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Essays: *(Re)Connecting Academia*

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Society Through a Public Exhibition*

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The Humanitarian Storyteller: (Re)connecting Academia and Society Through a Public Exhibition

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About two years ago, I conceptualised and produced an interactive, text-based public exhibition titled *The Humanitarian Storyteller*. The aim of my exhibition was to invite members of the public to think critically about narratives centered on humanitarian crisis they encounter in the media. This exhibition was inspired by my doctoral research, which explores processes and practices of storytelling within global development organisations, and by my previous lived experience as a communications officer within international development.

The exhibition was held at Phoenix Brighton and during the festival Brighton Fringe in May 2019, which allowed me to reach a wider segment of the public. The event was supported by the Researcher Development Programme (Public Engagement Fund) of the University of Sussex. In making my exhibition interactive, I adopted a choose-your-own-adventure style of presentation. I invited the public (the exhibition participants) to assume the role of a communications officer working for an international humanitarian organisation and make a range of choices in producing narratives portraying humanitarian efforts and their positive impact.

This exhibition provided an opportunity to creatively (re)connect academic/scholarly concerns with public perceptions and organisational cultures. While my exhibit was informed by my research data and scholarly

work, I re-packaged this academic material into engaging content, making it appealing to a diverse non-academic audience. In the feedback provided by the participants, many of them recognised the accessible and open nature of the knowledge shared. The exhibits were also shaped by my lived experience – an element that I particularly valued, given the limited space available to reflect on such personal experiences within academic writing.

In a later discussion, some members of the academic community inquired why I chose to produce a physical exhibition, instead of a digital one, which would have allowed me to reach an even wider public. A significant value of this exhibition was how it sought to promote tangible connections between diverse audiences, perceptions, and conversations, beyond what a digital space would allow. Whereas some participants were familiar with humanitarian appeals, others were not. Yet, I observed individual participants engaging in lively discussions with one another, including with participants they had never met before. Some spent considerable time debating the value of narratives centered on women, children, and pregnant mothers, as opposed to men. Some spoke to me about their scepticisms around portrayals of empowerment.

These conversations were enriching. In addition, some participants wanted to know more about my research, and in turn, shared their own experiences. Many participants expressed that they had limited understanding of how humanitarian narratives were produced, and noted how the exhibition provoked conversations and made them critique their own assumptions. Such feedback demonstrates the impact of this exhibition and highlights the value of (re)connecting academia with society through creative methods.