INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STORYTELLING, EFFICIENTCOMMUNICATION FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS
UNHCR Case Study

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ABSTRACT

UNHCR, a United Nations agency of great relevance for international society and international relations, uses storytelling, a communication tool with increasing presence in society. This article investigates how, through the possibilities and potential of this tool, UNHCR manages to better reach its audience and also promote the voice of refugees. The research has been carried out by combining a literature review of the role of storytelling with an interview with the UNHCR spokesperson for a subsequent analysis of campaigns in which UNHCR has successfully used storytelling.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) uses *storytelling* as a communication tool in its awareness campaigns, exploring the possibilities of this method of disseminating its messages when dealing with the stories of refugees, and the results of these initiatives. This case study focuses on the use of *storytelling* as a valid tool in the field of international organisations and, therefore, international relations.

It can be said that storytelling and the transmission of stories is something inherent to humanity since ancient times, as "humans are avid producers and consumers of stories" (Smith et al, 2017, p.1). These stories have been told through different formats up to the present day, initially through oral transmission and now increasingly through visual and audiovisual transmission. For some time now, *storytelling* has established itself as one of the most effective communication strategies for reaching an increasingly complex audience, which is difficult to sensitise and mobilise in this globalised and mediatised world.

More and more international organisations, entities and institutions are using *storytelling* to communicate and disseminate their campaigns, such as UNHCR. Since its inception, it has been sharing its work in the search for new funds to finance itself by communicating the stories of the people to whom it owes its mission: refugees.

Many academic studies have examined the role of *storytelling*, addressing a wide range of topics, from how storytelling promotes cooperation among individuals in an indigenous Filipino population (Smith et al, 2017), to how good stories contribute to the release of oxytocin, which promotes greater empathy (Zak, 2014), to its value as a multidirectional communication model in education (Hermann-Acosta, 2020). However, it is undoubtedly true that the most explored areas have been business environments (Zak, 2014).

Within the field of International Relations, there is little research on this subject, with the area of refugees being one of the few that has been investigated: attention should be paid to studies that have explored the possibilities of *storytelling* in the narrations (and narratives) of refugees. (Gebauer & Sommer, 2024; Woods, 2019).

In view of this, this research aims to analyse the communicative role of UNHCR through *storytelling*, in an international context in which forced migration and the number of people requiring refuge are increasing at an alarming rate in 2023: "One in every 69 people in the world, or 1.5% of the total global population, was forcibly displaced, almost double the figure of a decade ago, which was 1 in every 125 people." (UNHCR, 2024, p.6). By 2023, there were 117.3 million forcibly displaced people, and by the end of June 2024, the figure had risen to 122.6 million people. (UNHCR Spain, 2025a). The use of *storytelling* allows UNHCR to transform these figures, which often tend to be perceived as mere abstract numbers, into more human stories that reflect the reality of the millions of stories of people forced to flee their homes.

This article analyses how UNHCR uses *storytelling* in its campaigns and communication activities, seeking to understand the effects that the use of this tool has on the Agency and, consequently, on refugees.

1.1. UNHCR and Communication[1]

UNHCR is the United Nations Refugee Agency, established by the United Nations (UN) in 1950 as a result of the increase in refugees after the Second World War. Since then, and in accordance with the principles established in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR operates in 136 countries to provide support to people who have been forcibly displaced. (UNHCR Spain, 2025a, UNHCR Spain, 2025b).

It is necessary to consider the objectives of this UN agency when addressing how it communicates, as *storytelling* requires clearly defined objectives from which to tell stories in order to reach the public.

UNHCR's activities and objectives comprise four main actions: "protecting people forced to flee", "responding to emergencies", "safeguarding human rights" and "building a better future" (UNHCR Spain,

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[1] This section (1.1) is based mainly on information obtained and systematised from the interview conducted by the authors with William Spindler, spokesperson for UNHCR, in December 2024, as indicated below in the Methodology section (3).

2025b). With this in mind, it can be said that UNHCR's main communication objective is to obtain support and funding to continue its work, i.e. to encourage its audience to help refugees through donations.

