Psychological Science Perspectives: Research and Strategies for Navigating the Vividness Effect

Introduction

At any given time, there are multiple pressing global conflicts and severe human rights violations ongoing, each in their own right demanding urgent action, resources, and attention of the international community. Yet, many advocates find that when working toward a cause that does not have the focus of the media, it is difficult to maintain consistent public support. For example, September and October 2023 saw the outbreak or escalation of crises in Armenia, the Congo, Haiti, Sudan, and Ukraine - but, after October 7, 2023, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was dominant in the media, causing other equally important crises to be overshadowed. Several PCUN champions of those crises reported struggling to secure appropriate representation and public responses to their causes. In some cases, political bodies may even take advantage of normal cognitive limits by flooding their constituents with policy changes that cannot all be attended to at once. The result is that the "important" may be sacrificed for the "urgent." This dynamic is known in the field of psychology as the *vividness effect:* a cognitive bias wherein more striking and emotionally charged information captures public attention and shapes perception more than less "sensational" issues. Research has found that mainstream news media as well as online social media platforms emphasize information that is dramatic, shocking, and likely to invoke negative feelings, as these tend to draw the greatest number of views (Aday, Farrell, & Lynch, 2010). Particularly those who receive news primarily or exclusively from the internet and social media may be primed to focus on the latest stories, resulting in notable disparities in terms of public attention, humanitarian aid, and policy development. Communities facing protracted emergencies may be neglected or deprived in the long-term of support they urgently need. Further, those without the ability to continuously attract global media attention are often the very populations most in need of aid. As a result, policy development must prioritize mechanisms for consistent engagement with all humanitarian crises, ensuring that global support is not dictated by media cycles, but by genuine need and urgency.

I. Research: Vividness and Public Action

The vividness effect plays a significant role in spreading misinformation and forming biases, making it a crucial concern for the Psychology Coalition of NGOs at the United Nations' (PCUN) advocacy efforts. In the context of misinformation, the vividness effect can lead individuals to accept and propagate false or misleading information that is presented compellingly, overshadowing more accurate and nuanced facts that are less attention-grabbing. The Department of Global Communications (DGC) and the Information Integrity Committee focus on developing strategies to help people recognize and resist the influence of misleading information, and over-exposure to vivid and polarizing information is one important, often under-prioritized part of that. By promoting critical thinking skills and encouraging the evaluation of information based on its factual merit rather than its emotional impact, these United Nations bodies can contribute to more informed decision-making processes. Recent research has shown that warnings about misinformation can

significantly reduce its effects, suggesting a potential avenue for intervention (Stark et al., 2020). As factual information is vital for sound decision-making in global affairs, addressing the vividness effect is essential for maintaining informational integrity and fostering a well-informed global community.

The impact of the news cycle and public attention is also of major concern to non-profits involved in crisis fundraising. Media coverage significantly influences donation amounts and timing by increasing public awareness of specific issues, shaping perceptions of importance and urgency, and influencing social norms around donating behavior (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Saguy, Frederick & Gruys, 2014; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Agenda setting and framing is how media coverage notably impacts charitable giving, thus necessitating a strategic approach to leverage this dynamic effectively. Media coverage of disasters is associated with spikes in humanitarian aid, though not all regions receive equal attention or assistance (Kogen & Dilliplane, 2017). Moreover, how media frames certain issues can enhance or hinder public willingness to contribute to related charitable causes (Gross, 2008). Waters and Tindall (2011) demonstrated that American news coverage significantly influenced donations during the 2004 Asian tsunami, indicating that increased media exposure enhanced public awareness and thus, contributions. Yörük (2012) found that media campaigns effectively boosted charitable giving, highlighting the media's role as a catalyst for philanthropy. The way media frames social problems impacts perceptions of who is responsible for fixing them, harkening back to classic social psychological findings on social responsibility and decreasing the bystander effect (Rosenthal & Saucier, 2019). Social media also impacts charitable donations, although in different ways from traditional media (Chen et. al, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a pattern of extensive media coverage spiking as major conflicts and escalations have arisen. For example, within Haiti; then between Ukraine and Russia; and then between Israel, Hamas, and Hezbollah, with public attention turning to each country's aid in the form of weapons, funding, and political awareness. While each conflict is critically important in terms of public awareness, many crises across the world have garnered less sustained focus both from world leaders and the media. One example includes the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey, Syria, and Morocco. Another example of this is the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Myanmar that has been ongoing since 2017. After decades of discrimination and violence towards the Rohingya people by Myanmar's Rakhine State, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people were forced out of the country and into Bangladesh. The crisis escalated in 2021 following a military takeover resulting in the forceful displacement of over two million Rohingya people both within Myanmar and outside of it (UNHCR, 2024). At the same time, the recent regime change in Bangladesh has shaped the crisis of mass displacement and the deaths of Hindus due to war and conflict. The lack of media representation, both for this ongoing conflict and others, has devastated people worldwide, particularly those in Southeast Asia and Africa. This neglect is a disservice to those peoples as well as the global public.

