

# Beyond clickbait and commerce

The ethics, possibilities and challenges  
of not-for-profit media

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# ethical space

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## Looking beyond the traditional media business model

This special issue of *Ethical Space* explores the ethical dilemmas arising in the turbulent journalistic environment created by digital transformation and its impact on the traditional media business model. In that model, advertising revenue supported journalism, but as advertising has migrated online, revenue has fallen, with consequential dramatic reductions in the number of journalists' positions. One statistic illustrates the point: in the United States, the number of journalists employed full-time in newsrooms fell 42 per cent between 1990 and 2014.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, digital transformation has created new opportunities. While old media empires may have shrunk, online publishing platforms are, theoretically at least, open to anyone with an internet connection and basic literacy skills. However, between theory and reality lies a minefield of financial, editorial, ethical and, in some cases, security challenges. The papers in this issue explore some of the most pressing and ubiquitous of these and, in doing so, reflect the lived reality of online journalism in a range of socio-political contexts: mature democracies, established but fragile democracies, and states that are positively hostile to quality journalism.

As these accounts and discussions unfold, it will be seen that one of the oldest, most complex and ultimately unresolved ethical issues that has confronted practitioners of journalism and conscientious media owners for centuries remains at the heart of current dilemmas: how to generate the money needed to produce quality journalism, while retaining editorial independence.

Whether the money comes from commercial media organisations, not-for-profit foundations, quasi-government bodies or anywhere else, editorial independence remains an issue. Are journalists reluctant to bite the hand that feeds? Are they capable of independently critiquing their funding source? Are they free of funders' constraints in deciding what stories to cover and how to cover them?

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Mel Bunce's case study of the role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) in funding 'development journalism' raises all these questions, and more, at the global level. The Gates Foundation requires that its money be spent on journalism that has some kind of assessable impact. Defining journalistic impact is hard enough; measuring it is laden with unresolved methodological challenges. The requirement to show 'impact' could have possible consequences for the story proposals journalists offer when seeking a grant: they may be more likely to pitch stories about micro-level problems on which evidence of progress or impact is easier to adduce, rather than addressing long-term issues that may be objectively more important to the public interest.

The Gates case study shows that the foundation has an advocacy agenda, which the journalistic work it funds is expected to advance. This presents a challenge to conventional notions of journalistic impartiality. Moreover, as Lyn McGaurr's account of a conservation photography expedition shows, advocacy agendas can conflict with one another, and so can the uses to which the journalistic content is put. In the case of the Great Bear Rainforest, conservation photography was initially obtained for the purpose of raising public awareness about a threat to the environment, and non-profit funding was used to achieve it. However, some of the images were later re-purposed to promote tourism in the area, and their original conservation-oriented context was stripped away.

At the local level, Dave Harte reports research into the financing and issues of editorial independence at a newspaper established by a community housing organisation on the outskirts of Birmingham in the UK, and reveals similar questions there. His work also raises the question of 'whose news': is hyperlocal journalism really the 'voice of the people', as some imagine, or do the professional norms of journalism mean that there is an unbridgeable gap between what the community wants to read about itself and what professional journalists produce about it, even when they are employed to provide that local voice? As Harte says, the mantra of the newspaper is to 'tell it like it is', but the question of what 'it' is remains contested.

This question of story ownership is starkly illustrated by Jocelyn Williams's account of how the stories of seven community groups in New Zealand were developed and told as part of a series of joint exercises between tertiary teachers and students on the one hand and the community groups on the other. Degrees of control over the stories varied widely, with one group in particular taking more or less complete ownership and asserting control on their own terms. This illustrates another facet of editorial independence. When the subject of a story takes the story over, where does professional accountability fit in?

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These questions of independence are difficult enough when the operating environment is secure and governed by the rule of law. They become exponentially more difficult for journalists in exile supplying news back into their country of origin, or for journalists in their country of origin writing stories counter to the interests of the regime. Clare Cook writes about the dependency of these journalists on donor funding and the power relationships that develop between these journalists and their donors. She writes that for these journalists, economic necessity creates conflicts between the ideal of independence and the need to pay production costs.

In the UK, there have been calls to further extend charitable status to certain classes of not-for-profit and non-political journalism that provides identifiable public benefit. Judith Townend considers the possible benefits and drawbacks of charitably funding and structuring journalistic operations. On a related theme, Jonathan Heawood, founder and chief executive officer of the new press regulator, IMPRESS, analyses a recent decision to confer charity status on Britain's Independent Press Regulation Trust, which provides financial assistance to IMPRESS.

Finally, Denis Muller gathers together these large themes in a discussion about the overarching ethical issue of conflict of interest, referring to case studies in the US and Australia which illustrate how new and old media alike are making ethical compromises in order to remain financially viable.

This collection of shorter commentaries and longer research papers does not offer a solution to the financial difficulties faced by news organisations old and new, small and big. Many of these models for not-for-profit journalism have their own particular legal and ethical challenges and would only be suitable for a limited type of journalism. Nonetheless, we are optimistic that some of these developing structures offer an opportunity for both existing journalistic operations and new start-ups to free themselves from commercial pressures and help sustain a diverse and stimulating news media environment. At the very least, we hope that the ideas and evidence presented here offer a point of departure for further discussion and research.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/07/newsonomics-the-halving-of-americas-daily-newsrooms/>

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Mel Bunce

## Foundations, philanthropy and international journalism

*News stories about international development and humanitarian crises are expensive to produce and frequently neglected by the mainstream media. This paper examines the private foundations that are stepping in to finance this news and their growing influence over journalism and international news content.*

**Key words: foundations, philanthropy, international news, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, development journalism**

Amid tumbling circulations and declining advertising revenue, private foundations have emerged as a crucial source of funding for public interest news. A recent Foundation Center report (2013: 4) 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. In addition to domestic news, foundations have poured considerable resources into the production of international news and, in particular, stories about development, aid and humanitarian crises that are seen to be commercially unviable.

Today, the largest dedicated providers of international development and humanitarian news are all supported by foundation grants: the *Guardian's* Global Development website is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Alertnet is funded by the Thomson Reuter's Foundation; and IRIN, the world's first humanitarian newswire (which for 20 years was funded by the United Nations), is now an independent entity supported by grants. In addition, numerous foundations offer competitive grants for one-off reporting trips and projects, including: the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, the International Reporting Project, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation, to name a few.

Despite the important role of these foundations, we know very little about their motives, how they operate, or the implications of their funding for journalistic practice. David Conrad (2015) provides a case study of a reporting trip funded by the Pulitzer Center. But as Browne notes, there have not been any systematic content analyses

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of the work produced by foundation-funded journalists (2010: 890). Nor has there been any in-depth ethnographic research exploring whether the logic of the charitable sector (or ‘philanthocapitalism’ as it is sometimes called) may enter into, and potentially alter, the norms of journalistic practice. Feldman (2007) wryly suggests that it would be hard to secure funding for such research.

This paper starts to sketch the ways in which foundations may influence journalism about international development. The first section draws on the emerging research about foundation-funding of domestic journalism in the United States. From this, it infers that foundations may influence:

- 1) the content of development news;
- 2) the objectives of development news, and
- 3) the yardsticks by which the success of development journalism is measured.

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The second section illustrates how these influences play out in practice, by presenting a short case study of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the ways in which the organisation has implicitly and explicitly shaped news about international development.

### **Foundation funding and the content of news**

At the simplest level, foundations may influence the subjects that receive coverage because they fund some news topics and not others. Ramirez (2001), for example, notes there are many grants and funding opportunities in the United States for making news on health, science, and local economic interests, but this support is virtually non-existent for coverage of other issues such as immigration. As a result, the more an outlet relies on foundation initiatives for the cream of its editorial product, the more likely its coverage of other subjects, communities and viewpoints will be hemmed in.

In addition, researchers suggest that foundation funding may result in pressure on journalists to avoid certain topics, or adopt the political positions or interpretative frames of their funders (e.g. Brown 2010; Feldman 2007; Guensburg 2008; Ramirez 2001; Silverstein 2015). Some donors may make their intentions explicit. Michael Bloomberg, for example, is funding news on gun violence with the explicit aim of counteracting what he perceives to be NRA-dominated and sponsored mainstream media. For the most part, however, pressure from funders is likely to be indirect rather than overt. From the seminal work of Breed (1955) onwards, newsroom research has found that journalists internalise and reproduce the values of their employers without explicit instruction; this may be for a number of reasons including respect for managers, and

the desire for career advancement. Asking journalists and editors whether foundation funding influenced their work, Edmonds (2002) found:

Everyone involved emphatically says no, and in one sense they are right. It is extremely rare to find a non-profit 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. But 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.

These cultural ties might prompt journalists to adopt unconsciously the world-views of the funders. Bob Feldman (2007) has researched a number of left wing media groups that accepted funding from liberal foundations, and argues the news content at these outlets moved towards the liberal centre as a result of the associations: they avoid critiquing the activities of their funders, or the wider political economic structures that have allowed their funders to flourish.

### **Foundation funding and journalistic norms**

Foundation funding may also indirectly impact the objectives of journalism, and what reporters are trying to achieve with their work. Traditional journalists place a strong emphasis on the norm of 'objectivity', usually defined as a form of impartial, non-involved witnessing. Foundations, however, may have strategic objectives and seek to *enact change* with the news they fund: to help build communities, fight racism, change beliefs around climate change, encourage parents to vaccinate their children, and so on. One example is the Knight Foundation, which seeks to support participatory media and community cohesion. The organisation often starts by identifying a community's information needs, and working backwards to determine the news they should fund (Lewis 2012: 329).

These projects may well result in worthy and important media content. Interestingly, however, their underlying philosophy is quite distinct from traditional reporting norms, which tend to reject calls to 'achieve' anything within news work, for fear of compromising journalistic impartiality. (Whether impartiality is achievable is another question; but it remains, nonetheless, the goal of most traditional, professional journalists working within international news.)

With regards to development and humanitarian news, many foundations have specific, articulated goals. Some of these sit very comfortably with traditional journalistic norms. The Pulitzer

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Crisis Center, for example, has a grant round that funds traditional, public-interest news content about crises that have been neglected in the mainstream media. Some foundations, however, take a more political or solutions-based approach. For example, there is a current trend among funders to support news that offers a more positive narrative about development – focusing on how to solve problems, the progress that has already been made, and providing audiences with uplifting content. Managing editor of the humanitarian newswire IRIN, Heba Aly (2016) writes that many donors only want to fund development-orientated news ‘when it has an inspiring hero or flashy solutions: the village that bucked the trend or the new mobile app that will solve refugees’ problems’.

### **Moving the yardstick: Foundation funding and the new ‘impact agenda’**

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Finally, foundation funding may shape news work by introducing a new measure of success: ‘impact’. Foundations want to know whether the programmes they fund are making a difference and there has been increasing pressure over the last two decades on grant recipients to evidence their impact (see e.g. Flynn and Hodgkinson 2001). In the media sector, there is a growing consensus that view-counts of news stories do not, in and of themselves, constitute ‘impact’, and that donors want to see proof of news content that influences audiences, sways decision-makers, and may even change the unfolding of crises (Aly 2016).

Tying grant funding to ‘impact’ has a number of implications. These include: incentivising organisations to commit significant resources (from a limited pot) to monitoring impact activity; and incentivising forms of journalism that are more likely to achieve this goal. For example, 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.<sup>1</sup>

More generally, the ‘impact agenda’ may result in an even closer, more symbiotic relationship between journalists and aid/development practitioners. For years, politicians and NGOs have sought to influence the work of foreign correspondents, and through them, gain publicity for charity work during crises: a phenomenon that has long interested, and sometimes troubled, media academics (e.g. Cottle and Nolan 2007; Wright 2016). Under an ‘impact agenda’, journalists are asked to influence these NGOs and political actors in return. News outlets may ask their journalists to expand their professional activities – for example, networking with policy-makers and development specialists; appearing on panels and attending conferences, especially those hosted by elite development bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – with the

goal of creating networks and visibility so that their published work has more influence. The impact agenda effectively places journalists on the same side of the fence as aid and development practitioners: as actors in the development project, rather than witnesses of it.

### **The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and development journalism**

An examination of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) provides preliminary evidence that foundation funding is shaping development news content as well as journalistic practices more generally. The BMGF provides substantial funding to journalists and news organisations, much of which is targeted to reporting on development. This is primarily channelled through large grants to existing media – for example, the development pages of the *Guardian* – and competitive grant rounds for journalists working on development issues. And it is particularly focused on health reporting. For example, supporting the global health beat on National Public Radio (US); a large grant to Harvard University for a Nieman Fellowship in global health reporting; and funding HIV Prevention Reporting Fellowships in sub Saharan Africa. Their giving has, without doubt, increased the visibility of health within development media, particularly of neglected diseases and crises (see Balasegaram et al. 2008).

The BMGF places a premium on impact. Its funding schemes make it explicit that the news should result in change, rather than simply bear witness or disseminate information. One of the foundation's flagship grant schemes is the 'Innovation in Development Reporting' (IDR) Grant Programme. The application page for this grant states: 'Your project must have a goal: it can be very specific ("Get the authorities to change this law") or less so ("Raise awareness around this problem"). We want the projects and stories we support to have an impact, and for this reason it is important for us to know what you are trying to achieve' (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2015). This scheme has funded more than 82 projects to date, with an average grant size of 18,000 euros – the kind of resources that traditional media outlets simply do not have for development reporting. As a result, some of the most sophisticated storytelling about development today reflects the campaign and advocacy objectives of the foundation.

One particular goal of the BMGF is to change the narrative around development, and foster more positive reporting of success stories. In its call for grants under 'Aid is working: Tell the world' (Scott 2012), the foundation explains the need for more optimism: 'We are looking for proposals that help tell stories which "debunk cynical views about the effectiveness of aid and other investments in global development"' (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2012). California-based Link TV has been funded to create a digital video

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library that spotlights progress in global development and health, while ABC received \$1.5 million to travel the world reporting on various health crises and suggesting solutions (Carter 2010).

A number of commentators have expressed concern that journalists receiving funding from the BMGF are not willing to criticise the foundation's work in their reporting (Curtis 2016; Doughton and Heim 2011). This may flow from the cultural ties Edmonds (2002) identifies, or from fears of missing out on funding in the future – a particular challenge for journalists who are freelance, and have precarious employment. It is important to stress that these concerns have not been evidenced at this stage; however, as noted earlier, there has not been any systematic research on the impact of foundation funding on international news content. But BMGF funding clearly does influence news content by creating a *perceived* conflict of interest. Journalists who receive funding from the foundation worry that audiences think they are compromised, and thus feel unable to report on its activities. *Guardian* health editor Sarah Boseley explains the challenges:

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I am shying away not because I will find something bad, but because it will be too good ... I don't want it to look as if I am doing them any favours. ... I only do stories on issues that I'm interested in, and I invariably find the Gates Foundation is putting money into it. Once or twice, I drew myself back from covering them, so it's a disincentive to cover them. It's not a difficulty that I expected to find (quoted in Bristol and Donnelly 2011: 9).<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that Boseley was speaking on behalf of herself and not the *Guardian*. Other journalists at the *Guardian* certainly have been critical of the BMGF (e.g. Birrell 2014) and there has been a high profile 'Keep it in the ground' campaign at the newspaper, which openly pressured the BMGF to divest from fossil fuel.

Nonetheless, any reluctance on behalf of BMGF-funded journalists to critique the foundation is significant, given its enormous power in the development sector. Only ten countries spend more on aid than the BMGF (Brown 2015), and its annual global health expenditure has, at times, been larger than that of the WHO (Birn 2014). Through the sheer size of its grant-making and its active advocacy, the Gates Foundation influences priority-setting in the WHO and beyond (Martens and Seitz 2015: 62). Despite this, the foundation is not subject to the same accountability and scrutiny that aid programmes run by governments are. At present, the foundation is obliged to report only its high-level financial figures to the US government and its programmes are not subject to independent or public evaluation (Curtis 2016: 4).

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## Mel Bunce

Moreover, some of the approaches and solutions proposed by the BMGF are controversial; the organisation is infamous for pursuing biomedical and technological ‘fixes’ to health and development problems, and some researchers have suggested its focus on quick-win solutions – e.g. developing vaccines or disseminating insecticide-treated bed nets – neglects bigger, structural and political obstacles to development, such as weak public health systems (Martens and Seitz 2015: 61). More generally, the preference for technological solutions over those that address systemic social factors may divert attention from issues such as structural inequality, corruption, and human rights abuses (Curtis 2016: 16).

If BMGF-funded journalists are reluctant to critique the foundation, this is particularly significant for a further reason, given the wider lack of resources for development reporting and the limited number of news outlets in a position to provide alternative perspectives. Surveying the media-philanthropy landscape, Tom Paulson writes for the *Humanosphere*:

What I am fairly certain of is that as journalists and news organizations come to depend increasingly on philanthropies like the Gates Foundation for financial support, it is even more important than ever that we stay focused on our main job – arguably, pushing for critical analysis and accountability – and tread carefully when asked to strategically partner with even the most well-intentioned humanitarian in promoting a cause ... or solution.

### Conclusion

Foundations provide a very important source of funding for international development news, which is generally neglected by the market. Even if shortcomings or conflicts of interest can be identified, none of these issues should be regarded as reasons to dismiss foundations as potential sources of funding for journalism which, as Browne writes ‘has never been pure and cannot afford to be choosy’ (2010: 891). However, the increasing role played by this funding does raise important issues that require further research. The urgency of this inquiry is underlined by the fact that foundations and philanthropy are due to play an even greater role in the global development sector in the future, as laid out in 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015, articles 41 and 45).

This paper’s survey of the emerging research on foundation funding of journalism, and preliminary commentary on the BMGF, suggests a number of specific areas for future research. These include: the extent to which the topic priorities of foundations shape the subjects that receive news coverage; whether foundation funding silences investigative and critical journalism; and whether foundation funding is changing the norms and objectives of

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journalists working on the development beat. The close relationship between journalists and development practitioners has important implications for the future of both sectors.

## Notes

1 There is an interesting parallel here with the funding of university research. Commentators believe that the introduction of 'impact' as a funding criterion is instrumentalising research, incentivising some research topics above others, and sucking up considerable resources in monitoring and evaluation (e.g. Martin 2011)

2 This anecdote also illuminates how many layers the BMGF operates on, and just how hard it is to avoid its reach in the development sector. Journalist Sarah Boseley is here quoted in the report: *Taking the temperature: The future of global health reporting* (Bristol and Donnelly 2011). This report is funded by the Kaiser's Global Health Policy Project, which is, in turn, supported by the BMGF. Put another way, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation does development work. It funds the journalists who write about its development work. And it funds the researchers who analyse the journalists who write about their development work

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### **Note on the contributor**

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DISCUSSION  
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## The photography of debate and desire: Images, environment and the public sphere

*Photography has long been a powerful tool of environmental communication and debate. In their efforts to promote environmental issues, landscape and wildlife photographers committed to conservation may provide images to established environmental non-government organisations (ENGOS), appear in activist documentaries, found their own ENGOS, curate websites and social media pages, run galleries or publish books. Yet the same photographs and photography events that feature in activist media may also appear in the editorial sections of commercial newspapers and magazines, and in public relations and advertising for consumer goods. This paper draws on interviews with photographers and ENGO spokespeople in North America to consider the implications for the public sphere of image events that combine activist media and mainstream media to promote environmental concern.*

**Key words:** image event, public screen, public sphere, environmental movements, Great Bear Rainforest

### Introduction

Contemporary anxieties about the role of the media in public debate include unease about the concentration of ownership (Barnett and Townend 2015) and concern that rampant spectacle is 'the ultimate expression of alienation and fetishization' (Igoe 2010; c.f. DeLuca 1999; DeLuca and Peeples 2002; DeLuca et al. 2011; McKee 2005). Shrinking newspaper and magazine workforces, a trend towards soft journalism, and easy access to online photographs distributed by image banks or produced by citizen journalists have contributed to retrenchment of many staff photographers (see Jurkowitz 2014 for United States statistics) and reduced opportunities for in-depth photo assignments in mainstream media (Grayson 2014). Despite innumerable channels for dissemination offered by the internet, professional photographers wishing to direct their practice towards progressive ends can find it difficult to fund the necessary field trips, gain access to distant or restricted sites, and reach a wide audience without the backing of mainstream media (Grayson

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2014). One response has been to partner with non-government organisations (Grayson 2014; Myers 2008) – an image-hungry sector that *Popular Photography* magazine advises its readers is the eighth largest economy in the world, worth more than US\$1 trillion a year (Myers 2008).

The position of landscape and wildlife photographers is not entirely congruent with that of other photographers made vulnerable by disruptions to the business models of corporate media. The subjects and attractiveness of their images mean they may be well placed to take advantage of any editorial preference for the soft commercial genres of travel and lifestyle journalism. It is also noteworthy that working closely with ENGOs is nothing new for conservation photographers – many have been doing it for decades (Mittermeier 2005), albeit that ENGOs often expect them to donate their time and supply images free of charge (ibid). Conservation photographers are defined as nature photographers who go beyond ‘documenting nature or creating works of art’ to make images that help ‘protect the subject they depict’:

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Conservation photography showcases both the vanishing beauty of our planet and its disappearing spirit, and it puts the image ‘to work’. It is the pictorial voice used by many conservation organizations to further their messages (ibid: 8).

In addition to working with ENGOs, photographers committed to conservation usually conduct their own distribution via personal websites and social media, books, workshops, presentations and exhibitions (Seelig 2014). Some run their own ENGOs. Nevertheless, professional nature photographers are likely to make a portion of the income they derive from their images by licensing them to mainstream media, other corporations or government agencies. Many conservation photographers believe that distributing their work through multiple outlets – mainstream media as well as ENGO and personal channels – increases the likelihood their images will reach both environmentally conscious and uncommitted audiences (see, for example, ibid).

Although some conservation photography also documents environmental damage (ibid; Peeples 2011), arresting images of wildlife and unspoiled nature continue to play an important part in ENGO marketing and mobilisation (Schwarz 2013). But there are many examples of the visual discourse of environmental concern and action being appropriated by commercial interests (Hansen and Machin 2008; Doyle 2007; Linder 2006). An attractive image of nature that functions well as activism can also be an effective advertisement for tourism (see Urry and Larsen 2011) or – abstracted and decontextualised – an array of other brands and commodities (see Hansen and Machin 2008; Doyle 2007; Linder 2006). On the one hand, conservation photographers who partner with ENGOs

travel to sites of environmental risk or conflict they might otherwise have been unable to visit, ensuring a flow of issue-related images for distribution in not-for-profit and mainstream media. On the other hand, subsequent distribution and associated processes of post-production may see images stripped of their political charge and re-purposed in ways that contribute to consumerism.

Hansen and Machin (2008: 779) highlight the value of 'representations that locate and connect ... issues in actual concrete processes such as global capitalism and consumerism'. One tactic conservation photographers may use to attract mainstream distribution for photographs of this kind is the image event. These actions are forms of activism deliberately designed and staged 'to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience' (Johnson 2007: 2). They put alternative or activist media to use in an attempt to engage, disrupt or penetrate mainstream media or in other ways make social movement concerns into highly charged issues to which decision-makers will feel compelled to respond (DeLuca 1999). The case study I present in this paper unpacks some of the possible implications of image events for the public sphere and ENGOs by examining a Rapid Assessment Visual Expedition (RAVE) organised by the non-profit International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP) in the Great Bear Rainforest of British Columbia, Canada, in September 2010, in association with the Gitga'at First Nations, ENGO Pacific Wild, the National Geographic Society and EP Films, among other partners. The RAVE can be described as an image event because the visual novelty of many famous conservation photographers working together in one wild and beautiful place at one time to promote an environmental issue was intended to attract mainstream media coverage and provide opportunities for participants' images to be widely disseminated. The event featured in an allied documentary that screened internationally, a travelling exhibition, and in mainstream media such as the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) television programme *Nightline* and the online news site of the *Guardian*.

