

Charities as journalists: distorting international reporting?

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As an advocate of public participation in the journalism I welcome the increased use of news communication methods by international non-governmental organisations such as Oxfam, Christian Aid or MSF. But it raises all kinds of ethical and editorial issues for both the media and the charities.

This Friday Polis launches a high-profile [series](#) of seminars and a symposium on humanitarian and development communications. We kick off with a [discussion](#) between top NGO officers and academics from the US and Europe on [NGOs as Gatekeepers](#).

As the NGO journal [Third Sector](#) reports today, I believe that this is an increasing fact of media life:

NGOs are increasingly responsible for international news reporting as media organisations shut down their foreign bureaux, according to a TV journalist-turned-academic. Charlie Beckett, director of Polis, part of the journalism and society department at the London School of Economics, said dwindling investment in news reporting had left media companies increasingly reliant on NGOs for material. "Apart from the BBC, everyone is shutting foreign news bureaux."

Fewer foreign correspondents in themselves is not a good thing. But citizen journalism is going a long way to providing even more information than before thanks to organisations such as [Global Voices](#). And news organisations, including the [BBC](#), guided by their enlightened global news chief (and blogger) [Richard Sambrook](#), are increasingly linking up with journalists in the countries covered rather than parachuting in their own people.

NGOs recognise this trend as an opportunity for to get their own message out direct via the international news media. They have always done this. A former head of Oxfam's communications has told me hilarious stories of chartering a plane back in the 90s to take hacks on a lightening tour of Africa to view famine. The journos (including DJ Christopher Evans who was working for GLR at the time) leapt in and out of the plane to snap fly-blown children and barren fields in a kind of charity Cooks tour of famine. And bear in mind, that even Michael Buerk's legendary Ethiopia famine report for the BBC back in 1984 was only made possible by an aid agency flight.

But as [Suzanne Franks](#) reports in this month's [BJR](#) and as [Glenda Cooper](#) has shown in her [Nuffield Lecture](#), this process is becoming much more systematic. NGOs are now making their own film packages and some media companies are putting them virtually straight to air, occasionally without proper attribution.

This is bad for the media and the NGOs as in the long-term both will lose credibility. The news media needs to learn how to use public participation without cheating, while the charities need to learn some media literacy and ethics. This should be more than a PR fight. All of us want the public to be better informed about humanitarian and development issues, but distorting the message for short-term gains will not serve the greater truth.

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