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NGOs As Gatekeepers to  
'Local Media': Networked  
News for Developing  
Countries

**Charlie Beckett**

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# **NGOs As Gatekeepers To 'Local Media': Networked News For Developing Countries**

**Charlie Beckett**

Director, Polis, London School of Economics and Political Science

## **Abstract**

This paper illustrates how innovations leading to networked media have the potential to support the work of non-governmental organisations engaged in development work through providing new means of achieving accountability and transparency. The trend towards new forms of participatory media does not necessarily lead to better engagement with local media, civil society or citizens in developing countries. As the analysis in this paper, suggests there is some resistance in the development community towards a deeper involvement in networked forms of journalism.

## 1 Introduction

What happens when Development non-governmental organisations (NGOs)<sup>1</sup> become engaged increasingly in the practice of gathering and disseminating news information? How do they respond to the new relationships with journalists and the public that result? This process is part of a more general shift in the distribution of power and control over the process of news production and consumption which is referred to here as a mediation process. It is creating a different, 'networked' form of topical discourse where NGOs and the citizen increasingly are empowered in relation to the practice of journalism. By 'empowered' I mean that the citizen has a greater choice of news sources and more control over how news information is consumed. There are more opportunities to contribute to the production of news itself and to interact with the journalism texts that are created. Organisations like NGOs can communicate with the citizen directly as well as contribute themselves to the generation of news content on independent and mainstream news platforms. As a result of these changes, the traditional journalist has less control over the mediation process while the NGOs and citizens have a greater opportunity to articulate their views and news directly to the rest of society and to those in power.

Yet NGOs are driven by the priorities of fund-raising and advocacy. They increasingly employ corporate marketing techniques to advance their own agendas. Is it possible for them to adopt this new role without compromising either editorial values or their own organisational ethos?

At the same time, international NGOs are becoming more concerned with their own accountability and are reviewing their relationships with both donor and 'recipient' publics. Increasingly, NGOs are finding it a challenge to convince donor publics that aid is efficient and justified. There is a widespread scepticism throughout the Western publics about the moral authority of donor governments and a perception that recipient states are politically corrupt and economically. Simultaneously, NGOs are under pressure from their partners and from recipient governments to devolve control of their work to programme countries. So the shift in mediated news relations

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<sup>1</sup> There is an infinite variety of international NGOs. For the purposes of this paper I generally refer to medium to large NGOs. However, as I address later in this paper, their relationship with the media through their programme partner NGOs is critical.

referred to above is coinciding with a more general concern with governance and the public sphere. This paper examines some of the challenges and opportunities afforded by this problematic process.

Networked news production <sup>2</sup> involves much greater public participation in the production process and more extensive interaction with the dissemination process than earlier forms of news production. New technologies allow for increased creation of journalism outside the traditional mainstream professional media. The public is exponentially more able to interact with the news media. This replaces the old 'delivery' system of news production with a more 'networked' process. News media production is still largely driven by professional journalism, but increasingly with input and influence from the citizen and civil society.

As NGOs become part of this realignment of the news media, I suggest that they must become more transparent and accountable as gatekeepers if they are to meet the ethical standards set by themselves and by the public and governments. This challenges both their historical assumptions about their function, behaviour and organisation and traditional assumptions about the role of journalism.

## **2 NGOs as News Organisations**

NGOs have always had a role as providers of information to the news media about development and humanitarian issues. They have facilitated journalists as well as producing public relations and campaigning material used by the news media. They have become increasingly professional at supplying and influencing the news media. The purpose was to raise funds and to increase awareness amongst publics in the developed world. They sought to influence policy-makers and politicians to effect change. It was only marginally about building governance, transparency and accountability around the Development process itself. It was even less about building accountability through the news media. There was, in the words of one senior NGO

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<sup>2</sup> See Beckett, C (2008) *SuperMedia*: Blackwell, ch. 2; Jarvis, J. (2006) 'Networked Journalism', <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/>; Castells, M. (2001) *The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business and society*, Oxford University Press, and Gillmor, D., 2005, *We the Media*, Sebastapol, CA: O'Reilly Media.

