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Pratt, Kenneth

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# Developing International Development Journalism programmes

**Kenneth Pratt, University of the West of Scotland**

**Like many ordinary hacks, I'd never actually heard of the term IDJ (International Development Journalism). It was only when reading *The Guardian* and its invitation to submit to its prestigious IDJ competition (professional category) that I decided to give it a go.**

The research initially involved surfing a range of NGO (non-governmental organisations) and latching on to a story. A 53-year old grandmother in DR Congo had been gang raped at gunpoint by a gang of teenage boy soldiers high on drugs. My story, 'Child Killers of DR Congo' came first in its category and I was then invited to visit Uganda to write more material. The only problem was, I hadn't read the small print. The genre of International Development Journalism demands positive and intelligent problem solving in conjunction with the host organisation (and in the context of *The Guardian*) in association with DFID (Department for International Development). I like problem solving. I like intelligence. And I like cooperation. So onward I went to Kampala to begin my next assignment.

On my return I found myself teaching a module called *International Perspectives*, a fourth year module on the BA Journalism course at UWS (University of The West of Scotland). It was whilst emerging myself in the literature of international reportage that I came across the work of Terje Skjerdal (NLA, University College Bergen). In it he concludes:

'there seems to be no single media or journalism model that is likely to resolve the diverse challenges of a transitional media society. Instead, a combination of models should be considered. To the extent that development journalism is applied as one of the approaches, particular attention must be paid to avoiding problems of politicisation in reporting, and to securing overall media freedom.' (Skjerdal 2011: 70)

I took comfort from Skjerdal's conclusions. Media pluralism is key. I re-emphasised its definition and effectiveness with my students. However Skjerdal hadn't fully addressed one key issue - the manipulation of the press. Keen to call upon my own vocational experiences I began to reflect on the NGO control mechanisms I'd witnessed. I wasn't the only IDJ journalist to do this. Before speaking at the 2018 AJE Winter Conference at City University I contacted some of my old international development journalism colleagues. Some had already taken steps to circumvent the worst excesses of media manipulation by NGO's. Award-winning Libby Powell for example is Founder and CEO of *On Our Radar*, a London-based organisation that co-produces digital media features on uncovered issues in developing countries without NGO's. Libby told me:

"Too often NGO's have their own slant on things. It's time to cut out the middleman. Too many journalists for example are being employed to ghostwrite as if they are there in the field. It is heart breaking to see the other side of things when you break loose from the NGO. I would never have seen that if I hadn't broken away."

## Reflective practice

After my conversation with Libby it was hard not to reflect momentarily on my own experiences in the field. Such as the assignment in a leper colony in India for *The Sunday Times* where I witnessed a church organisation charity cherry picking for treatment lepers from a slum village based on their family connections within the church. I still recall the furious row that erupted with one of the village elders (himself a

leper) and the dash to safety we had to make in the priest's 4x4 chased by angry village lepers, desperate for treatment in the charity-run leper hospital - or the time in St Petersburg where food aid was distributed according to local peoples' political affiliations. There were many other assignments too where controlling NGO's presented their case studies to me (local people groomed for media attention) - then set about preventing me following up sharp news leads extracted from the interviews. This manifested itself in various ways. For example, no access to the real people who wanted to tell their real stories, and negative or silent responses to previously collegiate and constructive discussions.

Around this time I was asked to write a concept paper for a proposed MA in International Development Journalism. The first point to make was simple. IDJ is a caveated genre distinct from International Journalism for example in that it specifically focuses on working alongside NGO's and government. By delivering IDJ courses journalism educators are therefore opening the door to employment opportunities for our new graduates in a range of fields including humanitarian communication, NGO communication, Development Journalism and media communication, within an expansive range of national and international NGO's such as Oxfam, UNICEF, British Red Cross and Save The Children. While theoretical input will play an important part, our graduates will be vocational practitioners trained to operate in NGO environments to professionally develop internal and external communication and media networks. The course would also offer participating students some excellent opportunities to engage with our growing/developing international cohort and so spotlighting a range of international projects ripe for IDJ coverage. International development is a thriving, expanding sector, continued the spin. It can offer new frontiers, scattered with stories and the chance to chronicle real change. The ethical justifications behind the teaching plan were clear. According to Amartya Sen (1999) 'no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.' But on reflection one significant recommendation is missing from the above concept paper - our IDJ students will be trained to evaluate:

(A) The shifting and often flawed symbiosis between NGO's and journalists; and

(B) New theories of censorship in a post (post) Leveson environment in which Culture Secretary Matt Hancock has said the government will not implement the second stage of the Leveson Inquiry.

