
The privatization of development through global communication industries: Living Proof?

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Karin Gwinn Wilkins

University of Texas at Austin, USA

Florencia Enghel

Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

Abstract

Development is meant to alleviate problems in the interests of the public good, yet the growing dominance of private donors problematizes this conceptualization. Working through a political-economic analysis of development, we see global communications as an industry that channels wealth from citizens into the hands of few corporate moguls, who then have the resources to assert their agendas in a global development context. We begin by conceptualizing development and social change within communication studies, paying attention to the privatization of aid within global capitalism. Next, we contextualize our case study, describing the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and ONE, promoted by Bono, as the funding and management settings of the Living Proof campaign. We analyze the initiative's construction of development problems, its articulation of how communication is expected to work toward social change, and its conceptualizations of success. The dominant theme of Living Proof program is that "real people" have achieved development success, which can be shared as "proof" with website consumers. We conclude by considering how such a framing serves the agenda of privatized development within a neoliberal project.

Keywords

communication, development, Gates Foundation, global, privatization

Corresponding author:

Karin Gwinn Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin, A0800 | University Station, Austin, TX 78751, USA.

Email: karin.wilkins@austin.utexas.edu

What are the consequences of the increasing privatization of international development cooperation? Tracing the ways in which global communication industries produce political-economic capital, we connect development approaches to a neoliberal project that legitimizes free markets through the privileging of individual empowerment as an approach to social change. Following a brief exposition of development strategies in relation to global communication industries, we concentrate on Living Proof, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as a case study for this discussion.

Living Proof illustrates how individual pursuit of happiness and empowerment are identified as the most effective approach to social change in a privately funded, media-driven development initiative. The Living Proof website documents “stories that are too often ignored,” promoting “the incredible progress being achieved by some of the world’s poorest people.” Administered by ONE, a private organization directed by a board that includes rock star-cum-humanitarian Bono, the initiative promotes stories of “individuals transforming their communities and countries, and the smart aid investments that are helping them realize their goals” (Living Proof, 2011). Through the accumulation of wealth and the prestige of celebrity, Gates and Bono leverage their resources as a way to control the diagnosis of, and prescription for, critical development concerns.

In our analysis, we connect the discourse of this media-driven initiative to the broader political-economic foundations of its funding and management. We begin by conceptualizing development and social change within communication studies, focusing attention on the privatization of aid within global capitalism from the perspective of the political economy of communications and the role of celebrities in endorsing a private aid agenda. Next, we contextualize our case study, describing the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and ONE as the funding and management settings of the Living Proof campaign. Finally, we discuss the initiative’s construction of development problems, its articulation of how communication is expected to work toward social change, and its conceptualizations of success. We conclude by looking at how such a framing serves the agenda of privatized development within a neoliberal project.

Development, communication and social change

In 1985, Raymond Williams challenged the idea of “development” as an “unexamined idea” able to “limit and confuse virtually any generalizing description of the current world economic order,” and argued that “it is in analysis of the real practices subsumed by development that more specific recognitions are necessary and possible” (1985: 104). To date, development remains a contested notion (see e.g. Eriksson Baaz, 2005; Nederveen Pieterse, 2009), while critical studies challenge us to continue our explorations of how development agendas are constrained by political and economic structures; without this critique of discourse, we cannot engage in constructive action (Skelton and Allen, 2000; Wilkins, 2000, 2008). Development intervention has been traditionally understood as the distribution of grants or loans from wealthy to so-called developing countries, either through bilateral or multilateral agencies. Current processes of globalization contribute to a changing development geometry, in which social change more

broadly understood has come to encompass the work of communities and social movements (Shah and Wilkins, 2004; Wilkins, 2008).

Recognizing process and power as integral to the conceptualization of “development,” Nederveen Pieterse defines it as “a struggle over the shape of futures” (2009: xviii), noting that the standard unit of development, that is, the nation, is being overtaken by globalization and regionalization; international institutions and market forces are overtaking the role of the state as the conventional agent of development; and the classic aim of development, that is, modernization or catching up with advanced countries, is no longer compelling in light of neoliberalism’s excesses, profound imbalances and economic instabilities in the world economy. Importantly, Nederveen Pieterse proposes that instead of abandoning the idea of development as suggested by post-development thinking (e.g. Escobar, 1995), a possible response is “to qualify the crisis, acknowledging the failures of the development record but also its achievements, avoiding simplistic, one-sided assessments” (2009: 1).

