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‘Helping our beneficiaries tell their own stories’?

The politics of voice in international aid organisations

Abstract: International aid agencies often claim to give the poor and disenfranchised a voice by helping them tell their stories to others located far away. But how do aid-workers conceptualise and operationalise a politics of voice in their production of media for mainstream news? What struggles does it shape within news production processes and what are the effects of this?

This article explores two contrasting production case studies which took place in South Sudan and Mali, involving Save the Children, Christian Aid and their local partners. It finds that different approaches to giving voice exist in aid work, create serious tensions within and between agencies. In addition, commercialised notions of value for money, the influence of mediated donor reporting, and aid-workers’ weak understandings of linguistic and intercultural interpretation combined to make aid agencies’ values-in-action far less empowering than they assumed.

International aid agencies' frequently claim to give voice to those who are poor and marginalised in the Global South (Krause, 2014). This claim can be vital in constructions of aid-workers' moral authority and political accountability (Slim, 2002). But 'giving voice' has long been criticised for being ambiguous as it may mean speaking as the poor, with the poor or about the poor (Slim, 2002). The communications staff of international aid agencies increasingly stress a fourth approach: enabling others to speak for themselves or, as one Oxfam press officer put it, 'helping our beneficiaries to tell their own stories through the power of modern media' (speaking at British Overseas Network for Development (BOND) event, 2014). But despite the rise of User-Generated Content, most international aid agencies still employ large teams of professional press officers to supervise media production (Fenton, 2010). These press officers still focus on accessing popular mainstream news outlets in the Global North (Powers, 2015, 2016a); although this may change as a number of major aid agencies are due to move their head offices to countries in the Global South (Moorhead & Clarke, 2015).

In addition to giving voice to others, accessing mainstream news enables aid agencies to pursue a number of other organisational goals relating to public education, fundraising and brand awareness, and establishing their political legitimacy in the eyes of institutional actors (Franks, 2013; Powers, 2016a). Two key strategies are used to do this. The most longstanding involves giving journalists logistical support on trips, such as arranging transport and accommodation, as well as access to case studies, in return for organisational branding and influence over the framing of stories (Franks, 2013). Sometimes, journalists are even completely 'embedded' with aid agencies on trips (Cottle & Nolan, 2007), collaborating closely with them in the field to produce journalistic coverage. But the severe and widespread cost-cutting taking place in the news industry means that it is now much more common for journalists to accept media

produced or commissioned by international aid agencies without ever leaving their offices (Fenton, 2010).

So international aid agencies have moved from being sources of news to being co-producers of it. Discussions about the effects of this draw on much broader debates about the movement of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) into journalistic production. These debates have been rather polarised, tending to conceptualise such changes as either a “boon” or a “bane” (Powers, 2016b). Optimistic critics argue that NGOs have the potential to enhance the diversity, dynamism and social engagement of journalism (Beckett, 2008; Sambrook, 2010). Whilst others see progressive potential in NGOs’ ability to engage in new forms of mediated forms of advocacy (Reese, 2015; Yanacopulos, 2016). However, more pessimistic scholars view NGOs as undermining the critical independence of mainstream news: skewing public understandings of the problems faced by those in the Global South and leading to misguided forms of collective action (Franks, 2013; Seaton, 2010). In particular, it is feared that media consecration of international aid work prevents more complex debates from taking place about the structural causes of suffering and more radical solutions to it, including tackling the excesses of economic globalisation and addressing ongoing forms of North/South dependence (Lugo-Ocando & Malaoulu, 2014).

Rather than benefiting from consecration by mainstream news outlets, a third group of sceptics argue that collaborating closely with news outlets risks damaging NGOs by undermining their alternative values, perspectives and working cultures (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010). This is because accessing mainstream news is difficult for NGOs, requiring a continual investment in communications technology and the recruitment of numerous former journalists,

picture and video editors, with the social and cultural capital to tailor and pitch material to specific outlets (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010). This necessitates a restructuring of NGOs' resources, time and energy, which tends to change what NGOs do and how NGO-workers think (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Jones, 2016). In particular, concerns have been raised about the ways in which this restructuring encourages NGO-workers to conceptualise accountability in mediated ways, which are directed primarily towards news organisations and audiences, rather than towards their supposed beneficiaries (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Jones, 2016).

More recent work has sought to move away from this 'boon or bane' debate, stressing the need to differentiate between the media strategies employed by international aid agencies and other kinds of NGOs, as well as examining their potentially mixed effects on journalism and NGO-work (Author, 2015; Orgad, 2013; Powers, 2014; Waisbord, 2011). This emerging body of research explores the tensions at work within different kinds of NGO-journalist relations, viewing production processes as being powerfully shaped by struggle, conflict and compromise. But although international aid agencies are some of the most prolific news producers, no-one has yet researched how these tensions, struggles and compromises relate to aid-workers' normative claims to give voice to others.

