

Amplifying NGO Messages with Critical Incidents: A Comparative Analysis of the Impact of New Media Disruption and Legacy Media in Journalism

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Abstract: This paper explores the use of traditional and new media by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for effective communication. It argues that NGOs should leverage different media forms based on specific circumstances. The paper discusses Farm Radio International's use of radio and mobile phones to engage farmers in dialogue, empowering them to voice their concerns. It also highlights the #blogladesh campaign, where mommy bloggers were utilized to raise awareness of women's and children's health issues. By using traditional media, NGOs can reach a wider audience, particularly in marginalized communities. New media, on the other hand, offers personalized and interactive communication. Understanding the strengths and limitations of each media form enables NGOs to effectively convey their messages, enhance communication effectiveness, and achieve their mission and goals.

Keywords: NGO, journalism, new media, legacy media, critical incidents

1. Introduction

NGOs, aid agencies, and other advocacy organizations are committed to addressing and supporting public interests, and providing tangible benefits to their target groups. As part of civil society, these organizations are relatively independent of the government and the market [1] and have the potential to effect social and political change [2]. In this process, NGOs rely on the media to amplify their advocacy campaigns and raise public awareness of their programs [3, 4]. The question of whether to rely on legacy media or break with established news fields and use new media for dissemination is crucial. This paper argues that it may be more appropriate to draw on the strengths of different media forms according to different circumstances. The paper will use critical incidents in journalism (defined as events or developments that lead journalists to reconsider "the hows and whys of journalistic practice" [5]) as examples to illustrate how NGOs can achieve their communication effects through the use of traditional and new media in different situations, as well as the pitfalls to be aware of. It concludes that for NGOs, the key is to choose an appropriate way to convey information, enhance the effectiveness of their communication, and promote the organization's mission and goals, regardless of whether they choose traditional or new media.

2. Amplifying NGO Messages: Navigating the Dual Nature of Traditional Media in Information Dissemination and Responsibility

NGOs and other organizations can use traditional media, such as radio, to reach a wider audience. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes that at least 75 percent of households in developing countries have access to radio. Radio is a local, widespread and effective medium of communication, and is a primary choice for organizations that target people in the developing world and people in remote areas with low levels of education.

Farm Radio International (FRI) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to improving small-scale agriculture and rural livelihoods in Africa, operating in the field of journalism and communication. They use radio as a means of disseminating information to farmers, enabling them to access the latest agricultural information and knowledge to help them increase productivity and income. FRI innovatively uses mobile phones to increase the interactivity of radio programs, allowing listeners to provide feedback and engage in dialogue through phone calls or text messages. By providing opportunities for ordinary people to express themselves and have their voices heard [6], this model transforms radio from a top-down media to a two-way communication tool, facilitating true dialogue and communication, and promoting “participatory communication.”

In the field of journalism and communication, participatory communication in broadcasting has long been recognized as important, with audience feedback and access to participation in programs being key factors in the early days of radio broadcasting. Bertolt Brecht [7] argued for the transformative role of radio in society in the 1920s, suggesting that it should transform “from a means of dissemination to a means of exchange in public life, in which case the audience is allowed to speak.” Brecht [7] emphasized the need for radio to have “true publicness in public places” by improving it. With technological advancements, participatory communication has become a critical characteristic of broadcasting. An example of this is Farm Radio International’s (FRI) opinion poll project (Farm Radio International, n.d.), which collaborates with radio stations to survey farmers’ views on specific agricultural policies in Tanzania. When radio stations broadcast poll questions, they invite farmer listeners to participate in the vote by dialling a specific number on their mobile phones. FRI utilized this interactive radio-driven initiative, which involved 9,000 farmers, to allow national leaders in Dar es Salaam to directly hear the voices of farmers. This use of interactive broadcasting not only shares knowledge and disseminates information but also provides opportunities for the public to express their opinions and lets decision-makers see their views and concerns.

FRI utilizes interactive broadcasting to foster audience participation in the production and broadcast of radio programs, resulting in content that is more tailored to the practical needs and interests of listeners. On its official website (Farm Radio International, n.d.), FRI introduce “La parole paysanne” program features host Seydou Camara inviting farmers and experienced producers to share their agricultural knowledge with listeners. Seydou also hosts a radio debate program on news issues to help address the issues affecting farmers in his region, such as government policies and collusion between officials and businesses that impact farmers’ interests. In one debate about an official’s illegal sale of fertilizer, a farmer used the platform to push for government action to reclaim the fertilizer and distribute it fairly, thereby safeguarding the rights of farmers. FRI utilizes interactive broadcasting as a means to give power to the audience, challenges the hegemony of knowledge and power that often results in political, economic, and social marginalization of certain groups. This approach addresses the fundamental imbalance between elites and marginalized groups such as women, indigenous peoples, and the poor [8]. Freire [9] also shared this perspective, asserting that individuals, regardless of who they are, possess the ability and capacity for critical thinking, decision-making, and planning for social change in order to achieve their own

development and transform society. Similar to how dialogue in the classroom can empower students and free them from a passive role, participatory communication among members of a community can have a similar impact [9]. Poor farmers, as listeners, use radio interviews and call-in programs to voice their demands and interests through wireless communication, resolving the inconvenience brought about by their marginalized status through interactive broadcasting.

