



Getting into living rooms: NGO media relations work as strategic practice

Journalism
2018, Vol. 19(7) 1011–1026
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1464884917691542
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou



Ruth Moon

Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, USA

Abstract

Research on the publicity strategies of non-governmental organizations suggests that they seek out coverage from the news media. In so doing, they typically adopt traditional news values, thus adapting to the institutional demands of journalism in ways potentially harmful to organizational goals. This study suggests that, while employees do court news coverage through events and strategies designed to capture media attention, they do so strategically. The research presented here draws on institutional theories of organizational behavior to understand the strategic behaviors undertaken. Through participant observation and document analysis of the media relations office at World Vision US, a key player among international development non-governmental organizations, I find evidence that media relations employees engage in strategic practices of bargaining and compliance. These behaviors allow them to work within and beyond given institutional parameters to accomplish organizational goals not aligned with traditional news values.

Keywords

Institutional theory, journalism, public relations, non-governmental organization, World Vision, news values, news sources

Introduction

Existing research shows that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) generally adapt to the news values of journalists, but does not fully explain the motivations behind this adaptation. Without a theoretical understanding of the strategies guiding such behavior, scholars find it puzzling. I suggest that there is meaning to be found in these actions

Corresponding author:

Ruth Moon, Box 353740 Seattle, Washington 98195, USA.
Email: moonr@uw.edu

when they are interpreted through the lens of institutionally situated theories of strategic organizational behavior. Using data from participant observation, interviews, and chat-room transcripts to examine media relations staff at a large US-based NGO, I suggest that interactions with journalists involve particular strategic tactics aimed at garnering organizational legitimacy and brokering institutional compromise. To make this case, I first discuss the existing literature on NGO-media interactions; then, I introduce a set of strategic responses from institutional theory. I then outline my method and data, and finally discuss my findings. I suggest that NGOs accommodate norms of newsworthiness accepted by journalists while employing tactics of compliance and bargaining, by which organizations work within the status quo of institutional structures to promote organizational values.

NGOs and the media

NGOs¹ play a growing role in news coverage, and the resulting reporter–NGO alliance is the subject of increasing scholarly interest (Powers, 2015a). As news budgets shrink, NGOs shape the news, both indirectly as expert sources, and directly, as reporters and photographers (Grayson, 2014; Powers, 2016). For instance, an analysis of news content in *The New York Times* and London’s *The Guardian* shows that citations of two leading human rights NGOs (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) doubled from 1980 to 1990 (Powers, 2015b). NGOs also provide access, increasingly hosting journalists in foreign locations and sometimes paying for these freelance or staff reporters to visit difficult-to-reach sites (Conrad, 2015; Green, 2016). Such trips create complicated ethical and practical dilemmas for the journalists involved, and these dilemmas have been documented in the popular and scholarly press. Conrad (2015) foregrounds the tension and negotiations that he experienced between freelancers, non-profit organizations, and for-profit funders when he reported on a health crisis revolving around a trash dump in Nairobi, Kenya. Bunce (2016) points out that, while nonprofit funding has not been shown to systematically impact news content, it does create a perceived conflict of interest, leading journalists to worry that their audiences will lose trust in their objectivity. However, in spite of these ethical and practical complications, journalists increasingly participate in such trips, partly to fill the news holes created by foreign bureau closures documented by Sambrook (2010).

This relationship benefits NGOs as well, both in amplifying their presence in the mainstream press and, occasionally, in garnering quality materials for internal publicity when news freelancers produce content explicitly for NGO use (Wright, 2015). Research suggests that NGOs still rely on the news media to promote organizational awareness and messages (Thrall et al., 2014) and see traditional news media as essential to broadcasting their cause (Jacobs and Glass, 2002). This is evident even while NGOs are increasingly able to communicate directly with audiences through new media tools, including direct advertising (Vestergaard, 2008) and blogs, podcasts, and wikis (Seo et al., 2009). In spite of this direct audience access, NGOs go to great lengths to secure favorable news coverage, as Imison (2014) illustrates with an analysis of the ways staff from eight NGOs sought coverage from the Australian news media for their work on health issues in low- and middle-income countries. Even over new media channels,

NGOs chase mass media coverage, sometimes prioritizing journalists over the mass public as an audience (Seo et al., 2009). Thus, research suggests that NGO entities and journalists find their relationship mutually beneficial.