manager, “a sense that we were the nice guys and we did not need to explain ourselves”.<sup>3</sup>

Recent trends have accelerated this process. New technologies make it much easier and cheaper for NGOs to gather media materials. They also make distribution more efficient and effective for their own staff, stakeholders, supporters and the public in general via digital platforms, from their own websites to *YouTube*. This trend has coincided with a reduction among mainstream Western media organisations in the resources devoted to gathering and disseminating news relevant to development issues. NGOs are increasingly deploying their resources to fill this gap.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, there has been an expansion in most developing countries of news media. A growth in education and income levels, combined with a general trend towards liberalisation of legal and economic controls over media, has led to a growth in journalism production in most developing states. All this has encouraged the emergence of ‘Citizen Media’, a phenomenon by no means confined to the West. These forms of media including community media, blogging, and other non-professional news media platforms have grown in developing countries facilitated by improved technologies and communication infrastructures such as mobile telephony. Some of these media are independent, but much is ‘networked’ into mainstream media outlets.<sup>5</sup>

So far, NGOs have not responded particularly imaginatively to the implications of these developments. Their self-perception is as civil society organisations that are separate from news media systems. Classically, they see themselves as the subject or influencers of media rather than as producers. This is despite the increasingly direct part they play in creating flows of news information.

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous interview with author of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, C. (2007) Guardian Lecture, Oxford University,

“Anyone here survived a wave, speak English and got a mobile? Aid Agencies, the media and reporting disasters since the Tsunami”, Accessible at [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield\\_Guardian\\_Lecture\\_2007.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield_Guardian_Lecture_2007.pdf).  
[http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield\\_Guardian\\_Lecture\\_2007.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield_Guardian_Lecture_2007.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Beckett, C (2008) *SuperMedia*, Blackwell, ch. 4.

During the 2008 Myanmar disaster, for example, the international health charity Merlin sent in its own communications officer, Jonathan Pearce, to gather material and make videos at a time when the mainstream media were excluded by the regime. They then found two medical volunteers (who conveniently had previous television experience) to film their investigation of the damage wreaked by cyclone Nargis and by the regime's negligence, for a film for the BBC.<sup>6</sup> This film was a classic piece of networked journalism. The NGO did the news gathering while the media organisation provided the editing and a platform. Neither could have secured the resultant material and impact without the other. Control was ultimately with the BBC, but Merlin CEO Carolyn Miller was happy to take the 'risk'. As she put it:

“We were worried that the issues might get trivialised. We didn't want it to come across as “heroic white aid workers”. But in the current media environment NGOs have much more control as long as you have good communications staff and take it seriously.”<sup>7</sup>

How far does this type of development re-shape the traditional NGO approach to news media? It appears to suggest that NGOs have to think more 'editorially'. For any given package of news information what they say will often be virtually the whole story rather than just one voice which is heard as special pleading. Across the range of news media increasingly they will be part of the production process. Nonetheless, despite the experimentation with platforms and channels of communication the fundamental attitude to the relationship on the part of NGOs is still arguably that of publicist/lobbyist and journalist.

There is a strong instrumentalist bias on the part of NGOs toward communications and mediation processes. Media work is seen as functioning to promote their profiles, disseminate messages and to raise funds. Institutionally, media departments of NGOs are under-funded and low down in the policy-making order. By extension, the mainstream journalist and the citizen journalism are seen as offering instrumental tools rather than as a part of the development process.

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<sup>6</sup> The BBC Newsnight film can be accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7461284.stm>.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author January 2009.



### 3 NGOs and Media and Development

One area in which NGOs could evolve their role is in their dealings with 'Local Media'. In the past there has been a general disregard for work with local media. The traditional communication structure for NGOs involved staff from head office (and sometimes local staff) feeding information from their programme countries to donor countries. This material was used in fundraising, campaigning and media work. It was part of Media *about* Development.

There was also Media *for* Development, usually run by completely different NGOs. Organisations like the BBC World Service Trust, Thompson Trust or *InterNews* train journalists, set up fellowships in Western newsrooms, create community radio stations or help countries set up regulatory or legal frameworks for news media. They have sought to build media capacity. The virtue of this approach was that it delivered observable new services for civil society. A community radio station could be established and it could provide further services such as health information. Better trained journalists were expected to produce more reliable and useful news.

