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The neoliberal workings of The Family Meal campaign: Unfortunate others, European citizens, and the branding of the EU

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Wouter Oomen** 

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Abstract

Due to increased privatization of development assistance, humanitarian communication is usually considered to be the domain of non-governmental organizations. However, (inter)governmental and (supra)national institutions still play an important role in development assistance. Notably, the European Union has become a leading development actor globally – and also actively brands itself as such. In this process of branding, the European Union not only celebrates its empathic recognition of vulnerable non-European Others, but also aims to promote a sense of European citizenship. In this article, we examine this process in the context of The Family Meal, a 2014 awareness campaign on food assistance led by the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department of the European Commission. We argue that the campaign reflects both the logic of neoliberal humanitarianism and the quest for European citizenship. To develop our argument, we will assess The Family Meal in three steps. First, we discuss how the campaign mimicked post-humanitarian tendencies in non-governmental campaigns aimed at raising funds. Second, we demonstrate how The

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Family Meal not only reported on (helping) non-European Others, but also, and importantly, promoted a sense of European belonging. Finally, we introduce the concept of *successional campaigns* – that is, campaigns that follow up on the action taken rather than preceding it – to show that The Family Meal largely appeared as the result of the neoliberal trend toward administering accountability and branding organizations. Altogether, we consider the campaign, with the neoliberal branding of the European Union and its citizens at its center, as emblematic for humanitarian communication within the rise of New Public Management in the 21st century.

Keywords

Citizenship, development and accountability, European Union, humanitarian communication, international development, neoliberal branding, new public management

Introduction

In 2014, the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department of the European Commission (ECHO), in partnership with the UN World Food Programme (WFP), launched a new awareness campaign on food assistance called The Family Meal. The project's website stated that a daily family meal in five non-European countries – Ecuador, Chad, Niger, Jordan and Myanmar – was 'made possible thanks to the generosity of European taxpayers'.¹ The statement established a clear connection between well-off European tax-payers and 'disadvantaged others' for whom the availability of a daily meal is not considered as self-evident. Highlighting this connection, The Family Meal campaign explicitly asked the question of 'what brings us together?' – thereby, referring to a global sense of togetherness beyond national and cultural borders. The campaign presented a family meal as a 'universal custom' with relevance to nutrition, well-being, family structures and food cultures, both in European households and humanitarian crises. In this article, we will address the dynamics of this connection between well-off Europeans and so-called 'vulnerable' or 'unfortunate' Others (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2013). We will show that the fortunate/unfortunate relationship suggested in The Family Meal campaign was, though, taking place within a governmental framework, informed by traditional forms of humanitarian communication.

The institutional embedding is significant because so far humanitarian communication has largely been understood addressed as being grounded in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Instead, The Family Meal was funded by the European Union (EU, and its tax-payers), while the WFP provided humanitarian aid in the form of coupons to purchase ingredients for the meals. Until now, most academic studies in the field have concentrated on campaigns launched by either NGOs or commercial companies, leaving (inter)governmental campaigns under-researched. This is not surprising given the privatization of developmental assistance that has taken off since the mid-1970s (Rist, 2008: 174). From then onwards, international NGOs that are disentangled from governments have taken an increasingly central position in contemporary global aid (Cheah, 2007; Nelson, 2008: 149; Stein, 2008: 127). According to Harvey (2006),

NGOs have in many instances stepped into the vacuum in social provision left by the withdrawal of the state from such activities. This amounts to a process of privatization by NGOs. In some instances, this seems to have helped accelerate further state withdrawal from social provision. NGOs thereby function as ‘trojan horses for global neoliberalism’. (pp.51–52)

However, although The Family Meal was not a non-governmental but an (inter)governmental initiative, we will argue that the campaign did not defy the neoliberal gaze in humanitarianism. Instead, we will demonstrate that the campaign had much to do with corporate communication strategies that are, in often problematic ways, entering the domain of public institutions. This argument aligns with renewed theorizations of neoliberalism, where academics do not strictly focus on the ‘reduction of the state’ but rather on its ‘redeployment’ (Hilgers, 2012), a process in which commercial commodification and political rationality are exerted to ‘reengineer’ public institutions (Wacquant, 2012).

The public institution at stake here, the EU, has long been criticized for being a neoliberal project in itself (Hermann, 2007), a critique mainly voiced by the political left (Mathers, 2007). At the same time, contemporary right-wing nationalists have challenged the European project. For example, during the 2017 elections in The Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom and Germany, ‘the idea of Europe’ (Steiner, 2015) became a central issue, and all of these elections were at least partially determined by the rise of Euroscepticism (Pirro and Van Kessel, 2017). In addition, and most obviously, Euroscepticism has played a decisive role in the road to Brexit. In these political environments, the notion of ‘European citizenship’ (Isin, 2013) took center stage, that is, a sense of citizenship that goes beyond mere formal EU citizenship in the juridical sense of the word, as ‘European citizenship is enacted through not only legal but also cultural, social, economic and symbolic rights, responsibilities and identifications’ (Isin, 2013: 19). Such a discursive take on European citizenship also underpinned the dynamics of The Family Meal. In a range of implicit and explicit references to Europe, its citizens *and* its others, the campaign celebrated both an idea and ideal of Europe. We will argue that European citizenship was being branded in The Family Meal – an argument that boils down to the rise of neoliberal conceptions of humanitarianism as well as European citizenship. Examining both as they collide, this article contributes to the understanding of changes in humanitarian communication as well as the reengineering of public organizations.