In light of this, recent research has examined the ways humanitarian and human rights organizations engage with journalists to play a role in the public sphere, including the processes by which NGOs solicit news coverage and the effect those processes have on organizational messaging. Some research finds that, while NGOs provide valuable services to news organizations, they are often not successful in communicating effective organizational messages. Cottle and Nolan (2007) write that “aid organizations are becoming increasingly ensnared in a global ‘media logic’ ” (p. 863), with the result that the aims of global humanitarianism are often not promoted and may, in fact, be hindered. Other research suggests that, in seeking out coverage, NGO staff package their stories within the traditional news values and priorities of journalism. These include values of simplicity, cultural and geographic proximity or conflict with other cultures, unexpectedness, timeliness, entertainment value, negativity, and reliance on specific personalities (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; O’Neill and Harcup, 2009; Waisbord, 2011). Journalists tend to also prioritize episodic framing—the portrayal of news as self-contained events rather than thematic, continuing issues (Iyengar, 1991). In making sourcing decisions, journalists tend to prioritize credibility, which they feel public relations professionals lack (Aronoff, 1975).

In general, existing research finds that “NGOs adapt to—rather than challenge—existing news norms that emphasize conflict, spectacle, and celebrities” (Powers, 2015a: 429). To conform with these news values and others prioritized by journalists, NGOs focus on celebrity, conflict, and spectacle to garner coverage (Dale, 1996; Gaber and Willson, 2004). However, suggesting that NGO values are always at odds with news values is simplistic; recent research finds that these values overlap and there may be compromise in both directions. Powers (2016) finds that the news values of journalists and those of NGOs intersect on some issues, with NGOs valuing accuracy and timeliness (two things important to journalists), along with pluralism and advocacy. And there is evidence that, when NGOs and journalists do prioritize different values, NGOs have power under some circumstances to change or override news values. Grayson (2014) recounts how her photography assignment in Mozambique for the Kyeema Foundation took on a documentary quality as she sought to avoid the hard-hitting “shock value” photography prioritized in news media coverage of faraway countries (p. 17). Imison (2014) finds that NGOs work “beyond” media logic (p. 438): They critique journalists’ interest in negativity and disasters, but capitalize on those values to pursue their own ends of fundraising and building organizational reputation. In her analysis of a reporting trip funded by the World Wildlife Foundation, Coward (2010) finds that, in spite of competing and sometimes tangential media interests, NGOs can and do bargain with journalists to receive the news coverage they want. These accounts suggest that there may be a more interactive relationship between NGOs and news media than has been understood thus far.

Strategic pursuit of news coverage

What these perspectives do not explore fully is the motivation behind the adaptive behavior of NGO staff. However, this topic is gaining attention; Wright (2016) proposes that

NGO-journalist interactions be examined through the framework of moral economy, suggesting that journalists and NGOs “collectively renegotiate the practices, purposes, and boundaries of their respective fields” as they interact to produce news content (p. 1524). I also find evidence of negotiation between journalists and NGOs, but suggest an institutional, rather than moral-economic, framework to shed further light on the behavior. In capitulating to media demands, NGO staff are not “losing out” in a representational battle with news organizations, as some previous research would suggest; rather, as Wright finds, they negotiate with journalists for representation, and I suggest that NGOs cooperate with news organizations for strategic ends. Even when published news content is defined by traditional news values, organizationally motivated NGO goals may be achieved. In particular, while there might be more efficient ways of conveying NGO messages (such as the direct messaging via social media highlighted above), organizations retain legitimacy by working with, rather than overturning, news norms (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). By retaining legitimacy—a perception of proper or desirable behavior within a socially constructed values system (Suchman, 1995)—and practicing resistance within an institutional structure, organizations protect the ability to change those structures (e.g. news values) over time.

NGOs may comply with journalistic norms while still pursuing organizational goals. The NGO sector exists in an environment where traditional news organizations retain agenda-setting power among the mass public and the decision-making elite (Wanta, 1993; Wanta et al., 2004). Scholars have identified a range of possible responses to external pressure in such an environment, suggesting that even when organizations lack overt power to change external, institutional constraints like news values, they might nonetheless act in ways that protect organizational interests (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009; Scott, 2013). That is to say, they might behave tactically in pursuit of particular strategies, actively and consciously undertaking such actions to serve organizational interests (Oliver, 1991). Organizations choose tactics in pursuit of strategic goals that range from acquiescence to the status quo to outright defiance of institutional demands. Seen in this light, the behavior documented by Cottle and Nolan (2007) might be read as passive acquiescence to institutional demands. On the more resistant end of the spectrum, the “NGO reportage” photography described by Grayson (2014: 633) could be read as an example of successful manipulation of news values, occurring because a particular news organization relied on an NGO to produce news, and in spite of the fact that journalists tend to resist attempts to gain coverage by manipulation of news values (a pattern noted by Waisbord, 2011). Research on NGO-media interactions suggests that NGO strategies might generally fall somewhere in between these extremes, exerting more or less outright resistance to the institutional demands of journalism depending on the level of power a particular organization holds in a given interaction. Two possible organizational responses along this spectrum are *compliance* (a tactic associated with strategic acquiescence) and *bargaining* (a tactic associated with strategic compromise). *Compliance* entails mindful acquiescence: An organization chooses to obey rules and accept certain norms of the status quo, and in so choosing aims to strategically align itself with institutional pressures to reap “self-serving benefits” (Oliver, 1991: 153). *Bargaining* is an active form of compromise, and involves a negotiation wherein an organization

receives some benefits from the more powerful institution in exchange for following certain parameters. I present evidence of both of these strategies in NGO media relations work.

