

Communicating For Change: media and agency in the networked public sphere

by

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Preface

This paper is aimed at anyone who is interested in the role of media as an influence on power and policy. It is especially about the role of news journalism, NGOs and other activists who use communication for change. It looks at the context for those actors and their actions. It asks how much the Internet and social networks are changing advocacy. It takes an ethical and political rather than technological or theoretical approach. It asks whether the 'public sphere' needs to be redefined. If that is the case, I argue, then we need to think again about journalism, advocacy communications and the relationship between mediation and social, political or economic change.

I would identify three overlapping, interrelated media dynamics that might add up to the need for a new notion of the public sphere: the disruption of communication power; the rise of networked journalism; the dual forces for online socialisation and corporatisation. This is not only a theoretical concern. From these dynamics flow all the other arguments about what kind of media we want or need, and what effect it will have on our ability to communicate particular kinds of issues or information. Unless we understand the strategic context of these changes we will continue to make the kind of tactical blunders that *Kony2012*, for example, represents. This is not just an academic question, it is an ethical, political and practical set of problems.

This long paper was written as a 'think-piece' in preparation for a shorter report that I wrote for the International Broadcasting Trust, published in November 2012. That report is a more focused, policy-orientated paper that condenses much of the content in this paper. This version is a longer version with much greater detail on the cases and more extended argument. It also has much more extensive footnotes and references. But both papers have one thing in common. They are attempts to explore a developing field rather than an attempt to summarise all current thinking or survey all current practice. In that sense they are supposed to be interventions that stimulate debate. So I welcome any kind of response, even if it's just to add useful references or links (or grammatical corrections!).

This paper was provoked by *Kony2012* but it ranges much more widely. It is based on my experience as a journalist at places like the BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News where I had to make editorial judgements about humanitarian and development issues. It is also based on my research in the last seven years at the LSE on media change and the growth of what I call Networked Journalism - the blend of citizen and professional production. It also draws on the work that Polis has done over the last seven years on NGO communication and the role of media in development. You will find details of all that on the Polis website and blog. I am based in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE so this paper also draws upon the work of my colleagues, especially that of Professor

Mansell¹, Professor Chouliaraki², Professor Livingstone³, Dr Shani Orgad⁴ and Dr Bart Cammaerts⁵.

I am the founding director of Polis, the London School of Economics' international journalism think-tank based in the Department of Media and Communications. I was an award-winning filmmaker and editor at LWT, BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News. I am the author of *SuperMedia* (Wiley Blackwell, 2008) that sets out how journalism is being transformed by technological and other changes and how that will impact on society. My latest book is *WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era* (Polity) that describes the history and significance of WikiLeaks. Polis is a public forum for debate about the news media in the UK and globally. Polis holds seminars, conferences and lectures and has published reports on topics such as social media, reporting politics, financial journalism, humanitarian communication and media and development.

See the IBT paper at <http://www.ibt.org.uk/>

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¹ Mansell, R. 2012 *Imaging The Internet* (Oxford)

² Chouliaraki, L. 2012 *The Ironic Spectator* (Polity)

³ Livingstone, S et al. 2010. *Changing Media, Changing Families* (Polis)
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/11/17/family-and-media-a-new-polis-report/>

⁴ Orgad, S 2012. *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (PGMC)

⁵ Cammaerts, B et al. 2012 *Mediation and Protest Movements* (Intellect Books)

Part One: The digital challenge

i. Kony2012: A Challenge to the analogue public sphere?

One of the most interesting reactions to the unprecedented success of the *Kony2012* online video campaign was from envious mainstream media journalists. Outstanding foreign correspondents like Lindsey Hilsum, the experienced International Editor of ITN's Channel 4 News, were impressed that in less than one week the tiny *Invisible Children* organisation could garner 105 million views for a 30 minute long video about human rights abuses in northern Uganda⁶. It seemed almost as if traditional broadcasters were conceding defeat to their digital rivals in the battle to bring difficult international issues to a mass audience:

"...none of the articles...I or a hundred other journalists who have covered Uganda over 25 years has reached the people this video has reached. OK, it may not be accurate. It may use out-of-date figures. But it's struck a chord we have never managed to strike. What wouldn't we do for an audience of 30 million? The video has reached people who would never watch Channel 4 News, or read the Financial Times. The "Invisible Children" campaign could learn a little from those of us who care about accuracy and context. But I think we could learn something from them about how to get a message across, and how to talk to a generation that has stopped bothering to read newspaper and watch TV news."⁷

The video raised millions of dollars for the Invisible Children 'not for profit' organisation through the sale of a 'campaign kit' consisting of bumper stickers, a badge, bracelet and an action guide. The organisers promise to take the campaign offline with a global demonstration⁸. The video meant that at least 100 million people were now aware in some way of the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. Millions more have had the issue brought to their attention by the subsequent media coverage and discussion in social networks. Luis Moreno-Ocampo the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), who was featured in the video, welcomed it as a force that might bring justice closer:

"The Invisible Children movie is adding [the] social interest that institutions need to achieve results. Invisible Children will, I think, produce the arrest of Joseph Kony this year"⁹

⁶ <http://corp.visiblemeasures.com/news-and-events/blog/bid/79626/Update-Kony-Social-Video-Campaign-Tops-100-Million-Views>

⁷ <http://blogs.channel4.com/world-news-blog/kony-2012-inaccuracies-aside-this-is-how-to-spread-message/20728>

⁸ April 20th 2012 - in practice the day was a relative flop with very few activists taking to the streets.

⁹ Interview with Reuters <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/01/us-kony-campaign-hollywood-idUSBRE8300JZ20120401>

Much of the awareness of the video was amplified by the debate it provoked. Immediately upon its release there was an online counter campaign that critiqued the motives, methods and aims of the campaign. Much of this was 'unofficial' as individuals on the various social networks voiced their reservations. It even turned into a rival viral #StopKony campaign. One of the leading critical voices was Grant Oysten, a teenage student in Nova Scotia, whose blog was one of the first to counter Invisible Children's aims and methods:

"Is awareness good? Yes. But these problems are highly complex, not one-dimensional and, frankly, aren't of the nature that can be solved by posterizing, film-making and changing your Facebook profile picture, as hard as that is to swallow. Giving your money and public support to Invisible Children so they can spend it on supporting ill-advised violent intervention and movie #12 isn't helping."¹⁰

'Official' responses from human rights and media professionals, experts and activists were equally critical, (including one from the author of this paper: *Why I think the Kony 2012 Campaign Is Wrong*¹¹). One of the most widely respected experts on both social media as a form of advocacy and African development is MIT-based Ethan Zuckerman, a co-founder of the international blogging aggregator *Global Voices*¹²:

"We are asked to join the campaign against Kony literally by being spoken to as a five year old. It's not surprising that a five year old vision of a problem – a single bad guy, a single threat to eliminate – leads to an unworkable solution...What are the unintended consequences of the Invisible Children narrative? The main one is increased support for Yoweri Museveni, the dictatorial and kleptocratic leader of Uganda."¹³

Many African voices were also raised to criticise the campaign, like Ugandan journalist Angelo Opi-aiya Izama:

"The simplicity of the "good versus evil", where good is inevitably white/western and bad is black or African, is also reminiscent of some of the worst excesses of the colonial era interventions. These campaigns don't just lack scholarship or nuance. They are not bothered to seek it."¹⁴

Mainstream media then tentatively reported the debate. It was clear that they were struggling to work out what the story was. Was this another 'Gosh look what the Internet Can Do!' narrative? Or should they focus on the policy debate around the merits of campaigning for a US-backed military manhunt? Lurking behind the mainstream media coverage was Lindsey Hilsum's ambivalence about

¹⁰ <http://visiblechildren.tumblr.com/post/18890947431/we-got-trouble>

¹¹ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/09/why-i-think-the-kony-2012-campaign-is-wrong/>

¹² <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>

¹³ <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2012/03/08/unpacking-kony-2012/>

¹⁴ <http://angeloizama.com/2012/03/07/acholi-street-stop-kony2012-invisible-childrens-campaign-of-infamy/>

a self-styled human rights media project that had achieved dramatic impact but with debatable means and aims.

Whatever its intrinsic merits, the *Kony2012* phenomenon proved one thing. It may be an extreme or exceptional case study, but it showed the power of the Internet - especially of social networks combined with a relatively old-fashioned kind of emotional filmmaking - to create a self-sustaining, citizen-propelled tidal wave of messaging. It was a kind of networked advocacy journalism.¹⁵ It was especially effective with the group that conventional news media finds hardest to reach - the young.