If we problematize development assistance as a complex process, we can then recognize that some interventions improve conditions in substantial ways without disregarding shortcomings such as, for example, unrealistic timelines, abrupt termination of funding, poor planning, interventions disrespectful of cultural conditions, or a narrow focus on projects and individuals at the expense of attention to social processes (Quarry and Ramírez, 2009). This critical approach calls for constructive critique in order to enable reflexive insight toward political action.

Development communication, also known as communication for development (Servaes, 1999) and communication for social change (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006), engages research and action intended to problematize and improve practice. Critical approaches to development communication question the way in which the development industry functions (Enghel, 2011) based on assumptions about “the nature of the problems addressed, appropriate solutions, and communities at risk” (Wilkins, 2008: 1235). In line with this approach, Chakravarty has observed “an astonishing acceleration both in the scale of development projects based on information and communication technologies and in its symbolic significance in promising a painless transition to modernity” (2008: 37), critiquing widespread claims of the “magical potential” of these technologies in transforming lives that ignore the wide inequalities in access. World Bank economist Milanovic’s oft-cited analyses of income inequality establish that not only has the disparity between wealthy and poor been rising within individual countries, but also global inequality among world citizens is even greater (Milanovic, 2011). Graphic depictions of global income distribution as a champagne glass, based on earlier UNDP reports, illustrate the dramatic differences between the excess of resources among the wealthiest 1 percent, with access to as much as the poorest 57 percent (GSC, 2012).

In the field of development communication, participatory approaches have been promoted as a way to resolve disparities in access to communication and other resources. Over time, the diversity of conceptual and operational definitions of the term “participation” (Huesca, 2002) has rendered the term problematic. Understandings of the supposed benefits of participation range from facilitating the effective implementation of projects

(as stressed in the literature produced by multilaterals) to guaranteeing more ethical approaches to development (as highlighted in the academic literature and self-reflections by practitioners). In other words, the ways in which participation is put into effect can range quite dramatically in terms of the effective consequences vis-a-vis the projected outcomes. However, the value of the notion of participation in calling attention to the scale, forms and durability of the participation of citizens within decision-making structures remains, particularly if considered as an analytic framework rather than an idealistic stance: from this perspective, power dynamics at play in the production of social change initiatives and symbolic understandings can be articulated rather than ignored.

Building on the idea that participation can be conceptualized in structural terms (Wilkins and Chae, 2007), this article interrogates underlying dynamics of power within the current production of strategic communication and media interventions focusing on development aid. Our aim is to problematize the seemingly unquestioned proposition that privatizing development is both beneficial and inevitable, paying special attention to the role of communication and media in this process.

Private aid in a changing development landscape

The global development landscape seems to be undergoing several changes. Notably, an apparent rise in the privatization of aid paired with calls for the transfer to private hands of the administration of matters of public concern, and thus of the definition of social problems and their solutions (Engel, 2011; Wilkins, 2008); the rise of philanthrocapitalism, epitomized by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates, aided and abetted by celebrities such as entertainment industry mogul Oprah Winfrey (Edwards, 2010; Peck, 2008); and a reconfiguration of the modalities of international development assistance as individual consumer agency through “brand aid” as promoted primarily by rock star Bono (Richey and Ponte, 2011). Meanwhile, aid effectiveness debates concerning bilateral and multilateral agencies remain fierce, ignited for example by media darlings William Easterly (2006) and Dambisa Moyo (2009), two economists who have deconstructed the many failures of aid without engaging in the challenge of reconstructing ways forward.

In this context, the irony of programs designed for the public good being privatized through foundations dependent on personal wealth gained through communication industries profits needs to be explored. The emphasis of private aid initiatives on individual empowerment resonates with a broader agenda of neoliberalism that reduces social change to entrepreneurship in a market-based system, and civic involvement and voice to clicktivism. At present, even multilateral donors, funded through governments increasingly affected by economic crisis, sing the praises of their corporate partnerships, promoting the idea that private aid could substitute for states’ responsibility to address collective needs. This is striking, given that such aid still contributes proportionately much less to global development than official development assistance from donor countries (Kreme et al., 2010). Bilateral funding, estimated at about \$US129b in 2010, still dominates the funding streams of global development (OECD, 2011).