Leveson's work had had a massive impact on public life, but there was also a need for a free press that could properly hold the powerful to account, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Matt Hancock said. "Britain needs high-quality journalism to thrive in the new digital world. We seek a press, a media, that is robust and independently regulated, that reports without fear or favour." Hancock's quote may be predictable, however its essence should be built-in to the teaching framework of new IDJ courses throughout the UK to specifically empower IDJ students to tackle the power structures present within global NGO frameworks, while constructively working within the organisations to enhance the good work they already undoubtedly conduct.

A quick tour of Higher Education IDJ provision in the UK demonstrates this point. Let's begin with arguably the flagship MA Media and International Development course at UEA (University of East Anglia). A well-designed introductory video by Martin Scott and David Girling clearly explains why media matters for international development. However, as with my own concept paper, while Scott and Girling mention the importance of investigative journalism within the international development framework, they arguably aren't specific enough in explaining how investigative journalism can best be used to examine the required symbiotic shift in NGO and journalism relations. To achieve this a change in thinking is arguably required. To hold power to account we firstly have to define what power is and who holds it? Power is routinely associated with government. And government routinely plays a part in various forms of IDJ. What is missing in our analysis is that, although NGO stands for non-governmental organisation, the entire concept of IDJ is built around NGO's and governments working in harmony. We therefore have to begin to shift the focus of our IDJ investigative journalism teaching inwards to reflectively expose corruption and/or abuses of power within the host organisations our students often aim to represent upon graduation from an IDJ Masters. Look at London South Bank University's Journalism with Development Masters. Its overview is impressive.

*It states:*

*'Development issues such as migration, poverty, the environment, aid and governance are increasingly relevant in journalism, and this course develops a theoretical understanding of these issues alongside practical journalism skills.'*

This is an interesting sentence. But is there perhaps also room for a module that combines journalistic practice and theory and equips students with the tools to work within NGO's developing their media coverage in a cutting edge and transparent way, using, for example, the experiences of *On Our Radar*, or develop-

ing new practical journalism standards to reporting on the internal weaknesses of the host NGO not within a negatively based construct but in a constructive, consultative context to build stronger journalistic outputs that refuse to merely ‘front-up’ the NGO, but which deal with the real issues both behind the scenes of the organisation and, of course, in the field itself.

## Recent research

*The Aid Industry - What Journalists Really Think* Report published by the International Broadcast Trust (2014), paints a dark picture of relations between reporters and agencies. In it journalists accuse NGO’s of ‘neglecting individuals on the frontline of conflict zones to focus on relatively safe refugee camps - as well as exaggerating the scale of disasters to attract donor money.’ According to the report, Tim Miller, former foreign editor at *Sky News*, calls for greater scrutiny on aid agencies using donations. ‘The nadir in NGO activity was the tsunami in 2005 when it became apparent that aid money had been raised and no one knew where it was going,’ he says. Nevine Mabro, head of foreign news at *Channel 4 News*, was one of many interviewees to suggest that the media was now more prepared to scrutinise the work of NGOs.

‘In the past there was perhaps a feeling that they were untouchable because the majority of what they do is good so they weren’t worthy of investigation in the way that a big corporation would be,’ she says. ‘But I can’t think why or when that might have changed. If someone came to me with a story now about corruption [within the aid industry], I would definitely look into it.’

Other recommendations in the report show journalists urging NGOs to be more transparent in their dealings with the press, and to focus on emergency, rather than development aid. In a *Guardian* article by Joe Sandler Clarke *Corporate, Patronising and obstructive: what journalists think about NGO’s (2015)* Head of media at Christian Aid, former *Sunday-Times* journalist Andrew Hogg, is quoted as agreeing that the relationship between reporters and aid workers can be unnecessarily strained: “I’ve spoken to journalists who think we’re the enemy – that aid agencies are trying to pull the wool over their eyes, that just isn’t the case. Transparency and accountability is key to the way we operate.”

But Hogg admits that the suspicion goes both ways. “There are undoubtedly some people working for aid agencies who hold journalists in disdain, citing sensationalism, or superficiality,” he says.