FRI's array of events exemplifies the role of traditional media, particularly broadcasting, in disseminating information and knowledge to remote communities, as well as its potential to help marginalized individuals defend their rights. This not only has references for other non-governmental organizations that help similar target demographics, but also functions as a critical incident that stimulates reflection regarding the traditional media's monopoly over power in the news industry. The media is frequently criticized for having more interaction with elites and official sources, which can be detrimental to the interests of marginalized individuals [10], leading to the dominance of social class perspectives in media discourse and the limited expression of views from marginalized groups. FRI has created a demonstration for diverse and participatory discourse interaction in the news industry, providing passive and marginalized audiences with an avenue to voice their opinions, as well as serving as a source of reference and inspiration for other organizations.

Broadcasting is a double-edged sword, with the power to educate and inspire, but also to trivialize and dumb-down, promote truth or disseminate lies, and promote peace or incite war and hatred [11]. The Rwandan genocide serves as a negative example of the infamous role played by the Miller-Collins Free Radio Station (RTL) in the 1994 ethnic slaughter of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Regardless of whether the broadcasts actually incited people to commit violent acts, the content of daily broadcasts has a pervasive influence on what individuals consider acceptable or normal [12]. Therefore, the negative impact of broadcasting cannot be overlooked, particularly in conflict-affected areas. A report by the London School of Economics' Fragile States Stocktaking indicates that in certain situations, such as those found in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi, investment in regulation is more important than promoting diverse media [13]. Thus, NGOs, particularly those targeting conflict-affected areas, should carefully consider the regulation of broadcasting and assume the responsibility of using radio for peacebuilding, counter-propaganda, and truth-telling.

3. Empowering Humanitarian Advocacy: Exploring the Potential and Challenges of Personal Blogs in the Era of New Media Disruption

New media in the internet era offers new possibilities for NGO advocacy. The use of personal blogs on social media as advocacy camps for humanitarian issues frees journalists from the traditional news agenda and the traditional "objectivity and distance" journalistic guidelines. Personalized, diverse perspectives give disadvantaged or marginalized people equal access to the public eye, and subjective, emotional narratives provide emotional resonance and appeal to a wider audience.

Save the Children UK (<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/>), an international charity organization, initiated its #blogladesh campaign in 2010 through social media. The campaign aimed to raise public awareness of the Millennium Development Goals [14], promoting women's and children's health in Bangladesh and other developing nations. Aid organizations often rely heavily on journalists to publicize their projects and raise funds, but this approach may be unsustainable and unhealthy. However, Save the Children UK, has started to rely on social media influencers (mommy bloggers), to promote their activities. This approach challenges the traditional view that aid organizations should only or primarily work with journalists to ensure coverage.

Mommy bloggers emerged in the early 21st century as a group of ordinary women who shared their daily lives on social media platforms. Mommy bloggers challenge traditional media's limited

portrayal of motherhood by featuring diverse mothers from LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority communities [15]. The emotional reciprocity among mommy bloggers creates a strong sense of trust and support within the community, described by blog authors as meaningful friendships. This non-hierarchical, tightly woven network is characterized by continuous, mutual, and intimate self-disclosure facilitated by the interchange between blog authors, readers, and commenters. This highly cohesive network has become an important driving force for the movement, attracting numerous followers and generating significant online impact.

Regarding narrative coverage, new media bloggers, as “individuals,” have the ability to break free from traditional news norms and use personal experiences infused with emotion to tell stories to the public, thus adding dramatic effect and appeal to their promotion. The #blogladesh movement selected new media bloggers to document their observations and thoughts in Bangladesh. According to Wahl-Jorgensen [16], Bloggers are not trained journalists and therefore do not use ritualistic storytelling to ‘inject’ emotion into their work or control their emotions when reporting on aid agencies. In a promotional video made for the #blogladesh campaign [17], one blogger appeared very emotional when sharing about meeting a woman who was upset about seeing a sick baby, which makes the audience feel sad too. As Wahl-Jorgensen [18] pointed out, “News depends on the dramatic and engaging narrative it presents, explaining the emotions of individuals and actors, and appealing to the emotions of the audience “. Aid agencies choose to emphasize emotion and personal experience in non-traditional media practices, which differ from traditional news practices, to highlight their distinctiveness and difference. The public’s preference and emphasis on this emotionally charged technique in the current news communication environment also demonstrates its effectiveness.

