

Media For Development: What Mainstream NGOs Can Do

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/11/09/media-for-development-what-mainstream-ngos-can-do/

2009-11-9

[These are notes from a talk to a group of senior NGO officials from a major UK INGO]



Media For All?

Back in 1991 the Oxfam press office was worried about the lack of coverage for unreported food-shortages and conflicts in the horn of Africa. So they got a 747 from British Airways and flew a group of UK journalists around a series of 'war-torn' 'famine stricken' states like Ethiopia. The hacks included George Alagiah – the BBC's new developing world correspondent – and bizarrely – Chris Evans – then working at GLR. They stopped at various locations just long enough to measure the 'fly to eye' count before hurtling onwards with their magical misery tour. Well that is one way to capture media attention but I am sure you all realise that NGO thinking

on communications has changed since then. Well so has the media.

That trip was from a different age – just before the dawning of mobile telephony, the world wide web and digital cameras. Put that revolution in new technologies together with the social, political, and economic shifts in the last couple of decades and you have a whole new media landscape.

What's changed? what's happening now?

I could show you Global Voices connecting bloggers around the world – we see how citizen photojournalism is bringing stories like Ian Tomlinson's death at the G20 into the open or providing instant and comprehensive coverage of events like the Boxing Day Tsunami – we might think about how email and social media brought the Tehran protests to the world – how Twitter told us first about the Sichuan Earthquake – we could see how the Guardian created an amazing online collaboration with AMREF with its Katine Project.

I could give you realms of statistics about growing internet and mobile phone use across the world – I could tell you about new ideas such as the semantic web.

But I want to concentrate on the meaning of the media revolution. It is significant to you for two reasons.

Firstly, the media that tells local communities and wider publics about development is changing.

Secondly, it is because you are now part of that media.

Let's look at a fairly low-tech example to show what I mean. I am not offering this as a perfect model, what I want to stress is how the relationship between the public – organisations like yours – and journalism is changing.

Take this community radio station in Kibera slum in Nairobi Kenya that I visited last year – it filled a yawning chasm

ignored by MSM in Kenya and elsewhere – mobile phone creates interactive networked journalism – newsgathering but also interaction – not just better journalism but different – more closely connected so when riots struck more responsible – new relationship – so while the new technology is significant as a catalyst or a tool – its the new dynamics it creates that is really interesting.

So we can see how journalism is changing – it is participatory, it is networked – it is a process not product and just as everyone is now a journalist so every organisation is now a media organisation.

And when you start behaving like that you have a choice – to be good journalists or bad ones. What is interesting is that in some ways the new media environment seems to favour good journalism. People want information that is reliable and if it is not, then they can quickly go elsewhere for something better.

So Transparency is the new objectivity. If you are not seen to be open, honest and fair then people will not respect your reporting or your analysis.

So Connectivity is the new accountability. If you are not listening then the public will not continue the conversation. If you are not interactive and accessible and allow participation then people will not trust you.

Now this raises enough issues for conventional journalism organisations – some of whom are represented here tonight – but I think that it also challenges NGOs.

Isn't it about time NGOs:

- a) invested more in media as part of their process as well as marketing?
- b) adopted more open and interactive media policies
- c) used media to empower as well as advocate?

In an age when you NGOs claim to be more devolved, democratic and empowering – are you really using media enough to accelerate that process?

And are you using media in the right way to accord with the ideological or moral and political claims that you are making?

In the end this is an opportunity for development agencies – but it will only work if you understand the new nature of media and reflect upon the challenges it might pose for your identity and ideals as campaigning organisation.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science