The Family Meal campaign is part of an ongoing attempt of the European Union to position itself as a leading ‘humanitarian aid donor’ (ECHO, 2015: 11) since 2007, when the EU adopted their first political document on humanitarian aid: the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. As such, the campaign is part of the first wave of so-called ‘high impact communication campaigns’ (ECHO, 2015: 11) on humanitarian action that the EU has launched since 2010. More specifically, The Family Meal answered to a 2012 policy measure that envisions ‘large-scale communication and outreach campaigns implemented jointly with humanitarian partners and targeted at EU citizens’ (ECHO, 2015: 11). In fact, the opening up of communication activities directly implemented by ECHO in 2013 made The Family Meal one of the first major ‘communication projects’ (ECHO, 2015: 11) carried out by the Directorate-General (in collaboration with WFP). From 2013 to 2019, nearly 30 of these campaigns ‘aimed to bring the EU closer to its citizens’ (as a recurrent tagline goes) and have been implemented by ECHO in

partnership with humanitarian organizations. All in all, The Family Meal represents a significant EU humanitarian outreach campaigns in a new period of campaign upscaling, stronger partnerships and enhanced accountability toward EU citizens, and is as such emblematic for both the rising neoliberal humanitarian communication and EU branding strategies in the 21st century.

To develop our argument, we have explored The Family Meal through a critical discourse analysis of the campaign's website, videos, images and other related content such as online interviews and social media. In doing so, we have scrutinized the 'semiotic elements of social practices' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 38), where the semiotic elements are all those that arise out the content produced in the outreach campaign, while the social practice is apparent in the humanitarian enterprises of the EU and its communicative aims. By shifting back and forth between the campaign itself and its social embeddedness in wider humanitarian communication genres and standards as well as the production of European citizenship, the role of the Family Meal in wider EU communication is interpreted. In the following sections, our argument proceeds in three steps. First, we will discuss the campaign as it blends in with – and is shaped by – the styles of humanitarian communication *as we know it*. Here, the relationship between the generous benefactor and vulnerable beneficiary is highlighted to invoke direct monetary action in the form of donations. We will explain how The Family Meal, like most other (non-governmental) humanitarian campaigns, continues to engage with the disparity between the 'fortunate spectator' and 'unfortunate other' (Boltanski, 1999), the two problematic basic agents in traditional humanitarian communication. We will show that the use of contemporary styles in humanitarian communication, denominated as 'post-humanitarian' (Chouliaraki, 2013), aims to bridge this disparity by presenting recognizable, 'universal' habits on the side of the unfortunate other that allows for self-reflection and introspection on the side of the fortunate benefactor.

Second, we will demonstrate how such self-reflection provides alternatives to the goal of direct donations and monetary success.² While The Family Meal mimicked traditional, non-governmental campaigns in style and aesthetics, it did so with a different aim, since the aid program was (already) being funded by public money instead of (in need of) private donations. Rather, by constructing a sense of self, The Family Meal not only named European tax-payers as the main *resource* that made the campaign possible, but also constructed them as the main *audience* – as a coherent group of spectators *brought together*. Both in formal and informal ways, the importance of European citizenship was implied. The European tax-payers and institutions were hailed (the formal aspect), while the role of good and responsible citizenship was channeled through discourses on food, cooking and family (the informal aspect). In other words, stories about vulnerable others were not just used to create solidarity, but also, and importantly, to construct an image of the self and to promote a sense of European belonging.

Finally, to better understand the neoliberal workings of the campaign, we look at contemporary developments in self-realization, branding and humanitarian imagery. We will do this by applying the concept of what we call *successional campaigns*: humanitarian campaigns that follow up on the action taken, rather than preceding it. In fact, successional campaigns do not necessarily stress the suffering of others, but, instead, highlight successful interventions, thank the donors, and provide accountability for the project.

For these reasons, such campaigns look back instead of looking forward. The neoliberal trend toward administering accountability and branding organizations (such as the EU) fits successional campaigns well and ties in with contemporary ‘moral’ standards of depicting vulnerable others with agency.³ One core aspect of post-humanitarianism is that it provides a basis for personal introspection (and celebration) on the side of the spectator rather than necessarily informing solidarity. Here, we extend the argument to the formation of collective identities that further problematizes how images of vulnerability are, in this specific campaign, used to promote a sense of citizenship and brand the EU. While being part of a tendency to praise diversity and attribute agency to the (vulnerable) non-European other, a critical approach is needed to understand how solidarity is being made subservient to the promotion of good neoliberal citizenship and the branding of (inter)state entities, identities and projects.⁴

The Family Meal and post-humanitarianism

In order to evaluate The Family Meal against the backdrop of the traditional style of humanitarian appeals, it is useful to compare the campaign with No Food Diet, another campaign launched by the WFP (and with the intergovernmental character again being quite rare). This campaign has been thoroughly studied by Chouliaraki (2013) as part of her analysis of post-humanitarianism that signals ‘the emergence of a self-oriented morality’ (p. 3). In line with her study, we will address the figure of the fortunate self (*vis-à-vis* the suffering other) in order to understand how the figure of the European citizen is imagined and promoted in The Family Meal. Although the campaigns show structural differences with regard to their aim and, consequently, their mode of addressing and constructing their audience, the two campaigns are strikingly similar on the level of style with regard to their narrative and aesthetics. Despite the fact that the No Food Diet campaign can be regarded as an appeal in the most classical sense of the word, we believe this stylistic similarity proves fertile ground to connect The Family Meal to the post-humanitarian genre of the positive appeal and allows us to use this genre as a framework in examining how our case diverges from it.

