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'Give us your ****ing money'

A Critical Appraisal of TV and the Cash Nexus

GLENDA COOPER

At 3 pm on 13 July 1985, Bob Geldof, the organiser of Live Aid, burst out on live television: "People are dying NOW. Give us the money NOW.... F*** the address, give us the phone, here's the number."

It was, in fact, the first time such an expletive had been used on such a 'family friendly' occasion (Franks, 2013). Geldof's swearing may have broken boundaries in taste terms—yet after this outburst, giving increased to £300 per second (Geldof, 2014). And Live Aid would, more important, come to symbolise the increasing importance of the cash nexus to the aid industry.

Thirty years on, the relationship between rock-'n'-roll, charity, and money claimed the headlines in a very different way, when at the end of 2013 it emerged that the international NGO World Vision UK had paid Elizabeth McGovern (better known as the Countess of Grantham in TV series *Downton Abbey*) £28,000 to subsidise her band Sadie and the Hotheads, as part of a deal in which she would become an ambassador for the charity. In three decades we have moved from rock stars raising money for aid agencies to aid agencies paying money to rock stars to raise their profile.

This chapter will deal with the increasing importance of the cash nexus in the modern humanitarian agency and how consumerism has become embedded in aid. In this, I use Carlyle's view of the cash nexus of social relationships being reduced to economic gain, then taken on by Marx and Engels, but also the idea as expressed by Dant (2000) of the idea of the cash nexus in the area of personal choice—defining oneself by the NGO you choose to donate to or the NGO product you consume.

It will trace the development from the success of Live Aid as a televisual event to the other forms of media that have been able to marry consumerism with caring. The changes take place with the background of an increasingly competitive environment for international NGOs, coupled with the global financial crisis putting the squeeze on donations.

Today, deals with big corporates to market children's action figures, sponsorship on *American Idol*, paying for a celebrity's vanity rock band—all are now playing a role in how the most successful international NGOs operate, even if that means they find themselves in situations they could not have predicted years ago. As Justin Forsyth, CEO of Save the Children UK, puts it of his organisation's tie-up with pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline, years ago he used to picket the company's annual meeting in protest at their lack of action on HIV and Aids drugs, but in contrast now:

They are in the forefront of finding new solutions to illnesses such as diarrhea and pneumonia, investing in a malaria vaccine. But also, they're partnered with us in investing in new health workers to administer vaccines. (Cooper, 2012)

GELDOF AND THE REBRANDING OF POVERTY

As far back as 1977, Jorgen Lissner argued there was a destructive internal conflict in NGOs between fundraising and development with the activities of fundraising and education being conflictual and competitive (Lissner, 1997, cited in Lidchi, 2005).

But the seductive success of Live Aid's moneymaking—it raised \$150 million (Richey & Ponte, 2008)—opened aid agencies' eyes to the possibilities of television and other media being harnessed. And in the aftermath of Live Aid, Geldof was lauded by thinkers such as Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall, who opined that the cause of the developing world had become one of the major popular movements of its time, in contrast to a Thatcherite selfishness (Allen, 1986; Franks, 2013). Jacques and Hall (1986) saw its popularity as an attack on prevailing sensibilities and Geldof's achievement as a reinvention of Sixties' charitable activism using a combination of rock and politics. There was, they felt, a sea change in public mood.

But even in the early days that reading was disputed, most fervently by Robert Allen, who said that what Band Aid, Live Aid, and Sports Aid had created in contrast was “the first truly effective version of Consumer Aid” (Allen, 1986, p. 34).

He went on:

Consumer Aid is about a product, a packaged disaster, and a client, the individual consumer. The problems and answers of the Third World are only marginally about those

things. Central to the whole of Geldof's campaign was the idea of a sudden disaster and immediate action. This was reflected in the style of presentation, particularly of Bob Geldof himself. There was the frequent emphasis on the word 'now' and a very visual sense of urgency and crisis in the interviews and appeals. (1986, pp. 35–36)

For the aid agencies, however, Geldof's legacy was to cement the link between money and media interest. Pre-dating the much-disputed 'CNN effect', linking political action and media coverage, the connection between donations and disaster coverage seemed clear—for the 'lucky' disasters which caught a journalist or rock star's attention, the effect could be astonishing.

As the former UN Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, Jan Egeland, summed up not long after the 2004 tsunami, disaster victims are caught up in a 'kind of humanitarian sweepstake in which... every night 99 per cent of them lose, and one per cent win' (2005). The Red Cross's *World Disasters Report 2006* estimated that in the case of the tsunami, those affected received on average \$1,241 per survivor—50 times as much as the worst-funded crises in that year (Walter, 2006).

