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**“Doing good” and “looking good” in global humanitarian reporting: Is philanthro-journalism good news?<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This chapter investigates if and how a private donor’s apparent motivation to ‘look good’ – or to generate symbolic capital – interacts with a news organization’s ability to ‘do good’ by producing public service content. We address this issue by reporting on the findings of a year-long study of the online humanitarian news organisation – IRIN – as it became primarily funded by a new donor. We argue that whilst it is possible that the Foundation’s pursuit of symbolic capital may have had some effect on how IRIN sought to ‘do good’, it did not appear to affect the extent to which IRIN was either willing or able to ‘do good’. Indeed, our analysis makes clear that the influence of the Foundation only had an effect on IRIN when it combined with other factors, especially journalists’ own values and organizational strategies. Ultimately, this case highlights the limits of generalized claims about the likely influence of a donor’s desire to ‘look good’ on a news organization.

## **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the interaction of “looking good” and “doing good” in relation to the philanthropic funding of international non-profit journalism. Specifically, it investigates how a private donor’s apparent motivation to “look good” - or to generate symbolic capital —interacted with a news organization’s ability to “do good”— by producing what they saw as public service content.

We address this issue by reporting on the findings of a year-long study of IRIN. This is an online humanitarian news organisation, founded in 1995 after the Rwandan genocide by what is now the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). On 31st December 2014, OCHA ceased funding IRIN following, amongst other things, a series of disputes over editorial freedom. From January 1st 2015 and for the next eleven months, IRIN was funded primarily by the Jynwel Foundation, which is the philanthropic arm of the Hong-Kong based international private equity investment and advisory firm, Jynwel Capital. The Foundation’s support effectively saved IRIN from closure. During 2015, a number of news stories came out which alleged that the Chief Executive of Jynwel Capital —Taek Jho Low— may have been involved in a major international corruption scandal (see Ungood-Thomas, Rewcastle and Boswell 2015). Under the circumstances, the Foundation’s move to support IRIN had the potential to offer Jho Low some reputational benefits.

Using extensive ethnographic access to their online newsroom, semi-structured interviews with all their staff and a content analysis of their outputs, we interrogate how and why changes in IRIN’s journalism occurred after their transition to this new donor. We also investigate the extent to which the Jynwel Foundation’s apparent desire to “look good” played into these changes. We argue that the Jynwel Foundation’s pursuit of symbolic capital was not the donor’s sole or even most significant influence over IRIN’s approach to public service journalism. Instead, Low’s adherence to norms and values associated with the field of philanthro-capitalism appears to have been more important. Primarily, though, our analysis makes clear that the influence of the Jynwel Foundation only had an effect on IRIN when it combined with other factors, especially journalists’ own values and organizational strategies.

We begin by considering how philanthropic funding can “do good” by supporting humanitarian journalism, before explaining how the motivation to “look good” might, in theory, affect such journalism. After discussing our methodological strategies, we document the most significant changes that occurred in IRIN’s journalism before interrogating the principal causal factors that appeared to produce them.

### **“Doing good” by supporting humanitarian news**

News coverage of humanitarian issues and crises is important because it plays a vital role in informing and supporting the community of relief workers, donors, and policy makers who respond to such events. It is also the key medium through which citizens learn of faraway crises. As a result, humanitarian news has the potential to influence international donor responses, inform cultural attitudes, and impact international tourism, trade and foreign direct investment

(albeit in complex and non-linear ways) (Cottle 2009). Such news is particularly important at a time of escalating global need. A combination of climate change, economic globalization and conflict mean that nearly two thirds of the world's population are expected to be living in fragile situations by 2030 (OECD 2014).

However, engaging in regular, detailed reporting of global crises such as conflicts, refugee flows and food insecurity is not profitable. It rarely helps news outlets attract mass audiences, enter lucrative new media markets, or secure advertising from luxury brands (Aly 2017). It is also very expensive to fund a network of on-the-ground reporters and the kinds of time-consuming research and travel necessary to explain the complex causes and contexts of these crises (Sambrook 2010). For these reasons, this kind of news is generally produced by journalistic outlets funded via non-commercial, alternative sources with a strong commitment to public service values, such as public education, deliberation and democratic participation (Lowe and Stavitsky 2016). In this chapter, we regard public service commitments as a dynamic set of values held by journalists rather than as a fixed, pre-existing category of particular kinds of news content.

The pursuit of such normative commitments within journalism has traditionally been enabled by state subsidies, as in the case of national public service broadcasters (PSBs). However, at a time when many states are cutting back on this type of financial support, news outlets with public service commitments have become increasingly reliant on funding from private foundations in order to subsidise their loss-making journalistic work. A recent report prepared by Foundation Center (2013) found that between 2009 and 2011, 1,012 foundations in the United States made 12,040 media-related grants totalling a staggering \$1.86 billion - a third of which went to support news journalism.

By providing greater independence from the influence(s) of commercial pressures, foundation funding can affect not just the amount, but also the kinds of international journalism being produced. Browne (2010, 890), for example, suggests that foundation funding, "could, logically, result in... reducing the likelihood of pressure from an owner or advertiser... giving reporters more time to work on a story... freeing them to pursue less-popular topics". There is some, albeit limited, evidence to suggest that the alleviation of a profit-seeking motive may result in more diverse or alternative sourcing practices, thematic focus and news geography. For example, based on a comparative analysis of the forms of international news produced within 13 different countries, Chan and Lee (2013) found that commercial broadcasters are less likely to include characteristics of "analytical depth", such as longer soundbites, and more likely to include features of "sensational" coverage, such as "soft" news topics, compared to public service broadcasters.