In the narrative of both campaigns, the use of an iconographic ‘habit’ that is both accessible and recognizable for a Western audience was paramount: in No Food Diet hunger was crudely and ironically presented as a Western-style *diet*, while The Family Meal stresses the importance of *family meals* in European society. Both habits, embedded in Western, and, almost by extension, ‘global’ food cultures, characterized the title of both campaigns. In fact, they were crucial to connect the fortunate spectator with (the situation of) the vulnerable other. Notably, Claus Sørensen, former Director General ECHO, referred to the family meal as,

one of the many ways in which we have to communicate the suffering and the aspirations of people out there. People in Europe understand what the family meal means. Not only for themselves, but evidently for all families around the globe. So I find it a very powerful way of communicating the common destiny of humanity.

Though the effect of establishing the connection in the two cases clearly differed, both ‘dieting’ and enjoying a ‘family meal’ were explicitly presented as a gateway through

which the European audience could compare itself with vulnerable others and think of itself as being as dependent on food as others are. Constructing a sense of common ground around food here extends on the 'nostalgia for the idealized kitchen and family meal gathering [that] have reinforced the symbolic power of food' (Adema, 2000: 118). Taking on this idea(l) of food, both campaigns relied heavily on the notion of family. In her analysis of No Food Diet, Chouliaraki (2013) describes that 'the dominant imagery is that of an African family, with a focus on the mother who makes food and puts her children to bed' (pp.65–66). According to Chouliaraki (2013), this imagery 'evokes an aura of "universal" everyday domesticity' (p. 66) – an aura that is highly similar to that presented in *The Family Meal*.

When considering aesthetics, a noticeable similarity can be found. According to Chouliaraki (2013) 'the "No Food Diet" WFP appeal relies on the contrast between language and image' (p. 65). The campaign contrasted images of peaceful domesticity with a harrowing voice-over comparing 'the effectiveness of our familiar "Atkins Diet" with the "No Food Diet"' and concluding that 'it is so effective that 25,000 people on the no food diet die every day' (Chouliaraki, 2013: 66). This aesthetic strategy seemingly circumvents the dehumanizing images produced in 'negative' appeals – appeals that, mainly from the late 20th century, have been criticized as 'pornography of pain' (Halttunen, 1995) portraying 'ideal victims' (Höijer, 2004). The contrast between language and image in No Food Diet enabled the presentation of both harsh 'facts' and human 'identities' in a configuration that was familiar to the Western spectator. As Chouliaraki (2013) states,

unlike the realism of 'negative' appeals, this ironic 'double-voicedness' does not work to remind us of the radical otherness of the African poor; instead, it operates as a strategy of 'cultural estrangement' reminding us of the otherness of our own cultural habits as they are placed against the background of their struggle for daily survival. (p. 67)⁵

This reflexive approach recalls the orientation of post-humanitarian campaigns, directed at an investigation of the self rather than at (the suffering of) the other.

Although *The Family Meal* did not use the strategy of estrangement and did not resort to irony, it heavily relies on both a reflexive approach and the separation of language and image. When describing the campaign, and its photo exhibition in particular, Ertharin Cousin, WFP's Executive Director, praised *The Family Meal* for giving a 'face, not voice, to those we serve'. The photographic work of British photographer Chris Terry, which was exposed in various European capitals and in the European Parliament, constituted the backbone of the campaign. The website of *The Family Meal* outlined that Terry 'travelled around the world visiting families who receive the WFP's assistance made possible thanks to EU support', taking him to Ecuador, Chad, Niger, Jordan and Myanmar 'in search of the ingredients of the family meal'. The exhibition was followed up by a family meal photo competition judged by Terry and celebrity chef, family man and 'moral entrepreneur', Jamie Oliver. This competition (see Figure 1) largely took place on the campaign's website, with most of the material, such as videos and recipes from the visited countries, being widely disseminated through social media as well.