One important difference between official development assistance from bilateral/multilateral agencies and private aid is that the first is bound to democratic models of accountability, and thus subject to public scrutiny, while the latter has no obligation to be

transparent: not from a legal perspective and not in practice (GSJ, 2012). Another ironic difference to be noted is that official development assistance is funded through the taxes paid by citizens of so-called developed countries, while private aid is funded through the tax-exempt excess fortunes of billionaires allowed by governmental tax-relief schemes. At a time when the distinction between the private and the public domains is becoming increasingly blurred through privatization (Sassen, 2008), Edwards stresses that private money spent on philanthropy is a matter of public interest for two reasons: its potential impact on seemingly increasing numbers of people worldwide, and “because tax breaks are given on the assumption that resources will be used to promote the public good as or more effectively than if the same resources had been available to government” (2010: 249). Within the broader rubric of global capitalism, wealthy individuals have been able to accrue extensive capital and thus control access to it and its distribution.

Global communication and private aid

Global communication industries produce political, economic and social capital that allows wealthy and famous individuals to influence the international development agenda. Individuals who profit from global communications technologies marketed through capitalist enterprises contribute to global development programs and establish their own foundations, while celebrities bring consumer attention to development problems, steering sympathies toward market-based, narrowly prescribed paths for resolution. Bill Gates, one of the most prominent individual donors in global development, is worth \$US56b and is currently designated by *Forbes* (2011a) as the second wealthiest person in the world. Next in line is Warren Buffet, with an estimated worth of \$US50b. In 2006 Buffet pledged to donate 10 million shares of stock from the multinational company Berkshire Hathaway Inc. to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Asset Trust to be delivered over time in annual installments (provided that Bill or Melinda are alive and actively involved in the foundation, and that the gift continues to qualify as charitable, i.e. tax exempt).

Although lower down on absolute wealth chart (#139), Oprah Winfrey is listed in the celebrity chart as the wealthiest celebrity, with \$US2.7b, followed by U2 as the second wealthiest celebrity when considered as a band (*Forbes*, 2011b); both are actively involved in global development work. Winfrey plays a key role in the deployment of a neoliberal spirit as a way of defining and categorizing the world (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Peck, 2008). The central message guiding the ideology of Oprah’s charitable initiatives begs women to take personal responsibility, privileging individual empowerment at the expense of recognizing social inequities that constrain opportunity. Such approach is evidenced in her talk show, as women are encouraged to see their problems, along with poverty, homelessness and other social concerns, as derived from individual psychological deficiencies rather than structured through lack of child care and salary inequities across gender. This ideological approach to depoliticizing critical social differences strengthens the neoliberal project, in which market-based exchanges are assumed to be beneficial without serious critique (Peck, 2008).

The role of Bono in the privatization and marketization of aid has been illuminated from the perspective of international development studies by Lisa Richey and Stefano

Ponte in their study of “brand aid” (2011), focusing on the RED campaign, launched on Oprah’s show in 2006 to promote a kind of shopping that would fix the problems of the developing world. As Richey and Ponte explain, celebrities such as Bono, with their “cool quotient,” lead fans to believe they can solve social problems through individual consumption, distracting attention from the structures that create inequities. The approach coaxes consumers in wealthy territories to feel good about their purchasing power, and not to worry about what leads to disparities in the first place. Threatening questions about causes of global inequity can then be avoided.

Although wealth gaps are increasing and national economies are in crisis, global communication industries remain strong. The combined net worth of social media tycoons stands at nearly \$US100b, with the industry itself worth \$US215b (*Folsom CEO*, 2011). Global media industries concentrate wealth and power into a strong minority of corporate and entertainment moguls. “Convergence,” a buzzword used within media and communication research to refer both to “the technological integration that powers new media technologies” (Jenkins, 2006) and to “the integration of big companies that make use of new media” (Mosco, 2009: 121–2), acquires a new analytic potential in this context. Gates’ fortune was accrued through Microsoft, a multinational computer technology corporation that develops, manufactures, licenses, and supports a wide range of software products for computing devices well known to researchers of the political economy of communication as a dominant influence in the media business. Communication scholars have long paid attention to Microsoft’s monopolistic take on the media market, its problematic labor practices in India where it has outsourced high-tech jobs, its participation in the reconstitution of entertainment and information networks through mergers and alliances across media, and its efforts to secure private-property rights in information (Mosco, 2009; Schiller, 2007). These studies suggest that there could be a conflict of interest between Bill Gates’ source of wealth and his purported philanthropic good intentions – a point that has also been made by journalistic researchers and social movements (Edwards, 2010). Chakravarty has highlighted the growing role of Microsoft and other transnational corporations “in setting the development agenda at the national, regional and local levels, often coordinating their efforts directly with NGOs who provide research and implementation assistance” (2008: 309), further arguing that the increasing dominance of the private sector in the global governance process has “limited the capacity of NGOs who offered a ‘humanitarian’ alternative to the dominant neo-liberal policy prescriptions” (2008: 312), thus leaving redistributive concerns largely unaddressed.

