Study explores whether internet campaigns motivate users to respond to crises

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Online campaigns about humanitarian crises need to be more surprising if they are to successfully engage the public, according to an academic from the University of East Anglia (UEA).

Research by Dr Martin Scott, published in the journal *International Communication Gazette*, aimed to explore why UK citizens respond to some online campaigns and communications concerning overseas crises and not others.

It is often suggested that the internet promotes greater understanding of humanitarian crises and encourages people to become more involved through forums and social media and by signing online petitions, making ethical purchases and donating money.

However, this new research identified a number of key reasons people give for not responding to campaigns or actively seeking out more information.

These include the time needed to find and search through material online and a lack of trust in sources such as governments and charities. Information from most non-news sources - including blogs and social media - was frequently rejected by many in the study for being inaccurate or biased.

"My findings suggest that the internet is not a magic bullet for getting people engaged with or caring about humanitarian issues or crises," said

Dr Scott, lecturer in Media and International Development at UEA's School of International Development.

However, participants reacted more much more positively to campaigns and information from organisations they did not recognise, such as Charity Navigator - which helps people make decisions about how and where they donate their money - Poverty.com and the Overseas Development Institute, compared to well-known charities like Oxfam, Christian Aid and Save the Children. Dr Scott suggests that audiences have become accustomed to, and are often dismissive of, traditional campaigns and appeals.

"The reasons why people might dismiss a television appeal seem to be simply transferred or modified for online campaigns. For example, they feel they are being manipulated or that they are not being told the whole truth. The key implication is that campaigns - both online and offline - often have to be surprising in order to be effective. When the participants in this study did respond positively, it was when they were unfamiliar with the organisation or not sure how to deal with the information they were getting. Campaigns that don't challenge well-established patterns of avoidance are less likely to succeed."

Dr Scott added: "We can't respond to every humanitarian appeal we see on television or online. So I'm interested in why we respond to some appeals and campaigns and not others, and in particular, whether there is anything special about the internet which makes people more or less likely to engage with a campaign. These results suggest that there isn't."

High profile examples of the use of social media in humanitarian campaigns, such as One Billion Rising, Kony 2012, and the Enough Food for Everyone IF campaign, have drawn attention to the potential role of the internet in enabling public mobilization and activism in response to suffering in other countries. However, little is known about

the role of more everyday uses of the internet in encouraging a sense of connection with, or awareness of, distant suffering.

Dr Scott's research involved a study of 52 UK internet users' online behaviour over two months. At one stage participants were asked to go online and find out more about an issue that interested them related to international development or developing countries - a task most failed to complete. They were then asked about their experiences during group discussions.

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