In 2007, Eisensee and Stromberg published a study that looked at the US government's response to 5,000 disasters that occurred between 1968 and 2002, claiming 63,000 lives and affecting nearly 125 million people. They deduced that decisions on who gets aid are driven by the intensity of media coverage of disasters. They found that if the first three stories in a news bulletin have 2.4 minutes spent on them—so if it is a busy news day like the Olympics or the Columbine shootings—then that decreases the likelihood a humanitarian disaster will get covered by four percentage points, and then the probability the disaster gets relief by three points (Eisensee & Stromberg, 2007, p. 708).

Like earlier studies, Eisensee and Stromberg found that the number killed or affected does not necessarily affect newsworthiness of stories but that the type of disaster has a direct effect on its 'newsworthiness'. As they put it:

For every person killed in a volcano disaster, 40,000 people must die in a drought to reach the same probability of media coverage. Similarly, it requires forty times as many killed in an African disaster to achieve the same expected media coverage age as for a disaster in Eastern Europe of similar type and magnitude. (2007, pp. 694–695)

But when the media does concentrate on such a disaster the results can be life changing. One example is that of the Niger food crisis of 2005. A combination of drought and locust swarms during 2004 had led to harvest failure in Niger, and by mid-2005, the World Food Programme was warning that 2.5 million people were on the brink of starvation. On 16 May 2005, the UN launched a \$16 million appeal. In contrast to the outpouring of money several months earlier for the South Asian tsunami, it was greeted with what Egeland called "near-deafening

silence” (Egeland, 2005). By 14 July only \$3.6 million had been raised. But then on 18 July, Hilary Andersson of the BBC started a series of reports on Niger for the *Ten O’Clock News* after her editor Kevin Bakhurst had spotted pictures of Niger when looking through Reuters footage to illustrate a Live 8 news package (Cooper, 2007). Within ten days, \$17 million had been committed.

Mamadou Tanja, Niger’s president, accused journalists of exaggerating the crisis (Aister, 2006). He was widely condemned—but the problem was many journalists who covered the problem had simplified the story so that it did not accurately reflect the situation. Niger did have food—but exporting it had caused prices to rocket. As the *Guardian*’s Jeevan Vasagar (2005) pointed out, there were markets full of food. The tone of many of the Niger pieces also caused disquiet within both agencies and the BBC—it was “the worst kind of ‘oh my god’ dying babies journalism” according to one senior correspondent (Cooper, 2007, p. 16).

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA—SMS TO SAVE A LIFE

But even as Andersson was reporting from Niger however, a change had already taken place. Television, while still the most influential, was no longer the sole player in the cash nexus. The use of social media, particularly after the 2004 tsunami, and the increasing professionalisation of aid agency press and marketing departments meant that aid agencies were increasingly looking to new ways to raise awareness—with new opportunities for consumerist approaches.

The change over the past four decades was neatly summed up in 2013 by Mitchell Hintz, an experienced NGO fundraiser for more than 20 years.

In the 70’s, fundraisers started “personalizing” NGO fundraising (Mr X, please be a sponsor and save a child). Then, in the 80’s, we tried to “commoditize” [sic] it (donate and get your free tote bag), in the 90’s we “experiential-ized” it (trek northern Cambodia and save a child), by the millennium 2000 we had “life-styled it” (buy now and 5% of your payment goes to charity) and now, finally, we are “digitizing” it (reply to this SMS and buy a meal for this child). (Hintz, 2013)

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw two key developments. First, as Hintz refers, the growth of multimedia platforms, in particular SMS and Twitter, meant that news coverage and fundraising could be much more easily intertwined. Second, there was a major push towards a consumerist outlook—far beyond the 1980s ‘tote bag’—in how aid agencies could sell a solution as an actual physical product—whether a PRODUCT (RED) phone, a stay in a Red Cross Hotel, or a Save the Children television programme.

In the late 1990s up to the millennium, Jubilee 2000, a campaign to write off the external debt of the world’s poorest countries, demonstrated how the potential

combination of the internet, celebrities, and diffuse structures could reach the public—and policy makers. The campaign—with its link to the new millennium and religious traditions—was, according to Jamie Drummond, its global strategist, a “re-branding” (Drummond, cited by Busby, 2009) of global poverty issues, in much the same way that Geldof had reconfigured the landscape in the 1980s. It paved the way for such movements as the ONE campaign, 2005’s Make Poverty History (and the 2013 Enough Food IF campaign, sometimes referred to as ‘Make Poverty History 2’).

These campaigns were not asking for donations—ONE’s slogan was explicit, “We’re not asking for your money; we are asking for your voice”—they wanted people to sign up, usually electronically.