Similarly, textual analyses of the coverage of non-profit international news agencies, such as Inter Press Service (IPS), have frequently shown that they have an alternative and much more diverse editorial agenda compared to mainstream, commercial news agencies, such as AP and Reuters. According to Joye (2009), IPS has been found to be more likely to report on countries in the global South; refer to actors and sources from the global South (particularly civil society organisations); report on stories relating to culture, development, the environment and human rights; and emphasise nations' cooperation, achievement and common goals. IPS is a global

news agency funded by a combination of grants from donors, revenues from news sales, and income from projects. Whilst none of this research isolates the effects of foundation funding on a humanitarian news beat, it does at least give some indication of how such news might change if commercial pressures are reduced.

Finally, foundation funding is often associated not only with a degree of independence from the influence(s) of commercial pressures, but also with independence from the the direct editorial influence of donors. Robertson (2015, 25), for example, describes global journalism funded by foundations as, “the relatively autonomous beneficiary of neo-Mediciism”, though without citing any empirical evidence to support this claim. The small amount of research that does exist in this area supports this assumption notwithstanding the existence of a number of anecdotal examples to the contrary (see Bristol and Donnelly 2011). Edmonds (2002, 1) found from his study of philanthropically-funded news organisations that, It is extremely rare to find a nonprofit funder who received the final say on news content, set specific ideological criteria by which news stories were developed, or demanded the inclusion or exclusion of a specific point of view.

However, he goes on to argue that the lack of overt editorial influence should not blind us to the more subtle, one might say cultural, ties that bind these news organizations to their funders. There are, for example, any number of opportunities for grant makers to shape the editorial product as it is developed (Edmonds 2002, 2).

It is commonly claimed, for example, that donor funding is likely to promote self-censorship in circumstances where there is a clear correspondence between the subject-matter being funded and the donors’ interests (Feldman 2007). It is also frequently speculated that donor funding may constrain the more general sphere of legitimate controversy adopted by philanthro-journalism, particularly by tying grant funding to “impact”. Bunce (2016), for example, suggests that, “journalists wishing to secure grants may be more likely to pitch stories about micro-level problems, on which progress and impact is easier to evidence, rather than addressing long-term thematic issues”. Finally, it has been suggested that journalists may be encouraged to reflect a world-view that aligns with their donor’s interests. Specifically, philanthro-journalism has been accused of adopting the ideology of “philanthro-capitalism”, characterised by the naturalisation of pro-market ideologies, which are supportive of the current economic and political status quo of global capitalism from which most foundations have derived their wealth (Wilkins and Enghel 2013).

The only evidence we have regarding such influences is currently limited to theoretical critique or brief critical discussions of anecdotal examples (see Feldman 2007). As Browne (2010, 890) puts it, “there has not, as yet, been any comprehensive content analysis of the work produced by foundation-funded journalists and it would be unfair to jump to critical conclusions via anecdote”. Put simply, we know remarkably little about the extent to which, and ways in which, donor funding helps international public service journalism to “do good”.

### **“Looking good” by supporting humanitarian news**

Whilst humanitarian news coverage may not produce significant *economic* capital, it can generate considerable *symbolic* capital. Symbolic capital refers to the resources available to individuals and organisations based on prestige, competence or respectability, which can be utilised as part of a system of exchange within a certain set of social structures (Bourdieu 1984). In the case of humanitarian news, this refers to the prestige and esteem often associated with longer-form coverage of issues or instances of extreme human suffering seldom covered by the mainstream media (Dencik 2013).

Such prestige and esteem may be particularly valued by states seeking to extend their influence through particular forms of nation branding (Kaneva 2011). Al Jazeera, for example, is not a commercially viable news organisation but it is funded by the government of Qatar because of the potential reputational benefits it offers as a result of its counter-hegemonic content (Figenschou 2013). The UK government’s recent decision to increase funding for the BBC World Service—one of the world’s largest producers of humanitarian news—was justified on a similar basis. The organization was described as “a vital part of the UK’s ability to lead the world in terms of soft power and influence, with its reach and reputation helping to project UK’s cultural and democratic values to more than 246 million people worldwide” (DCMS 2016, 25).

Symbolic capital may also be valued by some corporations and / or foundations seeking to promote positive public relations. Hopgood (2008, 106) makes the same point in relation to NGOs when he refers to the way in which they market the “moral brand and feel good associations” associated with their “product” in order to attract corporate funds.

Whatever moral authority humanitarian NGOs had accrued was now a lucrative resource—a vital source of income... These humanitarian NGOs rent the essence of their particular brand value— trust, respect, ethical motivation - ... in return for income... Value is now in the logo and its associations.

Finally, symbolic capital may be valuable to foundations wishing to draw public attention away from allegations of unethical or illegal business practices. Koehn and Ueng (2010, 3) refer to “moral window-dressing” or “making donations to buy good will or a better reputation” as a common issue in the non-profit sector whereby “firms turn to philanthropy... either to buy good will in advance or to purchase redemption”. They show that US firms required to restate their earnings following allegations of financial wrongdoing are both amongst the most generous philanthropic donors and some of the most visible givers in the media - regularly appearing in magazines’ lists of ethical companies (Koehn and Ueng 2010). Whilst cautioning against too much cynicism, they conclude that some companies and businessmen appear to be trying to buy back their good reputations and related forms of public goodwill using philanthropic giving — and that this works, at least in the short-term.

In summary, in each case it is conceivable that journalists will be incentivized by donors to produce content with high symbolic capital despite its relatively high cost. But whilst some form of donor influence is plausible, the precise mechanisms by which it affects journalistic practice and the ultimate consequences for journalistic content remain unclear. Since no prior empirical

research has been conducted to investigate how such incentives might work and how they interact with other pressures and conditions that journalists have to deal with, little is known about how a donor's motivation to "look good" might affect a news organization's ability or motivation to "do good". This chapter contributes to filling this important research gap.

