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*Public-  
Commercial  
Hybridity at  
BBC News  
Online*

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# **Public-Commercial Hybridity at BBC News Online: Covering Non-Governmental Organisations in Africa**

## **Introduction**

*BBC News Online* is one of the most popular news websites in the world (Jones and Salter, 2011), with enormous credibility in the UK (Hendy 2013) and overseas, especially in the US (Bicket and Wall 2009; Thurman 2007). It sits at the heart of the BBC's broader efforts to respond to the challenges of commercialisation, digitalisation and convergence, whilst remaining mindful of its commitment to public service values (Allan and Thorsen 2010; Thorsen et al. 2010). Yet serious concerns have been raised by Goldsmiths researchers about the ways in which the increased webcentricity of the Corporation's journalism has been shaped by its executives' privileging of speed, technology, and the homogeneity produced by recycling journalistic content (Lee-Wright 2010; Redden and Witschge 2010), so comprising part of a broader shift within the BBC towards marketised values.

My doctoral study (Wright 2015) serves to develop this work, as well as that carried out by Phillips into online journalists' changing sourcing practices (2010). This is because it found that the pressure to increase advertising revenue via the international-facing English-language site (*BBCNews.com*), together with the cost-cutting carried out at *BBC News Online* before and after the licence fee freeze (Hendy 2013; Tumber 2011), has begun to alter journalists' approach to sourcing and other forms of production practice. However, traditional Reithian values have not been marginalised by the intrusion of marketised norms. Instead, these different kinds of values were found to interact with, and modify, one another via journalists' deliberative decision-making in ways which prompted them to reconstruct their approach to public service journalism.

The cases I examined involved journalists' use of multimedia provided by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the news coverage of Africa. But in the course of conducting semi-structured interviews with those who made key decisions shaping the production of the two media items in question (Copnall and Hegarty 2012; Crowley and Fleming 2010[i]), it became clear that this relatively narrowly focused study had significant implications for the study of the Corporation's broader engagement in different forms of public-commercial hybridity (Born 2004; Steemers 1999, 2006). In particular, it raises serious questions about the extent to which these internal and external changes are eroding the organisational policies and structures put in place historically by senior BBC executives to separate commercial from editorial decision-making.

### **An 'Absolute Division Between Church and State?'**

In a rarely granted interview, Mark Byford, the former Deputy Director General of the BBC, explained that *BBC News Online* was not initially conceptualised by senior managers as a money-making venture (interview 5 Feb. 2014). But the rapid increase in the site's international audience, especially after the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the London Underground in 2005, led him to decide to allow advertising on *BBCNews.com* (interview Byford 2014). Whilst this was legitimised in terms of fairness to licence fee payers, Richard Sambrook, who was the Head of Global News at that time, stressed that BBC executives had also hoped that the income raised by *Online* would help them pay for the soaring costs of international coverage and for further digital expansion (interview 14 April 2014). In particular, he stressed that executives hoped that advertising revenue would be

significant enough to allow them to divert the Foreign Office Grant-in-Aid (which was at that time funding the international-facing section of the website, as well as World Service Radio) to Arabic satellite TV, because the Iraq war had led to this being ‘a big priority’ for the Corporation (interview Sambrook 2014).

However, Byford was eager that ‘public trust in the authority of the BBC’s journalism’ should not be endangered by perceived threats to journalists’ political impartiality and editorial independence (interview 2014). So he tasked Sambrook with chairing a special committee of senior executives, whose responsibility was to establish organisational structures and policies in order to ‘ensure a clear divide’ between editorial and commercial decision-making (interview Byford 2014). Sambrook spoke rather more frankly about this: arguing that there had been ‘enormous’ internal tensions between the senior journalists in BBC News and the commercial executives in BBC Worldwide, who he said ‘thought they could make a fortune’ from the site, but didn’t understand the editorial and political ‘sensitivities’ involved, so needed formal structures and policies in place to ‘keep them honest’ (interview 2014).

For these reasons, the committee worked with the BBC Trust in order to pass organisational policy placing the journalists at BBC News firmly in charge of all editorial commissioning, as well as clarifying where adverts could and could not be placed, and specifying which kinds of adverts were appropriate (interview 2014). The latter included banning adverts from NGOs, along with all other ‘political...lobby or pressure groups’ following a test-case relating to Oxfam (BBC Strategic Approval Committee 2009:10). Nevertheless, large quantities of NGO-provided multimedia were found on *BBC News Online* in 2012. This was indirectly shaped by serious changes to the BBC’s political economy, for in March 2010, Mark Thompson, the BBC’s then Director General, decided to cut the budget for *Online* by twenty-five per cent. This was a ‘tactical move’ to try and ward off attacks by the Corporation’s commercial rivals and by the pro-market Conservative party who looked likely to win the General Election in May (Franklin 2012:7). The strategy didn’t work, and the licence fee freeze announced by the new Conservative-led Coalition government led to the BBC experiencing a sixteen per cent drop in income in real terms: so compounding the effects of earlier cuts at *BBC News Online*.

