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Chapter 19

It was a "simple", "positive" story of African self-help (manufactured for a Kenyan NGO by advertising multinationals)

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Northern news organisations now face a perfect financial storm, which has been shaped by a variety of factors, including the rise of new media competitors like Google and Yahoo, regulatory change, the cost of developing new technologies, and dwindling advertising revenue (Franklin 2011). This has prompted widespread cost-cutting and the privileging of production practices geared towards producing more content, faster, and at lower cost (Phillips 2012). So it is perhaps unsurprising that news outlets' dependence upon the "information subsidies" (Gandy 1982) provided by external sources has increased, including their reliance upon the material supplied by public relations professionals (Lewis et al. 2008a, 2008b).

These changes have been compounded in the coverage of sub-Saharan Africa by reductions in the numbers of news bureaus and correspondent posts funded by international news organisations (Paterson 2011: 39–40). Those who remain, have often had to accept casualised posts that involve their being paid per item, so they struggle to leave their desks. Cuts to newsroom budgets also make it much harder for those working in the headquarters of such news organisations to justify trips to African countries themselves (Dozier 2008). Yet many journalists remain committed to representing a wide variety of people and places for a mixture of normative, legal, and commercial reasons.

In such circumstances, news outlets are increasingly turning to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to supply them with video and photographic images representing events in more remote or dangerous locations in Africa.[1] Large, wealthy international NGOs (INGOs) tend to dominate this field of media production because they can afford to fund extensive travel and expensive communications technology, as well as hiring experienced former journalists with the cultural and social capital necessary to create and pitch such multimedia to news outlets (Fenton 2010). Thus using INGO-provided video and photos is regarded by some as improving journalism's dynamism and social engagement (Beckett & Mansell 2008),

but others argue that it seriously damages the diversity and critical independence of news coverage (Cottle & Nolan 2007; Franks 2008).

Journalists' concerns about their potential complicity in enhancing the brands of powerful INGOs (Magee 2014) are often tied to other worries about some INGOs' tendency to use negative, stereotypical, and decontextualised images of Africans requiring wealthy Northerners' help (Lugo-Ocando 2015). Such arguments are underpinned by the conviction that negative media representations perpetuate chronic under-development by reinforcing notions that the entire African continent is a hopeless case. Indeed, even the former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, has asserted that international journalists have a responsibility to avoid harming African peoples' prospects and global standing through "negative typecasting" (cited in de Beer 2010: 602).

One solution, which has been explored by some British journalists, is to use photos provided by African NGOs, when these are of sufficient technical and aesthetic quality (Wright 2015). But, unless they were long-standing Africa editors, these journalists tended to assume that smaller, poorer African NGOs would be simpler and less dominated by commercial marketing practices and norms than major INGOs. So, they reasoned, disseminating such NGOs' representations of African people "helping themselves" would be more progressive, "positive", and "empowering". These assumptions were further enhanced by the ways in which these images were frequently obtained through social media, so tapping into broader hopes about the potential of digital media to foster more diverse and egalitarian modes of media production (Beckett & Mansell 2008).

The purpose of this chapter is to debunk such simplistic assumptions. It draws on Davis' theory about "promotional cultures" (2013) and Chouliaraki's work about "ironic spectatorship" (2013), as well as critiques made elsewhere in this volume about "Africa Rising" narratives, in order to analyse a particularly illuminating case study. This was constructed using internal documentation and semi-structured interviews with those who made key decisions shaping the production of a single journalistic article. It contained a still photograph produced for a campaign run by the Kenyan Paraplegic Organization (KPO), in conjunction with the telecommunications company Safaricom, and Scangroup, an Africa-wide network of advertising and marketing professionals based in Nairobi, which includes the global PR giant Ogilvy & Mather.

This article appeared in the British Sunday newspaper *The Observer* (Kiberenge 2012), although similar items about the campaign appeared outside the sampling period in one of Kenya's leading newspapers, *The Standard*, as well as in a number of prestigious international news outlets, including Al Jazeera, *The New York Times*, and *BBC News Online*. However, this case study is significant not only because the story was picked up by these major news outlets, but also because participants insisted that

commercial businesses often develop media campaigns with African NGOs to enhance their reputations in the continent's highly lucrative emerging markets.

Corporate social responsibility, promotional cultures, and expats

Like many smaller NGOs, KPO lacked the financial and cultural capital needed to produce its own multimedia (Fenton 2010). So when the NGO wanted to raise money to build a new spinal injuries rehabilitation clinic in Nairobi, its leader approached an acquaintance who was a senior executive at major commercial telecommunications company Safaricom, which is also based in Nairobi. This executive was involved with Safaricom's corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme,[2] which often "adopted" local NGOs (interview 23 April 2013). This was a strategy that Safaricom's Executive Director hoped would pay handsome dividends in terms of consumer goodwill and investor interest (Baillie, cited in *Standard Digital* 2010). Indeed, Safaricom's CSR programme seems to have functioned as a specific form of public relations exercise – crisis management (Demetrious 2013). This was because it was launched in 2009, shortly after allegations of serious corruption involving the company were finally dropped in Kenya and the UK (Kenya National Assembly 2007; interview, UK Serious Fraud Office, 20 June 2014).