## **The case study**

In order to consider how the twin phenomena of "doing good" and "looking good" interact in the case of philanthro-journalism, we carried out an in-depth case study analysis of IRIN: an online news outlet which reports daily on humanitarian issues. IRIN's content is disseminated digitally, through its website and social media channels and tend to be used primarily by the humanitarian sector.

Our study took place between November 2014 and November 2015. From 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 onwards, immediately after their involvement with the UN ended, IRIN's general operating costs became funded primarily by early installments of a \$25 million pledge from the Jynwel Foundation.<sup>2</sup> During this time, IRIN's financial and legal affairs were administered by the London-based think tank - the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

The Jynwel Foundation was established in 2012 by Taek Jho Low, who is also its co-director and the Chief Executive of Jynwel Capital. Before IRIN accepted the pledge from the Jynwel Foundation, allegations that Low had had undue influence over a state-owned company tasked with supporting development projects (1Malaysia Development Berhad or 1MDB) were largely confined to the niche, investigative outlet *The Sarawak Report* (2014a and 2014b). But during 2015 the allegations escalated and became more credible, with reports appearing in *The Sunday Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Specifically, Low is alleged to have facilitated, and profited from, the embezzlement of billions of dollars from 1MDB. By the time of writing, Low had been named in the largest set of cases ever brought by the US Justice Department's Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative (Menon et al. 2016). To date, he continues to deny any involvement in any illegal activity.

Towards the end of 2015, IRIN's financial and contractual arrangements with the Jynwel Foundation ended. Since then, IRIN has established itself as an independent non-profit association and continued operating without Jynwel's support. IRIN's funding now comes from a mix of sources including governments, foundations and some charged services.

## **Methodology**

In order to generate credible inferences about the possible effects of the donor's motivation to "look good", we examined both the content and production practices of IRIN and how they changed over time during a 12 month period. IRIN's news outputs were investigated through a content analysis of all original, English-language outputs published between 1<sup>st</sup> November 2014 and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2015. In order to establish if and how IRIN's content changed over time, all qualifying items were coded according to the date, author, word length, format, topic, sources

used and whether they adopted a “human interest” frame.<sup>3</sup> Outputs were also coded according to their “communicative frame”. Cottle and Rai (2006 169) describe these as, “conventionalized repertoires that routinely organize how news events and issues are publicly communicated and contested”. They identify 12 such frames including “contests” between opposing views, and “campaigns” in which articles actively advocate for particular causes.<sup>4</sup>

Our investigation into the causal processes shaping IRIN’s content consisted of a combination of a newsroom ethnography, in-depth interviews and a document analysis. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with all contracted IRIN staff between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2015. IRIN’s Chief Executive and Managing Editor were both interviewed twice. Despite repeated requests, we were unable to interview any representatives of the Jynwel Foundation. As a result, our interpretations of their motivations and values are, unfortunately, based solely on secondary sources. The Director of Humanitarian Programmes at ODI, who had multiple interactions with Jynwel, was also interviewed twice.

Our ethnographic research involved observing approximately four daily editorial meetings and one weekly planning meeting each month between January 2015 and November 2015, amounting to a total of 47 meetings that lasted between 20 and 60 minutes each. Since most of IRIN’s staff lived and worked in different countries, these meetings were held online, via Skype. IRIN’s newsroom was also virtual, consisting of a private discussion space on Slack - a cloud-based team collaboration platform, which we also had access to. We also observed IRIN’s two-day annual strategy meeting in February 2015. What follows is a description of the three most significant shifts in IRIN’s journalism during the period investigated, followed by an account of the causal processes which appeared to produce them.

## **How IRIN’s journalism changed**

### *The quantity, length and format of outputs*

In early 2015, there were rapid and significant changes in the quantity, length and format of IRIN’s outputs. Figure 1 shows that despite substantial declines in their budgets and staffing levels, the number of outputs IRIN produced each month increased significantly in the first few months of 2015 - almost doubling from 38 outputs in December 2014, to 73 outputs in March 2015. This was a direct consequence of the Managing Editor requiring each journalist to produce “one product, every day” (23.6.15) in order to help “build an audience” (Middle East Editor 30.1.15). This target represented a dramatic shift from when IRIN was a UN-OCHA project, when the focus was on “quality... not volume” (former Editor in Chief 20.3.15).