Only rarely can conventional broadcasting command this kind of mass attention in such a short period. Usually it takes a major event such as a World Cup Final, a disaster like 9/11 or, on a national scale, an entertainment like the X Factor. It may well be that the debate around *Kony2012* helped generate the interest - although that was not planned and the organisation did not fully take part in it. Indeed, at one point comments on the YouTube video itself were turned off.¹⁶ This was partly because Invisible Children was overwhelmed organisationally and even psychologically by the unexpected scale of the response. However, I would argue that they were also strategically and ideologically uninterested in a proper debate. Will this be the case for other organisations who use the same methods?

ii. How The Public Sphere Is Changing

The *Kony2012* case study seems to suggest that the way the public sphere works has changed. To simplify grossly, the analogue or pre-Internet version of the public sphere was relatively stable and contained. In Jurgen Habermas' celebrated definition he cites 'magazines, newspapers, television and radio' as making up "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed."¹⁷ The modern mass media model was linear and hierarchical. Broadcasting exemplified the 'one to many' model where professionals acted as gatekeepers to information. Content was scarce, expensive and difficult to access. The communication of news was an almost entirely one-way process with control of the mediation in the hands of public service and commercial organisations who competed with each other and sought to protect their market share and control of their product. More serious and complex reportage about distant or difficult issues was generally a niche in the public sphere. This would usually be achieved with narrowcasting (a classic example would be Channel 4's *Diverse Reports* series from the 1980s¹⁸). There was also a determined effort from many journalists to bring hard topics to a broader audience by diluting or packaging a subject to make it more palatable to a general taste (a good example would be the BBC's *Comic Relief* programmes).

¹⁵ For a definition of Networked Journalism see: Beckett, C, 2008, *SuperMedia* (Blackwell)

¹⁶ <http://theconversation.edu.au/kony-2012-and-the-case-of-the-invisible-media-5954>

¹⁷ Habermas, J "The Public Sphere, An encyclopedia article" in Durham, M and Kellner D. 2006 *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords* (Blackwell)

¹⁸ Brown M, 2007, *A Licence To Be Different* (BFI)

This fitted into the standard model of the role of journalism in an informed society. A Fourth Estate or news media was a discrete part of an information structure that gave the public the facts and a forum to have a debate about how the authorities should exercise power. Other social institutions such as formal education were part of this process and organisations such as charities, political parties and business were both players in, and shapers of, this public sphere. The flow of information was top down via the media to the public. Much of modern media continues to operate in the same way. But as we see from the example of *Kony2012* it is now subject to a digital challenge. Other phenomena such as WikiLeaks¹⁹ or the role of Facebook in the Arab uprisings of 2011 show this challenge is relatively profound in its consequences. It is far too early in the process to declare a 'revolution' but it is clear that the analogue version of the public sphere is no longer an adequate account of the new facts of digital political and social life.

We now live in a world²⁰ where there is an abundance of low-cost, easily accessed information. It is possible for anyone at virtually any time to get news of anything, anywhere. The key word there is 'possible'. There are still digital divides: generational, educational and economic. There are digital dark spots: places and times when information becomes scarce. There is a concerted effort by authorities in both liberal and authoritarian states to re-establish control over the new information channels through regulation, censorship and ownership. Indeed, it can be argued that the Internet makes it even more possible for those in power to surveil and control.²¹ There are also concerns about how the personalisation and choice offered by the Internet will create greater fragmentation, shorter attention spans, and a less civil discourse that cares more about 'Lolcats'²² than famines or injustice. However, putting aside those qualitative reservations for a moment, these three assertions would be generally accepted:

1. There are now vast flows of information through digital social online networks that compete in scale and effectiveness with mainstream media
2. That these information flows are associated with new forms of audience behaviour and thinking
3. That the nature of the public sphere is therefore subject to challenge and change

iii: What Happens When The Public Sphere Changes?

It is possible to make an assertively cyber-utopian (or dystopian) analysis that refers in absolute terms to the rewiring of the human mind, the radical overhaul of power relationships and the transformation of social organisation.²³ Those are

¹⁹ Beckett C and Ball J, 2012, *WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era* (Polity)

²⁰ http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research_reports/WorldOnline250110.pdf#view=FitV

²¹ Morozov E, 2011, *The Net Delusion* (Allen Lane)

²² <http://icanhas.cheezburger.com/>

²³

certainly possible outcomes but current reality is much more provisional and complex. However, we can already see trends emerging in the way the public sphere operates.

I would identify three overlapping, interrelated media dynamics that might add up to the need for a new notion of the public sphere: the disruption of communication power; the rise of networked journalism; the dual forces for online socialisation and corporatisation. This is not only a theoretical concern. From these dynamics flow all the other arguments about what kind of media we want or need, and what effect it will have on our ability to communicate particular kinds of issues or information. Unless we understand the strategic context of these changes we will continue to make the kind of tactical blunders that *Kony2012*, for example, represents. This is not just an academic question, it is an ethical, political and practical set of problems.

i) The Disruption of Communication Power²⁴

The first trend is towards a much more uncertain and complex network of communications. We have seen how relatively tiny outfits like Invisible Children or WikiLeaks²⁵ can quite suddenly become a major media force. A garage start-up like Facebook can become a global media corporation that creates a hugely important media platform within less than a decade. Equally the sustainability and direction of these digital phenomena is less predictable. Rupert Murdoch blows \$500 million on MySpace, WikiLeaks struggles for survival, a photo editing and sharing website is suddenly worth \$1 billion²⁶. The digital public sphere might still be dominated by mega brands such as the BBC, Google, or the New York Times but what happens on the Internet is often autonomous, asymmetric and hybrid.²⁷

ii) Networked Journalism²⁸

Mainstream Media (MSM) is still described by the public as their dominant source for trusted news information.²⁹ At the last UK election the Conservative Party ran a poster campaign that was mocked online by an amateur website that

Curran, J et al. 2012 *Misunderstanding The Internet* (Routledge)

Shirky, C. 2008 *Here Comes Everybody* (Allen Lane)

Tapscott, D. 2006 *Wikinomics* (Tantor Media)

²⁴ Castells, M. 2009 *Communication Power* (OUP)

²⁵ Beckett C and Ball J, 2012, *WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era* (Polity)

²⁶ <http://techcrunch.com/2012/04/09/facebook-to-acquire-instagram-for-1-billion/>

²⁷ For a full discussion of how the public sphere is evolving in relation to disruptive media such as WikiLeaks please see Chapter Four of Beckett C and Ball J, 2012, *WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era* (Polity)

²⁸ For a full analysis of Networked Journalism please see:

Beckett, C. 2008 *SuperMedia* (Blackwell)

²⁹ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/consumer-experience/tce-11/research_report_of511a.pdf

[http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/better-journalism-in-the-digital-age-\(full-report\)](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/better-journalism-in-the-digital-age-(full-report)) pp8

allowed people to customise and satirise the message.³⁰ The visual joke went viral through social media. But Conservative Party officials pointed out to me that while tens of thousands of people had fun with the posters online,³¹ millions more saw the official version on the streets of Britain. The most significant media platform in that 2010 UK election was the TV Leadership debates, not Twitter. Yet it is clear that MSM is now networked into those social media platforms where it disseminates its product and gathers citizen-generated material. The public uses social media routinely to comment on and forward MSM material. A series of reports³² have shown how journalism is now routinely interactive and collaborative, but one example will serve to prove the case.

The reporting from Syria by courageous, knowledgeable and skilled professional communicators like the late Marie Colvin was vital but it would have been impossible to understand fully what is happening there without the slew of video and audio material produced by anti-Assad activists. The 'CNN Effect' has been replaced by the YouTube Effect. [See Part Two of this paper for a more detailed analysis of this case study and the network effect on MSM].

iii) Socialisation and Corporatisation of the Internet

The forces of disruption and 'networkedness' are reflected by the dual dynamic of increasing socialisation and corporatisation of the Internet as a public sphere. Facebook stands at the intersection of this change in the location and nature of private and public discourse. It is an example of the increasing trend towards sectoral concentration. There has been a vast, exponential growth in the demand for personal and social communication online. Yet, the network effect with online sociability seems to be that we all end up sharing one (or a very few) social network provider. Journalism that seeks attention must go where people are active and so Facebook becomes the de facto public space.

At the same time Facebook finds itself constantly struggling to reconcile its commercial imperatives with customer concerns, for example over privacy. How much personal life will we trade for social networking services? This is partly a consequence of what media historian Timothy Wu identified as how corporations have always exploited new media innovation in a way that tends towards monopoly.³³ There is a parallel tension between the American Government's desire to tighten up the Internet to restrict WikiLeaks disclosures

³⁰ <http://mydavidcameron.com/>

³¹ <http://mydavidcameron.com/about/five-lessons>

³²

http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/how_mainstream_media_outlets_use_twitter?src=prc-headline

<http://newsroomcafe.wordpress.com/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/09/ibc_in_amsterdam.html

Polis Report on Networked Journalism available via this link:

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/08/19/new-report-on-networked-journalism-2/>

³³ Wu, T. 2010 *The Master Switch* (Alfred A Knopf)

or copyright abuse and its conflicting desire to fund internet-based democracy initiatives in oppressed countries.³⁴

The most important media organisations for the future of the networked public sphere did not exist when Habermas first used the 'public sphere' phrase back in the 1960s. The governance bodies of the Internet, and the dominant search engines and social network are creations of recent decades. They are still evolving their own corporate cultures. Governments and international organisations are working out how the system can be overseen and sustained. This is an evolving set of highly complex circumstances that goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important that it is factored into our discussion.