The Great Bear Rainforest RAVE was also covered by participatory journalism outlets such as the *Commonsense Canadian* and the *Tyee*. Participatory journalism 'adopts the values and practices of mainstream news production and public opinion to cover issues, concerns, perspectives and communities that are ordinarily sidelined in mainstream press' (Lievrouw 2011: 215). It is one of five genres Lievrouw identifies as alternative or activist new media. The other four are culture jamming, alternative computing, mediated mobilisation and commons knowledge. The definition of 'activist media' I adopt in this paper combines aspects of the last two of these genres. When I refer to 'activist media', I am describing digital and non-digital media products created, curated, packaged

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and/or distributed by ENGOs to mobilise members and publics and often also to challenge institutional knowledge. This material may reach its primary audience via an ENGO's websites or social media. Simultaneously or alternatively, however, it may find its way into participatory or mainstream media as a result of traditional news investigation or ENGO public relations, or through direct contribution by an ENGO activist (for example, opinion pieces, or material uploaded to a participatory media site). In mainstream media it might also take the form of overt advocacy journalism (see Fisher 2015). When I write of mainstream media in this paper, I am referring primarily to commercial digital or non-digital mass media, while also recognising that a non-profit media organisation may be high-profile, mainstream and mass media; social media has been described as 'many-to-many broadcasting' (DeLuca et al. 2011: 149); and a media worker who publishes in mainstream outlets may also be an activist or advocate (McGaurr 2015).

In the following sections I discuss the roles of images, spectacle, NGOs, desire and publicity in the public sphere, and introduce the concepts of the public screen (DeLuca and Peeples 2002; DeLuca et al. 2011) and re-mediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999). After describing my qualitative approach, I then present and discuss my case study. My examination of the Great Bear Rainforest RAVE – in particular image re-mediation, which is defined as 'the representation of one medium in another' (ibid: 45) – reveals some of the benefits and risks for the public sphere and ENGOs of combining activist and mainstream media in environmental campaigns. In my case study, a partnership with the National Geographic Society helped the iLCP and other ENGOs to gain publicity in mainstream media for themselves, the environmental issues they supported, and the images they curated on their own websites. However, because the narrative of an iLCP photographer on assignment for *National Geographic* was integral to the image event, re-mediation resulted not only in opportunities for raising awareness of the issue and challenging institutional knowledge but also, on occasion, decontextualisation in the interests of sometimes misaligned consumerism.

### **Images in the public sphere**

The public sphere, as conceived of by Jürgen Habermas (1989), is a metaphorical space in which individuals come together in person as equals to engage in rational-critical debate about their common affairs. Finnegan and Kang (2004: 380) posit that, in *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas demonstrates 'gross iconoclasm' – 'a blunt, general critique that argues that images are dangerous to the practice of healthy public communication', although they also find that in his later work he assigns 'appropriate' forms of visibility such as bourgeois art a role in rescuing the public sphere from 'the feudalizing force of

images' (2004: 387). One challenge to Habermas's iconoclasm is the metaphor of the public screen (DeLuca and Peebles 2002; DeLuca et al. 2011), which encompasses news, entertainment, advertising and public relations. In advancing the notion of the public screen, DeLuca et al. (2011) contend that today 'most, and the most important, public discussions take place via "'screens" – televisions, computers, smartphones, iPods, cinemas, the front page of newspapers' (DeLuca et al. 2011: 145), through dissemination rather than in face-to-face encounters or dialogue. Bolter and Grusin's (1995) discussion of re-mediation and hypermediacy is important to DeLuca et al.'s (2011) thesis, but as the idea of 'transparent immediacy' is also relevant to this paper, I will briefly explain all three concepts here.

*Transparent immediacy* is a quality of those media that attempt to 'come as close as possible to our everyday visual experience' (Bolter and Grusin 1995: 22). One example is photographs, which to varying degrees are 'naturalized' by their reproduction of some of the density of detail we see when viewing the world unmediated (Hansen and Machin 2008: 787). *Re-mediation* represents one medium in another. Sometimes an invisible re-purposing is attempted, as when computer games re-mediate cinema in interactive films; elsewhere, multiple media are clearly evident, as when photographic stills appear in videos (Bolter and Grusin 1995). *Hypermediacy* is a quality of the windowed screens of computers. Here, windows are co-present or accessed successively by the user when he or she clicks the mouse. Via this interactivity between the user and the technology, hypermediacy self-consciously draws attention to the fact of mediation itself. For DeLuca, et al. (2011: 150), in the 'landscapes of public screens the feel of images constitutes the real'; moreover, although words are still important, images are not 'subsumable to language' but are events in themselves. In these authors' view, amid distraction, cacophony and, in many cases, private ownership, the public screen still offers important opportunities for activists to engage the public and hold 'corporations and states accountable' (DeLuca et al. 2011: 149).

Hariman and Lucaites (2003: 36) consider as iconic those images that not only contribute to public debate but, through 'extended circulation and appropriation over time', may also help constitute public identity: 'If photojournalistic images can maintain a vital relationship among strangers,' they argue, 'they will provide an essential resource for constituting a mass media audience as a public' (Hariman and Lucaites 2003: 36). For DeLuca et al. (2011: 147), an 'essentialized public is not corrupted by the images of public screens but is called into being by the multiple imagistic discourses of public screens'. Hariman and Lucaites (2003: 35) suggest iconic images function for certain individuals as 'powerful emotional and intentional resource[s] for animating moral deliberation and

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democratic dissent', while DeLuca and his colleagues (2011) believe scholars should analyse the public screen's many affordances for activists without taking a moral stance towards its distractions and spectacle.

### **Images of nature and desire**

Non-government organisations use images to arouse in the public a desire to behave charitably (Davison 2007) and a desire to protect (Mittermeier 2005). However, scholars sometimes explain the role of nature photography in promoting conservation as marketing that sells wilderness as desirable for imaginative or embodied consumption by elites (Franklin 2006). Visual strategies aimed at cultivating public support for the preservation of natural places have been theorised as 'spectacular accumulation' hinging on 'the mediation of relationships by images ... embedded in the globally expanding consumer culture of late market capitalism' (Igoe 2010: 378). Elsewhere, images of nature are critiqued for their anthropocentric gaze. In an analysis of photographs of Africa in *National Geographic*, *National Geographic Traveler* and *National Geographic Adventure*, for example, Todd finds a consumption-oriented tourist aesthetic at odds with conceptions of photojournalism as witness (Todd 2010). In considering the role of images in the public sphere, it is necessary to be cognisant of such concerns. The interests of ENGO and commercial media will clash if the desire for harmony with nature cultivated by conservation photography and image events deployed by ENGOs is turned to the advantage of corporations in ways that depoliticise the issues in question and promote misaligned consumption (see Linder 2006; Hansen and Machin 2008).

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### **NGOs, publicity and the public sphere**

In his theorisation of rational-critical debate devoid of domination and leading to consensus, Habermas's metaphorical public sphere is utopian not only because it cannot easily accommodate spectacle but also, in Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) view, because it leaves little space for context or conflict (see also Deluca and Peeples 2002; Deluca et al. 2011). When public debate is competitive rather than co-operative, Habermas's distinction between communicative and strategic action breaks down (Knight 2010: 180). Dissenting voices sometimes find they, too, must 'conform to promotional logic' (ibid: 178) in order to achieve their goals. One form of strategic promotional action identified by Knight is branding. The brands of ENGOs and celebrities, like those of corporations and commodities, become a means to legitimacy but also ubiquitous cross-promotion that can sometimes make it hard to tell the difference between 'what is being promoted and what is doing the promoting' (ibid: 175). When the credibility of voices takes precedence over the evaluation of arguments, ethical behaviour can become one measure of legitimacy. As Knight observes:

The successfulness of strategic action rests on ethical as well as legal legitimacy, and this is secured communicatively within the boundaries of civil society whose problems, issues, and disagreements resonate throughout the public sphere (ibid: 180).

There are many challenges to ENGO brands – and, by extension, the brands of celebrated environmentalists and conservation photographers who partner with them. Perceived or actual conflicts of interest can be damaging, as can any failure to meet espoused ethical standards. It can also sometimes be difficult to manage public perceptions of efforts to protect particular areas if conservation actually or apparently disadvantages residents or traditional owners (see Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe 2010). Particular photographs and the uses to which they are put can also come under scrutiny. For example, scholars or Indigenous groups may question the very notion of untrammelled wilderness, as depicted in some ENGO images of the sublime (Cronon 1998). And among the general public, there may be scepticism about whether or not images have been digitally manipulated to the point of misrepresentation (Schwarz 2013). Such concerns may arise in part from understandings of ENGO media as public relations rather than journalism (see Muller 2015), even though the organisations might tender photographs as unimpeachable evidence.

### **Approach**

This study uses the qualitative method of case study to generate ‘concrete, practical and context-driven knowledge’ (Flyvbjerg 2001: 70) about the production, circulation and re-mediation of an image event. Analyses of photographs often disregard the influence that cultural and economic pressures on production processes can have on the meaning of a published image (Grayson 2013, 2014). Yet many people and institutions in addition to the photographer can influence a published image or written text and its meanings (Becker 2008; Cottle 2000; Schwarz 2013). It is my hope that the research presented in this paper will go a small way towards adding to our collective understanding of the ‘different degrees of power and very different communicative resources’ (Hansen 2011: 21) at the disposal of activist and mainstream media.

My case study draws on six in-depth interviews with present or former ENGO actors, photographers and a tourism operator. Hansen and Machin (2013: 45) recommend in-depth interviews as an academic method for obtaining ‘personal accounts of behaviours, opinions, and experiences’. Such interviews are usually theme-based but open-ended, which means they can inquire into new information that emerges during the interview and open up additional areas of inquiry for subsequent interviews with other participants (Hansen and Machin 2013). Before, during and after

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recording the interviews, I engaged in an iterative examination of photographs, videos, web pages, social media, other public relations and journalism, 'gradually allowing the case narrative to unfold from the diverse, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that people, documents, and other evidence tell' (Flyvbjerg 2001: 86). Previous research has used image events as case studies of movement-building by ENGOs (Sprain et al. 2011), and to investigate 'how environmental narratives are realised visually' (Schwarz 2013: 170). My own study is concerned with understanding the public sphere issues raised by re-mediation, and ethical challenges for ENGOs immersed in a public screen where image events intended to hold corporations and governments to account must compete with the spectacle of advertising and command space amid 'the ceaseless circulation of jarring juxtapositions' (DeLuca et al. 2011: 152).

The Great Bear Rainforest RAVE is a useful case for this purpose because its partners, participants and outputs spanned activist media, mainstream media and multiple genres, and its objective was to 'blow the story as far and wide as we could' (Mittermeier, Cristina, personal communication, 8 July 2015). Interviewees were chosen to bring a range of perspectives to the study – those of ENGOs, photographers and tourism operators (ecotourism being an important Indigenous business that has benefited from the protection of the Great Bear Rainforest's habitat and wildlife). Details are provided in the case study and in Note 1 at the end of the paper.<sup>1</sup>

### **Case study**

The Great Bear Rainforest, formerly known as the Mid Coast Timber Supply Area, is a vast region of temperate rainforest on the coast of British Columbia. Approximately half of the 35,000 people who live in its 6.4 million hectares are First Nations. The forest and its waterways are also home to salmon, whales, eagles, wolves, grizzly bears, black bears and a small number of black bears with a genetic trait that gives them a white coat, now known by their First Nations name of spirit bears. In the mid-1990s the forest became the site of contestation over logging and trophy-hunting. Environmental groups, First Nations people, corporations and governments became embroiled in the disputes, but by 'branding the region the "Great Bear Rainforest," the ENGOs successfully used endemic species to raise the region's profile, particularly outside Canada' (Affolderbach 2011).

The forestry dispute was brought to partial resolution in 2006, when a proportion of the area was protected and the spirit bear became British Columbia's official provincial symbol, but the same year energy company Enbridge announced plans to build the Northern Gateway Pipeline to transport what ENGOs describe as the world's dirtiest oil from Alberta to British Columbia. The oil would then

be shipped through the channels of the Great Bear Rainforest en route to markets in Asia, with the attendant risk of environmentally devastating spills. Despite the efforts of ENGO Pacific Wild to prevent the project proceeding, in 2010 Enbridge announced it would submit formal plans for approval. In a 2013 slide-show presentation for *National Geographic*, photographer Paul Nicklen recalled that he met First Nations spirit bear guide Marven Robinson when he (Nicklen) was visiting the Great Bear Rainforest prior to the RAVE and Robinson asked him to help the Gitga'at people of Hartley Bay prevent the pipeline. Pacific Wild director McAllister said in our interview that he also asked Nicklen for advice on preventing the pipeline (McAllister, Ian, personal communication, 17 June 2015). These encounters led to two outcomes: Nicklen secured the backing of *National Geographic* to do a story on spirit bears; and at Nicklen's suggestion McAllister flew to the 9th World Wilderness Congress in Merida, Mexico, which iLCP founder and inaugural president Cristina Mittermeier was attending, and gave a presentation about his concerns (ibid), leading to an agreement between Pacific Wild and iLCP to collaborate on a Great Bear Rainforest RAVE.

The United States based iLCP was established by Mittermeier in 2005. In 2015 the organisation was managed by Alexandra Garcia and frames itself on its website (iLCP 2015a) as creating opportunities for photography that gives the kind of context to environmental debates that Hansen and Machin (2008) consider essential to establishing links between specific issues and concrete processes of capitalism. The organisation also promotes ethical photography (Garcia, Alexandra, personal communication, 26 May 2015). Its code of practice (iLCP 2015d) includes responsible behaviour in the field and honesty in captioning practices. If images by iLCP Fellows are manipulated, the manipulation must be non-deceptive or 'fully disclosed to the end user' (iLCP 2015d). The organisation's stated principles are integrity (producing work that is 'authentic, accurate and honest'), professionalism and respect for human and wild subjects (iLCP 2015d). It also seeks to 'educate the community as a whole about the value of imagery' (Garcia, Alexandra, personal communication, 26 May 2015):

...if non-profit organisations want to be able to get consistent access to high quality imagery without having to go and search the internet and go through ten million images before they find a really good one that they can use that has the proper rights, that is legitimate, that's not stolen, that they can actually use and print, photographers have to be able to make a living.

In September 2010, nine iLCP photographers, including Mittermeier and McAllister, and several filmmakers, joined Nicklen – then also an iLCP Fellow – in the Great Bear Rainforest. The photographers

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spent two weeks collecting images and themselves being filmed for a documentary called *Spoil* (Jennings 2011), directed by filmmaker Trip Jennings, a 2007 'National Geographic Adventurer of the Year Honoree' (Balance Media n.d.). In order to capture photographs of the spirit bear in an area remote from the places where tourists generally go to see them, Nicklen ended up being in the forest for longer than the period of the RAVE.

Credibility and fame were features of the discourse of interviewees recalling the event, but individuals attributed those qualities to different elements. McAllister framed the iLCP and the professionals it brought together as the authorities (personal communication, 17 June 2015). For the managing director of Spirit Bear Lodge – a high-end tourism experience owned by the Kitasoo/Xai'xais First Nation – *National Geographic's* participation was important because its cover story (see below) contributed to a rising tide of government, commercial and activist publicity for the bear that attracted visitors (McGrady, Tim, personal communication, 21 June 2015). For Mittermeier, the spirit bear itself was the 'peg for the whole campaign', reflecting her faith in the power of 'flagship' animals to mobilise support for conservation<sup>2</sup> (personal communication, 8 July 2015). In the documentary *Spoil*, Marvin Robinson explained that he considered the animal crucial to his people's efforts to prevent the pipeline when he described it as 'the icon of this whole pipeline issue ... like an exclamation mark, you know, we've got to get this shot' (Robinson in Jennings 2011).

Inextricably bound up with Nicklen's search for the spirit bear, in the documentary of the RAVE *National Geographic's* participation was a hook for the more complex information about the risks associated with the pipeline, the interests of the ecosystem and the power dynamics between Enbridge and the First Nations people. Although at the time of the RAVE *National Geographic* magazine was still non-profit,<sup>3</sup> it was nevertheless a product of mass culture (see Lutz and Collins 1993) – a powerful, and powerfully branded, mainstream mass-media institution. In a consummate demonstration of cross-promotion for the publication, Nicklen pointed out in *Spoil* and subsequent slideshow presentations that 'with that article on spirit bears there's a chance to reach 40 million people all around the world and to let people know what's at stake in this part of the world' (Nicklen in Jennings 2011).

The extent to which the RAVE was a highly staged, highly strategised media event was evident in Mittermeier's description of the way she sought to manage and juggle collaborative and invited media:

By that time I understood that we needed *National Geographic* – of course it's great – but we also brought with us a news team from ABC News. So I had been working with this news team.

They were a pain in the neck to work with because they wanted assurances that they were going to see a spirit bear and I lied and I said: Of course you're going to see it – it's very easy to see. And they came and miraculously they saw the bear. And they played it on international news in the United States. But we also brought a movie team – a filmmaker team – Trip Jennings. ... So the filmmakers came and we raised the money for them to produce *Spoil*. And so *Spoil* became the documentary that was attached to the RAVE. And so it was not just the *National Geographic* magazine. We had a press conference and we had about 10 conservation partners in the US and Canada. We wanted to blow the story as far and wide as we could. And we did (Mittermeier, Cristina, personal communication, 8 July 2015).

Mittermeier's faith in the mainstream media appeal of the spirit bear was borne out by the six-minute *Nightline* video story, in which journalist David Wright interviewed Mittermeier, McAllister and Nicklen but also conducted his own quest for the animal, stressing the isolation of the area by pointing out that there were no roads or landing strips. In so doing, Wright's encounter with the spirit bear pre-empted Nicklen's own success in photographing the animal, suggesting a degree of competition may have contributed to ABC's decision to cover the RAVE. Importantly, ABC also gave Mittermeier space to expound her thesis that conservation photography makes a valid and important contribution to the public sphere: 'Photography doesn't require translation. It actually has a power to captivate audiences. And we can convene important conversations around these images' (Mittermeier cited in Wright n.d.).

Of the 86 photographs from the RAVE that appear in a slideshow on the iLCP's website, only seven feature the spirit bear (iLCPb), and these are by McAllister and Wendy Shattil. Mittermeier's photographs of First Nations' people and their intimate connection with the threatened waterways and land, share the screen(s) with her RAVE collaborators' photographs of other terrestrial and marine life, protests against the pipeline, landscapes and aerial views, as well as a shot of wolves by Robinson. In the context of the hypermediacy of the iLCP website, with its brief textual explanations of the problem and solution, this combination of images builds an environmental narrative that is complex, comprehensible and emotionally engaging. When a varied selection of the RAVE photographs was reproduced on the *Guardian's* website in November 2010 in a long scroll accompanied by detailed captions and links to the iLCP and Pacific Wild websites, the narrative of the RAVE rather than the search for the spirit bear was the successful hook that made space for the crucial story of the rainforest, the First Nations and the Enbridge threat. In fact, no images of spirit bears appeared in the *Guardian* feature.

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Although photographs of spirit bears published in McAllister's books and on Pacific Wild's website had been instrumental in raising awareness of the Great Bear Rainforest during the earlier campaigns to stop logging, in *Spoil* he was not shown locating and photographing a spirit bear. Instead, the climax of the documentary was Nicklen's success, with the expert guidance of traditional custodian Robinson, following weeks of unrewarded patience and physical discomfort. The documentary ended with a call to action, as viewers were invited to visit Pacific Wild's website and also to switch on their phones and ring the Canadian Prime Minister, whose number appeared on the screen as the credits rolled. Yet when I watched *Spoil* on the internet, the stills that interspersed the video coverage of Nicklen finding and photographing the spirit bear were by other RAVE photographers. For Nicklen's photographs, I was directed to *National Geographic* magazine.

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Nicklen's photo essay of the spirit bear made the cover of *National Geographic* in August 2011 (Barcott 2011a), but the pipeline debate and images by the other RAVE photographers were consigned to a separate, subsequent article entitled 'Pipeline through paradise' (Barcott 2011b). Only in the 'Editor's Note' (Johns 2011) at the front of the issue was there any explicit reference to threats to the bear posed by the pipeline. Before and after the *National Geographic* articles were published, Nicklen's photographs of the spirit bear also appeared in recorded slide-show presentations published online that referred to threats from the pipeline (Nicklen 2011; Nicklen 2013). In a talk he gave as part of the *National Geographic* 'Live!' series, for example, he referred to the oil from Alberta as 'bitumen, their oil, their dirty crude' (Nicklen 2013) and described himself as helping Marven Robinson and the Gitga'at 'bring attention to this cause of trying to keep oil tankers out of ... such a beautiful pristine habitat' by getting pictures of 'this really rare, hard-to-find, elusive white bear' (ibid). At the end of the talk, he drew attention to the work of the iLCP, acknowledged that Mittermeier was by then his girlfriend and told the audience he and Mittermeier needed their help to protect the rainforest (ibid). Neither McAllister nor Pacific Wild was mentioned. A video similar to the footage of Nicklen's quest in *Spoil* also appeared on the *National Geographic* website (*National Geographic* 2011), again re-mediating those 'close, intimate portraits' of the spirit bear – the kind of photographs Nicklen had said in *Spoil* were necessary 'to bring people into my story' (Nicklen in Jennings 2011).

Despite Mittermeier's contention that images do not require translation, linguistic anchorage was an important component of the products of the Great Bear Rainforest RAVE that I examined. Commenting on the experience of working with the iLCP and *National Geographic* in 2010, McAllister said he considered the RAVE a success and 'a stepping stone to a lot more other projects

and articles and documentaries' (personal communication, 17 June 2015). Yet although he felt photographs that, in his words, 'tell true stories' were 'the foundation of these campaigns', he also subsequently came to believe that images would not succeed in making a difference without engaging stories to carry them:

...it's not actually the imagery, because so often we just try to work so hard just to get it a little bit better or just to do a shot a little bit better and film or whatever, but in the absence of a real story, you know, it doesn't matter how great the material is (ibid).

The form and extent of access to sensitive natural places also emerged as a theme in this study. McAllister was positive about the contribution tourism had made to publicising threats to the rainforest and providing income for First Nations people but said he would be concerned if 'large industrial style tourism' arose as a result of the spirit bear's increased popularity (ibid). Simon Jackson, the founder of the former Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, believed the spirit bear had sometimes been used as a 'figurehead' for campaigns and then forgotten (personal communication, 24 April 2015). He was in favour of more egalitarian tourism access to bears in order to build relationships between people and the environment and to further promote conservation, as long as the rainforest could simultaneously be maintained as a 'large, roadless, interconnected wilderness, which is the only way to conserve large carnivores anywhere in the world' (ibid). Garcia, for her part, articulated the iLCP's appreciation of the centrality of issues of access to environmental debate more generally, and the complexity of discriminating among competing demands:

What it fundamentally comes down to is human activity and access ... fundamentally this is what all these issues come down to is access. How much access is appropriate? How much access for the local people, how much access for people coming in from the outside, for industry, for wildlife and conservation? It's about balancing all these measures of access and everybody's interests in achieving access.

It is noteworthy, then, that in addition to instances of re-mediation that explicitly anchored Nicklen's spirit bear photographs to the issue of the Northern Gateway Pipeline there were others in which they were decontextualised for the purposes of promoting commercial consumption or access to the rainforest. For example, one of Nicklen's spirit bear images later became the hero shot for an online tourism article about the Great Bear Rainforest (Kennedy n.d.) produced by *National Geographic* in 2014 in partnership with the Canadian Tourism Commission – an article that did not refer to the pipeline dispute, although generically worded hyperlinks brought

up the article 'Pipeline through paradise' and the accompanying map, which included the tanker routes. And in April 2015, Nicklen retold the story of his spirit bear adventures as part of a 'Keep it wild' promotion for Toyota 4Runner. On this occasion the RAVE and Marven Robinson were absent from his commentary, and instead of describing himself as cruising along the river in the forest by boat as he had elsewhere, he spoke of driving 'through-towards' the forest in his 4 by 4 (Toyota 2015). Here, the kind of intimate stills that had formerly been deployed to promote a desire to protect the Great Bear Rainforest from oil tankers were deployed to promote the desire for a car that runs on fossil fuels, in marketing that coincidentally appeared to advocate vehicular access to or through a sensitive environment that had been described in RAVE media products and coverage as roadless. The video was supported by a post on an Instagram account in Nicklen's name that endorsed the project and alluded to his own conservation endeavours and reputation as an adventurer by including a play on the 'Keep it wild' slogan (paulnicklen 2015).

