

Networked Journalism: Challenges To NGOs and Mainstream Media

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/12/04/networked-journalism-challenges-to-ngos-and-mainstream-media/

2009-12-4

We all like the idea of greater public participation in journalism. Most of us would think it a good idea if nice organisations like Oxfam helped in reporting the world too. But hang on a minute. What happens when NGOs – who have their own political and fund-raising agendas, start to get involved in journalism? Well, of course they always have on the margins, but if journalism is going to be more ‘distributed’ are we going to get good information?

I have written a [research paper on NGOs As Gatekeepers To Local Media](#) that you can access [here](#)

This is a paper being given to a Utrecht University international conference on Cosmopolitanism – the idea that media can help close the gaps between different peoples around the world.

Introduction

This paper is based on a range of interactions that Polis has had with the news media and NGOs since our Africa Media and Governance [conference](#) back in 2006.



The trajectory of the paper reflects the direction of travel of Polis’ work as a journalism institute that has become increasingly engaged with development organisations.

We start from the position that there is something called journalism that is in some way distinguishable from the use of media for representation, advocacy and fund-raising by international NGOs such as Oxfam, MSF, Red Cross, SCF, Christian Aid and others that have worked with Polis.

So what happens when the professional news media changes through the impacts of new technologies such as the Internet and other social, economic and political forces? What is the impact when NGOs become more active in using new technologies and their media resources to create media and become part of the flow of professional mainstream news?

Journalism will be transformed by these new forces into what I call [Networked Journalism](#). Public participation, interactivity, aggregation, disintermediation are all changing the way that journalism is produced and consumed – especially in the west, but you only have to look at the use of mobile telephony to realise that this is a global set of trends.

It is changing the business model for news and that is an important driver of editorial and ethical change in this area. As resources shift, so do priorities. News organisations are increasingly interested in partnerships that can increase capacity at a time of rising demand for more productivity at a time of reduced incomes.

NGOs are also looking for greater impact in a world where their messages of compassion and change are in danger of being drowned out by competing attractions for a citizen’s attention. NGOs themselves have become so professionalised that they appear to have exhausted the benefits of corporatised marketing.

Attention and Action

So media and development is a particularly interesting site for looking at the ideological and policy implications for

both journalists and NGOs of their use of networked communications. [Natalie Fenton](#) and others such as [Lilie Chouliaraki](#) have already outlined the core arguments. They have charted the shifts in humanitarian and development communications by NGOs and mass media in reaction to the changing news environment and the possibilities and limitations of engaging public attention and action.

Fundamentally, I think it comes to this. We want NGOs to campaign to alleviate injustice. We recognise that they will use media to do so. We want journalists to act as reporters of our world, but also as independent analysts and critical watchdogs to promote accountability.

New media technologies are acting as a catalyst to blur those roles. They are providing a range of communications opportunities that facilitate both NGOs and journalists to interact in ways that can enhance mediated connections between the powerful and rich, and the power and disenfranchised. But at the same time these new channels or networks of communication destabilise the idea that journalism and NGOs can be separate.

NGOs DIY

NGOs will generate their own communications and they will seek to influence other mediators such as journalists, and social media. They are acting as journalists in the new media environment. In turn, journalists have always colluded with NGOs but now they are positively embracing the surrender of their gatekeeper role in general, and on development in particular.

What happens to the idea of cosmopolitanism when this networked effect kicks in? Does it enhance the idea of empathy and agency? Or does it mean that we lose what the late [Roger Silverstone](#) called 'proper distance'?

Changing Journalism

In a recent Polis private seminar with a major international NGO and a global news organisation, the head of the news media's international division said that he now accepted that they had to work together to report the world:

"We may have, if we are lucky, one stringer in a particular country. You may well have a dozen people there who know it well. It makes sense for us to use your resources to cover a story or issue."

All media organisations are now opening themselves up to gathering material from the public – including NGOs. And NGOs are now expecting their humanitarian staff to act more like journalists. The media for development agency [DuckRabbit](#) recently trained MSF staff to create the interactive [Condition Critical](#) website which features the voices of displaced people in the DRC recorded by MSF staff and put on a website with blogs and an interactive map where readers can post messages of support. It is a classic piece of NGO campaigning online journalism.

Likewise, mainstream media is now embracing limited public participation. CNN now has [iReport](#), an unfiltered site for people to post photos and videos – with some ending up on the main network. Al Jazeera English recently handed out cameras during its coverage of the Israeli incursion into Gaza. And Peter Horrocks, the Director of the BBC World Service, which has a number of networked journalism projects, has [written](#) about how his journalists must move from a 'Fortress' to a 'Networked' mindset and practice. His thesis begins with BBC journalists networking with the audience, "a vast but still untapped news source" but soon moves onto the idea of the BBC itself opening up, initially to other media organisations:

'Reducing effort in any journalistic section is anathema to the old fortress mindset. Even more disturbingly, it might also mean

co-operating explicitly. If the BBC is best in news video and the Telegraph best in text sports reports, why shouldn't they syndicate that content to each other and save effort?'