The Internet may be ideologically 'neutral' in itself, but as a series of networks it is more than a blank medium. The condition of the network can have an ethical and political as well as material influence on the nature of the communications it carries. The network providers have responsibilities as any utilities company might but it goes beyond the quality of service. Here are three categories of responsibility that we might expect from network providers in the interests of a healthy networked public sphere:

1. A duty to provide open, accessible networks that respect privacy and prevent harm and that allow for free and informed societies
2. Corporate responsibility to foster healthy societies by direct support for and collaboration with the creation of humanitarian information networks
3. A (self-interested) responsibility to increase media literacies and to create value for the citizen in networks

New media companies like Google and Facebook have adopted some of these responsibilities to varying degrees. They have both put resources into encouraging journalists and civil society activists to use their platforms for non-commercial public interest purposes. Google has supported initiatives like Ushahidi, a non-profit tech company that specialises in developing free and open source software for information collection, visualization and interactive mapping. Facebook gives advice to civil society organisations who want to use them for fundraising, advocacy and campaigning. However, there is much more that they could be doing in terms of building the capacity - especially in developing markets - for public participation in ways that promote public goods. The most important thing they can do though, is to ensure that the networks remain free and open and uncompromised by the commercial drive towards greater control and exploitation.

³⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/apr/15/commotion-wireless-new-america-foundation>
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/03/11/who-are-we-fighting-the-information-war-with/>

iv: Conclusion: from sphere to network?

The desire for control is shared by most organisations that find themselves communicating online, from consumer goods companies to international NGOs. Yet, this is counter to the way the internet market in attention works best. Online, attention is based on trust. The most effective way to secure trust is through peer recommendation. It takes a user to confirm online that a brand is reliable and has provided a valued service. Trust online is affirmed by transparency. Transparency is the basis of online accountability. This accountability is transactional rather than legally based. People use certain sources because of their experience, not because of codes or regulation. Organisations that are open and interactive are seen to be transparent and so worthy of trust. This kind of trust is the currency of an interactivity-based information economy. Verification of the information it contains is a process that combines individual's expertise and experience with collective or aggregated affirmation. The Internet has not created a public sphere of greater purity or democracy. But it has altered the terms of trade in information.

Instead of a relatively stable sphere where information is produced and consumed by separate processes, we have a series of networks that are fluid, unstable and multi-dimensional. Think of the complexity of your own everyday media use and it soon becomes clear how many devices, sources, platforms and channels are now potentially parts of our mediated lives. This makes life much more complex for those in marketing, government, media or NGOs who wish to control a message and direct it. Indeed, the very idea of control may not always be helpful.

We are still looking for the right metaphor to describe this process. Digital 'Ecology' or 'Landscape' is often used but the danger of that imagery is that it suggests something natural, ordered, unified and stable in what is a series of contested and evolving political and material spaces. But we can be sure that the analogue public sphere is changing significantly and that the direction of change is clear: towards what is probably better understood as a series of networks rather than a sphere or spheres. There are organisations that provide infrastructure and content but most of the activity is generated by individuals acting in networks. They may be 'professional' or 'amateur'. Some actors are more influential and they can act in different ways: as filters, editors, aggregators, connectors and even as blockers and hackers. The flows of information vary greatly in speed and direction. The ability to understand and access them is irregular. Not everything has changed. The UK BBC Radio 4 *Today Programme* morning show is still the most influential agenda-setting news programme in Britain. But it did not even report on *Kony2012* until that remarkable media event itself had peaked. The world's teenagers were way ahead of some of Britain's finest journalists.

Part Two: Media Agency in the Digital Era

i: Introduction

We have seen in Part One of this paper how the public sphere and the way it worked in the analogue age is being reshaped. The new communications technologies alone do not determine the outcomes of this process. We are witnessing a 'co-evolution' between the new technologies and developing social trends. The role of the microchip or software design is critical but so are non-media factors such as the changing role of women or new working patterns.³⁵ Any understanding of how mediation fits into UK politics, for example, would have to take notice of how the increased ability to personalise our media consumption has both reflected and reinforced the growing individualism of our personal lives and our political affiliations. So any attempt to adapt to these new technologies for advocacy must also pay attention to how audiences relate to them. We should also recognise that as individuals and societies or organisations we have practical and policy choices that we can make, as well as being subject to market or other forces. However, while we are still in a transitional phase, the general direction of change is clear. Just as the idea of the public sphere has become networked, so must concepts such as journalism, marketing or advocacy. This section will look at this in relation to the communication of international humanitarian and development issues and the impact that might have on public attitudes and government actions.

The idea that describes best what we are focusing on is the concept of 'media agency'. In what ways can communications enable or inspire people to act in the world? And specifically, in a way that directly or indirectly supports efforts to promote global justice and development. Another way of describing this is the idea of media cosmopolitanism³⁶. Media is now environmental. It is part of our lives like any other universal resource such as water or electricity. We have moved from lives of information scarcity to abundance. We can know about suffering anywhere in the world and even use media to relieve it. But are we prepared to pay attention, to feel empathy and then to move beyond mediation to action?³⁷ Conversely, is it possible that the mediation around these issues can itself make agency less likely?

The conventional or analogue model of this process is that someone makes us aware of a problem then they make an appeal to us to help and we respond. We give them money and they go off and do something. A typical model might be a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal on TV³⁸. Your Sunday evening viewing is interrupted by the familiar voice of a celebrity talking over pictures of a famine in East Africa, an earthquake in Haiti or warfare in Congo. At the end a telephone number appears and you can ring in with your credit card details.

³⁵ Livingstone, S et al. 2010. *Changing Media, Changing Families* (Polis)
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/11/17/family-and-media-a-new-polis-report/>

³⁶ Silverstone, R. 2006 *Media and Morality* (Polity)

³⁷ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2203/hyperconnectivity-teens-young-adults-internet>

³⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Flgbi1TahVo&feature=relmfu>

Media agency in the digital era takes many more forms than it might have done in the past. We may read something online and press a 'Like' button. We might click on a link to read a background article with more analysis or a link to contact an NGO working in that field. We might forward a link to a friend or comment below the article. Perhaps we record a response for YouTube or add the link to an aggregator like Tumblr or digg? Or does the act of media consumption in itself actually satisfy the desire to empathise? Do we feel we have 'done our bit' by clicking on an e-petition? Perhaps it might even generate hostility or complacency? The numbers that view an appeal may look impressive but how much time is spent considering the issue and what steps does the viewer take afterwards? What legacy does it leave in terms of their solidarity with the subject? Is there a danger that we replace physical activism with weak online ties?³⁹ At least with the DEC appeals there is a simple measure in cash terms of how effective it has been. Networked communications are equally measurable in terms in terms of traffic, but agency is about the quality as well as the quantity of mediation. How we mediate the information itself may be part of the answer to these questions.

ii: The Network Is The Message?

I have written elsewhere that the *Kony2012* campaign is politically and practically wrong. I do not think that they will catch Kony and I fear that it might have a negative long-term impact by reinforcing all kinds of mistaken and damaging assumptions about African politics and human rights⁴⁰. But putting aside that judgement of its potential effect for a moment, what lessons can it teach us about media agency? As we pointed out in Part One, *Kony2012* is best known as a viral Internet phenomenon but it had previous history and shares many characteristics with conventional NGO communications practice. It did not appear overnight. Invisible Children founder Jason Russell had been working on the topic since 2003. A previous Invisible Children video had already achieved a million views. As the 2012 video makes clear, he and his colleagues have been campaigning in churches, schools and colleges for years. Invisible Children has spent around a quarter of its income on campaigning materials and marketing. So the viral video did not emerge in a vacuum.⁴¹

It could be argued that any 'viral' online media phenomenon achieves success thanks to one or more of three factors: source, content, network⁴². If an established source like David Beckham releases a video it has a distinct advantage because he is already so well known and popular. In the case of *Kony2012* the source was the least important factor, as its brand was little known. For Susan Boyle's *Britain's Got Talent* video the content was very important⁴³. The BGT brand helped as a source but it was the extraordinary

³⁹ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell

⁴⁰ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/03/09/why-i-think-the-kony-2012-campaign-is-wrong/>

⁴¹ For another full discussion of the Kony2012 see the International Broadcasting Trust report *Kony2012 Success Or Failure* <http://www.ibt.org.uk/>

⁴² <http://thefifthwave.wordpress.com/2012/03/26/kony-2012-and-the-art-of-going-viral/>

⁴³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPZh4AnWyk>

drama of her first appearance on that show that meant 100 million people viewed it online in a week. The content of *Kony2012* was polished and relatively innovative with attention-grabbing use of a cute kid and uplifting music. However, most of the creativity went into coating a rather unattractive pill of gory human rights abuses. At nearly half an hour long it was the antithesis of what is supposed to hold attention online. The third factor is the network. What really made *Kony2012* work as a viral phenomenon was its ability to act exceptionally well as a 'network exploit'⁴⁴. By this I mean that it was extremely and deliberately adept at understanding and using the particular processes of gaining attention and promoting dissemination through online networks. It was also able to exploit an offline network to seed the video and to offer the prospect of future online and real-world community.

