UNINTENTIONAL JOURNALISTS
The role of advocacy group 350 in filling a news gap for reporting from the Pacific region

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ABSTRACT
As new actors assert their voices into global discussions the boundaries of journalism are continuously tested and tugged at. Some, like citizen journalists and alternative community media organisations, are relatively well documented by scholars. Others, present a grey area in our understanding of who makes up the perceived ‘in club’ of journalism. One such area of emerging journalistic boundary research is about the media outputs of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose staff have traditionally been seen as sources for or stringers to journalists. Technological advances in information communications technology, increased staffing capacity and more sophisticated media strategies mean that some NGOs are now producing their own independent news as opposed to relying on journalists to tell their organisational stories. The question is, however, whether this is to be seen as more sophisticated communication strategies aimed at advocating a specific viewpoint or an emerging form of reporting folding into the expanding boundaries of journalism. This paper argues that one way to conceptualise advocates and NGO actors engaging in eye-witness reporting is as “Unintentional Journalists” doing the work of journalism, without intentionally meaning to do so. Following an exploratory case study of the Pacific branch of global NGO 350.org, the paper suggests that the organisation’s members who produced reports about the passing of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, 2015, intended to produce advocacy and in doing so, unintentionally acted to fill a global news gap for reporting from the Pacific region.

KEYWORDS
350.org; advocacy journalism; boundary maintenance; NGO journalism; NGO media strategy; Pacific journalism
INTRODUCTION: A STORM IN VANUATU

In early 2015 the South Pacific region experienced one of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded: Cyclone Pam. This weather event exposed a news media event that has given rise to this paper, which finds its point of inquiry on the expanding boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). It was Vanuatu that felt the full force of Pam. The cyclone was a humanitarian disaster and major international news story across Oceania and further abroad. But before any international media had arrived in Vanuatu – and during the course of the storm - it was not primarily journalists telling the story from the ground up: it was an advocacy and non-governmental organisation (NGO) that filed some of the first global news reports about Cyclone Pam in Port Vila.

Hunkered down in the Government’s meteorological office overlooking the city’s harbour was Isso Nihmei – a ni-Van climate change field officer and volunteer coordinator for the Vanuatu chapter of international climate change advocacy organisation 350.org. From the early warnings of Pam’s arrival to dealing with the devastation following the storm, Nihmei emailed photos, videos, video blogs, eye witness reports and meteorological updates to the wider 350 Pacific and 350 communications team based in Fiji, New Zealand and New York. This team then packaged and distributed his reports through their social media networks and a live ‘storify’ blog on the 350.org website, which provided rolling news coverage and updates from the cyclone as well as aggregating other international news reports on Pam. Within the context Nihmei was reporting in, one thing became apparent: Regardless of intent, the reports he produced existed in a global space where “boundaries are blurred, boundaries are drawn and boundaries are crossed as the logics of new and old media interact, compete and co-evolve” (Chadwick 2013, 184). And in this space, the reporting carried out by Nihmei and 350.org was part of the worldwide news output covering Cyclone Pam.

This eyewitness reporting forms the departing point for this paper. A small case study is used to explore not the output nor the positioning of 350’s news products but to try and understand the intent of their production. Whether, in the instance of Nihmei’s eyewitnessing, he and his team saw a gap for news content that reflected the needs of the local community facing humanitarian disaster and thus they intended to act in some capacity as journalists. Or alternatively, whether the team produced reports to draw attention to the plight of locals during the cyclone, as a calculated advocacy intervention whereby the actors could draw attention to their organizational mission of global, grassroots climate change advocacy.

BACKGROUND: ON BRINGING STORIES TO OUR ATTENTION AND THE NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS

The work of 350 Pacific and more broadly speaking, NGOs, offers a conceptual space to discuss how, where, when and by whom news from ‘distant’ places comes to the public’s attention in a global and digital society. NGOs here refer to a broad range of organisations operating within the non-profit space; for this study I operationalise Power’s (2015)

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1 350.org, as described by one of the key interviewees for this paper, is a decentralized advocacy organization that exists somewhere between a NGO and a social movement – it’s not classified as either in this paper although broadly fits into the topic of NGO-journalism.
definition of NGOs as “…Entities that are (i) nominally independent of government, (ii) not-for-profit, (iii) voluntary in nature and (iv) pursue some common good, rather than the interest of only their membership” (p. 428).

Traditionally, it has been foreign correspondents who, through their associations with mainstream television, radio networks and/or newspapers, have been the gatekeepers of reporting news from locations that are considered remote. In this context, there has been a long history of NGO organisations acting as sources or stringers to journalists. However, changes in the news industry have led to a shift in how foreign news is reported. No longer can legacy media call themselves the only key gatekeepers of news and the public’s right to know (Blaagaard 2013). We currently live in a network society (Castells 2012) where, thanks to the internet and ICTs, the global is local and the local exists alongside global as digital news reports and all other forms of stories compete for world-wide audiences and attention on the internet.

In response to the financial pressures this has put on advertising models, many mainstream outlets are closing their foreign bureaus, risk-averse newsrooms are hesitant to send reporters to cover natural disasters from places that won’t draw ratings (Williams 2011), and due to a range of cost cutting measures there is a heavy reliance on government sources in foreign reporting (Van Leuven & Joye, 2014). This has led to a situation whereby anyone with a laptop and an internet connection can upload a story and report international news (Williams 2011).

