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Aug 13, 2020 by [Christopher Scott Carpenter](#)

“Merchants of Misery” No More: A Media Toolkit for Ethical Storytelling ^[1]

I’ve spent a lot of time analyzing international media that I find damaging, be it in the development or diplomatic sectors; after I discuss these commonalities, I’m sure you will be able to think of your own examples.

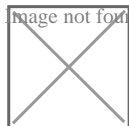
First, there seems to be an unabashed insistence on perpetuating the narrative of the White Savior in which a community in the developing world only achieves its needs through the intervention of a Western, white-skinned volunteer. Second, oftentimes the stories featured are nothing more than pleas for survival, a gross oversimplification of what in actuality are nuanced and complex human lives; this further highlights the incorrect assumption that all adversity looks the same. This is manifested in one popular example of a Starving Child: face dirty and dressed in rags. Third, they promote the ideology that only charity, and not activism and empowerment, can solve the world’s problems, creating a narrative of victimization that creates artificial distance between a struggling developing world and a prosperous developed

world.

What this all amounts to is the erosion of dignity and agency for those with and for whom practitioners work. In his seminal 1981 article "Merchants of Misery," published in the *New Internationalist*, author Jorgen Lissner writes, "Good intentions aren't good enough if they are pursued with little or no understanding of what such images do to the mentality, the attitudes, the political emotions and the behaviors of their audience." Lissner is warning us of the dangers of what he calls "poverty pornography," the commodification and commercialization of a human body in a way that abandons all piety and dignity for the persons involved, shortcutting its way into the base emotions of the audience for the sake of things like fundraising. It's an exploitation of the most vulnerable.

I'd like to use my experience as an international filmmaker who was removed time and again from his own culture and injected into the cultures of others to impart the importance of ethical storytelling when dealing with the narratives of other nations. By offering a critical analysis of some of my works, I hope to demonstrate and dissect the philosophy and practice of ethical storytelling because storytelling, I argue, is the backbone of public diplomacy, of generating knowledge and creating understanding. I hope to leave you with a toolkit to utilize in your own pursuits as a public diplomacy practitioner.

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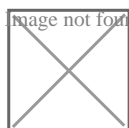
Filming on-location at a student-led event in Bangalore, India, as part of a fundraising campaign for the South Indian non-governmental organization Dream a Dream.
Source: Prasanna H., *Dream a Dream*, with permission.

A bit of my own story:

In the winter of 2019 I was asked by the Government of New Delhi to document, explore and interpret the stories of individual transformation emerging from their monumental education reform initiative. This initiative—which endeavors to instill within the young people of the New Delhi a government school system the mechanisms to navigate and overcome the obstacles of life through social and emotional life skills—was launched the previous July and quickly became a cornerstone of the ruling party's platform.

Colloquially dubbed, "The Happiness Curriculum," it was an effort to counteract an upsetting array of rising trends in a variety of issues, from a slipping national ranking in international happiness studies to student suicides related to academic performance. With my camera in-hand, I dove headlong into an education system undergoing radical transformation to direct, produce, shoot and edit a series of films we named, *The Happiness Diaries*. It is these films I will use to illuminate my points.

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Conducting and filming an interview at the government-run School of Excellence, Kalkaji, in New Delhi, India, for the documentary series

The Happiness Diaries.

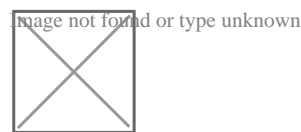
Source: Social Media Team, Government of New Delhi, with permission.

THE TOOLKIT

Explore and Familiarize Yourself with the Filmic Language

The filmic language is powerful and draws directly on an audience's subconscious recognition of spatial relationships. Something as simple as a camera's position and therefore an audience's viewpoint can be very powerful. Looking down on someone creates a sense in that person of immediate inferiority and in the audience a sense of superiority or ownership. You wouldn't be hard-pressed to find instances in development-sector media of young, wide-eyed children gazing longingly upwards into the camera, painting the children as nothing but victims. The viewer, the supposed savior, looks down from a place of power and privilege.

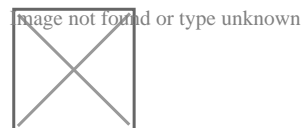
In the first installment of *The Happiness Diaries*, *Great Man (Bada Aadmi)*, I used this awareness of camera angles to maintain the dignity of the students despite highly emotional moments of vulnerability. In one sequence, a young girl started to cry after sharing a story of appreciation for her parents; in response to what was occurring in the classroom while filming, I chose to kneel down before her to capture the moment from a low angle. This imbued her vulnerability with power and dignity. As a result, the audience "looks up to" her, a phrase we commonly assign to persons we admire manifested in the visual language of the film.



A young woman has an emotional moment during a Happiness Curriculum reflection-based sharing session. Note the low angle which maintains the young woman's dignity, even in a vulnerable state.

Source: "Great Man (Bada Aadmi)," *The Happiness Diaries*, dir. Christopher Scott Carpenter.

The camera should, more often than not, be at eye-level or lower when capturing stories of adversity. If at eye-level, the audience can see "eye to eye" with those featured in the story; if lower, the audience can "look up to" those whose struggles, always dignified, are being shared. This is not to say a multitude of angles cannot be used; the visuals, I argue, should simply work in the service of dignity.



Filming a young man as he delivers a poem to his class, an act of bravery made possible, he said, through his Happiness Curriculum sessions. Note my posture in filming; I am hunched such that the camera sees the young man at his eye level or lower, which forces the audience to “see eye to eye” with him, or even “look up to” him.

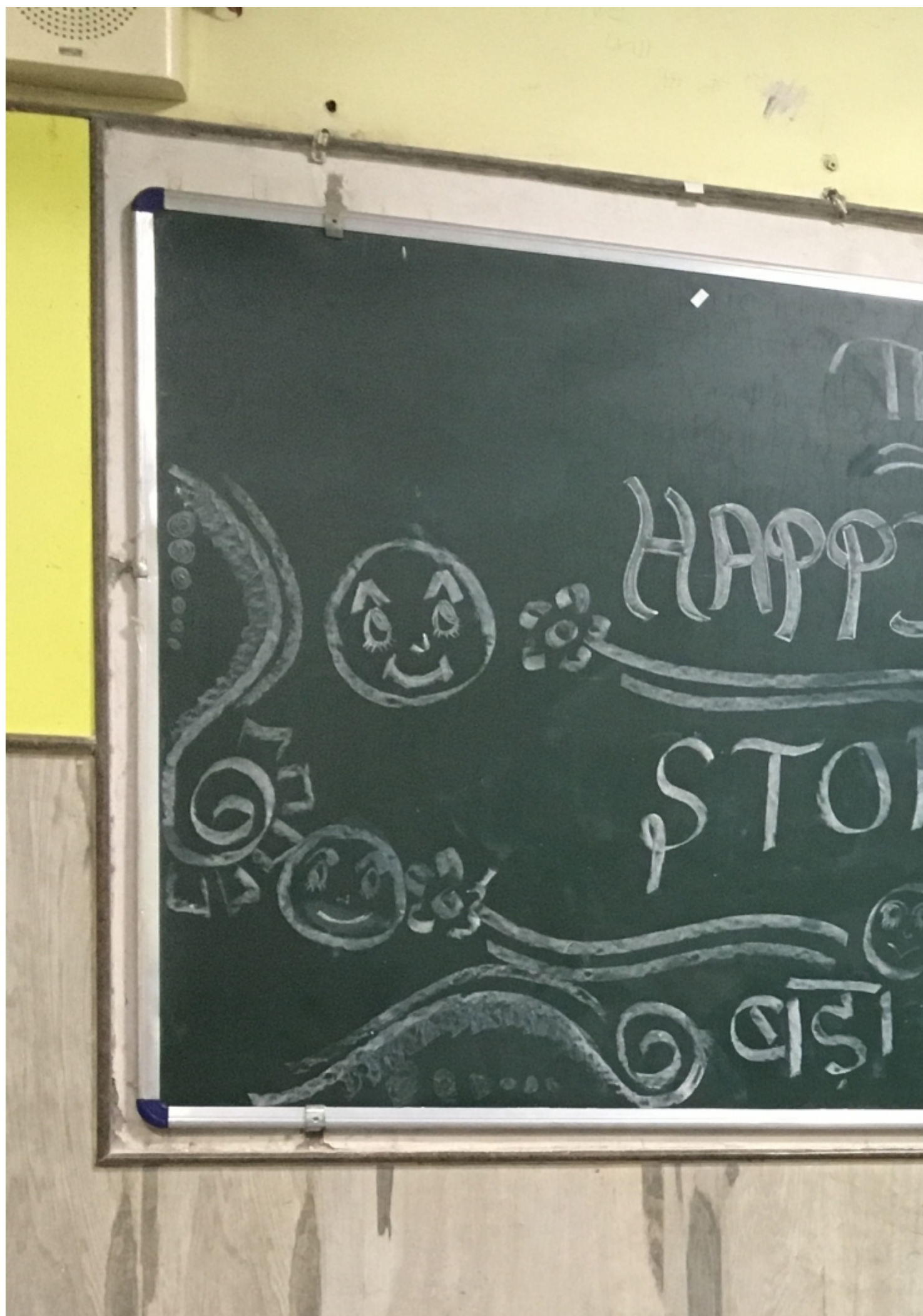
Source: Social Media Team, Government of New Delhi, with permission.

Create Ways for Everyone to Speak for Themselves

Filmic experiences provide surrogates for audience members through modes other than the visual; indeed, third-party voice-over audio narration can be useful in conveying information, but, as author Mary Ann Doane writes in The Voice in the Cinema: the Articulation of Body and Space, voice-over narration “speaks without mediation to the audience, by-passing the ‘characters’ and establishing a complicity between itself and the spectator.” In other words, it creates an additional omniscient presence speaking on behalf of the subjects of the media—those whose stories are being explored—which removes that subject’s involvement in their own story. This creates distance where there should be familiarity and understanding.



*A young man is interviewed outside his school for the segment
“The Boy Who Found His Voice” of The Happiness Diaries.
Source: Christopher Scott Carpenter*



A young woman is interviewed in a classroom in her school for the segment “Great Man (Bada Aadmi)” of The Happiness Diaries.

Source: Christopher Scott Carpenter

While it may be appealing to hire narrators to tell stories of adversity, practitioners should work to capture the voices of those whose stories are being told and construct opportunities for them to speak for themselves and articulate their life experiences, their adversity and their needs. Throughout *The Happiness Diaries*, the students, family members, teachers, administrators and community members provide the narrative information for their own stories, in their own words. As a non-native Hindi speaker working intimately with Hindi-speaking communities, I found myself challenged on two levels when directing the films: first, by committing to the words of the subjects themselves, as already discussed; and second, by committing to their native language, Hindi, and not mine, English, despite my own limited comprehension. These creative decisions help avoid the danger of creating a relationship with the audience in which “we” have to help “them.” Instead, the decisions promoted conversation, a transfer of information and emotion among us all.

Trust the Audience to See the Full Picture

Oftentimes, media producers will choose to highlight certain elements in a story they deem necessary to establish a portrait of struggle. This comes at the expense of two things: dignity and honesty. It creates a false association between people and problems, using the emotional heft of the latter to force sympathy for the former. It cherry-picks elements of someone’s context to create for an audience a picture that is incomplete or irrelevant. Be it undue emphasis placed on living conditions, physical disabilities or other elements, what can be left is an impression of a human being that is no better than a stereotype. Time spent on these details serve little purpose, a feeling exacerbated by the fact that those same details may not even be considered worth mentioning at all by the subjects of the media.

Instead, practitioners need to trust the audience’s ability to perceive the adversity, rather than make it explicit for its own sake. Trust grows between a piece of narrative media and the viewer when understanding comes implicitly. A viewer can be shown the context of adversity without editorialization or sensationalism and glean all that is needed. In the third installment of *The Happiness Diaries*, “Home Remedy,” I told the story of a young woman who took an appreciation-based activity from the Happiness Curriculum from her classroom into her home and used it to improve her parents’ relationship. In telling that story, I focused on the qualities of the human beings and not on their physical reality. In one scene, the audience sees the young woman facilitate the lesson with her parents in the family’s home, a living space that is sparse and simple. However, the living space is not the focus of the scene; the young woman is. It is through the portrayal of her growth and through the full picture of the story being told that the adversity is shown, honestly and with greater dignity.



A young woman facilitates a gratitude exercise with her parents, an activity she learned and internalized

during a Happiness Curriculum session in her school. Note how the characters interact in their living space.

No one aspect is highlighted; instead, everything is taken together to portray a fuller portrait.

Source: "Home Remedy," The Happiness Diaries, dir. Christopher Scott Carpenter.

Speak through Stories, Not for Stories

Let the individual human stories illuminate the issues that affect many others. This serves two purposes. First, it creates a singular protagonist or group of protagonists within the piece of media with whom an audience can develop relationships. Impactful media creates shared emotions, and in the interest of raising funds or awareness, it's always the emotion that drives the viewer to reach for a pen or pocketbook. Second, it avoids generalizations while maintaining issue-based validity. When attempting to explore the importance of social and emotional learning in the Indian context via the Happiness Curriculum, I did so through individual stories of young people who, in their own ways, found meaning in the various components of the Curriculum. In *Great Man (Bada Aadmi)* I explore familial duty, sacrifice and appreciation. In *Home Remedy* I investigate domestic relationships, authority dynamics and gender roles. In "Stephen Hawking and Me" I tap into ableism and inclusiveness. Embedded in each is the value of education reform, as interpreted through the specifics of these stories. The films don't speak on behalf of all young people; they can't. They do, however, seek to find the truth of an issue through the eyes of one young person.

Embrace Differences: Let Them Fuel Understanding and Creativity

My final point in this toolkit to promote ethical storytelling is perhaps the most fundamentally important: to be inspired by the differences inherent to our beautifully diverse human species. Throughout the production of *The Happiness Diaries* I was often acknowledged and thanked for providing a new perspective to the stories of the Happiness Curriculum—an outsider's perspective. In many instances an outsider can be valuable because it more reliably ensures a perspective free of biases or conflicting interests. When in the classrooms filming the sessions, I could not rely on language to guide my lens to the story unfolding in real time. I had to turn up my awareness of the emotions and dynamics of the group to discern where to seek truthful moments. This was highly liberating creatively. Being outside of the verbal exchange positioned me to tap into something deeper—perhaps into the emotional communication the Happiness Curriculum strives to impart—because that was all I had to work with given the difference in language. And thankfully so; through the practical limitations provided by those beautiful differences came creative freedom. And, from my outsider's perspective came an intimate understanding.



Being honored at a special flag-raising ceremony before the student body of the Government Boys Senior Secondary School, Sultanpur, in New Delhi.

Source: Social Media Team, Government of New Delhi, with permission.

Public diplomacy practitioners must maintain and refine toolkits to utilize when in the field or on the job, working to explore, convey and promote the stories that can help strengthen partnerships, solve problems and generate understanding between peoples in ethical ways. I hope these lessons, gained from my own experience, can be added to your toolkits. Our toolkits can formalize trends, and trends can crystallize into paradigms. However, by no means do I advocate a strict adherence to these points. Rather, it all simply serves to champion ethical storytelling that considers dignity, maintains agency and preserves one of the most crucial aspects of our roles as practitioners: the ability to consider, challenge and change what it is that we are saying and doing to better our world.



*With the staff and community members of the School of Excellence, Kalkaji, in New Delhi, following a day of filming.
Source: Social Media Team, Government of New Delhi, with permission.*

All photos courtesy Christopher Scott Carpenter.