The pre-existing network created by Invisible Children's offline campaigning first propelled it forward. Analysis of the first 5,000 people to retweet the #Kony2012 hashtag on Twitter shows that they were clustered around a few southern US cities. Analysis of the tags associated with those people retweeting showed terms such as 'Jesus, God, Christ, University, and Student'. These were precisely the people Russell had been aiming at in his previous offline outreach and exactly the kind of young people with a propensity to network online.⁴⁵ However, what helped it to reach 100 million views quicker than even Susan Boyle was probably its incorporation of networked media agency and what social media marketing analyst Gilad Lotan calls "attention philanthropy tactics."⁴⁶

The video makes a series of appeals for action. These were in addition to more conventional requests for money and registration that do not appear until 23 minutes into the film. From the start the video adopts an almost millenarian ideology that claims that the viewer is at a 'crucial time in history' because 'technology allows us to respond to the problems of our friends' and that all we have to do to 'fight war' is to 'make him [Kony] visible'. It even sets a deadline. It foregrounds evidence of people already being active in a very euphoric, uplifting way.

Cleverly, it goes further by asking the viewer to help Invisible Children to target celebrities and politicians - people who are visible and who make things visible. This astute focus on using its supporters to engage celebrities through social media was highly effective. One approving tweet from the massively popular American radio DJ Ryan Seacrest reached 6.5 million of his fans: "Was going to sleep last night and saw ur tweets about #StopKony...watched in bed, was blown away." However, the key celebrity endorsement came from Oprah Winfrey. After

⁴⁴ WikiLeaks is another good example of a 'network exploit' - it exploits the potential of the internet for security and publication, but it also exploits the network of mainstream media by collaborating with newspapers and the offline network of its supporters for financial and political aid.

⁴⁵ <http://blog.socialflow.com/post/7120244932/data-viz-kony2012-see-how-invisible-networks-helped-a-campaign-capture-the-worlds-attention>

⁴⁶ <http://blog.socialflow.com/post/7120244932/data-viz-kony2012-see-how-invisible-networks-helped-a-campaign-capture-the-worlds-attention>

she tweeted the link views of the video jumped from 66,000 to around 9 million.⁴⁷

The video makes an action proposition that is itself based on networking. The call for agency is to network, to join a global demonstration ['Cover The Night'] on April 20th 2012 when the world's cities will be covered with posters and stickers urging yet more networking. 'Awareness' becomes an end in itself for the campaign. It makes the classic advocacy argument that if you want powerful people to act then first you have to make the issue known to them. You do that by making it known to the public: "To care they have to know".

These tactics are not unique to *Kony2012*. We can never know for sure why this campaign went so rampantly viral and another similar one might not. It could have something to do with a specific mixture of youthful American religiosity and social networking or even US campus culture. It may be that I am right and the campaign will not have significant, let alone long-term effects. Dramatic network exploits like *Kony2012* may be inherently unstable and transient. Facebook may have helped catalyse the Arab Spring but is less potent in post-revolutionary Tunisian or Egyptian politics. However, as a case study of media agency, *Kony2012* offers us ways to understand aspects of the Networked Public Sphere and it may be that more credible and sustainable effects are possible. In terms of media agency it does seem that the key was its resolute focus on using the networking impulse of network users to leverage the content and its relatively small existing resource. So what can other organisations learn from this?

III: Legacy Media and Networked Agency

Traditional, legacy or mainstream media (MSM) is still the main resource for reporting, analysing and debating our world⁴⁸. The news media is increasingly swamped as a percentage of online communications but that is relative. Broadcasting is still cited in the UK as the chief source of political information, for example. Independent social networks and forums and aggregators rely on MSM to provide the grist for their mills. So how that news is produced and how it is networked is still the central communications factor in the networked public sphere. However, legacy media is changing its business model, organisation and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, its production methods.⁴⁹ The increasing 'networkedness' of newsgathering, creation and dissemination offers opportunities as well as challenges for media agency.

⁴⁷ http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2012/apr/20/kony-2012-facts-numbers?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

⁴⁸ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/consumer-experience/tce-11/research_report_of511a.pdf
[http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/better-journalism-in-the-digital-age-\(full-report\)](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/better-journalism-in-the-digital-age-(full-report)) pp8

⁴⁹ For a full analysis of networked journalism see:
Beckett, C. 2008 *SuperMedia* (Blackwell)

We are seeing the 'CNN Effect' being replaced by the 'YouTube Effect'. In the past the key to changing public and governmental perceptions about an issue or event in another country was to get TV cameras there. The causal relationship is always tricky to establish but it is generally accepted that the attention paid by mainstream mass TV can have a mobilising effect on public opinion, which in turn might sway the decision-making process of the authorities. Technically, it is easier than ever for broadcasters to cover international issues. Low air fares, compact digital equipment, multi-skilling and portable global communications technologies mean that international broadcast reporting has never been more efficient. Yet it is still much more expensive than any other form of journalism. Many international stories, especially those concerned with conflict, are also much harder to report on they become far more dangerous to cover. For example, Mexican journalists attempting to report on the narcotics problem there have been attacked by both the authorities and organised criminals. Even citizens and activists using social media to report it have been killed.⁵⁰ So with the combination of depleted budget resources for reporting and the increasing hazards it is not surprising that a gap has been created that is increasingly being filled by citizen or activist generated material.

The current Syrian uprising is a good example of this trend. As the deaths of media workers like Marie Colvin have shown, it is a highly dangerous, asymmetric conflict and the Government does not allow free access anyway. Much of the material shown on TV news has been gathered by Syrian opposition activists. It is uploaded to sites like YouTube where it can be accessed by journalists. Opposition spokespeople can speak live and direct from the scene. So networked communications allows us to see something and hear voices at the time of the event that we would not otherwise. It allows the activists to challenge the official version of events directly with evidence. The Internet allows that material to be distributed widely on non-news media networks. Even if mainstream media were not using it, the public in Syria, the region and the wider world would still be seeing it. This is another reason why mainstream media feels compelled to incorporate the material. If they do not then they would be failing to recognise the reality of the networked public sphere. One estimate regarding Syria was that 75% of news comes directly from activists, 10-15% from Syrian state media and a small percentage from 'normal people'⁵¹.

There are problems associated with this as with any other collaboration between journalists and citizens. In Syria these may be more extreme, but the principles involved are the same. The activists who generate most of the material inevitably have an agenda. At worst, this is a kind of propaganda and at best a partial picture. Most news organisations have relatively sophisticated procedures in place to filter the material and verify it⁵² but as Middle East correspondent Jess Hill reports, journalists are under pressure and may not always be able to go through complete process:

⁵⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2011/sep/16/journalist-safety-mexico>

⁵¹ <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/syrias-propaganda-war/183/>

⁵² http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/syria_too_much_information.php?page=all

"A reporter may detect a fabrication in someone's testimony and ditch that source completely. Others may discard the quotes that sound suspicious and use the rest. Too often, journalists will report something that is obviously an unsubstantiated rumour because it's a compelling story and they're on deadline. However scrupulous the reporter, the common caveat — "this has not been verified independently" — absolves us from taking full responsibility."⁵³

There is not much evidence of any one serious falsehood comparable to the *Gay Girl in Damascus* blogger who turned out to be a married American man,⁵⁴ although casualty figures, as usual in modern conflicts, have clearly been manipulated.⁵⁵ But there is a more general distorting effect of the media agency role of the activists. As Hill's analysis and her personal experience of reporting on Syria shows, the version of events given by media savvy activists can play into Western media biases and preconceptions. It may not in itself create an entirely false picture, but it skews balance and makes a proper, critical analysis of the Syrian opposition itself less likely. As American/Syrian journalist Nir Rosen told Hill, you do not hear many interviews with the millions of regime supporters or investigations into alleged human rights abuses by the Syrian opposition:

"Nobody would ever tell a journalist these things, because they don't help the cause...As a Syrian, I don't want people to see the ugly face of things either. But we're talking about arming these guys. Who *are* the Free Syrian Army? What do we even know about them?"⁵⁶

These issues of bias and the fallibility of journalism are as old as the craft itself. The speeding up of the news cycle through 24 hour TV news is as much a factor as the Internet or social media in the trend towards reporting quickly and checking later. Yet the networked nature of news is also changing the relationship of the citizen to the media and adding new complexities. Those Syrian activists - like their revolutionary counterparts elsewhere in the Middle East - are of a generation that understands their ability to message for themselves and with a purpose. This represents a shift in the balance of power in the networked public sphere.

This is not just an international news phenomenon. There is a similar rebalancing of power regarding domestic protest and campaigns in the UK. Organisations like UK Uncut, Occupy LSX and even the Dale Farm eviction protests demonstrated a new relationship between media-aware activists and a mainstream media struggling to report fast-moving, complex and highly politicised stories. Technological innovation and increasing media literacy among the activists mean that they are able to use new communications facilities both to boost the effectiveness of their mobilisation but also to attract attention

⁵³ <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/syrias-propaganda-war/183/>

⁵⁴ rdian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/13/syrian-lesbian-blogger-tom-macmaster

⁵⁵ <http://mideastshuffle.com/2012/02/28/questioning-the-syrian-casualty-list/>

⁵⁶ <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/syrias-propaganda-war/183/>

from journalists. At a recent panel debate⁵⁷ on the topic of reporting protest both 'sides' agreed that the relationship had changed:

"The privileged position that people creating media have is being challenged. We're not there yet, but it is making media's outlook much more accountable."

Naomi Colin Occupy LSX⁵⁸

"Social media changes everything. It puts power back into the hands of the grassroots, and it means the message can be tailored from there."

Paraic O'Brien, Reporter, Channel 4 News⁵⁹

This shift in the relationship with the audience in the production and dissemination of journalism may also represent a change in what we perceive as 'news' itself. I detect two trends. On the one hand we can see that strong media brands like the BBC, New York Times, and CNN are seen by the public as islands of trustworthy information in the swirling digital seas of misinformation and data overload. That is why the biggest media brands have had their positions reinforced, partly to the detriment of media plurality. On the other hand there is an acceptance by the public of the authenticity of the amateur. This is partly to do with growing scepticism about the ability of mainstream media to report fairly and comprehensively. However, it is also because people are increasingly comfortable with getting peer-reviewed or peer-recommended information direct from sources and platforms outside of mainstream media. It could even be that we have got to the stage where a shaky, grainy citizen-shot video of an incident is seen as more believable than a polished film by a professional camera crew. In a world where anyone can be a journalist, if only for a short period, then increasingly the world's news is created by the public.

As long as we live somewhere where we have open access, then the networked public sphere provides more choice as well as complexity. The 'networkedness' of news allows for a much healthier debate around these issues. Expert and very partisan bloggers like Syrian specialist Sharmine Narwani move between academe and critiquing news media to then being a journalist or an expert quoted in mainstream media itself.⁶⁰

This leads on to the bigger structural problem for legacy media in a networked public sphere. In the past the role of news media was defined by the metaphor of a Fourth Estate and their role as institutions within it. News media organisations were, as the BBC's Global News Director Peter Horrocks put it, like fortresses⁶¹. Writing in 2009 Horrocks was sure that they would have to change to adapt to a networked public sphere:

⁵⁷ Polis Conference 2012 Reported here <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2012/03/how-social-media-is-changing-protest-reporting-in-the-uk086.html>

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ <http://mideastshuffle.com/>

⁶¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2009/07/the_end_of_fortress_journalism.html

“Fortress journalism has been wonderful. Powerful, long- established institutions provided the perfect base for strong journalism...It has been familiar and comfortable for the journalist. But that world is rapidly being eroded...Economic pressures – whether in the public or private sectors – are making the costs of the fortresses unsustainable...Internet-based journalism may be the most significant contributor to this business collapse. But the cultural impact on what the audience wants from journalism is as big a factor as the economics...The reader may never be aware from which fortress (or brand) the information has come.”⁶²

In the new, networked world, Horrocks suggested that mainstream media organisations might have to start opening up their structures to collaboration, not just with the public but with other news organisations and even bodies like NGOs. This is based on but goes beyond the idea of networked journalism production where newsrooms use user generated material and foster public participation and interactivity. This requires an institutional commitment to opening up its resources and processes.

The first battle though, is to bring down internal walls. With media organisations like the BBC World Service facing cuts, that can be difficult for hard-pressed journalists to accept. However, newsrooms are literally being re-shaped. The new open-plan Broadcasting House home has helped physically to foster teamwork across BBC language services in response to big international stories like the Indonesia tsunami alarm in April. It also requires investment in new skills. So, for example, BBC language service journalists need help to bring their English up to a standard that can operate across all BBC outlets. This has already had real results in bringing a more cosmopolitan perspective to output according to Horrocks:

“World Service English documentaries have been increasingly reported by languages teams, something that was unheard of ten years ago. A great example was the award winning “Dancing Boys of Afghanistan” about sexual abuse of young boys⁶³. It was the kind of story that an English reporter would never have got near to. Another brilliant example is Rana Jawad, a reporter from the BBC Africa team, who was the BBC’s only person in Tripoli throughout the war and had to report anonymously for her own safety.”⁶⁴

The public is now part of the way that the BBC tells stories. It walks a tightrope that seeks to balance maintaining its constitutional obligations of universality and fairness with what Peter Horrocks has called ‘radical impartiality’. This means allowing a much greater range of citizen voices to be represented as part of news coverage. One way this is now built into BBC narration is through live blogging. BBC News’ live blog of the 2011 English riots, for example, sourced its

⁶² http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/future_of_journalism.pdf

⁶³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11217772>

⁶⁴ email to the author 15.4.2012

content from emails, texts, YouTube videos and Tweets from the public as well as the usual range of material from correspondents, politicians, community organisations and police. It meant that the public was providing information, images and opinions directly into the news flow. This was still verified, modified and framed by the BBC journalists but the openness displayed by this most cautious or responsible of media organisations is indicative of a willingness to acknowledge that the networked public sphere is much wider than the mainstream news media space.

Externally, the BBC has struck a deal to swap documentaries with Australia's ABC so that both get a wider range to offer their audiences. But perhaps the most interesting networking is done through BBC Media Action⁶⁵ (formerly BBC World Service Trust), which is pioneering collaborative work, especially around humanitarian and development issues. BBC Swahili and BBC Media Action are working with local radio partners in Kenya to train them prior to the forthcoming elections to try to reduce the impact of inflammatory coverage that was seen in the last elections in 2008. The best of their content will feed back into BBC Swahili, increasing the diversity of its output and providing a motivation for the local partners. There is a similar project underway in Tanzania.

With all the other pressures currently on BBC news resources it is not surprising that this process is not moving faster. However, as it celebrates the networked success of its coverage of the 'first social media' Olympics it is likely that the BBC will continue to exploit the advantages of openness. They are, of course, not alone among legacy media organisations in seeking greater networked innovation.

Dismantling a fortress is especially tough for the BBC, which has statutory obligations as a tax-funded public service with a legal duty to uphold balance and provide services in a fair and accountable way. The private sector has more editorial and managerial freedom of maneuver so can go further more quickly, yet will still face similar obstacles. The Guardian's editor Alan Rusbridger has come to a similar conclusion as Peter Horrocks with his idea of Open Journalism that has become the strategy for his newspaper⁶⁶. This is again, partly about production of journalism or what Rusbridger calls the 'mutualisation of news'⁶⁷ but it is also about the structure of the organisation and its relationship with both readers and other bodies. Newspapers deliberately used to put up strict walls between the newsroom and the outside world of readers and advertisers to protect editorial objectivity. While the Guardian does not want to compromise on its editorial independence it is now prepared to lower some drawbridges.

The Guardian's Development website is heavily sponsored by the Gates Foundation with a direct grant. Guardian staff is now involved in its popular

⁶⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/>

⁶⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/19/open-collaborative-future-journalism>

⁶⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sustainability/report-mutualisation-citizen-journalism>

Masterclasses (though not, I think, its popular dating service!). The Guardian also teamed up with the NGO AMREF for the joint four year Katine project where one village in Uganda became a live experiment in long-term development journalism⁶⁸.

Alan Rusbridger has even speculated that readers might want to volunteer for training as moderators for the newspapers online comment fields. Rusbridger has been clear that this fits in with the open journalism ethos of networked journalism production but must also work economically. Despite its trust ownership structure the Guardian has to make money. With the newspaper losing £33 million a year it has to find additional sources of funding and cost-savings. In an increasingly competitive digital marketplace it must produce more value for less to more people both on and off line:

“This open and collaborative future for journalism ...is already looking different from the journalism that went before. The more we can involve others the more they will be engaged participants in the future, rather than observers or, worse, former readers. That's not theory. It's working now.