Within this changing environment it is consequently worth paying attention to the news outputs of NGOs. This is because, as Van Leuven and Joye say, they could be “the new(s) kid on the block” (2014, 162) of international humanitarian reporting. Zelizer (2007) says that ‘having been there’; eyewitnessed a news event and reported on it, is at the heart of what journalism is. “Although having a “nose for news” has been invoked as evidence of a reporter’s innate news sense, the crafting of a news story draws from an ability to see events unfold,” she says (p. 410). Essentially, NGOs are entities that, as Powers says, are now in a position where they have the potential to act as “the new boots on the ground for reporting from faraway place” (2015a, 2; 2015b; 2015c). To this role in international reporting, I would add that the reporting outputs of NGOs are important to pay attention to because such organisations could also 1) fill a gap for content that puts authentic voices at the centre of reporting on faraway (remote to global news and population hubs) places and 2) in the specific context of reporting from the Pacific, following the work of Robie (2014) and Cox (2006), fill a gap for alternative (to corporate media) environmental news coverage from and about this region.

This potential role of NGOs as journalistic entities also has normative implications for the wider study of journalism’s changing ecosystems. These types of organisations do not fit into any preconceived boxes of ‘professional journalist’ or ‘citizen journalist’. In the case of 350 Pacific, there is not any established understanding of whether 350 Pacific’s digital media outputs were produced with the intentions of providing a news as a public service or to meet strategic organisational aims. This is a key question that guided empirical research. This study can therefore be further situated into what Carlson (2015) describes as a form of boundary expansion work related to new participants in the field of journalism. At this level, inquiry relates to who is appropriate to include within the framework of what journalism is and could be.

State of art: the shifting nature of NGO communications
So what are the detailed factors that are leading to a situation whereby NGOs are playing a role in reporting the news? Concurrent to journalism’s multiple crises unfolding and a reduction of foreign correspondents, many advocacy organisations and NGOs, by contrary, are strengthening their operations and developing resources to cover more countries than ever before. Many have communications staff teams that often rival those of newsrooms (Powers 2014, 2015b). The result of this is that NGOs are moving from an era of being reliant on the practices of the media, to being able to independently distribute messages into the global public sphere as they see fit (Cottle and Nolan, 2007, McPherson 2015, Powers 2015, Zuckerman 2010). Consequently, as Tsui writes (2009):

Whereas NGOs used to be located almost exclusively in the realms of speaking for others, in today’s saturated and global media environment they have much more control over what they do with raw information; their job is just as much about using information communication technologies to ensure those they’re speaking for get heard.

Adds McPherson, in her research on Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that NGOs can therefore now engage in similar practices to news organizations; “evaluating, producing, and transmitting information” (2015, 126).

There is yet no clear understanding of exactly what this means for news ecosystems. Grayson (2014), for example, investigates the role of NGOs in providing editorial photographs to news outlets that don’t have the capacity to report from faraway places. She describes this shift as creating an emergent field of “NGO reportage” that is in part responsive to the compassion fatigue which often plagues humanitarian reporting. “Hard-hitting images that shock are not being published on the front page of newspapers,” she says, “rather, it is positive images that appeal to a new diversified audience ‘reading’ their news from multiple platforms” (2014, 644).

Working on this premise of an overlap of boundaries between journalism and advocacy, Russell (2013), in evaluating the reporting practices of advocacy organisations (including 350.org) at a climate change conference, draws similar conclusions. She suggests these outlets are creating a new form of “hybrid journalism” that fulfils both journalistic and organisational intentions. She looks at this from the perspective that regardless of whether they act as news reporters or advocates, such a service is built, to an extent, on the notion of ‘public good’. The result of which is the production of “a distinct sort of news that sees public good connected to public engagement and harnessing the potential for participatory publics to emerge” (2013, 918).

Powers summarises such developments as the result of three factors. First, that NGOs face an uphill and uneven struggle for publicity; second, that in order to achieve publicity, NGOs adapt to – rather than challenge – established news norms; third, and as a consequence of the first two findings, NGOs are increasingly using digital tools to become their own news providers (2015b, 434). Meanwhile, Gillmor (2008) has suggested that such actors are “almost journalists” and thus through having little attachment to journalism as an institution are operate as “news hubs” in their own right. To this effect Reese (2015) suggests the challenge of this is consequently that these mediated spaces should be conceived of from a less media-centric perspective.
The common theme here is that the news that some NGOs are producing may have some similarities to journalism, regardless of where and how the content is produced. But in any capacity, their organising and delivery of content follows patterns, cultures and logics that veer from traditional journalistic norms. Such organisations are traditionally conceptualised as being non-journalistic actors and are thus driven by a potentially different logic to information production (McPherson 2015, Powers 2014, Russel 2014, Cooper 2010).

Further, many such groups engage with media in part for the purpose of communication for social change (CfSC) (Rodríguez et al. 2006). Dutta, for example, stresses the fact that advocacy groups and NGOs “seek to facilitate social change through implicitly and explicitly challenging sites of media power” (2013, 270). This is through the acquisition of social capital, which he says:

Refers to the communities, trust, interpersonal relationships, community networks, and participatory forums that exist within communities, thus tapping into the existing community capacities for bringing about transformations in structures and seeking out access to resources (2013, 302).

From this perspective, NGOs with a mandate for advocacy can use media to distribute alternative readings and in doing so co-opt the structures of news to bring about transformations in the status-quo. Therefore, when their organisational news products can be distributed and consumed in the same space and with the same form as journalistic products, one has to question the intent with which such products are produced and how they actually relate to journalism. In essence, charting how such news products come to exist thus becomes an exercise in interrogating the boundaries of what is relative to news (Lewis, 2015).