When a new Canadian government announced late in 2015 that it would institute a moratorium on tanker traffic on the Great Bear Rainforest coast, both Pacific Wild and iLCP claimed it as an organisational accomplishment (iLCP 2015c; McAllister 2015). In early 2016 the most recent agreement in the Great Bear Rainforest forestry negotiations was announced. In an online CBC News article featuring a spirit bear image by McAllister, a Greenpeace Canada spokesperson described it as a 'gift to the world' (Brooks in Morrow 2015). However, McAllister and Pacific Wild remain concerned about a range of environmental issues.

### **Discussion**

The swirl of publicity that arises from the interplay of journalism, public relations and marketing in the promotional public sphere (Knight 2010) and on the public screen creates the conditions for images and their makers to be deployed in the interests of capital as well as environment. By endorsing and promoting the brands of its Fellows, the iLCP is better positioned to deploy their credibility and, in some cases, their celebrity to attract mainstream media to environmental issues but also, perhaps, to argue that ENGOs should pay photographers for their services. ENGOs value the evidentiary qualities associated with transparent immediacy but they often also appreciate the publicity value of celebrity. Being seen to work with environmental organisations in turn adds to the credibility of conservation photographers' brands for some types of corporate endorsement. In 2015, for example, an article on United States photography blog PetaPixel advocated celebrity photographer endorsement of anything 'from credit cards to cars' (Murabayashi 2015):

...forget conflict of interest concerns. The real trend is that social media has enabled direct publishing. Photographers are finally able to build the enormous audiences they deserve without a middleman publisher, and brands are noticing. Hopefully, this is just the beginning...

Lievrouw (2011: 4) theorises that re-mediation (of 'forms and structures of communication relationships' as well as media content) combined with the reconfiguration of new media technology allows activists to 'blur the boundaries between interpersonal interaction and mass communication' in ways that are strategically advantageous. DeLuca et al. (2011) are, if anything, even more positive about the potential of activist media than Lievrouw, writing of the opportunities image events on public screens present for activists to 'call into being publics that transgress ... the fences of corporations [to] produce changes that exceed all hopes' (ibid: 157). The case study presented in this paper demonstrates that ENGOs are capable of coordinating their own activist media relatively seamlessly with mainstream media to obtain publicity for their organisations and raise awareness of environmental issues. Photographs of wildlife are convenient and popular forms of digital content, ideally suited to distribution on websites, blogs and social media (see McGaurr 2015). Following Hariman and Lucaites (2003), it is possible to theorise that by generating re-mediation of photographs in online videos, television and documentaries using multiple narratives to raise the status of photography, the iLCP and Pacific Wild created moments of stillness that functioned as opportunities for democratic deliberation amid an otherwise relentless flood of images on the public screen.

However, this study has also shown how re-mediation can undercut the transparent immediacy of photography, as when Nicklen repeatedly reasserted the primacy of the photographer in videos and slideshows. A powerful expression of this occurred when his images of spirit bears were stripped of all vestiges of the issue that gave rise to their production during their use in the Toyota video. Although Mittermeier and Nicklen now run their own ENGO and Nicklen is no longer an iLCP Fellow, he is prominently associated with the Great Bear Rainforest RAVE on the organisation's website. The decontextualisation of his story and spirit bear images to facilitate Toyota's appropriation of the discourse of environmental protection via its 'Keep it wild' slogan diminishes the communicative legacy of the RAVE. More broadly, it suggests there can sometimes be tension between ENGO values and the 'promotional logic' (Knight 2010: 178) of re-mediation on the public screen.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this study I draw on interviews I conducted in 2015 with the founder and former president of the iLCP, photographer Cristina Mittermeier; iLCP executive director

Alexandra Garcia, iLCP communications coordinator Gaston Lacombe; co-founder and executive director of Pacific Wild, photographer Ian McAllister; the manager of Spirit Bear Lodge, Tim McGrady, and the founder of the former Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, Simon Jackson. The Spirit Bear Youth Coalition brought the spirit bear to fame internationally at the turn of the century. At 17 Jackson was praised by *Time* magazine (2000) as a conservation hero and in 2004 was the subject of a feature film about his work to save the habitat of the Great Bear Rainforest. Mittermeier and McAllister were among the photographers who participated in the image event. Three of the interviews were held by phone, two were recorded face-to-face at the iLCP headquarters in Washington and one was recorded face-to-face during my own field research in the Great Bear Rainforest. Photographer Paul Nicklen was unavailable to be interviewed. Funded by the University of Tasmania's Institute for the Study of Social Change, my travel to North America was part of a larger pilot study I am conducting to compare tourism communication and environmental debate in Australia and Canada

<sup>2</sup> Mittermeier was influenced by the views of her former husband, primatologist Russell Mittermeier, who is a strong proponent of the ability of 'flagship species' – 'charismatic megavertebrates' – to convey 'the entire issue of conservation to the public' (Mittermeier 1988: 145) (Mittermeier, Cristina, personal communication, 8 July 2015)

<sup>3</sup> In 2015 The National Geographic Society and 21st Century Fox entered into a joint venture by which *National Geographic* magazine lost its non-profit status (Gajanan 2015)

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### Note on the contributor

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## **‘Tell it like it is’: The role of community not-for-profit media in regeneration and reputational change**

*Castle Vale is an edge-of-city, 1960s-built, housing estate in Birmingham that has historically suffered from a poor reputation for crime and social problems. A regeneration initiative in the 1990s sought to address this and community media (consisting of a radio station, newspaper and news website) were funded on a not-for-profit basis to help improve the estate’s reputation. Whilst much research has focused on the civic value of this type of ‘hyperlocal’ media, the outputs of the media in Castle Vale have been contested by citizens. This case study, which draws on interviews and workshops undertaken with media practitioners and citizens, reveals the ways in which assumptions about the democratising functions of such media come up against the tensions over representation that exist between readers and producers. The research here forms part of a UK Research Council funded project into the role of local community media as an aspect of ‘Creative Citizenship’.*

**Key words:** community, hyperlocal, media, news, regeneration

### **Introduction**

You live ‘on’ The Vale, as though it’s a ship. ... As though you have to take a step up to get towards it (Clive Edwards, journalist, *Tyburn Mail*).

This case study focuses on the role of community media (a radio station, a newspaper, a news blog and associated social media outputs) in the context of a major regeneration of a working class neighbourhood in north east Birmingham in the United Kingdom. The media operation discussed here was initially set up as an adjunct of the non-profit organisation undertaking the physical regeneration of the Castle Vale area (known locally as ‘The Vale’), and was designed in part to offer redress to the ways in which mainstream media had portrayed this edge-of-city estate. The media organisation has negotiated the politics of the

regeneration exercise while at the same time switching between different operational models – registered charity, limited company with charitable aims, in order to survive a funding landscape that has become increasingly austere.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the challenges faced by non-profit, embedded, community news operations whilst also offering a critical case study of how citizens can become sensitive to what David Parker and Christian Karner have described as externally-imposed ‘negative reputational geographies’ (2011: 309) and how they negotiate their identity as a result. While one might expect community media to be seen as the ‘voice of the people’, such assumptions belie the reality of how the norms of journalism practice come up against the expectations of audiences. The paper draws on a series of interviews undertaken in 2013 with community media workers, and workshops and co-created research interventions with residents of Castle Vale.

### **About Castle Vale**

Adam Mornement’s (2005) account of Castle Vale’s post-1990s transformation from troubled high-rise housing estate to a less imposing mix of suburban houses and low-rise flats is entitled ‘No longer notorious’, reflecting the widely held belief among citizens of Birmingham that for much of the estate’s history it was considered something of a no-go area. Mornement, a respected voice on regeneration issues in the UK, was commissioned by the Castle Vale Housing Action Trust to write an account of the estate’s physical and reputational transformation. He does not hold back on the role that mainstream local media played in painting the area in a bad light: ‘The media didn’t help. Castle Vale was constantly portrayed as a den of iniquity by local papers’ (ibid: 84). Ali Madanipour, writing for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2005) about the importance of ‘physical capital’, offers a description of Castle Vale that shows how much it had in common with many other 1960s failed estates that were already looking tired within 20 years of being built: ‘The neighbourhood suffered from poor quality infrastructure and buildings, lack of services, fear of crime and vandalism, poor health, unemployment, low educational standards, and a poor image’ (ibid: 51). The building of the largely council-run estate had begun in the early 1960s following extensive slum clearances of inner-city properties in Birmingham. By the time it was completed in the late 1960s it included 34 high-rise blocks and housed circa 20,000. Mornement (2005) highlights how the estate’s social issues were exacerbated by the poor condition of the housing stock. It was clear something had to be done.

For years Birmingham City Council had been aware of the gravity of Castle Vale’s problems. Final confirmation came in 1991 when a chunk of concrete fell from one of the tower blocks. There was nobody underneath, but Castle Vale was falling apart (ibid: 9).

Veronica Coatham and Lisa Martinali outline how by the early 1990s there was 'an identified need to develop a long-term strategy for Castle Vale encompassing the key priorities of a regeneration initiative' (Coatham and Martinali 2010: 91). The solution was the development of a Housing Action Trust (HAT), of which there were only six in the UK (see Evans and Long 2000 for an overview of the HATs). These trusts were a policy of the 1980s Conservative government, designed to deal with problematic estates by providing investment but taking them out of local government control into the hands of a non-departmental public body. Tenants in estates where a HAT was proposed were given a vote on whether to leave the control of the council. As well as new funds, the HAT promised a more holistic approach that saw social problems as related and encouraged partnership working with police, education and other parties (Mornement 2005: 15). In 1993, Castle Vale residents voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the HAT: 'The residents of a 1960s experiment in social housing had voted to be part of a social engineering experiment in the 1990s. It was a leap of faith' (ibid: 14).

### **Local media and improving the image of Castle Vale**

The Castle Vale Housing Action Trust saw its role, as did the other HATs, to be the 'redevelopment of the social infrastructure and combating social exclusion from the outset' (Evans and Long 2000: 309). The importance of emphasising citizen participation was central to how the HAT began to regenerate the area. The 1995 Master Plan for the area made clear that the future for the estate would mark a move away from central control and towards a more significant role for citizens:

A revitalised Castle Vale ... must engender a greater pride of place and community spirit than at present. In turn this may lead to the residents assuming greater responsibility for setting standards and taking wider responsibility and authority for the future management and maintenance of the new Castle Vale (Castle Vale Housing Action Trust 1995: 2).

While improving local social capital was seen as a central part of the regeneration process, it was also clear that the external perception of the area needed addressing. Adam Mornement (2005: 82-93) describes the role that public relations and art played in helping shift the 'story' of 'The Vale' to something other than crime and deprivation from the mid-1990s onwards. The area, however, also developed its own media outlets. Firstly, a community radio station, Vale FM, was established in 1995. Its manager at the time, Neil Hollins (interviewed in 2013), describes its early development: 'Vale FM was borne out of an idea by local residents who were maybe involved in pirate radio or who were maybe mobile DJs and believed that a community radio station would be good for Castle Vale.'

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## Dave Harte

Hollins became the station's first employee in 1996 and was employed directly by the HAT. The station broadcast on the basis of applying for 'restricted service' licences, which confined its output to a 28-day period at any one time (this was the most common way for community radio stations to legally operate at this time). Whilst the station might have initially been developed out of concerns to address wider public perceptions of the area and to give voice to residents, it also provided training and development for individuals who might then go on to fulfil educational or creative ambitions: '[From 1998] we began running training courses under franchise contract radio courses for unemployed people to use it as a way of developing skills, confidence, employability' (Hollins 2013). By the time it was applying for one of the new community radio licences in 2004 its role in supporting Castle Vale's transformation was recognised by a local councillor in the licence application: 'CVCR has been an important player in the regeneration of Castle Vale since the mid-1990s' (Castle Vale Community Radio 2004: 24).

In 2001, a community newspaper was developed (with just four pages at that stage and called *Vale Mail*), again, directly linked to the HAT. Hollins argues that there was initial distrust about the impartiality of the newspaper: 'It was still under the control of the HAT, so wasn't particularly trusted, it was seen a bit of a propaganda sheet, and it was rather disorganised and didn't look very nice really' (Hollins 2013). There was little citizen participation in the newspaper which, in 2004, took on a trained journalist, Clive Edwards, as editor. Edwards describes the role of the newspaper before he arrived:

[It was] closely edited and controlled by the Housing Action Trust entirely as promotional material. No indication of any bad news or anything. Its function was to improve its reputation ... All the work that the Housing Action Trust did to regenerate Castle Vale in terms of its buildings and its organisations, they thought would be well served by a monthly newspaper.

The newspaper under Edwards expanded in size (to 24 pages eventually), in area (to cover nearby council wards outside Castle Vale to increase revenue from advertising) and in editorial confidence in subsequent years. Edwards is clear that the newspaper's role is to provide critical commentary on the on-gong regeneration of the estate: 'Our independence is crucial to providing a sensible and level-headed critique of the progress that is or isn't being made.' Whilst there is a reliance on local residents as paid door-to-door distributors of the monthly newspaper, it has only occasional written contributions from citizens who sometimes write column pieces on fashion, music, history and suchlike. Although *Tyburn Mail's* digital outlets (website, Facebook page, Twitter account) prove useful both for newsgathering and for gaining a sense of

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which content its audience is most interested in, it is the newspaper that remains the focus of its operation: 'There are some stories that we leave out of the web, because we want the print version to have impact when it comes out. ... I think the newspaper has got more status than the web output' (Edwards 2013).

### **The political economy of Castle Vale's community media**

The HAT was designed to have a limited life span with residents allowed to choose to go back to local council control or to a housing association at the end of the HAT period. On the winding up of the Castle Vale HAT in 2005, almost all residents agreed for their properties to be managed by Castle Vale Community Housing Association. This also resulted in change for the community media operation. 'Castle Vale Community Radio Limited' had been set up in 1999 as the vehicle to bid for grant funding that wasn't directly from the HAT. Hollins became adept at securing external funding ('a mix of funds, which would be regional and European, and then some which were more local') and at expressing the value of Castle Vale as a place where funders could see the potential for interventions to transform lives: 'This is about putting out an image of Castle Vale as a vibrant creative place, where things are happening. It might not be the best place in the world but things are happening' (Hollins 2013). Different funders might require different articulations of place but the desired outcomes were always the same: 'The primary benefits were very much about the personal outcomes for beneficiaries. The secondary ones ... were about reputational aspects and challenging negative stigmas' (ibid).

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It was expected that the HAT's closure would result in the likely withdrawal of funding for community media in Castle Vale. However, the HAT had surplus funds from the sale of its stock to the housing association and these funds were to be distributed via a charity called the Castle Vale Endowment Trust Fund. Some funds from this have gone towards maintaining the radio and newspaper in each year since 2005 but it is expected that in 2016 no more funding will be available via this route (the trust's 2015 accounts say: 'Working capital is currently sufficient to cover the day-to-day running of the charity until 2016'). A change to charity status (and a renaming to 'Headline Media') in 2008 was part of a strategy to target lottery funds but two bids were unsuccessful. In 2010, with a crisis in funding looming, the charity came under the sole control of Castle Vale Community Housing Association: 'We were subsumed into this large organisation. Huge change, for all sorts of reasons ... that was a massively difficult period for the organisation but we survived, we came out the other end' (ibid). Yet during this time, which saw problems with trying to get the radio station permanently on air, the newspaper went 'from strength to strength', argues Hollins. It became 'the predominant form of communication in Castle Vale at the time' (ibid). In doing

so it reached a level of securing advertising income in the region of £33,000 in the financial year up to March 2012 (according to its published accounts), compared to only £3,000 generated by the radio station.

By 2013, another change would happen, this time separating out the radio and newspaper operations and severing the formal link with the housing association (though it remains one of its biggest advertisers). Headline Media was wound up as a charity and Topcliffe Media was established (named after the tower block that houses its offices) as a limited company with charitable aims to run just the news operation. In 2016 it has just two employees: one journalist (Clive Edwards), and a manager who sells advertising space and runs the operation on a day-to-day basis.

### **Hyper(g)local media**

The news operation of *Tyburn Mail* could be described as 'hyperlocal' since it covers a fairly small geographic area of a city (about 24,000 residents). Hyperlocal media are the subject of much attention by media commentators (such as Greenslade 2007), lobbyists (Talk About Local 2011) and academics (Baines 2010, Barnett and Townend 2015, Bruns et al. 2008, Kurpius et al. 2010, Metzgar et al. 2011, Williams et al. 2015). A report written by former Ofcom employee Damian Radcliffe argues that hyperlocal can be defined as: 'Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other, small geographically defined community' (Radcliffe 2012: 9). This focus on 'online news' marks a tendency in the commentary to situate hyperlocal media as a space for digital innovation and enterprise:

The 20th century model was for news to be gathered and delivered by institutions, very much shaped by the technologies available to them. The 21st century model shaped by new technologies is for news to be gathered and delivered by individuals and small specialist organisations and networks (Carnegie UK Trust 2014: 2).

Hyperlocal's function is also expressed in terms of its benefit to the community in a wider sense: 'The value and role of this type of community media may go beyond the provision of content, with the potential for specific value in the social capital generated through the production of hyperlocal websites' (Ofcom 2012: 111). This leads Metzgar et al. (2011) to note how 'grant-making organizations have hailed HLMOs [Hyper Local Media Operations] as a potential saviour for the struggling news industry. Scholars have proclaimed HLMOs a 21st century breeding ground for civic engagement' (ibid: 773). The emerging narrative around hyperlocal echoes the technological optimism of journalism scholars writing about the emerging importance of the internet to journalism

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in the 1990s and early 2000s. Borger et al. (2012) have noted that scholars tended to display a 'strong faith in the democratic potential of digital technologies' (ibid: 125). Such technological optimism 'can be traced back to internet enthusiasts of the 1990s who voiced great expectations regarding the reinvigoration of the public sphere' (ibid).

In his analysis of a hyperlocal news blog in Leeds, Tony Harcup (2015a) argues that we need to resist simplistic categorisation of alternative forms of news production: 'They do not form a uniform "sector" any more than mainstream media are all the same, and it is only by exploring specific examples in depth that we can hope to dig beneath the labels to see what we can discover about the possibilities and potential of such journalism' (Harcup 2015a: 16). Kristy Hess sees the emergence of the term hyperlocal as being evidence of 'a reinvigorated interest in geography as media industry and entrepreneurs experiment with new business models in the changing technological landscape' (Hess 2012: 53). Borrowing from the work of Manuel Castells, she argues that small local newspapers act as nodes, holding 'a degree of symbolic power in constructing the idea of "community" and the "local"' (ibid: 56). Hyperlocals are, in some sense, 'local and global at the same time' (Castells 2012: 222). David Baines similarly emphasises the 'glocalised' nature of being on the internet where there is the potential not just to reach make local connections but to draw potentially on any useful sources of information:

In a 'glocalised', networked society, even relatively isolated communities will have a large range of networks and sources of information, from direct social interaction, business, professional and civic contacts and customers to regional, national and global networks occupying numerous channels of communication, some one-way, most two-way (Baines 2010: 584).

Ultimately, Hess argues that it is timely to 'take a step back and view hyperlocal not as a product or object, but as a cultural phenomenon' (Hess and Waller 2015: 13). The focus in hyperlocal on the 'excessively' local means that the 'types of news featured in many hyperlocal publications provide a challenge to the very nature of news itself' (ibid). In this sense, our examination of the relationship between news makers and citizens in Castle Vale is timely, as despite Castle Vale being a part of a larger city (Birmingham's population is approximately one million), it is, as Neil Hollins says, 'a unique place'.

### **Research with residents**

Our research focus was on the role that *Tyburn Mail* played in creating a sense of place in Castle Vale and involved a series of interventions. Firstly, we undertook two exploratory workshops

with citizens during 2013 to help us understand how *Tyburn Mail* was perceived. This involved two groups who were asked to map out how they engaged with a wide range of news media throughout the day and how *Tyburn Mail* fitted into that. Further, they were asked to imagine what kinds of stories they might write for *Tyburn Mail*, with the research team prompting them to mock up a newspaper from cover. Secondly, we organised a 'news café' where the journalist from *Tyburn Mail* (Edwards) would meet local residents and see what stories emerged from conversations with them. We attempted to further facilitate this by creating a blank space in the monthly newspaper, into which citizens could write their own news stories. Chris Atton describes a similar project in a New York underground paper of the 1960s: '*Other Scenes* once offered an entirely blank set of pages for readers as a do-it-yourself publishing project' (Atton 2002: 24). Readers were then asked to bring their completed pages to the news café event organised in a local supermarket.

To some extent we were interested in what potential there might be in Castle Vale citizens playing more of a 'producer' (Bruns 2008) role in their local media. Axel Bruns has described the importance of the 'producer' function: 'the capacity to be an active producer ... equates increasingly with the capacity for active, participatory citizenship' (2008: 339). He cites citizen journalism as a key example of how produsage behaviour 'can be seen to help build the capacities for active forms of cultural and democratic citizenship' (ibid: 398). The ideal of the 'active' citizen is explored by Tony Harcup (2011) who argues that alternative media are awash with examples of it being fostered but that it remains 'little discussed within mainstream literature about relationships between journalism and politics' (ibid: 15). To be 'active' requires both agency and participation according to Harcup. He draws on the work of feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1992) who claimed that 'a radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking' (Mouffe 1992 in Harcup 2011: 17). The possibilities of active citizenship are that it opens up opportunities for alternative voices in the public sphere. Harcup makes clear that alternative media has a central role to play:

It is by encouraging and reflecting a culture of participation that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by being participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship (2011: 27).

Harcup later goes on to ask the question: 'To what extent can an engagement with alternative journalism foster active citizenship?' (2015b: 2). Drawing on his audience study of a hyperlocal website

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in Leeds, he notes the valuable role that this website plays in holding local power to account. However, he has concerns that although the audience self-identifies as active, he questions whether 'some people choose to consume alternative journalism not as an integral part of their civic activism but as an alternative to engaging in civic activism at all' (ibid).

## Findings

Across the workshops and the news café we found a tension between the ways in which *Tyburn Mail* represented Castle Vale through the prism of normative news values, and the expectations of citizens that it should play a more effective role in redressing the historic representation of 'The Vale' as a 'no-go' area. While one resident (in their written response on the newspaper's blank page) argued that the *Tyburn Mail* should 'tell it like it is' and worried about problems being 'swept under the carpet', this largely proved an exception. Most citizens were concerned that there was 'too much focus on individual crime' (newspaper blank page response). The issue of crime and how much of it gets covered was a recurring theme. One resident argued that the coverage of crime on the estate was disproportionate: 'The problem is it's no worse than others, but it gets reported more, so it makes it look worse. ... It's reporting more giving it a worse opinion of Castle Vale' (workshop respondent).

During the workshops residents were asked to react to example stories from the *Tyburn Mail* news blog as points for discussion; the first story was about local crime: 'It gives a bad name to Castle Vale. ... Someone from Castle Vale is always getting arrested for doing something, always.' Though considered essential by the *Tyburn Mail* journalist, coverage of crime can be problematic in creating an informed citizenship: 'The focus on the spectacular rather than the typical – endemic in news coverage of crime, for example – rarely implicates citizenship in useful or informative ways' (Lewis 2006: 315). As with Irene Costera's Meijer's (2012) research in Utrecht, we found that the people of Castle Vale were acutely aware of the mediatisation of their locality. Limited as it was by its one-off experimental nature, the blank space in the *Tyburn Mail* did at least offer readers a modest role in countering the 'problem neighbourhood frame' (ibid: 18).

The workshop exercise to create a citizens' version of the newspaper revealed examples of citizens as both active community members (one person talked about their attempt to tackle local traffic speeding) and potential chroniclers of the everyday (another talked about wanting to write about a local homeless person who had not been seen for a while), often mixing fact and fiction to create alternative narratives about life on the estate. One resident, in filling in the blank space we created, came up with a whole list

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of story and content ideas that could be taken up: 'Maybe have a panel of moms review baby groups. ... The children's centre is going through major cuts and changes and this needs covering ... More coverage on what's on for under fives ... Advice on how to pick nurseries and schools.' Such content may seem rather banal but John Postill has argued that there is much value in studying 'emerging forms of residential sociality linked to "banal activism" – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime' (2008: 419). He makes the case that, with very few exceptions 'banal activism has been neglected by internet scholars' (ibid).

It was clear that there was a degree of confusion about how *Tyburn Mail* was organised and whom it represented. Some thought it was still linked to Castle Vale Community Housing Association: 'Lots of peoples' negative articles or opinions are being filtered out, especially if it's against the housing and social,' said one resident in our workshop. Likewise there were concerns that coverage of the city council tended to shy away from controversy: 'There's always something about what the council are doing. They print all the good things, of course. It's very, very rare you get failings, unless it comes from the locals.'

