Descriptif d’enseignement / Course descriptions

cycle master 1 / 4th year
Semestre 2

Titre du cours - Course title

Humanitarian communication: contexts and challenges

Langue du cours/Language of instruction : English

Enseignant(s) – Professor(s)

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Résumé du cours – Objectifs - Course description – Targets

The course seeks to explore and analyse the use of different types of communication by several stakeholders involved in humanitarian crises and programmes. If communication has been at the core of humanitarian organisations’ public image and operational activities since the rise of modern humanitarianism at the end of the 19th century, these organisations have adapted their communication strategies to the competition of the international relief ecosystem, the complexity of humanitarian crises and the vulnerabilities of affected populations.

The main goals of this course will be:

a) to understand the multiple challenges of modern humanitarian communication, and the relations between the different actors of communication in particular;

b) to reflect on the typologies of communication involved, with a focus on life-saving communication (prevention, crisis and peace contexts), crisis reporting (relations with the media), public communication (PR, branding) and political communication (advocacy, negotiation);

c) to assess the use of new technologies and new media regarding the rise of digital humanitarianism;

d) to analyse the multi-faceted representations of humanitarian action and the economies of visualization of distant suffering.

Evaluation - Assessment

- Class participation is encouraged, as it is an interactive class in which students should engage in discussion and debate about the different perspectives.
- A written essay, to develop a personal, in-depth research question related to one of the topics seen during the course.

Plan – Séances - Course outline

The course is organised in six thematic sessions:

1. The challenges and objectives of humanitarian communication

Introduction of the course, understanding of the main concepts linked to humanitarian communication and its different levels (public, internal, operational)
2. The media and humanitarian organisations: moving beyond a relation at stake
Exploring the ambivalent relation between media and humanitarian organisations, and the new stakeholders (media development agencies, the diaspora, the military, local media, etc.)

3. The contexts, cycles and needs of humanitarian communication
The adaptation of humanitarian communication to affected populations, in pre-, during or post-crisis contexts

4. Challenging humanitarian representations: a path into alternative models?
Economies of visualization, “selling” distant suffering, humanitarian ethics, new representational models

5. The case of political communication: advocacy and negotiation
The dilemmas of speaking out, from the use of testimonies to advocacy campaigns and negotiation with armed groups

6. Digital humanitarianism: a new utopia?
The impact of new technologies in humanitarian responses, the Digital Humanitarian Network and the use of volunteer and technical communities

Bibliographie - Bibliography:

Recommended readings for session 1:

Recommended readings for session 2:

Recommended readings for session 3:
Recommended readings for session 4:


Recommended readings for session 5:


Recommended readings for session 6: