

Journalism, charity and transparency

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Channel 4's Street Kids

I am all in favour of journalists working with other organisations to create editorial material. It's an idea at the heart of [networked journalism](#) and it's been a reality of news media for yonks. Charities can give you access, expertise and cases. In return they get publicity for their cause.

But it can backfire for all concerned in specific cases and in general it can compromise everyone. So if charities – or companies, governments, councils or anyone else – are going to act like journalists then all I ask, is that they act like good journalists. In fact they need to be better than traditional journalists because they have to be more transparent.

Likewise, journalists who work with these organisations need to keep asking themselves if they are being as critical and rigorous as they should. With the growing pressure on newsroom resources it is vital to maintaining public trust for all concerned that any collaboration is open and obvious.

Take the compelling [Dispatches on homeless youth](#). It raised the difficult issue of young adults driven by drugs and domestic violence onto the streets. It was made with the help of the Railway Children charity who I am told, by someone I trust, is an excellent organisation. Their involvement was clearly stated.

The Channel 4 website provides very helpful links for people who want to do something about the issue having watched the programme. I like that. Journalism should be more than voyeurism. It should allow the public a link to action and engagement.

Railways Children also paid for an advert in the break within the programme. At that point I felt slightly uneasy.

I am not suggesting any hint of impropriety on anyone's part. I doubt any viewers will object either. Good luck to Dispatches and the charity. But there's a danger here.

Charities exist to raise money and awareness for their cause. They believe utterly in what they do and find it difficult that anyone else might disagree with their approach. They have all become highly professional at marketing and embrace the opportunities of the new media environment with commendable alacrity. But for them a critical and rigorous analysis of the issues is secondary. There are other perspectives on the issues of youth homelessness that might have been raised that weren't.

Again, I am not suggesting that the programme got it wrong. I really don't know enough about the subject. Any programme can always be made in a hundred different ways. I am merely pointing out how easy it would be for collaboration to spill over into complicity in the most unconscious and apparently benign way. The fact of that advert made me just a tiny bit less confident that due scepticism had been deployed.

This is something that I have investigated with [international NGOs](#), arguing that they should be more, not less, involved in communication. But only if they acknowledge that media is a way of holding them to account as well as publicising their views.

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