This article aims to open up new avenues of research by discussing these issues in relation to two contrasting case studies, which were built using internal documentation, as well as twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with journalists and aid-workers, including local field-workers, all of whom made key decisions in media production processes. The first of these cases is about the production of a human interest audio slideshow for *BBC News Online*, which

is one of the most frequently-visited in the world (Crowley & Fleming, 2010a, republished in 2012). The slideshow was about a former child soldier in South Sudan, involving one of the most commercialised agencies in the sector, Save the Children UK. In contrast, the second case study is about the production of a long news article and photographic spread produced for the UK broadsheet, *The Independent on Sunday*, which has a relatively small, niche audience. This involved Christian Aid, an agency explicitly positions itself as opposing populist commercialism because of its commitment to liberation theology.

These cases show that although there are strong incentives for international aid agencies to target populist outlets (Powers, 2014), sometimes they do not do so. In order to understand these variations in media strategy, it is necessary to examine how struggles within and between aid agencies are shaped by different approaches to the meaning of voice and its relationship to news-making. These different readings of voice map roughly onto the divisions between chemical and alchemical approaches in humanitarianism: that is to say, between aid-workers who seek to provide immediate relief to those who are suffering and those who seek to prevent suffering by challenging its structural causes (Orgad, 2013). Different approaches to voice also relate to tensions between fundraising and advocacy teams (Nolan & Mikami, 2013; Orgad, 2013). But arguments about the meaning of voice and the media practices appropriate to it were far more complex, nuanced and wide-ranging than these binary splits would appear to indicate.

Finally, significant tensions exist between the normative values of voice to which agencies ascribe and their values-in-action. In particular, this article highlights how and why commercialized notions of ‘value for money’, the unacknowledged influence of mediated forms of donor reporting and aid-workers’ inadequate understanding of linguistic and

intercultural interpretation combine to make media production processes far less empowering than aid-workers intended.

THE POLITICS OF VOICE, AID WORK AND INTERPRETATION

Couldry describes voice as the ability to give an account of oneself and one's place in the world (2010). He argues that valuing voice therefore involves discriminating in favour of organising resources and socio-economic conditions in ways which facilitate the ability of others to speak about their personhood, experiences, perspectives and values. For these reasons, Couldry sees the value of voice as different from, but implicitly connected to, the 'multiple, interlinked processes' involved in supporting and sustaining voice (2010:2). In particular, Couldry uses his discussion of voice to articulate his opposition to neoliberal norms, which he defines as entailing the belief that the market trumps all other forms of politics (2010). Although he also stresses the ways in which commercialized notions of 'value for money' threaten the investments needed to enable voice, because they involve conceptualising accountability solely in terms of managerial auditing (Couldry, 2010).

Yet a politics of voice is meaningless without a related politics of listening (Tacchi, 2011), with both being imbricated in ongoing, collective struggles for recognition (Honneth, 1996; Ricoeur, 2005). This is because the kinds of 'ontological narratives' involved in giving an account of oneself and one's place in the world (Baker, 2006:28) not only 'define who we are', they also serve as a 'precondition for knowing what to do' (Somers & Gibson, 1994, cited in Baker, 2006:30). Indeed, this is precisely why Sen's work on justice highlights the need for

mainstream journalism to aid collective reasoning by giving voice to ‘the neglected and disadvantaged’ (2010:336).

Detailed debates about the meaning and value of voice in international aid work were triggered by a series of events in the 1990s. These included several legal challenges brought by Southern community organizations against international agencies (Zadek, 1996), as well as a series of unequal conflicts in which civilians were disproportionately targeted (Hoffman & Weiss, 2006). Taken together, these events led to a profound crisis of legitimacy, during which international aid workers sought to reground their moral authority and political accountability in the absence of an electoral mandate. International aid agencies responded to this crisis of legitimacy in several ways. Firstly, they sought to strengthen their right to speak about the poor by investing in internal research and developing alliances with academics: adding this intellectual context to their own experience of project work in the form of case studies (Collingwood, 2006; Slim, 2002).

Secondly, international aid agencies enhanced their right to speak for the poor by constructing ‘downwards’ modes of accountability to, and feedback from, their beneficiaries (Kilby, 2006). This feedback then informed broader, industry discussions about the value of voice and the collaborative processes needed to support it, culminating in the production of a number of industry guidelines, including ones relating to dignified media representation (Dogra, 2012; Krause, 2014). Although such guidelines are regularly broken (Orgad et. al., 2012) and ‘downwards’ accountability procedures may actually entrench the marginalization of the poorest and most vulnerable (Madianou et al., 2015).

