

Civil Society Organizations and Traditional Media: Synergy Instead of Confrontation

Many people consider the traditional print and broadcast media to be part of the civil society or third sector.¹ Even though most media outlets (with the exception of public broadcasting or state media) are private businesses, they are generally considered an important public service that both mirror and influence society. For this reason, journalists are expected not only to contribute to the profitability of a media outlet, but also to act ethically as responsible and accurate sources of information. Like watchdog civil society organizations (CSOs), media may work to hold government accountable. It is these civic attributes of media outlets that separate them from other businesses in the private sector and lead to their frequent inclusion in definitions of the civic sector.

Media outlets, however, also differ substantially from CSOs. If CSOs tend to adopt a mission informed by its members' interests, most media outlets go to great lengths to stress their objectivity and independence from special interests.² Furthermore, the business aspect of media outlets makes them entrepreneurial in ways that CSOs typically are not. While CSOs may champion issues critical to the public good regardless of their popularity, media outlets report on stories that interest their audiences regardless of the report's effect on the public good. In many countries, media also avoid controversial stories because reporting on them can lead to their closure, even if ignoring such stories may be detrimental to society from a civil society perspective.³

CSO and Media Misperceptions

Both CSOs and media tend to harbor certain doubts or stereotypes about one another. A first step toward establishing a mutually beneficial relationship is identifying and resolving these misperceptions.

Common grievances leveled by CSOs against media include:

- Distorting information and use insensitive language;
- lacking familiarity with the mission, issues and expertise of CSOs;
- Wanting to exploit “sexy” stories and create scandals;
- Damaging victims through insensitive reporting about rape, assault, abuse, etc.;
- Not making it easy to identify and contact the right person in their organization; and
- Only wanting to make money.

Common grievances leveled by media against CSOs include:

- Not treating journalists as individuals;
- Not knowing the journalist's beat (what he or she covers) and interests;
- Being unprepared to provide clear, concise information when they contact journalists;
- Lacking a sense of what is newsworthy and trying to use journalists to promote their organizations;
- If involved in advocacy, not articulating goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound;
- Not facilitating direct access to individual beneficiaries/victims—instead they provide printed handouts;
- Not respecting media deadlines; and
- Not having a focal person in the organization as a link to the media.

Educating CSOs and media outlets about each other can be done in many ways, but the best approaches include involving both actors in seminars and projects that benefit both and cultivate a sustainable relationship.

Finding Mutual Interests

The similarities and differences between media outlets and CSOs as well as their mutual misperceptions have created an ambiguous relationship between these two critical players in civil society. On the one hand, media and CSOs stand to gain much from working together. CSO representatives can serve as authoritative commentators and experts for news stories, and media outlets can offer CSOs a means to convey their messages to a wider population. On the other hand, there are many obstacles to establishing such synergy between these two civic actors.⁴ Media outlets may see CSOs as a non-controversial source of stories about corruption, especially in countries where CSOs are dependent upon foreign funding and are under popular suspicion with regard to their motivations. CSOs often think that because they are working for the good of society, media will cover them. As a result, organizations are often unprepared to tell their stories to media or to provide context, insight and expert commentary on their issues. Instead of mutually beneficial synergies, the interaction between CSOs and media often results in confrontation.

Whether working to assist a fledgling media sector, develop an emergent CSO community or promote a reform agenda in any sector, addressing the relationship between media and CSOs can be beneficial.

CSO activities can provide media outlets with opportunities to make abstract issues concrete and newsworthy, and CSO staff can offer expert opinions on pressing policy matters. Media outlets can offer CSOs an expansive vehicle for public outreach and can help transform isolated CSO advocacy efforts into a popular movement that engages citizens from all walks of life. Finally, marrying media and CSOs in projects promoting critical reform agendas

can bring together public education, service provision and advocacy holistically.

Building Mutual Understanding

Facilitating such a marriage, however, requires careful planning that is informed by an understanding of the environments in which both media and CSOs work. First and foremost, offer CSOs and media outlets the chance to recognize each other's role in society and the limitations that each confronts in fulfilling that role. Allow CSOs to realize that many media outlets in the developing world are under incredible financial pressure, and therefore unable to afford to give away time or space for public service announcements (PSAs) or cover events just because a CSO works on behalf of a good cause. For a media outlet to want to cover an event or consult a CSO, it must see the organization as a credible source of worthwhile information that appeals to its audience. At the same time, offer media outlets the opportunity to appreciate that CSOs are not merely sources of grant money to pay for PSAs, programs or articles. CSOs frequently operate on limited budgets, and even if organizations have grant money for a given project at one time, it does not mean that this will always be the case.

Educating CSOs and media outlets together on the roles and restrictions that each has in society, however, is not enough to facilitate real synergy. Mechanisms for establishing shared work must also be considered. This can be accomplished in several ways, but two are critical: including CSOs and media in collaborative projects that benefit both equally, and facilitating a sustained working relationship between CSO and media professionals.