UNHCR's work is carried out using cross-cutting working methods, recognising that "the way it works is as important as the work it does" (UNHCR Spain, 2025b). For this very reason, it should be noted that UNHCR's choice of *storytelling* in its communications is not random but rather responds to a specific intention adapted to today's world, in which stories have become increasingly important, as can be seen in the following section.

UNHCR works on its communications through its Global Communications Service, using all the multimedia tools available on the market, including texts, photographs and videos in various formats, with social media playing a leading role in the dissemination of all its communications.

In designing its strategic communications, it places the voices of displaced populations, refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons at the centre of its work. To reach new audiences, it also uses goodwill ambassadors and other personalities who help it to reach young people and people who are not necessarily interested in its work. They also work closely with other United Nations agencies and civil society actors on events, campaigns, and issues related to the protection and assistance of refugees and others who have had to leave their countries due to persecution, war, and conflict.

Its communications section employs 75 people globally, including around 30 at its headquarters in Geneva. It uses social media to mobilise diverse audiences of millions of people around the world and try to increase its follower base. To do this, they have accounts on various global platforms: Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, X, LinkedIn, and Instagram, in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic, all at a global level. But they also have regional or national accounts in other languages such as Portuguese, German, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Ukrainian, Turkish, etc. From there, they manage hundreds of social media accounts at the national and regional levels. This section also works on developing training programmes and advising on UNHCR's national communication strategies. In addition, they have thematic accounts that address health, education, or climate change, for example. In short, it coordinates messages, distributes information, news, trends, produces content packages for networks, and authorises the creation of new corporate accounts.

The launch of campaigns and the use of tools such as *storytelling* in them is becoming essential for this international organisation. And it faces a major challenge: measuring results. They have an analysis section that provides quantitative and qualitative information related to communications. This unit conducts research on public opinion, among other things, and is attentive to changes in trends, which is key to achieving one of UNHCR's *storytelling* objectives: to create a positive narrative around refugees. This section uses a specific research methodology that helps them see what impact the campaigns have had on public opinion. To this end, they have also collaborated with Ipsos and other polling organisations that analyse public opinion.

UNHCR assumes that its impact on public opinion has been enormous since its presence on social media, and within that, since its use of *storytelling* as a communication dynamic. The organisation needs to influence public opinion; it has to explain who refugees are, why they have to leave their countries, and what the consequences would be if these people were forced to return to their places of origin. *Storytelling* as a tool allows audiences to see refugees as people, not as numbers or something abstract: it is the personal story of a woman, a child, a man leaving Sudan or Syria, for example, fleeing war and persecution, who cannot return to their country because they could suffer human rights violations, torture and, in some cases, even death. *Storytelling* gives refugees a face and a voice, making it a valuable tool for UNHCR in its work.

1.2. Storytelling

Christian Salmon is one of the most renowned theorists on *storytelling*, largely thanks to his book: *Storytelling: the machine for telling stories and formatting minds*, originally published in French in 2007. In this book, he explains and analyses the evolution of storytelling, something that until not so long ago was understood as being intended for children but has now become: "a form of discourse that is imposed on all sectors of society and transcends political, cultural or professional dividing lines, confirming what social science researchers have called the *narrative turn*" (Salmon, 2016, p.30).

As mentioned above, storytelling has accompanied human beings for many years, first as an oral tradition, which includes mythology and epic poetry, for example, which also contributed to the formation and consolidation of societies themselves. Over the years, these stories moved into written literature, but later also into cinema and radio, and finally, with the emergence of the mass media throughout the 20th century, stories have continued to be told, right up to the present day, where it could be said that the main areas where *storytelling* prevails are marketing, advertising, social media and politics.

The *narrative turn* of the late 20th century is crucial to understanding contemporary *storytelling*, as it "soon reached the social sciences" (Salmon, 2016, p.33) and came to give greater importance to human experiences and the narratives through which they were communicated. Thus, we have reached a point where:

> Storytelling has been able to present itself as a technique of communication, control and power. In the mid-1990s, the narrative turn in the social sciences coincided with the explosion of the Internet and advances in new information and communication technologies (NICTs), which created the conditions for the storytelling revival and allowed it to spread so rapidly. More and more NGOs, government agencies and large companies are discovering the effectiveness of storytelling. (Salmon, 2016, p.34).