So KPO's campaign was shaped by highly commercialised promotional cultures (Davis 2013) long before the executive in question ever approached Scangroup, a pan-African network of advertising and communications companies that normally produces marketing campaigns for Safaricom. This executive asked Scangroup – whose members include RedSky advertising, Scanad communications, Squad Digital, and the global PR giant Ogilvy & Mather – to design a campaign with KPO on a *pro bono* basis, which would incorporate Safaricom's mobile donation platform, M-PESA (interview). As Scangroup staff explained, this was not unusual, as they were often approached by large businesses asking them to design campaigns for African NGOs as part of their CSR schemes, which were envisaged by these businesses as a key part of their brand-management strategy (interview 4 May 2013; interview 18 April 2013).

Scangroup staff also talked about the "sympathy" they had for the individual Kenyan paraplegics whom they had met, but they were far more motivated by the greater creative freedom allowed to them in *pro bono* work. In particular, working on the KPO campaign offered the European and Australian expats who dominated RedSky's creative team the opportunity to design a cutting-edge "360°" campaign, which incorporated social and mainstream media (interview). Thus they hoped to be able to compete for international industry awards in order not only to consolidate their position

in the pan-African advertising market, but also to "sell" themselves in an increasingly harsh and insecure global job market. As an advertising executive at RedSky explained:

> There's a *lot* of people out there struggling with their careers and with, you know, with the global financial crisis ... [*sighs*].
> So you really need to prove that you can ... go beyond the normal. ...
> As a creative, you're always wanting to do work that gets you noticed, that *brands* you as an innovative thinker, because, on a selfish note, you know ... you're looking after your own career. (interview)

So the KPO campaign was very much designed according to the interests and norms of the commercial actors who were involved. This entailed Scangroup creating a "saleable event" (Davis 2013: 2) that its staff hoped would stimulate regular small donations from poorer Kenyan people, as well as larger donations from Kenyan elites and international audiences. First, an advertising executive at RedSky came up with the idea of asking a member of KPO to wheel himself from Nairobi to Johannesburg in South Africa – nearly three thousand kilometres away – where KPO claimed the nearest spinal injury rehabilitation centre was located. Next, this "event" was made even more "saleable" (Davis 2013: 2) by using another agency within Scangroup, Squad Digital, to track this person's progress using GPS. This information was then used in order to publish constant Facebook updates, Tweets, and embedded photo and video feeds, so stimulating a social media storm in order to attract the attention of the national and international media.

Scangroup staff then set about finding a "saleable individual" to embed in this "saleable event" (Davis 2013: 2). They interviewed a number of possible candidates before selecting Zack Kimotho, not only because of his level of fitness and determination, but also because of his marketability. As a senior figure at Scanad, who was involved in this decision-making process, explained,

> He was a vet before he got shot and he's got two kids. But, you know, he's determined to live his life, and erm ... that kind of thing was always going to go down well.
> Plus, you know, like a lot of people here, he's a very big-hearted fella and wanted to do something to help other people in his condition. ...
> And ... we thought it would be like a secondary er ... *bonus* if we got somebody, you know ... who's a good-looking guy. (interview)

So although the NGO campaign was not consciously designed in relation to mainstream news values, it was timely, involved an extensive journey, and was highly personalised, with an obvious "human interest" focus

(Harcup & O'Neill 2001). Indeed, these expat advertising and marketing executives framed the campaign in ways that were deliberately designed to persuade media audiences that the key problem was Kimotho having to continue on his arduous journey, and that the solution to this problem was for them to "Bring Zack Back Home" by giving enough money via M-PESA to enable a new rehabilitation centre to be built.

Selling representations of African "empowerment"

This emphasis on the positive but low-intensity emotions of audiences; the marketisation of suffering; the simple, immediate, and technologically delivered "solution" offered via communications technology; and on the capabilities of mediation itself, seems to mark the KPO campaign out as an example of post-humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki 2013). As such, it might be expected to be detached from the traditional grand narratives that link emancipation to solidarity (Chouliaraki 2013: 9–15). However, despite the framing of the campaign by the commercialised norms of largely European and Australian expats, it was legitimised according to normative ideas about Kenyan empowerment and collective self-help. This was because the campaign was conceptualised by the expats who developed the project as "capitalising upon" the success of the "Kenyans for Kenya" campaign, which had been run in the previous year by a coalition of charities and businesses (including Safaricom), to help those suffering from famine in the north of the country (interviews).