This research expands existing knowledge of the behaviors practiced by NGOs in seeking news coverage and the goals of such behavior. Theories grounded in institutionalism provide a way to understand this organizational behavior as not merely acquiescence or random victories but as strategic organizational resistance to antagonistic institutional pressure. The observations presented here suggest that NGOs do not lose sight of organizational goals even as they accommodate the institutional demands of the journalistic field. Rather than strictly acquiescing habitually to the institutional demands of the journalistic field, NGO professionals rely on compliance and bargaining to pursue news coverage that meets their own ends within the parameters enforced by journalists. The present study corroborates much current scholarship in finding that NGOs seek coverage from traditional media and, in so doing, adapt to news norms. However, I find that these practices are undertaken with strategic purposes in mind and that organizational messages can be broadcast even while NGOs cooperate with journalism's institutional demands.

Data and method

This study is informed by a desire to both “observe what people do” (Gans, 1999: 540) and understand the motivations for those actions. It thus relies on participant observation, chatroom transcript analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation took place from January through March 2015, primarily at the headquarters of World Vision US (WVUS) in Federal Way, Washington, where some employees are physically present and others telecommute from Texas, California, Washington DC, and other locations across the US. During this period, I observed interactions and behavior among employees in the media relations office space for three-hour shifts during various times of the day and days of the week. At first, I observed behavior from a cubicle assigned to me. However, I soon learned that media relations work at WVUS would involve fewer physical interactions and more virtual interactions than I had expected, and I subsequently spent the majority of my time sitting in the cubicles of other employees in the office, typing notes and working on volunteer tasks. I also analyzed the group's Skype chatroom transcript from this three-month period. During the final weeks of observation, I traveled as a freelance reporter to Zambia on a WVUS-funded water-themed reporting trip along with two other journalists—a full-time employee of an online news outlet based in New York City, and a self-employed blogger who had supported WVUS projects in the past.²

In the field, I adopted the role of a volunteer, participating and observing at the margins of the workplace (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010). I occasionally offered advice from a journalist's points of view, sought because of my background as a full-time and freelance reporter for various US news outlets. I jotted field notes in real time throughout my observations and supplemented them later each day with memos and fuller observations; I then organized field notes through an open coding process, as suggested by Emerson et al. (2011), to better identify and understand relevant observations.

WVUS is the US branch of World Vision (WV), a faith-based humanitarian NGO. It is an important player in the NGO world: With a 2016 revenue of \$1 billion, Forbes ranked it the 12th largest charitable organization in the US (Barrett, 2016), and it received the second-highest amount of private charitable contributions in the country in 2013 (Carlson, 2013). WV is one of four organizations, along with CARE, Catholic Relief Services, and Médecins sans Frontières, that shared a full one-quarter of the \$2.5 billion the US devoted to relief and development in 2000 (Stoddard, 2009). In 2008, *Foreign Policy* named WV one of the five most powerful development NGOs in the world. Research on organizational behavior suggests that organizations tend to mimic successful organizations in the same field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Thus, WV provides two things: an ideal setting to examine the ways a major non-profit adapts to news media expectations and what consequences those adaptive measures have on organizational publicity efforts, and a chance to observe behavior that may be practiced by staff at other NGOs as well.

Discussion

Data from my observation affirms and further nuances key current NGO scholarship. I found that WVUS, like other NGOs, relies on news coverage and seeks it out by invoking a variety of traditional news values. Employees used two primary strategies—compliance and bargaining—to achieve organizational goals at odds with institutional news values. To illustrate this, I will first discuss the goals employees described, and will then discuss the strategic behavior I observed intended to meet these goals.

Organizational goals

Media relations employees at WVUS expressed three main goals. These goals were: (a) to encourage media coverage of issues relevant to WVUS' humanitarian work (whether directly under organizational purview or not); (b) to build relationships with reporters, partly to encourage (a) and partly to encourage (c); (c) to build brand recognition for WVUS and WV broadly. To accomplish all of these goals, employees relied on strategies of compliance and bargaining.

The employees I observed relied on traditional news values and sought out mainstream media coverage. At the same time, they acknowledged that organizational goals were different from news media goals. "There's an interplay of two different agendas," one employee told me in describing interactions between World Vision and journalists. "The reporter wants information or commentary ... and we've got things about ourselves as an organization that we want included." The media relations office had two primary goals: to raise awareness of WV specifically, and to raise awareness of humanitarian issues—primarily, but not exclusively, issues WV works in. One employee explained that his primary goal was to make sure "the story is being told." This might involve getting WV specifically featured in a news item, but this was not required for an interaction to be successful. For instance, he had recently pitched a panel with a WV expert on human trafficking to an East Coast television reporter, but said he would be satisfied for the issue of trafficking to be raised on television, even if WV did not appear in the news

segment. For him, television and newspaper coverage were strategic avenues to raise issue awareness among the public. “I want to tell the story of what’s going on, and I want people to wake up from apathy and just get involved,” he said. “People read the newspaper or watch TV; it’s how I get into their living rooms.”