Consequently, when new actors are able to mediate messages that in some way relates to journalism, the delivery of such content also becomes about power and participation (Bennett 2013, Dutta 2011, Georgiou 2012, Lewis 2015, Reese 2015). This is because media, and more specifically ‘news’ is a cultural intermediary (Zelizer 2008, Bird 2011) that exists as a site where identities can be negotiated (Dutta 2011, Georgiou 2012, Hall 1980, Hall 1996, Silverstone 2007). And because the mediation of identities takes place in the public sphere where journalistic work also exists, “the ability to generate news – through journalism – is therefore a tool of power” (Becker and Vlad 2009, 62). In relation to the advocacy function of NGOs, Dutta says that power therefore becomes an organising concept where “the mediated spaces of news become entry points for social transformations through the articulations of discourses that challenge the status quo” (2011, 268). So mediating messages via producing news content relates to the agency an actor has to tell a story. This situates participating in the process of production of news as a point of interrogation for intent: in the case of an NGO reporting news is it to advocate, to report, or to do both?

The significance of NGOs producing news reportage as an object of journalistic inquiry is amplified when the location of this particular case study is considered too. Arguably the world’s ‘canary in the coal mine’ for living with the effects of climatic changes, both Harris (2014) and Robie (2014) say that discussing climate change in the Pacific region goes beyond being just a topic-of-the-day conversation: it is an issue of human rights. But adequately addressing the topic in the news media is a challenge within the region and outside of it. In fact, the challenges of communicating not just the nuances of climate change to audiences in Oceania, but of any issues concerning the entire region are complex. Within the Pacific
itself, journalism industries face many challenges to communicating issues of public importance. Undeveloped media systems, structural and technological problems, corruption and a lack of training (Koruuba, 2012) often hamper the efforts of journalists to effectively relay the urgency of addressing issues such as climate change. Structural issues within media systems are also identified by many scholars, who are critical of western and colonial models that don’t fit the nuances of many Pacific Island nation cultures that are much more relationship focused and tribally-focused than the prevailing colonial media systems account for (Koruaba 2012, Papoutsaki 2007, Hackett 2013).

Outside of the islands, the challenges for communicating issues of public importance are equally multiple. This paper does not have space to explore these from other perspectives like geo-politics or international relations. But in regards to news media, framing poses a significant issue for journalistic coverage of climate change and natural disasters in the Pacific. Regional news outlets, particularly within Australia and New Zealand, are prone to ongoing negative framing and ‘othering’ of Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders. If Pacific islands aren’t being talked about as attractive holiday destinations, they are seen as being either ‘proof’ of climate change, while Pacific Islanders themselves are seen through the negative lens of being victims of these ‘disasters’ bring, or climate change refugees causing a strain on each country’s resources, (Farbotko 2005, Dreher and Voyer 2014). News media in this instance works to affirm Pacific Islanders as being “others” and “victims”, while taking away any agency from islanders as being proactive in these situations. So within this region, contextualised by Western media systems layered on top of distinctly non-Western socio-cultural contexts, interrogating new models of news production takes on another layer of meaning. Explains Tsui for Nieman Lab (2009):

"NGOs whose production models are based on user participation might help us better understand the dynamics of how distant events are brought to our attention. They provide an alternative perspective, one that recognizes the possibility and the need for other cultures to bring matters to our attention in their own voice, rather than the ones we decide they should have."

Again, this brings the question back to intent. How do we make sense and understand the role of this type of reporting on the boundaries of journalism? If it is indeed an example of audiences bringing distant events to our attention, in their own voices, then what values and principles guide their reporting? In other words: Why is this reporting happening?

**Power, culture and influence: normative implications of NGO journalism**

Journalism as a concept is a surprisingly durable (Lewis 2015). Despite having ‘flimsy and malleable borders’ when it is considered as a cultural product (Zelizer 2008, Bird 2011, Carlson and Lewis 2015), there is much room for news production practices to continue to evolve. Consequently, Lewis says that “perhaps, with respect to industry changes, what we are not seeing a wholesale collapse of legacy borders but rather a whole series of disruptions” (2015, 220). Dueze says that within this context what we are seeing is the reorganisation of news through the overall rise of ‘participatory journalism’ – which could include NGO-journalism. This participation exists in the form of disruptions to the status-quo of newsrooms through technological advances, convergence of media logics, and a democratising of access to news-making tools. This participatory approach consequently
“serves as a corrective function to traditional or otherwise entrenched notions of what it means to be a journalist” (Deuze 2008, 112).

With this in mind, several scholars have advocated for a new understanding of what journalism ought to be. On evaluating new forms of public and citizen journalism, Min (2016), for example, suggests that conversation should be a new organising principle for news. Conversation here is defined as “any type of talk and interactions, purposive and non-purposive, as private chatter as well as formal deliberation” (573). With reference to Reese’s focus on new emergent deliberative spaces (2009), the idea is that conversation can contribute to strengthening democracy through meaningful journalism. To this Min adds:

Traditionally, a good journalism used to be derived from observing such norms as expertise, accuracy, objectivity, and impartiality. While those norms may still be useful, an understanding of journalism through the conversational prism opens the idea that ‘truth-telling’ is in fact created through forthrightness and discourse, and is subject to change over time (2016, 573).

Situating conversation as an organizing principle for journalism brings to light another emphasis of journalism at its boundaries: A focus on bottom-up approaches to producing news that places community at the centre of news production. Rosenstiel (2013, n.p.), for example, says journalism has always been conversation made public and that to this extent it belongs to communities: “Journalism has always been a service connecting people to one another, to government, to goods and services, to social institutions and more — in other words, the creation of communities.” This emphasis is echoed by Jarvis (2013). He argues news should be reorganised as a service that helps communities accomplish their goals.

Within this picture, journalism can find value (as it has always done) by asking the questions that aren’t being asked - but in addition, by using the power of narrative to give context to community conversations, as Min suggests. Jarvis suggests that journalists in turn become advocates (2013, n.p), “isn’t advocacy on behalf of principles and the public the true test of journalism? The choices we make about what to cover and how we cover it and what the public needs to know are acts of advocacy on the public’s behalf.” This brings the discussion back to Powers’ (2015) suggestion that research into NGO’s communicative practices is important to widen the lens of journalistic inquiry. By examining NGO-journalism one is essentially addressing the dichotomy between journalism and advocacy. And it’s a dichotomy that as he and Jarvis point out, may not have such relevance as news production processes are reorganized and reshaped by new disruptions and logics at the boundaries of journalism. The extent to which these boundaries are being blurred, will be discussed through the case study.