Indeed, the Kenyan account manager at Ogilvy & Mather said he had been appointed to deal with press enquiries because of his previous experience on that campaign, so enhancing journalists' trust via this value-laden association (interview 27 March 2013). Thus he pitched the campaign to journalists in a similar manner, arguing that "we Kenyans shouldn't all the time rely on the government or external donors ... to solve problems for us" (interview). But serious questions must be raised about the extent to which the campaign rested on principles of Kenyan empowerment, because a senior figure at RedSky, who was a British expat, said that some of KPO's lower-ranking members had objected to the plan and that he had overruled them. As he put it,

> What happened was some [KPO members] thought the idea [for the campaign] was too big and we were asked to do a Plan B.
>
> So I got everybody in a meeting in front of RedSky and did the "Over my *dead* body, this is not going to happen" number. "You *can't* not go with this *now*."
>
> But [some KPO members] still thought it had got out of hand and that, maybe, we were doing the wrong thing. ...
>
> Yeah ... there was a *lot* of bad feeling there. (interview)[3]

This displacement of Kenyan non-elites was not evident to Kenyan diaspora, who shared the campaign widely on Facebook and Twitter, so bringing it to the attention of a Kenyan journalist working on an internship with *The Observer* in London (interview 28 August 2012).[4] He then pitched this as a story idea to his duty editor, who pitched it to her senior editor, who agreed to allow the intern to proceed because, as he put it,

> When it comes to stories about Africa, we try and include as wide a range as possible so it's not all, well, here's another story about a disastrous situation in an African country brought about through war or poverty or what have you.
>
> Reflecting on media trends is part of our effort to have more varied coverage of the continent, which is itself extremely varied and going through some extraordinary, and often very positive, transformations. (interview 30 April 2013).

In this way, a story that was ostensibly about Kenyan empowerment and solidarity became subsumed by a broader "Africa Rising" narrative. Such narratives tend to articulate progress and self-help in privatised, technocentric, and mediacentric terms, so pose little challenge to Anglo-American cultural norms and neoliberal media markets. Thus they can be easily co-opted by Northern news organisations and used within their own commercial strategies. In this case, journalists hoped that the story would help the paper stand out from its rivals, operating as a kind of "information subsidy" (Gandy 1982) relating to market differentiation. Yet had they checked they would have found that Kenya's *The Standard* (*Standard Digital* 2012), Al Jazeera (Greste 2012), and *The New York Times* (Gettleman 2012) had already covered the KPO campaign. The BBC then covered the story two days later (BBC 2012).

In particular, *Observer* journalists hoped that the story would attract audiences because it would be uplifting and easy to read; and, as a duty news editor explained, a Sunday newspaper "cannot be all doom and gloom" (interview 23 November 2012). However, journalists' conceptualisation of this as an unchallenging, "positive" story prevented them from scrutinising the issues and values concerned: indeed, the duty news editor thought that it was not just a "light" news story but also a "simple" one, "one of the most straightforward that we do" (interview). Thus the only original research that the intern was tasked with carrying out was to call and interview Kimotho himself.

This lack of investigative research meant that neither the intern nor *Observer* journalists ever had the opportunity to discover that KPO had no plans about how to fund the equipment, staff, and running costs of a newly built rehabilitation clinic (interviews). Journalists also failed to explore the NGO's political links, even though these were detailed on KPO's website,

and even though the production of this article occurred in the run-up to a Kenyan general election. In particular, the site listed the spouse of the then Prime Minister, as a member of KPO's advisory panel (Kenyan Paraplegic Organization website, n.d.). However, even if *Observer* journalists had checked the website, they may not have understood what they read. This was because cost-cutting at the paper had led to the roles of the international and home news editor being merged, and the duty news editor was painfully aware of how little she understood about Kenyan politics (interview). So *The Observer* may have inadvertently boosted the cultural capital of a senior figure in KPO, who successfully ran for office for the same political party less than six months later.

"Dramatising reality"

Finally, journalists' uncritical use of the KPO photograph and the interpretative frame in which it was embedded was problematic because the KPO campaign – and all of the news stories about it – depended upon Kimotho's determination to go all the way to Johannesburg if necessary. Yet no logistical plans, financial budgets, fundraising licences, or travel permits had ever been put in place to allow him to continue over the Kenyan border. This was because none of those involved had anticipated that Kimotho would need to go that far before enough money had been raised (interviews). So the KPO campaign was based on a kind of "pseudo-event" (Boorstin 1961).

