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News media and NGOs: A study of journalists' attitudes to  
campaigning organisations as a news source

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**ABSTRACT**

New opportunities for NGOs have emerged from today's media landscape. At the same time traditional news media are experiencing a decline in resources, leading to increased usage of ready-made material from other organisations. This study aims to assess journalists' attitudes toward NGOs as a source of news and what might influence this. This was assessed through both quantitative and qualitative analysis in the form of a survey and in-depth interviews with journalists. The interviews concerned the reporting of the arrests of Greenpeace's 'Arctic 30'. Results showed that journalists had an idealised view of best practice when using material from NGOs which was challenged by what they do in practice, because of a lack of time, access and resources. To some extent journalists trusted NGOs more than the public and private sector, and in some cases attitudes were influenced by an inclination to support campaigns. It also indicated that news media was to some extent dependent on the NGOs, suggesting a power shift between the two.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The media environment, as well as how journalism is being practiced, has undergone great changes in recent years. As Fenton (2009) argues, ongoing technological, economic and social change are all

factors reconfiguring news journalism in an ever changing media landscape. Interrogating the nature of news journalism is therefore one of the most urgent tasks we face in defining what is in the public interest.

The arrests of Greenpeace's 'Arctic 30' in September 2013 after a protest against oil drilling in the Arctic was followed by a campaign which resulted in more than 1.1 million emails sent to Russian authorities demanding the release of the activists. This paper, which is partly based on a case study of the reporting of these arrests, will discuss journalists' attitudes towards NGOs as a news source.

One of the players in this new media landscape is the NGO, which in the last two decades has seen 'an exponential growth worldwide' (Fenton, 2009). These organisations have a greatly enhanced role in society, resulting in increasing competition amongst themselves to gain media attention. Consequently, the fundraising and campaigning roles of their press offices have gained in importance. Many, though not all, NGOs have charitable status. There are 180,000 registered charities in England and Wales today. Since 1999 the number of large charities (whose annual income is above £10 million) has grown from 307 to 1005 (327%) (UK Charity Commission). As a result of this expansion, these organisations are now more professional than before, and many form an important part of global networks. They intervene in both local and international politics and have the power to influence policy makers through their campaigns. With a new role as key players in concerns such as human rights and environmentalism, their credibility has increased and the media are more likely to perceive them as newsworthy (Fenton, 2009:244).

In accordance with Fenton, the environmental NGO Greenpeace (part of which is a registered charity) has, since starting out in 1971, become a major multinational organisation. As Dale (1996) argues, ‘While Greenpeace used to be a pair of bell-bottomed blue jeans, today it is more like a three-piece pinstripe suit’ (Dale, 1996:1-10). Already by 1996, they could be considered no less professional than for-profit organisations with both ethical and financial agendas, an observation supported more recently by Einstein (2012), who argued that ‘many NGOs are taking traditionally corporate measures to legitimise their presence by commercialising their messages and building brand recognition’.

The new media landscape has opened up new possibilities for all organisations to communicate with the public via social media and self published material online, including news sections. In line with commercial companies’ increased media presence worldwide, an increasing number of NGOs now also have their own websites, many of which include a news section. NGOs and news media do not focus on the same ‘filters’ when finding news content. NGOs’ news are not merely ‘newsworthy’ events; instead, they are the most deserving cases, according to their organisation’s opinion of what needs urgent help (Cohen, 2001:184). In other words, an NGO’s media and content producers work towards raising awareness of their cause and promoting action. This arguably contrasts with how traditional news media and their journalists perceive their role in society.

This newly acquired role for NGOs in the new media environment highlights a need to study how journalists perceive them as a news source. It is important to understand whether they are able to influence news content, and if so, how much. This is emphasised by the fact that alongside this surge in

NGOs, traditional media have experienced a decrease in resources in the last two decades (Davies 2009:63). This study will attempt to shed light on journalists' attitudes towards NGOs as a news source from the point of view of journalists. I will argue that their approach to working with NGOs is influenced by this new media landscape as well as by personal opinions and attitudes.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section provides a critical review of the literature on the research topic of how journalists relate to publicity material from NGOs, and to some extent private companies and the public sector as it is arguably intertwined. It will be followed by a discussion of the conceptual framework that was applied to the qualitative and quantitative analysis of this study, including the key research questions it will aim to provide answers to.

De Jong (2005) argues that although the majority of our information and knowledge about activism is mediated through mainstream or alternative media, much academic work on activism, 'largely ignores the relationships between activism and media' (De Jong, 2005:3).

Extensive research has been carried out on how activists and campaigners within NGOs use social media to advocate their cause. One of these studies (Seo 2009) showed an increased usage of new media by NGOs, such as online blogs and social media outlets. However, while new media is increasing in importance when communicating with the public, the NGOs' most important goal using it was to communicate with journalists (Seo, 2009:125). Therefore, as the authors suggest, although new media

provides a significant change, it can be argued that NGOs' public relations activities as a whole still put more emphasis on media relations than on interacting with the public.

Similar research has demonstrated how in zones of war, conflict or disaster, social media posts, citizen journalism and reporting from NGOs is increasingly used by the mainstream media (Sambrook, 2010). This study will therefore not assess new media or social media usage as such. However, social media or citizen journalism aside, these areas are also an example of where NGOs often have access to sources either exclusively throughout the course of event, or at an initial stage, until journalists get to the location. Sambrook (2010) discusses this phenomenon arguing that foreign news gathering is undergoing rapid changes, in which the reporter is increasingly removed from being the eye-witness of news events.

This paper will assess attitudes to NGOs as a source of information when gathering news, including working with material such as press releases, images, video and quotes. A wide range of literature exists on the influence of public relations and NGOs on the media, although few explore the journalists' own attitudes and approaches. Instead, existing studies are largely based on content analysis of their coverage.

## **Existing Literature**

### *A changing media landscape*

The relationship between the third sector and journalists has undergone drastic change since the rise of internet technology, as argued by Burrell (2012). The business model for traditional media has been undermined in recent years, leading to the realisation amongst NGOs that this has provided opportunities for publishing their own media content online. This is done via their own websites or social media outlets. For example, Greenpeace International has over 1 million followers on Twitter (as of May 2014). This change is so significant that it has resulted in the launch of a new MA course in Campaigning *and* Journalism at Brunel University.

Nick Davies (2009) describes a world of journalism in which newsrooms are increasingly becoming ‘news factories’. As one of his case studies showed, a modern reporter can produce 48 stories in a week. In the run-up to writing these stories the reporter interviewed had spoken to 26 people. Four of those conversations were made face to face during the three hours he had spent out of office, out of a total of 45.5 working hours. Davies argues that this is ‘churnalism’, which has, since his book went to print, become a widely used term for describing journalists who ‘churn’ out ready-made material gathered from various online sources, including PR, social media and campaigns. Davies argues that no reporter who speaks to only 26 people while producing 48 articles can possibly be verifying them (2008:59).

### *Public relations or news?*

Numerous studies have focused on assessing the amount of PR content that ends up in the news. An extensive study by Cardiff University (Franklin et al., 2006) found that the independence of British

journalism is in decline. The authors argue that the activities of PR professionals have the power to shape news content. This is increasingly acknowledged by journalists, academics and PR professionals today. With the increasing time pressure journalists face, questions are raised about the impact on the quality of the news they produce.