Beyond our research interventions, there is little sense in Castle Vale that citizens were active players when it comes to contributing to their community media. Mechanisms for input (comments on the blog or Facebook) were never used by any of our workshop participants and, indeed, it is clear that in comparison to some other hyperlocal media operations, *Tyburn Mail* does not actively facilitate reader interventions. Yet as an artefact, the newspaper was very much part of people's lives with everyone having clear views about its worth and some people even involved in its distribution.

Our research interventions were an attempt to intervene in the well-established, professionally-prescribed routine of making news at *Tyburn Mail*. To a degree, the news café helped to place the organisation more centrally in people's gaze and Edwards continued to run the news café on a monthly basis for a short period after our intervention (a column called 'News from the café' was created). At least one news story from the blank pages was followed up and in the subsequent interview with Edwards he was clear that citizens could not only play a role in newsgathering, but that the initiative had changed perceptions of the *Tyburn Mail*:

Clearly the news café is a good idea. We feel that it has worked for us in terms of opening us out and saying we are after domestic stories. ... It may well be that we are now being perceived as a voice of the people, as opposed to a voice of the council, or a voice of the councillor (Edwards).

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Yet the nature of the journalism at *Tyburn Mail* remains the same. As Michael Schudson's critique of the US public journalism movement pointed out, despite the strong desire and concrete initiatives to engage the 'public' in the co-production of news, 'authority about what to write and whether to print stays with the professionals' (Schudson 1999: 123).

## Conclusions

This case study has offered up rich detail into the precarious existence of one particular example of a hyperlocal media operation. It is an operation that has shifted from a not-for-profit arm of a non-departmental government body (the HAT), to a limited company scouring for grant funding, to a charity, and back to being a limited company. Its existence throughout has been precarious and it is now reaching a point where its only consistent source of funds (the endowment trust fund) may be coming to an end. Yet unlike similar operations, it has not quite built up the level of trust where funding through citizen patronage or crowd-funding are likely options. Whilst *Tyburn Mail* does an excellent job of fulfilling a 'fourth estate' role for its citizens, it comes up against the tensions in the area's troubled history. As Adam Mornement points out, 'the tangled knot of notoriety cannot be quickly be undone' (2005: 82). Residents are clearly conflicted about the extent to which 'bad' news should be talked about. Whilst there's a shared desire to 'tell it like it is', the residents of Castle Vale seem to contest the idea of what 'it' is.

In their examination of a nearby suburb of east Birmingham, David Parker and Christian Karner (2011) reflected on the notion that 'localities contain multiple "subjugated knowledges" [drawing on Foucault 1980: 82] and previously largely private, rarely heard memories of social struggle, exclusion and self-assertion. Such subjugated knowledges need to be excavated, captured and articulated' (2011: 308). They claim that such an excavation needs to take place online via the social web as much as offline through located local cultural expressions such as graffiti. The point is to counter the partial accounts of communities that come through mainstream media and too often position places such as Castle Vale within a very narrow representational frame in the public gaze. Instead, richer 'spatial biographies' might have a counter-hegemonic role in working against dominant external myths and instead 'recognise the intertwined histories of places and people, roads and their residents' (ibid: 309). Peter Matthews' (2014) account of research interventions in Wester Hailes in Edinburgh notes how working-class residents 'resist the discourses of policy-makers that seek to denigrate their neighbourhood to justify intervention' (ibid: 25). In Castle Vale, we witnessed similar resistance from residents to the ways that journalism tells stories that denigrate rather than celebrate. Having been established to help change perceptions

about Castle Vale in the light of its regeneration, *Tyburn Mail* still has a vital role to play in charting the effect of austerity on what remains of local public services. To do so it must engage with, and perhaps confront, the notion of what it means to be from the 'The Vale', and the value of continuing to practise a normative model of journalism. Perhaps by refocusing on the banal, hyperlocal media operations such as *Tyburn Mail* have a chance to articulate a citizen-led vision of what everyday life in areas such as 'The Vale' is really like.

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### Note on the contributor

Dave Harte is a senior lecturer in media and communication at Birmingham City University. He has been researching hyperlocal media in the UK since 2012 and has published widely on the subject. He is co-author of a book on hyperlocal journalism due for publication with Routledge in late 2017. He runs a news website for the Bournville area of Birmingham where he lives and has worked in higher education since the late 1990s in a range of teaching, policy and business engagement roles.

## Framing participation in collaborative community media: *The living community* documentary series

*This paper positions the concepts of participation and collaboration for media content creation in the context of a complex, commercialised media landscape that is difficult for community and not-for-profit groups to break into, and focuses on the case of a 2014-2015 community media project funded by Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand. The project set out to produce a series of half-hour documentaries, The living community, for broadcast on Face TV, a pay TV channel with a public service/community commitment. Each of the seven programmes was intended to offer insights into a community group or organisation in the Auckland region. The paper explores potential issues in co-creating community stories for media visibility, with few resources. The paper proposes an inclusive co-creation model based on the experience of creating the final filmed piece in 2015, influenced by 'a subset of planned, intentional participatory media engagements that rely upon professional facilitators to lead collaborative projects with explicit purposes and aims' (Spurgeon et al. 2009).*

**Key words:** participation, collaboration, community media, public service broadcasting

### Introduction

In this paper, the challenges and outcomes of collaboration during 2014-2015 between an educational institute and several community groups to create a low-budget series for broadcast TV called *The living community* are presented. Seven community-based filmed stories were produced, six of them screening as a series on Face TV in May 2015 and a further one being shown in a public screening at the Auckland Museum, in October 2015. The project had multiple aims in terms of product and process while also bringing together multiple stakeholders. These included the seven Auckland region communities who had a story to tell, each with leaders or key members representing a wider constituency;

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Unitec research colleagues; media production facilitators at my workplace who acted under my direction as mentors and guides in the project; a public service television station called Face TV, owned by a not-for-profit trust; and student volunteers.

The primary motivation for the project was enabling community voice.<sup>1</sup> Although stories are everywhere in multiple media forms and genres including transmedia storytelling (Edwards 2012), so many remain untold or struggle to rise above the noise. In leading the project team, I aimed to explore the potential for complementary talents and energies to enable community storytelling, convinced that worthwhile outcomes can be achieved if the necessary resources (commitment, time, stories, skills, media platforms) can be coordinated around a shared mobilising vision. Our impetus to mobilise came in part from the context of media content proliferation in which reaching an audience is hugely challenging, especially for meagrely resourced community groups. Despite dramatic growth in the volume and diversity of video content being shared on social media, infotainment, reality TV and commercial agendas dominate mainstream platforms and undercut public access to alternative, or sufficiently diverse, points of view. Thus content genuinely serving the public interest is now almost non-existent in New Zealand (Hope 2015: 2).

Creativity and determination are required to create community stories, find a space for them and get them shared. All involved in *The living community* were motivated to challenge that issue of reaching an audience, out of a conviction that community content deserves to be seen. After all it often invites audiences to share in inspiring and constructive stories or examples; it facilitates awareness of opportunities for civic engagement and it can encourage development and social change. This project explored the value of complex collaboration as one means of facilitating community visibility in the story landscape.

### **Collaborative content creation approaches**

Before discussing the detail of the filmed stories and the outcomes, *The living community* series will be situated within a range of collaborative approaches to developing community media content. In this way the choices we had to make to ensure, within the constraints of budget, project objectives and deliverables, that the stories spoke compellingly from the community itself will then become clear.

The broad genre of a documentary-style news show chosen as the format for the series was driven by three main considerations. First, an opportunity arose through my personal contacts for Unitec Institute of Technology, where I work, to avail itself of access to TV facilities and broadcast air-time for student content on Sky via Face TV, a channel that retains a strong commitment to public service

broadcasting values. Face TV is 'your channel, your voice, your community ... your voice can be heard, your message understood ... [TV] made for you and by you' (Face: Access TV for NZ, Sky Channel 083 2015). This opportunity led me to initial consultations with Face and Unitec colleagues about how objectives of community engagement, student learning, and impactful research relating to co-creative media and community storytelling could be brought together in a single venture. At the same time, community research colleagues at Unitec were keen to use the opportunity to help their community groups tell their stories.

Second, preparing graduates for evolving workplace practices, especially collaboration in diverse teams working on real projects, is held to be an institutional imperative at Unitec. Therefore, I sought to knit together the disciplinary skills and perspectives of staff and students from both Communication Studies (my discipline) and Screen Arts<sup>2</sup> (also a specialist discipline at Unitec). This meant that the direction and production expertise of Screen colleagues, especially in documentary, would inform the project, as well as providing opportunities for students in both disciplines to gain experience in content production.

Third, the availability of a Screen expert in the project team, as well as the fact that an important project objective was to maximise learning value for students, had specific effects on the creation and production process and the form that *The living community* takes. In the early stages, I consulted closely with the Head of Performing and Screen Arts at Unitec and very experienced documentary expert Alexander Lee<sup>3</sup> who took the role of Executive Producer for the series. We considered how best to involve students in as many ways as we could to give them experience, such as in researching for stories, developing scripts, being studio presenters, auditioning and rehearsing for studio work, and much more. We planned a standard half-hour format for each show (effectively about 23 minutes of content to fit Face TV scheduling) to achieve a series look and feel that would be relatively straightforward to edit and produce. This format consisted of an intro with graphics designed by students, an opening studio segment featuring student presenters, a community location piece of some length, and a final studio wrap-up and 'outro'. A Unitec Screen Arts colleague took the role of Production Manager, and worked with students filming on location. Post-production editing was done under the supervision of an editing teacher. This close collaboration with Screen colleagues also enabled the project to borrow equipment and post-production facilities. Thus the screen industry/documentary perspective shaped the operational detail of getting the series completed.

At another level, determining how to work with community groups, students, researcher colleagues and screen experts to facilitate the creation of stories that would honour community

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voice in seven unique contexts was a complex task that sits within an ethical framework for a collaborative content creation process. This accountability rested with me as the project lead. As both I and the project prioritised authenticity for all the stories, a pragmatic strategy was to customise an approach that would ensure integrity of process for each community and its story.

One tactic for getting stories filmed would have been for my team and me to come in as outsiders and *take* a story, interpreting as best we could what it was the community wanted to say. This could be described as an 'exogenous' initiative' (Gaved and Anderson 2006: 6) in which '...control and ownership may be exerted by ... an external body: for example government and/or university' (ibid). This has the advantage of efficiency but would severely constrain authenticity. The exogenous approach simply would not have any place in a project that has community empowerment objectives. My preferred methodology is to engage with people one-to-one in order that their knowledge and points of view, processed in dialogue, inform their purposes as a group (Williams 2009: 92-94; Williams 2013: 146). In this way the process can make some claim to integrity and the outcomes to have credibility. At the other end of the scale, we could have chosen the Participatory Video (PV) approach to content creation, which prioritises horizontal dialogue and local ownership. The participatory ideal is argued to be 'highly complementary to new digital communication environments, as it promotes horizontal and participatory models of development rather than vertical, one-way, top down, or trickle down models' (Tacchi 2012). In PV, 'a collective storytelling process that uses film-making as a means to positive and transformative social change' (Plush 2015: 15), the community's involvement is required in the entire message-making process from the choice of topics and issues, to the planning and production of media content (Williams and Saifoloi 2016). The community makes the content, with 100 per cent control.

In the context of *The living community* project, PV would have required much more time than was feasible. Also a case can be made for the proposition that putting cameras in participants' hands does not necessarily make for a participatory process:

Visual research methods do not become participatory in and of themselves; the role of the facilitator and the intention behind the use and implementation of visual research methods is of key importance (Reeves 2015: 3341).

From this perspective our 'intention behind the use and implementation of visual research methods' (ibid) is a key consideration, rather than what the method is called. The project goal determined that the lens for all decisions was collaboration, and that the communities were key partners in co-creation.

Production methodologies were developed in each situation that would be as fully collaborative as possible, falling short of being fully 'participatory' but delivering – especially in the case of *The Pacifica Mamas* – a film that comes very close to being that community's voice. Using Gaved and Anderson's terminology again, 'Control and ownership [were] exerted by the host community (and this can be contested and also evolve over time) – what we term endogenous or "grassroots" initiatives' (2006: 6). At least in the context of community ICT, endogenous initiatives 'may be more sustainable, as they are supported from within the community...' (ibid: 27).

### **Process**

Early in 2014, I brought together a team of Unitec staff already connected with community groups in the region through research or student projects and who were keen to be involved in developing filmed stories for their communities. Screen colleagues were also integral to the team as explained previously. Together we brainstormed and planned the co-creation of a series of half-hour TV programmes that would prioritise communities having some control in creating their stories, as well as facilitate student learning about aspects of media production in a practical setting. The first six pieces were produced over the best part of a year from April 2014, a much longer period than was anticipated due to the complexity of involving so many stakeholders and objectives. These screened weekly as a series on Face TV during April-May 2015. The seventh piece required a different approach as will be explained later in the article. As a result, a professionally crafted 13-minute piece was produced,<sup>4</sup> yet it had a high level of participant involvement. This seventh piece forms a methodological contrast to the other six, while suggesting a further model of co-creation.

Initial decisions were that each Unitec staff member in the project, with research connections to a community group, was to decide with their community on a story for videoing by student crews. These ideas were written up and submitted for feedback from the Executive Producer, Production Manager and me. Once research, meetings and location scouting were done, the Production Manager with small student film crews would arrange location shoots. Editing students would assemble raw material under expert supervision in ways that would convey the desired story. On completion and after screening of the series on Face TV, a microsite was created on the Unitec website to host the programmes (Unitec Institute of Technology 2015b) enabling easy sharing via social media by the communities as they wished. A project blog documenting the process was also used as a space to tell the story of the stories (Williams 2014).

The wish for creative input and control varied among the different community groups and depended very much on each group's leadership or collective structures and modes of practice. It was,

therefore, challenging to strike the right balance consistently across this operating model. As *The living community* series Production Manager put it:

One of the things we were really clear on is that we weren't here to tell their stories for them, but to provide a creative service to enable them to tell their own stories. Which can be tricky, because the moment you bring the camera out, people say: 'Was that okay, is that alright?' And we say: 'Yes, if that's the way you want to take it' (Unitec Institute of Technology 2015a: 19).

Managing the dynamic complexity of multiple objectives, constraints and people and delivering on the project's commitment to authentic community voice was enormously challenging. We needed to consider how the stories would be best told within the limits of our resources, and how each group wanted to – or was equipped to – collaborate. Each of the seven contexts and motivations was unique (see Table 1 below) as well as diverse in form, membership and ways of working to achieve their objectives. All, however, shared a commitment to building community connections or resilience through their efforts.

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**The community groups/organisations**

*The living community* team worked with the following community groups:

GROUP	CORE MOTIVATION
<p><b>1 Violence Free Waitakere – Bully Banishing Together:</b> BBT is a community resilience programme designed to take 'a whole of community approach to bullying' (Violence Free Waitakere, 2015) at family level, coordinating a number of initiatives and collaborators around anti-bullying and community capacity building.</p>	<p>'Our aim is social change. To actually create communities that are participatory and resilient. And engaging and honouring the people who are in them' (Elaine Dyer, VFW CE, personal communication, 21 August 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> The BBT documentary was initially intended to follow the story of a young man at the heart of an anti-bullying drama workshop series. This proved too complex: the final piece (Clarke 2015b) was structured around an interview with the CE of VFW, Elaine Dyer, and Geoff Bridgman, chair of the VFW Board, with location material filmed during BBT community events.</p>	
<p><b>2 CUE Haven</b> is a 59-acre former dairy farm being converted to native forest through extensive planting undertaken by volunteer groups including students. All types of volunteer effort, recorded in the CUE Haven blog (CUE Haven 2015), helps this project continue to meet its objectives.</p>	<p>'...we have over two thousand volunteers. And that to me is the story, to say that people can come together and work ... if you all put aside your ego or whatever it is for a day and your daily concerns ... to be able to come to a space ... and then say "let's work together and do something which is going to outlast us". To me, that is a story, to say that people can achieve things [together]' (Thomas Stazyk, personal communication, 27 August 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> A Unitec media class filmed interviews for <i>The living community</i> with Design students showing their installed 'way-finding' work in situ (Clark 2015), as well as interviewing the owners.</p>	

<p><b>3 The Rosebank Art Walk</b> was an Auckland Arts Festival installation at Rosebank Road, an industrial precinct in suburban Avondale. The temporary 'art walk' event was a platform for a design and art collective, members of which had researched and made artwork on location here. Artists collaborated with community groups to respond to what they found in this place, known more for its industry and commerce and yet of significant ecological worth as well as geological and historical interest.</p>	<p>'This project ... has a presence. It was temporary but it has a continued presence in articles and websites and in people's consciousness ... a small contribution to a big shift that's never going to happen in any other way except a whole multitude of small contributions' (Marcus Williams, Art Walk Curator, personal communication, 9 September 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> For the documentary, the art walk event was recreated as a lighthearted pilgrimage along the Rosebank Road route, narrated by the art walk curator who stopped along the way to interview other key participants.</p>	
<p><b>4 High Tech Youth Network</b> is a digital media learning centre for local youth in a low-income neighbourhood in suburban Henderson. Part of the global Computer Clubhouse network (Computer Clubhouse 2013; Resnick, Rusk and Cooke 1998) with a Pacific regional and Auckland city focus, HTYN gives 10 to 18-year-old youth after-school access to a wide range of digital technologies to work on activities such as short film production and computer game construction.</p>	<p>'In [our] community there is a lot of transience ... [it's] a place where they can explore creativity and feel safe doing that. And also really learn and engage in positive relationships in a supportive community ... learning as they do it' (Jonathan Hickman, Studio MPHS Supervisor, personal communication, 22 August 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> Filmed location and interview content was insufficient for a full half-hour piece so in post-production it was combined with the story below.</p>	
<p><b>5 Avondale Community Action (ACA)</b> is a suburban 'place building' arts collective funded by Auckland Council, committed to improvement of the local area so that it is more vibrant and inclusive of residents. Initiatives such as art installations and a creative hub in the main shopping street have emerged from a detailed ACA-run community research/consultation process.</p>	<p>'...we needed to instigate some urban interventions that will actually let people go: "Oh, some things are actually changing up in the town centre" ... We thought the best way to do that is through creativity. ... So we obtained funding from the council ... and had inexpensive public artwork [and] some installations. ... What that did is that it created visible change' (Michelle Ardern, ACA Collective, personal communication, 15 September 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> Helping ACA tell their story on film was a challenge because they are a tight collective with no one individual identifying as leader or spokesperson.</p>	
<p><b>6 More Than A War</b>, an oral history project involving Auckland Libraries, generated a series of oral narratives recording experiences, reflections and remembrances of World War One for a digital archive of stories and accompanying memorabilia; and searchable, interactive online content.</p>	<p>'It was really to surface narratives and stories that were particularly more on the margin ... we weren't that interested in the stories of the campaigns or the soldiers ... we're really interested in the home front. ... What were the women doing? What was a child's perspective of the time? The stories that lie behind. An opportunity for young people to engage with the subject. It's a contemporary picture of how, in 2014, people are remembering' (Sue Berman, Auckland Libraries, Sara Donaghey, Unitec, personal communication, 21 August 2014).</p>
<p><b>Comment:</b> The project was not so much a community story in the way the others were, but its objective of building community between young and old through the fabric of storytelling in a range of creative genres was seen as a fit for <i>The living community</i> series. However, its multiple goals and broad sweep of content were challenging to capture.</p>	

**7 The Pacific Mamas**, 'matriarchs of the Pacific' (Waitakere Pacific Arts Cultural Centre, 2014), is a collective of Pacific women aged between 60 and 80 based in West Auckland. They make arts and crafts, run workshops for Auckland schools, work with inmates at Springfield Correctional Facility, and provide Pacific event management services. Their activities aim to circulate their knowledge, stories and a feeling of Pacific community more widely, preserving heritage and cultural practices.

The Mamas are 'well respected artists, mentors and cultural leaders'. Mary Ama, who first brought the group together and who remains a driving force, and the Arts Centre Director Jarcinda Stowers-Ama aspire to use digital media to capture and disseminate the Mamas' story so that the group's Pacific cultures and values can reach a much wider audience.

**Table 1: Context for each community group and their core motivations**

Methods of working closely with these diverse groups in ways that honoured their visions and voices were a high priority. The most successful pieces in *The living community*, where stories came across coherently and in an impactful way, tended to happen when relevant expertise was taken on board if it was needed. The less successful pieces came out of situations where community stakeholders were not clear on the story they wanted to convey, but at the same time wanted to exert control.

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### Ethics and outsiders

The involvement of an academic student/staff team as 'digital storytelling researcher-facilitators' (Spurgeon et al. 2009: 277) seeking the best collaborative solution for community causes, is one way to facilitate 'the propagation of participatory culture' (ibid). The central challenge of *The living community* was finding a workable balance 'between the demands of institutional contexts of production and the interests of storyteller participants' (ibid: 278) in each instance. The institutional contexts of production included the requirement for student learning, the time frame of the academic semesters, and funding from institute research resources.

These factors present potentially significant limitations on 'the interests of storyteller participants' and raise ethical tensions around the co-creation process. Examples could include potential pressure on community participants to agree to conditions that may be uncomfortable because the group does not want to waste the opportunity; or a possible feeling of obligation to allow ideas, angles, arrangements or interpretations of participants' life-worlds that may not be entirely authentic or exact enough, from a wish to help student learning, or a wish to avoid appearing ungrateful. These considerations point strongly toward core ethical questions in research relationships such as 'is it necessary to be an insider to understand another's lived-experiences?' (Chatman 1996: 194). This is a question descended from ideas in the sociology of knowledge such as those explored by Robert K. Merton, observing 'according to the doctrine of the Insider, the Outsider, no matter how careful and talented, is excluded in principle from gaining access to the social and cultural truth' (Merton 1972: 15).

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Aware of and cautious about the critique of community-based research in the context of indigenous peoples that 'community-based projects are often conceptualised, funded and directed by researchers who have been trained within a discipline or paradigm, and are often employed by a research organization' (Smith 2012: 215) and thus perpetuate unhelpful outside-in control and representation of community interests, my *modus operandi* was to give the creative reins to each group and its intermediaries. These personal convictions about the need for an explicitly shared co-creation relationship based on experience in previous community research collided somewhat with, first, the discipline paradigm and practices of Screen colleagues and, second, with severe budget (time) limitations that inevitably led to compromises that may account for the varied effectiveness of each filmed piece.

The emergence of what we call 'disciplines' within Western systems of knowledge as a product, or project, of the Enlightenment (ibid: 117-118) continues to impose ways of knowing and doing especially in professional spheres, even if we refer, instead, to fields of study or professional practice. There are rules to be followed in different cultures of knowledge, and woe betide anyone who thinks things should be done differently. The disciplines' different ways of knowing, being and doing arising from varied understandings and lenses on what a cultural product is, is for, and who benefits from it, can be seen in *The living community* project. Specifically, ethical tensions existed in relation to filmed content being a form of knowledge, or cultural property, that belongs to a person or group.

Film production staff in the screen industry are trained to use 'talent release forms' for participants to sign, authorising ownership and use of the material. On the other hand in research practice, an ethical approach to informed consent is founded on the rights of the individual to privacy and ownership of personal disclosures, and on their agreeing to participate on the basis of strict conditions governing their use. In addition, where a group is formed around belonging to a particular culture, then a 'decolonising' critique of knowledge paradigms may apply (ibid). For example it might be argued that this project uses a content production framework defined and operationalised by mainstream culture, even if we call it public service broadcasting and make claims about the need for diversity in the media. This mainstream approach and worldview could – even subtly if not explicitly – frame a story in a particular way.

In the series we produced, a specific cultural context where the risk existed for indigenous ways of knowing and being to be thus subsumed applied to only one of the seven stories, *The Pacifica Mamas*. Yet the careful process (explained in the next section) with its emphasis on dialogue at every step led the way to a knowledge-

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sharing approach to collaboration, a partnership, between a documentary director and the Mamas, and a film that is explicitly and directly the Mamas speaking. It is my view that we were sufficiently aware of, and placed a high priority on, the need to let each community group steer what they wanted to say via a process that was inherently dialogic.

