Insights from a record-breaking response: The Ukraine Crisis

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Open

On February 24th 2022, we were all shocked and horrified by the invasion of Ukraine.

A week later, we had helped the Disasters Emergency Committee launch their fundraising appeal. In 24 hours, the DEC appeal had reached its UK Aid-matched fundraising goal of £30 million and went on to raise more than £300 million, setting a new world record for the most raised online in a week.[1]

As the initial rush of the appeal died down, we started to reflect on this extraordinary response. How could it inform us as we planned follow-up journeys for Ukraine donors and future appeals for the crisis? And what could we learn about the UK public's response to Ukraine that we could take forward into building support for other conflicts and emergencies around the world?

1. £61,997,547 was donated online between 3-10 March 2022, dec.org.uk

Photo: David Peinado

Research approach

We wanted to understand what it was about the Ukraine conflict that so motivated the UK public and to identify how support for other causes might be boosted. We had some hunches about what people's motivations and beliefs might be, so we teamed up with Discover.ai to validate and explore them.

Discover's real-time AI-assisted online listening tool engages a set of online sources with an emphasis on social media public discourse. When combined with rich qualitative insight, it enabled us to uncover the real conversations being had by the public online. Together with our deep understanding of fundraising and donor audiences we have been able to think about what these conversations might mean for fundraisers and emergency appeals in the future.

What we heard

It was reassuring to see many of our hunches validated by conversations that were happening online. And, as we delved a little deeper, it became clear that there was much to learn from what we heard.

Photo: Sima Ghaffarzadeh

The public is frustrated by – and distrustful of – political systems in place to keep peace and to protect people in conflict.

As world leaders were seemingly taken by surprise by the Russian invasion and jostled for position as chief negotiator or to lead the West's response, political debate delayed decisions. Meanwhile, the public grew frustrated, impatient and worried for the innocent civilians in the firing line. Faith in structures like the UN Security Council and the EU to take meaningful action quickly seemed fragile.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How can charities employ public campaigning actions in an emergency to pile on political pressure?
- Who should the advocacy target be for these campaigning actions? Who can be credible and motivating to the public so there's a genuine sense of traction and impact?

> **The people of Ukraine are being used as pawns by the West — life is too cheap to Western power.**

We stand in solidarity with #Ukraine today and against #Putins War but I fear that sanctions alone will not cut it.

Photo: President.gov.ua

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Peaks in donations follow the news headlines, and this does include social media, user-generated content and conversations online.

There was a huge amount of user-generated content originating from Ukraine in the early days which dominated the news feeds and blogs. There were issues over verifying some content, and identifying misinformation, but nevertheless it drove conversations, engagement and, by association, response. We know that younger audiences are getting the majority of their news now from social media feeds.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How could this inform the way charities think about digital comms and digital fundraising in an emergency?
- How quickly can digital fundraising content be sourced, verified and launched?
- How can we adapt and react to a fast-changing context?
- How can organisations keep the conversations online going?

> It hurts seeing innocent children and dads crying whilst saying goodbyes and not knowing whether they will see each other again.

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Social media users expect first-hand, real-time content from the front line.

President Zelensky himself led the charge here, going out into the streets with his mobile phone as an act of defiance and to show the real-time impacts of the invasion, posting content online daily. Save the Children UK had its Head of News on the Romanian border, and UNICEF managed to get reportage content, from a temporary maternity unit sheltering underground, into digital channels at speed. Post-lockdown expectations and platforms like TikTok have led social media users to feel comfortable with low production values.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- We know how stand-out personal stories can drive donations – the challenge is how to source them quickly in real-time in an emergency context.
- How can we ensure quick and authentic content gathering in an emergency, and be ready to publish?
- What technology might be available to help e.g. gather, sort and edit UGC?

> Head over to my Instagram page and join my efforts to aid in the War on Ukraine – I'm working with World Central Kitchen to feed the refugees and those impacted by this senseless war.

> Seeing the images on social media of the destruction, death and displacement of so many people, especially children, broke my heart.

Photo: David Peinado

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Audiences engage better with crises when there is a personal connection.

We've seen in the report how proximity can help drive a connection to the Ukraine crisis. A lot of people having conversations online have some direct or indirect connection to a Ukrainian person, which helps fuel empathy. We also saw the public relating to the emotional trauma be it mothers, fathers or women, as well as minority groups who experienced specific challenges and suffering during the crisis, perhaps due to a medical condition, sexual orientation or their ethnicity.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How can charities help to build personal connections to conflicts that may be further away from the UK, outside Europe?
- How can they engage and mobilise diasporas in the UK to help drive understanding and conversations in the wider public?

> We have family friends in Ukraine that have lived peacefully for years, raised families, built homes etc that now are having to hide in bunkers with their lives destroyed.

> I have zero patience for my mutuals that call for solidarity with Ukraine without a word on the horrific experiences Black people are facing at the borders.

Photo: Ivan Bandura

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Misinformation is rife, and is especially hard to manage in a fast-changing emergency.

The ICRC met with both Ukraine and Russia as a vital part of its neutral role to protect civilians and refugees, but the controversy and headlines that these meetings generated led to a spread of misinformation.