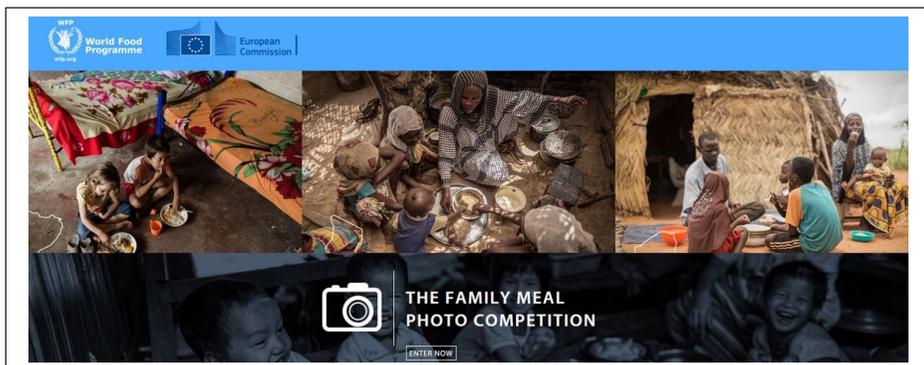


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Family Meal website, announcing the photo competition. Photos: WFP/Chris Terry – supported by the EU.

Throughout the campaign, The Family Meal displayed a clear separation between text and image. Both on the website and in the videos, vulnerability was largely expressed in words (either spoken by the interviewees or written on the website), while the photographs and the judges' commentaries usually presented an upbeat, colorful and optimistic story. This dynamic was particularly visible in the presentation of the two winning pictures from the competition on the campaign's website. The first winning picture, a portrayal of a Rshi family from Laos, was accompanied by a caption explaining that 'Rshi people are an ethnic minority in Laos' highlands' and a commentary (by Oliver) describing the photograph is 'a colourful shot' that serves 'a fantastic example of how important and fun it can be to prepare and share a meal with your loved ones'. The texts used for the second winning picture, from the Philippines, were even more telling. Here, the formal caption read, 'A small family in the southern Philippines enjoys their supper despite the darkness of their home. After the devastation of Super Typhoon Bopha in 2012, many families in these areas suffer power shortages every day'. After this, the commentary (this time by Terry) highlighted the aesthetics and affection of the photograph: 'Breech's candle-lit image of the family eating during a power outage has a lovely intimacy and warmth. It draws the viewer in, emphasizing the human need to gather around light, and company, when sharing a meal'. Of course, it is not so telling that judges of a photo competition direct attention to the aesthetic and emotional qualities of photographs. It is not even striking that the misfortune of a power outage can be understood in terms of beauty and warmth. What is significant, however, is the fact that the images and words diverged in message. While the words were used to address context, complexity and hardship, the images, as the judges' commentaries also indicate, expressed (family) enjoyment, intimacy and stability. The fact that the pictures were contextualized as such becomes particularly clear in one of the pictures on the website that literally frames a photo from the Philippines – held and presented by Oliver – in a bright and sterile kitchen environment that starkly contrasts with the dark and intimate family meal image (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of the Family Meal website with Jamie Oliver showcasing a winning picture – with both the picture and the interpreting commentary by photographer Chris Terry addressing ‘intimacy and warmth’. Photos: WFP/Sam Robinson – supported by the EU.

Overall, The Family Meal was positive and optimistic in tone. Although the campaign did not erase people’s adversity, the emphasis on giving a (happy) face to the ones who are being ‘served’ a daily meal largely diverted the focus away from suffering. As such, The Family Meal echoes the characteristics ascribed to positive appeals, a genre that has become prominent in humanitarian communication since the 2000s in response to the critique on negative appeals and their reliance on a discourse of victimization. According to Chouliaraki (2013: 61), positive appeals still ‘rely on photo-realistic strategies of authentication’ but ‘reject the imagery of the sufferer as a victim and centre on the sufferer’s agency and dignity’. In line with such appeals, The Family Meal circumvented common ‘negative’ representations of distant Others as ‘passive, unaware and quasi-human[s]’ (Chouliaraki, 2013: 59). Instead, it depicted ‘them’, like ‘us’, as creative and resilient people with authentic food cultures and rich family traditions.⁶ In reference to the value of a daily meal for the family, WFP’s assistant director Barbara Noseworthy affirmed on The Family Meal’s website that ‘it is important to convey that others, even in dire circumstances, want to have those natural, normal activities which are part of raising a family’. Still, and probably needless to say, this kind of ‘positive’ imagery is not without challenges. As Chouliaraki (2013) has argued, ‘while it appears to empower distant sufferers through discourses of dignity and self-determination, “positive” imagery simultaneously disempowers these sufferers by appropriating their otherness in western discourses of identity and agency’ (p. 63). Siapera (2010: 140) similarly states that such a ‘domesticated regime of representation’ is problematic because of ‘the stripping of difference of any threatening qualities by highlighting its folkloric dimensions’ (such as food), its ‘emphasis on sameness to the detriment of any actual engagement with difference’ and its insistence on ‘the ultimate subordination of difference’. Indeed, rather than highlighting the fate of the suffering other, the Family Meal provided ground for introspection and identification on the side of the European audience.