Thus, it is in marketing that the use of *storytelling* is most explicitly found, but in a world where it can be said that marketing has permeated almost every aspect of human life, becoming not only an essential tool for the promotion and sale of goods and services, but also, and more importantly, crucial for the formation of perceptions, ideas, feelings and emotions in many other forms of consumption, with consumption now being much more emotional and *storytelling* becoming increasingly important. Although *storytelling* began to be used to highlight the features and benefits of products through a story, over the years it has moved closer to the consumer, the audience, encouraging them to become part of it, creating a deeper connection that has been shown to greatly help the storyteller achieve their goals.

In his book *The Seven Rules of Storytelling*, authors John Sadowsky and Loïc Roche provide seven key points for this communication tool, which include: "Engage in your inner journey, create an authentic story, involve those who work with you, be yourself, project your ideas, personalise your stories, always simplify" (Sadowsky & Roche, 2013, p.43).

From there, following these recommendations from Sadowsky and Roche, we can say that there are a number of common characteristics that *storytelling* should include, related to: how to reach the audience and get them to empathise, promoting the construction of subjectivity, human identity through experiences, the power of stories, and proactivity towards cooperation after a good story. It is also common for *storytelling* to propose a structure that includes a challenge or conflict and then propose a choice (in which the audience is involved) and a final outcome based on what the audience has chosen, depending on which part of the story they have decided to contribute to.

Approaching the audience, getting them to participate and empathise is not easy. In Salmon's terms, it is about "formatting their minds" (Salmon, 2016), manipulating emotions through a story, squeezing out its potential. To do this, it is important to involve them in the story itself, so that: "audiences not only generate emotional content but can also establish a dynamism and participate in the processes of collective and collaborative construction of data and information" (Hermann-Acosta, 2020, p.31).

When it comes to achieving this, the emotional aspect is key, but it is not easy, especially at a time when people are constantly bombarded by narratives (media, political, commercial, etc.) that shape their own identity through stories with which they can identify to a greater or lesser extent. As a result, brands, institutions and companies are tirelessly seeking new ways to connect with their audiences.

It is therefore a question of conveying narratives, experiences and stories in order to understand human life and achieve other goals (which are framed within the product, medium or campaign in question) and connect with other human lives (those of the audience).

In these narratives, it is common for a conflict to be presented from which the whole story develops. As Zak (2014) explains, "a story must first hold attention (a scarce resource in the brain) by building tension during the narrative. If the story is able to create that tension, viewers are likely to share the emotions of the characters" (p.3). In the face of this conflict, a hero is usually introduced who promotes a positive resolution, which generally also involves cooperation.

The idea of the hero is widely used in *storytelling*. Salmon (2016) explains that it resonates strongly today, given that in both politics and advertising, stories are constructed around a "hero," a central figure who represents the struggle, change, or ideal that is being sold. This "hero" is often a symbolic construct and not necessarily a real person, but rather a figure that symbolises collective desires and aspirations, which is where the element of cooperation comes in, as explained in detail in the study by Smith et al (2017), In their research on the importance of *storytelling* skills among members of a population, they concluded that good storytellers became even more desirable than good gatherers within a hunter-gatherer population, which allowed them to "reflect the importance of storytellers in promoting cooperation and generating gains for all individuals" (Salmon, 2017). Along these lines, (Zak, 2014), in his research on the release of oxytocin through *storytelling,* explained that

> Oxytocin is produced when we are trusted or shown kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing our sense of empathy, our ability to experience the emotions of others. (Zak, 2014, p.2)

2. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to highlight the use of *storytelling* as a useful communication tool for disseminating messages from International Relations, exploring how it is implemented by an international organisation, in this case for the protection of refugees: UNHCR.

The first secondary objective is to understand how UNHCR designs and executes its communication work, in which the use of *storytelling* is incorporated as another tool.

The second secondary objective is to analyse some of UNHCR's main communication campaigns to see how it uses *storytelling* and to what extent this international organisation considers it a positive tool within the international communication space it operates in.

