



Five types of humanitarian influence

February 7, 2023, Analysis / History / Humanitarian Action / Humanitarian diplomacy

🕒 12 mins read



Hugo Slim

Senior Research Fellow,
University of Oxford



Humanitarian action involves words as well as deeds, influence as well as operations. Every year presents new influencing challenges for humanitarian diplomats and agency communications teams.

With deepening crisis in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and Ukraine, and upcoming global meetings in 2023 on water, climate change, nuclear weapons and the future itself, University of Oxford Senior Research Fellow Hugo Slim reflects on five ancient and enduring forms of influencing that humanitarians can still use today.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Five types of humanitarian influence

The word influence comes from the Latin word to ‘flow’ – like a river, stream or flood. Influence is the idea that various forms of power flow around us and we can be carried along in their flow, caught up in their current and changed.

Influence is typically conceived as a subtle form of power that is indirect, unconscious, or deliberately hidden. Influencers are often off-stage rather than on it, whispering behind a curtain, appearing in dreams, or using magic of some kind. Influence tends to work gradually, seeping gently into us like a slowly rising tide. And, of course, influence can be both malign and good, right or wrong, pulling us towards justice or injustice.

A soft power

This sense of subtlety means influence has usually been understood as a soft power, which is best applied with great intelligence. Influence is the opposite of direct force and its hard, coercive power compelling us to change against our will, usually described today as leverage.

Instead, influence is suggestive and psychological. It is something to which we succumb rather than submit. It charms us like a spell, and influencers are more likely to wield a wand than a gun, more often seen piloting a YouTube channel than a tank.

In ancient times, it was astrology which most clearly expounded a theory of influence – modern scientists dispute astrology, but they still recognize a wide range of subtle forces that influence who we are, what we believe and what we do, especially perhaps: cultural influence; social influence; religious influence; political influence and, of course, self-interest.

These forces flow within us and around us to make us think and act in particular ways. When they are combined, we talk about people living under the influence of a particular worldview, mindset or paradigm.

An important part of all these forms of influence is our tendency to copy other people. Human beings are extremely mimetic – we imitate each other and like to live as a herd as well as individuals. Strongly influenced by a shared identity and a desire to belong, we think collectively. We become locked into group think, ideology, narrative and imaginaries, which are full of important symbols, myths, heroes and villains that explain the world to us.

Influencing someone, therefore, involves entering their ideology, narrative and imagination to edit them, extend them, disrupt them, change them or replace them. And it usually means asking people to copy someone else.

A loud power too

Not all influencing is unseen, whispered and discreet. Much modern influencing is also extremely loud and ‘in your face’. It can sometimes be explicitly pressurizing in a way that is much closer to hard power.

Humanitarian diplomacy, campaigning and advocacy use a full spectrum of influencing that plays softly to people’s unconscious desires and anxieties, and also uses pressure and protest to directly challenge anti-humanitarian behaviour.

Five types of influence

There are perhaps five enduring types of influence which have been practiced for thousands of years and still form the essential repertoire of humanitarian influencing today.

1. Public prophecy

This is a direct public challenge which typically predicts a terrible future tomorrow as a consequence of bad behaviour today. Prophecy uses scandal, outrage, shaming and public attack to target people in power. It *accuses* them of acting unjustly, ruining the world and causing disaster.

The Jewish prophets of the eighth century BCE, like Amos and Hosea, pioneered this kind of influencing. They dramatically accused the kings, priests and people of Israel of greed, godlessness and oppressing the poor. The result, they predicted, would be their abandonment by God, the destruction of their capital, Jerusalem, and the occupation of their lands.

Prophetic influencing calls leaders and citizens to *turn away* from their current disastrous behaviour and take a new path fast before it is too late. Its very loud and public appeals ‘outside the room’ are often used to escalate and leverage simultaneous government negotiations behind closed doors.