Power relations potentially inherent in other story contexts (the Bully Banishing Together/BBT initiative, and High Tech Youth Network/HTYN, both based in a low-income suburb with high proportions of Māori and Pacific families) could be argued to impose an Outsider (Merton 1972) perspective, represented by the educational/research, content production and – potentially – commodification agendas, prevailing over the objective of facilitating Insider (ibid) voice. This lens may account for the challenges experienced in crafting a ‘story’ in each of those cases: whose voice, whose story? I had to rely on the researcher contact in each case to manage these matters of voice and power, and entrust them to work appropriately to define the need and find an ethical approach within the boundaries of the research projects they had already been working on in each case. In one example of the larger project’s responsiveness to potential issues of power, the BBT filming initially involved teenagers (minors) taking part in a performing arts workshop that exposed them emotionally. Ultimately this footage was not used, but in the course of considering how to film minors for a media piece about bullying and the potential for sensitive subject matter to be shared, the researcher who had close relationships to this neighbourhood formed over decades of work in community development created a detailed Information Sheet for parents so they could exercise choice, while the sheet also covered matters of ‘talent release’. An ethical process was carefully, respectfully and responsibly negotiated, and the filmed product tells this community’s story with integrity.

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The community groups’ ideas about their purpose and their strategies for achieving it, as well as their sense of urgency for gaining greater visibility for their cause, varied. Naturally this imposed complexity on a project also committed to collaboration and student learning. While community voice is best facilitated by giving the resources and ownership entirely over to the groups in a fully participatory way (as in the PV approach), this project was limited to finding ‘workarounds’ that could meet key outcomes for all stakeholders. In seeking ways to resolve this tension I considered approaches that view negotiation as a rational option:

The idea of co-creative media ... seeks to differentiate from the ‘spontaneous’ model of participatory media a subset of planned, intentional participatory media engagements that rely upon professional facilitators to lead collaborative projects with explicit purposes and aims (Spurgeon et al. 2009: 276).

This concept of 'planned ... engagements' still allows the room for horizontal dialogue and local ownership, and can generate a range of co-creative responses. Those groups in *The living community* who showed an urgent need to collaborate to achieve their ends were the least concerned about creative control, and the most flexible about the process of partnership. For example, in some cases (CUE Haven, High Tech Youth Network) the creative partnership meant facilitating the contribution of any number of willing participants – including students – who could each do their part. For others (Avondale Community Action, More Than A War, and to an extent BBT) it was much more important to them to have control of their story and to use their own voice to represent it. Under pressure of commitment to student learning and to Face TV programme scheduling, as well as to delivering for each of the community groups, we produced a series that broadly met stakeholder and project objectives. However, it became clear that one of the groups needed to be treated separately: The Pacifica Mamas. The following section explains why, and how we responded, so that highly collaborative processes and outcomes could be assured.

### **Co-creation: Unpacking what worked best**

The Pacifica Mamas ('the Mamas'), a group of older women, meet frequently at the Pacifica Arts Centre in Henderson to work on art and crafts from different Pacific Islands, to socialise, share meals and engage with visitors, and to put on workshops and other cultural events. It was intended that their story would be filmed as part of the production work involved in 2014's *The living community* series. The Mamas' piece was begun in 2014 but not completed, because a range of pressures associated with student assignments, class commitments, timetable schedules and a resulting sense of urgency to get filming done proved to be uncomfortable. For example, a production team needs to be respectful and sensitive in asking the Mamas to change the day or time of filming. They also prefer to have a direct and specific say in who should be filmed, how many should be in a particular shot, and so on. This is, at least in part, because a Unitec research team had engaged with the Mamas previously, teaching the skills of Participatory Video (Saifoloi et al. 2014) and they quickly picked up the PV method. They were keen on using cameras themselves and had clear ideas about the film we agreed to make with them. It became clear that a closer form of collaboration that would allow the Mamas to have a real say in how their story would be told was needed.

Therefore, I met with Arts Centre and Mamas Director Jarcinda Stowers-Ama in June 2015 to work out a process that would best meet their objectives. This time, they wanted a specific piece for a Creative NZ Heritage Arts Fono (symposium) to be held at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in October 2015, and for this they were highly motivated. The Mamas were to feature in the

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programme, and they wanted the spotlight on them and their artistic work (Jarcinda Stowers-Ama, personal communication, 22 June 2015), on film.

Rather than trying to achieve a participatory process in which the Mamas would script the story and use PV methods, I approached this piece as a fully collaborative partnership. The practicalities of time (an October deadline, and the Mamas' travel commitments) and budget, while more flexible than in the 2014 phase, would have made that impossible. On the other hand I wanted to avoid the mistakes of that first attempt by putting time into establishing trust as a foundation, and letting the Mamas lead the way, working first to establish a clear brief with Mamas' Director Stowers-Ama who, in turn, brokered agreement with the Mamas. In consultation with *The living community* Executive Producer Alexander Lee, I met with and subsequently engaged the services of a documentary director, Skye Clark, after she had met with Jarcinda and the Mamas and they gave their approval. They had seen a documentary she had made, *Luisa's Baby*,<sup>5</sup> about a young Pacifica woman, as well as meeting her in person. They clearly decided Skye Clark would fit the bill. Her process was to spend a great deal of time with the Mamas, talking, establishing what they would like, and using a camera when the time seemed right.

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In accounting for the positive outcomes of this approach for The Pacifica Mamas, I reflect on methodologies honed in my longitudinal research (Williams 2009). Teacher training led me to a preference for a social constructivist understanding of knowledge. My research experiences evolved from that basis so that I intuitively selected methods that probe and uncover meaning in context and in shared social settings. My community-based research is informed by social constructivism that

... assumes ... knower and respondent co-create understandings – as well as the appropriateness of a naturalistic set of methodological procedures aimed at bringing together diverse perspectives. In this sense, my approach is interpretive, so that 'research subjects ... collaborate in displaying key features of their world' (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 34 cited in Williams 2009: 79).

My true north is credible and trustworthy representations of social worlds; getting there implies multiple realities need to be brought together via appropriate dialogic methods, selected to suit each case. Working to create a trusting, respectful and transparent engagement between researcher/practitioner and participants is central to my research practice. When people are also engaged in creating an artefact together, we can describe this as social constructionism, which differentiates a role for the co-creation of shared outcomes and artefacts, actively constructed by groups

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of people (Shaw 1996: 177). All the groups involved in *The living community* were already deeply engaged in constructing artefacts and shared outcomes specific to their community priorities (such as a reforestation project at CUE Haven, a creative hub in Avondale, an arts installation, a digital drop-in centre, an anti-bullying performing arts piece, an exhibition, and so on) as well as the digital artefact representing their story for the Face TV broadcast series. In social constructionist theory, collaboration is recognised as central:

Community members act as collaborators, coaches, audience, and co-constructors of knowledge. In current educational research literature, new attention is given to communities of practice, knowledge-building communities, and [ICT] support for collaborative learning (Kafai and Resnick 1996: 6).

Theories such as these are helpful in accounting for the outcomes of the work with the Mamas in relation to the ideal of a participatory approach. While full PV was not feasible, the high priority placed on collaborative process and the shoulder-to-shoulder teamwork, enabled co-construction of an artefact (the film) as well as community building through the Mamas' engagement in the process of creating and celebrating the film. The Mamas were very present throughout its creation. Also, in the co-creative process, the Mamas drew the director in as a community member and facilitator, collaborator, co-constructor, coach, and audience member, no more nor less than each Mama, or camera operator, or academic colleague, or me or member of the wider Mamas community or audience engaging in the outcomes of the community's work. Most importantly, the documentary director responsible for researching, planning, consulting and liaising, eliciting beautifully judged story moments, editing the final piece and engaging the Mamas deeply in the entire filming process, talked about it afterwards in constructionist terms:

I did work quite closely and talking to them about what we could do, how we could do it, how we could shape it a little bit more ... I just had to be flexible really, and I didn't worry about my perfect film, I just tried to make sure that I told each person's story and the story of the Mamas (Skye Clark, personal communication, 29 October 2015).

She commented that she 'tried to get everybody at home ... so that I could see behind the doors and see who they really are'. This was the collaborator and co-constructor, finding the right story for this piece:

I did put time in as well, I went and had lunch with them one day and really talked about myself ... who I was and where I grew up, and talked about my grandparents, you know talked about a lot of stuff so that they could also appreciate who I was

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and that I was entrusting myself to them as much as they would entrust me and then I would also have research meetings with them all, and that was all at the [Pacifica Arts] Centre, and then I went home for their first time, to film with them at home (ibid).

The director felt that 'through the creation as they got to know me more and that, well – "it's just a little camera!" and ... they also came to me with ideas like "Can we film Mata at church?" In this way, co-construction became the practice'. And the fact that she is European seemed immaterial. I suggested to her that there was a connection between her and the Mamas on the basis of arts practice: she shared with their Tivaevae (quilting) and embroidery arts, a 'piecing' approach to her film art. She responded:

That's how I introduced myself to them – 'You're artists, so am I, so this is all art' ... so there was a common thing, we're women we're art. They could teach me to make a flower and I could teach them a little bit about a camera but it was fluid, it was never just 'sit down', it was, Oh, after I've finished filming: 'How do you make that flower, can I have a go?' and that was sort of how it went (ibid).

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It may be that this binding together as women and as artists was more important than the fact that she is 'Palagi' (European).

Based on the Mamas's previous experience with PV and their enthusiastic readiness to be a part of the co-creative process, they were in effect at some point on a learning curve, and very motivated. The process that occurred here, shaped through effective collaboration built on trust, produced a shared representation of a community's story, a digital artefact presenting cultural knowledge in such a way that all were satisfied with it. A 'learning theory for the digital age' (Siemens 2005: 3) called 'connectivism' (ibid) may shed a little more light on why it worked:

Connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and, therefore, that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks. It shares with some other theories a core proposition, that knowledge is not acquired, as though it were a thing. ... Connectivism is 'connectionist'. Knowledge is, on this theory, literally the set of connections formed by actions and experience (Downes 2007).

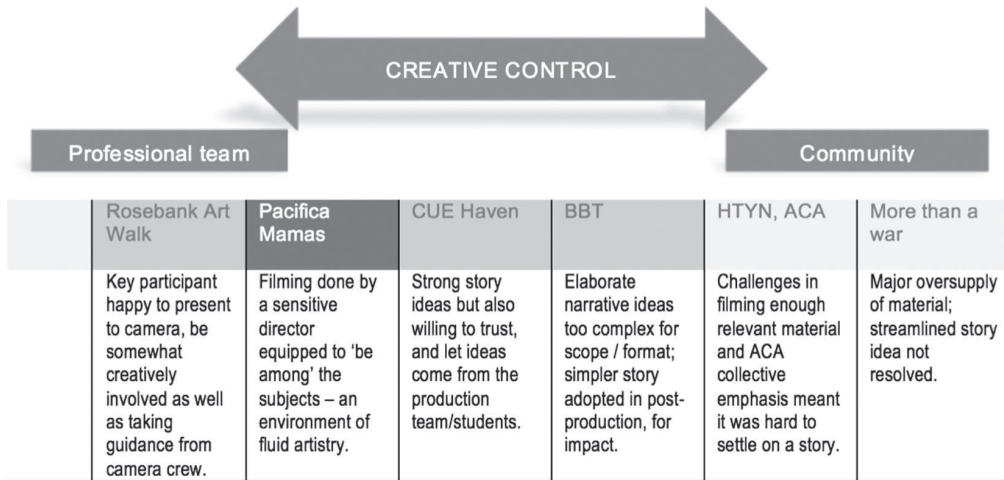
Proponents of connectivism suggest learning occurs between people rather than inside them, that 'learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions' (Siemens 2005: 7), that acquiring knowledge is about connecting nodes or information sources that include 'non-human appliances' (ibid) and that we 'derive our competence from forming connections' (ibid: 5) in social and cultural contexts.

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The Mamas' collaborative response that emerged from an active engagement in learning in order to shape a meaningful statement about their identity is not dissimilar to this view of learning and knowledge creation.

**Conclusions**

The outcomes of *The living community* project suggest co-creation may involve a participation spectrum from significant creative control by community participants to construction by an external professional:



**Table 2: A spectrum of creative control and outcomes**

Customised approaches that are legitimate and ethical and also meet the objectives of all stakeholders to a high level of satisfaction can be developed with a highly negotiated process emphasising relationship work and carefully integrated continuous review. The piece made with The Pacifica Mamas indicates there is a place for collaborative methodology lying somewhere between the extremes of full participation and outsider professionals that does not have to sacrifice authenticity or ownership. In this case, the documentary director found ways of being among the Mamas as an artist in trusting connection with them: 'I was entrusting myself to them as much as they would entrust me.' At a celebratory showing of the film a few weeks after its completion, the delight of all concerned was very visible, in speeches, comments, laughter and clapping, and avid viewing.

Returning to my introductory positioning of the series in a sea of story forms and a domination of the media ecosystem by mainstream commercial interests, it seems to me there is plenty of room for communication researchers, students and community interests to bring untold stories effectively to light. These are exciting times for such collaborations. However, critical reflection is required on what communication practitioners can realistically achieve, and what it is their responsibility to achieve, in a complex media

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ecosystem (Cooren 2015b). In a 2015 conference address entitled '*In media res*' (In the middle of everything), Francois Cooren asked his audience to consider, in their uses of media, what value am I adding? His answer was that we are 'passers', or intermediaries. We are intermediating so that others can 'acquire more existence'. Any being can be an actor and a passer – what they say, act or do can make a difference in a situation or scene. Cooren (ibid) argued that it is a 'serious business' and 'how the world, in the variety of its incarnations, embodiments and materializations, comes to express itself in interaction – what is passing through or coming across what we say' is something we have a responsibility for.

Reflecting on *The living community* in these terms, as project lead I have had the ethically weighty role of 'passer', intermediating in story worlds. My actions and facilitations interact with stories that already exist, and bring them to a place where they acquire more existence, where other people, and passers, then interact with them. A series of community stories acquiring more existence by my intervention or intermediation is no insignificant thing: 'A world where things more or less exist or are more or less material is a world where communication always matters' (Cooren 2015a). My team and I have responsibility for what that existence says in its mediated form as a digital media artefact. The ways in which we think about our part in co-construction as multiple co-authors, actors, participants and passers is fundamentally important for the process and products. Our involvement, the parts we play and how deeply we think about these, both determines the value of the products of this process, and interacts with the outcomes via multiple audience reception and engagement with the product. The product of the co-creative effort gives the story new form as it makes its way in the media ecosystem. Thus, in facilitating community media content creation, a deeply ethical commitment is implied.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At proposal stage, the research goal was to assess how the community communication environment can be mobilised to better serve community needs through engaging residents, local businesses and community organisations in storytelling networks. A number of subsidiary objectives related to production of media content about community development projects for broadcast and other dissemination, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of partnership opportunities

<sup>2</sup> Colleagues from Social Practice, Design and Management also had some involvement, arising from their existing research relationships with the seven communities identified as potential subjects for *The living community*. They were go-betweens, working with their community contacts to develop story ideas, and liaise through me with the series production manager, students and others

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unitec.ac.nz/about-us/contact-us/staff-directory/alexander-lee>

<sup>4</sup> It was not included in the Face TV broadcast series but is available online (Clarke 2015a)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.skyeclark.com/>

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## Money under fire: The ethics of revenue generation for oppositional news outlets

*This paper critically assesses the ethical challenges not-for-profit oppositional news outlets face when generating revenues. Both media in exile (out-of-country news outlets feeding independent information into the country of origin) and those in restrictive environments (in-country providing counter-information) often rely on media development funding to survive. Yet they are increasingly expected to diversify revenue as they wean themselves off grant dependency. As a result, tension arises between the necessities to generate revenues while continuing journalism in some of the most challenging environments globally. Building on empirical data, the author reflects on the ethical implications of three main revenue categories being used: grant funding, commercial revenues and donations. The paper finds oppositional news organisations are faced with a unique set of pragmatic challenges that prompts an ethical value set which oscillates between entrenched dependence on grant funding, commercial reluctance and commercial reconciliation.*

**Key words:** exile, oppositional news, revenues, business, media development

### Introduction

Exiled media can no longer operate in the country relating to their content. Journalists operate in exile on a residency, refugee or asylum status and focus on getting news back in. News exists online, occasionally in print, or shortwave radio near borders, satellites or phone-in radio. They are often unable to return home due to danger or warrants for their arrest, and many have been abused, imprisoned or tortured. The sites can be blocked in-country, requiring a proxy server; offices can be destroyed and cyber-attacks carried out. Information providers in restrictive news environments are in-country news outlets often operating under the radar. They also face extensive legal and operational difficulties. Both kinds of oppositional news outlets share a desire to truth-tell, give a voice to their populations suffering war or oppression and foster

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informed citizenry. Most see journalism as a way to hold decision-makers accountable and disseminate inaccessible material. They have a bias to editorial and human rights backgrounds rather than business. While journalism often focuses on human atrocities and hard news stories, editorial checks on balance are limited. Often volunteers, they are sometimes unable to produce high-quality, objective journalism.

The second commonality is in the overall economic fragility of their existence. Many face a unique set of business challenges internally and externally (CIMA 2007; Nelson 2011; FOJO 2013). Production is required on limited resources far from audiences in different languages. Teams are often small and traditional commission-based sales roles are deemed 'untenable' as they generate too little. External to their outlet, the market and currency are often weak and the normal supply and demand of products and services is disrupted. Government agents and trolls disrupt interaction online; literacy and the purchasing power of citizens are low. Podesta (2009) identifies 'soft censorship' to include pressure by governments on commercial enterprises to advertise in certain media and not in others. Market distortions arise for many reasons: advertisements are controlled, sizeable retail chains closed, controls are imposed on who works with whom, cosy business relationships are developed including highly lucrative concessions in exchange for a 'financially unsustainable pro-government media outlet' (Loza 2015). Internet penetration is usually low with slow bandwidth and with readers risking arrest. It is also a challenge not knowing what the future holds: if and when a country will transition.

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Given the operational difficulties and market distortions, it is significant that legitimate donor funding has emerged to support such media. An extensive landscape of international organisations, aid agencies, trainers, publisher associations and private foundations exists, providing an ever-widening range of assistance. However, as the media development sector has matured, media outlets have been increasingly warned to regard funding as seed and focus on sustaining themselves independently with business activity. Long-standing information providers such as Short Wave Radio Zimbabwe and Uznews.net Uzbekistan, for example, closed in 2014 due to lack of funding.

Evidence gathered to date shows these media use three main revenue types: most rely on grant funding, some earn income including advertising, sales, affiliate marketing and cross-subsidy from for-profit business ventures, and there is some evidence of private donations from individuals or through crowdfunding (Cook 2016). Of direct relevance, a consultation by non-profit organisation FOJO Media Institute (2013) looked at the sustainability of 14 independent exile media outlets. It found overall reliance on grant funding and only fledgling evidence of revenues (commercial

advertising, selling merchandise and events), but a lack of impact from those initiatives on overall budgets. A lack of in-house business skills was a key challenge and doubts as to the likelihood of achieving full sustainability in exile were raised (ibid: 17). The quest for sustainability has itself been plagued by confusion of the word and also belies the immaturity and complexity of the markets externally in many of the most repressed countries. Parsons et al. (2008) map the barriers to media development including economic impoverishment, lack of stable monetary systems, poverty, media consolidation, and the cost of starting out, but stop short of gathering any empirical evidence.

While scholars have focused to date on the broad challenges in media development funding, there is little understanding of the economic pressures at firm level, far less the ethical value set developed as a result. This study advances the discussion by confronting the underlying power relationship between not-for-profit oppositional media and grant-giving institutions. It is especially appropriate given the relatively new pressures on these typically weaker media supporting free information flow to diversify revenues. A legitimate flow of grant funding exists to support media where external market and operational forces make such funding a necessity. This has led to a form of unethically entrenched and strategic dependence on grant funding. Commercial reluctance is also evidenced: for some, making any revenue from their journalism is seen as ethically dubious, with scepticism around commercial and donated revenues. For others, commercial imperatives have spawned increased reconciliation in operational economic matters, including the use of a specialist advertising network as an 'ethical gatekeeper'.

### **Literature review**

Since the United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information in 1948, open and transparent media have been recognised as important vehicles to address conflict, promote freedom of expression and contribute to political or economic change. Against a backdrop of neoliberal civil society (Kaldor 2003) supporting independent media through a non-profit sector has also gained prominence with the UN good governance agenda (Wilson et al. 2007). It is difficult to unpick clear estimates of the amount of money dedicated to media support as it is often part of generalised democracy and governance portfolios (Deane 2013) and actions often result in a lack of close donor coordination (Fuchs et al. 2015). This can be due to the wider political (Alesina and Dollar 2000) or trade interests (Berthelemy 2006) that lead to a 'flavour of the month' syndrome (Nelson 2011). Cauhape-Cazaux and Kalathil (2015) note that many governments shy away from any kind of media support because it is seen as too sensitive.

While there is no universally accepted definition of media development, media for development, media assistance nor independent media, the normative assumption is that activity should support media systems that promote freedom of expression, plurality and diversity, strengthened media capacity, and professional training and skills development (GFMD 2008). The logic has been creating external pluralism through different media companies operating in one country to build democracy, assure access and voice to citizens. Scholars have explored how media can raise awareness and affect accountability (Batic 2006; Becker 2011), and freedom of the media is highly correlated with broader political freedoms (Karlekar and Becker 2014). Although the effect is arguable, reductions in restrictions on journalists can have a positive impact on corruption (Brunetti and Weder 2003; Chowdhury 2004). On the face of it, media development responds to challenges through an integrated model of support to tackle a deficiency of business skills, lack of market data and increasingly audience research (Foster 2014).

Which media funding models are most appropriate, however, is much contested. Promoting external pluralism via private media, funded by traditional choice-driven advertising and sales revenues, is questionable, given the current flaws and crisis in the 'free market' model (Peters 2010; Higgins 2014). Instead, low- or no-interest loans, public funding or subsidies are more likely to support quality, transparent media systems. Research in emerging markets suggests 'high levels of competition in markets with limited advertising revenues may lead to poor journalistic performance' (Becker et al. 2009). Rather, if it is accepted that media play a role in democratic society – and a policy briefing by the BBC Media Action highlights the 'urgent relevance' of public service media in fragile states (Harding 2015) – it could follow that this public good should receive public support or some form of subsidy or funding intervention. But donor funding can create a cycle of dependency undermining efforts to earn revenues. Reviewing the impact of donor media assistance in sub-Saharan Africa, Myers (2014) finds that it has, discouraging movement towards advertiser-funded high-audience content. Either way, according to Berger (2010) 'there seems to be an underplaying of business aspects and sustainability issues as a necessary feature for rendering a particular mediascape "developed"'.

Most recently, grant organisations have moved away from funding media directly in favour of tiered support across development stages, projects or initiatives. According to media NGO International Press Centre: 'Media centres will have to creatively think of rendering services for which they could receive payment so as to be able to meet aspects of their operational costs' (CIMA 2007). Equally, members of IFEX, the global freedom of expression network, reported it had become 'strikingly more difficult to obtain funding

for their work' (Becker and Vlad 2009). FOJO Media Institute ended a three-year programme to support exile media in 2016. At Open Society Foundations the sort of journalism being practised now drives funding decisions rather than political conditions of a country.

Previously they felt maybe they received grants simply because they existed and their work was important. Now they have to improve, get grants to perform better, to increase their impact on audiences. Many of our partners, after the initial shock, came to grips with the new reality and surprised us with great ideas. So the aim is really to make our partners stronger, improve their ability to be independent and survive the challenging market place and explore alternative digital business models (Ronderos 2015).

In response, some oppositional news outlets are attempting to diversify their revenue. While a precise typology of exiled and restricted media does not exist, they share characteristics with non-profit charities that seek to prioritise a public service mission more than for-profit revenues. This resonates with the investigative Latin-American journalism non-profit sector (Requejo-Aleman and Lugo-Ocando 2014). In some cases there has been piecemeal success: in digital inclusion projects in India, South Africa and Brazil (Madon et al. 2009) revenue successes were managed around donations, or partnerships with NGOs, but otherwise long-term indigenous revenue streams were difficult to find. A study of 35 independent media, some of which were in repressive regimes, identified four main challenges being faced by news producers: editorial, business, distribution and security. Innovation in business models occurs separately from content innovation (Robinson et al. 2015).