Indeed, Kimotho had already stopped his journey by the time that the Kenyan intern made his call on behalf of *The Observer*. The intern said the PR person at Ogilvy & Mather told him that this was a temporary break because Kimotho was exhausted and because Safaricom needed to apply for a new fundraising licence (interview). But more senior figures in the campaign said that Kimotho's journey was also curtailed because donations had already tailed off (interviews).[5] When challenged about why those in charge of the campaign had not been more transparent with *The Observer* about the extent of Zack's journey, those involved in commercial marketing and advertising insisted that they had not intended to mislead journalists. Instead, they had acted according to the commercialised, "promotional" logic (Davis 2013) normal in their lines of work. As one put it,

> We [were] just *dramatising* it ... like in advertising. It is just [using] creative licence ... to move towards an objective. It is [about creating] a mood, a goal, a feeling – in our case, that was to fundraise, yeah? (interview)

Indeed, all of those involved repeatedly described news coverage as a form of "advertising" or "publicity" donated by media owners (interviews).

Observer journalists, like others in the broader study from which this piece is drawn, were not aware of the problems caused by their uncritical

acceptance of the image produced for the KPO campaign and the narratives in which it was embedded. Much of this was due to the dominance of multiskilling, which led to widespread redundancies among photojournalists and picture editors. This meant that overworked subeditors were routinely expected to source, select, and attribute photos, even though they had little or no image-related training. The ways in which specialised understandings about visual meaning had been marginalised in news outlets also meant that journalists tended to regard pictures as simply "illustrating" the written story. So when subeditors omitted or made mistakes with pictorial attribution in their haste to carry out all of their tasks before deadlines, these errors weren't seen as being particularly significant.

In this case, when the senior editor at *The Observer* was made aware that the photo had been taken by commercial actors working for an NGO campaign, and that it had not been attributed at all because of a subeditor's error, he claimed that no serious harm had been done (interview). Instead, he reasoned that, because the article was about the KPO campaign and because the photo showed Kimotho in his wheelchair in front of a long road, it was "obvious what it's about" (interview). But even the photo itself was not what it seemed to be – it was a still taken from a staged TV advertisement.

Conclusion

This case study shows that Northern journalists are in danger of losing the critical judgement they need to analyse images of Africa circulated by others through social media at the same time as they have become more dependent upon them. Widespread redundancies among photojournalists and picture editors have made contributed photos seem like attractive "information subsidies" (Gandy 1982), while news outlets have become far less able to evaluate their visual meanings. Role-merging, multiskilling, and the sheer speed of news production have also combined to erode journalists' ability to interrogate and contextualise contributed material using traditional forms of investigative research grounded in geographic specialisation.

However, journalists' inability to exercise critical judgement has also been shaped by their desire to counteract what they believe to be common, negative stereotypes about Africa. This is simultaneously a normative and a commercial intention: encompassing considerations about attracting larger media audiences and differentiating news output in a fiercely competitive market, as well as moral/political commitments to "diversity" and African "empowerment". But appealing and positive "human interest" stories about the continent were rarely seen by journalists as meriting detailed investigation of specific political and economic alliances, vested interests, or areas of contention.

This problem was then compounded by journalists' assumptions about the uncommercial and "simple" nature of NGOs in Africa, when compared

with the slick, professionalised marketing operations of well-known INGOs (Cottle & Nolan 2007; Magee 2014). Yet this misses a very basic, logical point: that it is precisely because such organisations are comparatively small and resource poor, that they may need to rely on more powerful actors in order to achieve media impact. These actors include expat executives working for major advertising and public relations multinationals, who are not only keen to break into the continent's emerging markets, but also adept at generating the upbeat, technically sophisticated, and highly visual campaigns likely to go viral on Twitter and Facebook.

What's particularly interesting is that these expats deliberately crafted a value-laden and emotive story about Kenyan self-help and empowerment, while simultaneously maintaining interpretative control over the campaign in ways that served their own economic interests. Thus republishing the material they produced within the context of an uncritical, "positive" news story about "Africa" was potentially just as harmful as endlessly reproducing "negative" stories about the continent. This was because it played into simplistic grand narratives about "Africa Rising" that normalised and legitimised privatised and media-centric conceptualisations of empowerment, while effacing profound socio-economic disparities. It also gave Scangroup and Safaricom commercial advantages in the continent's emerging markets and political advantages to a particular party during a sensitive pre-election period, without addressing either of these issues explicitly. But most of all, it both entrenched and obscured the ascendance of commercial norms and practices over rigorous analysis and truth-telling in news coverage of the continent.

Notes

1 The findings of a broader research project (Wright 2015) are referred to throughout this chapter in order to contextualise the case study in question.
2 This participant has since left the company.
3 This account of events was supported by other participants who were present, although it should be noted that in later correspondence a more senior executive at RedSky, who was not part of the study, denied that any argument had occurred.
4 This was part of a scheme funded by a news-related INGO, the David Astor Trust.
5 In total, 73 million Kenyan Shillings had been raised (nearly £500,000), although this was not enough to build the clinic.

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