Finally, international aid agencies tried to strengthen their claim to speak with the poor by developing networks of partnerships with Southern aid agencies (Slim, 2002). But these are not necessarily any more representative of the people they claim to serve than their European and American counterparts, particularly since they tend to be dominated by the ruling and middle classes (Igoe & Kelsall, 2005). North/South partnerships have also been viewed as largely symbolic: allowing Northern organizations to be associated with the culturally rich ideals of bottom-up democratic participation, but without having to make any of the attendant economic or political sacrifices (Lister, 2003). For example, an empirical study of international aid agencies' engagement in advocacy work revealed that twenty-one out of the twenty-three organisations surveyed did not even consult their Southern partners about advocacy objectives and strategies, let alone involve them in detailed decision-making processes about media production (Anderson, 2007).

So the extent to which international aid agencies are able to act as cultural brokers or interpreters between the Global North and the poor and dispossessed in the Global South is contested (Lewis & Mosse, 2006). Moreover, aid-workers' tendency to conceptualise and operationalise 'voice' in relation to enabling their beneficiaries to 'tell their own story' is deeply problematic for two reasons (BOND, 2014). Firstly, it rests on the assumption that any such narration is inherently empowering – and it may not be. Being interviewed about the details of one's suffering may be upsetting, time-consuming and intrusive; it can also be very repetitive for those who are frequently approached by journalists, researchers and aid workers in crisis zones (Nayel, 2013). When interviewers lack the will or ability to address other goals which are a greater priority for interviewees than 'telling their own story', the experience can be perceived as extractive or exploitative, rather than empowering; leading to feelings of despair, rage and alienation, rather than collective recognition.

Secondly, aid agencies' claims to give others voice by about enabling them to 'tell their own stories' rests on the assumption that it is possible to pass meaning from one language and culture to another, without fundamentally changing it. But this obscures the manifold complexities involved in linguistic and inter-cultural interpretation, for asking people to tell their stories in terms which are meaningful to them necessitates them drawing upon a host of collective symbols, normative values, and social mores – and these may not have a ready equivalence in the target language/s or cultures (Baker, 2006).

Such acts of mediation also involve negotiating the subtle interplay of dominance, collaboration, hybridity and resistance which occur when the cultures and languages of speakers have unequal status or are tied together by colonial history (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Gudykunst & Mody, 2005). Interpretation is especially tricky in conflict and post-conflict situations because of shifting political and military allegiances and the potential security risks which speaking freely poses to participants (Baker, 2006). Interpretation contextualised by the delivery of aid also tends to mean that speakers are acutely aware of the ways in which they need to be 'storied' by others, in order to receive benefits upon which they are dependent (Baker, 2006).

Furthermore, interpretation must always involve forms of selection and recontextualisation in order to accommodate the needs and social mores of target listeners, otherwise they are likely to find the interpreted speech unintelligible. In the case of media production, these target listeners are multiple: including the press officers and journalists visiting from the UK who were physically present, but also the eventual consumers of the media texts which are produced. Interpretation within news production processes is even more difficult because news

audiences are so diverse and variously located and because part of domesticating the foreign for them involves the imposition of journalistic norms, including mainstream news values (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009).

So there were many different factors which were likely to reshape what local people said and how they said it in these case studies, as well as how this was reconstructed by field workers acting as interpreters. A more nuanced understanding of linguistic and intercultural interpretation exposes the naivety of aid agencies' claim to help those suffering far away to 'tell their own stories' through mainstream news outlets in the Global North. Indeed, this forces us to reconsider the politics of voice *per se*: making us question the extent to which it is possible for the poor and dispossessed to give an account of themselves and their place in the world and the multiple, interlinked processes which might be needed to support and sustain even an adulterated version of 'voice' (Couldry, 2010). Without these more sophisticated deliberations, those intending to offer others the chance to 'tell their own story' may end up inadvertently engaging in imperialistic forms of ventriloquism (Spivak, 1998), which serves the interests of international aid agencies and Northern news organisations by masking the 'contradictions and exclusions of dominant values and institutions' (Venuti, 1998:1).

METHODOLOGY

The cases studies explored here originally formed part of a larger study into how and why journalists use multimedia provided by different kinds of NGOs in the coverage of Africa (Author, 2015). In addition to choosing contrasting case studies, the sampling period was

chosen to contrast with previous research, much of which has focused on peak periods of news coverage during major humanitarian emergencies (Cottle & Nolan, 2007) and disasters (Cooper, 2011; Franks, 2013). Instead, TV, radio, print and online news readily available to British audiences were sampled during a comparatively quiet news week in the UK. This was 13–19 August 2012, which fell between the London Olympic and the Paralympic Games, as well as occurring outside of parliamentary sessions, major international conferences and summits.

A variety of checks were carried out to identify items in which NGO material had been used but not attributed. Quantitative analysis regarding the kinds of organizations, places and media involved, as well as qualitative topic-string analysis, were then used to identify media items which illustrated dominant trends in the sample, as well as others which bucked the trend. This was in keeping with Bergene's advice (2007) about how to use strongly contrasting case studies to build general theory by weeding out false assumptions and bad abstractions which lump together different kinds of causal factors, as well as non-essential context.