In addition to shaping media patterns, the vividness effect can cause significant negative impacts on decision-making processes within the United Nations. Recent research has shown that

vivid, emotionally charged information can overshadow more substantive but less striking data, potentially leading to misguided policies and resolutions (Ewell, Hamilton, & Guadagno, 2018). This effect can be particularly problematic in international diplomacy, where complex issues are often reduced to compelling anecdotes or striking imagery. For instance, vivid accounts of individual suffering might divert attention from broader, systemic problems that require long-term solutions. Moreover, the vividness effect can exacerbate existing biases and stereotypes, as vivid examples of extreme cases may be more readily recalled and generalized (Collins et al., 2023). In the realm of United Nations activities, this could lead to an overemphasis on crisis response at the expense of preventative measures for sustainable development initiatives, for example climate justice. Additionally, the vividness effect may contribute to misinformation, as vivid but inaccurate narratives can be more persuasive than dry, factual reports (Collins et al., 2023). United Nations bodies should prioritize evidence-based decision-making processes that balance vivid testimonies with comprehensive data analysis and expert insights to mitigate these adverse effects.

II. Action: Highlighting Vividness and Equalizing Public Action

Digital media is ever-expanding and allows its audiences to have infinite access to the latest breaking news around the world. This growth in the use of digital news media has led to people relying more heavily on social media apps and internet browsers to provide them with the current news (Gavilan et al., 2020). With conflicts arising exponentially, it is challenging to focus on every world event at the same time. Many news media stations keep audiences engaged through the use of push notifications, “breaking news” headlines, clickbait, et cetera. This marketing tactic keeps audiences engaged in the latest conflict, disregarding any others that are not as well known or as well “advertised.” The rule of thumb seems to be that in order for higher engagement, the media needs to be extremely accessible. Gavilan et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of news companies and social media accounts having push notifications to engross their audiences in the media they are sharing. By measuring the users’ click-through rates with both vivid and non-vivid push notifications, they found that users were significantly more likely to engage with vivid push notifications. Given that news media companies operating on social media have to compete with one another to grasp the most attention, the United Nations is uniquely well-positioned to create policies regulating the ethics of media advertising practices.

The volatility of public attention, driven by shifting news cycles, forces crises to compete for media coverage, leading to fluctuations in donation levels. Zhang and Zheng (2016) noted that the unpredictability of the public focus can cause social media fatigue, which reduces engagement and thus, donations. This impacts nonprofit organizations’ ability to sustain relief efforts. Understanding how media attention impacts donation behavior allows nonprofits to strategize better to help them ensure a steady flow of resources for ongoing and future crises. Research into the factors that motivate charitable giving highlights the significance of physical and psychological distance, vivid imagery, and the need to belong. People are more inclined to donate to local causes due to emotional proximity and perceived responsibility, though messages creating emotional connections to identifiable beneficiaries can mitigate geographical gaps (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017).

Psychological distance also plays a role, with social, temporal, and hypothetical distances affecting donor empathy and willingness. Vivid imagery related to message content improves memory and donations, while specific information about how donations will be used increases donor trust and contributions (Cryder, Loewenstein & Scheines, 2013). The need to belong is a powerful motivator; individuals are more likely to donate when others are doing so, especially if the donation activity is public and the donors are similar to them (Carman, 2003; Meer, 2014).