As David Moody, the Head of Strategy at Worldwide, explained the revenue generated by advertising placed on *BBCNews.com* is ‘but a drop in the ocean’ compared to the amount generated by licence fee, but finding ways to increase it became increasingly important to the Corporation after 2010 (interview 24 Jan. 2014). Because of the pressure to raise advertising income, Worldwide had begun to take some editorial decisions. This began with commercial executives’ engagement in ‘re-jigging’ visuals and running orders, in order to ‘represent content so that it is more relevant to international audiences’ (interview Moody 2014). But soon this ‘representation’ began to involve Worldwide commissioning ‘supplementary content’ for international audiences, albeit ‘in consultation’ with BBC News (interview 2014). This appears to undermine the organisational separation of editorial and commercial decision-making agreed historically by Sambrook’s committee, even though Moody maintained that there was still an ‘absolute divide between Church and State’ (interview 2014).

The editorial direction taken by Worldwide executives also merits further research because Moody described his priority as commissioning the kinds of ‘up-beat’ lifestyle features which advertisers would like to ‘associate their brand’ with (interview 2014). These included items

‘... around Business, around Finance, around Health and Well-being, around Motoring ... All the things that in their extreme form would be in what *The Financial Times* publishes in “How to Spend” on a Saturday.’(interview Moody 2014)

But Moody complained that BBC journalists simply didn’t make enough of the kinds of features which would appeal to advertisers seeking to reach those kinds of markets, so he ‘had to’ spend money commissioning these features from ‘the market’ (email communication 2014). Indeed, he stressed that these kinds of Worldwide-commissioned features now comprise ‘an increasingly large part – often the majority’ of the features on *BBC News.com* (correspondence Moody 2014).

### **NGO-provided multimedia and public-commercial hybridity**

No evidence was found that such commissioning processes shaped the use of NGO-provided multimedia directly. But the privileging of ‘feel-good’ features which trickled down from senior managers, together with cost-cutting measures designed to stimulate the publication of larger numbers of features, via the recycling of other BBC content, was important (Redden and Witschge 2010). For the production of the first media item studied involved the incorporation of photos taken by the South Sudanese media collective, Woyee Film and Theatre Ltd, in a feature article (Copnall and Hegarty 2012), and this hinged on the decision-making of a World Service journalist tasked with combing the radio station’s English-language output for non-news material suitable for publication online. Hegarty stressed that her personal views and practices had become more nuanced since gaining more experience in the coverage of Africa and that the BBC’s use of NGO-provided multimedia online was continuing to change rapidly, especially since the Ebola crisis in West Africa (email communication 11 May 2015). However, at the time of sampling, Hegarty said that senior managers had simply said that the site ‘needed more features’ and she had noticed that positive ‘human interest’ features were particularly warmly received (interview 27 November 2012).

So Hegarty did not see herself as deliberately selecting media items on the basis of their appeal to advertisers. Instead, she described herself as serving other commercial aims (interview 2012), although these also helped make the site more ‘advertiser-friendly’ (interview Moody 2014). Such aims included supplying *Online* journalists with immediately appealing ‘human interest’ stories which would be popular with, and ‘fun to read’ for audiences (interview Hegarty 2012, see also Sambrook et al. 2013), as well as sourcing stories about more unusual actors and place in order to differentiate *BBC News Online* from its competitors, and sourcing large amounts of high-quality, visually appealing material, so that the sight looked immediately striking.

All of these considerations shaped Hegarty’s decision to recycle media items about small African collectives and cooperatives, such as the South Sudanese NGO, Woyee Film and Theatre Industry Ltd which was represented by the item forming the basis of the first case study (Copnall and Hegarty 2012). This group had been represented initially in an arts radio package, composed by the BBC’s Sudan and South Sudan Correspondent, James Copnall, so Hegarty said she had much of the editorial material she needed already (interview 2012). Although she did go on to conduct one additional interview herself, she stressed that the main purpose of this was to ask permission to use the NGO’s photos, which she had seen displayed

on the group's *Facebook* site and which were of an unusually high technical quality for an African NGO because of their own focus on media production (interview 2012).

Hegarty relished the opportunity to represent the members of this NGO as adept film-makers, seeing this as striking a blow against stereotypical 'negative' and 'disempowering' representations of Africans by others (interview 2012). In this way, she argued she was enabling the BBC's public service journalism to function as a form of Reithian education (interview 2012). But in her eagerness to prepare a story which would be immediately appealing to the site's readers, she focused upon the entrepreneurialism and technical expertise of the NGO to such an extent that she inadvertently marginalised its more alternative, communitarian values (interview D. Danis 20 Feb 2013).