And, yes, we'll charge for some of this – as we have in the past – while keeping the majority of it open. My commercial colleagues at the Guardian firmly believe that our mutualised approach is opening up options for making money, not closing them down.”⁶⁹

Whether it provides enough revenue or not the new open journalism does provide opportunities for media agency. Both readers and humanitarian organisations like Gates or AMREF are now in closer proximity around these issues through the Guardian. At the same time, there have been mistakes and arguments about how far a journalistic enterprise such as a newspaper can go in opening itself up to readers or collaborators and funders. How much does the massive funding for the development editorial from the Gates Foundation distort editorial priorities? How does cooperation with AMREF prevent reporters from critical appraisal of its work?⁷⁰ How far should Guardian moderators go to edit readers who contribute comment to its articles?⁷¹

In practice, I have not been able to identify any serious editorial failings at The Guardian created by these new networked relationships. There is no doubt that there are tensions and the effort of negotiating the ethical hazards of this new environment is taxing. However, I suspect that the real drain on journalism is the overall lack of resource rather than the new openness. I would also suggest that in an increasingly competitive market that the temptation to go down-market for

⁶⁸ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/01/14/can-journalism-do-development-the-guardian-bares-all-on-katine/>

⁶⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/19/open-collaborative-future-journalism>

⁷⁰ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/01/14/can-journalism-do-development-the-guardian-bares-all-on-katine/>

⁷¹ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/01/19/is-comment-free-new-polis-research-report-on-the-moderation-of-online-news/>

easy hits is far greater than the danger of distortion by working with the readers or outside bodies. The Guardian will still need to fund traditional journalism such as the long-term investigation that exposed the phone-hacking scandal. However, it also broke the story of Ian Tomlinson's illegal killing at the G20 demonstration thanks to the collaborative citizen journalism of activists and ordinary members of the public.⁷²

The networked, open journalism model rather than the fortress Fourth Estate offers the greatest opportunities for both journalist and reader to click on. Increasingly, news information is connected to agency whether it likes it or not. Recently, the Guardian discovered that for a brief period more people were finding Guardian stories online through social networks than through search. This is partly a consequence of the success of the Guardian's Facebook app but reflects a wider trend.⁷³ It means that the content it produces will be even more dislocated from other Guardian content. This offers an opportunity for media agency. If content is able to infiltrate people's social networks then it is part of their personal space in the networked public sphere. It can also be connected by that person to their other interests and, importantly, to other people in their network. This offers the prospect of the kind of contiguous self-sustaining cosmopolitan networks that humanitarian campaigners dream of. But translating that into greater agency let alone awareness 'beyond the click' requires two things. Firstly, there need to be better mechanisms to convert weak ties into deeper engagement. Secondly, it needs better journalism. I will deal with the first in the next section on the role of NGOs in the networked public sphere [Part Three] but what do we mean by 'better journalism'?

So far, much of networked journalism has been exploitative of networks. The Internet is seen as a place to disseminate journalism or somewhere to gather (free) material. That response is inadequate. When the citizen faces a tidal wave of information - much of it generated by other citizens or interest groups - for example in connection with an event like the conflict in Syria - they need more journalism, not less. They welcome the direct source of information and content from the public but they also want someone to verify, filter and package this information. As we have seen, that task is not dissimilar from traditional journalistic functions albeit under new conditions where journalists have to work with a surfeit of data, a range of sources and competing, highly-paced, continual narratives. Some have described the new task for the news media as curating. I think that term has an unhappy connotation of museums when in fact it is a very active, topical act.

The live blog - a format pioneered at The Guardian - is a good example. With a live blog, the journalist or news team writes a story as it happens with multiple links to other sources - including social media - in a format that allows for multi-media material and for interaction through comments. It offers a stream of reportage but also connectivity to much greater context and reaction, including

⁷² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/g20-police-assault-ian-tomlinson>

⁷³ <http://econsultancy.com/uk/blog/9394-guardian-predicts-social-to-become-more-important-than-search-for-traffic>

opportunities for agency. However, for that act of curation to be effective the news organisation has to have the skills, knowledge, expertise, resources, and independence to create that - to understand the issues - and to maintain the reputation that will give its mediation value. They have to be part of the networks, but that does not mean they surrender their values. They have to adapt to the behaviour and ethics of the network. They must be transparent, authentic, personal, accountable, interactive and open - but that should not compromise their particular offering. The paradox of becoming more networked is that the job of journalists will increasingly be to deepen understanding and maintain critical perspective rather than directly enable agency - social networking means they won't have to do it.

A recent example of the old and new in action was the recent BBC Radio 4 Today Programme trip to Liberia to report on how Africa was changing⁷⁴. Presenter John Humphreys went out to West Africa to report live and with features on the state of that nation. It was clear that Save The Children had 'facilitated' some of the journalism in the traditional way that NGOs have always 'helped' mainstream journalists get access to case studies in return for publicity for their cause. At the same time Save The Children's social media team was busily promoting the programme on its networks such as Twitter. I suspect that in this case the effect was pretty marginal, let alone viral. It might have helped generate interest in the coverage and thus the issues behind them but it was hardly transformative. Likewise, the BBC's own coverage was very traditional with a strongly western perspective⁷⁵. John Humphreys reported in classic foreign correspondent style rather than giving a platform directly to Africans themselves. While this was a very worthwhile project that probably helped publicise SCF's work and give a much more rounded picture of development issues it represents a relatively modest approach to a network opportunity. (The project is planned for a year from April 2012 so this judgement is provisional).

iv: Conclusion: A Critical Network

Journalists must be allowed to criticise those who claim to do good. The public expects this. That is why citizens took it upon themselves to critique the claims of the *Kony2012* campaign even before MSM had heard of it. The news media relationship with NGOs is increasingly problematic in the networked public sphere as they become increasingly mutually dependent. As Monika Lakcsics set out in a recent research for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism:

"Aid agencies have become cleverer, "turning themselves into reporters for the mainstream media, providing cash-strapped foreign desks with footage and words gratis". While there is an increasing void in foreign reporting by the conventional media, there is a hugely competitive compassion market. On the one hand the major humanitarian agencies

⁷⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17590254>

⁷⁵ <http://africanarguments.org/2012/04/11/you-can't-come-here-with-european-eyes-a-letter-to-john-humphreys-on-his-trip-to-liberia-by-richard-dowden/>

have become slicker, PR-focused media operations, which want to feed a content-hungry disaster news market.”⁷⁶

Journalists may be too happy to play along with the aid agencies’ mission. An intelligent and committed journalist like the New York Times’ Nick Kristof who attracts a substantial audience for his humanitarian and development reporting still faces accusations that he ignores difficult background issues and even the contradictions involved in aid:

“...his method and style directly dehumanize his subjects, expelling them from the realm of the analytical by refusing to connect them to systems and structures that animate their challenges. Kristof’s distancing double move provides us with precisely what is worse than a bourgeois not knowing about the world’s horrors: knowing about them only enough to simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss them, to denude them of political and moral demand, to turn them into consumable and easily digestible spectacles. We are encouraged to look only so we can then close our eyes.”⁷⁷

This might feel like an extreme, even theoretical critique of a journalist trying to tell a complex story in a way that engages western audiences. However, while recognising the necessary compromises involved in journalism it is important that the news media does not become simply a marketing tool for anyone, including NGOs. This is partly an ethical question for journalists, but it is also a bigger issue for the long-term credibility of development organisations. As we shall see in the next section, if they are not more open in the networked public sphere then they will also lose trust.

One way forward in the networked public sphere is for both the journalists and NGOs to allow other voices genuine space. As Lakscsics points out, a more networked relationship between the journalist and the NGOs with greater voice given for the people involved in humanitarian and development work would improve the public sphere and might benefit both media and aid organisations:

“the public is tired of misery, caused by the repetitive representation of suffering...This reaction could be altered through a new and grown up relationship established by aid agencies and media... It could lead to a compassion regard based on the two key civil requirements for responding ethically to distant suffering: empathy and judgment... This narrative could also lead to less frustration between aid agencies and the media, because a more honest understanding of communicating aid would characterise the relationship.”⁷⁸

This applies to the relationship of journalism to all organisations including government or politicians in the networked public sphere. The paradox for the

⁷⁶ Kalcsics, M 2011 A Reporting Disaster? (Oxford, RISJ) pp7

⁷⁷ <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/be-aware-nick-kristofs-anti-politics/>

⁷⁸ ibid pp38

networked news media is that while it must become more integrated with social networks it must retain its independence. It must share the space and connect but it should also retain its distinctive value.

Part Three:

Humanitarian, development and aid communicators in the networked public sphere

i: Framing The Digital Challenge For Good

We have seen how the public sphere is being reshaped by phenomena such as *Kony2012* and digital media activism as well as the response by some legacy media to create more open journalism structures. We have also seen the role of the new media organisations that run the networks. Now let us see what other actors can do in the networked public sphere. If all organisations are now media organisations then what are the guiding principles for better communication by organisations that most want to facilitate agency? This paper cannot provide detailed applied answers to these questions because it depends on the particular aims of each organisation. However, it is important to think about the more general trends, principles and concepts.