Constructing an audience

While The Family Meal appropriated the self-oriented aesthetics and ethics of post-humanitarianism, the institutional context in which the campaign was produced differed profoundly from non-governmental (and even commercial) fundraising initiatives. The fact that the monetary backing of The Family Meal relief program was already raised by tax-payers, and thus acquired when the campaign started, raises the question of why the campaign was launched in the first place. In other words, while the purpose of the campaign seems obvious at first sight (since we know its style from the familiar genre of humanitarian fundraising campaigns), it lacks the very core of humanitarian appeals, that is, the aim to acquire funds. How and why, then, did it resemble or even mirror the style of prevailing *fundraising appeals* as it does? In order to understand this, we direct our attention toward a specific aspect of post-humanitarianism that The Family Meal campaign (at least partially) seems to defy; that is, the fact that the benefactors, ‘the European tax-payers’, were not addressed as individuals but as a group. This contrasts most other campaigns that rely on ‘the singularization of donors, which addresses each one as a person who can make a concrete contribution to improve a sufferer’s life’ (Chouliaraki, 2013: 61). In the context of The Family Meal, Noseworthy outlined her gratitude toward ‘the Europeans [who] have been extremely generous in their support for the EU’s assistance to those in need’, however, these tax-payers were not singled out in person. Rather, as The Family Meal website stated, ‘The Europeans have been extremely generous in their support for the EU’s assistance to those in need. They are incredibly generous *as a block*’.

The focus on European citizens as a group was made clear by other markers as well. The website for example used ‘.eu’ as its top-level domain and the European flag was prominently visible throughout the campaign, while the photo exhibition traveled to a range of European capitals and the European Parliament.⁷ As such, European citizenship was not just a by-product of the campaign but latently appeared as one of its core aspects. This runs in line with McGonagle’s (2014) observation that EU policy on audiovisual media services are primarily aimed at ‘strengthen[ing] a sense of European identity’ (p. 65). Similarly, the main objective of The Family Meal was to promote a sense of European citizenship. Apart from presenting issues of hunger, nutrition and well-being, the campaign constructed a European audience, shaped its identity and legitimized its existence *through benevolence*. The catch-line added to all the campaign videos (inserted both at the start and at the end of the videos in superimposed text), could in this regard be seen as exemplary. It appeared with the question, ‘what brings *them* together?’ (the word ‘them’ being highlighted in blue with the rest of the text in white), clearly referring to the portrayed other as a family or community brought together. Enhancing the difference between the non-European others and the European audience, ‘them’ creates a sense of distance, both spatially and culturally, and also in terms of well-being. Immediately, however, ‘them’ dissolved into ‘us’: ‘What brings *us* together?’ (with ‘us’ similarly colored in blue). The deictic was the only word that changed, but this minor modification created a sudden and evident shift of focus, highlighting the presence of a second cohesive group. This ambivalence provided space for contemplation about the relationship

between, and co-existence of, 'us' and 'them' within the otherwise familiar constellation of fortunate spectators and unfortunate others. In this context, the use of 'us' has several implications: it problematized 'them', questioned the spectator's attitude toward the 'Other', suggested a common humanity, highlighted the role of family in bringing people together, and, notably, pointed to a close-knit community of European benefactors. The imagining of a clearly demarcated group of (cosmopolitan) European benefactors – built by both formal and informal aspects of identity formation – fits the aim of constructing a sense of European citizenship.

The emphasis on 'authentic' food cultures played an important role in the (informal) identity formation in *The Family Meal*. Here, the dual construction of both a common humanity and a European public came to the fore. Throughout the campaign, the super-incumbent 'us' of common humanity was presented as being restored as a result of the WFP/ECHO program. It was stressed that thanks to the WFP coupons, which were financed by European tax-payers, non-European 'Others' could now cook food for their families.⁸ However, as the 'Others' were staged alongside their own recipes, the campaign suggested authenticity, tradition and respect for local (food) cultures. Indeed, as Lupton (1996) states,

cooking is a moral process, transferring raw matter from 'nature' to the state of 'culture', and thereby taming and domesticating it [. . .]. Food is therefore 'civilised' by cooking, not simply at the level of practice, but at the level of the imagination. (p. 2)

While imagery of the 'Other' was used to provide authenticity to the practice of cooking food (while glossing over the power relations implied), it appealed to 'cosmopolitan' cooking cultures as well, cultures that could be taken up by the spectators. The recipes from the participating families were displayed on *The Family Meal* website and visitors to the website were actively encouraged to prepare the meals of the 'unfortunate Others' themselves.

Throughout the campaign 'exotic' recipes were proposed, not just to inform about different habits and the struggle some populations face getting food, but also (or rather) to inspire European families for dinner. For example, when the photo competition (which made participants out of the spectators) was introduced, the announcement read,

In today's rushed world, it is more important than ever to make time to sit down with your loved ones and enjoy a meal together. That is why we are shining the spotlight on the universal custom of the family meal.

While the family meal was highlighted as a global habit, the phrase 'today's rushed world' particularly seems to concern the European public addressed. Tellingly, Diane Fresquez (2015), an American journalist living in Brussels, responded to the campaign by writing that 'to my surprise, many of the images made me feel, not pity, but delight – even a bit of envy, because we who do not suffer from hunger sometimes claim we are "too busy" for family meals'. Indeed, in the popular Western imagination, the global North usually connotes a rushed world (as in, among other things, modern, efficient, profitable and, ultimately, developed), while the global South is often euphemistically

associated with (innocent) tranquility and (static) charm, with people living in poverty sometimes being celebrated as those ‘knowing what’s really important in life’.⁹ The Family Meal campaign proposed an idea(l) of European citizenship in which a good European citizen is a good (cosmopolitan) cook who takes the time to prepare his meal and be with his family.