Nevertheless, using photos provided by a smaller, African NGO was quite unusual at *BBC News Online*. Joseph Winter, the site's Africa Editor, said a much more common use of NGO-provided multimedia involved his compilation of photo slideshows using images provided by major International NGOs (INGOs), despite the BBC's ban on accepting adverts from them (interview J. Winter 7 May 2012). Yet again, a key consideration here was how to make the site immediately appealing and visually distinctive, although Winter linked this far more explicitly to advertising than Hegarty. As he explained:

'There has been, if not exactly *pressure*, then *talk* of experiments about advertisers, because ... if there's a special event coming up then there's so many adverts around it. And if there's a special page, then ... for example, banks operating in South Sudan, you know, the likes of them *may* like to advertise around that so the page has to *look* really snazzy' (interview Winter 2013)

The lack of many internal photographers at *BBC News Online* and budgetary constraints therefore drove Winter to use the photographs provided by INGOs who were able and willing to hire experienced freelance photojournalists whom he 'could not afford to employ' himself (interview 2013). The technical and aesthetic qualities of these photos also meant that such slideshows were often republished in 'special reports' of archived material, such as the item on which the second case study was based, which used photos provided by Save the Children (Crowley and Fleming 2010).

Although Winter was uncomfortable about repeatedly reinforcing the definitional advantages enjoyed by INGOs in the construction of knowledge about Africa, like Hegarty, he justified his actions according to Reithian ideas about the educative purpose of the BBC's public service journalism. For he claimed that his rapid re-versioning of INGO-provided photos for slideshows enabled him to cope with the loss of one team member in the rounds of cost-cutting which had taken place (Fenton 2010): arguing that then he could focus on 'the real public service...the real *journalism*', which he re/defined as breaking news (interview 2013). Yet perhaps the most worrying way in which the use of NGO-provided multimedia functioned in the reconstruction of public service journalism at *BBC News Online* involved its role in entrenching the promotional culture that shaped journalists' relationships with each other and with their audiences (Davis 2013). For editorial discussions between colleagues had not only speeded up because of the loss of several *Online* journalists, but they had also become laden with noticeably commercial norms. For example, Hegarty stressed that she had to pitch re-versioned material to the journalists on the Africa page which would be immediately appealing to them, as they were so busy they would not have the time or energy to engage with more than 'a quick sell' (interview 2012).

Likewise, Lucy Fleming, the other journalist working on the Africa page, described herself as ‘pushing’ or ‘selling’ stories to the editors of main news pages, who then ‘sold’ or ‘promoted’ these stories to audiences (interview 16 November 2012). Fleming then went on to explain that INGO-provided multimedia was particularly useful in such processes, not only because it required little re-versioning (Fenton 2010), but also because INGOs had usually already identified saleable events, as well as stories about saleable individuals with significant emotional appeal to audiences (interview Fleming 2012; see also Davis 2013).

Indeed, Fleming even described the former child soldier, who appeared in the photos provided by Save the Children, as ‘a really easy sell’ (interview 2012). But what was most interesting about this was the way in which Fleming blended even this heavily marketised approach with Reithian ideals in order to reconstruct her understanding of the normative purpose of public service journalism. For she argued that the ‘whole point’ of such promotional processes was to try and get as many *Online* readers as possible to click on items about Africa, reasoning that then ‘they should understand at least *some* of the issues involved’ (interview Fleming 2012).

### Conclusion

Whilst this study pertained specifically to the use of NGO-provided multimedia in the coverage of Africa provided by *BBC News Online*, it shows that journalists’ sourcing and other production practices are beginning to change. This is because of the pressures exerted by both organisational cost-cutting and the need to generate more advertising revenue, then tie decisions to audience popularity, market differentiation, speed and staffing. From this one might surmise that such shifts are also taking place in other areas of news where advertisers and sources have far larger resources than NGOs. Further research clearly needs to be done in this area, but it appears that the intensity of such pressures has brought about the partial erosion of organisational structures designed historically to prevent the Corporation’s commercial aims from interfering with its journalists’ editorial decision-making.

These findings serve to develop previous work conducted at Goldsmiths regarding the marketisation of *BBC News Online* (Lee-Wright 2010; Redden and Witschge 2010), for it shows that normative values are not marginalised in such processes. Rather, economic and normative values interact with, and modify, each other in the course of journalists’ deliberative decision-making, so transforming their approaches to public service journalism. The new, value-laden practices which emerge from such deliberations also have a complex relationship to homogeneity (Lee-Wright 2010; Redden and Witschge 2010). For on the one hand, cash and time-poor journalists used NGO-provided multimedia because they thought it would help them differentiate their content from other news outlets visually, as well as in terms of the people and places covered (Phillips 2010). But on the other hand, the kinds of content these journalists selected, as well as the marketised ways in which they processed it, tended to strip out its alterity.

Such changing production practices re-legitimise the BBC’s reputation to offer a ‘global’ public news service, as well as enhancing its ability to compete for audiences and advertisers online. But this article raises serious questions about whether journalists’ use of NGO-provided multimedia on *BBC News Online* constructs public knowledge which enhances the capabilities of the people whose perspectives the Corporation claims to represent to the world. Therefore this study speaks to current debates about the future funding of BBC

journalism, for it demonstrates that organisational cost-cutting does not just produce greater efficiency. Rather, it tends to produce unintended qualitative changes in what journalists do, how they do it, and how they view the purpose/s of journalism in ways which further marginalise the values and perspectives of those who are already disadvantaged and disempowered.

[i] Both items were about South Sudan and appeared on the Africa page of *BBC News Online* during a single week in August 2012. However, the second item had been republished as part of a Special Collection of archived material to mark the first anniversary of the country's independence.

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