Publicizing water: Compliance and bargaining

During the three months I observed the media relations office, WVUS launched a campaign to raise awareness for its global WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) efforts. This multi-pronged effort showcased compliance and bargaining as strategic organizational behaviors intended to broadcast an organizational message to wide audiences through strategic adherence to media values and needs. While working within the institutional framework of the journalism field, WVUS nonetheless employed these tactics to promote organizational values of issues coverage, reporter relationships, and brand recognition.

Compliance. The most common strategic tactic I observed was that of *compliance*. This tactic involves acquiescing to institutional demands, a practice well-documented in the NGO literature. However, while I observed behaviors similar to those outlined in existing scholarship, I push back against the idea that such practices are “uncritically assimilated into NGO communication strategies” (Cottle and Nolan, 2007: 868). Compliance is separate from *habit*, which is unconscious adherence to rules that are taken for granted. Rather, *compliance* conveys the idea that an organization chooses to adhere to such values because specific, self-serving benefits are likely to follow (Oliver, 1991). This nuance complicates Cottle and Nolan’s suggestion that NGOs make “reflexive accommodations” to media demands. Instead, similar to how Powers (2014) finds that NGOs may seek divergent types of media coverage, I suggest that NGOs may have multiple goals in mind as they pursue media coverage—and that those goals can be and sometimes are met through NGO-media interactions. I observed strategically compliant behavior in the ways WVUS employees set themselves up to be sources (and cultivated other sources); in the creation of timely data to emphasize the news value of thematic stories; and in the use of novelty and proximity to emphasize the news value of faraway issues and events.

WVUS employees positioned themselves and others as possible sources for the news media. Employees frequently referenced the ideas that journalists prioritize “objective” sources and are impatient with “public relations” or “fluff stories.” But an important organizational goal was to ensure that journalists prioritized WVUS media relations staff when they needed to quote an expert on a humanitarian issue related to WV work. As one employee told me, he prioritized “making sure [journalists] know that I’m the person they should call first.” To accomplish this goal, staff acquiesced strategically to the needs of journalists in several ways. First, employees made themselves available, both by quickly fulfilling information requests and by reaching out to new contacts to promise rapid response for future stories. As one employee explained, “The more you help somebody, the more they know that you’re trustworthy and you’ll get them what they need”—the implication being that a trustworthy source is more likely to be called on in the future. Another employee echoed the same idea in explaining the value of cultivating

relationships with reporters: “Sometimes [outreach methods] yield immediate results and big stories and all that, and sometimes they yield relationships” where later someone might ask, for instance, “Who do you have who can talk about child soldiers?” (a situation which had recently happened to this employee). A newer tactic to accomplish this goal was also being implemented during my observations: A senior staffer had just received permission to cultivate external sources who would serve as expert sources on WV-related topics, working WV into the news and bypassing the potentially off-putting label of “media relations.” This staffer explained, “I’ll be expanding our list of usual suspects, developing sources to speak on our behalf—not as spokespeople but as people who can speak in an accurate way and reinforce our message.”

Finally, staff continually affirmed their *media relations* identity as separate from the public relations and fundraising roles filled by others in the organization. The director of the media relations department explained this by saying, “We’re not trying to sell something. That keeps our credibility with journalists.” The media relations office fielded and often rejected internal requests from departments eager to put out press releases on fundraising events or drives, insisting that overly positive press releases or story pitches would hurt their appearance of credibility. When I traveled to Zambia, the trip leader (a WVUS media relations employee) mentioned often his past work as a journalist, using that experience to underscore the idea that he knew journalists would be looking for “good stories,” would be less interested in institutional messaging, and would want freedom to pursue their own ideas, even within parameters set by WV.

I also observed strategically compliant behavior in the practice of data creation to pitch thematic stories to the news media. By conducting polls and releasing the results as news, WVUS employees relied on news values of proximity and novelty (as noted above) to achieve news coverage for issues neither proximate nor novel. This was a new use of polling for WVUS. The office director (who was new to this position) explained the shift in this way:

World Vision did polls before I got here, but they were usually related to fundraising campaigns, like the 30-hour famine [an awareness-raising event for hunger issues]. The shift we’ve taken is we’re starting to do issue-oriented polls ... which allow us to help tell a story about an issue, not just about something we’re promoting.

Through this sort of poll, WVUS employees would intentionally create news hooks of timeliness or proximity (or both) for issue-oriented stories they felt were important and deserved coverage.