In this context, the presence of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver was quite significant, because his persona is intimately related to notions of authenticity, family and cooking as a social activity. His mission of improving the (family) life of people through fresh ingredients and home cooking has been understood as a more general appeal to neoliberal responsibility (Slocum et al., 2011: 178) and good citizenship (Hollows and Jones, 2010).¹⁰ Oliver’s rejection of hastiness and fast-food in favor of authentic (g)locality fitted the campaign well and aligned with what Chouliaraki (2013) contends to be ‘the emergence of a self-oriented morality’ that requires a gratification of the self by doing good to others. Whether it was Oliver’s responsible lifestyle as an indirect indicator for engaged (and/but neoliberal) citizenship or the more direct reference to the generosity of ‘Europeans as a block’, The Family Meal represented an idea(l) of Europeans as authentic and engaged cosmopolitans. In doing so, it challenged one of the greatest weaknesses of the EU as a brand by exchanging the image of Europe as a bureaucratic bulwark detached from ‘the people’ (De Santis, 2014) for the ideal of authentic engagement with individuals and families.

By inviting Europeans to engage themselves with The Family Meal, the campaign acquires a distinct participatory character. Concerning the photo contest, not only the judges but also the spectators were able to vote for their favorite photograph. In addition, throughout the campaign, the hashtag #familymeal was used to create an engaged online community, including recurring propositions on the WFP’s Facebook page to make the recipes yourself (and ‘your own’). Such forms of participation contributed to an understanding of citizenship that was not only based on entitlement – that is, the formal citizenship that one legally *has* – but rather on what Isin and Nielsen (2008) have called ‘acts of citizenship’. According to them, ‘what is important about citizenship is not only that it is a legal status but that it involves practices – social, political, cultural and symbolic [. . .]. Theorizing acts means investigating everyday deeds that are ordinarily called politics’ (Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 2). It was within this conception of the everyday that citizenship became part of The Family Meal, and both the family meal (which was explicitly highlighted as an important ritual to bring the family together *every day*) and the act of interactively engaging with the campaign (and thus with the vulnerable other) underpinned this. However, in a more formal way, the EU was constantly presented as the largest donor for humanitarian aid worldwide – and the credit for this, ultimately, went to its tax-payers, that is, good European citizens. Essentially, The Family Meal did not (only) address its public in a general sense, but constructed it along the lines of an idealized European community of active and engaged citizens.

Successional campaigning in the neoliberal age

The Family Meal campaign was – and is – reflective of several trends in contemporary humanitarian communication, notably its presentation in ‘upbeat’ development stories,

its focus on transparency and accountability, and its use of branding strategies. These trends could best be understood in the context of neoliberalism, the ideology and policy model that progressively moved from the for-profit to the non-profit sector in the past few decades. So far, the neoliberal model of international development has hardly been discussed in the setting of what we would like to call ‘successional campaigning’, that is, those communicative practices by humanitarian organizations that look back on the action taken rather than look forward to what can be done. Instead of highlighting suffering per se, these campaigns emphasize relief; and instead of asking for donations per se, these campaigns ask for loyalty while providing transparency and accountability in return.¹¹ While, as argued before, The Family Meal resembled the aesthetics and ethics of a positive appeal, in which happy faces convey gratitude on the side of the (formerly) suffering Other, the fact that the campaign looked back rather than forward – and was thus a successional campaign – brought in a new neoliberal dynamic. We will conclude this article by highlighting two crucial aspects of such successional campaigns, as prompted by our analysis of The Family Meal.

First, successional appeals are illustrative of the rise of what Gross Stein (2008) has called the ‘contested discourse of accountability’ (p. 125). She observes that it

is inconceivable that, fifty years ago, humanitarian organizations operating in war zones would spend any time at all considering ‘outputs’, ‘outcomes’, and ‘benchmarking’. Today, leaders within the humanitarian community are intimately familiar with codes of conduct, humanitarian charters, minimal standards for the delivery of relief, active learning network gathering and sharing the lessons learned from humanitarian operations, outcome mapping, evaluation methodology, and ‘professional’ accreditation. (Stein, 2008: 124)

This accountability, which reflects ‘the general intensified scrutiny of NGO operations and practices’ (Orgad, 2017: 93), has been attributed to the neoliberal model of international development. According to Cottle and Nolan (2007), ‘recent shifts in political culture where tenets of neo-liberalism, market rationality and the rhetoric of accountable governance all now condition different spheres of social enterprise and activity’ (p. 873) include humanitarian assistance and development work carried out by NGOs. In this context, Vestergaard (2010) explains that

due to numerous scandals in the non-profit sector in the 1990s [. . .] NGOs have faced growing demands for accountability and efficiency in their performance. The capacity of organizations to account for their *raison d’être* and performance is becoming ever more vital in attracting and retaining support. (p. 169)

The need for accountability, which was typically ascribed to forms of communication in the private sector, has been progressively extended to the public sector, becoming part of the wider spectrum of ‘postmodern’ soft power (Van Ham, 2008: 128). The culture of evaluation, embedded in the wider culture of accountability, has started to characterize practices of new public management (Chouinard, 2013). According to Boelen and Woollard (2009), ‘as globalisation is reassessed for its social impact, societies will seek to justify their investments with more solid evidence of the impact of these investments on the public good’ (p. 891). Here, obviously, addressing the ‘European tax-payer’ is a

point in case. While the campaign informally focusses on the EU citizen as authentically engaged, The Family Meal also goes beyond cheerfully thanking Europeans and also makes clear that their tax-money is well-spent.

