

The media and international issues: how funders can help

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When Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, her face appeared in newspapers and on television screens the world over and she was praised for her pioneering environmental and pro-democracy work. Maathai, who is the founder of the Green Belt Movement, and has led women in her native Kenya and across Africa to plant more than 30 million trees, is no stranger to media attention. However, in the past, it hasn't always been this flattering.

In fact, when Maathai led a famous protest against then-President Moi of Kenya for his plans to destroy the only urban park in Nairobi (and use part of the land to construct a giant monument to himself), 'She was lambasted in the Kenyan press. She was a pariah,' recalls Lisa Jordan, a Ford Foundation Program Officer. Jordan remembers the local coverage well, as she happened to be in Nairobi at the time and read the local papers daily during the height of the protests.

Jordan cites Maathai as an example of how success in gaining international media attention, even in small, specialized presses or on internet listservs, has become a critical strategy for protecting the human rights and even the very lives of activists who dare to take on oppressive regimes. She cites Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma as another example of an activist who had the 'protective space around her extended by the media'. In other words, while the government might criticize her actions, they haven't dared to physically harm her because they know that there would be a strong international backlash.

With the increasing sophistication of activists and non-profits operating in the global policy arena, the communications strategies utilized by these organizations have become more complex, more finely targeted and, as a result, often much more effective in getting their message across and heard.

The changing media environment

In some regards, however, media consolidation has made it more difficult than ever to get coverage for international issues. Fewer media outlets means less competition, trends towards catering to the 'average' viewer and less room (and importantly, fewer financial resources) for diverse programming.

Another factor in the changing media environment is the influence of the internet. According to Jordan, access to the internet has helped close the gap between activists working on similar issues from very distant geographic points. Greater global connectivity has made it easier for an activist in rural America to get directly involved with an issue across the globe. If they then pitch a story about this 'international' issue to their local

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paper with the local interest angle being that they, as citizens of that locale, are involved and concerned, then the reporter can justify it to his/her editor and it may well get covered. This approach has the added benefit of allowing for coverage from the perspective of 'why we are all affected' by common issues such as the health of the planet, human rights, child labour, etc.

How can funders help?

So, what can funders do to support activists and advocacy-oriented non-profits to improve their success in getting media coverage for international issues? The individuals interviewed for this article (one funder, one journalist and one non-profit campaigner) largely concur on what works and offer the following suggestions:

- **Support useful and effective media training for activists that focuses on how to develop and pitch the 'local angle' of international stories.** Joe Mettimano of World Vision (www.worldvision.org) notes that for the organization's campaign against child sex tourism, the local angle is central to the appeal of the story, to both journalists and readers. Globally, 25 per cent of all sex tourists are from the US, and in some regions this number is as high as 80 per cent. Americans are horrified to realize that other Americans are involved in committing these crimes against children and want to see it stopped.

Lisa Jordan echoes the importance of the local angle. She cites an example of how the Ford Foundation funded local activists in Chicago to attend the World Social Forum in Brazil. The meeting, which had never before received positive media coverage in the US, was reported on in detail by the *Chicago Tribune*, because there were local activists participating.

- Support fully-fledged communications strategies for these groups that enable them to fund various aspects of media/communications work on an ongoing basis.
- **Look for ways in which collaboration among like-minded organizations can provide opportunities for increased leverage and efficiency,** advises Jordan. For example, there is an increasing trend towards funding websites for networks of organizations. These network sites have come to replace many individual websites and electronic newsletters. The resulting sites can be both more cost-effective and more useful in terms of the quality of their content. One network site sponsored by non-profits that monitor and protest the economic policies and impact of the international financial institutions (www.ifwatchnet.org) has become a reputable 'go-to' source for publications like *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*. Another example of this type of website is The Green Media Toolshed (www.greenmediatoolshed.org) which tracks and synthesizes environmental information.
- **Help grantees develop multi-sector partnerships on the issues that they seek to convey in the media.** Mettimano notes that their branding on the anti-sex tourism campaign includes the logos of World Vision's campaign partners: the US State Department and US Customs and Immigration. This is an attention-grabber to the key target audience of the campaign: the sex offenders themselves. It is this partnership with law enforcement authorities that lends 'bite' to their 'bark'. It also lends both credibility and interest to the story with media outlets and the public.

Interview with Dave Marash, ABC Nightline Correspondent

Alliance How do you end up choosing so many stories focused on international social issues and cover them in such depth?

Marash I am blessed to work for Nightline, one of the last programmes on [US] television that is willing to provide its viewers with in-depth coverage on international issues. My personal focus in my work now is on stories of the human predicament. My goal as a reporter is to provide an accurate assessment of the reality on the ground, on any particular issue. If I can portray it accurately, then the policy imperatives will follow. Our role is to shine an extended spotlight on an issue. If I lay the [stories] out correctly then it's up to the policymakers to play their role.

Alliance What factors influence you and your Nightline producers' decisions about what stories to cover?

Marash Well, declining news budgets are a major factor in making it harder and harder to get international stories covered. Right now, Iraq is the major focus and [when news directors are willing to approve a budget for international coverage it's almost always for an Iraq story]. The American public today seems to feel that knowledge about international issues is discretionary.

The other big factor is the reality of ratings and audience share. Back when Bosnia was in the news, there were ratings studies done that showed that just hearing the word 'Bosnia' made audiences flee. The comparison today is 'Iraq'. Increasingly, people don't want to know or hear any more about it. As a result, news programmes tend to scrimp on international coverage (ie not as often, less relentlessly) because they don't want to lose audience share and have people flip the channel.

Alliance How do you plug in to the reality on the ground once you arrive in a location assignment? Do you and your producers ever turn to local non-profit organizations to assist in this process?

Marash In the case of the series we did on HIV/AIDS in Africa, our Nightline producer saw an award-winning series on the subject in the Village Voice [an independent NYC-based newspaper]. Also, once we arrived in Zimbabwe, we called on Caritas to help us find translators, who then played a key role in helping us manoeuvre through the black townships in Harare. And unfortunately, HIV/AIDS is such a prevalent problem in Zimbabwe that you can barely walk down the street without bumping into someone who is either themselves HIV-positive or knows someone who has died or is dying from AIDS.

We also felt it was important to see how the public schools were involved, especially regarding HIV/AIDS education. So we contacted the Ministry of Education and were taken to a few schools, some of which were doing good work and some of which were doing nothing.

Alliance If a non-profit organization is working on an issue that they'd like to get your attention on, how can they succeed in getting your attention?

Marash Well, I have to confess, I religiously return phone calls and give the caller a chance to let them explain why I should pay attention to an issue.

Alliance You might be one of the last reporters to possess that particular quality, and be willing to admit it! OK, once someone does get you on the phone, what makes you respond?

Marash Passion. Nothing works like conviction.