METHOD

The empirical research is based on a single case study, focused on the reporting of Cyclone Pam by 350 Pacific, within its wider organisational bounds as a sub-group of (NGO) and social movement, 350.org. Fieldwork was conducted in Port Vila, Vanuatu, July 2015. The research was for a master thesis project, so time constraints limited the amount of fieldwork possible.

Wilson and Peterson (2002) say that anthropology is an ideal method to analyse new, online media because the internet and all its products are inherently cultural. This study
frames journalism as being a culture (see Zelizer 2008, Bird 2011 and Carlson and Lewis 2015), with news as a cultural intermediary between information and the audience. An anthropological approach therefore seemed a logical frame to start building the research project from. Additionally, the methodological approach responds to and builds on existing literature that intersects at the observation point of NGO-journalism in the Pacific. Specifically, the approach has been developed drawing on comments from scholars researching journalistic boundary maintenance, NGO-journalism, or also Pacific communication and journalism studies.

Data collection involved participant observation and in-depth, snowballed, semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork was to establish who in the 350 Vanuatu team was involved with reporting on Cyclone Pam, and the cultural context the reporting took place in. I intended to hold focus groups with the team as well as in-depth interview with 350 Vanuatu coordinator Isso Nihmei. However, during fieldwork it became apparent that the reporting was primarily carried out by Isso. Although several of the team’s members were very active with helping prepare for and then clean up after the cyclone, it was just Isso involved in reporting on it. It was the wider 350 Pacific and 350.org networks that enabled the reports to be circulated online. In total, I conducted three in-depth interviews. One with Isso while in Port Vila, and two over skype; one with Aaron Packard and the other with 350 storytelling coordinator Thelma Young, who was based in New York at the time of the cyclone and coordinate 350’s global, social and online media coverage of the event from there. I was also unable to secure an interview with another member of 350 Pacific’s team, a limitation of the study.

An ethnographic approach of the researcher as observer was used while in Vanuatu. Participant observation was useful for several reasons. Firstly, it gave me an insight into what advocating for awareness of climate change in Vanuatu meant to Isso and 350 Vanuatu. While conducting participant observation, I also had informal meetings with other NGOs operating from Port Vila. These meetings helped me understand 350 Vanuatu’s relationship with the wider aid and NGO community in Port Vila. It also provided insight into what other reporting happened during the storm. At one organisation, for example, a staff member was also a freelance correspondent for a major international news network. They said they were able to file some stories during the cyclone, but I was told that their full television crew wasn’t able to fly into Vanuatu to start full coverage until a few days after the storm had passed.

Following data collection, a thematic analysis was conducted, grouping results in relation to specific research questions aimed at understanding what values and principles guided the actors to produce the content.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results suggest that 350 Pacific produced content that relates both to journalism and advocacy. While this is in many respects an anticipated outcome, the research reveals several more surprising insights. Perhaps most noteworthy is that at each level of the organisation, the actors working with 350 Pacific perceived themselves as advocates. But they did not seem in any capacity to be acting with the intentions of providing a service that they related to being journalistic by nature. Journalism was always perceived of as being the responsibility of ‘others’, yet all three interviewees were aware of and sought to a certain extent, to fill a news gap for local, Pacific based, reporting on Cyclone Pam. Consequently,
one suggestion for conceptualising the role of such advocates is as “unintentional journalists”; people or organisations who do the work of journalism without intending to do so.

*Intentionally producing advocacy*

Overall, the reasons given for producing the content seem to closely relate to 350 Pacific engaging in communication for social change (Dutta 2013) – reflecting an intention to use media to advocate a position on climate change in the Pacific. At a local level this relates to Nihmei’s first reason for reporting during the cyclone. This was to position 350 Vanuatu as an active member of the Port Vila community and wider Vanuatu and Pacific NGO community. This relates to what Dutta describes as being part of acquiring social capital. Says Nihmei:

“My idea of that time was like to show what 350 Vanuatu is doing. Like showing this is what we’ve been doing and now we’re also active during cyclones…. I wanted to pull the attention of other NGOs, and the Government and so [they would be like] ‘oh - this crew, these guys are doing a great job’ and so if they have opportunities I can ask my crews ‘oh you should go apply’ and then you know, and [they] give the opportunities to 350 because we’re all doing voluntary jobs.”

Nihmei said he volunteered right up until the storm hit, then decided to stay overnight at the meteorological office, which is where his office for his day job as a climate change field officer within the local office of an intergovernmental organisation is stationed (at the time of research, July 2015). It was during this process that the potential for showcasing the work of 350 Vanuatu to not just the local community, but a broader audience through media, occurred to him.

His acquisition of social capital put him in a privileged position of having access to scientific information as well as the technological means – through a power generator – to deliver information from Vanuatu to the 350 Pacific team while the storm had cut off power in several other parts of the country. This highlights the role of serendipity in him creating news content – it was an unintentional outcome of his intention to showcase the work of 350 Vanuatu. This was also reflected by 350 Oceania team leader Aaron Packard, who said, “Certainly like this was just on a whole other scale and our organisers on the ground were just very active so, kind of, that hit a sweet spot of capability for us [in terms of covering the cyclone].”

