

The Influencers Are Coming!

Novel Directions in the Aid Industry's 'Theatricality of Humanitarianism'

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Abstract

Ever since its inception, the aid industry has been a chief producer of representations of 'the other' and of the global south, acting as a key maker of 'spectacles of suffering', and of neo-orientalism. While the industry's amplification of distance and difference has remained a constant, the means for and character of the industry's representations are far from unchanging: While the 1990s and 2000s saw the ascendance of celebrities in producing representations, the industry is now turning to social media and influencers. Extrapolating key analytical devices from theories on Celebritization and Theatricality of Humanitarianism, this article explores – through in-depth case studies of two prominent influencers – whether this turn may significantly alter the characteristics of representations. We find that the use of influencers may not only reproduce but exacerbate otherization. However, it also fundamentally alters (parameters of) distance and means of engaging in the theater. In this regard, the turn to influencers in the aid industry heralds in genuinely novel directions in the Theatricality of Humanitarianism.

Keywords: Development aid; otherization; post-colonialism; celebrities; spectacles of suffering