These pressures produce a new set of pragmatic and ethical challenges: independent media cannot exist without a viable business model (LaMay 2006) yet this creates a tension between information as a public service and operating a sustainable business. In a modern digital landscape, capturing readers without neglecting journalistic values is a recurrent tension. For some the ethical concern lies with private funding and the risk of bias, where company interests may feature more or less prominently in news agendas (Barnett and Townend 2015: 175). For others, the interests of audiences and advertisers are considered when selecting news (Beam 2003). Exiled media are not alone in having to gain readers, be more discoverable or make news more engaging (Batsell 2015). Some outlets have developed more light-hearted news stories (lifestyle, popular content or human interest) particularly to appeal to younger audiences (FOJO 2013: 22). In such a case, McManus (1992) would justify the strategy given the fragility of oppositional news: 'Only when profits are too small to sustain the

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news organisation are decisions to subordinate journalism norms to profit norms ethical.'

For individual journalists, economic necessities create conflicts between the ideal of independence and the need to pay production costs. There is a tension of loyalties: to those who pay you, your own values and your readers (Shrader 2011). In fragile states, this can become self-censorship for job security (Loza 2015). Sullivan (2013) urges local assessments of ethical behaviour when looking at investigative journalism in emerging democracies. Podesta (2014) finds that business journalism can thrive in repressive regimes because economic stories seem to be 'viewed as less threatening'. Discussing journalists' ethical duty to seek independence from economic pressures, Martin and Souder (2009) frame editorial independence as a matter of degree, proposing 'interdependence as a guiding principle for media ethics'. It is widely acknowledged that many journalists find business-related policy and entrepreneurial practices and content difficult to accept (Sylvie and Witherspoon 2002; Pekkala and Cook 2012). However, none of this directly confronts the ethical considerations for oppositional news outlets created by scarce resources and flawed markets.

### **Research method**

The findings are based on further analysis of empirical data from semi-structured interviews and a discussion group between December 2013 and 2015. It includes 23 non-profit media in exile or restricted environments producing content to reach Tibet, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Sudan, Syria, Iran, Burma, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, Russian Caucasus, Eritrea, Azerbaijan, central Asia, Turkmenistan and Belarus. The media outlets were all groups or organisations producing content independent from, and alternative to, state-controlled media and were mixed format: online media, broadcasting, shortwave radio, satellite and phone transmission. The sample was selected from grantees working with three philanthropic, non-governmental donor organisations. More systematic sampling was not possible, as no listing or database exists. In a new research field such as this, data gathered in this way is still valuable. The aim was to offer comparability by detecting ethical value sets in income-generation and revenue by a range of media. Anonymity was agreed to assure the participants' safety, yet common factors were drawn out to preserve analytical relevance. Exiled editors who choose to live in a more open market area and supply content exclusively to the diaspora community were not included. Nor does the research include journalists who may be in exile but who work for large, government-sponsored organisations. A further ten semi-structured interviews with project managers from donor organisations, project coordinators or consultants working in the field were carried out. These were conducted to document reflections on ethics relevant to the sector more generally.

*Grant income and donations a necessity*

Of the 23 cases included here, grants were substantial revenue or a way of launching in all cases. This is unsurprising given the sheer scale of media assistance funding historically. Grant income was seen as necessary where other revenue streams were impractical. Many in-country advertisers (advertisers who are based in the country where content is being served) will not advertise on oppositional sites for fear of repercussions and there are few opportunities for out-of-country adverts (such as banks or universities represent a product or service available beyond the country). One broadcaster covering Azerbaijan said: 'We are trying to plant a tree in a desert.' Sponsorship and sales are rarely appropriate, particularly for an outlet covering Turkmenistan: 'Selling merchandise would be ridiculous. People are not going to wear a T-shirt in the country where even the website is locked and you have to use a proxy service to read it.' Where content is particularly traumatic, advertisers do not want to be associated. 'One early decision was to get advertisers but we got no one because they said it would reflect badly on them because of the content.' A site covering the Caucasus said: 'We write about disappearances, tortures, the hardest stories on human rights violation, and advertisers do not want to be associated with that.'

Private donations (via microdonations or a fundraising campaign supported by individuals) presented complex operational challenges based on safety and infrastructure. Most of the cases made very little from user donations. They considered it impractical to ask for donations from readers. One Sri Lankan outlet said alternative secure payment systems would be needed: 'Everyone lives in fear. I got a few messages that someone wanted to send money to me directly but I was afraid as [the government] will see their official data.' More generally, banking was problematic for underground organisations. A Zimbabwean site said: 'We would have to move into mobile payment more seriously, for example using EcoCash (a Zimbabwean mobile payment solution). However, it is quite onerous to get an account. You need to be selling things as an individual or company.'

Even the most advanced editorially led initiatives typically generated only a fraction of the overall budget from donations. One site said: 'The Syrian diaspora is exhausted financially but they would not support the media when people are dying from hunger. Fundraising does not make sense at this time.' Another in Asia said apathy was a major obstacle: 'We are the only website like us but there is a very passive attitude. [They are] not very politically active and not conscious and take everything for granted.' In-country audiences also have far more pressing concerns. They are poor and spend all their resources sending money home for people to survive so it

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is largely seen as unethical to ask them. 'Syrians prefer to give to charity and people who work in relief.'

For some, grant funding was the way to achieve distance from editorial influence. One site developing coverage of Uzbekistan said: 'Donor funding is clean and ethical. As I am not influenced by them and they don't influence my editorial policy then it is OK.' One consultant noted: 'For them it feels as if making any money is corruption. They worry money means influencing stories and believe the newsroom can't touch the money.' A mistrust of commercial income comes in part from corruption in-country. Corruption was also taken into consideration when deciding on donations as a revenue stream. One editor considering a new operation highlighted the concern over control: 'With crowdfunding there can be money that I don't want from people. There are oligarchs who quarrel with the president, they go abroad and finance journalism. I would be worried. People from my country are not so developed to think they just give you money. They will see that you will satisfy their interests; it would be conditional.' Concerns were raised that private donations are not transparent. One media outlet said: 'If the economy reaches a certain level then everyone wants to have one media behind them so you can have big businesses and support, almost like a hobby.' One expert in exiled media said: 'There is just as much if not more of an ethical question because it is not someone with a product to sell, just someone who wants to exert influence.'

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For media in the most repressive environments, generating any sort of revenues based on atrocities or people struggling was seen as ethically dubious – making grant income an assumed necessity. Earning revenues would deter audiences and be against their editorial mission to spread content as widely and as freely as possible. There was also a sense among some that audiences would no longer support media if they were earning revenues. One Syrian journalist said: 'We will lose credibility if we earn income. They are listening to us exactly because we are struggling and non-profit. If they felt we were making money out of it they would lose faith.' Several sites said advertising would detract from the overall appeal of the site, or would irritate the audience.

***A form of unethical grant dependency***

This reveals an underlying tension over whose responsibility it is to fund such media, and how best to maximise funding opportunities. One media covering Syria said: 'We know how to do proposals and do donors but they always have strict conditions that apply.' There was also concern that countries and issues become 'increasingly less attractive', affecting the likelihood of grant support. Another said: 'We have two types of partners. Some are important strategically and can lobby on the EU front. Others are less committed. Overall it's influence plus money.' Representatives from the grant community

highlighted frustrations. One project co-ordinator assessed target audience size, journalism quality, and content distribution in-country before allocating grants. He said: 'I expect them to try. I don't like it when they just complain about grants not coming. There is some frustration because they should be able to sustain themselves. I expect some of them to make some revenue but not that they should be sustainable.' Despite media ownership and financial transparency being a starting point ethically (Foster 2012), grant sources were not declared in the cases here, a significant marker in the risks associated with media development funding.

Grant funding becomes more contentious when it has the unintended effect of distorting media outlets' focus, and in some cases creating dependency. One covering Iran said: 'You must be very professional almost full-time to work for a strategy on how to do donations.' One outlet described how they accept work that may not be core editorially – simply to fit in with grants. Others have made grants the core strategy. A Syrian outlet made grant-bidding a business goal: 'We have looked for sources of funding that have renewal or re-funding so chosen the relationship carefully. Grants are part of our strategic thinking.' Grant income has become part of exiled media DNA, notably for one in-country Zimbabwean site: 'Grant income is the one we have experience in and that feels more efficient than moving into less known spaces. We write a proposal and then shop it around. So the solution is to make the grant model less efficient and the other models easier to contemplate. We have years of experience in donor funding and almost none around the other revenues.'

This echoes findings by LaMay (2007: 55) where media adapt to the media development resource market by either becoming donor-driven, or by proactively developing services and outcomes to the funders whose rationale depends on delivery in these areas. Pragmatic tensions arise as funds are often restricted against specific budget lines. A grant project coordinator commented: 'It is not a light switch that suddenly when the donor money runs out they will be self-funded. They lack business and financial skills to survive and succeed. Once people start giving out money it's hard.'

### ***Commercial reluctance***

Many of the sites expressed commercial reluctance to generating revenues as it was perceived to be too difficult. One said: 'There are doubts and scepticism in us not to make money. We see that it is never going to be significant contribution to the income so why should I bother.' Another said their target audience was too disparate, and their broadcast time too short to be of value to advertisers. There were also concerns about time: 'When in exile, so much time is already spent keeping afloat there is no time to do money.' Some talked of re-educating audiences to be more

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open to paying for content. Others felt that commercial activity was incompatible with their mission. '[Earned revenue] is not part of our business strategy because our roots are editorial. Our idea is to share censored information in the best means so we can't capitalise; it would contradict.'

Resistance against earning revenues is a source of tension among consultants. One noted: 'Most are more on the activism side. They don't find the money generation as a value activity. They believe advertisers have a pressure point on them. They feel a dollar in ads is polluting their mission. They don't see a legitimacy in delivering audiences to advertisers and accepting a payment for that.' Another advertising expert said: 'It is simplicity of not having to be sales person. This is much more an argument of convenience. Blocking all ads is too broad brush. There's always a way to do it that is tasteful and ethical. There is a lack of knowledge. It's more that it suits them to say that rather than them having considered the question of ethics.'

### *Reconciling commercial imperatives*

Practitioners increasingly accepted that some revenue generation independent of grant funding was of benefit. There was evidence of a range of earned income in the sample (display, banner, Google AdSense online advertising and an advertising network), although earned income was often in limited amounts. There was much variance in the ethical values towards revenue generation for the news outlets included here.

Three sites used a specialist-advertising agency for fragile states. It works by pooling advertising inventory into one global network of standard advertising formats and sizes. The network carries out due diligence on advertisers and has ethical guidelines. Some publishers found that having the advertising agency separate by name, domain and organisation helped them maintain ethical operations. A director notes: 'We help the publisher to avoid that kind of editorial influencing that some might seek to gain. If we are running all the ads we can screen it. We can run sponsored content because we are separate from the publisher so it takes the headache away. We are the ethical gatekeeper.' In previous studies exploring niche-subject journalism, news outlets have been found to worry about seeking direct sponsorship due to perceived conflict of interest (Nolan and Setrikian 2014). Three sites listed problems generating revenues from syndication, as many larger media take content without appropriate credit. One outlet covering Azerbaijan said: 'It is unethical that lots of large media companies take our work without crediting us.'

Some were evolving their value set to accept more soft content to bundle with harder news stories, or to refocus material, in order to

generate revenues. An Iranian site said: 'If it is culture and softer news in separate sections you can make money from that. It is very humanistic and we cannot be ashamed of it.' Others were more open to advertising revenues. In the Russian Caucasus, one of the biggest advertisers is a phone provider. 'The region is important for them because the site can offer large audiences.' One site covering central Asia has shifted in mentality to become a 'normal business-orientated media'. The editor said: 'When we started, commercial revenue was an optional extra but now [grant] funding has been removed there are other ways. We just tried and it has opened my mind to how I want to develop my website. I am interested in commercial not just to write a good story. I want a bigger audience; then I will have more clicks and I will earn more. It is good motivation and good journalism. We had it in our minds we are in exile everyone hates us but no one will complain about Google Ads. It is normal now.'

There was widespread knowledge among the cases that private donations, microdonations (such as a 'donate here' button on a website) or crowdfunding were a step towards income generation. Two sites had run successful crowdfunding campaigns around specific projects. One mobilised a large social media campaign to secure donations around major European cities. This generated \$40,800 mainly targeting middle-class audiences for the broadcasting of information to Azerbaijan. In the Caucasus, an initiative generated around \$50,000 over ten months; however, it was 'very complicated and it took a lot of time'.

Media were reconciling the advantages associated with limiting grant reliance. One Uzbekistan media outlet said: 'With donor funding you can't use their money for marketing or for commercial purposes to generate more money.' For a Belarusian outlet it was the same: 'Grant-givers don't want you to have people supported that are not content providers and be paid from the donor's budget.' FOJO Media Institute's project coordinator noted at the end of a three-year programme to support exile media:

There has been a marked difference in attitudes in the last year. At the beginning of the project, there was a feeling that asking partners to generate revenues made them feel as if they might have to prostitute themselves. Perhaps it was part of the reliance on donor funding without any real thinking of what that would do for them. There are now more ideas and more thinking about the future on their own terms. There was a thinking that to make any money they might have to compromise their values but now they are more ready to reconcile that somehow if they want to continue.

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## Conclusions

Overall, oppositional news outlets are tailoring their ethical checklist based on shifting goal-posts. The paper finds that non-profit oppositional media are faced with a unique set of pragmatic challenges as they wean themselves off grant dependency. Perspectives shift between commercial reluctance and commercial reconciliation, all the while grappling with the legitimisation of grant funding. A priority was to remain independent and avoid economic corruption, associated with buying editorial control or lack of transparency from bribes or donations. This was expected despite a lack of transparency in what funding is received from whom.

From the cases here, reliance on grants is particularly entrenched and strategic. There are power relations and tensions between grant organisations, consultants and grantees. Despite warnings and efforts on the part of donor organisations to prepare outlets for funding changes, many are economically fragile. Overall grant funding is seen as ethical when approached from the perspective of necessity: where market forces prevent other revenues, and as a way of achieving distance from corruption or editorial control. Grant income is further justified where commercial activity compromises editorial values. Soft control in terms of spending restrictions, and media outlets altering their editorial priorities or projects to fit grants, have not featured heavily in driving emerging value sets. While grant organisations have complex criteria for allocating funding, this is at least in part based on size of audience and quality of production, which are also factors likely to affect earned income potential.

However, with income generation a more pressing concern, several outlets are now reconciling new pragmatic and ethical frameworks. An advertising network was seen as the most ethically robust as it acted as an 'ethical gatekeeper' between commercial and editorial operations. Others were attempting to diversify content production into soft stories in order to be more 'advertiser friendly'. Crowdfunding was a revenue source in two cases around a specific project with a campaign aimed out of country. Overall attitudes to commercial revenue-generation are shifting.

This paper offers a glimpse into ethical concerns of revenue generation for non-profit oppositional news outlets. It was not possible from the approach taken here to accurately contextualise whether wider funding changes represent commercial diminution of these publication's role, or indeed reflect shifting complexities in the identity of what oppositional news media are in an ever-more fragmented information space. Nor is it possible to assess any correlation between funding models and broader impact measures. Further consideration should include the ethical development and corresponding revenue potential of new distribution channels.

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### Note on the contributor

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## 'Charitable journalism': Oxymoron or opportunity?

*Resource intensive journalism considered likely to attract small audiences has been particularly vulnerable to industry cuts. Could charitable funding help reinvigorate topics neglected by commercial media? And what are the benefits and drawbacks?*

**Key words:** charitable journalism, media plurality, public interest journalism, media policy and regulation

My recent research investigating the possibility of charitably funded journalism has prompted a few bemused responses. Surely journalism and charity are mutually exclusive? This view is part of a general suspicion of public or state intervention in the news business; politicians such as Lord Stoneham of Droxford have been unconvinced 'that the state should get involved in subsidising the industry' (*Parliament.uk* 2012). Despite this perception, there is a range of existing journalistic projects that are funded charitably and opportunities to add more to this list.

As author of the UK section of a new five-country report co-produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Yale Information Society Project,<sup>1</sup> I was tasked with finding out whether any 'news' is sustained by charities in the UK, and if so, how. This exercise required flexible thinking. Certainly there are no national news organisations operating in this way. It is unlikely that any national operation could achieve such status without radical change to its structure and output. As a Charity Law Association working party identified in 2011, 'a commercial undertaking such as a conventional newspaper company is likely to be disqualified from charitable status because its underlying purpose is to generate a financial return for its owners, regardless of any beneficial effect on the public that might result from some of its work' (CLA 2011). This would make it difficult to meet the 'public benefit' requirement, by which a charity must not give rise to more than an incidental personal benefit.

### **Charitable journalism in practice**

This restriction would not, however, preclude a not-for-profit organisation seeking charitable status. And if one thinks beyond

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**Judith Townend** national news outlets to other types of organisations producing news-like or journalistic-style content, then there is convincing evidence of charitable funding being used to support journalism. In 2011 Robert Picard (co-editor of the new report) identified three possible models: 'Charitable ownership and control', 'Charitably supported media' and 'Trust ownership and control'. For the new research, I adapted and updated these as follows:

1. charitable ownership and control, in which a charity directly produces journalism as a core activity;
2. charitable ownership and control, in which a charity owns or controls a non-charitable journalism-producing organisation;
3. charitably-supported journalism in which non-charitable journalism-producing organisations and individuals receive some support from charities and charitable individuals (recipient may be taxed on grants received).

There were examples for each of these models, although some organisations might be better described as 'hybrid' with overlap between the categories depending on the nature of its set-up and operations. The national organisations *Full Fact* and *The Conversation UK* fall in category one, in which the charity produces journalism as a core activity. Both organisations are registered charities, employ journalists and writers, and have charitable purposes strongly connected to the mission of journalism. *Full Fact*, a non-partisan fact-checking website, provides tools, advice and information to allow people to assess claims made about public issues. It was originally rejected twice by the Charity Commission before successfully securing charitable status in 2014 after a third application (Sharman 2014). It aims to advance public education 'in the fields of crime, health, immigration, economy, education, environment and social welfare, through education, research and training' to 'promote and advance public understanding and inform public debate ... by making available to the public, through a process of objective, impartial research and rigorous factual analysis, full, accurate and relevant information' (Charity Commission 2015).

Meanwhile, *The Conversation UK*, part of an initiative that started in Australia, is publisher of an online news analysis and commentary website where all articles are written by academics for a general non-academic audience. Authors and editors sign up to an Editorial Charter and contributors must abide by its community standards policy. All its articles are available for republishing free of charge under a Creative Commons licence. Its charitable object is, like *Full Fact*, the advancement of education. As non-profits, rather than commercial enterprises, they were able to show that they would not give rise to more than an incidental personal benefit.

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In the second category, where the relationship is less direct, and the charity owns or controls a non-charitable organisation, examples include *Which?* magazine, published by the charity the Consumers' Association through its trading company Which? Ltd, which is registered as a private limited company; and the Maidenhead Advertiser, a newspaper run by the private limited company Baylis Media Ltd owned by The Louis Baylis (*Maidenhead Advertiser*) Charitable Trust. The charitable trust receives at least 80 per cent of the newspaper's profits. The benefits of being a charity are less obvious in this category: for example, the private entity would not necessarily enjoy the tax relief available for charities.

The last category allows for arrangements whereby an organisation receives charitable funding, but without necessarily being tied to one charitable owner. The boundaries are not clearly defined: categories two and three may overlap to some extent. Examples within this group include *openDemocracy*, a website published by a private limited company and wholly owned by a private not-for-profit, the openDemocracy Foundation for the Advancement of Global Education, and partially supported by a charity, the OpenTrust. This arrangement allows a publishing entity to engage in different types of activity, some charitably funded – with specific charitable purposes and for the public benefit – and some non-charitably funded, and therefore unconstrained by restrictions on political activity.

Finally, outside the three categories of what might be called charitable journalism, there are examples of *media*-supporting charities; charities such as BBC Action or the Media Trust which support media training and education. There are also charities that produce media content as part of their wider work: human rights charities, universities and churches, for example.

Not only is charitable journalism already being done, it is successful. At a local level, the *Ambler*, the *Burngreave Messenger* and the *Lewisham Pensioner's Gazette* are charitable initiatives producing local media content, part of a useful response to the 'democratic deficit' caused by local news closures and cuts. Academics have been able to share their work with public audiences through *The Conversation UK* without relying on commercial news organisations constrained by news agendas and a lack of time (or inclination) to commission and edit academic work for non-specialist audiences. *China Dialogue* is publishing a dual language website highlighting under-covered environmental issues. *Full Fact* is injecting reliable information into the media and political system by systematically checking the claims that are made by politicians, newspapers and other powerful people and institutions.

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**Judith Townend** These charitable initiatives share one striking similarity: they all provide content neglected in commercial environments, perhaps because this content does not drive enough traffic to attract online advertising, or is considered unlikely to appeal to paying subscribers and readers. One such neglected area is law for general public audiences: it is notable that specialist legal and courts coverage has declined in recent years, with fewer expert correspondents and full-time court reporters employed by commercial national and local news organisations (see, for example, Magrath 2012). *Full Fact* has, however, bucked the trend and increased its output on legal topics after the Legal Education Foundation funded its first legal researcher post (McKinney 2015). Charitable status helps attract funding for public interest content that is being cut in other quarters.

### **A suitable model?**

These forms of charitable journalism are not appropriate for all kinds of public interest content, however. According to Charity Commission guidance based on the common and statutory law, a charity's purposes cannot be political; political campaigning, or political activity, must be undertaken by a charity only in the context of supporting the delivery of its charitable purposes (Charity Commission 2008). A partisan newspaper offering strong political commentary would not be suitable for charitable status. It is only a particular type of tightly structured non-partisan organisation that would be able to fit within the constraints of the existing charity regime.

One concern raised by critics is that charitable trustees and funders would be able to put pressure on editors and journalists working for their publications, risking editorial autonomy. In counterpoint, it can be argued that the robust structure required for a charity, with guidelines and a system of regulatory enforcement, could, in fact, help protect journalism from editorial interference – offering greater safeguards than in commercial environments, where editorial interference from powerful owners is well-documented. Tom Murdoch, partner at the charity-specialist law firm Stone King LLP, believes that greater recognition of charitable forms of journalism could equip community news providers and investigative journalists to more easily survive in the new environment, strengthen local communities and meet an important democratic need to disseminate information which enables citizens to participate more fully in society.<sup>2</sup>

### **Obstacles to registering as a charity**

It is not easy for a non-partisan journalism organisation – even if designed to meet a charitable purpose and provide public benefit – to secure charitable status. It took *Full Fact* three attempts. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has also been rejected twice, and has delayed a third application until it can be more confident of success.

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Among the issues is the Charity Commission's requirement to see evidence that the organisation's input to investigative journalism translates into democratic participation and engagement; the Bureau felt it needed clearer guidance on this before proceeding with a further application. The Bureau was also concerned that changing trustee roles and operating procedures, as it has been advised to do, could affect the editorial independence of the editor and constrain the range of its journalism. A revised structure could potentially introduce delays in committing to stories. According to its chairman James Lee, 'these constraints would not necessarily have been prohibitive, but they were certainly far from ideal'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Policy and law**

Proponents of charitable journalism, such as an *ad hoc* group of lawyers and practitioners that submitted written evidence to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, have suggested that charity law 'should be capable of recognising the broad public benefit in certain forms of public interest journalism, subject to conditions that would not open the floodgates to the registration of news organisations that are pursuing commercial benefit or political objects' (Heawood et al. 2012). This followed recommendations by the House of Lords select committee on communication that the Charity Commission should 'provide greater clarity and guidelines on which activities related to the media, and in particular investigative journalism, are charitable in the current state of the law'. The committee also asked that the body 'take into consideration both the current pressures on investigative journalism as well as its democratic importance when interpreting the relevant legislation' (House of Lords 2012: para. 201).

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## **DISCUSSION PAPER**

The previous Coalition government was reluctant to engage on this issue. At the time of the House of Lords committee hearings Jeremy Hunt, then culture secretary, indicated that the Government was not 'inclined to legislate' (*ibid*: para. 198). And, it would seem, disinclined to take any action at all, as neither the government nor the Charity Commission appears to have officially responded to the House of Lords report. There has been no indication of further consultation on this issue, at least not publicly.

