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Chapter Six

NGOs, Media, and Public Understanding 25 Years On

An Interview with Paddy Coulter, Former Head of Media, Oxfam

Paddy Coulter with Glenda Cooper

In 1989, Paddy Coulter, former head of media for Oxfam, trustee of Comic Relief, and the man who facilitated Michael Buerk's first trip to Ethiopia, wrote a piece for the New Internationalist *magazine, making a powerful attack on aid agencies of the time for their reliance on backward-looking 'starving children' imagery. This pushed the idea of a passive developing world, and agencies whose intervention was cheap, easy, and risk-free and which failed to mention the indispensable work that local partners did.*

The article, titled 'Pretty as a Picture', was a controversial one, particularly as it was written by an insider. Coulter ended with a plea for agencies to stop seeing fundraising as the dominant, if not primary objective, and to fulfil their responsibilities to educate the public.

To mark twenty-five years on from that piece, we invited Coulter to reflect on the situation then and now, and what developments and differences he sees now in 2014.

Early Years : from discrete advertising to advertising gurus

Q: Can you start by just filling us on your experience in seeing how charities deal with publicising disasters?

A: My first involvement with Oxfam came in the early 1970s. I was working in Ethiopia and then in Yemen—I was Oxfam's first country director in Yemen in 1972. The key influences of that time in terms of charity communications were still very much the approaches of early Oxfam figure Cecil Jackson-Cole and his acolyte, Harold Sumption.

These two had pioneered a different approach to advertising. Previously the charities like Save the Children Fund (as it was then) and the Red Cross were very much sedate, establishment outfits, and rarely advertised at all. And when they did, it was very discreet. In comparison, the combination of Jackson-Cole (a businessman-cum-philanthropist), and Sumption, an advertising guru, applied commercial business techniques for the first time.

They used a combination of striking image and punchy copy. Some of this stuff was very much 'child in distress', 'human skeleton' etcetera and Jackson-Cole and Sumption certainly have to take responsibility for that. But they also ran more thought-provoking advertising, saying things like "Oxfam HATES hungry children" or "Help Oxfam STOP feeding hungry children" with "hates" and "stop" in huge bold capital letters. They were aware of the ongoing tension between maximising income and public education, both of which are strong impulses within aid agencies.

Traditional media, oversimplified imagery and charismatic figures

Q: Sumption's influence was marked in the 1950s; what changes did you see in the next decade?

A: Sumption and Jackson-Cole led the innovation in the use of advertising in mass-circulation newspapers. But by the time of the Biafran Emergency of the late sixties we find, for the first time, strong competition from popular television news bulletins for public attention. To see how it had changed, you need to compare Biafran media coverage with that of the Congo in the early 1960s. Congo had been a classic African famine disaster but I can identify only one television interview from that time with an Oxfam official for BBC News and this was extremely stilted. It went on the lines: "Tell me, Mr Oxfam director, is there tremendous need in the Congo?" To which Oxfam's then director, Leslie Kirkley replied, "Yes, there is tremendous need in the Congo," and that was the end of the take. It was a new technology and aid agencies weren't at home with it.

But Biafra was different. If you look at it in the context of Suzanne Franks' book (2013), you can see how a very clever African politician, Odumegwu Ojukwu, duped and outwitted most of the British media, international NGOs, and a lot of the wider world. When you read the Oxfam papers of the time, there were warnings from the very knowledgeable Tim Brierly, Oxfam's country director for Nigeria, who kept saying, 'Hang on, this is getting unbalanced"—as did the chair

of the Oxfam's Africa Committee—but against this there was a one-sided, seemingly unstoppable media campaign to 'save Biafra'.

Looking back it seems hardly credible now to have the pre-Murdoch *Sun* and the *Daily Express* competing over Biafra stories with journalists of the calibre of Michael Leapman, later of the *Observer* but then of the *Sun,* splashing stories on the emergency. And there was now a new media player, ITN, whose entrance was that of a brash intruder, transforming the staid ways of BBC News. So you had a scenario in the 1960s where the printed press is still top dog, but by the time I first worked in Ethiopia in the early 1970s it was television that had taken over the lead, for example, exposing with the Wollo famine in Jonathan Dimbleby's 'The Unknown Famine' report on ITV in 1973. This takeover by television of course was to culminate in Michael Buerk's BBC Television News coverage of an even more extensive Ethiopian famine a decade later.

