreach it provides the viewers with daily glimpses of the lives of strangers on the streets of New York City.

While, the mainstream media is amplifying the coverage of the tragedy and its suffrage among the people, Humans of New York brings out the stories of the victims. Amongst all the death tallies, human interest stories are getting lost. As most of the reports are presented in the general, monotonous ways to the people, they are getting detached from it. (Ghannam, 2016) There is no feeling of empathy or sympathy towards the news they read, watch or hear because of the same. ‘Individual stories are always unique and people would like to hear them.’ – Nabil Al Khatib, executive editor of Saudi owned Al Arabiya based in Dubai, UAE.² (Ghannam, J., 2016). Hence, HONY stands out amongst all these mainstream sources of information. HONY has also

¹ Stanton, B. About Retrieved from <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/about>

² Ghannam, J. (2016, April). *Media as a form of aid in humanitarian crises - center for international media assistance*. Retrieved August 30, 2016, from <http://www.cima.ned.org/resource/media-as-a-form-of-aid-in-humanitarian-crises/>

expanded to over twenty countries over the past five years to narrate feature stories from across the world. His work has also been released in two of the bestselling books - Humans of New York and Humans of New York: Stories.³ (Stanton B., n.d.)

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Literature Review

Humans of New York has been growing rapidly since its inception, and is continuing to do so. Hence, its presence is quote majorly seen and felt across all new media channels. There have been many writing about the same and critically analyzing its growth, existence and impact. Mirchandani, T. (2015, April 23) presents HONY as a stunning example of community engagement through social media and how powerful it is as a medium of storytelling. He also emphasizes on the fact about how it has also become a model for crowdfunding, and how it has been successful in changing a lot of lives because of the same. According to Mirchandani, T. (2015, April 23), HONY enjoys a numbers of factors that not all NGOs or fundraisers enjoy – like, a thriving social media presence, regular coverage by the media, and a variety of speaking engagements. But, in spite of that, Stanton has his own magical way of persuasion and an ability to move his audience by posting just a photograph and short interview or quote by the subject. He stays plugged into his community and he focuses on what engages them. And when he finds the thing that hits, he pushes it forward.⁴ (Mirchandani, T., 2015) He never sets out with his camera with the a pre-decided objective of raising funds or supporting a cause which

³ Stanton, B. About Retrieved from <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/about>

⁴ Mirchandani, T. (2015, April 23). *Webinars*. Retrieved August 31, 2016, from Fundraising & Crowdfunding, <https://www.causevox.com/blog/humans-new-york-crowdfunding/>

enables him to easily achieve a balance in the way his posts are put through to the public, and it does not seem excessive.

Balabanovic, Chu, Wolff (2000) put forth the idea that people usually alternate between photo-driven and story-driven methods while telling their stories about their photographs, as validated and revealed by a user test. They also put out the fact about photographs and its most common and enjoyable use, i.e., to share stories of one's experiences, travels, family and friends. Everybody has had an experience with this particular form of storytelling as it ranges all the way from reminiscing memories to cultural history. With the advent of the World Wide Web, the sharing of photographs has furthermore been facilitated by sharing stories in digital form and inspiring the movement towards digital storytelling. HONY is one of the most successful examples of this movement.

As mentioned by Girard, R. (2014), HONY cannot be simply classified as a photojournalism project, nor can it be viewed as strategic advocacy campaign on social media, since no clear points of view or action-based goals are mentioned. Yet, with his multifaceted approach of fusing together photography, short-form narrative, and the interpersonal dynamics of social media—HONY has developed its own communicative formula which interests and is appreciated by millions across the globe. It has brought people together online, standing up for a cause as the awareness and empathy towards topics like homelessness, mental health, immigration, homosexuality, race, and religion – were brought forth; while, a lot of followers have considered it a more authentic source of information than news reports. Lucaites and Hariman (2001) as cited by Rosemary G. (2014) assume that photographs often “reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies, shape and mediate understanding of specific events and

periods...influence political behavior and identity, and provide intentional (figurative) resources for subsequent communicative action” (p. 37-38). Images, in contrary to text, can often be more salient in viewers’ memories as they are “less intrusive than words and...require less cognitive load” (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 50), and may activate peripheral rather than central processing. The persuasive power of images might be subtler, but just as moving as any written language.

The research by BBC Media Action (2016, July) shows that though there are several challenges that have to be faced for an effective communication with the people affected by refugee crises, there are several opportunities of doing so as well. The needs highlighted by the refugees include the need for more translators, face to face communication and support in communication around the legal issues. The research also highlights that many refugees feel that their voices are not being heard, neither are their questions being answered by anybody. Which is leading to them being frustrated and losing trust. Hence, it can be concluded that there are a number of ways in which communication will play an important role in supporting people stranded during refugee crises. HONY has successfully worked on a series based on the same, by communicating the real, raw stories by the refugees themselves. This series of HONY touched millions of heart, and brought together the public towards a better cause.

Theory and Theoretical Framework

The research can be backed up by the priming and framing theory, which states that “Media provides a context for public discussion of an issue, setting the stage for audience

understanding. Media provide a focus and environment for reporting a story, influencing how audiences will understand or evaluate it.”⁵ (Smith, n.d.)

Linking the theory to the research paper will be looking for how the the digital storytelling form of media has been influencing the audience. It also is a type of reporting – as it includes human interest stories, hence the audience behavior and understanding of the same would be studied.

Gap Identification

In the paper by Rosemary G. (2014), a Neo-Aristotelianism (rhetorical criticism) has been carried out, and the research focuses on how HONY has evolved from its inception and how people have perceived it, for it to gradually grow. This research paper will be aiming at finding out the humanitarian impact of HONY and how it has successfully supported a number of causes through these years. The focus will also be on how public has reacted towards the same and how their perception has changed duly. So the research will particularly aim at covering the time gap between the paper by Rosemary G. (2014) by bringing forth the various developments.

Rationale

The reason to have chosen this topic for my research would be the empathetic approach storytelling and its attractiveness. HONY has been one of the most inspiring things that has happened in my life, and to many others too. The stories told, from the simplest to the most complex, have taught the followers so much more about the world and its people. Though the humans being photographed are inhabitants of the New York City, we can still find the

⁵ Smith, R. *Agenda-setting, priming & framing*. Retrieved August 31, 2016, from <http://faculty.buffalostate.edu/smithrd/PR/Framing.htm>

attachment and similarity amongst all of them. Hence, my research paper will focus on finding out more about the same.

Methodology

The research paper will be based on the qualitative method and will include content analysis, social media tracking and case studies. Qualitative research primarily being an exploratory research, it would aim at exploring the different angles of the impact on humanism by HONY.

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