The main problem for those seeking to justify Media for Development initiatives was the difficulty in sustaining and measuring programme effects. In addition, too much capacity-building was temporary, isolated and uneven spread within countries. Journalists would be trained up through Media for Development programmes and then they would leave their media jobs for better-paid work at NGOs. Community radio stations would often be abandoned when the development grant ran out. And there was the ever-present problem of demonstrating media effects. How could a project show that its media work had resulted in tangible health benefits or improvements in education, for instance? Often the desire by those initiating programmes was to have a visible social impact in areas such as health which, in turn, often meant that the understanding of development itself was crude and instrumentalist.

Media for Development initiatives have become much more effective in the last decade, however. Reports by Polis, Panos and the World Bank <sup>8</sup> indicate that the

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<sup>8</sup> The Polis (2007) *Media Governance and Democracy in Africa*, Polis, London School of Economics and Political Science is accessible at: <http://www.polismedia.org/dgmconference.aspx>; Panos (2007) *Making Poverty The Story*,

Media for Development sector has developed a much more coherent set of practices. These recognise that building capacity must be rooted in local needs and markets to make them sustainable. New technologies have helped make this more possible. But at the same time, much of Media for Development developed media initiatives in isolation from society, regarding media development as a technical exercise. 'Build the media organisations and the journalism will follow', was the argument.

This approach was based partly on the old model of the news media as a separate Fourth Estate; a discrete institution in the public sphere. The rise of networked journalism makes this model less tenable, even if it was ever desirable. If it had been successful then the danger of these kinds of Media for Development initiatives would have been that would replicate the faults of 'Developed' news media alongside its virtues. They eventually would have created similar kinds of self-serving media institutions that protect their ownership of the news process at the cost of accountability and transparency.

Networked journalism, as a new approach to journalism in developing countries potentially enables all NGOs to develop a synthesis between these two approaches: media *for* development and media *about* development. Development NGOs should recognise that engagement with local media at all levels offers increasingly significant opportunities to improve programme impacts, build civil society and increase transparency and accountability. However, this approach to engagement should be the result of a strategy to support, rather than simply to exploit, local media. The process of drawing up any such strategy should recognise that all partners need to be empowered by having a role in the process of creating the relationship: citizens, partner NGOs, donor NGOs and the local media organisations. As we will see below with the example of Pamoja FM, as local media becomes more extensive and more networked it is likely to offer more potential for targeted, sustainable and interactive relationships with the citizens that NGOs claim they want to empower.

This is entirely in accord with the recent ideological and organisational shift in NGOs approach to their own organisational structures. Many NGOs are devolving their

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Panos, London is accessible at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=284>; The World Bank Report on NGO Social Accountability (2007) is accessible at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVACC/Resources/practitionerssurvey.pdf>

programme work to the countries in which they operate. This step is mainly driven by a desire to rebalance the ideologically negative 'neo-imperialist' aid flows. By having more empowered local offices run by local people with responsibility over programme delivery, development the argument is that becomes more democratic and sustainable. It may also be more efficient. ActionAid International, for example, has created a series of regional offices including a head office in Johannesburg. It has appointed a series of media officers who work in the regional offices. Oxfam GB has set up a similar system of global media officers, albeit with greater oversight from the head office in Oxford. The claim, though undocumented empirically, is that there are efficiencies to be gained in this way; there may also be a heightened chance of effectiveness in meeting NGOs and local actors development aspirations.

There is not space to debate in this paper how successful these kinds of strategies have been in departing from the traditional flow of information through NGOs themselves. The evidence seems to suggest that, while there has been much greater autonomy for media workers in the programme countries, there is still a great deal of oversight and direction from the head offices. However, these strategies do offer the potential for NGOs to consider how they might better sustain the networked journalism model in developing countries. In order to achieve this, it may be that the media work of NGOs will have to become much more closely integrated into their programme work and that Media for Development specialist NGOs and conventional development programme oriented NGOs will need to become much more closely integrated. To illustrate this argument, I take the case study of Kenya based on interviews in the field supported by Polis in Autumn 2008.