But with Biafra you had a situation where the NGOs on the whole got the analysis wrong, as had most of the media. It was presented to the British public as a desperate one-sided race to save children, which was playing into the hands of those wanting a prolongation of the war.

This was exacerbated by oversimplified imagery, a colonial mind set, competition between the media plus the involvement of some very charismatic figures like the writer Frederick Forsyth and the photographer Don McCullin on the Biafran side. Cooler heads got side-lined in the frenzy. A frame was established for how a relief emergency got covered—but it was the wrong frame.

Recognising the problem, challenging the frame

Q: What do you mean by the wrong frame?

A: I think perhaps the most pernicious thing was the frame of whites to the rescue of blacks, and that is one of the most persistent problems in this area, a hangover from an imperial era. Relief agencies know you've got to simplify the situation to catch public attention and engage them but the challenge is to simplify in a way that does not distort.

The principal distortion is as follows: all these relief agencies operate through partnerships with national and local governments, local civil society organisations, church networks and the like—but these tend almost always to get written out of the script in charity advertising. The agency always has to appear top dog. It is the outside relief agency which is made out to have potency, and this is fundamentally misleading.

Q: Do you have personal experience of this?

A: I remember very vividly in 1984 when the Oxfam relief operation was set up, it was an emergency operation which had to be added to an overwhelmingly development-focused programme. There were 108 employees in all, of whom100 were Ethiopian and only a handful of specialists flown in from outside. The reality was for Oxfam, as for all the other international relief organisations, the main burden of the relief effort was being carried by nationals of that country. But that was very far from the picture that the British public got. Locals get written out of the script very quickly when it comes to fundraising.

The Ethiopian famine was the first time I recall that the internal debate within Oxfam on advertising post-Sumption becoming more sophisticated. I remember the fundraisers sitting down with the campaigners and communications people in an effort to work out a different kind of charity advertising, one which would combine public education with raising the cash which the charity required. We came up with advertising that there were two things you could do for Ethiopia: one was to give money, the second was to sign up to Oxfam's Hungry for Change campaign, which was tackling the deeper issues of trade, arms, and debt. There was a determination to get across some of the complexity.

There was also a kind of frustration that Oxfam had been party to an established frame and by the 1980s we were in danger of being trapped in it. It all too often ended up with Oxfam's veteran emergencies expert, the late Jim Howard, or myself being in front of a camera because we were the people who were most conversant with television interviews. At that time British television journalists would not normally look for Africans to comment and their news organisations didn't care to run interviews on mainstream bulletins with captions and translation— that was not regarded as acceptable for many viewers—with the net effect that we were inadvertently adding to the distortion of 'Brits to the rescue of Africans'.

We did try to challenge this; I recollect that we went back to ITN for a corrective, in a bid to try to get them to interview locals. But to get on *News at Ten* for that, we had to have Glenda Jackson to go out to interview Ethiopians and get their perspectives—we needed a celebrity to do that.

Q: How responsible was Oxfam for this situation though?

A: The fault was in our heads—not being sufficiently conscious of it at the time to insist, for example, on media training for our Ethiopian colleagues in order to give them a much greater familiarity with the most powerful medium. But there was also fault with the conventions of television news that we had to have a British celebrity to introduce Ethiopians to the peak-time British viewing public.

Images Of Africa and the Red Cross Code Of Conduct

Q: What changes came about post-Ethiopia?

A: The contradictions on the Ethiopian famine coverage were so overwhelming that it led to a huge debate, which crystallised in *Images of Africa* [the 1987 Oxfam report by Nikki van der Gaag and Cathy Nash] and that ultimately led to the Red Cross Code of Conduct in Disaster Relief of 1992[1]. Today, when you look at the code it may not strike you as being a momentous achievement—it is saying the obvious that people should have dignity in media portrayal, and agencies should be responsible. Before that, the better agencies had had internal principles, but they weren't Holy Writ—they could be overridden in certain situations.

The problem with this is the interagency competition, particularly in the situation of financial recession, when donations drop. It comes down to the argument about how principled you are. You may say, "Well, I'm very principled"—but if you're director of an organisation that has just effectively lost out on millions of pounds of potential charitable income and your trustees are beginning to wonder why they've employed you, you may come to feel that you are too principled. There can be a race to the bottom in charitable advertising.