Strap-lines were then used to trace back those involved in the six media items selected and 60 hour-long semi-structured interviews conducted with these individuals, in which they were asked in detail about how and why they helped to produce the media items concerned. A post-colonial approach was adopted here in order to address the perspectives and practices of those in the Global South who tend to be excluded from media production studies (Mosco & Lavin, 2009), as well as helping to mitigate the risk of engaging in imperialistic reconstructions of Africa as a homogenous mass (Mudimbe, 1994).

Study participants were asked which language they preferred to be interviewed in: all chose English or French. But although I speak some French, the very different regional dialects used in Mali, together with my nascent understanding of the importance and complexity of intercultural interpretation within research (Gent, 2014; Leck, 2014), meant that I decided to compensate for my limitations by hiring an interpreter. This person had been raised in Mali and was familiar with the regions and idiolects concerned: she had also been trained in interpreting to postgraduate level at the University of X, where I worked.

I am indebted to her active participation in re/constructing the perspectives of interviewees, especially field-workers interpreting for international aid agencies. However, the situation was still far from ideal, as she was French and not Malian like most of the study participants, so her ability to act as a trusted intermediary is likely to have been impaired by the lack of shared national and ethnic background, as well as by the presence of colonial ties (Leck, 2014). In addition, financial constraints meant that interviews had to be carried out by phone or Skype, which made it harder to build up rapport than it might have been through embodied co-presence.

This approach was also time-consuming, as the networks of people involved in news production were often far more extensive than initially anticipated. It took until the spring of 2013 to trace and interview most of the respondents. So participants' memories were not as fresh as they would have been immediately after the event/s in question: a problem which was mitigated by using other interviews within the same case study to triangulate any issues about which a particular interviewee was unsure, as well as checking oral accounts against written documentation, including emails, trip briefs and editing notes. A more serious problem with the time lag between publication/broadcast and research interviews was that it caused me to

‘lose’ one interpreter, a Malian school-teacher who had volunteered to help interpret between English and Songhaï and who could not be traced after being displaced by fighting between jihadi forces and the Malian government. However, this lengthy interviewing stage also had some significant advantages, including allowing me to manage security risks to study participants more effectively.

Although I had not originally intended to carry out participatory or action research, some of the effects of these production case studies were potentially harmful to those represented, so I raised these issues directly with the agencies concerned. Following these conversations, I was invited to present my findings to members of the UK’s Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which is comprised of all of the major international aid organisations based in the UK. After internal discussions, these agencies came back to me, saying that they were particularly concerned about that their ignorance regarding linguistic and intercultural communication might result in serious harm being inflicted on their beneficiaries, requesting that I help them avoid this by designing a bullet point briefing which could be added to trip ‘grab-bags’ detailing how to brief local field workers who were regularly asked to act as interpreters.

Given the difficulty of generalising on the basis of two case studies alone, I drew upon my own findings alongside the experiences and insights of professional interpreters, including those working at the Centre for Audio-visual Translation at the University of X, where I worked. I also liaised with a number of organisations with relevant specialist experience, including Translators without Borders and the Dart Center for Trauma and Journalism. I stressed that the bullet-point brief so produced was not intended to be conclusive, given the need for more empirical research in this area. Rather, its purpose is to act as an interim measure: offering aid-

workers a stimulus to further reflection and some practical guidance, until their own internal debates about voice lead to more detailed organisational policies and training programmes.

SAVE THE CHILDREN IN SOUTH SUDAN

Decision-making at Save the Children UK was more explicitly dominated by commercial imperatives than at Christian Aid, with participants referring far more frequently to notions of cost-effectiveness and to humanitarian emergencies as fundraising opportunities (Author, 2015a). This market logic was contested internally by the person in charge of the delivery of aid, the Head of Emergencies. During an organisational restructure, he changed the name of his department to 'Humanitarian' in an effort to 'attempt mainstream the humanitarian gene back into ... this big beast that has largely forgotten all that stuff' (interview, 1 March 2013). This move was specifically directed at the charity's press office, who regularly described themselves as 'selling in' stories to journalists, but whom the Head of Humanitarian thought were 'spinning' in order to raise as much money as possible (interview, 1 March 2013). In particular, he was opposed to 'facile' media campaigns 'which promise that if you click here, donate there, we can save that child', saying 'it's much more complicated than that'.

Rather than accepting the tension between his humanitarian ideals and the exigencies of media practice (Nolan & Mikami, 2013), the Head of Humanitarian appointed his own multimedia producer (interview, 1 March 2013). He tasked this person with creating a more 'thoughtful, honest' relationship with media audiences, by educating them about the difficulties involved in delivering international aid, the limitations of what it can achieve, and what he called the

fundamental ‘brokenness’ of the aid system, which keeps failing to prevent acute crises from happening. But he also asked the multimedia producer to enable local people’s values, opinions and perspectives to be heard, as well as illuminating their agency and resourcefulness. – all classic instances of ‘voice’ (Couldry, 2010).