Today’s humanitarians can be seen to use this kind of influencing strategy on many issues. Most obvious today is very graphic and prophetic descriptions of the *humanitarian consequences of climate change* being used to emphasize the huge threat of climate-related disasters. Recent humanitarian success in securing the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* used similarly loud *prophetic campaigning* to call States to turn away from the catastrophic use of these weapons. Desperate times are seen to demand desperate messages as humanitarians aim to shock people into action.

2. Intimate storytelling

A more personal and indirect influencing approach uses stories as analogies, allegories or parables to resonate with the best part of a person. In this approach, a story works to make a person *accuse themselves* and *reminds them* of the right thing to do.

In Islam, the Hadith is full of stories in which the life and words of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) are used to influence our behaviour by gently reminding us of what is right and good. One Hadith tells the story of a rich date merchant who had concentrated entirely on doing business all his life. In his will, he instructed the town elders that his great warehouse full of dates should be emptied and given to the poor.

To prove the task had been honourably done, the elders asked the Prophet to check that the store was now empty. The Prophet inspected the warehouse and found everything gone except for one small date on the floor which had been squashed under foot and left to rot. ‘Why did you not distribute this one too?’ asked the Prophet. The elders explained it was damaged and dirty so they had left it on the floor. The Prophet then picked up the trodden date and said to them all: ‘If this rich man had only distributed this small damaged date to the poor while he was alive, it would have been far better than giving all his dates to them when he was dead’.

A famous Biblical example of this type of influencing is the ancient Jewish story of King David and Nathan, his prophet and advisor. David had fallen in love with the beautiful Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most senior generals, Uriah. In order to take her as his own wife, David ordered that Uriah be sent to the front of an attack and ordered to lead an impossible assault in which he would certainly be killed, which he was. Responsible for the death of her husband, David then imposed his will upon Bathsheba and took her as his wife.

Carefully one evening, Nathan told the King an imagined story of a recent outrage in his kingdom in which a very rich man had stolen the sheep of his poor neighbour in order to feed a visiting stranger. David was duly furious at this immoral behaviour and passed judgement that 'This man deserves to die and repay four times what he stole'. Nathan gently replied: 'You are the man'. At this point, David clicked and understood the story as an analogy of his own scandalous behaviour. The story cut him to the core and for days he wept, suffered and regretted his behaviour, resolving to change for the better.

In a similar way, Jesus' famous story of the Good Samaritan has been enduringly influential as a powerful story which resonates in our hearts and encourages people to take responsibility for the suffering of strangers. It has functioned as a paradigm text for Western humanitarianism.

All humanitarian organizations today have large communications team which search for stories that will strike the heart of politicians and the public. These stories are carefully crafted and curated to resonate across social media and become iconic images of the importance of humanitarian norms. This year we can expect a succession of humanitarian parables about the right to water, the *protection of civilians* and the risks of *climate change*.

3. Deliberation and problem-solving

Thinking together with the powerful about what is good, and discovering the answer together is another ancient form of influencing. It is perhaps best modelled by Mencius (Mengzee), the great Confucian sage who lived in China during the terrible period of the Warring States in the 4th century BCE.

Mencius travelled from one kingdom to another where he stayed at court, discussing and advising the King and his ministers on the best way to be a good King. These empathetic discussions involved rulers sharing their dilemmas and Mencius appealing directly to their hearts and to their self-interest to avoid war, prevent famine and act justly towards their people.

Mencius' deliberative method did not shame and criticize his powerful interlocutors. Instead, he gently used the evidence of history to convince the mind and touch the heart, so ethically encouraging each King towards the particular duties of good Kingship that would deliver what is best for them and their people.

This technique of shared thinking and empathetic political problem solving is a central part of humanitarian diplomacy today, especially around new problems. For example, humanitarian diplomacy around *cyber warfare* and new *autonomous weapons* has involved numerous roundtable meetings in which governments, big tech companies and humanitarians work together to understand the challenge of new methods of war and develop new norms and policy. Together, they pore over moral and operational detail in a discreet and personalized approach that is rooted, Mencius-like, in mutual respect and a recognition of genuine difficulties that affect them all.