3. Methodology

Descriptive and analytical methods were used in this research to achieve the objectives set. The achievement of the main objective is based on achieving the two secondary objectives. For the first secondary objective, the descriptive method was used, taking into account that a narrative exposition of the reality under investigation was carried out. The aim was to

> to gain an initial understanding of the reality as it emerges from the analyst's direct observation and/or the knowledge acquired through reading or studying the information provided by other authors. (Calduch Cervera, 2014, p. 24)

This method used the technique of bibliographic review to theoretically explore various authors who, through their works, have delved into the use, importance and treatment of *storytelling* today. This was particularly interesting for the introductory and descriptive parts of UNHCR's communication field. Reports from the organisation were also used to provide data and figures to pinpoint the problem as specifically as possible.

In addition, the semi-structured interview technique was used: an interview was conducted with William Spindler, spokesperson for UNHCR, on 4 December 2024, via a videoconferencing platform; it lasted 35 minutes and 11 seconds, was recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis and systematisation of the information obtained. It has been used in points 1.1 and 4.1 of this article, with the authors having been authorised to do so by the interviewee. Two main topics were addressed in the interview: the importance of communication for UNHCR, how they design, organise and execute their actions; and the relevance of *storytelling* as a useful tool for achieving the results they seek.

To achieve the second secondary objective, the analytical method was used, which is based on a general description of a reality in order to distinguish, understand and classify its essential elements and the relationships between them (Calduch Cervera, 2014). This was applied to the analysis of UNHCR's communication campaigns developed in point 4 of this research. The following campaigns were selected: "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?" (Chacholiades, 2009), "UK for Refugees. Amplifying refugee voices and fostering meaningful storytelling" (UNHCR United Kingdom, 2025), "We change stories" (UNHCR Spain, 2017), "I am you; you are me" (UNHCR Spanish Committee, 2021), "Integrating

Storytelling as a tool for healing and community building #MeWeSyria" (UNHCR, 2025), "UNHCR Campaign 2018" (UNHCR Spanish Committee, 2018) and "UNHCR Campaign 2024" (UNHCR Spanish Committee, 2024).

4. Results

Through its campaigns, UNHCR seeks to convey to the public the importance of the work it does around the world, placing special emphasis on the fact that its activity is made possible thanks to all the people who support the Agency. This selection of campaigns shows how UNHCR uses *storytelling* to share the stories of the refugees it supports and to engage the public, making them participants and "heroes" for cooperating with the cause.

4.1. "Where Have All The Flowers Gone?"

This is a historic UNHCR campaign from the 1990s, based on a video advertisement for television and other audiovisual platforms. With the song that gives the campaign its title playing in the background, images flash by of some minors who were refugees at some point in their lives and became famous as adults: the psychologist Freud, the footballer Weah, the dancer Nureyev, the physicist Einstein, the conductor Solti, the gymnast Comanesci, the singer Dietrich, and in some versions the politician Kissinger (who did not appear in all versions due to the controversy surrounding his political career in the United States). The message read: "They were all refugees. Today we are helping 22 million people rebuild their lives." The video had a sepia tone, which gave it warmth and, together with the music, created a reflective atmosphere. It had a very positive impact on the image of the UNHCR, and it can be said that it told a story with a clear thread and a powerful message. Although no one talked about *storytelling* in those years, this tool was clearly used in the video, and it was done by an international organisation that increased its impact. It also received criticism for its choice to give prominence to famous people, focusing on them rather than anonymous individuals, but it decided to take that risk and accept the criticism.

4.2. UK for Refugees. Amplifying refugee voices and fostering meaningful storytelling.

This campaign was selected precisely because of the explicit use of *storytelling* in UNHCR's actions, in this case at its UK headquarters. It is striking how focused it is on ensuring that the transmission of these stories is "meaningful and appropriate".

Through this campaign, UNHCR UK created a network of *storytellers* (refugees or former refugees) from more than 20 countries who, through a web application, could share their experiences with the dual aim of raising awareness of their life stories and promoting understanding.

These narratives allow refugees and former refugees to recount their experiences, not only those related to displacement (which are in fact the ones that are generally known), but also those that came afterwards, success stories in which they cease to be "nothing more than refugees" and become people with aspirations and experiences that go far beyond their flight.

But these *storytellers* not only manage to inform the general public about their experiences, thus relating them to why UNHCR's work is important, but they also contribute to helping other people who are going through or have gone through similar experiences.