Living Proof

In what follows we analyze the Living Proof campaign, describing its funding and management structure and then analyzing its construction of development problems and communication solutions. This case study allows us to conceptualize communication not only as a strategic intervention for social change, but also as a resource through which those profiting from global communication industries are able to influence the development industry. The selection of this case is purposive, with no intention to generalize, but rather to identify aspects that would illuminate manifestations of privatization in development and contribute to further research.

Our sources of data for this analysis include public documentation concerning the funding and implementation of this program. We have documented the structure and discourse of the Gates Foundation, ONE, and this program based on available primary publications from the foundations themselves and on secondary assessments and reviews of development agencies as well as journalistic reports. These data sources inform our analysis of this development discourse within the organizations that fund and implement this program.

The organizational structure and funding of Living Proof

The organizational structure and economic foundations of Living Proof represent billionaires prominent in the communication industries who have accumulated considerable wealth and media power, in turn oriented towards varying but connected forms of private aid. The two private organizations funding and administering this program are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and ONE, which defines itself as an advocacy organization funded by a handful of philanthropists, with Bono as co-founder and head of a board that includes relatives of Warren Buffet and Gates Foundation staff. Initially launched and primarily funded by the Gates Foundation, Living Proof began working with ONE as well in 2010 in order to expand their target audience beyond the U.S.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

The Gates Foundation has been involved in global development work for almost two decades. The organization is supported by the foundation's endowment, built through the combined giving of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. The tax-exempt private foundation is structured since 2006 as a combination of two charitable trusts – the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which distributes money to grantees, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Trust, which manages the endowment's assets, legally bound to disbursing 5 percent of those a year while able to invest the remaining 95 percent. The total of grant commitments since the foundation's inception until 2009 was \$US22.61b, with \$US3b dispersed in that year alone. The foundation's central offices are in Seattle, Washington, which is Gates' place of work and birth. The geographical focus of its international disbursements – the distributive logic – is vague, seemingly targeted toward particular countries and regions rather than toward addressing the poorest ones. Most so-called global projects are located in Africa and Asia.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is organized into three main areas: the Global Development Program; the Global Health Program; and the United States Program. Since 1994, Global Health has received the most funding (\$US15.3b out of \$US26.2b distributed), to address malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, vaccine-preventable diseases, pneumonia and flu, nutritional needs, diarrhoea, maternal, infant and child health, and tobacco. The Global Development Program, which “seeks to increase opportunities for people in the developing world to overcome hunger and poverty” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012) has distributed almost \$US3.6b. The remaining funds are designated for U.S.-based programs.

The Gates Foundation has been involved in many joint ventures, leveraging resources across other donors and agencies with shared interests, and explicitly recognizing their partnerships with corporations. The foundation's work involves supporting capitalist ventures and entrepreneurship. In several initiatives, the poor are directed to access financial services to borrow and transfer funds through micro-finance programs, that is, to become indebted as the way to overcome poverty. Global libraries are offered to "provide free access to computers," corresponding to Microsoft's goals to sell computer software. Similar to the illustration described above, agricultural assistance through the foundation's Global Development Program intends to increase farming incomes through better crop management and marketing, which has been linked to the activities of multinational biotechnology corporation Monsanto (Murphy, 2011).

Not only does this vision of social change limit interventions to those that resonate with a particular version of capitalism, it also privileges individual empowerment at the expense of structural solutions to social problems. Redistributive social justice cannot be addressed within this framework, in which individuals are applauded for achieving success in a global market. However, the Gates Foundation has never pretended to be an advocacy organization designed to call on governments to tackle global poverty: that, instead, is the promoted identity of their partner, ONE.