Q: Did the Code make a discernible difference then?

A: With the 1992 code, all the key humanitarian relief agencies signed up for it and so for the first time ever there was an inter-agency deal on behaviour with media and advertising. I saw the code as a real breakthrough, thinking, 'That's it! That's been fixed!' as it had been something I'd been very irritated about in the '80s. But when I wrote that article in *New Internationalist*[2] in 1989 that there was a sense from some that these problems were going to be resolved. I find myself looking back and feeling that was a very naïve view! It's a bit like looking back at old-fashioned sexist advertising, for example, the use of attractive women in ads to sell cars. It became such a joke—what has a woman's body got to do with the selling of a car?—you thought that nobody would ever again stoop to that. Well, it turns out an awful lot of people would and it has all resurfaced. Similarly with charitable advertising, this battle is never finally won, it's not susceptible to being finally won because simplification is the name of the game—and your simplification is my oversimplification.

Then added to that, we have many completely new aid players coming in, including foundations like Gates, China and the other BRICS countries, sovereign wealth funds and diaspora groups—for instance, committed Muslim humanitarians driving to Syria. None of these new players had been involved in formulating this code. I think in too many charity quarters the argument still remains, "What

we have to do is attract the maximum number of eyeballs to this now; the deeper public education can come later but, to paraphrase Bob Geldof, we first absolutely have to have the f***ing money." That's the root problem.

Comic Relief – a critical turning point?

Q: Tell me about your experience with Comic Relief.You were involved at the beginning there.

A: I was involved from the very early days of Comic Relief, becoming a trustee of the charity for some ten years. I misjudged the very beginning—when I first met Comic Relief co-founders Richard Curtis, who then had a name as a radio comedy scriptwriter, and Jane Tewson, who was involved with Mencap, made their first visit to Oxfam House and wanted to send comedians to Africa, my first instinct was that sounded like the limit! But I quickly re-thought and saw that was really quite ingenious; someone like Lenny Henry could get over messages in a way that conventional aid agencies couldn't.

And by this stage Oxfam, which had started life as an anti-establishment body, was now a very large organisation, Britain's biggest charitable aid institution. So if comedians could take up this cause, they could have a 'Heineken effect' and reach a public that Oxfam simply couldn't. So I rapidly changed my position 180 degrees.

There is a brilliant early Comic Relief film when there are seven or eight Ethiopians wrapped in *shammas* (a loose wrap) standing in a row outside a typical Ethiopian *tukul* (a traditional circular hut) and the camera pans from left to right and then jerks back and the middle face creases up and the viewer sees that it is Lenny Henry. That makes the point eloquently that Ethiopians are real people (like the Lenny Henry the viewers already know) and as such this piece was probably more effective than our Oxfam initiative with Glenda Jackson. Certainly in the early days of Comic Relief there was innovation after innovation.

Q: But you became uneasy about Comic Relief and resigned as a trustee?

A: I began to worry how unbalanced the fundraising imagery was becoming. The emotiveness, which reaches to the widest possible audience and which gets the money coming in, and the public education aspect had been held in tension at the beginning, particularly for a very creative period in the nineties, but it later got seriously out of kilter. The use of celebrities, which is justifiable in terms of appealing to a very wide audience, was to become ever more strongly focused on the emotions of the visiting celebrity, and less and less on seizing the opportunity to explain the nature of the African partnership. The audience also got the

impression of weakness and powerlessness on the part of Africans which I found disturbing. This is a trend that had started to bother me when I was a trustee—I want to give you the example of the film treatment of Ethiopian street children.

The trouble with 'grab the eyeballs now, educate later'

Q: Tell me about your experience in Ethiopia.

A: As I found when I first turned up in Ethiopia in 1971, street children in Addis Ababa have acute problems of deprivation as well as posing a considerable social problem themselves. I recall that street children back then would demand a couple of dollars to look after your parked vehicle and if you dared not to give them this, when you returned to your vehicle, the exhaust would have been dismantled and you would pay a lot more than a few dollars to get it fixed.

