


Can journalism DO Development? The Guardian bares all on Katine

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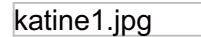
 Can journalism DO Development? That is the question posed by the [Guardian's](#) unprecedented collaboration with medical relief agency, [Amref](#) on their [Katine](#) project. The brutal answer from our seminar was “no, but it is worth trying”

The Katine project is a three-year partnership between the Guardian, Amref and Barclays to support a programme of Development around a small town in Uganda. As Guardian Associate Editor Madeleine Bunting told the [Polis](#) event, it all sprang from a desire to go beyond the usual newspaper Christmas charity appeal.

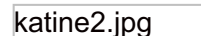
It was an experiment with three main aims:

- To test the potential of the website, especially its ability to crowd-source public knowledge around an issue
- To see if journalists could cover a ‘slow’ story like Development
- To do something more sustainable than a Christmas appeal

In effect, said Bunting, it was to “take the journalists out of their comfort zone”. From the evidence given at the Polis seminar, it certainly did that.

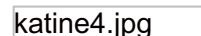
 It was clear from the evidence given by the Amref and Guardian staff at the seminar that this was an exhilarating, exhausting and ultimately unsatisfactory experience. They have another 18 months to go and everyone has learned lessons, much has been achieved, – but there was no sense that either party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

However, it should be said that other NGOs and media organisations are considering more modest versions of this kind of collaboration, so it’s worth considering what was said at our seminar. It also raises some serious issues about the role of NGOs and the media in modern Development Communications.

 Firstly, from the New Media point of view. The online project has been highly attractive and has created a repository of useful information and material. It is packed full of photos, audio, blogs and data. But it hasn’t rewritten the handbook on new media and Development. There were some practical problems, articulated by Amref’s Uganda country director 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”

And then, as John Vidal put it, “all they want to talk about is oxen”.

 There hasn’t been a huge amount of input from the Western reading public either. Apart from some help on solar panels there has not been a great crowd-sourcing dividend. So, “Nice Website but No Revolution”.


From the Guardian journalists’ point of view, it was clear that they enjoyed covering a story without having to parachute in and out. John Vidal and Sarah Bosely both wrote some wonderful stuff. But it was quite disturbing to hear them admit that they had censored themselves. In effect, they were ‘embedded’. There has been critical material published but the Guardian hacks felt indirectly and directly under pressure not to raise certain problems – or at least to modify when and how they reported them.

I am not sure that is so vastly different from the way that hacks regularly have to allow for dealing with sources or lobby groups but it certainly did raise some painful ethical dilemmas.


 It was also a huge resource commitment for the Guardian which, at times, had a team of six committed to varying degrees to the Katine project. Bunting denied that meant that other Development stories were ignored, but she readily accepted that it was a drain on their overall editorial budget.

For Amref it was even more of a distortion of their normal operations. They are delighted by all the publicity and they have learnt some important lessons about how to deal with the media. But it has been a drain on their country staff's time and they have not always welcomed the scrutiny of every aspect of their work. All aid agencies make mistakes, but few operate under the spotlight of a continual media presence.

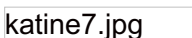
Grace Mukasa from Amref said that they had to struggle both to manage local people's expectations and to cope with the constant needs of the Guardian. These are problems that all NGOs face when they bring Western media to programmes, but imagine committing to that kind of engagement for three years. For Amref it has been a gamble that has not entirely paid off.

 We will publish a full report soon on the seminar that will give a much more detailed and balanced picture. But what was most interesting in the end for me was the view of the brilliant young Ugandan journalist Richard Kavuma. His job is to report on Katine for the Guardian.

He said that he faced ethical conflicts between his normal instinct to report fully and fairly, and the pressure to support the project. He accused Amref of failing to open up at the beginning and of not encouraging other Ugandan media to cover the story.

 Encouragingly, Kavuma said that other Ugandan media are following his example and reporting the human reality of stories as well as the big politics. But he also said that there was huge scepticism amongst African journalists about Development and NGOs. Many Ugandan journalists saw the Guardian/Amref Katine project as just another patronising Western aid scheme which would benefit only the elites. "The poor of the North giving to the rich of the South" as he put it.

I felt that the seminar did raise some hot issues about how NGOs deal with the media. As journalism loses resources and as NGOs tackle difficult topics such as climate change, this relationship will become much more important and even more complex. Polis is publishing research on this over the next few months.

 The problems are not just about collaboration. In a sense, this is a debate about Development itself. I am convinced that NGOs are just 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 fund-raise and advocate causes.

On the other hand, it is clear that even top Guardian journalists can be less than informed on Development issues. Like all news reporters they find it challenging to adjust to different modes of investigating, analysing and representing complex stories that don't fit the normal formulae.

In the end one has to applaud both the Guardian and Amref. Partly, for their openness and honesty at the Polis seminar. It has been a steep learning curve for them, but now everyone can benefit from their commitment, innovation and transparency. But also for their bravery in undertaking the Katine project overall, which has been such a fascinating challenge for all concerned.

Photo credits: All photos are from the [Guardian Katine website](#)

Read [Laura Oliver's](#) account of the seminar at [journalism.co.uk](#)