4. The dripping tap

Human beings are remarkably susceptible to repetition, which is widely recognized as one of the most effective influencing techniques. To influence people, it is often only necessary to keep repeating the same message over and over again until it is eventually believed, or its believers are so many that they are overwhelming.

Deliberate techniques of repetition are often referred to as 'the dripping tap' which finally fills the bath, or the 'stuck record' which repeats the same phrase or idea over and over again until it sticks in the brain.

Many activists use the repetition of facts and slogans – true and false – to brainwash their targets. In Shakespeare, this is notoriously done by the wicked Iago to Othello to defame his virtuous wife. Iago continuously drips poisonous and untrue rumour and inuendo into Othello's ear about Desdemona's supposed infidelity until Othello is turned mad and murderous with jealousy.

More positively, many humanitarians have been steadily beating the drum around the risks of *urban warfare* for the last few years – constantly repeating statistics of civilian deaths and graphic descriptions of the terrible effects of bomb blasts on the human body and essential infrastructure.

The Liberian women's peace movement used repetition to extraordinary humanitarian success. Every day for months, they stood dressed in white outside the President's House singing for an end to the war. They then did the same at the peace negotiations in Abuja. Standing in the same place, repeating the same message, they gradually grew in numbers every day, and would not budge until peace was made.

5. The power of example

Finally, the unspoken power of example is one of the most effective forms of influence. Our mimetic nature means that if someone sets us a sufficiently powerful and inspiring example, then we will copy it. Where someone leads, people will follow.

Setting an example, and doing what you want others to do, is a highly effective way to influence people. This often involves moving beyond words to embody your values and live out your message in actions that speak louder than words.

As a humanitarian diplomat for the ICRC, the best influencing power I ever had at my disposal was the ICRC's track record of action on the ground. Politicians and government officials I met had often seen ICRC operations, benefitted directly from its work, or heard of its reputation from people they trusted.

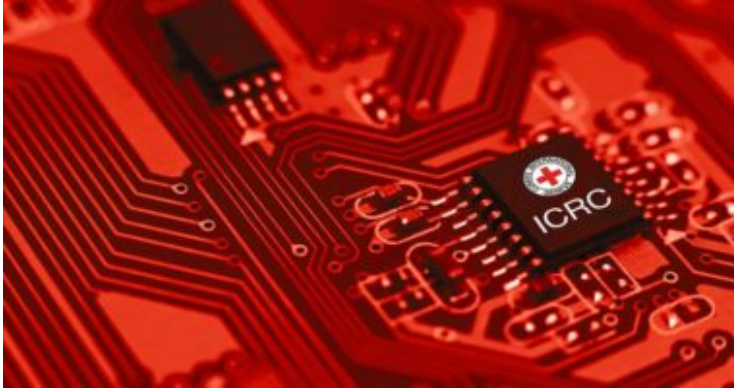
At its best, the ICRC sets an example of neutral and life-changing humanitarian work which resonates more deeply with powerful people than any arguments I could make in a meeting. This iconic example of practical humanitarian work meant that my influencing targets were often well disposed to me before I entered the room, put out my hand and opened my mouth. The ICRC's quiet example was influencing gold in many of my diplomatic encounters and gave me an extraordinary head start as we discussed humanitarian problems new and old.

See other posts by the author:

- *A new Solferino moment for humanitarians*, February 10, 2022
- *People power in humanitarian action*, February 20, 2020
- *Reflections of a humanitarian bureaucrat*, January 9, 2020

Tags: humanitarian, humanitarian diplomacy, influencing

You may also be interested in:



‘Back to basics’ with a digital twist: humanitarian principles and dilemmas in the digital age

🕒 14 mins read

Analysis / History / Humanitarian Action / Humanitarian diplomacy
Pierrick Devidal

The digital transformation has been a key vector of progress for the humanitarian sector. It ...



The translator is a traitor: translation in humanitarian response

🕒 10 mins read

Analysis / History / Humanitarian Action / Humanitarian diplomacy
Rasha Mahmoud Abdel Fattah

Translation has often been regarded as an act of ‘betrayal’, for the impossibility of transferring ...