Younger audiences, who drove the most conversations about Ukraine online (45% 25-34 years and 27% 18-34 years) and get a lot of their news from social media are particularly exposed to the risk of misinformation.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How can charities use communications to build trust with their audiences during an emergency?
- Is there an opportunity to use content partnerships for example to build transparency and validate fact-checking?

> The fake news coming from Ukraine and Russia only helps to panic the population of Ukraine – over 90 fake photos from other conflicts and similar amount from Russian fake news only prolongs wars.

People want to give tangible help or support locally based efforts, especially with crises closer to home such as Covid, Calais and Ukraine.

During the pandemic, we saw neighbours helping each other with grocery shopping and donating extra meals. When the concentration of refugees in Calais became a critical and well-publicised crisis in 2015, people responded with donations of basic items driven over by lorry. And at the start of the Ukraine crisis, lorry loads of donations were again sent to borders, forcing some INGOs to speak out against making ad-hoc deliveries which distracted time and money away from coordinated programmes.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How can charities find a way to effectively meet the audience's need to help directly and tangibly?
- How might new product development create an outlet for people's desire to buy and send physical items?
- How might charities be more transparent and inspiring in communications about the things that they provide, and where they provide them, to make it more tangible, real and credible?

A Norfolk man who was left feeling 'angry and helpless' by the war in Ukraine has decided to drive to the country's border to deliver vital aid to refugees and help rescue families to safety.

Saw the idea to book an Airbnb in Ukraine to help send direct support (amongst other means, I've also given to charity) and I went searching.

The UK media presented a seemingly simple 'good vs evil' narrative, with Putin as a clear enemy, which led to broad, mass market support.

The Ukraine crisis was one that everyone could easily understand and support, thanks to the simple narrative of attacker and victim. However, other enduring crises around the world like Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan seem mired in complexity and mixed up with poor understanding of middle eastern politics and religion, leading to lower relevance for the wider UK public.

What this might mean for fundraisers:
- How might charities broaden support for other conflicts in light of the coverage of the Ukraine conflict?
- How might more simple explanations of what is happening in Syria and Yemen help build understanding and support?

> I'm in awe at the strength and courage of the people of Ukraine in defending their country against such an aggressive monster.

> A moment of truth to stand by justice against their barbaric invasion.

Photo: Katie Godowski

In conclusion

It can be easy to assume that, from a fundraising perspective – launching an emergency appeal and managing communications with donors – that all emergencies can be treated in a similar way, with a similar process.

What Ukraine has reminded us is that there is nuance, challenges and opportunities with each one; that the public's mindset, level of knowledge and understanding is ever evolving; that the role of the news media is as important as ever in driving response, but that some audiences get their news primarily from social feeds.

This exercise has also reminded us that if we are going to be able to meaningfully engage and connect to our audiences, we need insight to understand them.
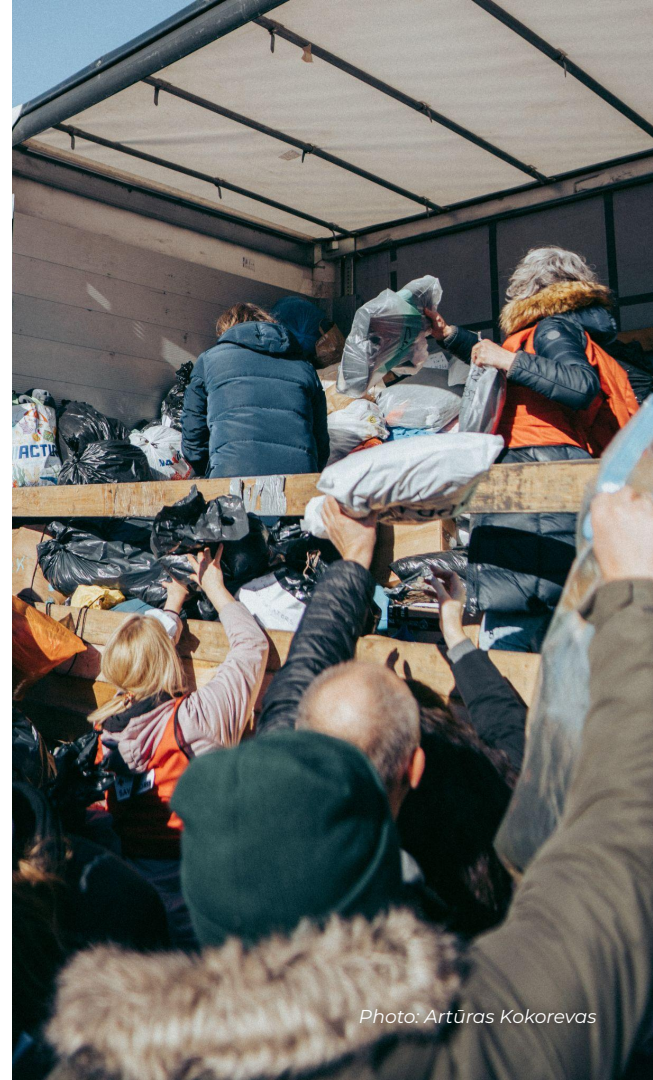

Photo: Artūras Kokorevas

Photo: David Peinado. Cover photo: Artūras Kokorevas

If you'd like to discuss any of the questions raised in this report, please get in touch at:
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