ONE

While the integration of the U.S.-based Living Proof campaign with ONE was designed to expand the program's appeal to include European audiences, the collaboration between Bill and Melinda Gates with Bono also fits their shared status as *Time* magazine's "people of the year," according to U.S. media, for their global philanthropic work. Just as foundations partner with corporations with similar goals, billionaire philanthropists seem to combine media celebrity with financial prowess to accentuate the power of their initiatives. The Gates Foundation remains the primary donor of Living Proof, with ONE operating as the implementing agency.

Distinct from the grant work of the Gates Foundation, ONE does not directly fund development projects, but focuses on raising consciousness about global poverty. In its website, ONE describes itself as:

a grassroots advocacy and campaigning organization that fights extreme poverty and preventable disease, particularly in Africa, by raising public awareness and pressuring political leaders to support smart and effective policies and programs that are saving lives, helping to put kids in school and improving futures. (ONE, 2011a)

Initially dubbed DATA (Debit, AIDS, Trade, Africa) in 2002 by Bob Geldof and Bono, ONE started out as an "anti-poverty" group. Global music Live 8 concerts in 2005 were part of the history that led from DATA to ONE. Intended to compel G8 governments to increase their aid commitments to the African region by 2010, the concerts were said to have led 3 million fans to click an online button to demonstrate their "grass roots support" of ONE, indicating that they, like the rock stars, found global poverty deplorable.

While it may be easy to find agreement that poverty is a problem, turning this compassion into a shared strategy for resolving inequity is more difficult. Next, we consider how the Living Proof campaign articulates its diagnosis of the problems that create global poverty, as well as the solutions suggested through the contribution of communication.

The Living Proof campaign

Living Proof was initiated through the Gates Foundation in 2009 as a development education program designed to create awareness and increase participation among U.S. constituencies. The goal is to “showcase” positive testimonials of development’s “incredible progress” and promote “a celebration of the remarkable people achieving it” through video, photographs and verbal descriptions of individual stories (ONE, 2011a). Development education programs have become increasingly used by bilateral donor agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), to inspire public support for foreign aid programs in a climate of decreasing government funding. Their intention is to create public opinion that would encourage governments to be actively involved in global development work, justified in their public relations efforts as not just altruistic but, even more importantly, in this rhetoric, serving their national political and economic interests. The Living Proof campaign is not sponsored by these bilateral agencies, however, but instead by private groups, with much more funding than the more meager bilateral development education programs (whose agencies put relatively more resources into their aid programs). Living Proof operates as a grantee of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and does not seek funds from individual members, governments, corporations or multilaterals, or disperse funds as a mediator between the Gates Foundation and other recipients. As a single-donor initiative, it administers its work within the parameters designated by its donor.

Next, we consider how this program articulates the nature of the underlying problems that create global poverty, as well as the solutions prescribed through their intervention. This development education program is designed to create awareness of development “success” through web-based video and photograph databases produced and distributed by Living Proof staff, as a way to gather digital support from individual citizens to their plea for increased aid expenditure by governments.

What is the problem?

The long-term problem addressed may be global poverty, but Living Proof targets bilateral donor aid as its intermediary goal, through raising citizens’ consciousness. The specific problem then is that wealthy governments are not giving a high enough percentage of their resources to the cause of foreign aid. In order to achieve stronger donor commitments, this program challenges constituents to act on their knowledge of global poverty by pressuring their governments to change their budgets. This pluralist model of political change designates individual knowledge and action as the problems that must be resolved, with an assumption that informed individuals will join in a collective chorus,

so loud that bilateral donors must echo their refrain through increasing their foreign aid budgets.

While ONE campaigns have been designed more broadly to resolve the problem of individual awareness of global poverty, Living Proof has a more specific goal, which is to promote the idea that development actually works. This involves an added step from individual knowledge toward attitudinal support for bilateral aid. The Living Proof mission statement clearly articulates this goal:

Investments in global health are achieving real, demonstrable results. These investments are saving lives, preventing and curing disease, and helping people to escape from poverty. Unfortunately, this message is not reaching many people. Research on the tone of media coverage has shown that stories about global health are generally negative. The same research shows that Americans have had enough of stories that focus on problems, pessimism and guilt; they want to hear about progress, optimism and opportunity. (Living Proof, 2011)

This interest in strengthening “constituencies for development aid” suggests that public support would enhance global health expenditures. How public attitudes might result in resource allocation is addressed in the next section.