While accountability is usually associated with voluminous reports, statistics, data and the mapping out of results (Stein, 2008), the trend in international development is also visible in more informal and light-hearted ways. As NGOs provide their donors with updates and newsletters, and as disaster relief platforms return to sites of emergencies years later, their communicative practices tend to go far beyond *just* fundraising in a direct sense. Where, according to Boltanski (1999: 17–19), the spectacle of the vulnerable Other usually prompts possibilities of ‘paying’ and ‘speaking’ as ways of formulating a morally acceptable response, the ‘informal’ accountability approach is different. Rather than entailing concrete and future-oriented action (paying to relieve the suffering or speaking to spread the word and raise awareness), different options for introspection and reflection are offered. Indeed, in contrast to the usual awareness and fundraising intents of humanitarian campaigns (No Food Diet tellingly ends with the website: ‘www.wfp.org/donate’), The Family Meal presented two forms of humanitarian communication that went beyond, or at least came after, paying and speaking; that is, thanking and accounting.

Second, the concept of successional campaigning indicates the rise of marketing (rather than fundraising) in humanitarian communication. While discussing positive appeals, Orgad (2017) notes that ‘NGOs seem to have learnt from the consumer market that, in marketing their product [. . .] they need to focus on “positive psychology” and, in approaching their audiences softly and gently, to elicit positive feeling’ (p. 95). This means that, rather than raising funds *directly* through appeals that ignite an immediate monetary response, the ascent of marketing techniques signifies that NGOs now focus more on brand recognition and loyalty. Such techniques must ensure stable cash-flow in the longer term and respond to increasing competition and declining credibility in the field of humanitarianism (Vestergaard, 2008). Summing up how this trend has been studied in the literature, Stride and Lee (2007) note that ‘brand orientation helps voluntary organisations [to] develop trust across key stakeholder communities [. . .], strengthen awareness among target audiences [. . .], and build charity loyalty within donor and supporter groups’ (pp. 107–108). While these techniques find their roots in commercial environments and have recently been acknowledged in the humanitarian sector, The Family Meal campaign shows that governmental institutions nowadays adhere to them as well. For institutions such as the EU, improving their ‘brand’ is deemed particularly important as they often have a reputation for being technocratic and detached from the life of the citizens they serve. In The Family Meal, this reputation is contrasted with the emphasis on food cultures, family ethics and authentic cultures as well as with a renewed establishment of a collective European identity. In addition, as Richey and Ponte (2011) point out, aid potentially ‘helps sell branded products and improve a brand’s ethical profile and value’ (p. 10). Similarly, Vestergaard (2010) suggests that a strong brand, one that clearly conveys the (human) values of a charity, results in a higher number of donations.

In the case of The Family Meal, the role of funds was removed, thus marking the difference between fundraising and marketing even clearer. What the campaign marketed was the idea(l) of Europe *and* its citizens, and it constructed these citizens while addressing them at the same time. Indeed, according to Peter Van Ham (2005), ‘branding Europe

is less about *knowing* the EU than it is about *loving* it [. . .] [and] generating “loyalty beyond reason” (p. 123). The Family Meal tapped into branding to seek legitimization for both a humanitarian program and a political body, thereby adapting its institutional framework to a neoliberal context. This marked a strategic move for an entity that normally competes with the ‘brands’ of nation states (Van Ham, 2008: 138), non-European powers and renowned global institutions. As stated in a 2006 report on European communication policy, ‘communicating about the role of the EU in the world is an effective way to engage Europe’s own citizens as well as to enhance support and understanding of the EU in the rest of the world’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2006: 11). This applies even more so in a period when the stability of the EU is threatened by anti-European movements and European citizens that express skepticism toward European identity politics (Cmeciu and Cmeciu, 2014: 196). In this climate, (inter)government-led campaigns such as The Family Meal play a crucial role in justifying political entities like the EU, whose existence is extensively debated as a consequence of Brexit and the 2017 elections in European countries where Eurosceptic parties played an important role. As Van Ham (2008) puts it, ‘the European Union’s task is to find a new, postmodern *raison d’être* that inspires its own populace and appeals to the wider world as well, which is where branding comes in’ (p. 137).

Conclusion

In the introduction of the recent Europe for Citizens Programme Guide for Actions Grants (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2018), the European Commission states that it considers European citizenship as ‘an important element in strengthening and safeguarding the process of European integration’ (p. 4). In a period with ‘serious issues at stake’, including ‘security and Europe’s role in the world’, the commission deems it ‘now more important than ever’ to enable European citizens to ‘participate in the construction of an even closer Europe’ (European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2018: 4). The Family Meal, though set up to support non-European Others, did exactly that. By thanking the European citizens (and, along the way, constructing and promoting their collective European identity) and accounting for the use of taxes, The Family Meal epitomized the post-humanitarian tendency to reflect on a sense of (collective) self rather than on a (distant) other. The role played by ECHO and the community of European contributors was acknowledged, with concrete results achieved through the WFP being shown. In so doing, the institutions involved in the communication process were legitimized and, at the same time, a sense of European citizenship was strengthened.