A content analysis of domestic news coverage in the study showed that UK quality media was heavily dependent on what the authors referred to as ‘pre-packaged news’, with 60% of press articles and 34% of broadcast stories coming wholly or mainly from either news wires or PR material (Franklin et al., 2006:22). The same study showed that for-profit PR material was more than three times more successful at reaching the news than that coming from NGOs. Although less frequently used than that of the for-profit sector, NGO’s PR material still made it into 11% of press articles and 8% of broadcast news. PR material aside, NGOs were a frequently cited source in the news analysed in the study: 13% of stories had quotes from NGOs, compared to 17% from business. This draws further attention to the importance of these groups as a source for journalists. Franklin et al.’s study, like a number of others, unpacks the impact of public relations as a whole (Franklin et al., 2006:24). Singling out NGOs as a news source would arguably enhance the analysis of those studies.

### *A changing third sector*

The concept of fourth estate journalism, meaning that journalists strive to uncover truths and hold governments to account, was challenged by Chomsky’s (1989) argument that other factors play an increasingly important role in deciding what ends up in the news. His argument that the independent

media is a myth states that the developed world's media is controlled by, and serves the interests of, the state and commercial companies. Although controversial, his argument presents a conflict between the individual journalist's striving for professionalism and independence on the one hand, and the power of their paymasters and their dependency on audience and capital on the other, which ultimately decides what goes in the news (Chomsky, 1989).

In addition, as Strom (2011) argues, a new sector is emerging, sometimes referred to as social enterprises, meaning for-profit organisations which work for *a good cause* and claim to put social goals ahead of profit. This stresses the need for laws to be reviewed to bridge the divide between for-profit and not-for-profit organisations (Strom 2011). This indicates that the lines between business, NGOs, and media are growing ever more blurred.

### *Activism in the media*

All this is not to say that NGOs' media relations have not been studied in the past. As Dale (1996) argues, Greenpeace is a 'survivor' which has managed to renew itself and grow with a changing world. A quarter of a century after its establishment, Dale described it as a 'hard headed' cosmopolitan organisation with the power to influence on a global scale, without losing its original environmental idealism (Dale, 1996:65). Media's power has always been of the utmost importance for activists and campaigners. Cottle and Lester (2011) argue that campaigners and activists employ increasingly innovative usage of media and communications within their campaigns.

This paper does not aim to assess the implications of inaccurate, biased or advocacy reporting. However, some discussion of its impact is necessary to give context and understanding to the topic. Some environmental pressure groups have become increasingly important in setting the political agenda and advanced in obtaining media coverage. Anderson's case studies (2003:119) explore, from the perspective of the activists, how these powerful organisations work with the media. Greenpeace's occupation of the Brent Spar oil platform and its media coverage in 1995 figures as an example. A Flemish study showed that the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières contributed significantly to shaping the agenda of Flemish newspapers between 1995 and 2010. Researchers studied how press releases were directly adopted in news coverage by the journalists using content analysis (Van Leuven et al., 2013). The study does not include the journalists' perception of the relationship. A similar topic was explored in a Chinese journal (Fanxu, 2006). It studied the media strategies of NGOs, using Greenpeace's media campaign against deforestation in China as a case study. The study assessed Greenpeace's successful use of PR to raise both public and political awareness of their campaign, using carefully structured framing and communications strategies. (Fanxu, 2006).

Anderson (2003) argues that international environmental pressure groups have significant resources and are increasingly operating in a similar way to multinational corporations. Studies have shown that they employ skilled public relations personnel who use radical campaign tactics to gain coverage. Therefore, argues Anderson, although the news coverage is not always on the organisations' own terms, it is important to study the relationship between media and non-governmental public relations to gain a greater understanding of the process during which news is produced (Anderson 2003:120,131).

Although the voluntary sector has grown exponentially in the last 40 years, research has shown that the way media treats the third sector is based on a somewhat antiquated impression (Deacon 2003).

This development prompts the question: How do journalists approach these organisations when using them as a news source? And how do they know who to trust and when to verify their reports? Atton (2011) further unpack the relationship between journalists and their sources, with particular focus on the question of ‘who gets to speak through the news?’ Research into the differences between so-called ‘indymedia’, often produced by activists within NGOs, and professional media, shows that indymedia’s grassroots eyewitness reporting adds a new dimension to online journalism. This research was mainly focused on the activists’ news gathering, rather than journalists’ attitude and approach when using activists’ material (Atton, 2011).

A case-study (Garcia, 2011) of a conflict between the oil company BP and Greenpeace, particularly focusing on the 2010 Deep Water Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, showed that most UK and US newspapers had covered Greenpeace in a more favourable light than BP, and Greenpeace was framed as being more credible (Garcia, 2011:75).

A survey of the public’s perception of Greenpeace (Sievers, 2013:22) showed that the media audience’s first associations with Greenpeace ranged from ‘fighting against big companies’ and ‘annoying and aggressive’ to ‘peace and nature’ and ‘saving the planet’. It found that most people were rarely in contact with Greenpeace personally, highlighting the importance of the way the media communicates these NGOs’ messages (Sievers, 2013:22).

Olesen (2008) found both differences and similarities between investigative journalism and activism when studying cases of public debate in Denmark regarding the export of dangerous pesticides to developing countries. This supports the argument that the lines between activism and journalism are being blurred and raises the question: who is a journalist and who is an activist? (Olesen, 2008:245-263)

### **Research questions**

The rise of the third sector and its increased involvement in sourcing news content has the potential to influence the political agenda. Simultaneously, studies report on a new, ever-changing, media landscape in which journalists are under pressure to produce more content faster, using fewer resources with less time spent talking to the subjects and investigating. Arguably, given that research has shown how this results in an increasing inclination among journalists to use ready-made material from public relations departments of the private and public sector, there is also a need to study the journalist's approach when working with NGOs.

Existing literature of NGO's influence on the media is largely written from a public relations point of view. Some have focused on the journalists, but using content analysis. Few of the recent studies reviewed in preparation for this research focused on the journalist's attitudes and approach when working with NGOs. With that in mind, and given that some of the above studies are more than five years old, yet repeatedly refer to 'an ever-changing media landscape' in which new technology keeps

being adopted into journalistic practice, more research is needed to help gain understanding of what shapes the news.

Reviewing the existing literature of this research topic left me with the following questions:

Do journalists find NGOs more trustworthy as a news source than for-profit companies and the public sector? And to what extent do they perceive it to be necessary to verify material coming from them?

These questions raise other questions: What influences their decisions and approaches when working with these organisations? In addition to answering these questions and to help understand journalists' attitudes towards NGOs, this paper will also discuss journalists' opinions on where to draw the line between *activism* and *journalism*.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY**

The following section will describe the methodology used for this research. It will be followed by a terminology.

#### **Methodology**

##### *Case study*

The aim of this case study is to shed light on how journalists approach NGOs. Greenpeace was chosen because it is a well-known multinational environmental organisation. It was done using a qualitative approach by in-depth interviews of four journalists who covered the first three weeks of the events surrounding the arrest of the activists in September 2013. It focused on the question of verification and trust in Greenpeace as an organisation compared to the private sector (in this case Gazprom) and the public sector (in this case the Russian government). I also explored what might influence the decision making process.

