

## Article

# Reviewing NGOs' media strategies: Possibilities for NGO-media collaboration

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**With the emergence of exploding forms of media and ever greater variety of internationally vocal non governmental organizations including multinational corporations, the field of public diplomacy and international relations is infinitely more complex. The fluid equation of public and private forces on the world of international communication and public diplomacy is the crosscutting issues in the multimodal media world. There is a need to highlight the principles and practice of global communication and public diplomacy today focusing on the interaction of government, media and NGOs and interplay of non governmental forces on governmental actions. Focusing on the context, this essay tries to forward a thematic framework for exploring and practicing efficient NGOs media strategies to sustain NGO-Media collaboration in today's multimodal media world.**

**Key words:** Thematic framework, exploring and practicing efficient NGOs, today's multimodal media world.

## NGOs MEDIA STRATEGIES IN FOCUS

An organization needs to constantly communicate to its environment how it is performing in relation to the reason for its existence (Julie, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. An NGO which can produce a media strategy with clearly identifiable, predetermined and actual outcomes can sustain longer. Promoting good governance and development requires improvement of media capacity for reporting on socioeconomic and development issues such as public health and education (Hudock, 2003; Ojo, 2005; Biswas, 2007). United Nations general assembly, special session on HIV/AIDS,<sup>2</sup> has suggested for the development of media strategy by networking with local journalists, local NGO network and local media for meaningful involvement of NGOs and civil society. Given the media's important role in shaping public opinion and awareness, advocates of any development program must rely on the media to disseminate their messages (Rubin, 2000;

Biswas, 2007). It appears obvious and urgent that media and NGOs have to find out new way of collaboration that could lead to better general understanding and awareness on North-South relations<sup>3</sup>.

## Examples of successful NGO-media collaborations

1. Some of the NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Belgium or Action Contre la Faim (ACF) in France have developed a strong and sustained relationship with national and international media, who now refer to them in order to get information or to confirm data from third sources.
2. The partnership between the public Czech television and the NGO people in need foundation (PNIF) is one of the best illustrations of the impact of a public media involvement in development education.
3. AlertNet, from Reuters foundation, whose mission is

<sup>1</sup> THE NGO NETWORK ALLIANCE PROJECT - an online community for Zimbabwean activists, kumbatan.net, Media strategies for NGO sustainability by Frank Julie, August 05, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations General Assembly, Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS, A Guide for Meaningful Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society, PREPARED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF AIDS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS (ICASO), FEBRUARY 26, 2001,*

<sup>3</sup> European conference on Awareness-Raising and Development Education for North-South solidarity, Brussels, 18-19-20 May 2005, 1/8 [Working paper group C], MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES, Belgium Dev Corporation

to raise the profile of many of the world's "forgotten" emergencies, is a very good example of the use of ICT with media.

Source: European conference on Awareness-Raising and Development Education for North-South solidarity, Brussels, 18-19-20 May 2005, 1/8 [Working paper group C], MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES, Belgium Dev Corporation.

## **SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF NGOs MEDIA STRATEGIES IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

Regarding the growing trend of public diplomacy practice (the participation of non-state actors in the process of communicating and relationship building among citizens of different nations with implication for government foreign policies) Zhanga and Swartz (2009), studied the media strategies of a U.S based NGO, the Washington Profile, which engages in public diplomatic-oriented activities by providing international news services through the latest communication technologies. According to their work, the perceived effectiveness of this NGO international news service is much higher than government sponsored news programs such as VOA. The factors that impact this effectiveness include foreign censorship, NGO leaders' vision, audience, access to the Internet and funding restraints.

Non-governmental actors have become increasingly effective in advancing their agendas and disseminating their messages across the field of international affairs. For example, in 1996, more than 1000 NGOs as leading actors, joined by like-minded nations, successfully reached a global treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines. In 2002, the NGOs and like-minded nations successfully made the International Criminal Court Treaty into force (Davenport, 2002; Zhanga and Swartz, 2009).

## **STRENGTH AND EFFECTIVENESS OF EMERGING NGOs MEDIA STRATEGIES**

Compared to government-sponsored media diplomacy, such NGO media diplomacy appears to be stronger with many advantages:

1. They are independent from the government and could be perceived more neutral and thus more credible.
2. Relying on the latest communication technology such as websites and e-mail publishing, they could reach world publics at very low cost, with fewer staff and less bureaucracy.
3. The latest communication technology guarantees that such communication can be targeted to the smallest segment of audiences: individuals; and the same

NGOs Media strategies have significant impact affecting the public diplomacy efforts of governments. Taylor, 2000a and Tyler, 2009 has argued that NGO public relations practitioners and media representatives have the potential to build a special relationship that can serve civil society objectives in transitional nations. In a study of the public relations efforts by Bosnian NGOs, Taylor concluded "the media relations function has an important role in the development of civil society in Bosnia".