As the storm hit Nihmei first sent written updates including official meteorological reports, via Facebook, to his boss in Port Vila and the 350 Pacific team stationed in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. 350 Pacific then organised and distributed his raw material. Before and after the storm he uploaded videos to YouTube – the first of which showed Nihmei explaining what the 350 Vanuatu crew were doing and the latter of which surveyed the damage of storm. It seemed that it was at the point that Nihmei’s boss asked him for updates that he moved from perceiving himself as a local volunteer to being in a position to use the storm to advocate for climate justice in a global space:

We talked about the message I want to share. And those news [reports] share my message...to other people who are somewhere else who are like ‘oh this shows
really how intense the cyclone is and how dangerous it is for the people’ - especially for us ni-Vans.

...They [audiences] have to understand that, you know, we are suffering the worst impacts of it [climate change]. And so if we are at the frontline, we should be at the frontline of tackling this global issue...

Here, Nihmei makes a connection that leads to his second reason for reporting during Cyclone Pam. If he is able to use the 350 Pacific network to share his local accounts of the storm, then this will put his voice at the centre of a wider discussion about climate change, again relating his intentions to use communication to bring about social change.

This highlights several factors. Firstly, emerging digital technologies allow some NGOs in remote locations to produce media that bypasses their need to use existing journalistic structures (Jepperson et al. 2014, Merry 2010, Powers 2014) and this is confirmed here. In the case of 350 Pacific, a globalised, networked media landscape allowed Nihmei a means to navigate dominant media logics by participating in the production of his own media content. He has a certain agency over his own voice and made a conscious decision to use it for advocacy.

This further relates to what Servaes and Lie describe as the global/local nexus of international media (2007). This news was produced in a “glocalised” (Bennett, 2015) space – a factor particularly relevant to the geographically isolated Pacific region. Here, globalization, as discussed, is an indication of the implicit structures that actors seek to work within. Servaes and Lie (2007), Bennett (2013), and Hall (1980, 1993, 1996) highlight that these structures are based on power struggles as different actors try and assert their identities into local and global discussions. And as power and participation relate to mediating identities, it places culture – the link between power and identity - as an underlying reason for producing media content.

Climate change is important here because as Harris (2014) and Robie (2014) point out, the implications of a changing environment become human rights issues for the region; Nihmei’s livelihood is at stake – preserving his way of life is thus a motivating factor for his reporting. This is reflected in the implicit intent Nihmei expressed when he reflected on his news coverage; his advocacy directly relates to preserving the ni-Van way of life that he describes as being disrupted due to changes in the local climate.

**Using global media to amplify local voices**

While Nihmei was aware of the power and agency he enacted by producing news content, he repeatedly states that his primarily objective was to send out the information as opposed to shape it or have any editorial control over it. Nihmei operates from a ni-Van perspective and perhaps within this epistemology he doesn’t relate to the western methods of reporting. Further, one cannot assume that NGO actors are going to follow the same logic not just in their intent for producing information but to way they produce it. There is much criticism, for example, of colonial media systems in the Pacific region that don’t account for the dominant relationship-focused paradigm of Pacific societies (Korououba 2014). So while Nihmei was happy to provide information, he didn’t consider it his role to manage or connect it to audiences.
This in turn highlights the structural role of 350 Pacific in enabling the reporting to happen. Which is quite ironic considering that 350 is a global organisation that has developed within a Western media context. That said, the notion of social change, and in turn of much NGO journalism, is based on the fact that that organisations can work within the existing dominant global media structures in order to challenge the status quo. This is rather than creating completely new avenues to do this where their voices may not be so easily heard (Dutta 2013, Powers 2015, Srinivasan 2006). Referring back to Nihmei’s offering of information, this further highlights the fact that his participation was reliant on there being a foundation of a network society (Boyd 2011, Castells 2012, Walters 2011) in existence in the Pacific. If he was operating solely within a localised, small community group without privileged access to media infrastructures, he may not have access to the wider social media reach that 350 Pacific and 350 had.

Once his raw material was sent to 350 Pacific, a wider communications team was responsible for its distribution and editorial strategy. But did the staff of 350 Pacific also perceive themselves as advocates or how did they perceive of their role in the communications process? At this level of management, intentions for producing a live blog seemed to echo Nihmei’s desire to share his on-the-ground experiences in Vanuatu. Reflecting on the decision-making process and the principles that guided the news production, Packard said: “What we really just focused on was having authentic voices from on the ground...and showing solidarity with them and that is something that I think people wherever they are can relate to.”

New York-based Thelma Young, digital storyteller for 350 and social media coordinator for the organisation during the cyclone, also frequently referenced a desire to use the wider network to “amplify local voices to direct aid and other things”:

We don't want communities to think that they're alone. And the beautiful thing about having a pretty massive social media reach is that it does matter to groups and I've gotten a lot of feedback being like ‘thank you for sharing that post’.

Furthermore, the team expressed that they were producing the content in response to Nihmei’s desire to share his story, as opposed to them intentionally seeking out an opportunity to produce news coverage. In terms of intent, this is where the boundaries get blurry. At a local level, Nihmei perceived himself as a volunteer and an advocate. At a management level however, 350 Pacific team members saw their role as being as much about raising awareness for what was going on in Vanuatu as it was about using the storm to explicitly talk about climate justice. Said Packard:

We chose not to really push climate change from the outset, and like come to that a little bit later because we just wanted to be sensitive to what was going on ...without feeling like we needed to push our agenda. And if people will come to us then they will start to see that we're about climate change in other ways.... Which I think in this case was a good approach.

Young also reflected this sentiment, saying, “We don't want to co-opt people's tragedies for our own political gain...This was just a massive ass storm hitting people we love and that was the kind of angle that we really wanted to go for more rather than being like 'see, climate disasters are happening'.”
Here again the element of serendipitous reporting involved in their coverage is highlighted; through their organisational structures and consequent access to ‘sub-altern’ (Dutta, 2007) communities, 350 Pacific is offsetting news outlets’ often diminishing capabilities (Powers 2015). And by not pushing climate change their coverage was arguably more neutral in its intent to share authentic local voices and cover the storm as it happened. However, this unintentional outcome cannot be seen without referencing the strategic objectives that drove the news production. Said Young: “There’s the public good aspect but I think for me personally and a lot of other staff, it's the value of solidarity. Especially with communities on the ground with climate change, that is one of our key values.”