Each recording was then transcribed and reviewed. The advantage with interviews is that they are suitable for finding out what motivates people and why they do what they do by enquiring about their ideas, opinions and attitudes. It is particularly useful when probing for answers, the questions to which the interviewee may not be conscious or aware of themselves (Berger, 2000:111-113).

The interviews were semi-structured using a list of questions yet maintaining a relaxed approach to encourage further discussion in order to assess the topic in-depth. All interviews were conducted using the same protocol, including, as recommended by Berger (2000:114-117), a list of key questions, follow up questions and time for comments and notes. Questions used in the interviews were for example:

- To what extent did you use material directly from Greenpeace for your coverage?
- Was it possible to verify that material? Did you? Do you think it is necessary to do so?
- Did you use sources other than Greenpeace during that time?

- Do you think Greenpeace has a potential bias in framing their stories?

### *Survey*

The survey was conducted online and could be taken anonymously but information of name of publication and years worked as a journalist was required to take the survey. When presenting the results, all will be identified by type of media outlet, name of publication and number of years worked. For example: Broadcast, BBC, 11-20 yrs.

Surveys are useful for assessing a group of people's (in this case journalists) attitudes as well as what they do and have done. The main advantage is time and access and the ability to gather data from a large number of people. This survey used an online questionnaire with 27 questions. The questions were kept short, clear and unambiguous, using simple language and asking only for one piece of information per question to ensure they were coherent. The majority of questions used the Linkert Scale as recommended by Berger to enable quantifying opinions and beliefs during analysis. The multiple choice questions gave mutually exclusive answer options which were exhaustive by adding options such as 'other' or 'neutral'. The open questions allowed for a qualitative approach to analysing the responses and some had a comment box for the same purposes (Berger 2000:187-193).

### *Sampling*

This study does not differentiate much between broadcast and print/online. This is because the main topic relates to their approach when researching news rather than the finished product. It was however taken into consideration when analysing the differences between activism and journalism, given that print/online news outlets have more freedom when it comes to partisanship.

Among the 55 respondents were:

Broadcast journalists: 12

Print/online journalists: 39

Both print/online and broadcast journalists: 4

The majority were senior journalists with over 10 years of experience. 24% had worked for up to ten years, 36% between 11 and 20 years, and 40% for more than 20 years (see graph in appendix).

Further details of the survey respondents including a list of job titles and media organisations as well as date and location of the in-depth interviews can be found in the appendix which is inserted after the references.

## **Terminology**

*Third sector* and *not-for-profit* (and non-profit) refers to the sector of the economy or society comprising non-governmental and non-profit-making organisations or associations, including charities, voluntary groups and community groups (Oxford Dictionaries).

*Non-governmental-organisations (NGOs)* are as explained above non-profit making organisations, voluntary citizen groups or organized groups of individuals, working on behalf of issues at a local, national or international level and. Many, though not all, have charitable status.

*For profit* refer to businesses in the private sector.

*The public sector* refers to the state, and state-run/governmental organisations.

*The fourth estate* refers to the press and the journalistic profession.

In this study, when using the term *attitude*, it signifies the personal evaluations people hold in regards to themselves, other people, issues and objects or ‘a settled way of thinking or feeling about something’ (Oxford Dictionaries).

For the purposes of this paper, I have used the definition of *activist* and their organizations as suggested by Grunig: ‘a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force’ (1992:504). Both the terms *activist* and *activism* and *campaigner* or *campaigning*, meaning someone who works in an organized and active way towards a goal (Oxford Dictionaries), are used throughout this paper.

#### **4. RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

This section includes a presentation of the research findings. The results will be presented in two subsections: the qualitative and quantitative results from the survey and the qualitative results from the case study. Finally, the results will be followed by a discussion in which the findings are analysed.

##### **Where do journalists draw the line between activism and journalism?**

I will begin by exploring the journalists' perception of the differences between practicing journalism and activism. This will help to understand their approach and decision making processes when working with activists. This was studied using a qualitative approach in the form of an open-ended question in the online survey.

As Ruigrok (2010:85) argues, it can be difficult to draw a line between activism and journalism. My survey results supports this. That said, however, the majority of the 35 who answered the open question: 'Where do you draw the line between journalism and activism?' agreed that the two should be considered different concepts.

Answers ranged from arguing that activism and journalism are largely the same to arguing that the two are completely different. Some were adamant that activism should not be included in their work.

*The minute you start to actively try to influence the course of events, you've crossed the line. The job is to report on events, not start / cook things up.*

*(Print/online, Daily Express, 11-20)*

*The line should be thick and distinctive. There are far too many crossing that line. The worst cases are the Israel-Palestine conflict where much of what passes for journalism is in fact pro Palestinian activism rather than objective, fair, honest reporting of both sides.*

*(Print/online, Guardian, 20+)*

Others said they did not mind it if the two were intertwined. Some even encouraged it.

*Journalism I do for money. Activism I do for free. It's always nice when they coincide.*

*(Print/online, MailOnline, 0-5)*

*I think journalists have a responsibility to use their voices for activism. Too many people do not have the opportunity journalists are presented with every day to advocate for a better life or world. (Print/online and broadcast, freelance, 11-20)*

Some suggested that the main difference between the two was that activists always try to achieve some kind of policy change, or as one described it, the line is crossed ‘when one strays from reporting to advocacy’, for as one stated: ‘Who is the journalist to decide which side of conflict/disagreement is right?’ With regard to the role of the journalist, it was also suggested that

journalists were there to ‘objectively inform the public’. Or as one put it, a journalist is an ‘observer’ rather than a ‘participant’. Others said the two were unavoidably interlinked and that for example story choice should also be considered as a form of advocacy. Another said that ‘verification is the key’, arguing that as long as the story was verified they ‘may support activism related to the story’.

Given that broadcast journalism has stricter policies for impartiality, it was, perhaps not surprisingly, a particularly strong tendency among the BBC journalists in the survey to argue against partaking in any kind of activism. One said: ‘journalism is reporting on news; activism is creating it’.

Numerous respondents agreed that this is a difficult question. The same people had a tendency to point out that some activism by journalists could be positive. It was also pointed out that some of the most famous journalists, ‘James Cameron, Lydia Cacho, etc.’ had been activists, and that as long as the reports were accurate and truthful, there need be no line. Journalists writing for specialist publications mentioned that those publications had already taken a stand. As one said, by profiling itself as a sustainable fishing news website, it was by definition campaigning for sustainable fishing.

One said that journalists should attempt to uncover injustices, shed light on hidden truths and expose what their readers would see as wrongdoings - ‘exposing and investigating the powerful on behalf of injustices committed on the less powerful’ - as well as simply reporting on events.

Some of the respondents set themselves apart by arguing that activism and journalism are largely the same.