Generally, international NGOs (iNGOs) in the UK have adapted with great speed, skill and creativity to the communications challenge of the Internet and social media. Yet, this has made it even more true that mediation is at the heart of the continuing wider discussion about the potential conflicts between marketing, advocacy and work 'in the field'. The 'Finding Frames'⁷⁹ report was part of a debate started in the Common Cause document that pointed out how the development sector was becoming more professionalised and might have lost track of its core purpose:

"There is an irony at the heart of much campaigning on global challenges – including campaigning on humanitarian and environmental crises: as our awareness of the profound scale of these challenges and the difficulty of addressing them grows, we tend to rely ever more heavily upon a set of issue-specific tactics which may actually militate against the emergence of the systemic and durable solutions that are needed."⁸⁰

I want to put those concerns about ends and means into a communications context and ask the question, 'what is the role of iNGOs in the networked public sphere?' While this discussion is focused on international aid and development organisations, it is also relevant to any organisation seeking to influence public opinion or policy-making for ethical or political reasons.

One of the lessons for any organisation concerned with marketing or advocacy is that *Kony2012*'s viral success may be unreplicable and even undesirable. I imagine that many people in the marketing or communications departments of

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<http://findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>

⁸⁰ http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/climate_change/downloads/common-cause-cultural-values-090910-en.pdf pp5

iNGOs would instinctively disagree. Who would not want to reach 100 million plus people? However, in the networked public sphere how you communicate is even more an incarnation of your values and objectives than in the analogue world. You will be judged on what you say and if it is false in any way then it will tend to be exposed or ignored. If you do not seek a properly reciprocal relationship then you will end up with one-dimensional connectivity. This may be acceptable outcome or even the desired result but if so, it is both a failed communications opportunity and, I would argue, a political or ethical mistake.

ii: Opportunities and Risks

When Marshall McLuhan coined his famous phrase ‘the medium is the message’ he was talking about the shift in human society to mass media (in its broadest sense, including the automation of our lives) in the analogue age. His theory is subject to different interpretations but in this context its useful meaning is how it describes the empowering potential of new communications regardless of their actual content:

“...the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology”⁸¹

In the networked public sphere there is another dimension. We are not just talking about a new scale - such as 100 million clicks in six days - but a new relationship. As we saw in Part One and Two these relationships are made up of trust, transparency, interactivity, connectivity and shared verification processes. This brings many positive opportunities for initiating a process of contact, education, engagement and action with the public. Compared to analogue technologies, networked communications offer low-cost but highly efficient ways to target more accurately, respond more personally, motivate more creatively and inform more thoroughly. The evidence is that they also facilitate a much smoother transition to off-line action such as donation, demonstration or participation.

They also bring risks. What multi-media journalist Benji Lanyado calls the ‘Minimum Viable Message’ may set too low a threshold for meaningful engagement. Although the traffic may be measurable, the commitment is not:

“[is] a million-strong Facebook group more or less meaningful than a dozen activists who storm a building?”⁸²

Indeed, there is a danger that over-casual marketing might feed into what research indicates is increasing scepticism about humanitarian marketing in

⁸¹ McLuhan, M. 1964 *The Medium Is The Message In Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, pp23 (New York, Signet)

⁸² <http://benjilanyado.wordpress.com/2012/04/12/the-web-and-the-minimum-viable-message/>

general.⁸³ If iNGOs see online as just another marketing tool then their messaging will become associated in the public's minds with other commercial propositions online. This is a maturing technology and while users seem prepared to accept they are in a market for attention they resent anything that intrudes upon their discourse. Digital 'chugging' will not be tolerated. This should not be confused with concerns about so-called 'compassion fatigue'. This is about the new relationships of trust online and in networks. The absolute, high moral claims that iNGOs like to make in the analogue sphere may not carry the same weight, indeed, will often feel alien and inappropriate in the more personal online space.

An example of this is the use of celebrity. iNGOs use celebrity routinely but are also conscious of the risks. If they are just used as a way to attract attention they might distract from the message. Celebrities are just as important in social networks but their relationship with the public is different. We saw the example of how *Kony2012* used its supporters to engage the celebrities online rather than the organisation commissioning the influential person directly. The celebrity endorsement has been democratised.

This is a small example of the wider point that in the networked public sphere we cannot control the communications process in the ways that were possible in the analogue age. One otherwise media competent NGO chief executive told me that she did not want her staff to use Twitter because she did not have time to approve every message before it was published. Of course, the point of Twitter is that it is most effective because it is *not* hierarchically sanctioned. An organisation can have a social media policy but if it wants to be properly networked then it must be interactive and authentic. Any organisation that does not trust its staff or partners to participate in the networked public sphere might have a deeper organisational problem. Engagement through social media is about more than pretty websites or a Facebook page. The cliché about 'having a conversation online' is still understood by most NGOs as talking *at* people rather than *with* them. As an InterMedia report has shown, engagement through social media requires a new understanding of audience, attention and trust.⁸⁴

This tendency towards transparency and openness in the networked public sphere should be extended to all aspects of iNGO organisational mediation. Why have a conversation with the donor public but not with citizens in the countries where iNGOs work?⁸⁵ This was true of iNGOs in the analogue age that made claims about democratisation and devolution, but then retained central control over communications. This is even truer in the networked public sphere for two reasons. Firstly, the same digital communications that we discussed in western societies are also having an effect on the public sphere in developing countries.

⁸³ Forthcoming Polis report (June 2012) based on research by Dr S Orgad et al
'Mediated humanitarian knowledge: audiences' responses and moral actions'
http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/pdf/Shani_Orgad_research.pdf

⁸⁴ http://audiencescapes.org/sites/default/files/Networked%20Audiences_AIB%20Channel.pdf
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<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/units/innovationResearch/pdf/EDSdp021/EDSdp021.pdf>

They are creating significant spaces for debate and information, despite the infrastructural challenges. Secondly, those online networks being created in developing countries are in turn increasingly accessible by diaspora and other communities globally. So there is a practical as well as a moral and political case for greater investment in 'local' social media as well as that aimed at western donor publics.

In the end each organisation has to make a choice about how it communicates in the networked public sphere. There are no universal prescriptions because it depends on strategic goals. *Kony2012*, for example, is only using networked communications for a limited outcome. It appears uninterested in sustained debate or a more complex developmental goal. The messaging around the video reflects that. Other iNGOs might seek something more long-term that addresses more fundamental concerns. For them the simplifications that help generate viral storms will have to be the beginning not the end of the narrative that clicks on to less superficial information.

There are examples of more nuanced networked campaigning by UK iNGOs. The ONE campaign's efforts to show the public that aid is effective for example was a well-designed online engagement tool.⁸⁶ It combined celebrity endorsement on Twitter with a detailed, evidence-based report. There was nothing wrong with the campaign in itself. But this kind of "transparency as a campaigns marketing tool" still fails to acknowledge the criticisms it was set up to counter and still treats the argument as won before it has started. In the wider networked public sphere the most successful advocates will be those who are prepared to be part of the fully open (and sometimes brutally honest) debate that is already happening among 'real people' on social media.

In the same way that ONE has created a different kind of organisational role, it may be that it will be new campaigning groups that can best exploit the potential of the networked public sphere, rather than expecting 'legacy' iNGOs to adapt. *Avaaz* claims 15 million members in nearly 200 countries and has campaigned on issues such as climate change, WikiLeaks and against Rupert Murdoch. It has raised about £13 million since 2007 and has 50 staff. It works by asking its members to suggest campaigns that it selects for action. *38 Degrees* works in a similar way but on UK based issues. It has two million 'members' and has campaigned successfully on issues such as the proposed sell off of British woodlands. *Change.Org* and *Purpose* are other examples of this trend towards activist online networks that do not have a policy programme beyond broad generalisations about peace, democracy and environmentalism. They have proper organisational structures with varying degrees of hierarchy.

These online advocacy organisations do not seek to promote a detailed agenda in any one area and they do not have programmes of significant field-work (unlike Invisible Children which has workers on the ground looking at health and education issues in northern Uganda). So they act as reactive lobby groups that focus on varying single items within wider issues. They are unencumbered with

⁸⁶ <http://one.org/c/international/actnow/4222/>

the long-term considerations of organisations that have to build relationships over time with authorities. They exploit the ability that the Internet provides to mobilise public opinion rapidly to pressure policy-makers.

They have streamlined decision-making structures that allow them to respond rapidly and they abandon weak or difficult campaigns in pursuit of more effective targets. However, while they may be efficient and flexible they can only be a catalyst for a digital challenge not a long-term solution. They can attract attention but in themselves can only provide limited deeper engagement. Their account of the world is inevitably partial and some would say simplistic. Their appeal is inevitably more instinctive and emotional.