How is communication expected to solve this problem?

Living Proof approaches the problem of donor funding through a pluralist model of political participation, assuming communication has the potential to raise awareness that will then leverage action. The solution then is to “advocate awareness among donor publics in order to support donor interest in aid allocation” through offering a “showcase of stories and statistics that are too often ignored” (Living Proof, 2011). The direct target audience for this showcase is the “donor public,” which is assumed to have the power to affect government policy makers, who in turn will increase funding that will promote the well-being of “Africa.”

On the English-language website in 2011, this program was described as a:

Multimedia initiative intended to highlight successes of U.S.-funded global health initiatives. By reporting success stories back to the people who funded them – American taxpayers and their representatives – we hope to reframe the current global health conversation. Millions of lives have already been transformed and saved with effective, affordable solutions. We have the knowledge, innovative technologies and proven tools to do much more. (Living Proof, 2011)

Individual success stories as evidence of development at work

The showcase of testimonial evidence of the success of foreign aid is offered through photographs, videos and reports accessible through the ONE website. As banners move across the top portion of this website, we learn about Ethiopian “supermodel” Liya, who “returns to her homeland to raise awareness of maternal and child health,” and in another segment a father in the Ivory Coast who defied social stigma against those with HIV infection, taking his HIV-positive son for medical treatment.

These and other captioned photographs lead to slick video segments, accompanied by dramatic music, chronicling the sad stories of these individuals who were able to rise above their struggles through their dedication and perseverance, as well as the benefits of western-given expertise. In one story, the Ethiopian Minister of Health offers “an army of good” to resolve the problem of half of the country’s population not having access to health care. This army consists of female extension workers, who are trained to conduct family home visits, where they can distribute malaria medication, contraception and informational pamphlets. This network may offer a low-cost solution to offering access to basic health information and products, but it is not clear whether or how much these extension workers are paid, what sort of support they have in the course of their work to address medical concerns, whether better transportation or facilities might offer a structural solution, or even how this network fares in relation to community interests and needs.

More of these uplifting tales are found in a linked section entitled “Real Lives: The stories that are too often ignored – the incredible progress being achieved by some of the world’s poorest people” (Living Proof, 2011). The top photograph depicts a dark-skinned woman looking down, with a baby boy, tied through woven cloth to her back, gazing directly at the viewer. These stories emphasize their protagonists’ individual power to overcome obstacles. In a segment captioned “barbershop,” a female protagonist explains that she “refuses to be a victim” of her HIV status or of her abusive husband; she opens a shop to ensure her economic independence rather than rely on charity. In a classic “positive deviance” approach (Singhal, 2011), she sees herself as a role model for the community.

While some of the issues described explain how structural conditions, such as educational opportunities for girls and vaccinations for children, do contribute to development goals, the video stories told tend to project the anecdotal circumstances of individuals. To illustrate, a video clip detailing a nutrition program in Egypt that funds adding nutrients to local bread (ONE, 2012) concludes with the successful birth of a healthy son, applauding those smart enough to make the right consumer choices in purchasing these fortified breads. The audience for these stories of individual success becomes those who have computer literacy and access, and enough interest in the subject matter to locate and peruse the website. On this level the audience passively reviews the testimonials after somewhat limited action needed to find them.

Digital membership and online consumption as civic engagement

Beyond witnessing the success stories presented, the audience is invited to become “members,” and join ONE. The largest option offered on the top of this page offers an iPhone application, which “empowers the user.” Various quotes rotate in support of this application for “mobile social advocacy,” necessary to “be a better activist.” Bono, described here as co-founder of ONE, argues that: “If you want to jump into fight extreme poverty, you can find things to do that take less than a minute or that take over your life.... 21st century activism in the palm of your hand.” While this application is free, when we steer toward the download option, we are invited to purchase for \$US14.95 a “GelaSkin” cover for our iPhones and iPads, in bright neon colors, with pithy logos and

slogans advertising the ONE organization. Not to miss out on other potential sales, ONE offers shirts, bags and other accessories through its online store. As in many other philanthropic works supported by Bono, the path to social change lies through consumption (Richey and Ponte, 2011).