In an environment where different forms of government compete (in this case, most prominently, the intense competition between the EU and its nation states for the scarcely available sense of belonging), one of the most public entities, namely that of the citizen, is nowadays often drawn into the marketized sphere of branding. At present, institutional communication is being reengineered by means of (post-)humanitarian strategies as well as corporate techniques to support the legitimization and promotion of the ‘EU brand’. In this sense, The Family Meal campaign is not only emblematic for trends in humanitarian communication but also for the spread of new public management; transferring

responsibilities from the public realm to NGOs (in the sense that NGOs have stepped into the vacuum in international development left by governments from the early 1970s). In turn, the organizational strategies and marketing instruments used by NGOs feed back into this same public realm as an image to be modeled as part of the effort of branding the EU as a public institution – as also happened in the case of The Family Meal.

However, when looking at the campaign, new public management and current standings in branding the EU were not its (only) determinants. Apart from these factors, The Family Meal furthered, reiterated and reinvented trends in contemporary humanitarian communication more generally. As Chouliaraki (2013) notes, the (introspective) style of post-humanitarian appeals and the (upbeat) style of positive appeals can and do coexist. Indeed, these modes of appealing have largely paved the way for The Family Meal to appear in the form it did. To properly understand the complex range of factors that shaped the campaign, we introduced the concept of successional campaigning. This concept proved theoretically and empirically helpful in the sense that it thrives on the existence of positive campaigns, mirrors the self-oriented character of post-humanitarian campaigns, is effective in the process of branding, and meets demands for accountability. The concept followed from the observation that, although The Family Meal was not on a mission to acquire any funds, it looked strikingly like existing *fundraising* campaigns. When considering the contexts and trends that we have used to explain the look and feel of the Family Meal campaign, this paradox turned out not to be as contradictory as it looks. Rather, it reflected the neoliberal workings of the EU, in which European citizens were brought together to reflect on the (fortunate) Self by helping the (unfortunate) Other.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from the campaign used in this article are taken from its website of the campaign or from the YouTube videos embedded in the website: <http://familymeal.eu>. Recently, the website has undergone quite significant changes, but older versions of the website can be found through <https://archive.org>.
2. This is not to say that fundraising efforts are precluded per se. Post-humanitarian communication certainly accommodates very well to calls for direct donations. For our analysis here, however, we want to address the alternatives provided by the post-humanitarian style as well.
3. This way of representing developmental aid is of course not limited to publicly funded development practices; think for instance of NGOs advertising their achievements, or disaster

relief organizations returning to former sites of catastrophe to account for the aid that has been provided. It is therefore important to stress that successional campaigns do not just explain the example of The Family Meal, but also shed light on the increasingly important role of accountability and branding in both the realms of non-governmental and (inter)governmental humanitarianism.

4. Although largely beyond the scope of our analysis, the recent overhaul of Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets for the purpose of counteracting migration from the African continent (Fox, 2018) shows just how problematic it is to make this solidarity, that is supposed to inform development projects, subservient to other political purposes. In this case, the purpose is, ironically, to promote the EU as an outward-looking political body that embraces social cohesion and cultural diversity.
5. In the field of humanitarian communication, the ways in which public messages by international NGOs are dominated by discourses of ‘difference and distance’ (Dogra, 2013) are a central theme. Studies in this field usually outline how Otherness becomes exaggerated ‘through “biblical” depictions of starvation and rurality that project a timeless and ahistoric “Third World” as against a modern, urban “First world”’ (Dogra, 2013: 26). Dogra’s (2013) postcolonial analysis of such depictions (pp.9–17; 25–27) is indicative and demonstrates the centrality of (images of) Otherness in the field.
6. Still, while The Family Meal refrains from images of desperation, malnutrition and passivity, the tropes of dependency (on WFP food coupons) and primitiveness are still firmly in place, the latter mainly through the use of wide angle shots of the rural environments contrasted with close-ups of very basic housing and cooking gear.
7. The campaign was displayed as physical exhibition in Rome, Milan, Amsterdam, Dublin, Madrid, Lisbon, and Brussels.
8. This conflation is particularly problematic because it hides charged histories and serious responsibilities behind an optimistic, non-political and a-historical claim of universality placed beyond discussion. Western responsibilities and interventions in the countries are not tackled and the problems are masked by a beautified, a-historical perspective (Silverstone, 2007).
9. As Dogra (2013) for example states, it is ‘a common idea in colonial discourses’ to show “‘Africans’ as happy and joyful in their simplicity and closeness to nature, projected through smiles and singing’ (p. 203).
10. As Slocum et al. and Hollows and Jones suggest, food cultures are domains where neoliberalism abundantly and explicitly manifests itself. Beyond the person of Oliver, on which these authors focus, Lewis (2008) and De Solier (2013), among others, address the role of neoliberalism in food cultures more generally.
11. Quite often, there is a mixture at play, in which an organization points to the initial success of a campaign as a way of stressing the need to prolong a particular project or a particular way of working.

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