

2009 SESSION REPORT

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Hit by the headlines: Communicating with the media in a time of crisis

Moderator: Erik Rudeng, Institujonen Fritt Ord

Speakers: Fiona Ellis, Northern Rock Foundation; Caroline Hartnell, Alliance Publishing Trust; Norine Macdonald, The Mercator Fund

Session proposed by: European Foundation Centre

Mr Erik Rudeng, Institujonen Fritt Ord, opened the discussion by explaining to participants that initially the title of this session had been proposed as ‘Hitting the headlines: How to engage effectively with the media.’ However, with the subsequent deepening of the financial crisis, mainstream media has been paying increasing attention to philanthropy and its ability to address the needs of those hardest hit. At the same time, recent negative news stories have called into question the very purpose of foundations and the culture of philanthropy. Speakers and session organisers therefore agreed that it may be a more ideal starting point for foundations to share their own experiences being ‘hit by the headlines.’

Former Director of the Northern Rock Foundation, **Ms Fiona Ellis**, shared how the foundation dealt with the media attention directed at the organisation during the crisis which hit the Northern Rock bank over 2007, forcing the bank’s collapse. She qualified her remarks, noting that while the foundation experienced an extreme and unique situation during that period, the lessons learned are critical and relevant to other foundations. Ms Ellis then outlined some general advice which she would share with other foundations who find themselves in a similar situation:

- Sending quick, clear, and coordinated reactions to the press in a time of crisis is often helpful for dispelling any rumours or mistruths. A muddled message can be like waving a red flag at a bull.
- Trustees and staff may be excellent at communicating good news, but can be unsure of how to deal with negative press. Rehearsing tough questions and answers in advance can clarify a message and reduce unease.
- It is often worth the investment to hire a professional to deal with media relations, or to pick just one person from an organisation to act as the sole spokesperson.
- While national media sources may focus more on the negative side of a story, local media often seek out good news and human interest pieces, making the local media an important ally in crisis situations.
- As the Northern Rock Foundation experienced, in certain cases, grantees can act as the best spokespersons for a foundation by providing first hand testimony to the good work of the organisation.

Reactions from the audience generally agreed with the assertions of Ms Ellis; one participant candidly made the statement that even the best of intentions can go awry as it can sometimes be the case that ‘newspapers don’t check facts.’ Another audience member suggested that being aware of all questions before an interview with a reporter is essential. No matter what they ask, try to stick to rehearsed and safe answers. Furthermore, never relax in front of a reporter, as one never knows when a microphone or tape recorder has actually been switched off. As one participant, and former journalist, offered: ‘there is no such thing as dead air.’ Finally, the suggestion was made that in interviews it is often useful to bring a witness to take notes, which can then be sent back to the interviewer immediately after to avoid any misinterpretations.

As the session’s ‘devils advocate’, **Ms Caroline Hartnell**, Alliance Publishing Trust, played the role of the mainstream media to illustrate that often bad press occurs because there is a lack of understanding from the media and public at large about the work of foundations. By way of example, Ms Hartnell cited an article published in the *Guardian* in February 2009 entitled ‘Thanks for the philanthropy billionaires: Now pay your tax’ which lambasted the rich who hide behind a ‘fig-leaf of charity’ in order to gain tax advantages. She explained that the image of philanthropists as privileged holders of wealth with sometimes hypocritical behaviour¹ leads to bad press coverage. This unfortunately often has a ripple effect and can hurt even foundations doing great work. Increased transparency from foundations may be the key to improving this tarnished image. However, Ms Hartnell did point out that it is not just the philanthropic sector which is punished by the media’s hunger for negative stories, and used the world of celebrities and tabloids as a prime example to prove this.

Speakers agreed that media sources which take a critical, yet constructive, stance on issues are extremely important as they maintain focus on pressing and controversial issues in a productive manner. *Alliance* magazine is such a source for the European philanthropic sector, and Ms Hartnell encouraged participants to send in positive stories.

Ms Norine Macdonald, The Mercator Fund, pointed out that there may be reasons why foundations have not had their desired experiences with the media, as perhaps the proper tools have not been at the disposal of foundations to act accordingly in crisis situations. She then introduced a new project of The Mercator Fund- the Global Media Centre. Recently launched, the Centre provides tailored advocacy and media outreach work for foundations, which is specifically designed to influence policy and bring about desired change. Rather than waiting to react to negative press, the Global Media Centre encourages foundations to take a more proactive approach in their media relations strategies.

As a summary discussion, many participants agreed that it is often the case that a foundation can be ‘friendly’ with the media, but they should not be fooled into thinking that they are ‘friends’ with the media. Differences in national press were discussed, leading to the conclusion that while it is important to share basic lessons in peer-learning sessions such as this, foundations are bound to have diverse press relations and experiences across Europe. Overall, while a foundation may not always be able to control a situation with the media during a time of crisis, they can certainly try their best to control the damage which is inflicted.

¹ The idea of holding a conference on the topic of ‘Fighting Poverty – Creating Opportunities’ in a luxury hotel was brought up as one such hypocrisy.