The campaign website features various testimonials from people who have participated in the programme, all of whom agree that taking part has made them more aware of what telling their own stories can mean.

For example, one of them, Samin, a film director and producer, commented that through this initiative, UNHCR UK was "setting the standard by bringing untold stories to light and allowing viewers to see both sides of the narrative". Another storyteller, Kana Josée, commented that "you will never fully understand the impact of sharing your story until you hear the stories of those you have listened to." She also stated that after her story published by UNHCR appeared in the media, she realised that she had become "a voice for those who could not speak for themselves." Eid, a finance graduate, commented that participating in this campaign had helped him "develop a greater appreciation for working with UNHCR UK and the power of *storytelling*."

This UNHCR UK campaign contributes greatly to a very important issue, which is to reclaim the agency of refugees, who are often sidelined, resulting in their stories being presented as mere passive

victims of the growing statistics on forced displacement. The fact that it is the refugees themselves who tell their stories brings new perspectives and new narratives that are far removed from the often repetitive and dehumanising narratives commonly associated with refugees.

In this way, through this *storytelling* campaign, UNHCR UK provides a space for refugees to raise their voices, not only to tell their stories of flight, but also their stories of struggle, resilience and dreams, which really allow us to get closer to the reality of these people, enabling the UNHCR audience to connect in a much more empathetic way.

4.3. We Change Stories

"At UNHCR, we cannot change history, but we can change stories." This is the slogan that UNHCR launched in 2017 to raise awareness of the real impact that UNHCR has on the lives of millions of refugees.

This campaign was launched both online and on television with a 30-second video emphasising the negative reception that UNHCR's work generally received and those who thought it was not possible to change people's lives. Then, this negative message was accompanied by images projected in reverse, emphasising that UNHCR is indeed present in all these moments.

The campaign emphasises that UNHCR does not believe it is impossible. Far from being intimidated or limited by all these negatives, it acts to alleviate the consequences of a situation that UNHCR recognises it cannot change.

It is interesting because it provides a "realistic" alternative in line with the current situation, in which it is assumed that history will not change course, with the expected negative consequences for refugees.

On the website, you can read about different specific stories in which, despite their stories already being marked by the horror of flight, they managed to change course with the help provided by UNHCR. In Omar's case, this was through treatment with advanced technology, in the case of Esther, who became a neurosurgeon after starting to attend a UNHCR school in Kenya, or the story of Hala, to whom UNHCR provided shelter and materials so that she could study.

4.4. I am you; you are me

This is an interactive campaign that allows you to put yourself in the shoes of refugees. It is an interactive journey that allows you to "put yourself in the shoes" of 10 refugees through interactive narratives. This initiative aims to bring refugees closer to the public by appealing to the common issues that refugees may have with the potential audience (e.g. talking about age, aspirations, dreams, etc.).

Based on this approach of bringing people closer together, specifically "putting yourself in someone else's shoes", the website features a world map inviting the public to "begin the journey", which traces the movements of 10 refugees from different places. When selecting the story of each of these people, an interactive image was presented with everyday objects belonging to each of them, which also allowed visitors to learn how these objects were used in their daily lives.

For example, it tells the story of Tateh Lehbbi, a Sahrawi refugee, recounted first-hand, in which he explains what life is like in a UNHCR shelter in Tindouf (Algeria). which also opens a document showing the more than 19 designs used by UNHCR when building shelters around the world. It also provides a comic strip narrated by voice based on a characteristic garment worn by the protagonist, a turban. It also provides more information about his life and his great idea: building shelters from water bottles filled with sand. This story was also adapted into a documentary entitled "Tateh Lehbib, the madman of the desert".

The most notable aspect of this campaign is its high educational value, as the format and interactivity of the website, its design, the use of illustrations, etc., make it much more suitable for a younger audience, which UNHCR also wants to target in order to raise awareness and empathy from an early age.

4.5. Integrating Storytelling as a tool for healing and community building #MeWeSyria

This campaign is a programme run by Ashoka's Youth Venture, founded by Mohsin Mohi Ud Din in 2014, starting with a small group in the Zaatari refugee camp. By 2017, it had grown into a team of more than 50 people replicating the project in different countries.