## **WEAKNESSES: LOSS OF ORIGINALITY AND CREDIBILITY OF INFORMATION**

In some cases, it is argued that think tanks and NGO's are always self-appointed and often single issue oriented about the agenda-setting and the role of think tanks and NGO's on government perceptions and policies. If aid agencies act as reporters they must consider whether they are acting as journalists or as advocates. When they act as journalists, this often becomes blurred. NGOs are partial, occasionally illegal and passionate about their cause, if they continue to mimic the requirements of mainstream, institutionalized news, then arguably they will fail in the role of advocacy, become not different from elite sources of information and lose the position of public credibility that many are now enjoying<sup>4</sup>.

Because of the weakness, for NGOs, there is a chance of getting embroiled within media scandals that is far removed from the ideals and aims of humanitarianism.

## **IMPACTS OF EMERGING NGOs MEDIA STRATEGIES**

### ***Potential impacts to traditional journalism***

Civil society actors such as NGOs and advocacy networks are becoming increasingly significant players as the traditional news media model is threatened by shrinking audiences, the availability of free content online and the declining fortunes of mainstream media<sup>5</sup>. These developments have a significant impact on the traditional news makers: news media outlets, journalists and editors. In this regard, emerging NGOs media strategies are to be judged as the progressive challenges to the traditional journalism.

### ***Impact on international relations***

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<sup>4</sup>Natalie Fenton: Has the internet changed how NGOs work with established media? Not enough - By Natalie Fenton / Nov. 23, 2009

<sup>5</sup>NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, Nieman Journalism Lab, A project of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, <http://www.niemanlab.org/ngo/>

Development Education for North-South solidarity<sup>6</sup>, identified the dual role of media. On the one hand, media can definitely help make North-South relations more interesting to the general public; on the other hand, they tend to convey a biased image of the South, leading to a negative overall perception of developing countries by people from the North. Based on this argument, emerging NGOs media strategies are also the subject of the potential impact to the international relationships.

Regarding these critical issues, the working paper of European conference, raises some questions: Can media independence be guaranteed when co-operating with NGOs and donors in the coverage of North-South relations? Can the different types of media (written press, radio and TV) play a different role in raising awareness on North-South issues and Development Education<sup>7</sup>? Relying on these facts, emerging NGOs media strategies should be in line to create a better international relationships and recognition.

## **ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES**

“Ethics ... should be built into every program”<sup>8</sup>, ethical issues also pose a major problem. The overuse and abuse of undercover cameras, misrepresentation and payment of money for information are all nettlesome issues that must be dealt with. Such ethical and professional shortcomings affect not only investigative reporting but all of the news media and need to be part of basic journalism education.

For NGOs, it is necessary to practice trust, transparency and credibility for producing successful collaboration with mass media and building up better international relationships.

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<sup>6</sup>Working paper group c, European conference on Awareness-Raising and Development Education for North-South solidarity, Brussels, 18-19-20 May 2005, 1/8, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES, Belgium Dev Corporation

<sup>7</sup> Working paper group c, European conference on Awareness-Raising and Development Education for North-South solidarity, Brussels, 18-19-20 May 2005, 1/8, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES, Belgium Dev Corporation

<sup>8</sup>See Center for International Media Assistance, *Media Assistance: Challenges and Opportunities for the Professional Development of Journalists*, National Endowment for Democracy, July 25, 2007, as in *Global Investigative Journalism: Strategies for Support*, A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance, December 5, 2007, By David E. Kaplan, Investigative Journalist/Media Consultant

## **Initiation phase**

The ‘NGO working group on women and international peace and security’ was formed to encourage the open session and resolution of the UN security council on women, peace and security. The group has since expanded to include: amnesty international, international alert, the women's international league for peace and freedom, the Hague appeal for peace, the women's caucus for gender justice, the international women's tribunal center and the women's commission for Refugee women and children. These non-governmental organizations have worked with UN departments and sympathetic member states, another example of the productive synergy of the democratic diplomacy at work<sup>10</sup>.