One specific example of this was the water poll, which was conducted and publicized while I was in the office. This poll asked respondents about water use, with questions designed to tap into local-market water concerns. Results were used to pitch local news outlets with stories on the importance of water conservation, capitalizing on the news value of proximity in references to local results, but transitioning to mention the challenge of water access in other countries. This poll would allow the media relations team to pitch stories to local (as opposed to national) media outlets in the US, thus gaining coverage for a structural issue (water scarcity) that WV works to combat on a global level. While WV does not work in water, sanitation, and hygiene in the US, it conducts

such work extensively abroad, and poll results would provide “an entry point” to talk about that international work. This is one example of ways WV employees sought to use traditional news values subversively—as a way to gain entrance to a mass media platform, where they could then publicize a message central to the organization’s aim. The water poll was constructed with an explicit aim to “get a finding that’s newsworthy,” as one employee put it, but that finding would become a springboard to a larger issue important to and selected by WVUS, not a news cycle or program.

Finally, I observed WVUS employees using values of novelty and proximity to pitch thematic and distant stories to news outlets. Throughout February, WVUS employees planned events with the Harlem Globetrotters, a theatrical basketball troupe, to publicize World Water Day (March 22). These events represented a way to make international stories accessible to domestic media outlets. “Saying, ‘Oh, the Harlem Globetrotters are doing this fun skit about World Water Day, do you want to see it?’ ... sometimes that’s an easier entry point for local ten o’clock news” than a story reported from or about an international phenomenon, an employee said. Another explained it this way: “A lot of times, we want to get information out about a new tactic, and that’s not news. So [we create] something—an event, a stunt, or something that we could generate to create coverage.” Through Skype, employees discussed ways to raise awareness of global water shortages using common gag skits the Globetrotters perform—one suggestion was to replace a water hose used in one skit with a machine that ejected orange ping pong balls, thus capturing a WV organizational symbol (the color orange) and an issue (lack of water). The media relations team had recently received greater organizational leeway to orchestrate this and other events as a way of raising awareness—a strategy that employees thought might have better traction with reporters as news budgets shrink and reporters have less time to devote to investigative and issues reporting.

Novelty and events-driven news pitches led to coverage that meets WV goals—“stuff we maybe wouldn’t be able to get otherwise, or wouldn’t get as easily,” without celebrities or events to help the story, the media relations director said. These discussions around polling and celebrity appearances highlight the strategic thought process behind WVUS media relations decisions to appeal to traditional news values in seeking coverage. While employees expended great amounts of time and energy strategizing short appearances, they did so with the understanding that even a brief positive organizational mention on a national news platform would accomplish a goal of maintaining organizational legitimacy and raising audience awareness of issues important to WVUS.

Bargaining. WVUS also used the strategy of *bargaining* to achieve desirable coverage of water-related issues. Bargaining is a specific form of compromise where an organization attempts to convince an external party to meet some of its demands or expectations. This was most evident in reporting trips, which were strategically directed at journalists in target groups of religious media outlets and national mainstream news outlets. These trips were another newer practice within the organization; one employee explained:

We are investing more in trips. We are willing to pay for trips, which is not something we’ve been willing to do in the past, partly because in the past journalists weren’t willing to go, but now they are more willing to do that.

During my observations, I saw staff plan two of these, and I participated in one. I traveled to Zambia with two other writers in March 2015 on a WVUS staff-led trip. My colleagues on the trip included one blogger with a large reader base that included a number of WVUS donors, one reporter for a New York City-based online Christian news outlet, and myself (invited as a freelancer for several national religious magazines). WVUS staff also planned a trip to South Sudan to highlight organizational work in refugee relief. The organization's president traveled to the country along with reporters, including a nationally syndicated political op-ed writer and a lead editor for a national religious magazine.

Because these reporting trips cost significant amounts of time and money for the organization (WVUS paid all expenses for reporters on my trip, and extended the same offer to reporters on the South Sudan trip), WVUS had fewer trips than other types of news coverage in the works during my observation. Media relations staff said that these trips were happening with increasing frequency prompted by changes in news media—decreased prevalence of reporters stationed at foreign bureaus, and increased interest in expenses-paid reporting trips by stateside news outlets (something that has gone in and out of vogue in US journalism and is currently increasingly in favor). Trips were planned with journalist's interests in mind and locations selected in conversation with journalists whose coverage and input WVUS staff valued (staff mentioned conversations with reporters at outlets including the *Washington Post* and CNN). The director of the office had polled journalists to ask where they would most like to visit, and responses included Gaza, northern Nigeria, and South Sudan.