The relationship between journalists and NGOs is symbiotic - both need each other to do their best work in developing countries.

“The truth is, we need each other,” says Hogg. “The relationship may at times be uneasy, but it is mutually beneficial. Journalists want access to stories and first-hand accounts which aid agencies can supply, and the agencies want to draw attention to issues of concern, as well as promote their work.”

Hogg’s points are of interest. But they fall short of informing journalism educators how we can best *teach* the re-balancing of this symbiosis to ensure the scales of both journalistic and development justice are properly re-aligned. The insights of Tobias Denskus, senior lecturer for development at Malmö University in Sweden, are more helpful in pointing us toward a curriculum for excellence in teaching IDJ. In an interview for *humanosphere.org* Denskus talks about the ‘increasingly competitive and corporatized environment’ in which both NGO’s and IDJ journalists have to operate. He points to journalists and development professionals having similar goals - from critically engaging with power structures to helping citizens to make meaningful decisions in their lives. But it is Denskus’s points about ‘the communication biotypes’ of capital cities that perhaps provide the real foundation upon which IDJ journalism educators can really begin to build curricular progress. He writes:

‘The communication biotopes of capital cities are made up of the same people. I can see that in my network clearly: Some friends work in PR in Brussels, other work for NGOs in London or the U.N. system in Geneva and New York—or in Swedish academia. So at some point we probably need to talk about filter bubbles, privilege and power in media-related work.’

Denskus’s point about privilege and power in media-related work is worth noting. It’s time we faced up to the fact that an elitist culture exists within both media and NGO work. While this is no great revelation in itself, the way forward as IDJ educators may be to begin to create new reading lists that consciously (and more subtly) investigate the cultural and psychological processes that occur when progressive entities such as IDJ and NGO’s begin to merge. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is an account of a group of barnyard animals that revolt against their vicious human master, only to submit to a tyranny erected by their own kind.

Without having to point to who the pigs are in this particular analogy, the point is clear - power corrupts. In the recent BBC documentary *Putin - The New Tsar* Scots neuroscientist Professor Ian Robertson examines how Putin's brain may have been "profoundly changed" by the trappings of office. What neurological impacts occur when NGO chiefs arrive in disaster zones to become all omnipotent men and women with their hands firmly on the purse strings surrounded by drug and prostitution sub-cultures for example? (\* see note below). The formula or experience is often further complicated by the added, often self-absorbed assumption that they are the good guys, the aid cavalry coming to the rescue of famine or earthquake victims. In addition they also may believe they have controlling rights over the aid journalists (potentially our IDJ students) with whom they come in to contact. As journalism educators in HE institutions many of us will be familiar with the use of the reflective log to encourage students to reflect on their vocational progress in terms of, for example, newsgathering techniques. In terms of the teaching of IDJ it is time to promote this technique to encompass the use of first person narratives within which our students can examine and evaluate their interactions with NGO activists, particularly media offices. But they must be armed with the cross-curricular insights to fully augment their evaluations. In terms of our IDJ teaching that could mean for example, recommending reading list works of literary reportage or political allegories or even works of psychology and neuroscience, as well, of course as the already established social scientific insights into power relations within political structures in western democracies (with the caveat that IDJ/NGO relations and operations are apolitical - a human experience that partly exist outwith the confines of class as well as outwith the boundaries of capitalism and or religion).

In 2014 the IBT (International Broadcast Trust) published a paper entitled *The Aid Industry - What Journalists Really Think*. Its findings point to NGO's setting unrealistic development objectives and making exaggerated claims about what they can achieve; they restrict their activities to the safety of refugee camps and do not address the needs of those on the frontline in conflict zones; the aid sector has become too big and competitive; NGO's are overly concerned with their corporate image and pay their senior executives too much - all of which tends to undermine their core message; although aid workers are often self-questioning in private, they are reluctant to discuss issues openly when confronted by the media on the record; despite the increased criticism, NGO's still enjoy too close a relationship with the media and too often set the agenda. In the paper's executive summary Helen Magee writes:

*Interviewees were asked how NGOs could best respond to these criticisms. There were a few comments about the practical day-to-day business of media relations, but in many cases this seemed to work well. Journalists were equally concerned about the fundamental way in which the aid sector operated. They made the following suggestions:*