From, I think, the late 1980s Comic Relief started supporting imaginative work with the Addis street children and gave substantial funding over a period of years. This was successful—not just in terms of giving street children a conventional education but also of stimulating their creativity and of training them for employment. Some became successful performers and dancers, doing shows in public, including in the city's main square for public gatherings, Meskel Square, in front of enormous audiences. And there was a film and video training component to the project with help from a couple of committed BBC film producers so the street children could film their own activities.

For a Red Nose Day of the late 1990s, the plan was for the street children project to be visited by a celebrity, in this case the actress and comedienne Julie Walters. When the film team came back from the shoot, I was able as a trustee to review the rough footage and it was clear they had got masses of material of all the different dimensions of the project. However, when I was sitting in on the BBC viewing of the fine cut later on, the focus of the film was limited to the education of the younger street children, with appealing shots of Julie Walters with her arm around a little boy doing his homework by the light of a hurricane lamp.

It was a powerful piece, very emotive and skilfully produced, but where, I asked, were the adolescent children and scenes of their vocational training in performance arts and indeed of their own filmmaking capacities and evidence of their progress? Without some of these elements a sense of the empowerment of street children and what they could go on to achieve was missing. I was told that the insertion of those sequences showing Ethiopian street children as successful dancers or filmmakers would not bring anything like the same amount of money as the more narrowly focused film. And I was reminded that it is very important to Comic Relief that each Red Nose

Day sets a new record total of funds raised. As indeed it is because the achievement gets used by sympathetic politicians and the aid industry more generally every time they are challenged on the popularity of aid to say, "Well, actually Comic Relief has attracted a record amount of money from the British public this year" to back up their claim that there is not a seriously declining public appetite for giving aid.

Now I accept that if the sequences which I favoured were inserted, then Red Nose Day probably wouldn't raise quite as much money as the sequences which had been chosen. On the other hand, it seemed to me the Red Cross code rules out a policy of maximisation of money at all costs. Certainly it was a policy I didn't hold with and so I stepped down as a trustee with these misgivings. I found this personally a very difficult issue because I believed Comic Relief and the setting up of Red Nose Day was a hugely creative and wonderful thing, one which has had such an enormous impact on the school system in the UK that it is almost embedded in the curriculum. I also worried that critical noises might play into the hands of that vocal anti-aid lobby orchestrated by the likes of the *Daily Mail* and serve to undermine public support for development and make the situation worse. But if you ask me directly about my views on Comic Relief 's recent fundraising imagery, I have to say that I feel that it's going in quite the wrong direction.

The trouble, in my view, with the 'grab the eyeballs now, educate later' approach is that the education part never really happens, or if it does, it's very subsidiary and short lived and doesn't attract anything like the same resource and effort. So that became a parting of the ways, in sorrow and not anger.

Q: What is your verdict now?

A: The original impulse [of Comic Relief] was so brilliant and creative, but if the only way the level of popularity can be maintained is by ignoring or suppressing inconvenient information because of the need to maximise the cash return, I, for one, would rather accept a smaller return and have a more 'educated pound'. Because aid is not just the crude insertion of cash, it's what is done with it and the relationship you have with your beneficiaries that is crucial. And if the role of beneficiaries is subtly reduced or not so subtly edited out, then I think the public is being given a very partial and distorted view, particularly in the case of Ethiopian street children who turn out to be like teenagers here— or even better than us because some of them have been able to make the leap from being street children to being performers and filmmakers.

Q: Is this a problem confined to Comic Relief?

A: No. I feel this erosion of the Red Cross Code goes on across the charitable sector. Officially when agencies join BOND, the membership body of UK-based development NGOs, they are obliged to subscribe to the code. Yet I was watching

television the other day and caught a Save the Children Fund advert that seemed to violate those principles. SCF is a sophisticated agency which knows better than most about the complexity of development, and yet they are wilfully putting out this misleading and reductive messaging.

The SCF ad managed to insinuate most of those messages I objected to in the original *New Internationalist* article—that intervening is risk-free, it's cheap and easy, little or no references to the causes of suffering or its complexities at all, and any partners involved are edited out of the equation. But I know from my own field experience that where Save the Children are at their most effective is where they are working with a national or local government partners or a community group. And then there's the question of the beneficiaries. Are the people involved really aware of how they are being used? I am concerned that agencies pay lip service to the beneficiaries, but the assumption is that if the advertising 'works' in terms of raising money at more or less any price, then that can be justified.