*Journalism is a kind of activism, founded on the principle that information is power. Ideas about impartiality and journalism are too simplistic, and no journalist is truly objective. Your positioning depends on the sources you use and the credence you give them. Relying heavily on or trusting 'official' sources is a stance in itself, and every journalist brings their own perspective. It is better to acknowledge that. ( Print/online, The Herald, 20+)*

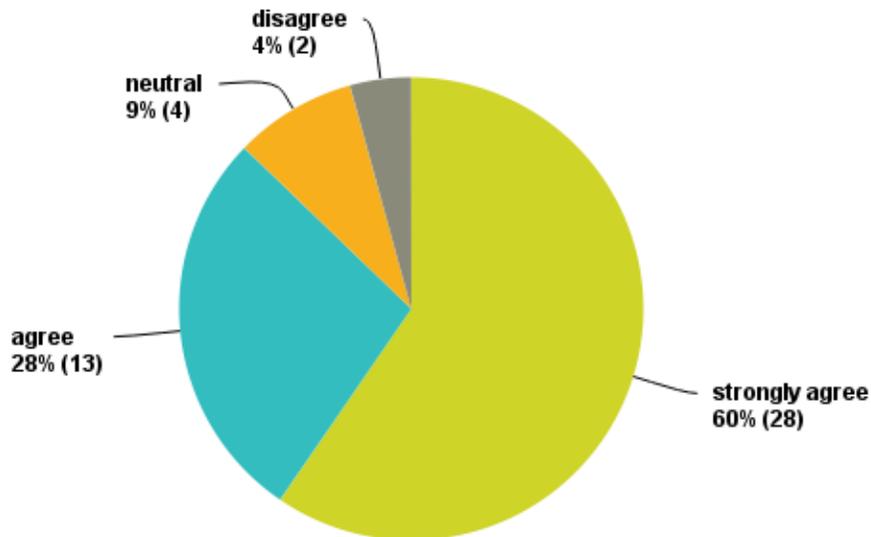
### **Verification and trust of NGO material**

This brings us to the findings of the perceived need to fact check and verify NGO material, since, as the final quote above indicates, this is linked to personal opinion. And if trusting official sources is a stance in itself, arguably so is trusting NGOs as a source of news.

My survey found that most journalists believed they had an obligation to verify facts coming from NGOs. 60% said they 'strongly agreed' and 28% answered 'agree' (Q23). In other words, 88% agree that this is best practice.

**Q23 In your opinion, are journalists obligated to verify facts surrounding stories coming from non-governmental organisations?**

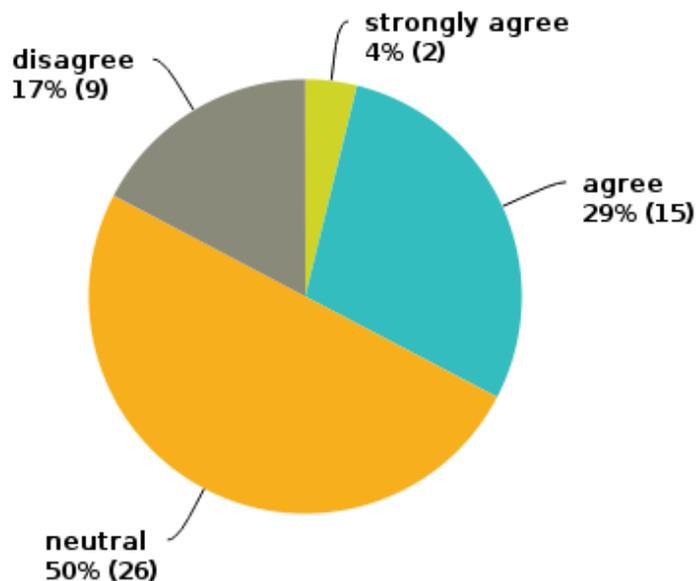
Answered: 47 Skipped: 8



When asked ‘Do you generally trust NGOs more as a source than commercial companies?’ (Q7), the opinion was more divided: 29% agreed, 4% strongly agreed and 17% disagreed, while 50% were neutral. Although divided, when bundling up the positive answers, a significant 17 (33%) did consider NGOs more trustworthy.

### Q7 Do you generally trust NGOs more as a source than commercial companies?

Answered: 52 Skipped: 3



13 of the 52 who answered also commented. The majority suggested that 'it depends' on the NGO, while another said 'I don't trust anyone'. Some said NGOs should not be treated differently than other organisations on this matter:

*Everyone who sends a press release has a vested interest in doing so. Treat with caution.*

*(Print/online, Evening Standard, 11-20)*

*Think it has been tendency in past to be easier on NGOs than on commercial companies, shouldn't be case (Broadcast, Channel 5, 20+)*

While some said there was a difference:

*(I agree) simply because they're committed to a cause rather than profit and are generally well-informed about their field of interest. That doesn't mean I see them as an objective or neutral source. (Broadcast, Al Jazeera English, 20+)*

The survey included the open question: 'Could you give one or more examples of NGOs from which you would never feel the need to verify material?' to which 18 people answered (some with a 'no'). 5 NGOs were mentioned more than once: Amnesty (3), Human Rights Watch (3), Oxfam (3), Medecins Sans Frontieres (2) and Global Witness (2).

The majority surveyed (62%) said they never used press releases from NGOs without verifying the content (Q8). 38% have at some point used unverified material and 36% do so at least a couple of times per year. The figures for journalists using images coming from NGOs were similar, with 30% saying they used these images at least a couple of times per year. When comparing this with Q23, it seems although the clear majority (88%) believe that material from NGOs should be verified in theory, in practice this is not the case. This will be addressed later in the discussion.

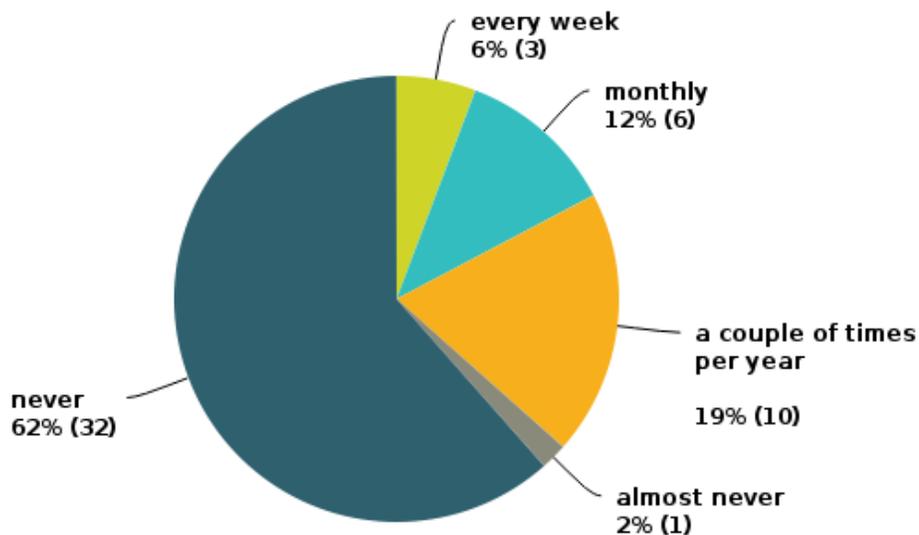
Some chose to elaborate (Q8) on their response:

