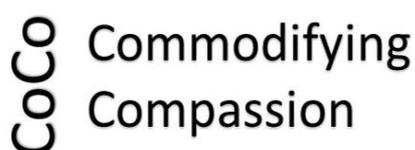


## **Commodifying Compassion and Beyond: Do-Gooding Partnerships and Power in the Digital Age**

Humanitarianism is big business. The will to help, from consumers and their corporations, is used to sell products and to build brand value for businesses, nonprofits and even governments. The research project, *Commodifying Compassion: Implications of Turning People and Humanitarian Causes Into Marketable Things* analyzed how 'helping' has become a marketable commodity in ways that impact the causes, organizations, and beneficiaries. We have explored the mismatch between the politics of the elite partnerships formed to support this 'helping' and the politics of sustainable development that relies on a more democratic agenda. As we end our Commodifying Compassion Research Project, we invite scholars to join us at Copenhagen Business School on May 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> 2023 for a conference on the project's contributions and beyond. The conference will include a one-day workshop developing future research papers in progress, for which this call invites submissions.

Over the past three decades corporations have taken on increased responsibility for responding to humanitarian crises. At the same time, nonprofits operate in an increasingly competitive market for scarce funding. In the process, as Devika Sharma (2017) has argued, "humanitarian organizations operate today much like brands and speak to us as consumers just as any other brand would do." The increasing profitability of 'helping' can be situated within a larger realm of the marketization of humanitarianism (Andreu, 2018; Glaab & Partzsch, 2018; Richey, 2018). But what have scholars learned about privatized, profit-driven, everyday humanitarianism (Richey, 2018; Budabin & Richey, 2021; Atal & Richey, 2021)? Business became an important part of how we understand new actors and alliances in development and humanitarianism and the partnerships of Brand Aid (Richey & Ponte, 2011) are now mainstreamed into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The meanings of these shifting global forces as exemplified by the SDGs are only now being taken into account (Mawdsley, 2018; Yanguas, 2018; Brooks, 2017). Michael Barnett (2022) now calls this 'humanitarianism's new business model,' favoring pragmatism over utopianism. We will present knowledge about the relationship between profit and prosociality, between narcissism and altruism, and between Western self-identity, hegemonic politics and 'helping.' We unpack empirically the trade-offs that defy win-winism for corporations and their nonprofit partners, but most of all for their supposed beneficiaries.

These are the themes that our conference will grapple with at the Copenhagen Business School on May 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> 2023. Michael Barnett, Dan Brockington and Amal Fadlalla will be our keynote speakers. Other conference sessions will cover topics including the rise of commercial partnerships between businesses and NGOs, and implications for aid recipients of such privatized humanitarian development.



<https://www.commodifyingcompassion.com/>

For scholars working on Commodifying Compassion themes, we invite you to contribute new work for discussion at a workshop held on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2023. Workshop participants are expected to attend both full days of the program.

In humanitarianism's business model, representations of 'helping,' images of global good-doing and imaginaries of benefitting 'distant others' must be linked to on the ground, empirical outcomes (Olwig, 2021; Richey, Hawkins & Goodman, 2021). A growing body of scholarship examines the rise and impact of humanitarian communications that present human vulnerability as a cause for public concern (see the handbook by Chouliaraki & Vestergaard, eds. 2021). From news reporting on humanitarian issues to the brand communications of humanitarian actors to marketing campaigns for products whose proceeds are donated to a 'good cause,' the rise of such activities has transformed humanitarian causes and social movements into commodities to be bought and sold.

Digital technology is transforming the way we buy, sell, and communicate. This growing role of digital technologies, and the companies that produce them has shaped the humanitarian sector and the constellation of actors and alliances that navigate it. Companies now provide social media platforms for consumers to build loyalty as 'fans' by sharing their own interactions with the company or its products (Budabin, 2017). As Nyberg and Murray (2020) have argued, social media enables corporations to speak like 'citizens' with their own view of the common good. Individual citizens, meanwhile, are increasingly encouraged to communicate their social and political values online, signing petitions, sharing viral campaigns or documenting their own involvement in humanitarian causes. Simultaneously, transnational tech companies have also found a way to harness the potential of the entanglements of humanitarianism and digital capitalism. Large technology companies, who have emerged to replace finance and energy as the dominant corporations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Atal, 2021), have begun to provide disruptive solutions to humanitarian causes through 'tech for good'. Continuing to blur the lines between humanitarianism and digital capitalism, these new technologies have been argued to continue to turn humanitarian causes into profitable, technocratic, and apolitical solutions (Henriksen & Richey, 2022).

*The Commodifying Compassion and Beyond* workshop brings these developments together to consider how humanitarianism is mediated in the digital age. We invite papers interrogating how humanitarian recipients experience mediatized, commodified interventions, how actors (both nonprofits and companies) market their activities, how citizens and consumers interact with humanitarian issues, and what role new technologies and the companies who make and sell them play in contemporary humanitarian discourse and practice. Questions to consider might include, but not be limited to:

- Which theories can best inform interdisciplinary thinking about the politics of 'helping'?
- How has the privatization and commodification of humanitarian compassion been altered by digital technology?
- How is digital technology shaping the commodification and privatization of humanitarian causes and social change?

- How has public understanding of humanitarian issues or humanitarianism been altered by digital technology? What do citizens know about humanitarianism, and where do they learn it today?
- What role do digital platforms/AI/etc. play in humanitarian practice today, and how do NGOs, governments or other humanitarian actors make use of them?
- What role do technology companies play in humanitarian practice today? How, if at all, are they different from other corporate humanitarians?

As the topics covered straddle the fields of politics, humanitarian/development studies, international relations, geography, media studies and science and technology studies, we particularly welcome contributions that bridge one or more of these fields. Following the workshop, we aim to select and revise papers for submission as a journal special issue/s. Thus, we solicit original unpublished contributions only.

The conference organizers are pleased to offer a conference dinner and meals during the conference for all selected workshop participants. Participants are expected to cover their own transportation and housing costs. Due to the generosity of private research fund contributions from senior scholars, we have some available travel support for scholars attending without institutional funding. We will first fund junior scholars and particularly scholars from the global South and from other communities underrepresented in the academy as making our conference and workshop accessible is a priority.

Abstracts of 300 words along with a CV should be sent by email with the subject **CoCo2023** to [maharafi.atal@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:maharafi.atal@glasgow.ac.uk) and [lri.msc@cbs.dk](mailto:lri.msc@cbs.dk) by the **28<sup>th</sup> of February 2023**. Scholars who require financial assistance to attend the conference should additionally submit a brief statement of support detailing their need. We will do our best to accommodate any special needs for accessibility if you let us know when applying. Presentations and papers will be in English, but support can be given for language editing if needed for publication.

#### **Timeline:**

**28 February 2023:** Deadline for abstracts and CVs

No later than **8 March 2023:** Accepted participants will be notified, and financial support offered

**15 March 2023:** Deadline for participants to confirm their participation and any vacant slots will be offered to stand-by participants

**17 April 2023:** Full draft papers to be shared with closed workshop participants

**2-3 May 2023:** Conference and Workshop at Copenhagen Business School

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