It is worth noting, however, that NGOs commonly have a policy called ‘conversion’—that is changing those who are willing to sign up for a cause with their email address to giving money regularly. It becomes a grey area. As one NGO fundraiser puts it:

There wasn’t a donation request for those events/campaigns but charities did get people’s data. This meant they could contact them at a later stage and ask for a direct money pledge. The fundraising value lies in getting the data and ‘upgrading’ the ask to a cash donation or setting up a direct debit. (personal communication, 2014)

The game changer of the 2000s, however, was the growth of text messaging to make donations. In the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake the American Red Cross alone received \$21 million in text donations in just over a week—compared with \$4 million raised by SMS by all US charities in 2009 (Gross, 2010).

The advantage of text fundraising was that it was immediate—and so those moved by the sight of an emotive advert or news story could donate before the feeling receded. It was also simple—it relied on punching in a short code, and then usually a word—HAITI in the 2010 earthquake, or in UNICEF’s more recent Syria appeal BLANKET, and a specific amount is suggested. (In UNICEF’s case the charity said that for £3, donors could help buy a blanket for a Syrian child.) And there was no need to plug in credit card information; the amount was simply added to your next phone bill.

Research carried out by the Pew Center (Smith, 2012) into those who donated via text to the Haitian earthquake appeal found that donors tended to be spur-of-the-moment givers, many of whom had not given via phone before and twice as likely to be Twitter users as the general population. It is interesting that more than half went on to donate to other disasters—such as the Great East Japan Earthquake or the BP oil spill—as a result.

This was reflected in the UK by a report by the regulator of premium phone services, which said it saw text donations double in 2012, with one in four 18–34-year-olds having donated by text; the regulator concluded it was a “real growth opportunity for charities” (Warman, 2012).

Added to that, it is far quicker to react to moving stories than traditional media space buying. As one iNGO fundraiser puts it:

For one food crisis we knew that [our chief exec] was going to be on BBC radio and news, and we knew what time s/he was going to be on, and we said, right, we have an SMS broadcast that we've agreed, time it for this time, because we know s/he will be on—how powerful would that be if you see the CEO of a charity on, and then you get the text, asking you to donate? (personal communication, London, 2013)

THE CORPORATISATION OF CARING

If phones were an integral part of the consumer lifestyle, they were not the only objects deployed. So, for example, Make Poverty History was not just about the sign-up and attending the rally—it was about the white rubber/fabric wristband, sold for £1 each, of which 70 per cent went to organisations such as Oxfam and Christian Aid. (The perils of such a visible consumer object came to light when it was revealed that some of the bands had been made in Chinese factories, which violated the Ethical Trading Initiative [McCormack, 2005].)

These wristbands—also used in the IF campaign—were fairly low-key however compared to the 2006 launch of PRODUCT (RED), a project dreamed up by Bono and Bobby Shriver of ONE. The pair sought to engage the private sector to raise money for HIV/AIDS in Africa by licensing a brand to partner companies such as Nike, American Express, and Apple—the idea as Richey and Ponte put it of “doing good by dressing well” (2008, p. 712). In return for the opportunity to increase revenue through the PRODUCT (RED) license, a percentage of the profit gained by each partner was donated to the Global Fund to Fight Aids, TB and Malaria—ranging from 1 per cent to 50 per cent of profits. But again there was controversy over connections with brands like Gap who had previously faced criticism for their labour standards. As Richey and Ponte elaborate further:

Product RED, in its positive spin, masks the social and environmental relations of trade and production that underpin poverty, inequality and disease. This process, also known as ‘commodity fetishism’ (the term was first used by Marx), is not new per se in capitalist relations. What is new in the context of Product RED is its employment by celebrities in connecting consumption and aid. (2008, p. 722)

The profits from RED were only a tiny amount compared to the amount governments gave the Fund or foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Despite some disquiet, the success of RED was noted by mainstream aid organisations. As Neal Keny-Guyer of Mercy Corps based in the US commented, NGOs were constantly looking for new and innovative approaches to raising funds.

There's a real use of new business models on the fundraising side—we try to strike interesting partnerships with different companies that longer term revenue stream associated with it, whether it's through Affinity credit card or Affinity advertising or sponsorship on American Idol. We just did one with Warner Brothers and Save the Children International and International Rescue Committee around the We Can Be Heroes action figures to raise awareness around the Horn of Africa. (Cooper, 2012, July)

In the UK, one of the most innovative agencies but one which has also faced criticism because of its corporate links, was Save the Children which saw its turnover grow from £140m to £300m in the space of five years according to its chief executive Justin Forsyth (personal communication, 2012). Its No Child Born to Die campaign was named slogan of the year at the 2011 AdSlogans Awards (Campaign, 2011a) and Grand Prix winner at the ThinkBox Planning Awards (Marketing, 2012). A key part of that campaign was the link up with ITV and the 2011 *Born to Shine* TV show, which raised more than £2.1 million for the charity. The six-week series involved children with exceptional talents attempting to teach celebrities a new skill. It culminated with the comedian Jason Manford being crowned the winner. The reviews for the programme were not particularly flattering, and some questioned the ethics of the approach. As Kevin O'Sullivan of the *Mirror* wrote:

We're all for raising money for worthy causes. But unless every single last penny of the profits—including the channel's vast advertising—revenue—goes to charity it smacks of a cynical ruse. Watch this show or African kids will die. (O'Sullivan, 2011)

Meanwhile the blogger Charity Celebrity questioned whether ITV was pushing the boundaries of Section 9 of the broadcasting code, which rules that charity appeals should benefit a range of charities by featuring Save the Children so heavily (Charity Celebrity, 2011).