In order to prevent this multimedia producer from being swallowed up by the press team, the Head of Humanitarian thought it necessary to take some precautionary steps. These involved situating this post in Nairobi, rather than in London and embedding it within the agency’s team of rapidly deployable ‘emergency response personnel’ (interview, 1 March 2013). Secondly, the Head of Humanitarian explained that he deliberately appointed someone who wasn’t a former journalist, but who had always worked for aid agencies, as he thought that such a person would be more likely to share his normative values.

The Humanitarian Head was largely right about this, as the multimedia producer spoke at length about his own commitment to a politics of voice, linking this to his interest in linguistic and intercultural interpretation (interview, 31 August, 2012). As a white American from the mid-West he explained that learning French and living for extended periods in Francophone countries had

... broke open my mind to see that the concepts you understand the world with are actually largely tied to your native language.

Once you jump outside that you learn... that there are all these different ways that we can see and understand reality, understand our culture, understand ourselves, our relationship to the world.

....So for me it is *always* been about how to balance how to empower someone to voice *their* reality with all its differences...

But at the same *time*, trying to figure out where is this space of commonality amidst all these differences, so that I can enable an audience who might be millions of miles away to understand.

But in order to persuade Save's commercially-minded former Chief Executive, Jasmine Whitbread, to introduce the post, the Head of Humanitarian had had to prove that it would provide 'value for money' for the organisation (interview, 1 March 2013). This meant that the post was funded by a cost-recovery system levied across all departments, and everyone in the organisation was encouraged to ask the multimedia producer to provide material for them (interview, Multimedia Producer, 31 August 2012). In practice, this meant that the multimedia officer was pressurised into producing very high volumes of material for multiple stakeholders on every trip, so it was difficult to find time to make the longer, more critical pieces he had been hired to create (interview, Multimedia Producer, 31 August 2012).

In addition, the dominant discourses of 'value for money' at Save meant that the press office was entitled to disrupt commissions already agreed through the multimedia producer, if a more popular media outlet evinced an interest in his work (interview, Multimedia Producer, 31 August 2012). This was because the fundraising potential and brand awareness generated acquired through popular news outlets was believed to give the agency 'more bang for their buck' (interview, Media Manager, 16 November 2012). On the trip in question, the Media Manager for Africa, who was based in the agency's press office, obliged the Humanitarian Multimedia Producer to drop an arrangement he had made to do a short film about a former child soldier in South Sudan for *The Guardian.co.uk* as part of a year-long 'Child's Eye' series

(interview, Media Manager, 16 November 2012). Instead, she wanted him to work with *BBC News Online* to produce an audio slideshow about the same boy.

The Multimedia Producer objected vehemently because he had already had detailed discussions with *The Guardian*, which had included reaching an agreement with them about the use of subtitles (interview, 31 August 2012). He felt particularly strongly about this because of his conviction that empowering children's 'voices' was an 'embodied process' (Couldry, 2010:8). As he put it,

There are things that come through when somebody is speaking, so that even if you don't understand their language, you can hear *them* – their intonation, inflection, hesitations - all these sorts of verbal-emotional cues...

That *matters*

But the Media Manager was convinced that a politics of voice and a related politics of listening was better served by targeting a more popular outlet, even if this did mean letting go of some editorial control. This involved allowing the BBC journalist to join Save staff on the trip to do the interview herself and allowing the BBC to dub over the boy's voice with that of a child speaking in English, rather than using subtitles. As she put it,

You can get the story that's exactly how you want it to be on a specialised blog and maybe *five* people will read it...and they already *know* a lot about child soldiers... you are just preaching to the converted.

Or you can maybe make some compromises and get it in a much bigger outlet read by people who might know nothing it, and the difference you can make with that is far greater.

(interview, 16 November 2012).

The conflict between these two members of staff was ultimately resolved by the agency's Head of News, who backed the Media Manager on the grounds that accessing a more popular news outlet would also enable Save to strengthen its existing relationship with donors, heightening awareness of its organisational brand and consolidate its moral authority and political legitimacy (interview, 19 March, 2013). Interestingly, she also framed this in terms of voice, saying,

It was just a no-brainer because the BBC was *the* go to place for global news then. So in terms of readership and spread and all of that it was ... just basic *maths*...

You see, the main thing we are trying to do is get *our* voice heard in the most influential and most widely-read spaces.