Her intent to express solidarity echoes Packard’s approach to the news production: This was a direct attempt to respond to the local context that the news was being produced within. Packard situated 350 Pacific as an organisation that was, through their coverage of the storm, able to challenge the dominant media logics and structures that push a victimised, tragic framing of Pacific Islanders (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012, McNamara and Gibson 2009, Harris 2014): “So not being afraid to have unedited voices from the Pacific and having that leave the movement and shape and actually reflect the diversity and agency and Power of Pacific Islanders,” he says. The underlying assumption here is that media can be used as a space for social change (Dutta 2013, Rodriguez et al. 2013, Srinivasan 2006). Thus, at each intersection, 350 Pacific’s aims suggest that their reporting was an intentional construction to give evidence to their climate change advocacy.

On 350 Pacific’s relationship to journalism

So if 350 Pacific staff members related their news production to advocacy, did they in any way see themselves as journalists too? Each interviewee seemed to distance themselves from journalists and the processes of journalism. The implicit assumption was of journalists as being ‘others’ to themselves and their work. While Nihmei didn’t seek to produce media for a journalistic purpose, he actively referenced journalism as a way to strategically share his messaging:

It’s all part of you know, communication...I don't really care about how people use those pictures...even if they acknowledge me...but also they could make money out of it... like write an article or sell it... I don’t care about this. But the important part is like, I just want people to you know...feel how we experienced it [the storm].

Packard also distances himself from any self-relation to journalism. Instead, he sees journalism as offering a useful service for 350 Pacific to share its messaging. He describes mainstream media as being “helpful in reaching new audiences and amplifying the situation”. This reflects more traditional journalist/source relationships between NGOs and news media.

And while Nihmei didn’t see himself as a reporter, Young did. Although she referenced the power of storytelling and amplifying local content as part of her job, she didn’t relate her own work to journalism per se. Instead, she saw that as being the role that Nihmei took on:
I think especially for disaster reporting there's definitely been a definite increase in the importance of citizen reporters and I think especially because...like climate organisers, they're often these small youth groups on the ground.

...it's no more just running local campaigns about climate change. They are now first responders, they are now reporters. And I've seen this in almost every single cyclone or local disaster since then.

Here she explicitly acknowledges that NGOs and community groups can become reporters through their advocacy. But again, she distances herself from this process – the implication being journalism is something ‘they do’ not ‘us’. This reinforces that advocacy is an intentional process within 350 Pacific’s production and journalism as a practice is an unintentional outcome of it.

Finally, despite not connecting themselves with journalism or being journalists, all interviewees showed an awareness of the role journalism could play in reporting news events from globally remote locations – as Nihmei’s comments above reflect: It was about strategic messaging in a way that was respectful and in solidarity with the community who were sharing the messages. As all interviewees repeated, 350 Pacific actively sees itself as part of the ‘climate movement’. And therefore, as Young concludes: “a lot of our rhetoric, and a lot of our work, is about the [climate] movement itself and how do we support the movement.”

Unintentionally producing journalism

It wouldn’t be fair to say that the organisation wasn’t completely aware that what they were doing could be considered as providing a news service. Both Packard and Young note that they set up the live blog and continued to roll coverage because audiences of the 350 Pacific Facebook pages were asking for updates. The team was actively responding to audiences who wanted news on what was happening. Furthermore, all interviewees actively sought to engage with media for the purpose of communicating for social change. They knew that by mimicking the norms of journalism (Powers 2015) they could mediate their messages. More will be discussed in relation to this shortly, but first – how does one account for the fact that despite not perceiving themselves as journalists, 350 Pacific clearly offered a news service during Cyclone Pam? The serendipitous nature of their reporting is two-fold. Firstly, it is situational and responsive to Nihmei being an active volunteer in his community. This is noted in his reflections of Cyclone Pam as it passed through Port Vila:

"During the night, all the electricity was out. The next day everything was gone, like the whole of Port Vila was totally dark from Friday to Saturday and there was nothing on air. But we were lucky because...the whole night we had electricity because we're using the standby generator and also the internet and so that's why I just like, keep updating..."

This highlights the simple fact that he spotted a need for information and sought to fill it. There was such little access to working technological infrastructure during the cyclone, and few, if any, foreign correspondents present. While in Vanuatu I spoke to one journalist who had been in Port Vila during Cyclone Pam and produced content for Australia’s ABC
following the storm. But this reporter said ABC’s team could not get there till a few days later for logistical reasons. The Guardian Australia also sent a reporter and ran a live blog following the storm, but again that blog didn’t start until several days after Pam had left Port Vila. Nihmei meanwhile, had shot and uploaded two videos surveying the extent of damage within a few hours of the storm passing.

Young further backs up this situational, responsive reporting process. 350 Pacific was not actively seeking to produce information on the cyclone but instead the staff decided to act in reaction to Nihmei offering information. She repeatedly said “it really was just Isso” in reference to the initial news reports coming out from Vanuatu. Young further reflected on the fact that unlike other storms she’d covered with 350.org – in Vanuatu there was hardly any other citizen eyewitness accounts available on social media:

“A lot of this really hinged on the fact that Isso was actually a hero and a social media champ... he started sending us photos before the storm, of people kind of scrambling to get to prepare and he even recorded this video I remember of as the storm was coming... so he was already sending us this great content and I was like ok, how do we get this content to a greater audience.”