The initiative, under the hashtag #MeWeSyria, promotes the use of *storytelling* focused on young refugees, arguing that when they have an adequate space for expression, they are able to better themselves, achieve their goals and even more: guide other young people in the same situation to "regain control of the narrative of their lives".

One of the greatest strengths of this campaign is that, in addition to giving refugees the space, the voice and the necessary means to tell their stories, it does so based on the need for safe spaces where refugees can decide what to share and what not to share about their own experiences, taking into account that what is expressed and how it is expressed has an impact on their development and the way they manage their own experiences.

This is why the way in which MeWeSyria uses *storytelling* to create a genuinely safe space that allows refugees to identify with their own stories and reclaim them is so important, contributing to the decentralisation of the power of narrative, which is often so distant from refugees and contributes to their dehumanisation.

In this way, MeWeSyria is a platform focused on young refugees, but it also proposes a novel methodology through storytelling to help oneself and others in similar situations.

4.6. UNHCR 2018 campaign

This campaign, launched by UNHCR (Spanish Committee in 2018), is particularly interesting because it involves the viewer in a very concrete way, encouraging them to question what is normal vs. what is "crazy", presenting the latter as what should be done.

For example, it talks about how it is normal for families to suffer on migration routes, while taking in a Syrian family was crazy. It also presented the case of child soldiers as normal and then contrasted it with the possibility of children in South Sudan having access to education; how it is normal for children to go hungry, but crazy to donate £1 a day so that they can eat.

It ends with a very powerful slogan that encourages viewers to differentiate themselves through their choice to collaborate with UNHCR: "When it's normal to be indifferent, the only hope is to be crazy. To all the crazy people who collaborate with UNHCR, thank you."

In this campaign, it is worth noting how UNHCR portrays those who collaborate with its work as heroes, labelling them as "crazy" and appealing to their identity as non-conformists in order to get them involved.

4.7. UNHCR 2024 Campaign

This video campaign, which is the most recent at the time of writing, takes up the idea of changing stories in the face of a story, a reality that does not seem to be improving, but rather tends to worsen. The campaign uses a series of catastrophic images to represent the current situation in the world, in a context in which there are unprecedented numbers of displaced people, the highest in history, as reported by the UN Agency itself.

UNHCR presents the idea that, in this context, although it is logical for the viewer to lose hope, it quickly reminds them that UNHCR is still there, and that no matter how bad things get, it will continue to serve refugees, encouraging them to get involved, to take part in the work that UNHCR has been doing throughout 2024 and which will continue to be more than necessary in 2025. The aim is to urge viewers to continue supporting UNHCR through their donations, as the emergency and the plight of refugees will continue in 2025.

5. Discussion

In general, it can be said that the UNHCR campaigns selected in this article achieve their main objective of engaging the public through donations as a result of eliciting empathy and connection through the use of *storytelling*.

UNHCR manages to present a conflict with which the public can empathise, making them feel included in the story being told, specifically as heroes, as people who, through cooperation between individuals via the work of UNHCR, are alleviating the situations they face and will continue to face. Furthermore, it does so with simplicity, ensuring that the message reaches more people, and with the sensitivity that the subject requires, addressing the stories of the people it serves in an ethical manner,

respecting their privacy and integrity, but also, and more importantly, their agency, which is so often overlooked when talking about refugees.

This use of *storytelling* is part of an increasingly fast-paced, changing context in which there is "an escalation of proposals that seek to provoke emotional remobilisation, a recovery of commitment". (Salmon, 2016, p.110) in a context in which, as clearly expressed in the "We Change Stories" campaign, history cannot be changed, but it is possible to commit to changing the individual stories of the people to whom UNHCR provides the necessary means to improve their conditions despite being refugees.

How UNHCR manages to make its stories work is explained very well through the research of Paul J. Zak (2014), who explains how "people are substantially more motivated by the transcendent purpose of their organisation (how it improves lives) than by its transactional purpose (how it sells goods and services)". (p.3). What is unique about UNHCR is that, by its very nature, its goods and services coincide with improving people's lives, which facilitates its work and makes it even more conducive to the use of *storytelling* techniques*.*

In this vein, it could be said that, for this very reason, the content of UNHCR's campaigns will necessarily be imbued with emotional and experiential language, something that "arouses interest in audiences, as it connects with their personal experiences and stories." (Hermann-Acosta, 2020, p.32). Specifically, the "I am you; you are me" campaign shows how ideas are communicated and bonds are created through "emotional content and shared experiences" (Hermann-Acosta, 2020, p.34). In this particular campaign, the public is invited to share the experience of refugees, to put themselves in their shoes through greater knowledge of their life stories, customs and daily lives.