In the traditional media landscape, media outlets rely on emphasizing certain topics in a prominent way in order to achieve agenda-setting, leading a significant portion of the public to perceive those topics as more important than others. However, this practice also results in a restriction of diverse voices, as even traditional media journalists who may be interested in covering humanitarian stories face obstacles such as the ever-changing news agenda and the need for news hooks or case studies. By contrast, bloggers encounter fewer obstacles, as they can build their stories around their personal experiences and schedules. Wahl-Jorgensen [19] describes that journalists usually maintain their authority by isolating or selectively incorporating user-generated content. However, in the case of #blogladesh, journalists used mommy bloggers’ stories as a case study rather than a news report, as mommy bloggers’ real-time subjective reporting via social media was influential. This approach to reporting also has an impact on journalists. Later, Save the Children UK organized a similar event, and Neal Mann, a digital media editor for Sky News, documented his personal journey through Burkina Faso in a similar manner [20].

The #blogladesh campaign’s utilization of mommy bloggers as a means of promoting itself is a prime example of the utilization of new media to promote in the public sphere. The public sphere was first conceptualized by Habermas [21], who defined it as “a domain of our social life in which such things as public opinion can be formed.” New media has shown how the public sphere is reshaped in the online space, where it fosters an actively participating network public, and expands the right to participate equally to all citizens, regardless of social status or class. Compared to the real-world public sphere, new media participants are less constrained by social identity, and it affords marginalized groups an equal opportunity to participate. As Jarvis [22] notes, dictators, politicians, media moguls, and marketers have all attempted to shape what we think and say. However, now, they are required to listen to what we have to say.

While people’s participation in the public sphere is not idealized as rational debate in Habermas’s view, we can draw some similarities between Habermas’s public sphere and the online space. By selecting mommy bloggers, the #blogladesh campaign transcended the constraints of

traditional media and directly utilized new media to disseminate information to the public. This approach is capable of rapidly and widely spreading information while increasing the public's sense of participation and resonance. Concurrently, this approach can also disrupt the information monopoly of traditional media, weaken the power of traditional gatekeepers, and afford more individuals a voice in the public sphere. Through the utilization of new media, the #blogladesh campaign was successful in bringing Bangladesh's issues into the public sphere, arousing widespread public attention. This approach can be employed not only for the promotion of international aid and other public welfare organizations but also for organizations related to promoting human rights, social movements, and media monitoring.

The #Blogladesh event conforms to the definition of a key event in the field of journalism and communication. The advent of user-generated content and social media networks has not only posed new challenges to journalists by affecting their traditional sources of humanitarian stories and their roles as witnesses and reporters of breaking news but also presented new avenues for aid organizations to promote their cause. Meanwhile, journalists themselves began to employ subjective influence in their humanitarian reporting to appeal to the emotions of their audience.

In addition, the online public sphere presents challenges for NGOs and organizations using new media for publicity, such as difficulties in rational political discourse, online violence, and an absence of rational discussion and criticism. NGOs must avoid these challenges to prevent negative events such as online violence and hate speech. Anonymity reduces the pressure of personal expression but can also lead to irresponsible behaviour, resulting in violations of personal privacy and reputation rights. NGOs must strengthen their prevention and response efforts to these issues. Finally, when using new media for publicity, organizations should actively guide public discussion and advocate for rational expression to strengthen the construction and governance of the online public sphere.

4. Conclusion

Given the crucial role of media in shaping public opinion and awareness, advocates of any development plan must rely on the media to disseminate their messages [23]. The article uses critical incidents from "Farm Radio International" and "Mommy Blogger" to argue that NGOs can select different media channels based on specific circumstances to achieve their communication goals effectively. Traditional media provides a complete communication model and a wide audience base. For example, low-cost and easily accessible broadcasting is the most suitable medium for NGOs to convey their mission and values to marginalized and impoverished populations. On the other hand, emerging media, such as social media and online forums, are more suitable for rapidly disseminating personalized and interactive information, engaging and mobilizing audiences emotionally, and establishing close relationships with them. Moreover, this article discusses the features and limitations of legacy and new media, and NGOs can adjust their communication strategies promptly by monitoring the effectiveness and impact of media coverage through audience feedback and media coverage detection. By understanding the different media channels available and their respective advantages and limitations, NGOs, aid agencies and advocacy organisations can effectively communicate with their target audience and create a positive impact in society.

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