One could assume that this meant that 350 Pacific intended to produce news content – because they were being responsive and it could be seen as an active choice to report on Cyclone Pam. But as Packard highlights, this situational response isn’t actually so serendipitous when 350 Pacific’s approach to communications is considered: “This is how 350 tends to work as well... is like not be super rigid and pre-planned but we do rapid response work when it comes up, when it’s needed.” Therefore, it could be seen that part of 350 Pacific’s strategy is to be in a position to respond to and highlight disasters as they are asked by communities to do so. Again, this brings the intention back to using media for their climate change advocacy rather than with a journalistic intent.

*Incidentally providing more ‘island perspectives’*

The leads to the second aspect that shows 350 Pacific unintentionally partook in the practice of journalism. As well as filling a general news gap for information on the storm, their production relates to fulfilling a gap for reporting that includes more islander perspectives (Papoutsaki and Sharp 2005, Tacchi et al. 2013). The response Nihmei gave above shows the dual processes of advocacy and journalism that were at play, making it hard to separate one from another. While he has a mandate for advocacy and doesn’t perceive himself as a journalist, he also acknowledges the power of his voice being thrust into an international discussion. As do his colleagues. 350 Pacific is thus at once advocating as part of the climate justice movement while also creating the unintentional infrastructure to tell news stories in an authentic way, as Pacific scholars have suggested should be done by media focused on the region (Korauaba 2014, Harris 2014, Dreher and Voyer 2014, Papoutsaki and Sharp 2005, Papoutsaki and Harris 2008, Robie 2014). This further relates to the general expression of discontent that 350 Pacific staff expressed in regards to existing media representations of Pacific Islanders. Says Packard:
So often the story or narrative that's told about the Pacific Islands is of white men or white outsiders...we’ve been quite focused I think primarily on trying to tell a different story about the Pacific islands to the rest of the world.

The organisation’s strategy is consequently an attempt to use media to challenge dominant news narratives and negative framings of Pacific Islanders. Farbokto and Lazrus say the dominant narratives and frames are problematic (2012). They situate Pacific Islanders as ‘tragic victims’ rather than active agents in their own affairs, “and in doing so entrench them in inequitable power relations, redirecting fate from their own hands” (2012, 383). Packard notes that 350 Pacific’s mandate is to challenge the victimisation of Pacific Islands. He says their communications work aims to present “authentic voices” in a “Pacific way” with the intention being that the voices of the people lead their climate justice movement, “rather than trying to pressure the western ideals of getting media hits all the time”. It thus incidentally responds to the calls to put island perspectives at the centre of reporting, moving their advocacy to having a journalistic purpose, without intending to do so.

Young also gives a frank observation of this media situation. Justifying 350 Pacific’s response to Cyclone Pam, she says: “And the fact that it was Vanuatu, most likely the global media would not be covering it...and you know, there weren’t any other journalists there.” Again, this could show that 350 Pacific intentionally engaged in journalism to fill a news gap. But, as the analysis has indicated, their coverage is still entrenched within a discourse of advocacy. In response to Nihmei sending his eyewitness accounts, 350 Pacific produced coverage according to their organisational principles of listening to the community and letting them lead the news production. These in turn relate to the organisation’s value of showing solidarity for local communities on the frontlines of climate change. They used global media to amplify local voices and in doing so mimicked journalism by adapting some of its norms for the purpose of advocacy (Cottle and Nolan 2007, Powers 2015a). While this was intended to amplify local voices, the unintentional outcome was that it also thrust the organisation into a global power struggle to mediate cultural identities through the media (Hall 2006, Morley and Robins 1995). And in the creation of this news hub they have incidentally created space for ni-Van reporting, fulfilling a call for more local journalism in the Pacific (Dreher and Voyer 2015, Papoutsaki and Sharp 2005, Papoutsaki and Harris 2008, Harris 2014).

**Discussion**

350 Pacific’s media production in many ways shows characteristics to those identified in the literature on NGO-journalism. As McPherson (2015) and Russell (2013) found, and echoing the above findings, 350 Pacific were able to use the structures of media to not only produce information but to meet their organisational objectives. Furthermore, in doing this they were as Powers describes, using digital tools to become their own news providers (2015) and as Gillmor (2008) and Reese (2015) suggest, their product could be conceptualised as a news hub. This also highlights the impact of NGOs with an international staff team to capitalize on changing technologies to ensure voices get heard in faraway places. As previous scholars have observed, they consequently created a “hybrid” product that is disrupting journalism as it is popularly known.
But the fact that a journalistic product seems to be an unintentional outcome of 350 Pacific’s advocacy raises questions about the extent to which their distributed product could be a viable and legitimate news service. As Gillmor (2008) describes, they are ‘almost journalists’ and as this paper argues they are even more so, ‘unintentional journalists’ doing the work of journalism without intending to do so. And in regards to media coverage of climate change in the Pacific, this raises questions about the use of disasters as ‘media spectacle’ for event-driven NGO reporting (Anderson 2014, Bødker and Neverla 2012). One could argue as Farbotko and Lazrus do that “climate exposed populations are being positioned by foreign actors to represent an entire planet under threat” (2012, 388). The assumption here is that regardless of fulfilling a news gap, 350 Pacific and 350.org are capitalising on cyclones and disasters as evidence for their advocacy and in doing so, potentially undermining the agency of the communities they report on in order to serve their own agendas. This in turn could undermine the potential credibility of their product as a new addition to the expanding field of journalism.

But reflecting on the research, this doesn’t seem to be particularly evident within the findings. Some scholars suggest the changing global media environment is having a negative impact on the integrity and credibility of NGOs as they seek to align themselves closer with the structures of journalism (Cottle and Nolan 2007, McPherson 2015). Others say that in a crowded and digitally saturated public sphere it is harder than ever before for NGOs to have messages heard (Powers 2014, Thrall et al. 2014). While this study doesn’t measure the impact of 350 Pacific’s content, it does show through their production processes that neither of these outcomes are necessarily the case. As Dutta (2013) and Lewis (2015) both say of their respective fields, at the centre of these production practices is the notion of power. Power to push boundaries, power to mediate spaces and identities, and power to create new entry points for social transformations.