However, we can make two fundamental distinctions, depending on whether UNHCR uses *storytelling* for its general campaigns, or whether refugees themselves use these tools for their own lives through initiatives in which UNHCR participates. The first group includes the following campaigns: Historical, We Change Stories, UNHCR Campaign 2018 and UNHCR Campaign 2024. The second group includes the following campaigns: UK for Refugees, Integrating *storytelling* as a tool for healing   and community building.

Specifically, with regard to the campaigns in the second group, it is important to emphasise how *storytelling* ends up having two very relevant uses for the work of UNHCR and the well-being of the refugees themselves, since, on the one hand, it manages to communicate and reach UNHCR's external audience, but on the other, it also has a simultaneous and direct impact on the refugee communities themselves.

Syrian-British linguist Dr Lina Fadel, herself a refugee, told UNHCR UK how she truly believes in the power of *storytelling* and the achievements it can contribute to. What's more:

> In order for refugees and marginalised groups to challenge myths and stereotypes, they need to be given a platform to share their stories and speak for themselves. Stories are a human right and a responsibility, but more than that, stories are a privilege that most refugees cannot access. (Fadel, 2023).

It can be said that in all the UNHCR campaigns analysed (although this is most explicitly shown in "UK for Refugees", "I am you; you are me" and "Integrating Storytelling as a tool for healing and community building"), there is a commitment to promoting and defending the agency of refugees, favouring counter-narratives to those that commonly portray refugees as passive in the face of the realities they face, reinforcing the situation of refugees as voiceless victims, even "dehistoricised" (Woods, 2019, p. 11).

In contrast, UNHCR is more committed to constructing its own narratives, which normally face multiple structural barriers of power, but which UNHCR helps to counteract through its work. The fact is that "although speaking on behalf of migrants is a legitimate strategy for promoting a humanitarian narrative, indirect storytelling (...) attributes a largely passive role to refugees and migrants that does not do justice to the communicative potential of *storytelling* as a form of empowerment and recognition" (Gebauer & Sommer, 2024, p.11).

In doing so, UNHCR takes into account how the very way in which it will "bias" information when communicating it to its audience, because no matter how good its intentions are and how much it is driven by a desire to promote solidarity with refugees, the role of intermediaries in refugee stories can

be detrimental to the people who lent their stories, in favour of the intermediaries (this applies to journalists or academics), but also to entities such as UNHCR. (Woods, 2019).

6. Conclusions

The results of UNHCR's use *of storytelling* are very positive, as this tool has enabled them to connect better with their audience. They have achieved not only greater awareness, but also greater mobilisation and support, which in turn allows UNHCR to obtain the resources it needs to continue operating.

Stories are necessary to record human realities and help raise awareness. This ancient communication technique is experiencing a significant resurgence thanks to social media and is being used in various fields. International organisations are one such field, and one of the least researched. Within these organisations, UNHCR is a leading example of the positive use *of storytelling*. This demonstrates that, given the difficulty of manoeuvring these organisations, due to their complex international composition and their membership of the United Nations, *storytelling* has elements that facilitate agreement on the narratives to be used.

Conveying stories, bringing them closer to our reality through communication, and distancing them from the abstraction of numbers is very important when it comes to refugees. *Storytelling* becomes an optimal tool for combating this abstraction, giving a face, voice and presence to millions of refugees around the world.

UNHCR is one of the first international organisations to use *storytelling* as an awareness-raising tool, as documented in the first campaign referred to in this research, in the 1990s. It has been aware for many years that communicating through the stories of the people it works with is key.

Measuring results is one of the most important elements in ensuring that the use of *storytelling* continues to grow as it has done so far, and partnerships with organisations that carry out this work in other areas will be essential to improving its efficiency in use by international organisations.

7. Acknowledgements

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