- *There should be greater honesty and transparency – a willingness to tell it how it is.*
- *The larger aid agencies in particular should be better at explaining the way they now operate.*
- *Agencies should adopt a less patronising tone when dealing with the media.*
- *The aid sector should be restructured to achieve more specialisation amongst the different agencies and less competition between them.*
- *NGOs should rethink their role in society – a choice between taking government money and remaining closer to their roots.*
- *They should stop development aid altogether and focus on emergency aid.*

*The three NGOs interviewed for this briefing also gave their recommendations for improving the response to media scrutiny.*

- *Rise to the challenge and do not be afraid to campaign against the government's aid policy when appropriate.*
- *Acknowledge the realities of operating in the global aid sector and be prepared to explain the necessity of spending money on salaries, administration and logistics.*
- *Find ways into the mainstream media with stories that resonate with a UK audience and open up communication with journalists who might otherwise not talk to NGO.'*

The above findings provide a platform for a new dynamic approach to International Development Journalism teaching in HE institutions across the UK. In particular, the report points to 'a growing academic literature which questions the value of development aid and the shift away from the belief that charities are necessarily a "good thing". Works such as Cracknell's *Evaluating Development Aid Issues, Problems and Solutions* (Sage Publications, 2000) or Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: why the West's Efforts to Aid The*

*Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (2006). But of course the key to a progressive IDJ teaching plan is not simply the reliance on economics texts but a cross-disciplinary approach that also embraces works of literature such as Orwell's *Animal Farm*; works of neuroscience such as *The Winner Effect* by professor Ian Robertson; works on best reflective practice within journalism itself such as *Reflective practice in action: preparing Samoan journalists to cover court cases* by Mark Pearson (Bond University, Australia), and *From Knowing How to Being Able* by Sarah Niblock (2007); as well as works that show literary reportage at its best including *The Great Reporters* by David Randall or the ground-breaking work by Dr Monica Chibita, senior lecturer journalism at Makerere University in Uganda. In her paper *Developing Undergraduate Journalism Curricula: Concerns and Issues* she asks "for a journalist looking at practicing in an African context, though, what about understanding community problems and dynamics? What about applying their understanding of the workings of the media to poverty, maternal and infant mortality, HIV/AIDS, energy, environmental degradation, unemployment, governance etc?" As with the excellent work being conducted at *On Our Radar Chibita* points to the growing number of Ugandan communities who do now have access to a wide range of media technologies and how IDJ can engage with this by directly training citizen journalists in the field on how to best use digital technology. But it is the task of arming such communities too with the intellectual confidence to critique the NGO's that may be trying to help them - a rebalancing of the symbiosis between the power relations of the poverty stricken people on the outskirts of of international aid - that must also be addressed, and should certainly be addressed at any IDJ curricular design stage.

### \* Breaking News

A few weeks after speaking at the AJE 2018 Winter Conference about international development journalism, and the need to review the shifting symbiosis between NGO's and journalists, as if by perfect timing, the Oxfam scandal erupted. It was a story that dominated the headlines and one that highlighted exactly why the big aid powerbrokers cannot be allowed to function unchecked. International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt has instructed aid charities that 'now is the time for action.' At a London summit attendees were told how they were to change the culture to tackle 'power imbalances.' But yet again the government has missed a real opportunity to affect real change. Surely any serious discussion about power imbalances has to involve those whose job it is to hold power to account in the aid sector. That, of course, is the role of the journalist. That is why an enquiry should now be held to investigate the role IDJ journalists also played in seemingly (consciously or sub-consciously) turning a blind eye to the types of sexual abuses that have now been well documented. As my own research is beginning to show there are wide and complex reasons for journalists themselves feeling restricted and or repressed in the international aid environment. But surely now is the time for journalism educators to step-up to provide new recommendations for an improved symbiotic relationship between NGO's and journalists in the field. It is incumbent on us to begin to work such recommendations into the core of the new learning outcomes we develop for international development journalism courses in the UK and beyond so that, for example, our students will:

- \* Reflect critically on the role played by your host NGO in implementing transparency in the field.
- \* Evaluate a range of cross inter-disciplinary literature that engages progressively with a range of core intellectual issues at the cutting edge of IDJ.
- \* Create a portfolio that demonstrates the highest critical engagement with detailed insights into the symbiotic relationship between your host NGO and its development journalists.

Only then can we begin to look ourselves in the mirror and say that's what journalism educators do, and that's why we can make a real difference.

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