When this is related to 350 Pacific’s media output it can be argued that more than reducing or diminishing their core advocacy work, in this instance the unintentional journalism the team performed was a powerful act of inclusion. It did what they intended to do: It put indigenous voices at the centre of the reporting and did so by listening to the community experiencing the news event. Say Papoutsaki and Sharp: “The western style of reporting cannot be transplanted into a fragile developing South Pacific society and economy and assume that it would serve the same purpose, meet the same objectives and be absorbed by the public in the same way” 2005, 3). It is about considering what is relative to news. And if climate change in the Pacific is an issue of human rights, then 350 Pacific’s ability to report is relative to the function of news, regardless of its intent. As an unintentional corrective function, 350 Pacific therefore challenged the notion of what it means to be a journalist in the Pacific by “placing of the capabilities of producing media messages in the hands of the local communities that have traditionally been subalternized” (Dutta 2013, 272).

Consequently, the act of reporting on Cyclone Pam created a discursive space that disrupted the status quo of climate change reporting in and about the region: By using global structures to amplify local voices, 350 Pacific challenged the top-down flow of content in the region (Papoustaki and Sharp, 2005). They also offered a way to produce media outside of existing journalism outlets that often replicate western news values as opposed to those that are responsive to the cultural contexts of Pacific communities (Korauaba 2014, Robie 2014). In turn, their production offered a way to challenge the ‘carbon colonialism’ that Robie (2014) says characterises climate change news reporting in the region.
Finally, the values guiding their news production were entrenched in logic more reflective of the cultural context of the region than some “outside” reporting. By valuing ‘islander perspectives’ (Papoustaki and Harris 2008) and putting them at the centre of their storytelling, the team challenged approaches to media that place emphasis on elite sources, policy reports, unemotional reporting and impartiality (Min 2015). It did this by being guided by an alternative set of values and production principles, that could be summarised as:

- Being led by the communities the team serves,
- being reflective of the cultural context in which the news was produced,
- showing long-term commitment to building relationships within communities,
- and not being afraid to tell authentic stories that don’t necessarily represent the dominant media framing of the community in question

It can consequently be seen that 350 Pacific reorganised journalism as they saw a need to – even if that need was interpreted as advocacy.

The nuances of news reporting in the Pacific bring the discussion back to having a wider normative implication. If advocacy can be news, then how does this impact our understanding of the function of journalism? Does it exist to give voice to the voiceless, to be a watchdog, to hold those in power to account, all of the above, or should it be something completely different? Do these functions still hold true when other actors begin to tell stories once reserved for the news media to report and distribute? For example, as one of the world’s ‘frontlines of climate change’, who has the power to tell Pacific stories and on whose terms? As Zelizer remarks, “not all of [journalism’s] key terms remain as relevant to understanding journalism as they might have been at the time they were first proposed” (2012, 459). Referring to Rosenstiel’s (2013) summary on how the future of journalism will be determined, the relevance and function of news and to a degree, civil life, will be answered in part by questioning the purpose and the social value of journalism. And as 350 Pacific shows, at the boundaries of journalism a hybrid product can serve a journalistic purpose and have an important socio-cultural function without having to adhere to more traditional organising principles and values like objectivity and neutrality.

**Conclusion**

In exploring this example of NGO-journalism I have aimed to show that the lens of journalistic inquiry can be broadened, as Zelizer, Bird, Powers and Harrington suggest it should be. 350 Pacific’s hybrid news outputs not only responded to the journalism needs of the Pacific region but also is characteristic of a new participatory style (Deuze 2008) of journalism that is based on listening to communities and providing a community service. One has to consider that as Jarvis says, “if it isn’t advocacy, then it isn’t journalism” and that consequently, there are new ways of reorganizing journalism that put emphasis on the needs of communities as opposed to an objective style of reporting. The findings are ultimately a modest response to a wider call that Blumler and Cushion (2014) put out for empirical research on the normative dimensions that are shaping a new global news ecosystem. However, due to the limited scope of this study, it is relatively difficult to generalize or apply the findings to other NGOs. Other organisations, for example, might not have the loose organizing structure that 350 has as an NGO that shares characteristics with
social movements. This may limit their ability to produce such localized, grassroots content that is led by the community the organization is embedded in.

So, a call for further research: Anecdotally, I have observed several other NGOs with arguably more rigid structures, conduct similar reporting efforts during cyclones in the Pacific. UNICEF New Zealand, for example, had its Pacific communications manager stationed in Fiji and a team of communications staff between there and New Zealand during Cyclone Winston, in early 2016. The team in Fiji filed eyewitness accounts of the storms, shot videos and took images of Winston’s damage that were edited and shared online by UNICEF New Zealand. These reports were distributed to some online mainstream media networks in New Zealand as well (Spyksma, 2016). More empirical research into the principles and values guiding the news production practices of organisations like UNICEF, would add depth to discussions about NGO journalism.

Additionally, a further study could thus seek to measure its impact and the influence of 350 Pacific content once it was produced. Perhaps more importantly though – it could investigate how Nihmei’s raw media and subsequent interviews are framed and used by traditional media and other outlets, following distribution by 350 Pacific. This might offer some further insights into just how influential NGO-journalism is when it enters the global public sphere, and as to whether Nihmei’s intentions for producing the content are matched by the way other journalists and media outlets perceive of and use it. All of these suggestions could help textualise and build a broader understanding of the consequences of this shift in some NGO’s communicative processes and how they impact the field of journalism.

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