

## Talk to the Bevan Foundation

July 14, 2009

THERE is a general assumption that poverty is hardly reported – if at all – in the media. This is not the case. It is reported, but perhaps it is not the treatment that anti-poverty campaigners would prefer.

A good recent example of this was the Shannon Matthews case. Shannon, if you remember, was the subject of a kidnap investigation that occurred in the wake of huge public sympathy for the family of missing Madeleine McCann. Subsequently, Shannon's mother, Karen, was jailed for her part in the deception. There was much media interest on Karen's social circumstances, particularly the mothering of her children and the way in which they were raised.

You may have felt that there was much finger pointing, a touch of the Vaudevillian circus freak about the way she was portrayed. However, there was some thoughtful coverage of the case at the time, not least from BBC's *Panorama* programme, which was brave enough to look into the family and pose far-searching questions about the benefits culture we have in this country.

News gatherers aim for objectivity, but they are simply making judgements on what they perceive to be the subjective interests of their audience. As such, any organisation that is pressing a cause will often have reason to complain. But put yourself in a news editor's boots. The biggest story of our time at present is the recession (notwithstanding expenses payments in Parliament). If you understand what interests editors have when they are putting together their newslists and schedules for the day, you can find more effective ways of publicising your concerns.

It's worth dwelling on the effects the recession is having on the media, and the newspaper industry in particular. For years, newspaper owners have indulged in asset stripping in the pursuit of increased returns. It now finds itself in tough times, having to deal with the advance of online content, without the means or the preparation for dealing with either. Instead, it is left to manage decline.

Because of reduced manpower (and perhaps diminished investment in training) reporters have increasingly come to rely upon companies, organisations and bodies for help in completing their work, and case studies have become an incredibly important facet of newsgathering. It allows for empathetic understanding on the part of the reader – what the media calls “like us”. What you may call: “There, but for grace of God, go I”.

Even as newspapers close and more people switch their news habits to online, case studies are unlikely to go. In truth, we don’t know what kind of media we’re likely to get from the internet. It’s too early in the day. We can safely assume that the BBC will continue to produce news in the way it has always done. But what about stories – yes, there is a difference – and what about analysis?

At present, most analysis on the internet comes in the form of blogging. Given the peer-to-peer freedom that online access has given us all, it’s perhaps no surprise that a lot of it is inaccurate and biased. There is talk of the rise of citizen journalism, but that’s rather like citizen firemen. Sure, they might put the fire out, and then they might not. But they certainly won’t be rescuing the family albums and the cat.

Blogs open and close faster than coffee shops, and it seems pretty safe to assume that some kind of Darwinian principle will come into play, but perhaps not for a few years as reader habits form. It is my firm belief that anyone who uses the internet to relate news or opinion must be made aware of the consequences of what they do. There are potentially serious repercussions that rise out of inaccuracy or a disregard for the process of law. You’ll find plenty of places online where those responsible for the death of Baby P were named some time before partial identification was allowed. No doubt those people who passed it on thought the perpetrators deserved to be named and shamed. Yet no thought was given to the real purpose of the initial ruling, which was to protect any brothers and sisters of Baby P.

So, as an old media begins to wither and die and a new one rises unsteadily in its place, where does that leave organisations and causes that see media coverage as a cornerstone of their communications? As much in the hands of the fates as for

those people in the industry. But there are ways in which they can improve what they do, in order increase public awareness through the media:

- Streamline the approval process. Too many quotes spend far too long with directors that are the only people that can sign them off and have other things to do in their day;
- Devolve more power to out-facing communications staff. You've employed them as experts – they should be able to make snap decisions that are in the best interests of their organisation. Remember – news of a good contact (for which, read quick response) will go around a newspaper office faster than the story itself;
- Make sure you have plenty of willing case studies, with full contact details that are regularly updated. Ensure they are trained, and understand exactly what it is that they are there to comment on;
- Be alive to the use of new media. Blogs and Twitter are confessional in nature. Many interesting stories start in this way. Stay ahead, and control the output. If you don't have the experience in this field, call it in;
- Take the employment of out-facing communications staff very seriously. You need people that are able to think laterally, immediately, and have experience of dealing with difficult issues, such as criticising a government that has funded your organisation. A good communications officer that can bite the hand that feeds it – even if it is a little nibble – is unlikely to walk straight out of university.

At the end of the day, it is far easier to improve your own communications efforts than it is to expect the media to change. For too long, many organisations have been hamstrung by the fear of consequences, but there really is no consequence save those for the good if your message is conveyed accurately. All it takes is a real commitment to communication.