*Simply because they're committed to a cause rather than profit and are generally well-informed about their field of interest. That doesn't mean I see them as an objective or neutral source. (Broadcast, Al Jazeera English, 20+)*

*It depends. Companies have an open agenda in terms of promoting their products, defending their share price, countering criticism from consumers etc. Sometimes, some NGOs have a hidden agenda and are not always honest about it. (Print/online, Guardian, 20+)*

### Q8 Do you use press releases from NGOs for your coverage without verifying the content?

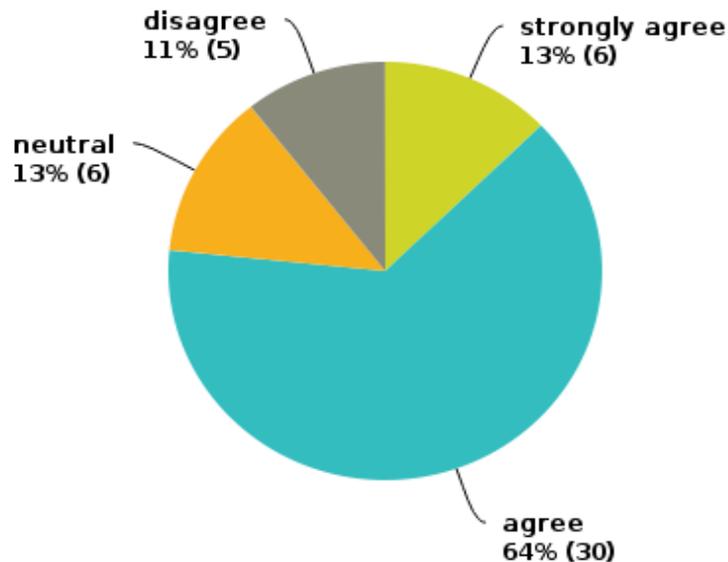
Answered: 52 Skipped: 3



When surveying what obstacles may prevent journalists from verifying news material gathered from NGOs, the results showed that the majority (77%) believe *time pressure* is an obstacle (Q24). In addition, 34% said they agreed and 11% strongly agreed that *access* was an obstacle which could hinder journalists from verifying NGO material (Q25). When asked if *money* was an obstacle (Q26), opinion was divided, with roughly the same number agreeing or strongly agreeing (30%) and disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (32%).

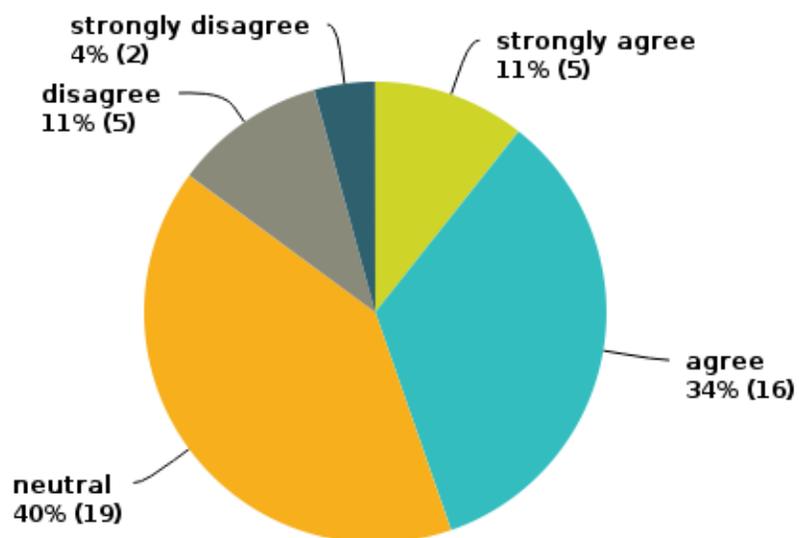
### Q24 Is time pressure an obstacle when it comes to fact checking material from NGOs?

Answered: 47 Skipped: 8



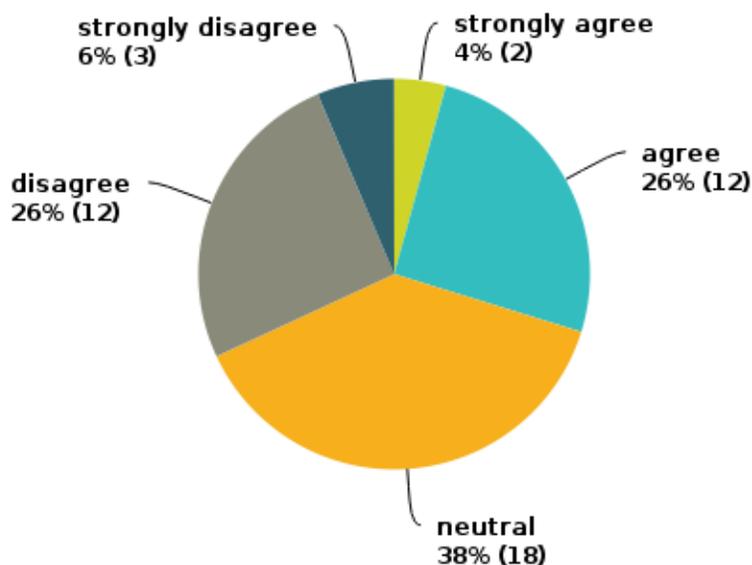
### Q25 Is access an obstacle when it comes to fact checking material from NGOs?

Answered: 47 Skipped: 8



### Q26 Is money an obstacle when it comes to fact checking material from NGOs?

Answered: 47 Skipped: 8



26% of the surveyed journalists agreed these obstacles had changed over time. This was followed by the open-ended question: ‘If so, what has influenced these changes?’ to which 16 answered. The majority of these respondents supported the findings in Q24 and Q26 and mentioned *time pressure* and *lack of resources* (arguably, money and resources being largely the same). Some mentioned pressure to publish content instantly on multiple platforms. Some expressed a concern for the quality of the news they published and said these changes meant less time for verification. One confirmed Davies’ argument (2009), saying that journalists are ‘increasingly becoming churnalists’ and no longer have time to wait for answers because of the pressure of instant publication. Two said increased usage of social media allowed them to

contact and verify sources better and therefore helped with gaining access to NGOs and other sources.

One journalist in particular summed up what implications this seems to have on their work:

*All the organisations I work for have fewer resources now than they did 10 years ago. This has a major effect on my work and means I come across many stories, particularly foreign stories or those that require longer investigations without a guarantee of success, which I simply can't cover now.*

*(Print/online and broadcast, BBC, Guardian, 20+)*

### **Case study: journalists' approach when working with Greenpeace**

The arrest of Greenpeace's activists took place in the Pechora Sea, a remote region of the Arctic, on 19 September 2013, following a protest against Gazprom's drilling for oil in the Arctic. Present at the events were the Greenpeace activists, staff working on Gazprom's oil rig and the Russian coast guard. The first articles reported that armed Russian troops had stormed the Greenpeace ship following the protest. The Russians, it was reported, dropped guards on the deck of the vessel by rope and rounded up the activists who were detained and later arrested, spending months in a Russian prison until their release in December.