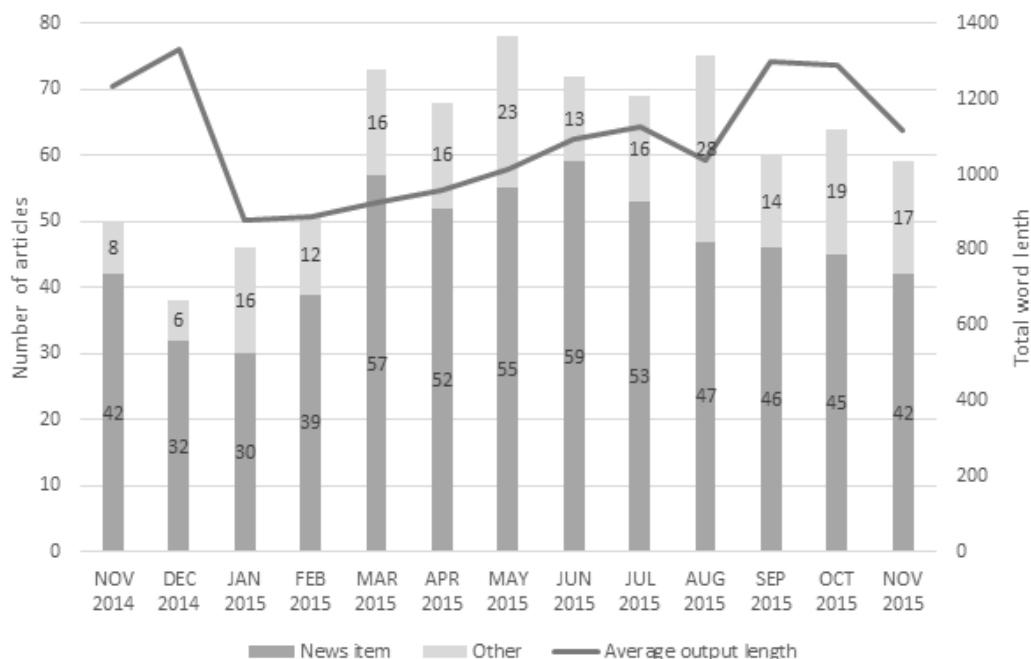


Figure 1: Change over time in the quantity, format and average word length of IRIN outputs.

Alongside an increase in the quantity of outputs was a decrease in their average length. Prior to 2015, IRIN’s outputs were characterised by their Middle East Editor as, “tend[ing] to be 500 words longer than they deserved” (30.1.15), because, as IRIN’s News Editor explained, “there wasn’t a really big incentive to cut them” (20.2.15). In contrast, the editorial guidelines issued by IRIN’s senior managers in January 2015 advised journalists that “we want to see more short pieces (300-400 words) and average size pieces (800 words)”. So, as Figure 1 shows, the length of IRIN news items declined sharply in the first few months of 2015: from an average of 1329 words in December 2014, to 888 words in January 2015.

From January 2015 onwards, all IRIN journalists and editors were also required to post on social media channels at least once a day, and a target was set for IRIN to increase average monthly users and social traffic by 100% in its first year. IRIN adopted a deliberate policy of recruiting new staff with, and training existing staff in, skills relevant to multimedia and digital design. Journalists were also repeatedly encouraged to produce content that was suitable for sharing and consumption via social media. The newly appointed Outreach Manager regularly made suggestions to editors and journalists regarding how to make their outputs more marketable.

Finally, during the first three months of 2015, IRIN staff were repeatedly encouraged on Slack and in editorial meetings to “experiment” and be “more creative” (Slack 19.3.15) in the format and presentation of their outputs. As the Middle East Editor explained, “for the first time since I’ve been at IRIN, I’m being encouraged just to try stuff out” (30.1.15). As a result, the average proportion of outputs not in the form of a conventional news item increased from 16 percent in the last two months of 2014, to 28 percent of all outputs between January and November 2015.

This included guest columns, editorials, briefings, and visual features—many of which were introduced for the first time.

### *The nature of IRIN's public service commitments*

Secondly, there were important changes in the forms of public service journalism that IRIN aimed to provide, i.e. the ways in which it sought to “do good”. When IRIN was a UN-OCHA project, its principal form of public service consisted of providing longer-form, in-depth coverage. As the Managing Editor explained, “our selling point [was] that we were adding [value] to the quick news stories that tell you what’s happened and we try to explain why they’ve happened and the context in which they’ve happened” (22.1.15). In 2015, however, this was not emphasised as strongly. Instead, IRIN’s longstanding public purpose of reporting on humanitarian issues or crises neglected by mainstream media was not only retained, but given seemingly greater emphasis. This purpose was foregrounded in internal documents, public statements by Jynwel and IRIN’s management, as well as in interviews with almost all IRIN staff and even within some of IRIN’s outputs. In the draft of IRIN’s Statutes in March 2015, for example, IRIN’s charitable purpose was described as “to improve understanding of natural or man-made humanitarian emergencies, particularly those less reported or overlooked”.

The most significant change in the nature of IRIN’s public service orientation, though, concerned their watchdog function. It has been reported (Lynch 2014) that when IRIN was a UN-OCHA project there were, as one interviewee put it, significant “limitations on IRIN’s editorial independence”. This resulted in what various interviewees described as a more general tendency to produce “softish leads on the story’ and ‘not writ[e]... anything too provocative... [about] the UN’. By contrast, when IRIN left the UN it repeatedly asserted in public statements that it would ‘be better positioned to critically examine the multi-billion dollar humanitarian aid industry’ (Press Release 20.11.2014). A new position devoted to specifically covering “aid policy” was created to produce “stories that push the industry forward by forcing it to confront critical issues” (Slack 30.7.15). Most IRIN journalists also perceived their coverage to be more critical, with one describing himself as, “less concerned about upsetting member states, because they’re not our member states any more”.

However, there were limits to the extent to which IRIN adopted this particular role. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of IRIN outputs that qualified as adopting either an “expose/ investigation” or “campaigning” communicative frame increased only marginally in 2015, from an average of 4% of outputs in November and December 2014 to 6.5% between January 2015 and November 2015. This refers to news which either exposes information that would not otherwise be revealed within the public domain, or actively campaigns for a particular cause or issues (Cottle and Rai 2006, 180). Moreover, the form of critique that IRIN offered in 2015 was, at times, described as “constructive”, rather than severely critical. In its 2015 Vision Statement, for example, IRIN describes its coverage as leading to “constructive dialogue, not scandalous headlines”.