More serious was the controversy around Save's close relationship with several corporates. A linkup between Save and GlaxoSmithKline was announced in 2013 worth £15 million, of which £1 million was to be raised by GSK employees themselves (Boseley, 2013a). During a five-year project it was said that the drugs behemoth will train new healthcare workers to vaccinate babies and give essential medicines to children as well as reformulate some of its existing products. But as Boseley puts it: "It raises questions about Big Pharma and about the future direction of NGOs and development as a whole. And it has left a number of people working in aid feeling very uncomfortable" (2013b).

The concerns Boseley raises are whether GSK would lower its prices of HIV drugs or whether this was a Corporate Social Responsibility stunt. These questions were exacerbated by a BBC *Panorama* programme in December 2013 which raised questions about Save's earlier sponsorship deal with British Gas. A former head of news at Save the Children alleged he had been asked to spike a press

release condemning price rises (Nutt, 2013) and *Panorama* also alleged that Save the Children had avoided criticism of EDF when it was in consideration for a partnership with the energy company (Milmo, 2013).

Save the Children issued a detailed rebuttal of the claims and categorically denied pulling a campaign on fuel poverty in order to win the EDF staff charity funding (“Our Rebuttal,” 2013). But as Matthew Sherrington for Third Sector alleges, many charity workers attacking *Panorama* for raising the issue, missed the point.

Corporate partnerships are often where values, money and the question of independence come crashing together. Can you take the shilling without compromising your integrity, independence and campaigning voice? You might think so and be confident of that, as Save the Children was, but is that how it will be seen? (2013)

CONCLUSION

It is the perception of the NGOs’ relationships with money that has proved key, the confusion of philanthropy and commercialisation. Criticism has grown over the past decade after the problems exposed spending the South Asian tsunami money, when many journalists uncovered waste and underspending for the traditional ‘anniversary’ articles (“Post-tsunami Chaos Wastes Aid,” 2005; Jones, 2006; Callick, 2010), and recent coverage concerning six-figure chief executive salaries (Hope, 2013; Jennings, 2013; Seamark, 2014).

The aid agencies have found themselves caught in an uncomfortable dilemma as a result: by emphasising their new professionalism (the need to recruit the best staff—and pay them well; their new global status to help people as effectively as possible), they inevitably clash with the traditional fundraising and media images they have clung on to which emphasise the individual donation can make a difference (a blanket for £3 or a wristband to show support for a cause) or that a personal connection between a donor and beneficiary (e.g., via sponsorship). A better solution might be to acknowledge this disconnect.

Even the use of celebrity (with inevitable tears as s/he experiences the developing world for the first time) often uses consciously or otherwise a Geldofian framing: rock stars taking action because of being sufficiently moved by a news story, when in reality major aid agencies all now have ‘celebrity fixers’—jobs within their PR or media offices specifically tasked to sign up celebrities to their cause.

Which brings us back to the case of Elizabeth McGovern and the World Vision UK donation to her rock band. This was revealed in an excruciating *Daily Telegraph* interview in which a badly briefed (or ignorant) McGovern confused Darfur and Dakar, appeared to be unclear that WVUK is a faith-based organisation and suggested that “in Africa people have sex more freely than we do back home” (Wallis Simons, 2013).

Not that the McGovern deal was unique: World Vision later revealed that it was paying £106,900 in total to ‘artist ambassadors’ in the year finishing September 2014, describing it as a “good investment” and “cost-effective” marketing (Rawstrone, 2014).

When *Third Sector* magazine asked celebrities’ agents and charities whether celebrities would be paid to be ambassadors for charities, the vast majority of charities said they would not—although curiously the Agents Association and the Big Talent Group said that they would expect celebrities to be paid if they are used as ‘marketing tools’ (Rawstrone, 2014). What is particularly interesting is the explanation McGovern gives for accepting World Vision money in the *Telegraph* article.

World Vision has paid her band £28,000 to fund the recording of their latest album and a UK tour, in return for which they have agreed to promote the charity. Without this money, McGovern says, her band would “never survive”. (Wallis Simons, 2013)

As Geldof once said, “Give us the money NOW.... F*** the address, give us the phone, here’s the number”.... But who is the money for now?

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