*In-depth interviews*

Journalist A: Environment Editor, The Guardian, 20+ years

Journalist B: North of England Correspondent, The Independent, 11-20 years

Journalist C: Moscow Correspondent, Freelance, The Times, 20+ years

Journalist D: Online Journalist, Mail Online, 0-5 years

Journalist A was involved throughout the reportings as editor. He wrote the first story, which was published the morning after the events at sea. Further reporting was undertaken, in which journalist A was involved, by a Moscow correspondent. Journalist D was involved in producing around 5 articles. Journalist B wrote one article personally and followed the reporting throughout. Journalist C wrote three articles on the events.

Q1: Do you remember how you first heard about the events at sea?

*Mixture of sources, the wires, AFP, Moscow radio, Greenpeace themselves would have raised the alarm. (Journalist C)*

*Via the news agencies, it would have been on the wire, either Reuters or AP. (Journalist B)*

*I was in bed. I got a call from the ship. And I knew the man on the other end, because I have been on that ship. I knew the ship, I knew the people there. The man said 'I'm locked in the*

*cupboard and they're beating it down', and so on... so I wrote it down and just sent it off.*

*(Journalist A)*

The discussions showed that the majority of the content used came directly from Greenpeace. None of the interviewees had contacted Gazprom or the Russian authorities personally. In some cases there was additional material from international news agencies or, as in one case, from the foreign ministry. At some point in the discussion all interviewees agreed that as long as you attribute where your material (facts, statements, images or footage, etc.) comes from, there is no issue with unverified content. All of them also mentioned that the events took place in a remote area (the Pechora Sea) to which no journalist had access, and therefore verification of facts was impossible. Journalist C and D said this was a special case which evolved around the people arrested and not the average Greenpeace protest or 'environmental subject', and therefore didn't require the same critical approach to the material.

*If there were comments from Gazprom, no doubt they were quoted as well. You can't just pick up the phone and talk to the Russian prison service. They don't issue press releases. This is part of the problem when you're dealing with a dictatorship, that you don't derive the kind of information that a free society provides. I think Gazprom, and Putin also, made a comment about the case ... So yes, you do quote Russian officials when they make statements, but you can't sort of just pick up the phone and interview them like you can interview people in a free society. That's part of the problem. (Journalist C)*

Q2: Was there editorial talk of fact-checking or investigating further? If so, what was said?

*I think (you do that) when you work for a newspaper like maybe the Mail on Sunday, when you have a lot more time, you have essentially from Sunday, all the way until it goes to print on Saturday night, to investigate and look at something, whereas we get an hour, maybe an hour and a half if we're lucky, to go from finding out to producing and publishing the actual story.*

*(Journalist D)*

Q4: Do you think Greenpeace may have a potential bias in framing their stories?

*Of course, yes. They know what they are trying to do. They know what they're trying to say. They give their side of the story, they come at it from an ecological point of view, they come at it from a resource point of view, and they are not looking at it from anywhere else. And you know they've got a membership which they have to feed and they need money, so of course.*

*(Journalist A)*

The discussions showed that the fact that there was a journalist involved in the arrest had impacted Journalist C's and D's reporting, while Journalist A and B said it made no difference.

*Journalists try to humanise the news, because we know readers like what we call a human interest story. When you have eco protesters jailed by an authoritarian regime, obviously a bit of sympathy is going to creep in. And especially in the Arctic-30 case, as one of those jailed had*

*previously worked for The Times and was our colleague. We carried extracts from his diary, where he spoke of eating pigeon, thinking it was chicken. Perhaps, strictly speaking, this sympathy is bias, but it's what makes us human and what makes newspapers readable.*

*(Journalist C)*

*I'm a bit of an environmentalist myself and I have a good view of Greenpeace. I don't always agree with everything they do, but I remember what upset me a lot personally was that the British man was arrested and detained. He didn't actually work for Greenpeace. He was just a hired freelancer that they had hired to bring along with them. (Journalist D)*

*It didn't make any difference to me at all. I mean it was lots of human interest in there, obviously, which Greenpeace were pushing. But they have 300,000 members, a million people on their Twitter feed, for goodness sake. They don't necessarily need the Guardian to put all this nonsense out. So it had a life of its own. And we weren't there to be effectively Greenpeace's advocates. In this case we were interested in the news story and the political, social and environmental significance of it. (Journalist A)*

The discussions showed that in this particular case, all four journalists treated Greenpeace as a trusted source and felt no need to go personally to either Gazprom or the Russian authorities to verify the facts coming from Greenpeace.

*Yes, I did (trust Greenpeace). I think it would have been different if we felt that it had been, say for example, Occupy or any other organisation that has done anything that would go against British authorities. Maybe then perhaps we might have been a bit more critical of the source, but because Greenpeace had hired a freelance videographer, we felt that we could trust what Greenpeace were saying. Even though it came from or via Greenpeace, it was also the words of someone who was hired and paid by Greenpeace to be there, so I thought that was quite balanced ... I think Greenpeace really took their responsibility, they were really easy to work with, they didn't try anything. For whether it's a PR agency, an NGO, or a volunteering organisation, they always try and push their message through. But in this case it was about the people and getting them out as soon as possible. I mean from Greenpeace's side, they are not violent, they hadn't actually done anything wrong... It was an unusual situation and it might have been different had it been a case of, say, a demonstration in London and Greenpeace accused the Met police of using violence. I think in that situation it would have been different.*

*(Journalist D)*

*This wasn't a matter of interpretation. This was just a matter of straight facts. So there was the people on the boat, there was the 15 Russian military who'd invaded them, beating down their door. What is there to distrust about? You didn't go to the Russians and say, "Did you beat that down?" Because clearly that's what they did. It's not a question of interpretation, it's just about getting facts and finding out what went on. And I have learned to trust Greenpeace, actually. I've worked with them in different situations on several continents and I've found them to be pretty straightforward, and there was no reason to doubt anyone. Because I knew the man who*

*called me, and you can tell, I mean you have instincts, for God's sake, you can tell, the man cowering in a cupboard, he's not making it up. He feels his life is in danger. (Journalist A)*

As with the survey, the discussions showed that time pressure, access and money all played a part when working with NGOs.

*What one really needs to understand is that the big enemy of all journalists is time. In an ideal world we'll check and double check and quote, you know, ten people. But in reality we may have only two hours to write something, and we have to use what material is to hand. So that is a constant problem. It's not our bad intention to distort reality, we're just sort of under the gun all the time, timewise. (Journalist C)*

*There's a re-balancing going on. And the media needs the NGOs now... If I want to go to Lagos, to the Niger delta, I need an NGO. It would be too risky for me... They are the only way you will have access to where you need to go. (Journalist A)*

This suggests that there is a power struggle going on between NGOs and media. The NGOs have money and access. On the other hand, media's resources are decreasing, resulting in what can be called a dependency on these organisations. This supports Burrell's (2012) argument that it is 'suddenly the NGOs, rather than the news media, which have the money to fly photojournalists on foreign assignments in search of images that will support an important campaign.' I will return to this later in the discussion.