### **An opportunity for journalism**

To return to the question posed in the title: is charitable journalism an oxymoron or an opportunity? The research discussed here, and in my wider work (Townend 2016; Barnett and Townend 2015), indicates that models of charitable journalism provide an opportunity for producing public interest content under-served by commercial organisations. It would only be oxymoronic if the journalism were partisan, existed for a political purpose and provided more than incidental personal benefit to owners: these characteristics – which define many commercial news operations – would conflict with a

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**Judith Townend** common social and legal understanding of charitable work. As the *ad hoc* group wrote in its evidence to Lord Justice Leveson, there need to be conditions preventing news organisations which further commercial and party political interests from becoming charities.

Charitable status is not a magic bullet for the media industry. Being a charity places particular burdens on organisations as well as granting them reputational and financial benefits. But certain (existing or future) non-profit news organisations, especially those working in local geographic communities, on investigations and specialist topics such as law could greatly benefit from a regime that recognises specified forms of journalistic and news activity as charitable, to a greater extent than it does already. The structures and approach required for charitable status would strengthen rather than undermine the quality and independence of journalism, and especially so in areas neglected by commercial media organisations.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The impact of charity and tax law/regulation on not-for-profit news organizations*, edited by Robert Picard, Valerie Belair Gagnon and Sofia Ranchordás and published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, and the Yale Law School Information Society Project, was published in March 2016. The research for my chapter in that report is partly based on work completed for an AHRC-funded project on media power and plurality at the University of Westminster, 2013-14

<sup>2</sup> Tom Murdoch advised on the full RISJ/ISP report, in which his views are set out more fully

<sup>3</sup> Information taken from discussion seminar notes at the University of Westminster in 2014 and personal correspondence with James Lee

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### Note on the contributor

Judith Townend is lecturer in information law and policy and director of the Information Law and Policy Centre at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London. She is co-editor (with Steven Barnett) of *Media power and plurality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and her interdisciplinary research focuses on access to information and, more broadly, the development of media and information law and policy in society.

## Regulating ethics: A way forward for charitable journalism

*In this paper, I review the decision of the English Charity Tribunal to grant charitable status to the Independent Press Regulation Trust and argue that, by recognising the existence of a distinct body of journalism ethics, the tribunal has opened a way forward for charitable journalism.*

**Key words: press regulation, ethics, charitable journalism, Charity Tribunal, Independent Press Regulation Trust**

### Introduction

There have been sustained calls in recent years for journalism to be recognised as a charitable activity in England and Wales, as it is in the United States (Smith et al. 2011; Levy and Picard 2011; Heawood et al. 2012; House of Lords 2012; Moore 2014; Radcliffe 2015). Charitable status would allow non-profit news organisations to raise funds through charitable donations, which would in turn help to diversify the range of voices represented in an otherwise highly concentrated news media sector.

In its capacity as the ‘fourth estate’, journalism undoubtedly plays an important public function. Journalists hold powerful groups and individuals accountable for their actions, expose wrongdoing and disseminate information of social value. Journalism does good, therefore news organisations do good, runs the argument. Charitable status is appropriate for organisations that do good, therefore news organisations should be charities. In practice, the legal reality does not permit this simple conclusion.

The requirements of charitable status do not coincide neatly with the practice of journalism. Under English law, charities must exist to pursue exclusively charitable objects, such as the advancement of education, citizenship or community development; they must provide demonstrable benefit to the public and they must not exist to achieve a political purpose (Maclennan 2007). Traditional news publishers tend not to meet any of these criteria. They are highly politically partisan – a fact which was recognised and welcomed in the Leveson Report: ‘It is the prerogative of a free and partisan

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press in a democracy to campaign, lobby and seek to influence both public opinion and public policy' (Leveson 2012: Part I, Chapter 1, 1.12).

As commercial entities, news publishers do not exist to pursue objects such as community development but to generate financial rewards for their owners and shareholders. The vast majority of traditional news publishers could not possibly become charities under the current legal framework, and it is not the purpose of this article to argue that they should. The nature of the public good which is provided by journalism *in general* is quite different from the nature of the public good which may be provided by certain forms of journalism *in particular*. When I refer to this latter form of journalism as 'charitable journalism', I mean journalism which has the potential to demonstrate its charitable nature in the legal sense upheld by the Charity Commission for England and Wales ('the commission'). This is not possible for all journalism, by any stretch of the imagination. But it is possible for some forms of journalism.

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The commission has accepted that, in principle, some journalism may well be charitable in the narrow legal sense (letter from Alice Holt to Andrew Phillips, 3 December 2010, cited in Heawood et al. 2012: 11). However, the commission has suggested that, before registering a news organisation as a charity, it would need to see concrete evidence that its journalistic activities are directed towards and reflect a charitable purpose; that this purpose will, in fact, be achieved; and that this purpose will benefit the entire public, or a sufficient section of the public (ibid). In effect, the commission wants to understand the ethical standards under which charitable journalism is produced. This concern was echoed by participants at a seminar about charitable initiatives in journalism, at which the Charity Commission was represented, when it was suggested that any charitable news organisation would require 'robust operating guidelines and a system of enforcing them' and that there could be 'a need for formalising standards of conduct and decision making process ... through an independent body' (Westminster 2014: 7). Thus, in order to be capable of demonstrating a charitable purpose and public benefit, charitable journalism must be able to demonstrate that it is produced according to high ethical standards, formalised and upheld by an independent body.

Whilst the United States Inland Revenue Service (IRS) has granted numerous non-profit news organisations the equivalent of charitable status (see Hermes 2012: *passim*), the comparatively cautious Charity Commission has so far recognised very few, of which perhaps only one, the *Maidenhead Advertiser*, has all the characteristics of a traditional newspaper (see Townend 2016: 63-64). There is, therefore, little case law in this area, and consequently almost no guidance on the ethical standards under which charitable

journalism might be produced. For this reason, the case of the Independent Press Regulation Trust (IPRT) is of considerable interest.

### **The Independent Press Regulation Trust**

The IPRT was established by a Declaration of Trust dated 8 November 2013 to promote 'high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and the editing and publication of news in the print and other media, having regard to the need to act within the law and to protect both the privacy of individuals and freedom of expression' (cited in Vernor-Miles, Flackett and Rees-Pulley v Charity Commission for England & Wales 2015: 2). The Declaration of Trust expects that the IPRT will advance this object by activities including 'the provision of financial assistance towards the establishment and support of an independent press regulator or independent press regulators to be established and conducted for the whole or any part of the United Kingdom in accordance with the recommendations and principles set out in the Leveson Report' (ibid).

The Leveson Report, published in 2012, recommended a new regulatory regime for the press, to be independent of control by either the newspaper industry or government (Leveson 2012). A regulator designed in accordance with the Leveson recommendations would, to paraphrase the comments cited above, formalise and uphold ethical standards of journalism. This would not only help to regulate major national and regional news publishers; it would also satisfy the need of charitable news organisations for 'robust operating guidelines and a system of enforcing them' (Westminster 2014: 7), thereby demonstrating to the Charity Commission that such organisations were likely to be of benefit to the public.

The IMPRESS Project was launched in November 2013 to develop plans for such a regulator.<sup>1</sup> That regulator was launched, as IMPRESS: The Independent Monitor for the Press ('IMPRESS'), in 2015 and will commence operations in 2016. IMPRESS is constitutionally separate from the IPRT, although the two entities have similar purposes. In 2014, the IPRT proposed to provide financial assistance to IMPRESS. This proposal was concluded in 2015 in the form of a four-year funding agreement.

The IPRT's application for charitable status was twice rejected by the Charity Commission, first on 7 May 2014, and again, after an internal review, on 16 October 2014. At this point, the trustees of the IPRT took their case to the first-tier tribunal (charity) ('the tribunal'), where the case was eventually heard on 12 May 2015. Whilst the tribunal did not consider arguments relating directly to the charitable nature or otherwise of journalism, their decision indicates a possible way forward for news organisations which aspire to charitable status.

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## The tribunal's decision

For the purposes of the IPRT appeal, I was commissioned by the trustees of the IPRT to prepare a report on the public benefit in independent press regulation. My report was unchallenged by the commission and was relied upon as evidence by the tribunal.

In the report, I set out the core ethical standards of journalism, as represented in the UK by the *Editors' code of practice* and the National Union of Journalists' *Code of conduct* (IPSO 2016; National Union of Journalists 2011). These codes share some underlying principles with other journalism codes around the world, which, together, constitute a recognisable body of journalism ethics. The Council of Europe has recently distilled the principles which are common to the ethical standards of journalism codes across Europe into the following list (Council of Europe 2011), which I cited in my report:

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- respect for dignity and privacy;
- respect for the presumption of innocence and fair trial;
- respect for the right of intellectual property;
- remedies for third parties, in the form of a right of reply;
- avoidance of hate speech;
- respect for the rights of children;
- respect for the rights of women;
- respect for the rights of minorities;
- avoidance of covert advertising.

I concluded by describing the public benefit to be derived from independent press regulation in the form recommended by Lord Justice Leveson:

A body such as IMPRESS, which complies with the public interest principles of the Leveson Report, would be of considerable benefit to the public. It would promote ethical journalism, free expression, privacy, alternative dispute resolution and the education of journalists and the public. It would encourage the publication of journalism that provides the public with accurate and reliable information and which avoids harm. It would help the courts to distinguish between journalism produced according to ethical standards and other forms of expression, thereby upholding the constitutional protections for free expression, within permissible limitations. It would protect the human right to privacy, not only by offering redress for the victims of privacy breaches, but also by mitigating the risk of such breaches in future. It would promote alternative dispute resolution through its complaints-handling and arbitration schemes. It would educate journalists and the public through its standards code

and the publication of guidance on the code, and by allowing publishers to display a kitemark to help the public distinguish ethically regulated journalism from other forms of expression. Any private benefit to regulated news publishers under such a system would be minimal and incidental to the public benefit (Vernor-Miles, Flackett and Rees-Pulley v Charity Commission for England & Wales 2015: 5).

The tribunal found this evidence regarding the public benefit in ethical journalism ‘persuasive’ (ibid: 9), and concluded that, by formalising and upholding a clear code of journalism standards independent press regulation was capable of advancing the ethical and moral improvement of the community – a recognised charitable purpose. The tribunal, therefore, upheld the IPRT’s appeal and directed the commission to enter the IPRT on the register of charities. This decision was underpinned by the tribunal’s acceptance that there is a recognised body of journalism ethics, and the implicit acknowledgement that journalism produced according to such ethical standards is likely to be of benefit to the public.

### **Conclusion**

If charitable news organisations are to demonstrate that their journalistic activities are directed towards a charitable purpose; that this purpose will, in fact, be achieved; and that this purpose will benefit the entire public, or a sufficient section of the public, then they must – among other things – be able to show that their work is produced according to ethical standards. This is not sufficient to achieve charitable status, but it is a necessary precondition.

By registering the IPRT as a charity, the tribunal has created a precedent in charity law for the existence of such ethical standards of journalism. The tribunal did not see any need to define ethical journalism, but relied as evidence upon the existence of a set of recognised principles, as distilled by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2011). This precedent should help news organisations show the Charity Commission that they will fulfil their charitable purposes by researching and publishing stories with full regard for the rights and interests of any individuals concerned, and of society as a whole, according to a recognised code of ethics.

Moreover, by enabling IMPRESS to operate as an independent press regulator, with financial assistance from the IPRT, the tribunal has helped to create a framework within which the ethical standards of news organisations may indeed be formalised and upheld. News organisations which are independently regulated by a body such as IMPRESS can demonstrate to the commission that they follow high ethical standards of journalism. This should provide the commission with the necessary reassurance that, whilst not all journalism is charitable, certain forms of journalism are charitable, and that

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charitable journalism may be recognised by its regulation against clear ethical standards. And this, in turn, should lead to more scope for news organisations to be granted charitable status.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The author was founding director of the IMPRESS Project and is Chief Executive Officer of IMPRESS

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### **Note on the contributor**

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## Conflict of interest: Hybrid journalism's central ethical challenge

*Acute economic pressures on media, legacy and new alike, induced by digital transformation have contributed to the burgeoning of a class of news-like content that goes under various deceptive names such as 'hybrid journalism'. This challenges certain foundational assumptions on which ethical notions of editorial independence, conflict of interest and deception have rested for many decades. News-like content is not just about the promotion of commercial products and interests, which have generally been the focus of 'advertorials' in the past, but about politics, religion and ideology as well. These developments confront democratic societies, which depend on news media for a bedrock of reliable information on which to make choices as citizens, with a new and serious problem. This paper examines these foundational assumptions and ethical norms by reference to three case studies and concludes that long-term trust in media is being traded off for short-term financial gain.*

**Key words: conflict of interest, deception, native advertising, sponsored content, hybrid journalism**

### Introduction

Conflict of interest has become a structural ethical challenge for journalism, embedded now in the content-production processes. Whereas in pre-digital times it was recognised by journalists, publishers and broadcasters as a problem to be managed, now it is being deliberately built in to the work of journalists. A range of new categories of content has been developed by start-ups and established news media publishers alike, creating new sources of revenue but blurring the distinction between advertising and news content. The lexicon in which these categories are referred to is still evolving, but is replete with disarming and bamboozling names: hybrid journalism, native advertising, branded content, sponsored segments, and integrated content. One particular term, 'brand journalism', considered from the standpoint of conventional journalism ethics, is an oxymoron, embodying as it

does a declaration that the journalism involved is inseparable from advertising content.

For the purposes of this article, the term 'news-like content' will be used to define these categories of material. They are news-like because although the exact mix of advertising, promotional and independent news content in any one of them is unknowable, the presentational techniques commonly used – story structure, language, typography and layout – create the impression that the content is news alone.

These developments mean that conflict of interest as an ethical problem in journalism today is of an order of magnitude greater than it was in the pre-digital era, when it was seen as something to be resisted rather than absorbed. Being vigilant against it was a permanent feature of newsroom management (Tanner et al. 2005: 190).

In this disorienting period of rapid change, discussion of an ethical concept such as conflict of interest might usefully begin with an exercise in which we get our bearings by referring to relevant definitions, principles and assumptions which underpin conventional thinking on the issue as it relates to the profession of journalism.

### **Conflict of interest defined**

The conflict-of-interest concept has deep roots, even if the term itself is relatively new. The New Testament asserts, in the words of Matthew 6: 24, that no man can serve two masters, and in those of Luke 16: 13, that a man cannot serve both God and mammon. This describes one facet of the problem, that of a plurality of principles (Peters and Handschin 2012: 4). Another facet is summed up in the everyday phrase that no one should be judge and jury in his own cause. This imports ideals of independence and impartiality grounded in utilitarianism and contained in journalism codes of ethics globally. Where the subject is news-like content, both facets are relevant. Wasserman's (2009: 229-241) definition incorporates key elements that seem particularly relevant:

Conflict of interest comprises a variety of instances where undeclared obligations or loyalties exist that might plausibly intervene between journalists and journalism organisations and the public they principally serve.

Wasserman identifies three characteristics: lack of disclosure ('undeclared obligations or loyalties'), plausibility (in the sense that there is a rational basis for suspecting a conflict), and an organisational as well as an individual dimension. He has also drawn attention to the concept of competing loyalties (2010: 253).

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Tanner et al. (2005: 187) identify three levels at which conflicts of interest may occur in media settings: institutional (arising from conflicts between editorial and commercial sides of a media organisation); process (which may occur, for example, through 'capture' of journalists by valued sources and contacts, or from pressure induced by gifts of such goods as travel), and personal (arising from individual loyalties).

It will be seen from the three case studies in this paper that lack of disclosure, plausibility and institutional culture are major factors in contemporary media's conflict of interest problems.

### **Professional expectations**

The importance of managing and resisting conflicts of interest is reflected in journalism's codes of ethics across the Western world, as noted by Keeble (2001) in his enumeration and analysis of the values underpinning these codes. Avoidance of such conflicts ranks with other core values such as fairness, separation of fact from opinion, factual and contextual accuracy, respect for people's personal characteristics and privacy, and editorial independence.

Management of conflict of interest was part of a larger set of institutional arrangements inside media organisations that went under the rubric of 'church and state separation'. Borrowed from constitutional principles enshrined in writing or by convention in many Western democracies, the concept of church and state separation in the journalistic context came to mean the separation of news copy from commercial content (Friend and Singer 2007: 181). It was the means by which the ideal of editorial independence was given effect to, allowing what C. P. Scott described as a newspaper's moral and material existence (Muller, F. 1946) to live side-by-side, albeit with the inevitable tensions created by commercial and competitive pressures.

These arrangements were grounded in certain assumptions about the nature of news, the nature of journalism, the role of the news media in society, and the means by which commercial media could plausibly serve the public interest whilst maintaining material viability.

### **The nature of news**

In his lapidary work, *Public opinion*, Lippman (1922: 338-357) strips the concept of news back to its bare essentials: 'when the life of anyone ... departs from ordinary paths, or when events worth telling occur'. What is 'worth telling' has been analysed and described many times and is now established as a set of professional norms known as news values (see, for example, McQuail 1994: 271 and Brighton and Foy 2007: 31-45). From these norms there follows an ethical principle, that material published as news should exhibit at

least some of the characteristics of news. These characteristics are defined in news values. Material published as news that contains little or nothing by way of news values may rightly give rise to a question about the propriety of the motive for publishing it as news.

Lippmann further enlightens us with his insight that before something takes on the nature of news, it must enter a factual realm that takes it beyond mere rumour or speculation and in so doing manifests itself in a definable form – a fire, a riot, the introduction of a legislative Bill. He writes of news as thus assuming a definable shape. It then becomes a question of who does the shaping. In Lippmann's now seemingly far-off world, the shaper is the 'press agent':

Were reporting the simple recovery of obvious facts, the press agent would be little more than a clerk. But since, in respect to most of the big topics of news, the facts are not simple and not at all obvious, but subject to choice and opinion, it is natural that everyone would wish to make his own choice of facts for the newspaper to print. The publicity man does that. ... It follows that the picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. He is censor and propagandist ...

Note, however, that in this model, which obtained for many decades, the publicity agent and the reporter are two different people and are assumed to have different responsibilities and interests: the publicity agent to his or her client in acting as censor or propagandist, the reporter to the public in providing the best available version of contemporary truth. In the world where news-like content is created, these two personas, with their often conflicting responsibilities and interests, merge into one.

Bull (2013: 74-83) has argued that 'brand journalism' is not necessarily unethical because it is open to brand journalists to adhere to the profession's codes of ethics, but there is an inherent contradiction here. Typically, the codes require independence, impartiality and transparency, qualities that are by definition absent from brand journalism.

It may also be argued that in these new circumstances, the conflict of interest disappears because the interests and responsibilities are congruent and inhere in the one journalistic practitioner. This is a fallacy. It ignores the deception involved in making one thing, advertising or promotion, appear like another, news.

### **The nature of journalism**

Journalism as a professional practice exhibits certain characteristics that enable the profession to keep the implied promises it makes

to its audiences. To engage in journalism is to establish an implicit contractual relationship with the audience. This relationship contains promises about factual and contextual reliability, impartiality, independence, and separation of factual information from comment or opinion. If these promises are broken, society is robbed of something essential to the healthy functioning of democracy: a bedrock of trustworthy information people need to make informed choices as voters, consumers, and participants in social life (Muller, D. 2014: 3).

The standards that enable these promises to be kept are that factual material will be checked before publication to ensure its accuracy so far as it is possible to know at the time; that factual material will be presented in a way that is contextually truthful and represents a fair portrayal of the people, events, organisations and ideas that are the subject-matter of the material; that an impartial assessment will have been made concerning the weight of evidence to be accorded to issues in contention; that the journalist will have brought an open mind to these tasks, and that the content will have been prepared independently of improper or distorting influences. By convention, these include political or commercial considerations, in particular the influence of powerful people or valuable advertisers.

These standards have been set out in codes of ethics for journalism across Western democracies for many decades (see, for example, Keeble 2001). They form the basis of contemporary assumptions among practitioners and the public alike about what constitutes journalism.

### **The role of news media in society**

The functions the news media are understood to perform in society have been articulated with reasonable clarity for at least 70 years. A seminal influence, at least over modern practice and scholarship, was the analysis of news media functions by the United States Commission on the Freedom of the Press. In his summary and analysis of the commission's report, one of its most influential members, William Ernest Hocking, wrote (1947: 224-232):

The functions of the press, typified by the news function, are 'clothed with a public interest'. ... One begins to speak of the 'right' of the public to have its news; this language has no necessary legal implications – a moral right lifts its head to announce an answering responsibility on the part of the institution.

The phrase 'freedom of the press' must now cover two sets of rights and not one only. With the rights of editors and publishers to express themselves there must be associated a right of the public to be served with a substantial and honest basis of fact for its judgments of public affairs.

A public right to an honest basis of fact for its news as concomitant with the phrase 'freedom of the press': this is a touchstone upon which the ensuing decades of practice and the development of professional ethical norms have been built. And it is on that foundation that other, more specific functions, were identified by the commission and have remained relevant to this day:

- provision of a truthful and contextually meaningful account of contemporary events;
- provision of a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions;
- the holding up of a mirror to society;
- presenting and clarifying society's goals, and
- giving a full account of the important things that are going on.

To these may be added the function of providing the basis for a shared conversation among citizens, and the general public-interest function of providing information necessary to the general public welfare.

It is the fulfilment of these functions that provides the basis for upholding press freedom and for giving recognition to the media's claim to the status of a 'fourth estate', that of holding to account others in society who wield power.

### **A moral and material existence**

Throughout history, media outlets have largely been private property. In the eighteenth century, after the licensing system in England had lapsed, privately owned newspapers multiplied, most enduringly *The Times*, which began life as the *Universal Daily Register* in 1785. It was conceived as an advertising sheet augmented by news with a largely commercial focus and was supported by the printing business of its proprietor, John Walter.

This was the template for other newspapers: journalism supported by commercial activities that were, on the whole, distinguishable from the editorial processes. The model was especially evident in the Anglophone democracies where the experience of England's oppressive press licensing system had left an imprint on the political DNA. This was manifested in suspicion of government ownership or control of the press, and the placing of a high value on freedom of a press that was privately owned. This ideal was exemplified in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, and was reflected too in the common law jurisdictions that had their roots in England (Hallam 1884).

But the necessity to generate revenue in order to sustain the journalism and return a profit to the owners had the effect of

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creating a commercial climate in which competition, so far from driving quality up, drove it down. These shortcomings were evidence of a corporate culture in which, as Richards (2005) said:

At any given moment in most major corporations one can find a vast array of vocabularies of motive and accounts to explain or excuse or justify expedient action.

In tension with these material pressures, the media also have, as C. P. Scott said, a moral existence. As Muller (1946) recounts, his way of describing this was to refer to the media as an institution that reflected and influenced the life of a whole community, and might affect 'even wider destinies'. 'It is, in its way, an instrument of government.' By this, Scott did not mean that the media were tied into the processes of government but that they were part of the way in which free societies governed themselves. Tiffen (1994: 53-67) captured this idea with his statement that the mass media were the central political arena of contemporary liberal democracies, the link between the governors and the governed.

It was the recognition of this institutional function, combined with a self-interested response to political and community dissatisfaction at the way in which the press had allowed commercial considerations to influence the conduct of editorial operations, that gave rise to the development of the 'church and state' separation.

### **The effect of the digital revolution**

The digital revolution, which began to have measurable effects on newspaper advertising revenues, at least in Australia, in about 2005 (Finkelstein et al. 2012: 301-314), has challenged those four assumptions on which the related ethical concepts of editorial independence, conflict of interest and deception have rested.

Evidence for this phenomenon is abundant. Simons (2013) reports on a range of news-like start-ups characterised by a mixture of idealism, altruism and financial insecurity. Williams et al. (2014), describing the state of hyperlocal news in the United Kingdom, reveal that while 56.7 per cent of hyperlocal publishers described their activity a journalism, among the sub-sample (43 per cent) who generated income from their activity, 31.1 per cent nominated 'sponsored features' as among their sources of revenue. The three brief case studies that follow illustrate the breadth and variety of these practices.

### **Case 1: *The Atlantic* and Scientology**

In January 2013, *The Atlantic* published online an item headed 'David Miscavige leads Scientology to milestone year'. The item began: 'Under ecclesiastical leader David Miscavige, the Scientology religion expanded more in 2012 than in any 12 months of its 60-

year history.’ Underneath this were the standard social-media sharing options for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and then a large full-colour photograph of Mr Miscavige surrounded by Scientology symbols.