(interview, 19 March 2013)

But the aid agency's last-minute decision to prioritise the more popular media outlet, together with its overloading of the South Sudan trip in the name of 'value for money' meant that the Humanitarian Multimedia Producer and the South Sudanese press officer, who was based in the capital (Juba), did not have much time to prepare with the junior South Sudanese employee who tasked with interpreting the embodied voice of the boy soldier (interview, Multimedia Producer; interview, South Sudan Press Officer, 9 June 2013). This was an important omission because this individual had not received any training in interpretation and the task he was asked

to perform was an exceptionally difficult one: involving interpreting for a vulnerable child who had been forced to join a military group, as well as interpreting between English and Dinka, two languages bound together by colonialism. These inequalities were then exacerbated by the nature of the boy's relationship with the interpreter, who was an assistant on a cash transfer scheme, which the boy and his family were dependent upon (interview, Interpreter, 15 May 2013).

But despite the very challenging nature of this task, the interpreter had been given little preparation time or information about the task ahead of him (interview, Interpreter, 15 May 2013). Indeed, he stressed that he had not been told that the pictures and interview were to be used by a news outlet, or that the person who had joined the trip was a BBC journalist. Instead, he assumed that the purpose of the trip was to produce material for a donor report, as had been the case on previous occasions. So he sought the consent of the boy, his parents and others in his village who appeared in another piece (Crowley & Fleming, 2010b, republished 2012) by saying 'we want to make something that we are doing for them even better' (interview, Interpreter, 15 May 2013).

The interpreter later regretted this bitterly because he felt that he had gained the villagers' acceptance under false pretenses: arguing that they had 'trusted' him as a worker for Save the Children on the cash transfer scheme and as another Dinka, 'a brother...the same to them' (interview, 17 May 2013). He was also convinced that those represented 'would not have wanted to make an interview *world-wide*', so would have refused if they had realised that they were being asked to be interviewed by a journalist for a news outlet, rather than an aid-worker preparing an internal report.

Thus concepts of ‘value for money’ which relied on managerial auditing (Couldry, 2010) and on accessing mass audiences through popular news outlets drove high-speed, high-volume forms of media production at Save the Children UK. These were not devoid of normative intentions regarding giving voice to others, rather they involved different approaches to a politics of voice and a related politics of listening. So it would not be fair to say that the only logic which mattered was that of the market (Couldry, 2010). However, aid-workers’ haste and their failure to adequately address the complex, interlinked processes involved in interpreting, undermined the principle of empowerment in a very basic way. For the boy, his family and villagers were only made aware what the purpose of media production was when the interpreter returned to their village a month later - long after the finished slideshow had been published online (interview, Interpreter, 17 May 2013).

This means that Save the Children broke its own codes of conduct regarding informed consent. and the protection of minors: allowing photos of the boy’s face, name and exact location to be published externally without his family’s permission, as well as an (interpreted) account of his fury at his captors. This was not only profoundly disempowering; it was potentially dangerous as the military situation was still very unstable in South Sudan, Indeed, the country lapsed back into civil war in 2013: three years after the piece was originally published and only a few months after it was republished by *BBC News Online*.

CHRISTIAN AID IN MALI

Staff at Christian Aid repeatedly contrasted their media strategies with those taken by Save the Children, which they regarded as stimulating a ‘race to the bottom’ by using what they thought were disempowering and stereotypical images in order to raise as much money as possible (interview, Communications Manager, 8 March 2013). Instead they stressed that their organisational branding and image policy had been designed to reflect their commitment to dignity, voice and partnership with local people (interview, Communications Manager, 8 March 2013). Historically, the agency’s main supporters were older members of the Church of England, radicalised in the 1960s. But these supporters were gradually dying off and, despite the agency’s efforts, it struggled to appeal to the growing numbers of evangelical Christians, who tend to prefer World Vision (interview, Communications Manager, 8 March 2013).

Thus the agency faces a funding crisis, which had prompted a large-scale organisational restructure, involving merging marketing, media and advocacy teams into one Communications department. Although this restructure had produced some cost-savings in the form of redundancies and was designed to help the agency locate new, long-term donors, the senior manager overseeing the restructure framed this in terms of political autonomy: stressing Christian Aid’s desire to resist becoming overly dependent on foreign donor governments, which often gave the charity short-term contracts (interview, Director of Supporter and Community Partnerships, 7 May 2013). Following extensive internal debates, this goal was then set within a broader strategy relating to the development of deeper and more egalitarian relationships with all of Christian Aid’s partners, including its financial supporters, local partner agencies, and the people whom it tries to help.

Just like the Head of Humanitarian at Save the Children, the senior manager at Christian Aid used the opportunity afforded by the restructure to make a strong internal statement to his colleagues about this - by changing his own job title to the Director of Supporter and Community Partnerships. In order to make this change of strategy meaningful, the Director of Supporter and Community Partnerships then introduced new processes to make it easier for in-country programme directors to request attention from the London-based media team, as well as giving them the right to ‘sign-off’ any media items which press officers created. As he explained,

What we’re looking for is to strengthen the voice of our partners, who are close to people living in poverty, to strengthen their influence in the world...

So we’re interested in ...making sure that what we say is based on their experience. Those kinds of values are very important for us

(interview, 7 May 2013).