#### **4 Kenya Case Study: Networking Local Media and NGOs <sup>9</sup>**

The Kenyan news media are relatively rich and advanced as compared to many other developing countries. Kenya also acts as a regional centre for international and African media organisations. Nevertheless, local media workers and other experts make it clear that there is plenty of scope for further media development support.

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<sup>9</sup> All quotes in this section are from interviewees interviewed by the author in Nairobi, December 2008.

Esther Kamweru is Executive Director of Media Support for the independent Media Council of Kenya. She points out that Kenya by 2008 had a regulatory structure and freedom of expression legislation. There had been a lot of innovation in creating new language services including in the Swahili/English slang 'sheng' which is especially prevalent among the young. New technology and, particularly, the mobile phone are increasing public participation in news media. She had reservations, though, about the news media's ability to fulfil its wider civic functions:

"The threat to good journalism is not from government but from commercialisation. The media market is growing but whole areas are being missed out."<sup>10</sup>

According to Kamweru, Kenyan journalism is good at covering process politics, personalities and lifestyles. This coverage could relate to development issues, but says, Kamweru, "we don't know how to cover them". This is partly because Kenyan journalism training and education are largely unconcerned with the ethics of the craft or encouraging editorial development. However, it is not just the media that needs support. Kenyan NGOs also want to enhance their role in the production of news and other media.

Ann W Njogu, Executive Director of the Christian Aid partner *Centre for Rights, Education and Awareness* (CREAW) is a good example of a highly motivated and effective communicator. She works directly on placing stories in the media. For example, she briefed a journalist about a rape in custody by a police officer. This put a little-covered issue in the public domain and put pressure on authorities to deal with a particular manifestation of gender-related crime. She said that she uses a range of techniques: letters to the editor; press conferences; Buying 'advertorial' space; Demonstrations/picketing; and editors invited to breakfasts.

Njogu recognised that CREAW needs more training capacity to be effective at a consistent level. She was also realistic about the limits of media interventions in Kenya. There is corruption and the usual media distractions of deadlines and

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<sup>10</sup> James Deane and Jamal Abdi (2007) The Kenyan 2007 elections and their aftermath: the role of media and communication, (BBC World Service Trust policy briefing), accessible at [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya\\_policy\\_briefing\\_08.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya_policy_briefing_08.pdf).

commercial pressures. Editorially, there is a failure to tackle the underlying issues behind individual cases or stories. She was so convinced, however, of the value of the local media work that she was working to create a radio station for CREAW:

“Media is such a critical tool of development because it has the potential to change minds. Nevertheless, to achieve a paradigm shift it needs to be given a context. Media work must be meaningful, effective and sustainable.”<sup>11</sup>

This is an example of an NGO seeking to go beyond normal media relations to become increasingly ‘networked’ into news media production.

Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director of Kenya Human Rights Commission has also been highly successful in gaining publicity in the international, regional and local media. She was convinced that media growth, including online media, means that the opportunities for working with media will increase which means that partner organisations will need more support in building their capacity:

“Few local organisations have the capacity to manage all the media work. That is why we are reviewing our work and trying to create a proper media strategy. It needs to be designed to be co-ordinated and provide long-term support for staff working with local media from national papers to community radio and SMS [mobile phone texting]. We are under-utilising the media, but this needs proper prioritisation by expert communications and media experts.”<sup>12</sup>

So the need and demand are present from both local NGOs and the local media. Njogu and Wanyeki both foresaw a more participatory role for their organisations as content generators and networkers with local news media.

Community activist Sammy Gitau, who was hoping to create a new Community Radio Station as part of a community project he was running in the Mathare slum, said that radio offers three benefits to development organisations:

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with the author in December 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author in December 2008.

“It allows them to get information out there and to raise issues in a local context. It also gives a voice to local people to talk about the issues in their own way. But it can also become part of other community services such as finding work or accommodation.”<sup>13</sup>

As Gitau indicates, healthy local media outlets provide much more than a channel for development messages. They can be a bulletin board for commercial services, new enterprises and activism. They can provide the community with the political and economic communications and information that can contribute to building a healthy civic society at a neighbourhood level. This is a vision of a media properly networked with the citizen and public bodies.