In planning trips, WVUS capitalized on recent institutional changes in journalism, which have relaxed restrictions on source-funded press junkets. Cottle and Nolan (2007) calls these trips “beneficent embedding.” While these authors claim that moments of beneficent embedding “have become increasingly few and far between,” several WVUS sources told me these trips had increased in number over the past year and were expected to become even more common in the future due to increasing budget restrictions in news organizations. That is, WVUS expected to be able to send increasingly large numbers of reporters on organizationally planned and directed trips, since the news organizations employing those reporters were becoming less and less likely to fund reporting trips on their own. The media relations director told me, “You have to be much more creative with travel ... not ‘this thing is going on, you’ll be there eventually, and when you are, call us.’ That might be never, unless we design something to make it happen.” WVUS used trips to create pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1961 [2012]), framing issues-based thematic stories, such as water and sanitation developments, in novel and episodic ways through interaction with specific people and circumstances in foreign countries. WVUS’ goal in the Zambia trip, for instance, was to “raise awareness about a really critical issue,” the director told me, by publicizing examples of what WV does and how clean water affects communities. “If all they do is make a community aware of an issue of that level of importance, that’s a win,” he said. “People need to understand it better, so awareness matters.” Trips were intentionally planned to show reporters WV programs but to not be “over-programmed,” so that if reporters met someone “with an incredible story to tell” they would have space and time to pursue those stories.

In planning trips and choosing reporters to include, WVUS pursued long-term strategic goals. In the short term, they acknowledged that journalists would not be interested

in writing “fluff pieces about World Vision,” but the media relations director repeatedly emphasized “trends” and “issues” in discussing the purpose of the trips. The trips were, in other words, planned to expose episodically-minded journalists to thematic issues. In Zambia, WVUS staff wanted to give journalists firsthand experience with the ways water shortages, lack of hygiene training, and lack of sanitary toilet facilities affected rural families and communities, alongside a look at how WV Zambia’s interventions to dig wells, offer hygiene education, and improve sanitation facilities had enhanced the quality of life for local residents. While staff planning the trip expressed hope that reporters would take the opportunity to write “a super deep dive into the issue itself,” I was also reassured that staff had no explicit requirements for coverage based on the trip, and that even if I only gleaned information about WV’s operations in Zambia and a sense of how the organization intervenes more generally in international development, they would consider it a successful trip. In South Sudan, reporters would be following WVUS president Rich Stearns as he visited sites in the country, using conflict in the country as a news hook to discuss ways WV intervened. The guiding strategy in planning trips, I was told, was based on an understood desire of journalists for novelty: “what’s an untold story?” Media relations staff looked to invite reporters who were “willing to take an interest in [an] issue at large and explain it to an audience.” Journalists were also selected based on platform; the blogger on my trip had a large blog and social media following, and the other two of us had access to magazine platforms with national reach.

Because WVUS planned and bankrolled these trips, journalists were captive to an organizationally programmed itinerary once they arrived in-country. On my own trip to Zambia, this meant that, while I could (and did) request programmatic changes ahead of time, the final itinerary reflected WV’s work in the country and was centered geographically around primary sites of WV intervention (which in this case primarily included rural, southern Zambia, rather than urban areas such as the Lusaka slums, a site I requested we visit). Once on the trip, my group had some discretionary power over site visits—for instance, we considered cutting a second school visit out of the itinerary in favor of spending more time at a health clinic, after the three of us decided the latter would be more interesting—but the itinerary stayed roughly the same. Our drivers were WV Zambia staff, we visited WV Zambia sites, and we interviewed primarily subjects who had first been vetted by WV Zambia staff. Thus, while we were free to write any type of article based on the trip—WVUS staff followed up to ask if we needed information and to request hyperlinks to completed articles, but did not request or expect prior review—the narrative scenery from which we reported our articles was heavily controlled by the organization.

This is not unique to WV; Coward (2010) outlines a similar experience in a reporting trip funded by the World Wildlife Federation. And this type of experience points to a strategy not strongly acknowledged or explored in current NGO literature: the ability of NGO media relations staff to bargain with journalists, a tactic Oliver (1991) notes is likely when organizations with competing interests are dependent on each other. On reporting trips, journalist-NGO relations take on more of a tit-for-tat character than in most interactions with journalists. This may not be explicit; as I noted above, WVUS did not ask for specific types of coverage from the journalists on my Zambia trip (though they do request that bloggers on similar trips use their blogs to raise a certain number of new supporters for the

organization). However, some on my trip still felt a need to repay the organization in ways that would bring publicity: The blogger on my trip said that, while WVUS had not imposed any particular requirements on her, she blogged as many stories as possible from the trip, hoping to raise as much awareness and support as possible for the organization so that she might be invited back on a future trip. I personally felt similarly indebted to the organization; for instance, I typically take only paid freelance assignments, but wrote an unpaid magazine blog post on water interventions to mark World Water Day. The post relied heavily on WV sources. While I did not attend the South Sudan trip, the news record suggests that WVUS got what it wanted in that case as well: In a column published in the *Washington Post*, the op-ed writer discussed issues of poverty and intervention in South Sudan, using WV as a touchstone. And the religious magazine (*Christianity Today*) ran a lengthy feature piece on South Sudan in which Stearns and WV feature prominently. In these situations, reporters still have something the NGO wants—a credible voice to raise awareness on an issue or raise the profile of the organization—and the freedom to produce content to that effect or not, but NGO staff have a high amount of power to guide that coverage through source and site selections.