Other than having the “right” digital tool for protesting poverty, we are encouraged to become active by attending events, signing petitions and contacting local organizers. But if being involved in the flesh is not an option, digital participation is offered through “friending” on Facebook and Twitter. The ONE blog offers accounts of meetings, speeches and reports for review as well, linked to the Living Proof page.

A ‘members only’ image bank

In addition to the freely accessible website, the program possesses databases of photographs and videos, which they claim to share with other nonprofit agencies. However, this sharing enterprise is restricted to specific agencies, which must apply for access by signing a detailed consent agreement and explaining specifically how they will use content in their own projects. We tried to apply for this service, but, as university teachers, did not warrant inclusion. Access to the database appears to be limited to a chosen few, depending on how they intend to use content. ONE seems keen to control the potential uses, judging from an invitation to attend a workshop circulated in 2010:

As part of its expansion of The Living Proof Project, ONE is developing a content database that will give other non-profit partners working in development access to video, photography and other assets to support their efforts. ONE will also invite NGO community members to a storytelling workshop later this year. At the workshop, media and communications experts and producers will work with NGO partner organisations on how to best mine, develop and sharpen on-the-ground stories of success and connect with The Living Proof Project. (ONE, 2011a)

What constitutes “success”?

There are many ways “success” could be conceptualized. Within the campaign itself, individuals are defined as success stories when they persevere against the odds, finding economic independence and social confidence rather than succumbing to government assistance or peer pressure. In a video produced by TedxChange (“an initiative devoted to ideas worth spreading in the areas of global health and development” developed by nonprofit organization TED [Technology, Entertainment and Design] in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), Melinda Gates explains that the value of telling “success stories” lies in countering what most Americans learn in the media about crises in Africa; instead she believes that the American public needs to understand that 1.3 billion people have “lifted themselves out of poverty” and this is indeed “progress” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). As in much of U.S. media, the narratives of individual accomplishment and perseverance dominate the entertainment as well as the educational industry.

As a campaign, the program’s immediate success might be defined in terms of exposure of their website, monitored through hits and online membership and commentary.

ONE repeats its sense of its own success in many public statements in that “3 million” people have connected online as grassroots advocates in the “fight against global poverty.” It is not clear what exactly these 3 million people have done to be counted as such, or whether they themselves feel they are part of this proclaimed community – and interviews of members of said constituency would be necessary in order to provide empirical detail. The long-term stated intention, though, is to increase bilateral aid through awareness. The promoted success stories are linked to this goal, in that the publicity of individual progress is expected to create a successful membership network that will pressure governments to finance foreign aid.

Focusing on the numerical amount and high proportion of development assistance compared with other types of donors, ONE assumes rather than questions the value of bilateral aid. For example, a consistent refrain from Living Proof is that “U.S. investments in global health are working” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012; Living Proof, 2011). Alternatively one might advocate for more transparency, accountability or quality of aid. Easterly and Williamson (2011) offer an extensive analysis of bilateral and multilateral donors’ practice, specifically concerning their transparency, specialization, selectivity, ineffective aid channels and overhead costs. They conclude that the “escalating rhetoric” of “success” has little empirical evidence to support it.

Much easier to document is the amount of funding allocated to foreign aid. Recent reports demonstrate that most bilateral donors have not kept their 2005 promises, which was one of the goals initially articulated by ONE (ONE, 2011b). ONE concludes that some the designated wealthy nations did increase their aid to sub-Saharan Africa, though most did not reach their commitments declared in 2005 prior to the collapse of global capitalist markets. The U.K. was commended for increasing its funding toward a more ambitious goal than that of the U.S., Japan or Canada, while Italy, France and Germany were described in more condemnatory terms. “Emerging” economic countries, notably Brazil, India, China and Russia, have increased trade and investment with this African region as well, but operating outside of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) they do not report data to this multilateral agency, and thus are not considered “traditional donors” according to this report. As a long-term goal, increasing aid expenditures by most bilateral agencies has not been achieved.

Another set of long-term goals points to public health indicators, such as reductions in child mortality, smaller family sizes, and polio eradication, which are highlighted in public speeches by Bill and Melinda Gates and on a sub-link of the Living Proof webpage providing facts and figures. World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations (UN) statistics are cited in other linked documents as well, as evidence of the success of development investment. While there is evidence that some of these trends are indeed moving in directions that benefit people, making an empirical link between aid expenditures and long-term health outcomes is quite difficult. Some evaluation research does offer methodologically sound results justifying development programs, but most assessments do not, either because they cannot confirm the substantive benefit of their programs empirically or because they do not use outcome evaluation approaches that would enable such an assessment.