*Civil society is increasingly becoming the eyes and the ears of journalism, good journalism. They are people on the frontline of liberty, of the environment, of war. These are the people who are telling us what's happening. You cannot rely on governments anymore, and you cannot rely on corporations anymore. And therefore, you go to people who form themselves into groups sometimes. Now some of these are very very rigorous and they absolutely, if you like, hold the same values, as you might. Some don't, others have a particular agenda which they are trying to press. They are trying to make a point. Everyone's trying to make a political point, but some are looser and faster for facts and some are not. (Journalist A)*

In addition, the discussion showed an inclination by journalist C and D to support the work of NGOs.

*The thing about a democracy is that it's also protecting the minority. So very often what journalists are doing is protecting the underdog, and I kind of get a suggestion in the question that you've been asking that you think that we just lazily repeat what NGOs tell us. But in a fight between David and Goliath, if you like, in order to be fair, you can't actually fifty-fifty quote David and quote Goliath, can you? In order to be fair you have to give perhaps a little bit more support to the underdog, the person who is weaker, who is more vulnerable. And you know corporations and politicians have massive machines that they use to send out information the way they want to. And NGOs are on the whole the Davids in this situation and the Goliaths are the politicians. (Journalist C)*

## Discussion

The quantitative results from the survey showed a divided attitude as to whether journalists trust NGOs as a news source compared to commercial companies, although a significant 33% (Q7). This indicates that in theory, journalists to some extent do consider NGOs more trustworthy. As the comments showed, numerous journalists thought that it depends on the NGO (some also mentioned organisations they particularly trusted) indicating that certain NGOs are considered more trustworthy than others. This may be the reasoning behind why 50% chose to stay 'neutral' in their answer. Overall, taking into account that only 17% disagreed, the results indicate that journalists do trust *some* NGOs more than commercial companies. Five organisations seems to be considered particularly trustworthy, which suggests that there are numerous NGOs from which journalists feel they can use unverified material.

The quantitative analysis (Q23) demonstrated that in theory the clear majority of journalists (88%) believe they have an obligation to verify material sourced from NGOs. This attitude, however was challenged by surveying the journalists on their news gathering processes in practice, as 38% had at some point used unverified material, with 36% using it at least a couple of times per year (Q8).

Numerous journalists, both in comments and in-depth interviews, said that it was perfectly good practice to use unverified material as long as it is attributed. This contrast indicates that journalists have an idealised view of what is best practice when working with NGOs, which in reality is not achieved. This is further supported by the case study, in which all four interviewees agreed they trusted Greenpeace as a source to explain what went on during the arrests, (and to some extent more than the public sector, the Russian authorities). This show that, just as unverified material from for-profits

increasingly ends up in the news, so does NGO material. This should arguably be added to the debate about the decline of the quality and independence of British journalism (Franklin, 2006).

To help understand and contextualise these findings it was natural to discuss what influences the decision-making during the news gathering process while working with NGOs. In today's media environment, with much of the news instantly published online, news journalists may find themselves, as Lewis and Cushion (2009) found, caught up in what often feels like 'a hamster wheel'. The 24-hour news cycle has created a medium that prioritises immediacy over more traditional forms of reflection. Franklin argues that unless journalists' workload and pressure changes, the situation would only deteriorate (Franklin et al. 2006:47). Both the survey and case study showed that news journalists still find themselves under *time pressure*, which was the largest obstacle for verifying and further investigating stories and material from NGOs, followed by lack of *resources/money* and *access*. Lack of access was an issue in this case study, as only three parts (Gazprom, Russian authorities and Greenpeace) had access to information about what went on at the protest and during the arrests. This influenced the journalists' approach. One stated that in their opinion, the Russian authorities, being a dictatorship, could not be trusted and even if they could be trusted, they had no access to them, indicating that opinions on who is 'good' or 'bad' also influenced the decision. Three of the interviewed journalists said they trusted Greenpeace in this case. However, they also said yes to Greenpeace generally being biased when framing their stories. Another factor shaping the journalists' approach was the general attitude towards the campaign. The fact that two of them showed relatively strong feelings for supporting the campaign arguably indicates that their approach to the story may have been biased by personal attachment. This is supported by the overall attitude that in this case Greenpeace was the

‘good guy’, the ‘underdog’ and that Russia was the ‘bad guy’ (or ‘David and Goliath’, as one journalist said). For while some argued it was impossible or unnecessary to fact-check such a story, another said that, had it been a case of Greenpeace versus the Metropolitan Police, they would have acted differently. These findings suggest that in their opinion, the British police force was more trustworthy than the Russian and that in this case, Greenpeace was more trustworthy than the Russian authorities. This personal view of the parties in this conflict arguably contributed to the decision of not feeling the need to verify information given about the arrests with other sources or people present at the scene of events, and to take Greenpeace’s word for it. One deemed Greenpeace ‘not violent’ and that they had ‘not done anything wrong’. This indicates a positive attitude towards them as an organisation.

Davies argues that Greenpeace are particularly skilled at gaining media coverage, often by creating what he calls ‘pseudo-incidents’:

*Its supporters are up Nelson’s Column with a banner, abseiling onto an oil platform with their own camera crew to film it, raiding Exxon’s headquarters dressed as tigers. The list goes on.*

*And regardless of whether or not one supports their cause, the fact is that, like all PR, these stunts are designed to open the media door for the supply of claims which, in the case of some of the organisation’s statements, appear to be at best highly contentious.*

(Davies 2009:191-194)

It is not the intention of this paper to discuss whether or not it is sensible to support Greenpeace’s cause. However, it should be noted that, as Dale argues, the fact that Greenpeace is a smaller and less

powerful organisation (money-wise) than many of the multinationals it campaigns against, they operate much like a professional company. And, there is ‘nothing that says that underdog status implies sainthood’ (Dale, 1996:5).

As discussed in the findings, journalists have a wide range of opinions about where to draw the line between activism and journalism, ranging from promoting advocacy journalism to deeming it something that does not belong in journalistic practice. The line between the two is clearly blurred. Many in the study agreed that all journalists do to some extent participate in some form of campaigning, and that it is better to acknowledge it. Olesen’s studies (2008) have found that advocacy journalism has an agenda-setting effect in Denmark. As he argues, although campaigning organisations can contribute to a positively democratic debate, it is important to note that there is more often than not at least two sides to a story, and communication from NGOs can be one-sided. Therefore, journalists should approach stories from activists carefully and not assume that they represent the whole truth about an issue (Olesen, 2008:245-263).

And as argued by Ruigrok (2010), if journalists adopt activism in their reporting they can become advocates for a special cause, or take sides in a conflict situation. Because although activism can be perfectly harmless in many cases, as one respondent argued: who is the journalist to decide which side of conflict or disagreement is right? The effect of such news coverage is something to be aware of as activism among journalists can have an effect on public opinion and lead to ‘tunnel vision’, with all manner of consequences for the news audience ‘who depend on the media as a source’ (Ruigrok, 2010:85-90).