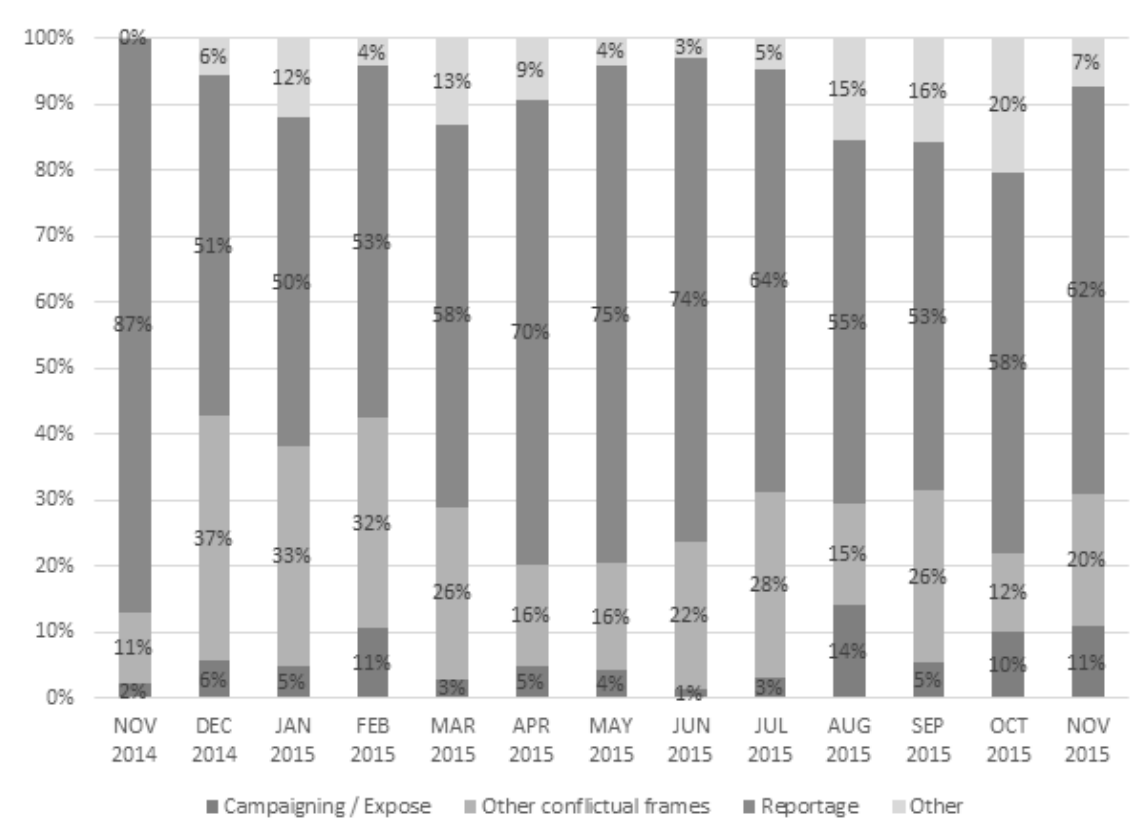


Figure 2: Proportion of IRIN outputs each month (excluding “top picks”) which adopted a particular “communicative frame”.

Alongside changes in their role perceptions, the journalists at IRIN had a new and more diverse understanding of who their audience should be. In 2015, most staff described IRIN’s target audience as having expanded to include those “peripherally involved in the [humanitarian] sector” (Managing Editor 23.6.15) or “people that are interested in the subject” (Middle East Editor 30.1.15). However, the Jynwel Foundation frequently described IRIN’s audience as being the “general public” (cited in Hatcher 2014), and the draft IRIN Foundation statutes in March 2015 referred to an ambition to “reach as many people as possible”. Further target audiences mentioned by different individuals included affected audiences, policy makers, other news organisations, donors and celebrities. IRIN’s “Editor-at-Large” (20.3.15), for example, stated that he “want[ed] to be relevant to the people in the countries that we are reporting on”, whilst the Outreach Manager (29.5.15) said that, ‘for us it’s important to still reach that kind of ‘impact’ ... audience, so decision-makers and policy-makers”.

### *The prioritisation of some public service values*

The third significant change in IRIN’s journalism concerned an apparent temporary decline, between December 2014 and February 2015, in the prioritisation of some public service values as defined by IRIN staff. Put simply, there was a brief change in the extent to which they “did good” in certain ways. Table 1 shows that, during this three month period, the percentage of IRIN outputs adopting a “human interest” frame and those citing local citizens was significantly

lower than for any other month during the sample period. Providing a “platform for the voices of the powerless” (Slack 27.5.15) was understood to be a key public service value for every IRIN journalists.

|                | <i>Percentage of outputs adopting a 'human interest' frame</i> | <i>Percentage of articles citing local citizens</i> |
|----------------|--|---|
| <i>Nov-14</i>  | 13%  | 59%   |
| <i>Dec-14</i>  | 6%   | 37%   |
| <i>Jan-15</i>  | 7%   | 36%   |
| <i>Feb-15</i>  | 10%  | 34%   |
| <i>Mar-15</i>  | 17%  | 42%   |
| <i>Apr-15</i>  | 33%  | 61%   |
| <i>May-15</i>  | 17%  | 53%   |
| <i>Jun-15</i>  | 25%  | 59%   |
| <i>Jul-15</i>  | 19%  | 55%   |
| <i>Aug-15</i>  | 17%  | 61%   |
| <i>Sep-15</i>  | 18%  | 68%   |
| <i>Oct-15</i>  | 22%  | 49%   |
| <i>Nov-15</i>  | 16%  | 40%   |
| <i>AVERAGE</i> | 17%  | 50%   |

*Table 1: Change over time in the percentage of IRIN outputs (excluding 'top picks') adopting different frames and citing different sources*

Similarly, Figure 2 shows that, in the same three month period, the proportion of IRIN outputs that were “reportage” declined significantly. Cottle and Rai (2006, 181) describe reportage as, “a communicative frame that... [provides] detailed background, context and analysis; *in situ* observation, first-hand testimony and/or experiential accounts of events”. It is associated with public service, or “doing good”, because it, “attempt[s] to generate deeper understanding and insights into current news events” (Cottle and Rai 2006, 179). Figure 2 also reveals that, during these three months, more simplistic, “conflictual” communicative frames, including “dominant”, “contest” and “contention” frames,<sup>5</sup> reached their highest levels within the sample period - making up between 39% and 43% of all IRIN outputs.