However, community radio stations are not looking to be run by NGOs. They seem to work because they are from the community and sustained by the community. Nevertheless, there are interventions that would support this kind of media. Apart from financial support for facilities, there is a need for training in areas such as marketing so that they can become sustainable.

Beyond that, networked media like community radio, offers NGOs a prospective platform and even locale for their campaign and advocacy work. NGOs can combine Media *for* Development skills and interventions with a network of partners who could benefit and which would have the ability to bring in the necessary expertise and support

## **5 Conclusion: What Have We Created?**

I have suggested in *SuperMedia*<sup>14</sup> that networked journalism is not a revolutionary paradigm for news production and consumption. I have argued that it has far-reaching potential consequences for both media and society, because, in essence, it is a synthesis of traditional journalism and new media participatory processes. This is also the case with networked development media.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with the author in December 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Beckett, C (2008) *SuperMedia*: Blackwell.

NGOs are becoming more participatory in the production of news. This begins with their interaction with their 'donor' publics, but it should also be the case in developing countries where forms of networked journalism are emerging. This raises particular problems for NGOs. This is because they may not be equipped with the skills to engage in this emerging form of journalism or they may feel that they want to work through partners rather than participate in media production directly themselves. These are essentially tactical or practical issues, however.

Underlying some NGOs' ambivalence about participating in the media may be a deeper desire to exercise caution in exposing themselves to critical debate about development issues in the public sphere. Accountability for NGOs, as measured by the OneWorld Trust, for example, in its annual Global Accountability Report <sup>15</sup> does include measures of transparency and disclosure. However, this does not include how NGOs (or other international organisations) act as media organisations or towards journalists. It does not assess them in terms of their role as news media gatekeepers.

NGOs are already subject to increasing criticism and scepticism from the public and the mainstream media. By engaging with media in developing countries they could build a reputation founded on constructive openness and responsiveness. By having a continual conversation through an active and engaged relationship with platforms like *Pamoja FM* they are able to bring themselves into a relationship of direct interaction with the local public. At present, accountability is via stakeholders through administrative procedures. Networking with local media would provide a much more open and robust form of public accountability and communication.

Unfortunately, very few international NGOs understand the potential of networked journalism for increasing their transparency and accountability to citizens who benefit from their programmes. Publicity and branding on the ground is usually aimed at their international supporters and donors rather than at the local community. They tend not to prioritise or resource local media work because it does not fulfil their traditional international fundraising and advocacy objectives. Neither do they do enough to encourage or fund their partners to engage with local media, thereby gaining the potential to increase their own accountability and transparency.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.oneworldtrust.org/>.

Would this kind of networked local media engagement by NGOs threaten journalistic independence, a value that is often given a high priority in *Media for Development* debates? Realistically, the real threats are from oppressive governments and a failure to integrate development goals and aspirations into commercial media production. The problem is a lack of resources and skills and not interference itself in most cases. However, it is important, as with all development work, not to create a dependency culture. The aim should be to create networks of support and engagement; not client relationships. By working with independent *Media for Development* organisations and by working towards creating diverse, community-supported media, NGOs could play their part as networked stakeholders rather than dominant donors. The aim must always be to help foster initiatives that become sustainable, economically viable enterprises. Much more investment is needed by NGOs to help local media compete with other commercial media enterprises in ways that enable them to create value and a profit in the marketplace that at least makes them sustainable. In that way they can build independent journalistic resources and capacities.

All the organisations involved in development need to be networked – not just with themselves but also with civil society and the citizen. The evidence today indicates that healthy accountable adaptable organisations are networked. They do not have impermeable barriers; instead they make connections. This is a practical advantage but it is also an ethical necessity. This is even more important for advocacy, campaigning and marketing NGO organisations. Yet, at present, the flow of communication is largely one-way. It does not match the aspirations for transparency and accountability that is valued in the ideology of the policy work of many NGOs. It is essential to engage in building governance, democracy and development through local media if the goals of the policy work of these NGOs is to be central - not peripheral - to that task.



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