WVUS had more control over journalists on reporting trips than in their typical day-to-day interactions, and thus could rely on bargaining strategies to better control both the individual journalists chosen for trips and the types of news those journalists might produce. Reporters still had power over the ultimate message produced, but invitations strategically given to journalists likely to produce favorable content, the likelihood that only journalists interested in and likely sympathetic to organizational goals would choose to dedicate several weeks to such a venture, and the near-absolute control WV maintained over messaging through the duration of the reporting trip I took highlight the increased power of the NGO during this type of interaction. The resulting news coverage from my trip to Zambia included the thematically framed (but news hook dependent) blog post I wrote, two lengthy articles comparing the negative effects of open, unsanitary water sources with the positive effects of WV-provided sanitary wells, several blog posts about the ways WV funds had supported communities and individuals by funding hospitals, digging wells, and providing community education, and many tweets from every participant mentioning the organization over the course of the trip. This coverage featured WV extensively, showed positive results of WV interventions, and focused on issues—all goals of the organization.

Conclusion

Current research on NGO communication strategies suggests that NGOs adapt to the institutional values of newsworthiness held by journalists in ways that sometimes seem detrimental to organizational goals. Through participant observation at the media relations office of WVUS, I confirm that this adaptation occurs. However, while NGOs do pursue costly and time-intensive strategies to get news coverage, including manufacturing pseudo-events, collaborating with celebrities, and planning press junkets, there is an element of resistance contained within these strategies. Furthermore, some of these strategic behaviors have been adopted recently, and interviews with staff members confirm that the behaviors have been adopted as a direct result of shifting news expectations.

Thus, I propose that NGOs are gaining power in the news realm as the realities of working journalists shift in ways outlined above. This shift has potentially far-reaching consequences on the ways journalists and NGOs continue to interact with each other and on the ways NGOs could exert institutional power on journalists, including their reliance on news values.

I observed strategic *conformity*, where staff members acquiesced to external demands of news values at odds with organizational values in order to achieve an organizational goal. I also observed *bargaining*, where employees sought to control elements of the news agenda by funding valuable first-person reporting trips to hard-to-reach locales. Conformity occurs when an NGO chooses to cater to news values misaligned with organizational values, but does so fully aware of the misalignment, in a calculated attempt to gain news coverage of thematic issues and organizational values. Bargaining occurs in the negotiations surrounding reporting trips, where the NGO controls the itinerary and foots the bill for the trip—thus retaining power over the information gleaned—but depends on journalists to provide coverage valuable to the NGO. These two strategies suggest that, rather than impugning organizational integrity and compromising goals by conforming to news values in seeking media coverage, NGOs may pursue strategic interactions intended to further organizational goals by cooperating with and working through agents of cultural power and agenda-setting, including the news media. This research provides a platform for further study of the organizational strategies NGOs pursue in acquiescing to the institutional demands of mass media.

The research presented here has implications for future study of the ways NGOs seek and maintain legitimacy in their interactions with journalists. Suchman (1995) persuasively argues that the concept of “organizational legitimacy” is multi-faceted; organizations may seek many types of legitimacy through many strategies, including those suggested by Oliver (1991) and others. Future research could yield rich data by further exploring the types of legitimacy these employees seek to maintain, strategies used in the pursuit of legitimacy, and clarifying how, when, and why these vary. Participant observation and in-depth interviews with NGO leaders at other organizations can and should explore this phenomenon further to ascertain what conditions lead to which strategic tactics being employed. Understanding this work will shed further light on the forces shaping organizational behavior and, by extension, news coverage today.

In addition, this study has implications for the continuing study of journalist-source relationships and the effect of those relationships on the news. My findings complicate the perspective that the battle over news values is a zero-sum game, suggesting instead that multiple goals might be met in news coverage. Particularly when source goals are not at odds with, but merely tangential to, journalist values and goals, sources may have power to shape the news. This shaping potential merits further exploration in journalism studies, in the context of the NGO-journalist relationship and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Matt Powers, Will Mari, Alicia Cohn, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Following Powers (2015a), I consider NGOs to include voluntary organizations that are independent of government, not-for-profit, and pursue a common good beyond membership interests.
2. As a condition of this study, the WVUS legal team and the media relations team supervisor reviewed the final study before submission for publication, with the stated purpose of ensuring that any reported information would not harm the organization's reputation. As a result of that review, two changes were made—one to correct a factual error and one to further contextualize a quote. Neither changed substantive content, in the researcher's opinion.