New horizons? Changing media, complex partnerships, power disconnects

Q: What do you see as a solution?

A: There are many questions involved here: Does there need to be a renewal and, indeed, a toughening of these codes, and what is the engine of implementation? What is the regulation of this? Is it self-regulation? Are the trustees regulating? And how much do agencies discuss this with the beneficiaries? The evidence is that people, when they are consulted about how they are portrayed, often do have strong views.

I feel two things really matter here. One is that this issue of enforcement of codes and who regulates needs to be brought right up charity agendas. We've seen with the regulation of the press that it's pretty hopeless relying on people to police their own. I would imagine that if I was back on the Oxfam board I would be wondering 'what price our principles?' when we see Save the Children and others going down this road.

Two, I think we need to see another burst of new creativity over communicating aid and development. When I wrote that *New Internationalist* article I was criticising allies like the UN Association and the New Statesman for carrying a UNA ad with a stereotypical image of an African skeletal child. Stephen Platt, the then editor of the *Statesman*, responded to the NI with a letter challenging, "Well, what would Mr Coulter show? What would he do?" That is a good question.

It seems to me looking back on all this that there is a pattern which starts off with a brilliant surge of creative energy, but then you reflect later on the flaws—for example, take Oxfam which, having invented mass charity advertising, by the sixties was re-thinking this as too crude and at odds with basic principles. Then come the

African famines of the 1970s and '80s that reinforce the stereotypes which seem to 'work', at least on a fundraising level. But then, by the time of the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s it becomes so difficult for the agencies that they are forced to reflect much more deeply and then that fresh thinking eventually generates a new inter-agency code. And that seemed to be that, issue done and dusted. But of course it wasn't and it isn't. I have a theory that it goes in cycles over the decades with the pulse waxing and waning. The big question is whether the situation needs to get so much worse at the bottom of a cycle that out of it will come the best new creative thinking.

I can see the internet and social media are allowing people to be their own media, therefore enforcement of codes will become far more difficult in future. But you have nevertheless to develop some very clear principles and have the best creative minds doing something with different approaches, ones that fit the situation. And this is a different situation from before, one where global poverty is overall in decline and if the world were to sustain this trend, extreme poverty could be very radically reduced if not eliminated within the next 15–20 years. The research I've been associated with at OPHI (the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative) shows that the countries that are making the fastest inroads into poverty are some of the poorest countries but it's the middle-income countries like India that have the largest repositories of poor people that are the most sluggish. The challenge is to make innovative partnerships to end poverty a proposition that everyone would want to support.

Q: Why do you think agencies hide their work with partners?

A: If the choice is between an emotive piece with Julie Walters with her arm around a little kid studying with the aid of a hurricane lamp versus a non-engaging mini-documentary, then it's a no-brainer. But why is it not possible to highlight more of the success, to show that people's lives have been transformed by their own efforts and the efforts of supportive partner organisations? Surely that is a genuine 'good news' story?

I wonder if in part it's because the current more professional generation of fundraisers and marketeers have less of a background in relief and development, less direct personal involvement with people and programmes on the ground. Is this separation fostered by career trajectories which mean you are likely to have come up by being a fundraiser or marketeer with some other charity in a different field, and it's this professional expertise that comes across, rather than any necessary identification with poor people and an understanding of how development occurs?

The beneficiaries of aid are a long way away and so on the whole are not going to see the adverts to complain. You couldn't do some of this stuff with a domestic audience who have much more direct access to media and powerful representatives, including MPs. The agencies have a freer hand than would a domestic charity, especially if you are not consulting beneficiaries and not dealing with them directly. There

is a power disconnect at the bottom of all this where professional aid careers here are judged not by the adherence to the Red Cross Code, not by their consultation with beneficiaries nor by how far they have been able to take this challenge of simplification and do it in an ingenious way, but—crudely—are they bringing in the loot?

Notes

1. In particular, article 10 of the Code read, "In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects". See more at http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/#sthash.Zc43Lkvq.dpuf.
2. http://newint.org/features/1989/04/05/pretty/.

Reference

Franks, S. (2013). *Reporting disasters*. London: Hurst.