He also offers though, a more strategic vision which implicitly recognises that organisations outside of the traditional news media industry are now part of the BBC's journalistic plans:

'The BBC has been undertaking a major rethink of its responsibilities in the face of a collapse in the UK and international news market. The BBC's Director General, Mark Thompson, has put forward a number of ideas for the BBC to partner other organisations – potentially sharing content, technology, facilities and resources'

Peter Horrocks is now head of Global News at the BBC and so in an interesting position to pursue this line of thinking further.

Part of the problematic of this changing role for journalists and NGOs has been a failure to think through the role of the public. Recent Polis research on an online campaign conducted by Oxfam with the News Of The World showed some of the limitations of networked journalism campaigns. This research was based on an unpublished MSc dissertation by Oliver Courtney, a Media and Communications student and Polis Intern 2008/9.

The British tabloid Sunday newspaper *The News of the World* worked with Oxfam to set up a [Go Green](#) website for its readers to encourage actions in support of reducing readers' carbon footprint and increasing their awareness of climate change. The motivational theme was that the readers could save money by Going Green while saving the planet. It was clearly an attempt to pursue Oxfam's goals mediated through mainstream media using an interactive online platform to engage a section of the public that was seen as outside of the usual climate change discourse. The aim was to persuade readers to take limited actions based on a more accessible understanding of aspects of climate change.

More Media Literate

The website has been relatively successful attracting reasonable traffic. However, Polis focus group analysis of readers indicated that the News of the World readers were more media literate than had been expected and that the danger of these platforms is that they are networked without the journalism.

The respondents appeared to be fully-conscious that the website was a 'soft-soap' approach to the issues. They expressed a widespread desire for much greater clarity and institutional leadership on climate change rather than expecting individual actions to have an impact. They felt that a much more negative and realistic approach would have more impact. And that a more emotive and singular message was required. Their opportunity for their own participation was welcomed so they were by no means rejecting the value of the Go Green project. However, this selective group was suggesting that the more traditional blunt NGO propaganda campaign and a traditional powerful journalistic narrative of threat and danger might have had more impact and clarity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has avoided the question of media as part of a resistance strategy because it focuses on what is happening in mainstream media and NGOs. I don't deny that there is a whole space opening up outside both sectors, but so far, organisations which attempt to aggregate that, like Indy Media, have failed to generate any

significant impact.

But even in the mainstream, these new media technologies do at the very least alter the terms of the debate and the dynamics of the discourse. As I hope to have shown they do at least challenge some assumptions about the role of journalism and NGOs in shaping and transmitting debates around development.

For the NGOs the danger at its most basic level is that these new communications strategies will simply make no difference. It is entirely possible that the level of public engagement and global inter-connectedness is limited and that the best they can hope for is incremental efficiencies in advocacy. The danger is that it will backfire. If NGOs adopt journalistic practice without embracing exploring ideas of their responsibility: for objectivity, accountability, diversity and plurality, then they will simply replicate the deficiencies of mainstream media in the past. If they fail to become more open, interactive, facilitating – in other words networked – then they will fail to take advantage of the possibilities of new media technologies and practices.

Superficially, the danger for traditional news organisations is that they lose their reputation for editorial independence and critical rigour. If they become too empathetic and work too closely with NGOs the fear is that they will not subject them to the kind of objective analysis they deserve. They will become too dependent on NGOs and the wider public for both content and in agenda-setting.

I would argue that the ability of mainstream media to perform those functions was always exaggerated. In fact, if journalism is more networked then the premium for authoritative and trustworthy facilitation and filtering will increase, not diminish. The paradox of networked communications is that as information is increasingly disintermediated, the demand for transparent and relevant mediation increases. There is every sign, for example, that the BBC's reputation and the demand for its services increases globally through online.

There is plenty of space in the new communications environment for NGOs and News Media organisations to act independently. Increasingly, though, they will benefit from networked effects by acting in an interconnected way. They will leverage mutual benefit. But if NGOs can't act outside of their marketing impulses then they will fail to connect with the public. If the ultimate goal is greater cosmopolitanism, the primary need is to establish better quality and more open communication, which is what used to be called 'Good' journalism. The difference with new technologies, is that in theory while everyone may be able to deliver that, in practice it requires genuine editorial ethical standards. These in turn are changing as ideas of objectivity, for example, are replaced by a demand for accountability and transparency.

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