References

- Aronoff C (1975) Credibility of public relations for journalists. *Public Relations Review* 1(2): 45–56.
- Barrett WP (2016) *The Largest U.S. Charities for 2016*. Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/williambarrett/2016/12/14/the-largest-u-s-charities-for-2016> (accessed 1 February 2017).
- Boorstin DJ (1961 [2012]) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bunce M (2016) Foundations, philanthropy and international journalism. *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics* 13(2/3): 6–15.
- Carlson LG (2013) Giving USA 2013: The annual report on philanthropy for the year 2012. Research report, Indiana University, USA.
- Conrad D (2015) The freelancer–NGO alliance: What a story of Kenyan waste reveals about contemporary foreign news production. *Journalism Studies* 16(2): 275–288.
- Cottle S and Nolan D (2007) Global humanitarianism and the changing aid-media field: “Everyone was dying for footage”. *Journalism Studies* 8(6): 862–878.
- Coward R (2010) The environment, the press and the missing lynx: A case study. *Journalism* 11(5): 625–638.
- Dale S (1996) *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media*. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- DiMaggio PJ and Powell WW (1983) The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 147–160.
- Emerson RM, Fretz RI and Shaw LL (2011) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gaber I and Willson AW (2004) Dying for diamonds: The mainstream media and NGOs – A case study of ActionAid. In: *Global Activism, Global Media*. London: Pluto Press, pp.95–109.
- Galtung J and Ruge MH (1965) The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba, and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research* 2(1): 64–90.
- Gans HJ (1999) Participant observation in the era of “ethnography”. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28(5): 540–548.
- Grayson L (2014) The role of non-government organisations (NGOs) in practising editorial photography in a globalised media environment. *Journalism Practice* 8(5): 632–645.

- Green A (2016) *The Thorny Ethics of Embedding with Do-gooders*. Available at: http://www.cjr.org/first_person/the_ethics_of_embedding_with_do-gooders.php (accessed 1 February 2017).
- Imison M (2014) Selling the story: Australian international development NGOs and health news from the developing world. *Journalism Practice* 8(4): 438–453.
- Iyengar S (1991) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobs RN and Glass DJ (2002) Media publicity and the voluntary sector: The case of nonprofit organizations in New York City. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 13(3): 235–252.
- Lindlof TR and Taylor BC (2010) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Mahoney J and Thelen K (2009) *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer JW and Rowan B (1977) Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology* 83(2): 340–363.
- Oliver C (1991) Strategic responses to institutional processes. *Academy of Management Review* 16(1): 145–179.
- O’Neill D and Harcup T (2009) News values and selectivity. In: Wahl-Jorgensen K (ed) *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp.161–174.
- Powers M (2014) The structural organization of NGO publicity work: Explaining divergent publicity strategies at humanitarian and human rights organizations. *International Journal of Communication* 8: 90–107.
- Powers M (2015a) Contemporary NGO-journalist relations: Reviewing and evaluating an emergent area of research. *Sociology Compass* 9(6): 427–437.
- Powers M (2015b) NGOs as journalistic entities. In: Carlson M and Lewis SC (eds) *Boundaries of Journalism, Professionalism, Practices, and Participation*. New York: Routledge, pp. 186–200.
- Powers M (2016) The new boots on the ground: NGOs in the changing landscape of international news. *Journalism* 17(4): 401–416.
- Sambrook R (2010) *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The Changing Face of International News*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.
- Scott WR (2013) *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Seo H, Kim JY and Yang SU (2009) Global activism and new media: A study of transnational NGOs’ online public relations. *Public Relations Review* 35(2): 123–126.
- Stoddard A (2009) *Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and trends*. Research Report, New York: Humanitarian Policy Group.
- Suchman MC (1995) Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review* 20(3): 571–610.
- Thrall AT, Stecula D and Sweet D (2014) May we have your attention please? Human-rights NGOs and the problem of global communication. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 19(2): 135–159.
- Vestergaard A (2008) Humanitarian branding and the media: The case of Amnesty International. *Journal of Language and Politics* 7(3): 471–493.
- Waisbord S (2011) Can NGOs change the news? *International Journal of Communication* 5: 142–165.
- Wanta W (1993) The agenda-setting effects of international news coverage: An examination of differing news frames. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 5(3): 250.

- Wanta W, Golan G and Lee C (2004) Agenda setting and international news: Media influence on public perceptions of foreign nations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81(2): 364–377.
- Wright K (2015) “These grey areas”: How and why freelance work blurs INGOs and news organizations. *Journalism Studies* 0(0): 1–21.
- Wright K (2016) Moral economies: Interrogating the interactions of NGOs, journalists and freelancers. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 1510–1529.

Author biography

Ruth Moon is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington in Seattle. Her academic writing has appeared in the *International Journal of Communication* and *New Media & Society*; her journalistic writing has appeared in magazines and daily newspapers across the US. She is currently conducting research for her dissertation, which examines the impact of technology, culture, and policy on the creation and maintenance of journalism cultures.