Thus this manager explicitly grounded ‘the authenticity of what we say as Christian Aid’ (interview, 7 May 2013) in terms of giving voice to the charity’s in-country partners.

But this communications strategy was also powerfully shaped by the faith commitments of Christian Aid staff. In particular, the Director of Supporter and Community Partnerships described his stance as being strongly influenced by his study of liberation theology in South Africa towards the end of apartheid. For instance, he elaborated at length on the role of Freire (2000) in his thinking and his experience of working in South African churches: praising the

growing ability of black, poor South Africans to become their own ‘agents of change’ (interview, 7 May 2013).

Christian Aid’s Programme Director in Mali requested media coverage from the aid agency’s headquarters using this new system, in order to bring the ‘world’s attention’ to a food crisis triggered by military conflict between the government and Islamist rebels, but underpinned by deeper inequalities relating to the operation of markets (interview, 22 March 2013). He regarded his ability to do this as entailing a ‘significant devolution of power.’ But the Communications Manager explained that his request was only granted because a West Africa appeal was already in progress, which had been decided upon by staff at the charity’s headquarters in London (interview, 8 March 2013). He was torn between asking press officers to target popular outlets, such as magazines and online outlets, in order to maximise monies raised, and concerns that the soft and often simplistic ‘human interest’ focus of such outlets would not be in keeping with ‘the voice that Christian Aid wants to be in the world’.

These concerns were not only normative, they also related to organizational branding and fundraising, as the Communications Manager thought that such coverage might alienate the agency’s existing donors, as well as failing to attract the kinds of long-term, committed supporters it needed to survive in future (interview, 8 March 2013). So he deferred to the Head of News, although this member of staff was technically his junior. The Head of News argued that the socio-economic elites with the power not just to give money, but also to bring about political change, were more likely to be influenced by a ‘serious’ news article in a broadsheet (interview, 7 November 2012).

However, the Head of News also argued that pursuing this course of action meant that it would be impossible to carry out extensive editorial consultation with in-country staff as ‘news has to be a speedy business – otherwise it isn’t new any more’ (interview, 7 November 2012). Indeed, he found it impossible to find a journalist with them on the trip because the presence of multiple roadblocks meant that it would not be possible for them to guarantee that they could file in a few days. There were also security reasons for working speedily whilst in the affected areas, as jihadi militants had been trying to abduct foreign visitors, so national and local government bodies insisted that the Head of Media and the freelance photographer who accompanied him never stayed more than one night in a single location.

Nevertheless, the Head of News had other objections to giving voice to Christian Aid’s in-country partners through greater consultation which related to his understandings of the editorial control which he thought were appropriate, and which had been acquired during his own time as the editor of a Sunday broadsheet. As he explained, he would have refused to make any significant changes to his article even if Mali’s Programme Director had asked for this during the sign-off procedure, as it was ‘a journalistic exercise’ (interview, 7 November, 2012). Much like other journalists, the Head of Media also conceptualised interpretation as a largely logistical issue, akin to booking flights, travel permits or a driver, so did not devote much time to briefing the local fieldworkers tasked with interpreting for him (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2009).

But the Head of News was deeply committed to enabling the voices of local people, expressing this by insisting that field workers ‘translate word for word’, rather than paraphrasing what interviewees had said or adding their own comments (interview, Head of News, 7 November, 2012). Yet in so doing, the Head of News demonstrated that he radically misunderstood the

complex forms of selection, negotiation and re-contextualisation involved in oral interpretation. In his research interview, the field worker tasked with interpreting between Bambara and French, challenged this stance on several fronts (interview, 29 March 2013). He started by saying that the lack of preparation time meant that he had not had time to research many of the technical terms and acronyms used by the visitors, such as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), which meant little to him or to local people when interpreted word for word.

But the interpreter's main criticism was that mediating between the British visitors and many of those who had fled their homes north of Gao, involved far more than finding words which were roughly equivalent to one another - it involved trying to bridge very different and unequal worlds of experience (Baker, 2006; Schäffner & Bassnett, 2010). As he explained the main challenge he faced was how to interpret 'the *context*...the situation of desperate people and their emotions' (interview, 29 March 2013). A key aspect of this challenge involved subjects' tendency to use short, colloquial phrases laden with culturally-specific meanings when trying to describe their reaction to events which were painful or degrading. One of these phrases, whose meaning was difficult to convey in French, was 'Ou ye lanogo': a saying in Bambara which the interpreter said meant something like 'a total humiliation in every way... on economic, social and cultural levels' (interview, 29 March 2013).