Overall, though, the nature of the evidence offered to the website consumer focuses on narratives of triumph over tragedy, due to individual empowerment, made possible

through the saving grace of U.S. aid. Highlighting anecdotes over trends obscures the potential for empirical evaluations that offer more solid assessments of ways in which some programs contribute, but others fail, given a complex set of contexts and circumstances. This emphasis, on episodic success over thematic progress, functions more as a public relations campaign than as an evaluation of aid quality. Moreover, this “Hollywood” approach to happily concluding individual narratives avoids the structural factors that must be taken into account to understand why most people still suffer from lack of health care, nutrition and sanitation, as well as from suppression of human rights and labor unions.

Living Proof of development success

The dominant theme of this program is that “real people” have achieved development success, which can be shared as “proof” with website consumers. Problematic here is what these select individuals are meant to represent, and what constitutes evidence of their success. Some people have improved their life circumstances, as documented in these characterizations, with compelling stories to serve in video and photography files on this website. However, the purposively selected stories of a few do not represent the trends of many, as inequity increases within and across countries on a global scale, intensifying devastating conditions of poverty.

Just as it is problematic to project the experiences of a few fortunate mobile individuals onto entire communities living in poverty, generalizing from one case to all of “development” falls victim to similar logical fallacies. Some development projects have met their goals, and even achieved beneficial outcomes, while others have not. Given the complexity of funding, implementation and political contexts, varying results are to be expected. Comprehension of these differing processes and outcomes would contribute toward building accountability (McAnany, 2012). But disguising the depth and breadth of development work under one cloak of projected “development success” masks this diversity as well as the potential for learning.

This projection of success then speaks to the relatively less examined scholarship concerning how development agencies communicate *about* their work (Wilkins, 2008). Most of our communication research in development focuses on how communication works *for* social change in the implementation of programs, privileging applied over critical work. But, as is evident in this case study, the public relations aspect of development as an industry merits our critical scrutiny. This approach to development is not just a matter of public relations for aid expenditures, it also endorses technological optimism in the power of digital media and individual actions. As in many emerging and privatized development enterprises, success can be considered beyond specific project outcomes, toward promoting the latent values that legitimate the agenda of private global industry in the service of the neoliberal project.

Neoliberal impulses dictate the parameters of the development industry, as well as limit approaches to social change. Neoliberalism, as explained by Dutta (2011), imposes an economic framework on policies and programs that assumes privatization and markets to be a natural order of human relations rather than a consequence of hegemonic interests. Future research might explore further how the political-economic interests of

global corporations may be well served by the privatization of the development industry. Globalization of development in recent years is built upon these neoliberal principles, reinforcing what Sparks calls an “uncritical acceptance of the benign nature of capitalism” (2007: 14).

An increasingly privatized development world enhances the productivity of global capitalist industries when the process of social change dissolves into a simplistic path of consumption, as social media applications are offered as a useful way to change the world. Slacktivist cultures are inspired as media consumers are led to believe they can contribute to meaningful global change by clicking spots on an internet website (Richey and Ponte, 2011). While interactive digital media open opportunities, for those privileged with access, to engage in serious activist work (Bennett et al., 2011), Fenton reminds us of the limited potential for participation in a digital system that “does not transcend global capitalism, but is deeply involved with it by virtue of the corporate interests it supports and the discourses of capitalism and neoliberalism that are constantly reproduced by its users” (2011: 192). Participation, then, remains at a superficial level, offering an illusion of action while distracting from the more seriously powerful yet potentially threatening force of collective action.

When agency for social change is restricted to individual empowerment, governments are no longer at fault for not providing adequate health care, and corporations are not responsible for paying taxes or fair wages; instead, individual consumption becomes the answer. If the world’s problems can be solved through buying products, then global corporate industry benefits from these purchases. But development is not that simple, social change not that narrow, and most individuals not all that wealthy or powerful. For the vast majority of people in the world, the rulers of global capitalism dictate the agenda of global development, at the expense of the many and for the benefit of the few.

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