### **What caused the changes to IRIN’s journalism?**

Our analysis generated no evidence to suggest that the Jynwel Foundation had any direct influence over IRIN’s editorial decision-making. Representatives of Jynwel had no direct contact with IRIN journalists, never suggested any specific investigations or stories, were never shown content prior to publication, and were very rarely mentioned on Slack or in editorial meetings. However, Jynwel seems to have had some limited and indirect influence over IRIN’s broader,

strategic approaches. This involved what IRIN's Managing Editor (23.6.15) described as the Jynwel Foundation's "insist[ence] on visibility", as well as their particular approach to generating revenue. However, this influence could only operate in combination with many other factors, including journalists' own values and objectives, and was heavily modified by them. The interplay of these factors is reviewed through a discussion of 1) audience reach 2) competing field logics and 3) journalistic values.

### *Emphasis on maximising audience reach*

The most significant factor behind many of the changes to IRIN's work was a new focus on maximizing audience reach. This involved a considerable shift of resources towards activities intended to help IRIN reach its new target audiences more efficiently, including a greater emphasis on social media, as well as changes in the quantity, length and format of IRIN's outputs. The decline in average article length, for example, was said to be important for enhancing the "readability" (Editor-at-Large, 20.3.15) and "relevance" (Senior Sub-editor, 15.6.15) of IRIN's outputs. New formats were introduced to help reach key audiences; these were described as being "a very clear expression of [IRIN's] brand" (Managing Editor, 23.6.15).

This new focus on increasing audience reach also appears to have been partly responsible for the temporary decline in the prioritisation of some public service values in the spring of 2015. As the Managing Editor (23.6.15) explained, "in our attempt to be... more relevant on a day-to-day basis, I think we've swung a little too far in chasing after news stories of the day instead of doing our own original, unique stuff". However, other factors were also important. Significant organisational changes were taking place at IRIN between December 2014 and February 2015. In particular, uncertainty over commissioning budgets and disruption to their network of stringers (freelance journalists) meant that IRIN staff were producing a much higher proportion of outputs than usual. This is significant because, compared to stringers, staff were less likely to author longer news items, which included local citizens as sources and adopted human interest and "reportage" frames.

This emphasis on audience reach was itself driven by multiple factors. In particular, there was a desire expressed by all IRIN staff to "source different revenue streams as soon as possible" (Head of Special Projects 22.5.15) by expanding their audience. This would help to establish their actual and perceived editorial independence. As the Managing Editor (22.1.15) put it, "it's risky having most of your funding tied to one donor. It makes you very vulnerable —both financially and in terms of your editorial independence". This strong adherence to the journalistic norm of independence and impartiality was reinforced by their previous experience as a UN-OCHA project, when IRIN staff perceived their editorial integrity to have been compromised.

In addition, the Jynwel Foundation appears to have had self-interested reasons for wanting IRIN to expand its audience and visibility. At a time when Jho Low was facing increasing scrutiny for his alleged role in an unfolding corruption scandal in Malaysia, IRIN's efforts to raise its profile had the potential to offer him some reputational benefits through the accrual of symbolic capital. Whilst Jho Low made no explicit public statements about this, some IRIN journalists speculated that Jynwel's support for international public service journalism was motivated by "PR reasons

as much as anything else” (Head of Special Projects 22.5.15). It is noteworthy too that reputational enhancement was an important element of other organisations’ involvement with IRIN. For example, IRIN’s Chief Executive (16.1.15) suggested that UN-OCHA had gained “soft power... [or] a brand-enhancing equity value” from supporting IRIN. Similarly, ODI’s Director of Humanitarian Programmes (10.4.15) said that the think tank had gained “gratitude from the sector, for keeping IRIN going”.

But whilst an emphasis on audience reach may have been commensurate with Jynwel Foundation’s political and economic interests, there is little evidence to suggest that it was the principal factor shaping IRIN’s strategic decision-making in this area. Instead, the most likely source of donor influence appears to have stemmed from the logic of the field of philanthro-capitalism within which they appeared to operate. One of the conditions of Jynwel’s funding was that IRIN should aim to generate, at a minimum, a third of its budget from “earned revenues” within 5 years. Although such commercial expectations are common for foundation-funded non-profit news start-ups, most struggle to generate more than 25% of their revenue outside of donor grants (Pew 2013). As a result, achieving this degree of revenue diversification is likely to have represented a significant challenge for IRIN and required it to invest heavily in news products and activities that might help expand its audience.

According to Benson (2016, 15), requirements regarding commercial sustainability derive from the dominance of the economic market field within most foundations, which entails, “a fundamental ideological commitment to a market-led solution”. The accounts Jho Low gave journalists of his decision to invest in IRIN suggest that such a logic was also dominant at the Jynwel Foundation. Jho Low repeatedly emphasized his intention to “ensure IRIN’s financial viability”, asserting that this would only be possible if IRIN combined “the intensity of a business with the integrity of an NGO” (cited in Bond 2014). In short, the Jynwel Foundation’s most significant influence is likely to have stemmed from their insistence on “earned revenues” rather than visibility.