## **Initiatives**

A panel discussion organized by International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) during the 46th session of the Commission on the Status of Women on March 7, 2001 in New York, entitled "Women's Media strategies for Peace" was IWTC's first step toward designing a multi-phased and multi-media communications strategy for the promotion of Resolution 1325<sup>11</sup>.

## **Implementation phase<sup>12</sup>**

### **Examples**

“Taking 1325 to the Village,” an initiative of the Association of War Affected Women (Sri Lanka) and integration of 1325 into a “Community Women's Peace building Manual,” developed by the West Africa Network for Peace building, West Africa Peace building Institute.

## **Other outreach tools**

### **Radio**

The West Africa network for peace building (WANEP) produces a “Voices of Women” Radio Program, with stations in Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Senegal.

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<sup>9</sup> NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security, Resolution 1325: Publications available at- <http://womenpeacesecurity.org>

<sup>10</sup><http://womenpeacesecurity.org/media/pdf-NGOWG-OneYearOnReport.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>two years report

<sup>12</sup><http://womenpeacesecurity.org/media/pdf-NGOWG-FourYearsOnReport.pdf>

## Website

The women's security council in Germany has created a website devoted to 1325. The website features the

women's security council 1325 postcard campaign, their "Plan of Action for Accelerating Implementation of SCR 1325," and provides an online discussion forum on 1325. <http://un1325.de/fsr.htm>

## Magazine

FemLINK<sup>13</sup> pacific has produced "fem'TALK 1325: a women and peace community magazine project", supported by UNIFEM pacific.

## Communication and advocacy<sup>14</sup>

Communication and advocacy such as translation campaigns to make SCR 1325 available to local communities.

## Collaboration with Department of Public Information (DPI)

Production of brochure Women, Peace and Security: At a Glance (October 2003).

## Online resources for advocacy and education on SCR 1325

The E-Newsletter: [www.peacewomen.org/news/1325News/1325ENewsindx.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/news/1325News/1325ENewsindx.html): 1325 PowerPoint Presentations and Handouts: at PeaceWomen.org website.

The last five years have seen a marked increase in the level of awareness among policy-makers and personnel in governmental and non-governmental agencies working on peace and security regarding the need to address gender in discussing conflict resolution, peace-building and reconstruction<sup>15</sup>. These initiatives successfully influenced the UN policies through the recommendations for United Nations member states and United Nations entities from women's civil society organization.

<sup>13</sup>FemLINK seeks to provide alternative and additional viewpoints to mainstream media coverage, particularly on issues related to the culture of peace and other issues that are of concern to Fiji women.

<sup>14</sup><http://womenpeacesecurity.org/media/pdf-fiveyearson.pdf>  
*From Local to Global: Making Peace Work for Women*, The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, *Security Council Resolution 1325 – Five Years on Report*

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

## WAYS FORWARD

In the present context of rapidly changing communications environment, including local-global, interactive  
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and transnational flows and networks, NGOs are growing up with new communications opportunities. The emergence of humanitarian resources such as Reuters' AlertNet and the United Nations' ReliefWeb and other web-based services are collating and disseminating accessible, up-to-date information and background on forgotten humanitarian crises around the world<sup>16</sup>. Zhanga and Swartz (2009) articulated an NGO media diplomacy mode, which include values (independence from government, journalistic objectivity and balance, and reader education) and perceived effectiveness (reaching audiences, affecting elite groups and return of investment), leading towards the successful media strategies.

## CONCLUSION

In the multimodal media world, civil society, NGOs and the mass media have to come together with the voices of the public for shaping the better governmental policies and building up stronger international relations. To sustain the organizational development and global network, NGOs need to develop effective media strategies and train journalists (including local correspondents) on reporting developmental issues. NGOs and media organizations can organize such training together. NGOs should maintain relationships with news media, not only to seek coverage of their projects but also to update reporters on different issues and research findings. The time ahead is to create an environment for the successful collaboration of the NGOs, media and civil society. Beginning with this review, a framework for 'sustainable NGOs-media collaboration' can be designed through the critical perspectives on the development journalism, the essential aspects of the monitoring and evaluation on standard and quality of development news and reports, and practical recommendations for NGOs-Media collaboration in the future.

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<sup>16</sup> How the media's codes and rules influence the way NGOs work, By Simon Cottle and David Nolan, *Nieman Journalism Lab* November 16, 2009, Global Policy Forum, <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/advocacy-methods-for-ngos/networking/48459-how-the-medias-codes-and-rules-influence-the-way-ngos-work.html>

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