Long-term, *Avaaz* says its vision is to foster a deliberative democracy that does not rely on mainstream media or conventional politics. Unlike most NGOs that focus on a particular topics or area, real people do not think only in single issues. So by choosing a variety of topical campaigns *Avaaz* is able to connect with its community across different subjects. Unlike most NGOs it is prepared to campaign aggressively against people or organisations that are behaving 'badly'. *Avaaz* says it is not just a petition site. It claims to have agency built into its design. People sign a petition, but they are then only another click away from more information and other routes to action.

Avaaz itself has engaged in some real world activity such as supplying communications equipment to Syrian activists. The key question, however, is not if they are a total 'solution' in themselves - something they make no claim to be - but what positive role they might play in the networked public sphere compared to say, mainstream news media or iNGOs. *Avaaz* has already teamed up with local organisations but also other NGOs like Oxfam and lobby groups such as the Media Standards Trust. It seems that these online activism groups are helping to forge the new networked public sphere.

iii: Conclusion: Ways Forward

The networked public sphere is different. How different depends on market forces, social trends and policy-makers' decisions. That will also be determined by the choices of individuals and organisations about how they act on the networks. Unlike the analogue public sphere, just about anyone can have an effect. So everyone has a potential responsibility. This is why all organisations that seek change need to attend much more closely to mediation and find ways to support healthier communications as well as practice it.

At the same time there needs to be a realism and sense of proportion about the limits on the ability of networked communications to facilitate awareness, let alone agency. This is not an argument 'against' being more networked. Just because not everyone clicks on, does not mean you should not attempt to connect. iNGOs in particular have always been puzzled why everyone does not feel as strongly about their cause as they do. In the analogue era they could reassure themselves this was a product of public ignorance rather than the public choosing to ignore them. In the networked era everyone can - in theory -

know, but still the world remains stubbornly uninterested. The networked public sphere offers a way out of this potential disillusion. It allows a much greater range of options and opportunities for engagement. Some will be straightforward linear marketing or broadcast, others will be journalists and activists being part of other conversations. The process will be more complex and uncertain, but that in itself will help to shape a more open and authentic communications process.

There is a deeper crisis that lurks behind this set of issues around the conduct of politics both locally and internationally as the institutions of the 20th century struggle to cope with a world of dramatically shifting power balances and the introduction of new forces for change such as global warming, economic crisis (in the west) and the crisis of legitimacy of democratic politics. The information reformations should be seen as part of those processes not a solution for the problems they throw up.

Media do not change the world, politics and people do. But for progressive movements to work efficiently and to create healthy democratic societies, a commitment to media citizenship is vital.⁸⁷ This is the idea that policy choices must always include the promotion of media literacy in its widest sense - open, accessible networks with empowered users.⁸⁸ That includes the policy choices that news media and iNGO organisations make about the way they act in the networked public sphere.

The battle for the open Internet is the most important issue in the media world today ⁸⁹ and all civil society organisations need to pay more attention to it before they lose the facility it offers. Likewise, anyone interested in a healthy networked public sphere must wish independent networked journalism to thrive. I would be sceptical of calls by mainstream journalists for greater public subsidy as it might slow down industry reform and compromise independence.⁹⁰ But there is nothing to stop civil society from supporting investment in good networked journalism:

“...to fund new initiatives in journalism (with an emphasis on technical and editorial innovation) to ensure greater quality and diversity of news sources and more journalism that holds the powerful to account.”⁹¹

These might include specialist network media organisations like *Ushahidi* or foundation funded journalism like *ProPublica*. Yet the main capacity must still be mainstream public and private media that need more incentives to innovate

⁸⁷ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/10/07/media-citizenship-a-new-charter-for-an-informed-society-world-economic-forum/>

⁸⁸ <http://reports.weforum.org/global-agenda-council-2011/#view/global-agenda-council-2011/councils/informed-societies/>

⁸⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/apr/15/commotion-wireless-new-america-foundation>

⁹⁰ Beckett, C. 2012, 'How to Save Journalism' <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/09/24/how-do-we-save-journalism/>

⁹¹ Jenkins, B 2011 *Better Journalism In The Digital Age* (Carnegie) pp40

around networked communications. Yet, oddly, some public service broadcasters in Europe are circumscribed by law or regulation from taking their services online.

Any report written by someone employed by a University must end with a call for more research. We do not know enough about why people engage or not online. We need much more data on flows of information rather than rhetorical pleas for more coverage or greater interest by the public. We need much better critical analysis of this information. But ultimately this is not a science, it is a political campaign. If we want progressive ideals to thrive and be applied in the networked public sphere then we must support and enact them in our own work.

Executive Summary

This paper asks how we foster communication about the wider world to the UK public in the digital age. It looks at how the context for mediation is changing and asks how communicators such as journalists and international non-governmental organisations (iNGOs - eg Oxfam) should adapt their strategies. In an age of networked communications what are the principles that should guide efforts to persuade the public to pay attention but also to become engaged and active?

In the first section

The viral Kony2012 video is a symptom of how the traditional idea of the public sphere is changing. In the Internet age there will be new forms of communication that can perform in ways that traditional media could not.

There are now vast flows of information through digital social online networks that compete in scale and effectiveness with mainstream media.

These information flows are associated with new forms of audience behaviour and thinking.

The nature of the public sphere is therefore subject to challenge and change

There are three key dynamics at work as the analogue public sphere changes to a networked public sphere:

1. A Challenge of Communication Power as the citizen and other society groups are enabled to disintermediate traditional gatekeepers of information and debate
2. This is demonstrated in the case study of reporting Syria where mainstream media recognises that it must work with the citizen in a collaborative process
3. There is a tension (sometimes creative) between the trend towards socialisation of communications through social networks that offers greater opportunities for expression and connectivity with the historic trend of corporations and governments that attempt to reassert control over the networks and content.

There are expectations that we should have about the responsibilities of the organisations that provide the infrastructure for the networked public sphere:

- A duty to provide open, accessible networks that respect privacy and prevent harm and that allow for free and informed societies

- Corporate responsibility to foster healthy societies by direct support for and collaboration with the creation of humanitarian information networks
- A self-interested responsibility to increase media literacies and to create value for the citizen in networks

We should all understand that the communications relationships are also different based on new ways of establishing truth and creating trust. As the complexity of media increases transparency and accountability become more important in the attention economy.

In Section Two

We look at how media agency changes in the networked public sphere. What do we do with the information we get?

Again, we use the Kony2012 video to show how the act of networking itself has become as important as the content or source of the information or argument. This is a reworking of MacLuhan's 'the medium is the message'. This can make communications more potent as media but it may also make them weaker as a sustainable force for agency.

Key to media agency is the ability of mainstream media to adapt to its new role in the networked public sphere.

It must change its production processes to a form of networked journalism but also its whole structure to become more open in its relationship with society and the citizen.

The Syria case study of activist media production networked into mainstream media shows how this can afford new opportunities for reporting complex and difficult stories although it also presents problems of verification and bias.

The BBC global news case study shows how media organisations can adapt to these new circumstances though there are obstacles of culture and resources. When they do the more networked media organisation can offer opportunities for partnership that can foster greater awareness and potential agency.

The Guardian example shows how these more open ways of working - such as live blogs and partnerships with foundations - could provide a solution to the private news media business model crisis as well as creating more opportunities for facilitating flows of information and agency.

It is vital though that the journalist is allowed to retain their critical independence - otherwise it will not have authenticity in the networks - and likewise, the journalist should be subject to critical oversight too - networked communications may offer a way of reconciling the traditional conflict between independence and collaboration by allowing more diverse voices.

In Section Three

We ask what are the risks and challenges for iNGOs and how they communicate in the networked public sphere. There are specific issues for iNGOs but it is also a case study for all organisations that seek political or other influence in the networked public sphere.

The new media networks offer iNGOs unprecedented opportunities for engagement, informing, fund-raising, and advocacy.

Careless communication might actually increase public scepticism around iNGO marketing and reinforce deeper negative responses to cosmopolitan appeals.

Celebrity endorsement is just one example of how conventional assumptions change. Celebrities are now democratised by social media.

If transparency and openness is what works then iNGOs need to adopt those principles throughout their communications practice, including in the 'local' public spheres where they work. This might also extend to a much greater openness to engage in critical debate around their work.

There might be a need for new advocacy organisations - like the online campaign group Avaaz - that can exploit the potential of networked public sphere, but they are not a solution and would probably work most effectively in partnership with traditional iNGOs.

Every iNGO must decide its own policy in the light of these new circumstances. There needs to be a greater realism about the limits of the new communications platforms. And in turn there needs to be greater self-awareness of the limits and even contradictions between networked communications and actual iNGO culture and practice.

iNGOs (and other media organisations) interested in progressive change through media should therefore take much greater interest in the fate of those networks - such as the struggle for the open internet and the need for greater investment in citizen media literacy and public service networked journalism.

More research is needed on the effects of the new networked forms of communication and the actual behaviour of the public when engaged in mediation around these issues.