It is important to stress, though, that in this instance, the donor encouraged IRIN staff to pursue a strategy they had already agreed-upon, rather than pressurizing them into following a course of action which they were uncomfortable with. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that IRIN managements’ values were the key driver of IRIN’s efforts to expand its audience and revenue, rather than any influence(s) of the donor. Jho Low was quoted in the *Financial Times* as saying that IRIN “should kick-start with a strong enough capital base that they don’t need to worry about money [initially]” (Bond 2014). Despite this, the Managing Editor described herself as being “still hesitant” to be so reliant on one donor’ (23.6.15). This suggests that IRIN managers’ pursuit of a more diverse audience and funding base exceeded the Foundation’s expectations and requirements.

### *Satisfying multiple agendas and negotiating competing field logics*

While funded by the Jynwel Foundation, IRIN worked in, and engaged with, three fields, each with their own dominant logic and ways of doing things: journalism, humanitarianism and philanthro-capitalism. Certain changes in IRIN’s work can be seen as the result of journalists’

efforts to negotiate the often competing logics of these three fields, and the multiple agendas that stemmed from them.

### Changes in the nature of IRIN's public service commitment

IRIN journalists' prioritisation of their public service commitment to report on neglected issues and crises was emphasized in early 2015 because it served multiple agendas simultaneously. For IRIN journalists, drawing attention to neglected crises corresponded with the humanitarian principle of human equivalence. As IRIN's Chief Executive (16.1.2015) explained, "the humanitarian value I think behind our practice... is that we believe suffering is equal wherever and that... [it is] equally deserving of attention and response". In addition, telling unreported stories made IRIN more attractive to potential donors because it helped them to achieve impact. Finally, reporting on the "under-reported" may have also helped IRIN to "look good", or to generate symbolic capital, because it demonstrated their novelty and specialist expertise.

The need to satisfy multiple agendas —and negotiate competing field logics— also helps to explain the adoption of what we described earlier as "constructive watchdog" journalism at IRIN. The adoption of this role appears to have been, at least partly, a consequence of a compromise between two competing values. On the one hand, some IRIN journalists were driven by the tradition of adversarial reporting in the journalistic field, which places a strong emphasis on "speaking truth to power". One wrote in a correspondence that they chose to work for IRIN because they were "really genuinely excited about the possibility to kick up shit by ripping into one of the most unaccountable, unchallenged parts of the global economy" (27.5.15). In contrast, other journalists suggested that the experience of operating with, "a kind of... self-censorship" as a UN-OCHA project, when reporting on sensitive issues, continued to shape their role perceptions in 2015. As one relatively new IRIN staff member put it, "I think that's something that... other... [staff] are still coming out of".

The adoption of the role of a constructive watchdog may also have been informed by a compromise between two contradictory pressures from the Jynwel Foundation. On the one hand, Jho Low's values; Low repeatedly referred to his adherence to a somewhat vague philosophy of "disruptive philanthropy", which appeared to support IRIN's adoption of a more critical tone towards the aid industry. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he stated that whilst IRIN's new pursuit of "hard questions and critical reporting... may be painful short term for certain states... long term, we should be clear that it achieves the overarching agenda of saving human lives" (cited in Cumming-Bruce 2014). On the other hand, there was evidence to suggest that the Jynwel Foundation was reluctant for IRIN to be overly critical. Jynwel's representative reportedly expressed anxiety at the idea of IRIN performing a watchdog function. It is unclear whether this apparent anxiety stemmed from concerns over the potential implications for Jynwel's reputation if IRIN pursued adversarial reporting, or from an incompatibility between IRIN's and Jynwel's beliefs about journalism's role in promoting transparency and accountability. Either way, it appears that the contradictions between Jynwel's interests and apparent values ultimately resulted in a preference for IRIN to adopt a constructive, rather than an especially critical, watchdog role. It is important to note, though, that our data does not reveal the extent to which this preference actually affected IRIN's strategic objectives (if at all).

## Changes in target audiences

The need to satisfy multiple agendas and negotiate competing field logics also helps to explain the shift in target audiences that occurred at IRIN. The Jynwel Foundation's accrual of reputational benefits relied upon IRIN generating symbolic capital, either by "impacting" policy makers, influencing the mainstream media agenda, raising their profile amongst the general public, or getting noticed by certain celebrities. At the same time, though, IRIN was required to generate economic capital by building its existing humanitarian audience. As explained earlier, this requirement to generate revenue stemmed partly from the donor's field logic.

But again, these competing pressures were themselves mediated by the journalists, who operated in accordance with their own norms and values. The norms of neutrality and impartiality within IRIN encouraged the pursuit of diverse revenue streams (as noted earlier). However, these same norms also constrained the forms of revenue generation IRIN staff felt able to pursue. For example, IRIN's Chief Executive (Slack 31.3.15) stated that none of the IRIN staff were "very comfortable with the idea [of] sponsored content". As a result, IRIN was frequently described as being, "not quite there yet on the business model" (Outreach Manager 29.5.5). The Head of Special Projects (22.5.15) admitted that she was, "still not a hundred per cent clear what our core businesses [is] and for which audience".

Finally, the existence of multiple target audiences was a product of the competing visions of IRIN's future held by both Jynwel and IRIN's management. In his public statements about IRIN, Jho Low repeatedly describes the organisation, not in journalistic terms, but as "an NGO... work[ing] hand-in-hand with the major media in the common objective of dealing with humanitarian crises" (cited in Bond 2014). This divergence of opinion stemmed from a clear discrepancy between IRIN management's adherence to journalistic field logics and what IRIN's Chief Executive (16.1.15) described as the "culture [of] philanthro-capitalism [and] philanthro-entrepreneurialism" at the Jynwel Foundation.

