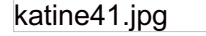


Telling Development Stories: media and NGOs

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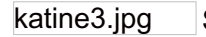
2009-1-30

 Development stories don't often make the front page, but at a time when journalism is facing a resource crisis, the news media is even more vulnerable to accusations of either ignoring the subject or simply recycling aid agency propaganda. This is an article I wrote for [The Guardian](#) following their seminar at Polis which discussed their [Katine project](#) in partnership with medical charity AMREF. You can read further excellent [coverage](#) of the issues around this [article](#) by [Ben Jones](#).

For journalists, development has always been the poor relative of proper, grown-up foreign reporting. Wars and disasters make headline-grabbing stories. They are dramatic and packed full of pictures and people. Development, on the other hand, is slow, invisible and complicated.

People who work in development think journalists are shallow and ignorant. But they also see them as “useful idiots”. Aid agencies have become very skilful at getting journalists to repeat their messages and accept the NGO version of reality.

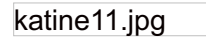
At a time when journalism faces a resource crisis, the [news](#) media is even more vulnerable to accusations of either ignoring development or simply recycling aid agency propaganda.

 So The Guardian's Katine collaboration with the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref) was welcomed by both NGOs and journalists, like me, who believe that development is a big story that deserves to be told.

However, the reality of the Katine collaboration has been more painful. I am director of the media thinktank [Polis](#), based at the London School of Economics, which last week held a seminar where Guardian journalists and Amref officials openly admitted that things haven't been easy.

The Katine project was supposed to show that Guardian hacks could do a multi-dimensional slow story. It wanted to prove that newspapers can stick with a narrative. “A charity appeal is not just for Christmas.”

It was also meant to demonstrate the power of new media platforms. The Katine website is a triumph of online design and is packed with articles, interviews, podcasts, photos and forums.

 However, has it brought many new readers to the issues? Interestingly, it has not yet worked as an experiment in “crowdsourcing”. This is the idea that you can gather clever ideas and knowledge from your readers through journalism that can inform an issue. According to the project's independent moderator, Rick Davies:

“I think that crowdsourcing via the web may be a solution to a problem that is not necessarily recognised. I suspect Amref might well argue that they have the necessary expertise, and where they don't have it, they know how to find it.”

Another new media trick that has not really worked is blogging, according to Amref's head of programmes and advocacy, Grace Mukasa. “There is an oral tradition in rural Africa. You have to remember that these people may not be literate and may not have seen a computer before, so it is hard to expect them to blog,” she said.


And, as the Guardian's John Vidal put it, “all they talk about is the oxen”.

From the Guardian journalists' point of view, it was clear that they enjoyed covering a story without having to

parachute in and out. They have written some wonderful stuff. But in effect, they are “embedded”. There has been some material published that exposed Amref mistakes. However, overall the Guardian reporters felt indirectly and directly under pressure not to raise certain problems – or at least to modify when and how they reported them.

The Ugandan journalist Richard M Kavuma, who spends two weeks a month in Katine covering the project for the Guardian, said he faced ethical conflicts between his normal instinct to report fully and fairly, and the pressure to support the project. He also criticised Amref for failing to open up at times.

I am not sure that is so vastly different from the way that journalists regularly have to make deals with sources or lobby groups, but it certainly raises some painful ethical dilemmas.

 It is clear that even top Guardian journalists can be under-informed on development issues. Like all traditional news reporters, they found it challenging to adjust to different modes of investigating, analysing and representing complex stories that don't fit the normal editorial formulae.

The Katine project has exposed problems about the media, but also about development itself. I am convinced that NGOs are not open enough to real accountability through the media. They assume they are innately innocent and virtuous and that the media are there to help them fundraise and advocate causes.

It was clear from the evidence given by Amref and Guardian staff at the seminar that this was an exhilarating and exhausting experience. They have another 18 months to go and everyone has learned lessons. Much has been achieved, but there was no sense that either party wants to repeat the project.

However, it should be said that other NGOs and media organisations are considering more modest versions of this kind of collaboration, such as the current partnership between the Sunday Times and Save The Children on their [Kingsville Project](#).

In the end one has to applaud both the Guardian and Amref. They have shown imagination, bravery and honesty. It has been a steep learning curve for them, but now everyone can benefit from their commitment, innovation and transparency.

In the future, media and organisations such as NGOs will have to work together much more as traditional forms of news break down and more participatory production evolves. But the Katine project shows that you must never lose the traditional journalistic virtues of critical investigation and independent observation.

[Picture credit: All from [the Guardian Katine](#)]

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