Walters (2013) found that generic news coverage of disasters did not significantly increase donations, but specific mentions of organizations and their representatives in the media resulted in noticeable spikes in contributions. To maintain public interest, nonprofits should implement continuous and proactive media engagement strategies, ensuring regular updates and personalized stories. Including a media spokesperson in news broadcasts can enhance fundraising efforts. Additionally, leveraging diverse media platforms and content types can help reach a broader audience and sustain donor engagement over time. It is crucial to address this issue, as failure to do so can severely limit nonprofits' effectiveness in responding to crises and sustaining long-term projects. Adaptation to the changing media landscape is essential for securing the necessary support and resources for vital nonprofit work.

These disparities and volatility of information representation are crucial to the United Nations' Department of Global Communications' (DGC) current tasks and priorities, particularly in addressing how certain crises receive more media attention than others, caused partly by the vividness effect. For example, the DGC has long emphasized the importance of balanced information in resolutions such as *A/RES/74/82* (2020), which stresses the need for accurate and diverse representation of global events to ensure equitable coverage. Furthermore, *A/RES/76/233* (2021) calls for the promotion of transparency and information integrity in media coverage, highlighting the risks of sensationalism and misinformation. Addressing these issues is crucial to achieving the United Nations' goals, as unequal representation can undermine the global response to less visible but urgent crises. By acknowledging and mitigating the vividness effect, the DGC aims to foster a more inclusive global dialogue, ensuring that all humanitarian crises receive the attention and resources they require.

III. Recommendations

To these ends, the PCUN recommends particular attention to the following action items:

1. **Promoting Equity in Global Attention**: As noted, the challenge facing the United Nations toward the goal of information integrity is not only the overrepresentation of certain issues, but also the absence of others. Ensuring that all voices are heard and every crisis is individually recognized is essential to maintaining equity in global discourse. The DGC and Human Rights Committees must prioritize this goal by focusing on balanced media strategies that bring lesser-known issues to the forefront. By integrating equitable representation into their strategic objectives, these bodies can better highlight the struggles of underrepresented communities and amplify their stories. This focus should include not only active engagement with traditional

media outlets, but also partnerships with social media platforms to promote content that reflects a broader spectrum of global challenges.

2. **Regulating Ethical Distributive Behavior of Media Companies:** It is recommended that the United Nations work collaboratively with mainstream and social media companies to develop ethical guidelines aimed at prioritizing factual reporting over attention-driven algorithms. We call for the United Nations to establish an accountability index that evaluates social media platforms based on their commitment to promoting factual, balanced news. Criteria could include efforts in curbing misinformation, their transparency in algorithmic decision-making, and initiatives that support responsible journalism. This would incentivize platforms to adopt more ethical standards in news amplification.
3. **Leveraging AI to Address Disparities**: The DGC has made strides in utilizing artificial intelligence to combat misinformation, and this same technology can be applied to reduce vividness disparities and the resulting polarization. By using AI-driven tools to analyze and identify imbalances in media coverage, the DGC can amplify voices and perspectives that are often marginalized in public discourse. For instance, AI algorithms could be deployed to identify trending issues and ensure that equally pressing but less visible crises are highlighted alongside them. This approach would help create a more nuanced global narrative, where individuals are exposed to a diverse range of conflicts and human rights issues rather than being drawn solely to the most temporally sensational stories.
4. **Developing Partnerships for Broader Awareness**: To address the vividness effect and its impact on global awareness, the United Nations should build partnerships with both media organizations and grassroots communication networks. These partnerships could focus on creating content that brings lesser-known humanitarian crises to light, offering a platform for voices that are often left out of mainstream narratives. Additionally, training programs could be established for journalists and media professionals, emphasizing the importance of covering underrepresented issues with the same vigor as high-profile events. Such collaborations would ensure that the vividness effect does not lead to selective empathy, and that global attention is more equitably distributed among various humanitarian concerns.

Conclusion

Ultimately, addressing the vividness effect is not only about balancing media narratives, but about challenging underlying structures that shape global compassion and attention. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is crucial for the United Nations to rise to the challenge of ensuring that no crisis is deemed too obscure, no community too distant, and no suffering too muted to warrant attention. This requires a fundamental shift in how information is managed and amplified, a commitment to ensuring that deliberate focus is put toward giving voice to those who have been silenced. By highlighting the vividness effect and its impact on information integrity worldwide, the United Nations has the opportunity not only to bridge gaps in global awareness but also to reshape the world's moral compass, moving toward the goal of a more just and empathic international community that equitably sees - and acts on - every corner of human need.

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