### *Journalistic values*

There is evidence to suggest that many of the key changes we observed in IRIN's journalism were driven primarily by decisions made by the organisation's editorial management. For example, the "readjustment" in the prioritisation of some public service values that occurred from March 2015 onwards was the result of a deliberate shift in editorial strategy by IRIN's management. As the Managing Editor explained: whilst "chasing after news stories of the day" may have been "necessary" at the time, "now it's time to kind of re-balance" (23.6.15). This editorial "re-balancing" suggests that IRIN's management had sufficient autonomy to regulate the extent to which IRIN prioritised public service values - at least in terms of the framing and focus of outputs. As the Head of Special Projects put it, "I think we are still grappling with what stories fit within our remit and what don't. But there is no doubt at all that we can do any stories that we want to... The debate is internal and not with an external fund-master" (12.3.15).

It is important to note, however, that the apparent autonomy of IRIN's management may be explained by the possibility that the interests of the Jynwel Foundation appear to have been



served by encouraging IRIN to generate the symbolic capital associated with highly valued forms of public service journalism. Given that editorial independence is a key public service value, efforts to interfere with news production would ultimately have been incompatible with the interests of the Jynwel Foundations. Put simply, it was in the interests of the donor not to interfere or to be seen to be interfering.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we sought to investigate if and how a private donor's motivation to "look good" interacts with a news organization's ability to "do good". To achieve this, we reported on the results of a detailed investigation of how and why the journalism at the humanitarian news organization IRIN changed when it ended its association with UN-OCHA and became funded primarily by a donor who appeared to have been engaged in an act of "moral window-dressing" (Koehn and Ueng 2010).

We identified a number of significant changes within IRIN's content and professional norms during this time. These included; a decrease in the average length of articles, an increase in the quantity of articles and use of social media; the foregrounding of the role of constructive watchdog and rectifier of media inattention; an increase in the breadth and diversity of their target audience; and a temporary decrease in the prioritisation of some public service values.

It is likely that the Jynwel Foundation's apparent motivation to "look good" did play a role in some of these changes. It appears to have been one (albeit relatively minor) contributing factor to IRIN's renewed focus on maximising audience reach (which was itself responsible for many of the changes in the quantity and format of IRIN's output). Perhaps the greatest influence of the donor's pursuit of symbolic capital during this particular time was on further encouraging IRIN to expand its target audience beyond its traditional humanitarian audience. It appears that a donor's apparent motivation to "look good" has the capacity to affect more than just the extent to which a news organization "does good".

Moreover, it is possible that the Jynwel Foundation's pursuit of symbolic capital had some effect on the kinds of public service values IRIN pursued —or *how* it sought to "do good". However, it did not appear to significantly affect the extent to which IRIN was either willing or able to "do good". Interestingly, it is also possible that the Jynwel Foundation's desire to "look good" was one reason why it did not interfere directly, or want to be seen to be interfering, with IRIN's editorial decision-making. In this respect, the Jynwel Foundation's desire to "look good" may have helped IRIN to continue to "do good".

However, our results also suggest that the Jynwel Foundation's desire to "look good" was not the donor's only or even most significant influence. Jynwel's professional values and engagement in the field of philanthro-capitalism appear to have been important to IRIN's renewed focus on maximising audience reach, but also the lack of clarity at the time over its audience and the temporary decline in particular forms of public service content.

Most importantly, though, the results also reveal the limits of the influence of the donor — whether through encouraging the pursuit of symbolic capital or otherwise. The most striking feature of our analysis was the over-riding significance of historically formed, individual values and dispositions and journalistic field logics in mediating all forms of donor influence. Put simply, the influences of the donor always acted in concert (or conflict) with the dominant professional values within the news organisation. In particular, journalistic values were central to IRIN managers' pursuit of a wider range of sources of funding and the “readjustment” in the prioritisation of some public service values that occurred from March 2015 onwards.

Finally, our analysis makes clear that the influence of the Jynwel Foundation's desire to “look good” interacted with these multiple other influences in complex ways - and that these interactions could be both complimentary and contradictory. For example, whilst the dominant journalistic field logics worked with both the donor's field logic and pursuit of symbolic capital to produce a clear focus on maximizing audience reach, they also created internal contradictions that led to differences of opinion over IRIN's target audience. This strongly suggests that it is not possible to make generalized claims about the influence that a donor's desire to “look good” has on a news organization.

Since this is the first in-depth case study of the influence of “looking good” on international journalism it is not possible to ascertain precisely how common these findings are. Further research is required to investigate how the incentive to produce content with high symbolic capital affects journalism within much larger news organizations, such as Al Jazeera and Voice of America, which are supported by governments rather than Foundations. However, this study has enabled us to make a number of more general observations about how the motivation to “look good” and the ability to “do good” interact within international journalism, which can inform theory-building and future research in this area. In particular, we encourage such research to be mindful of the importance of contradictory dynamics, to be attuned to influence of the logics of different fields and, where possible, to not base its conclusions solely on a critical reading of media texts.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter has also appeared as an article for the International Journal of Press Politics —see Scott M. Bunce M. and Wright K. (2017) “Donor Power and the News: The Influence of Foundation Funding on International Public Service Journalism” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 22 (2) 163-84.

<sup>2</sup> At this time, IRIN was also receiving financial support from the governments of Switzerland and Sweden, albeit at much lower levels.

<sup>3</sup> A news item that adopts a “human interest” frame usually personalises and dramatizes an issue. In this case, it was indicated when at least half of all quotations within an article came from affected citizens.

<sup>4</sup> We would like to thank our research assistant Jessie Hagen for her dedicated and thorough contribution to the content analysis.

<sup>5</sup> News items adopting a “dominant” communicative frame are defined by a single external news source that either receives marginal or no challenge. Those adopting a “contest” communicative frame are presented in terms of binary opposition between opposing views. News items adopting a “contention” communicative frame reflect a plurality of voices/perspectives around a single area of contention (Cottle and Rai 2006, 181).