This leads me to the suggested ongoing power shift between news media and NGOs, for all this is arguably interlinked. On the one hand the media organisations are experiencing increased lack of resources, causing increased time pressure; a new media landscape where the pressure to publish immediately means less time for verification caused by increased workload and even more time pressure. On the other hand this new environment has created opportunities for NGOs to gain more independence of the media, as they can communicate with the public more directly and publish their own material online via blogs and social media. As one journalist said: Greenpeace, with their one million Twitter followers, ‘don’t need *the Guardian*’ to advocate their cause for them. This shift in power is also supported by findings from the in-depth interviews, during which it was stated that NGOs are increasingly becoming ‘the eyes and ears’ of journalists. And to some extent, this has created a dependency on the NGOs, in particular for access. This is arguably when the question of ‘who to trust?’ becomes increasingly important. For if you don’t have the resources to verify information from these organisations, despite the fact that most journalists would prefer to do so, it may be possible for activists to dictate what goes in the news.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The media landscape of today has provided new opportunities for NGOs. At the same time traditional news media are experiencing a decline in resources. This study has assessed journalists’ attitudes towards NGOs as a news source from the point of view of the journalists. The research was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods in the form of a survey of 55 journalists and a case study

of the arrests of Greenpeace's Arctic 30 in 2013 using in-depth interviews with four journalists who had reported on the events.

While journalists agreed that Greenpeace generally has an agenda to push, they made an active decision to trust the organisation as a source when reporting on the Arctic 30 arrests. This was influenced by access, trust, and to some extent personal interest and an inclination to support campaigns. The study found that in terms of sourcing material from NGOs in general journalists trusted some NGOs more than commercial companies and the public sector.

Findings showed a contrast between the journalists' idealised view and the reality of their news gathering processes: while most journalists said they *should* verify material coming from NGOs, in practice, some *don't*. Journalists had a wide variety of views on advocacy journalism: while some promoted it, others said it had no place in the news, and answers indicated that the line between activism and journalism is blurred. In the light of these findings, the research also revealed that there seems to be a power shift in progress between news media and NGOs: while previous studies have shown that NGOs are dependent on the media for coverage, that seems to be changing. Instead, the study found that journalists were dependent on the NGOs for both access and resources. This could become an issue, since too much influence and power over the news media by NGOs, whose communication can be one sided, could compromise the quality and independence of journalism and set the public and political agenda.

I would therefore suggest further research into this topic to gain understanding of the extent and implications of these findings.

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## Appendix

This appendix presents further details about the interviewees and respondents. It includes names of interviewees, dates and location of the interview. It also contains further details about the respondents in the survey, including a list of working titles and data for the representation of media organisations.

### *Interviews*

The interviewees were identified by studying newspaper content from the first three weeks following the arrests of the activists. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face and two over the telephone, because those interviewees were not in London. The length of the discussions varied between 20 and 50 minutes depending on the interest shown by the interviewee.

- John Vidal (Journalist A, Environment Editor, The Guardian, 20+ years) was interviewed at *The Guardian*, King's Place, London on 30 May 2014.
- Jonathan Brown, (Journalist B, North of England Correspondent, The Independent, 11-20 years) was interviewed via telephone on 15 May 2014.
- Helen Womack (Journalist C, Moscow Correspondent, Freelance, The Times, 20+ years) was interviewed via telephone on 15 May 2014.
- Sara Malm (Journalist D, Online Journalist, Mail Online, 0-5 years) was interviewed in a cafe near her place of work in High Street Kensington, London, 17 May.

## Survey

Although some journalists chose to identify themselves by name, more than 50% chose to remain anonymous. Selected journalists were contacted via email and a link was posted on Journalism.co.uk. 346 journalists were contacted using a personalised email inviting them to take the survey. 65 (19%) responded. Seven took the survey using the online link. Ten were disqualified by an initial screening question, because they had not worked with material from an NGO in the past 12 months.

The survey was available to take online between 3rd April and 28th May. Respondents (both freelance and staff) were sourced from all national UK media organisations including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, BBC Sky News, Channel 4 and Channel 5. In addition, journalists from *The Evening Standard*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Scotsman*, *The Herald*, *AlJazeera English*, were invited to take the survey. As per the chart below, journalists from the Guardian and BBC had the highest response rate.

### *News organisations represented*

*The Guardian* or *The Observer* 27%

BBC 18%

*The Times* or *Sunday Times* 9%

*The Independent* 9%

*Evening Standard* 9%

*The Daily Telegraph* or *Sunday Telegraph* 5%

*MailOnline, The Daily Mail or Mail on Sunday 5%*

*The Daily Express or Sunday Express 4%*

Sky News 4%

*The Herald 3%*

*The Scotsman 3%*

Channel 4 2%

Channel 5 2%

*Reuters 2%*

Other / Freelance 19%

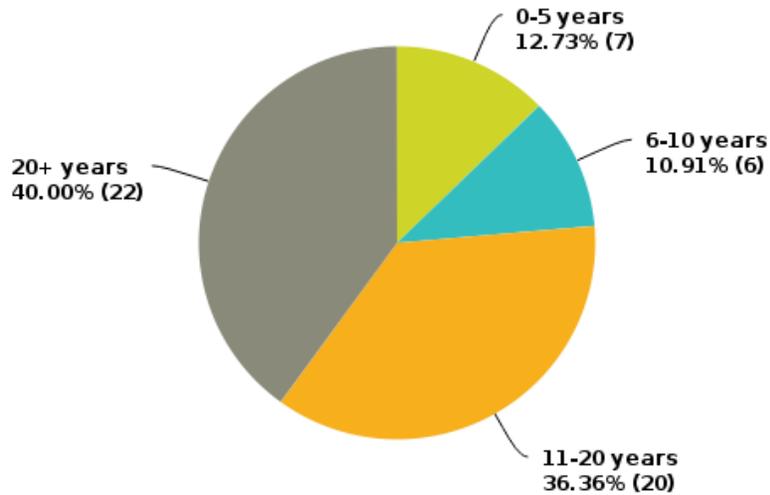
7 of the respondents who entered 'other' specified these organisations: Al Jazeera English, The Financial Times, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Help me Investigate, The Ecologist, Fish2Fork. Others were freelance. Since most of them named more than one organisation, I have chosen not to quantify that category, but to name them 'freelance' instead for the purposes of this appendix. When quoted in the findings, I specified 'freelance', followed by the organisation they mentioned first.

#### *Job titles and years in the profession*

The majority of respondents were senior journalists with over 10 years of experience:

### Q5 For how long have you worked as a journalist?

Answered: 55 Skipped: 0



43 People answered the open question ‘What is your job title?’, below is a list of the individual answers.

Northern Correspondent

Freelance journalist

News reporter, recently global development correspondent

Reporter

Site editor

Senior correspondent

Online Reporter

Health correspondent

Editor

Correspondent

Freelance journalist

Personal Finance Editor

Reporter

Freelance writer

Freelance energy and environment journalist

Correspondent

Social affairs correspondent

Ireland Correspondent for the Guardian and the Observer

Online Journalist

Senior reporter

Science Editor

Digital development editor

Business Editor

Reporter

Reporter

Broadcast Journalist

Senior Broadcast Journalist

Political Editor

Presenter

Broadcast Journalist

News editor/reporter

Editor

Senior Broadcast Journalist

Beijing Bureau Chief

Chief News Correspondent / Health Editor

Science and Environment freelance writer

Assistant Editor

Freelance reporter

US correspondent

Freelance journalist, writer and academic

Producer Science reporter

Deputy Editor,

Social Media Manager and Senior Journalist