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Donor's Role: Facilitating Collaboration

To cultivate meaningful relationships, donors should carefully craft projects to foster collaboration between CSOs and media outlets. That means more than paying for airtime to broadcast PSAs or for space to place articles or adverts. It means finding ways to provide assistance to the media outlets and CSOs that benefits both parties and cultivates a sustainable relationship.

To achieve synergy, donors should promote a balanced equation with CSO representatives responsible for providing reliable technical information about the issues they know best on one side and media professionals responsible for the information's presentation on the other. Donors may facilitate this by:

- Providing equipment to journalists and/or media outlets. This does not set a "pay-to-play" precedent in the same way that buying airtime and newsprint space does, and it helps the media develop by updating necessary equipment.
- Working with the media outlet to produce the PSA that it will air or place on the CSO's behalf. The CSO should play a key role in assuring that the message is on target.
- Funding news magazines (broadcast or print) or other efforts to encourage CSO-media collaboration. Assistance should be provided to both partners to allow them to create the best product by respecting each other's professional strengths.

Media Relations Is a Two-Way Street

It takes regular interaction between CSOs and media to forge and sustain synergy. When there is synergy, media looks to CSO representatives as trusted sources, expert commentators, interviewees and talk show participants, while CSOs look to media to help spread their core messages.

To facilitate such a relationship, media outlets must understand how to use external experts in their reporting and how this improves the quality and appeal of their news product. Even more importantly, however, CSOs must learn how to feed the media the right information in the right format. In other words, CSOs must learn the art of successful media relations.

Establishing Professional Relationships with Media

Though technical assistance can build a CSO's media relations capacity, the organization must first understand the substantial benefits such outreach can bring and make an ongoing commitment to integrate communication outreach into its overall workplan and strategies.

As with any private sector company, CSOs must become adept at providing useful products (i.e., newsworthy information in the form of press releases, fact sheets or other materials on key issues) to their consumers (journalists) in ways that are appropriate to the medium (print, radio, TV).

To start, CSOs should study the environment in which media outlets work as well as the stories and topics being covered and by whom. This information gathering also will help CSOs target the media outlets that reach the constituencies they seek to influence. Then, CSOs should think about ways to relate their work to those topics and to the areas of interest or beats of those journalists. Staff may brainstorm a list of possible articles about the organization's work, its impact on people and on the community.

Every organization, every leader, every issue has a story. For example, if a CSO is pushing national legislation that recognizes human trafficking as a serious crime worthy of prosecution, then it likely has stories of victims that will make the issue come to life.

New technologies are dismantling the old ways of gathering and disseminating news and information. This changing media landscape offers CSOs both new opportunities and new challenges.

Case Study

Creating a space for joint learning and collaborative work

A workshop held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in December 2005 brought together media and CSOs from India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The 26 participants not only acquired skills regarding effectively "packaging" or "reporting" about issues of equity and gender for print, electronic and visual media, but also forged closer ties across the South Asia region. "This is the first workshop that I have attended where the media and the NGOs are sitting together trying to understand each other's points of view and the everyday challenges they face," said a TV journalist from Pakistan. An NGO participant stated that, "This was a one-of-a-kind workshop where NGOs and media came together, critically yet positively and gave tips and feedback to each other." The workshop proved to be successful at many levels. The effective transfer of knowledge and skills was visible in the active participation of both NGOs and journalists and in action-specific and concrete follow-up plans. As demonstrated through networking and deliberations outside the formal training and e-mail exchanges following the workshop, new bonds were created among the participants. Some of the stories and articles "committed to" by the participants were published soon thereafter in local countries and regional papers.

New Media and NGOS

While synergies between CSOs and traditional print and broadcast media outlets have been and remain relevant, the media terrain has changed rapidly in the last decade due to the growth of mobile media channels and new approaches to journal-

ism. These new technologies are dismantling the old ways of gathering and disseminating news and information. This changing media landscape offers CSOs and funders both new opportunities and new challenges.

References

- ¹ For the purposes of this *Tips* paper, media refers to those traditional print and broadcast mass communication vehicles or outlets that disseminate news and information (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio, TV), and their staff (e.g., journalists, editors, producers).
- ² There are exceptions to this rule. State media outlets tend to have blatant pro-state biases since they are intended to serve as a speaker for the state. Similarly, in many parts of the world, media outlets are controlled by political parties and openly promote the agenda of their parties.
- ³ While NGOs can also face state pressure to avoid controversial issues, it is easier for the state to close a media outlet since media depends upon resources often controlled by the state such as television or radio airwaves and printing presses.
- ⁴ According to *Wikipedia*, "synergy" (from the Greek *syn-ergos*, *συνεργός* meaning working together) is the term used to describe a situation where different entities cooperate advantageously for a final outcome. Simply defined, it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The essence of synergy is to value differences. For more information, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lurker>. Accessed June 2009.

For more information:

This NGO Tips brief is available online at www.NGOConnect.NET. This dynamic and interactive site is dedicated to connecting and strengthening non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and support organizations worldwide.

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