Above the main headline in much smaller type but highlighted in a yellow bar were the words ‘sponsor content’ and a pale grey bar attached to it reading ‘What’s this?’ By mousing over this, a reader would reveal the following statement:

Sponsor Content is created by *The Atlantic’s* Promotions Department in partnership with our advertisers. *The Atlantic* editorial team is not involved in the creation of this content.

The item remained up on *The Atlantic’s* website for about 11 hours before an avalanche of criticism from staff and readers alike forced a take-down. The magazine then issued a frank apology beginning with the pungent statement, ‘We screwed up’. It admitted not having sufficiently thought through its policies concerning sponsored content and said it was working hard to put things right. However, it also said that it remained ‘committed to and enthusiastic about innovation in digital advertising’.

In a critique of this episode, the Poynter Institute (Moos 2013) raised a number of ethical challenges: What standards were applied for accepting sponsored content? How was sponsored content created? What safeguards exist to prevent conflicts between sponsored content and real editorial content? Is the process for moderating online comment on sponsored content the same as, or different from, the process for moderating comment on other content? How transparent is the publisher obliged to be with readers about the way sponsored content is handled?

This list does not exhaust the possibilities. A central challenge is this: what steps need to be taken to minimise the risk of a reader’s being duped into mistaking sponsored content for real editorial content – content that keeps the promises of journalism?

Clearly, *The Atlantic* failed this challenge spectacularly. The very phrase ‘sponsor content’ made no grammatical connection with the neighbouring material. To do so, it needed the participle ‘sponsored’ otherwise it might be read as simply a general label about sponsors at large. Requiring the reader to mouse over a small pale grey panel to find out what it means was an exercise in opacity, not transparency.

To its credit, within a month of the original publication, *The Atlantic* published a revised set of policies concerning sponsored content. They focused on the key issue of transparency, and included a rule

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that a sponsor would have no role in moderating comments on sponsored content (Sonderman 2013).

### **Case 2: *BuzzFeed* and political sponsorship**

In October 2012, the Obama for America movement became the first political group in the United States to experiment with native advertising (or sponsored content) for political purposes. In an analysis for NiemanLab of the content of these advertisements, Ellis (2012) described the campaign videos as looking similar to, if slightly less busy than, most posts on *BuzzFeed*. Rather like *The Atlantic's* subdued labelling of its Scientology content, *BuzzFeed's* presentation of the Obama campaign material carried a small yellow bar above the headline saying 'Paid political content'. Although modest in size, this at least had the merit of being unambiguous in its meaning and of existing on the surface of the page, not hidden under a layer that needed to be peeled back by the reader. There was also a further panel under the introduction to the item saying 'Political Ad Paid For By Obama for America'.

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NiemanLab reported that unlike other cases of sponsored content, *BuzzFeed's* staff was not involved in creating the content: the Obama campaign people simply put up campaign videos that had already been published on YouTube. On one hand, this eliminated the problem of having staff journalists involved in the creation of sponsored content, but it also created a problem of provenance: what is disclosed to the audience about the source and authoritativeness of the material?

In a further analysis of this case, Murtha and Gourarie (2015) raised a series of other questions. Noting that campaign advertising for the 2016 US elections was expected to be worth \$US1 billion to publishers and broadcasters, an almost five-fold increase on the 2008 spend, they asked whether audiences would be able to distinguish between what they called 'untethered' political news and advertising 'fluff'. They argued that when votes and public opinion were at stake, the issue was more pressing than when the product being sold was something like cat food.

*BuzzFeed* subsequently announced its intention to publish political sponsored content during the 2016 US election campaign (Warren 2015). Its vice-president, politics and advocacy, Rena Shapiro, said in a statement: '*BuzzFeed* is the top place millennials and influentials are reading and sharing news, and with the smart and thoughtful reporting from *BuzzFeed Politics*, there is a huge demand for political and advocacy groups to tap into that audience. From our shareable videos to our social posts, there's a massive opportunity and I can't wait to get started.' The advertising content would be created in conjunction with *BuzzFeed's* product and branded video teams from *BuzzFeed Motion Pictures*.

**Case study 3: *Mamamia***

In 2007, an Australian journalist and author, Mia Freedman, founded the *Mamamia* website targeted at women. In the seven years to 2014, it built an audience, engaged with it and made a profit. Native advertising was a critical factor in its success. Freedman calls it integrated content and it is written by the editorial staff. Freedman is quoted as saying: 'We know how to engage. And it does work. Where it can go wrong is when clients come in here thinking they want to do this and they want to do that, and we are, like, look, we know how to engage women online. Leave it to us.' Clearly, then, at *Mamamia* the staff and publisher take ownership of, as well as creative responsibility for, the native advertising project.

An academic analysis of the *Mamamia* project (Cowcher-Guthrie 2014) found that native advertising, written by *Mamamia* writers but sponsored by advertisers, made frequent appearances on the website and on social media. She found that while the native advertisements took on the tone and voice of *Mamamia* editorial content, they were, in fact, about products that advertising clients were paying to promote.

Whilst some of this material was disclosed as 'integrated content', the disclosure was not always prominent. In several cases it appeared only after the second paragraph of what looked like a genuine (i.e. non-sponsored) editorial item. Cowcher-Guthrie also found that on social media, advertisements were completely disguised, with sponsored posts appearing on Facebook and Twitter with links that were not labelled as sponsored content yet which were identical to links to non-sponsored items. She found that the language and topics of the sponsored articles so closely resembled non-sponsored content that, without the labelling, it would be almost impossible to distinguish one from the other.

In one particular example, content that purported to be non-sponsored editorial content, in fact, exhibited the promotional characteristics of native advertising and straight public relations material. The item concerned the Dove range of products and Dove's Real Beauty campaign. As Cowcher-Guthrie described it, Real Beauty was modelled on the feminist notion that women ought not be valued principally on the basis of their weight and appearance. Dove was an advertiser on *Mamamia* and its body-image-complex commodification of feminism reinforced the *Mamamia* brand of feminism that, according to the researcher's interpretation, paid lip service to feminist issues such as women's representation in advertising and media, but did not question or critique structural inequalities.

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Items about Dove not labelled as sponsored content included a headline: 'Share: The new Dove ad proves that being beautiful is just a state of mind', with accompanying text reading: 'Dove – the creators of many a beautiful viral video about women's body image and body confidence – have another question for you.' The words 'viral video', 'body image' and 'body confidence' were presented as links.

Another item, again presented as non-sponsored content, was headlined: 'Watch: The new Dove ad that will make you think', which explained that 'The Dove Real Beauty Sketches campaign encourages women to reassess how they see themselves'.

*Mamamia's* overt and covert product endorsement, sometimes labelled as sponsored content and sometimes not, was found by the researcher to be an important factor in the website's financial success.

In many respects, of course, this is simply an online version of that genre of largely 'women's' magazines which for decades have mashed editorial and advertising content into a *mélange* from which it is impossible to disentangle the independent journalism – if any – from the promotional fluff. For that reason, perhaps the readers of this particular website are not duped. However, the evidence from an American survey (reported below) suggests that a large proportion of readers do struggle to recognise native advertising, even when it is labelled as such.

### **The problem of deception**

Closely allied to conflict of interest is the further ethical problem of deception. The potential for sponsored content to dupe audiences was illustrated by the findings from a survey (n = 209) conducted in 2015 by a native-advertising technology company, TripleLift. The survey tested the perceptions of respondents to five versions of a native advertisement on a website, each with a different disclosure label. The data showed that 62 per cent of respondents did not realise they were looking at an advertisement (Moses 2015).

One example from Australia and several from the United States illustrate the deception problem. They also show that what a decade-and-a-half ago was considered to be unquestionably dishonest conduct is now accepted, indeed promoted, by large parts of the media.

In July 1999, the Australian Broadcasting Authority conducted an inquiry into the conduct of five commercial radio talkback hosts in receiving undisclosed payments from programme sponsors in return for making favourable comments about the sponsors that

were presented to the audiences as if they were the hosts' own genuinely held opinion. The practice became known as 'cash for comment'.

In February 2000, the authority found that this conduct had led to 90 breaches of the broadcasting code of practice and five breaches of Sydney station 2UE's licence conditions. The authority imposed three new standards on commercial broadcasters, including a requirement that they make on-air disclosures of any agreements between sponsors and programme hosts.

In the United States in 2005, a series of scandals erupted over the payment of fees to journalists in return for various services. As *The Economist* (2005) reported, Michael McManus, a syndicated columnist, received \$US10,000 from the Department of Health and Human Services for helping to train marriage counsellors. Another syndicated columnist, Margaret Gallagher, received \$US21,500 from the same department for helping to draft brochures, and a talk show host, Armstrong Williams, received \$US241,000 to promote the 'No Child Left Behind' initiative. These journalists not only took the money but they continued to write and broadcast about these issues without disclosing them to their audiences. In these cases, deception and conflict of interest were intertwined.

Deception is also the principal criterion used by the Australian Press Council to determine complaints from newspaper readers concerning sponsored content (Weisbrot 2015). The council's general position was spelt out in its adjudication of a complaint brought against the *Sydney Morning Herald* concerning its labelling of a supplement on Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN).

Whilst dismissing the gravamen of the complaint (Adjudication 1548, 2012), the council found that the label 'special report' did not assist substantially to provide adequate identification of the nature of the supplement. It went on to state that in the absence of a prominently displayed 'unequivocal branding' of such supplements, there was a substantial risk that a publisher would breach those principles of the Press Council concerning disclosure of vested interests and conflict of interest.

### **Conclusions**

Whatever terms are used to describe news-like content, it is ubiquitous in online media and in legacy media alike. It presents pressing ethical challenges to the profession of journalism and to the media as an industry concerning conflict of interest and deception, and mocks the concept of editorial independence. Ethical norms concerning these issues are grounded in assumptions about the nature of news, the nature of journalism, the role of the news media and the processes by which media manage the tensions between

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their public-interest responsibilities and commercial imperatives. As a consequence of the burgeoning of news-like content, these assumptions are themselves under challenge.

There are large stakes here because these assumptions provide the foundation for the institutional place of journalism in the functioning of a democratic polity.

The terminology surrounding news-like content is clearly designed to disguise the real nature of the material, and this itself is *prima facie* deceptive conduct. Whilst far from perfect, the term 'native advertising' at least has the merit of including the word 'advertising' and is preferable to the questionable term 'hybrid journalism', and the elliptical 'integrated content', 'sponsored content' or 'branded content'.

Where conflicts of interest exist, a declaration is usually the bare minimum ethical requirement. However, where staff writers whose job is ostensibly journalism are assigned to create this content, a bare declaration will not be enough. Audiences are entitled to know the provenance of the material because whatever else this work might be called, it is not journalism.

While some scholars (for example, Carr et al. 2014) draw a distinction between 'mainstream' and 'citizen' journalism in this regard, in fact the problem is common to both, as the case studies in this paper show.

Moreover, the phenomenon is now reaching out beyond standard product endorsement to material about religion, ideology and politics. As a result, while disclosure of the true nature of the material is a minimum requirement, it might not always be sufficient. The level of integration between journalists and sponsors, responsibility for authorship of the material, and disclosures about the way comments are moderated are other essential requirements. This is especially the case where the content concerns politics. Voters are entitled to know exactly whose material they are reading and whose ideas are being promoted. The core journalistic function of informing voters is in danger of being surreptitiously suborned.

The economics of advertising no doubt go some way to explaining the desperation evident in these attempts by publishers to find new ways of making money. The Pew Research Center (Mitchell 2014) reports that while traditional advertising from print and television still accounts for more than half the revenue supporting journalism, total newspaper advertising fell 49 per cent between 2003 and 2013. So new media and old media alike have an equivalent stake in pursuing any new possibility. News-like content represents just such a possibility.

In pursuing it, the media and elements of the journalism profession seem prepared to trade off long-term trust for short-term profit. It is, in effect, another example of the Richards (2005) dictum: that a vast array of vocabularies of motive and accounts is drawn upon to explain, excuse or justify expedient action.

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### Note on the contributor

Dr Denis Muller is a senior lecturer in politics and journalism at the University of Melbourne. He practised as a journalist for 27 years, mostly on the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, Melbourne. His special research interests centre on media ethics, and he was a consultant to the Finkelstein Inquiry into Media Regulation, conducted in Australia in 2011-12, contributing sections on press theory, codes of ethics, and media performance. In 2014, he published *Journalism ethics for the digital age* (Scribe, Melbourne). He may be contacted at [dmuller@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:dmuller@unimelb.edu.au) or 613 8344 9439 or 61419 414 121.

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## REVIEWS

### **Public relations ethics and professionalism: The shadow of excellence**

Johanna Fawkes

Routledge 2015 pp 244

ISBN 780415630382

This book is part of Routledge's 'New directions in public relations and communication research' series. As such, it comes in hardcover only, with the commensurate steep price tag that academic publishers charge for what are essentially 'library runs' in many cases – books produced in limited volume to sell to libraries that are required to purchase them irrespective of their price.

Notwithstanding, this book is an important contribution to public relations literature specifically, as well as a useful expansion of thinking about ethics generally.

Academics in the disciplinary field of public relations will need to do as Fawkes advocates and think in a transdisciplinary and critical way to access the rich insights that this analysis provides. If you are a dyed-in-the-wool Grunigian disciple dedicated to the 'excellence theory' of PR (Larissa Grunig, James Grunig and Dozier 2002) and pretending that PR involves *two-way symmetrical* relations between organisations and their stakeholders and publics, hold on to your hat as you go on what Fawkes calls 'an adventure in thinking – and feeling' (p. 1). She proposes a Jungian approach to ethics in public relations. To embrace this approach fully requires a deep reading of Jung's work. However, in this clear, well-written text Fawkes makes her case accessible to those not well versed in Jung's ideas on the psyche and its elements including the ego, the persona, and the shadow.

It is the latter, in particular, that is a central focus of this book. While the public face of an organisation is its persona in Jungian terms – increasingly created and crafted in contemporary societies by public relations – its shadow comprises those elements that the organisation (and PR practitioners) do not want to talk about or reveal. In the case of PR, its shadow is *persuasion*. Fawkes argues that dominant paradigms and theories of public relations including rhetorical and relationship management approaches present an idealised conceptualisation of PR. Her Jungian framing of PR sees 'persuasion as the rejected [or ignored] shadow material' and she argues that reflexive 'engagement with persuasion is a prerequisite for developing a depth approach to ethics' in PR (p. 219).

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Recognising the shadow elements of PR – persuasion and its even darker cousin propaganda – brings the issue of power to the foreground in Fawkes’ analysis, including economic, social, and cultural power, although interestingly she does not mention political power.

Despite her strong criticisms of dominant theories of PR and shameful practices that are enacted (Stauber and Rampton 1995), Fawkes does not dismiss PR *per se* or stop at deconstruction. She uses Jung’s depth psychology to point out that, in the case of individuals, the ‘self’ is composed of multiple elements that often act in conflict or tension with each other, describing this as a ‘messy psyche’ (p. 141). So it is with organisations, Fawkes suggests. The point is to recognise the dark side, the power imbalances, the potentialities for harm as well as good, and deal with them rather than veneer them over with idealistic theories, self-serving managerial and functionalist models of practice, and aspirational and unenforceable codes of ethics. Fawkes also constructively calls for an end to the ‘slanging match’ that often occurs between critical scholars and proponents of the dominant paradigm, and sees hope in newly emerging sociocultural thinking about PR that seeks to integrate the interests of organisations and society.

Fawkes also draws on a substantial body of literature beyond Jung, including the social theories of Durkheim and Weber, Habermas’s public sphere and its corrupting influences (Habermas 1989), and Bourdieu’s *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984), as well as complexity theory, chaos theory, postmodernism and concepts such as reflexivity. In contrast with triumphalist texts on PR, Fawkes refreshingly practises reflexivity, citing her own experiences as a PR practitioner before becoming an academic, and ‘owning up’ to her own doubts and uncertainties. She argues that ‘uncertainty is a healthy state to be in when reflecting on ethical situations’, rejecting the hubris of certainty and ‘idealised self-images’ (p. 1; p. 5).

While this book is based on ‘conceptual research’ and a ‘hermeneutic approach’ (p. 5) involving critical interpretation rather than new empirical data, it presents new ideas for twenty-first century public relations.

Given the increasing role of PR as ‘a social force ... a producer of culture’ in contemporary societies (p. 226), the arguments presented in this book warrant close attention by scholars, professional bodies in the PR industry, and practitioners.

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### **Researching creative writing**

Jen Webb

Newmarket, Suffolk, Frontinus Ltd, 2015 pp 271

ISBN 978-1-907076-37-4

Early in this text, Webb draws on seminal thinker and philosopher Martin Heidegger (pp 1-2), calling his notion of knowledge – ‘seeing, apprehending, making sense’ – research. Her text makes a cogent argument for ethical creative writing as a discrete praxis of the creative arts. She writes: ‘Research practices can invigorate writing; creative practices can invigorate research’ (p. 2). And she adds: ‘Creative writing can operate as a mode of knowledge generation, a way of exploring problems and answering questions that matter in our current context’ (ibid). She claims that ‘every writer – every maker of any kind of creative work – is a person who is involved, at some level, in research’ (p. 2). If only it were as easy as this.

Webb starts by defining research and examining its etymology– it being a French word dating from the late 16th century meaning ‘to look, intensively’ (p. 7). Webb cites the *Frascati manual*, a 1963 document, now in its sixth edition, providing guidelines on collecting and reporting data on research, where research is defined as ‘creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications’ (pp 7-8). Unpacking each phrase, Webb

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admits that 'systematic' may be a problem for creative practitioner researchers, as method is often 'anathema to many artists' (p. 7), and that 'stock of knowledge' and disseminating it is imperative to the overall practice.

The text is divided into three parts: 'Designing the research', 'Doing research' and 'From materials to the published work' with sections on such subjects as finding a project, the epistemological preliminaries, the craft of research, writing as research, managing the material, research and other people, research and the environment, and writing and telling. Each chapter brims over with entertaining and surprising citations, ancient, seminal and contemporary (e.g. Aristotle, Ovid, Barthes, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, de Botton).

In the section on 'Research and other people', in Chapter 2, Webb sets out the ethical imperative around 'research governance and codes for the responsible conduct of research' (p. 128), quickly moving on to the techniques creative practitioners use to engage other people within their research: interviewing (designing good questions), selecting participants, survey questionnaires and focus groups. In 'Research and the environment', the writer-researcher is seen, Webb writes: '...not as an objective outsider, but as participant, as embodied and emotional individual, and as observer' (p. 151). And she continues: '... even the most precise and objective science is conducted by human beings whose work may be marred by headaches and hunches, or assisted by their sensory acuity: sight, sound, smell, tactility' (p. 152). The three specific research methods she unpacks in this section are phenomenology, or 'being in the world', proprioception, or 'moving about in the world', and participant observation, or 'being with and moving among people' (ibid).

Perhaps what is missing from this text is a step-by-step articulation of the methodologies for the creative practices. But until the cultural capital of the creative practices is refined and accepted, and a universal language implemented for practice-based and practice-led research, they will be regarded as 'a poor cousin' of traditional disciplines. This text is an excellent precursor to a definitive text on the methodologies and ethics underpinning creative, self-reflexive practice and research. Perhaps Webb and her colleagues are hard at work, as I write.

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## **Journalism, ethics and regulation (fourth edition)**

Chris Frost

Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge 2016 pp 430

ISBN 978-1-138-79658-4 (pbk)

Since Britain's inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of its press following the News International phone hacking scandal, it has become awkward for journalists in the UK and elsewhere to discuss what they do and the ethics of doing it in the same breath.

Hearings chaired by Lord Justice Brian Leveson – appointed in July 2011 – stretched over two years, during which we learned of the *News of the World's* unsavoury treatment of the Dowler and McCann families and others, and came to question seriously the right of journalism to keep its status as a Fourth Estate.

So the arrival of a newly revised text on the ethics of practising journalism and the possibilities for its regulation is more than welcome, and has great potential to clear the air.

Perhaps understandably, author Chris Frost reflects on the Leveson Inquiry right from the outset of this fourth edition, returning to the issues in more detail later in the text. Frost is well situated to speak on the matter: the Professor of Journalism at Liverpool John Moore University in the UK spent more than twenty years as a journalist and editor, is a former president of the National Union of Journalists, and chairs the NUJ's Ethics Council.

While the future of the regulation of journalism in Britain remains unclear, debate sparked by revelations from the inquiry has spread internationally, casting doubt over journalistic practice in the US, Australia and elsewhere. Hence, in a comprehensive and entertaining introduction Frost writes: 'This seemed like the best time to release a new edition to track what has been happening' (p. 1).

Here at the very beginning, Frost provides an informative history of the development of texts on ethics in journalism – a more recent phenomenon in the UK than in the US – and outlines new considerations for the ethical journalist brought on by the internet. Above all, Frost argues ethical practice is everyone's concern, emphasising that:

For too long, as shown clearly at the Leveson Inquiry, many journalists in the UK have tended to shrug their shoulders and assume morals are for someone else and then wonder why there are calls for legislation on such issues as payments to witnesses and privacy (pp 3-4).

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Rather than ethics being an issue that raises its head from time to time as commonly believed by some, Frost argues ethical problems are 'dealt with almost on a minute-by-minute basis in journalism' (p. 4).

The book is of tremendous scope and so quite sensibly treats its subject in two sections, although disappointingly these sections are not distinguished as such in the table of Contents, which would have made navigating easier. The first section (Chs 1-13) examines journalistic ethics and attempts to provide tools for good or moral decision-making; the second (Chs 14-21) covers regulation of journalism in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere, and often makes use of case studies.

While it may seem a trite matter, throughout the book and in each of the arguments he presents, Frost goes to considerable and commendable effort to start at the start. By way of an example, the first chapter deals with morality and asks the question: what are ethics? Frost's answer not only provides a definition, but builds a nuanced and historicised snapshot of ethics – starting with the Greek *ethikos*, meaning 'of or for morals' – by revisiting classical philosophy for its discussion of morality and leading eventually to the development of a 'language of morals' (p. 17).

In a later discussion of the morality of reporting, such painstaking care at the start leads Frost to make this important observation:

A journalist needs to determine right from the start of any story why he or she is covering it. If the reasons for covering it are morally, not just commercially, viable, or if the moral reasons for using the story outweigh the moral arguments against, then the journalist should aim to publish. However, it also needs to be looked at in another way: is a story not being covered because it is morally, or merely commercially, unjustifiable? (p. 46).

Other chapters on ethics cover what makes a good journalist, the importance of truth-telling, privacy and intrusion, reputation, and importantly, the internet.

The second section on regulation includes histories of print regulation in the twentieth century, and press regulation in the twenty-first, where Frost discusses the Leveson Inquiry as well as the lead-up to it in some detail. The second section also covers broadcasting, codes of conduct and press and broadcasting regulation systems in the UK and Ireland, as well as a final chapter on the international experience.

In addition, ten appendices cover (mostly British and European) codes of practice, ethics guidelines, and regulatory bodies.

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While the book is unashamedly UK-focused, its broadly based discussions, case studies and theoretical underpinning, and the fact that the Leveson Inquiry sparked debate on ethics among journalists world-wide, should ensure it provides interest for journalists, students and teachers everywhere.

Disappointments are few: some chapters included helpful recommendations for further reading but there could have been more; the glossary seems unnecessarily brief; and there were more than a comfortable number of errata (mainly typos).

The glaring omission is of a separate chapter on regulating the internet. While certainly a developing, if not thorny and complex topic, it would seem that regulating the internet – impossible as it might seem – is likely of paramount importance given the uncertain future faced by print journalists and broadcasters alike.

Also not covered are the public's perceptions of the journalist, which can prey on the viability of a reporter's *modus operandi*. In part, such perceptions are recently tarnished, but also it must be said they have been poor for some time. For example, as Ian Richards writes for *A companion to the Australian media* (2014), 'for most of the 19th century, journalists were widely viewed as a rough and ready lot' (p. 153).

While Frost does not broach these last matters at all, this should not detract from our appreciation of the overall project. For while a brief history of the journalist as figure and a deeper exploration of possible regulation of the internet are desirable, they would merely add context to what is already a comprehensive and important volume.

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