The interpreter dealt with this by trying to elaborate on culturally-specific terms and give additional examples in order to try and aid the visitors' understanding. But the Head of Media, who was already frustrated by the cumbersome double-interpretation process, from Bambara to French, and then from French to English, became very annoyed by what he perceived as

digressions which slowed down the interpretation process even further, and which he thought risked ‘making it unclear what interviewees were actually *saying*’ (interview, Head of News, 7 November, 2012). For these reasons, the interpreter abandoned his earlier tactic and tried to pick exactly the same number of words which he thought were ‘roughly similar’ in French, even though he knew this stripped local peoples’ speech of its richness and subtlety. Thus ‘Ouye lanogo’ was interpreted as ‘I felt bad’ (interview, Interpreter, 29 March 2013).

So although staff at Christian Aid had engaged in lengthy and sophisticated internal debates about the politics of voice and its relationship to their organisational identity and practice, their values-in-action did not enable the speech of local people. Indeed, some of the most significant obstacles to giving voice were created by the very North/South partnerships which the aid agency sought to foster. This was because Christian Aid had invited the mayor of Mopti to host a meeting to welcome the Head of Media and the photographer, out of respect for his role in leading local communities and in order to ensure his continued cooperation in securing access to the displaced people living within the district. Yet this mayor alienated many of the displaced people gathered to meet the British visitors, because he did not speak Songhai, their native language, and refused to speak in Bambara, which most of them also spoke (interview, GRAT Programme Director 3 April 2013; interview Interpreter, 29 March 2013).

Instead, the mayor stressed the formality of the occasion and his own high status by using the prestige language at his disposal, French. But few of the displaced Malians present spoke French, especially those from poorer backgrounds, and the handful who did, resented being addressed in a colonial language, particularly in the context of receiving white European visitors (interview, GRAT Programme Director 3 April 2013; interview Interpreter, 29 March

2013). A serious row ensued, during which many of those who had initially seen the opportunity to speak as empowering changed their minds, and even those who were interviewed remained angry and guarded (interview, GRAT Programme Director 3 April 2013; interview Interpreter, 29 March 2013).

A further example of North/South partnerships functioning in disempowering ways involved the ways in which local people were approached by Christian Aid's in-country partners in Mali, APH and GRAT. It was assumed by British and Malian staff of Christian Aid that these aid-workers would be able to ask local people to participate in more sensitive and culturally-appropriate because they were 'closer to people living in poverty' (interview, Director of Supporter and Community Partnerships, 7 May 2013). But both approached displaced and poor people in ways which were framed by their own organisational interests and prior experiences of mediated donor reporting.

So the GRAT Programme Director told displaced Malians near Gao that they needed to meet the British visitors because they 'had to' make the 'people who support Christian Aid' know 'that they have done the right thing [in] paying for this [project]' (interview, 3 April 2013). Likewise, the Project Manager at APH, explained that he approached Dogon beneficiaries, who lived near the military front, by stressing that they needed to show to donors 'that the monies given to the project had been rightly given, and rightly used' (interview, APH Manager of Agricultural Projects 15 May 2013). Indeed, he said that he had had a 'very hard job' to persuade the Dogon people to come and meet the British visitors because it was harvest-time and, given the threat to their food supply posed by nearby fighting, they had not wanted to waste a whole day of labour on a media-related visit.

Field-workers' experiences of mediated donor reporting meant that partnerships with local agencies, which were perceived by senior managers at Christian Aid as supporting a politics of voice sometimes had disempowering effects. Specifically, they led to field workers assuming that they should not only coerce local people to speak, but also coach them in what to say: so severely restricting the accounts of themselves and their place in the world which such people were able to give (Couldry, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The cases explored in this article demonstrate that serious tensions exist within and between agencies regarding their conceptualisation of what 'giving voice to others' means, its relationship to a politics of listening and its relationship to organisational positioning, branding and fundraising strategies. These value-laden struggles relate to the division between chemical and alchemical traditions within humanitarianism (Orgad, 2013) and to tensions between the objectives of fundraising and advocacy departments (Nolan & Mikami, 2013; Orgad, 2013), but they are more complex and wide-ranging than either.

Unfortunately, these debates are too often divorced from a detailed understanding of aid-workers' values-in-action. By researching production practices inside and outside of Northern press offices, I demonstrated that aid-workers' actual production practices can seriously undermine their commitment to an empowering politics of voice – no matter how detailed their organisational policies and mission statements may be. In particular, this article highlights the problematic nature of commercialised notions of 'value for money'; the unacknowledged

influence of mediated donor reporting; and aid-workers' inadequate understanding of linguistic and intercultural interpretation.

Whilst these findings may have implications for the practice of international aid work, they also have implications for global communications theory: raising serious questions about the extent to which giving the poor and dispossessed an unadulterated and authentic 'voice' is possible, given the difficulties of navigating different languages, cultures and deeply unequal power structures. But such reflections need not necessarily lead to a position of moral and political defeat. Instead they can prompt us to generate more nuanced understandings of the 'multiple, interlinked processes' (Couldry, 2010:2) needed to support forms of media production which may not give others an uncompromised 'voice', but which are more empowering than imperialistic ventriloquism (Spivak, 1998).

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