

# NiemanLab

## Bringing NGO news into the mainstream: The case of OneWorld.net and Yahoo News

By **LARRY KIRKMAN AND LAURIE MOY** Dec. 14, 2009, 10 a.m.

*[It's one thing for NGOs to get into the news-producing business; it's another for their news to get noticed. Here Larry Kirkman and Laurie Moy explore the case of one NGO,*

*OneWorld.net, and how its partnership with megalith Yahoo! News has put its work before an entirely new audience. This is the fifth part of our series on NGOs and the news. —Josh]*



One month after September 11, 2001, OneWorld.net, a global network of civil society-based public media centers, launched a daily service on Yahoo!

News in its World News section. Yahoo News was then, and continues to be, the top rated online news source according to Alexa.com and comScore, and it reaches more than 43 million unique visitors per month.<sup>1</sup> How did an NGO-based news organization become a contributor to the most visited news portal online? The answer lies in the perfect storm of innovative editorial policies, a challenging news media environment, evolving media advocacy, and private foundation support.

Yahoo! and OneWorld editors both believed that U.S. audiences were motivated by the national crisis to understand more of the world beyond their borders. In an email communication, the current Yahoo! News Editor, Sarah Wright, recalled her organization's motivation:

Yahoo invited OneWorld.net to join its world news service in Fall 2001 to complement the coverage of mainstream sources, such as AP and Reuters, with daily reports that tapped into the knowledge of nonprofit organizations. OneWorld journalists provide a unique and valuable resource to Yahoo by providing context for international headlines and voices from the front lines of international development.<sup>2</sup>

Yahoo! had been poised to broaden its news sources just before 9/11, in response to a study by the New York-based media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) that criticized Yahoo's "male, white, and

right” bias. According to OneWorld International News Editor at the time, Sebastian Zebania, the FAIR study, titled Diversity Gap in Online Journalism, “showed Yahoo’s coverage to be monochrome needing to diversify quotes, subjects, etc., as it grew global.”<sup>3</sup> On August 24, 2001, FAIR reported on its website that Yahoo! News senior producer Kourosh Karimkhany had thanked the group for the critique and affirmed a commitment to improve: “To state it succinctly, we agree with you 100 percent. We have been trying to achieve exactly what you suggested.” Karimkhany wrote that the Yahoo! News mission is “to represent almost every perspective... We encourage Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting to watch our site over the next few months. We hope you will notice a broader journalistic range.”

It was just two months later that OneWorld joined the Yahoo! World News page. The timing of this relationship was significant. By 2001, the American news media environment was feeling the growing pains of the digital revolution. Internet news portals were taking off and traditional outlets were struggling to catch up. At the same time, U.S. mainstream media were drastically downsizing their foreign correspondence, eliminating international bureaus and relying on government-supplied perspectives. OneWorld offered an alternative mission that challenged the dichotomy of popular and serious. The conventional wisdom of news media gatekeepers was that U.S. audiences were simply not interested in international news. OneWorld believed that the burden of finding engaging international news was not with the audience, but rather with the news media. It explained its

approach, reaching out to popular audiences through the internet with serious content, in a grant proposal to the Veatch Foundation:

Today's news media and political structures do not engage or fully inform Americans on most issues of global significance. The same elite sources are quoted time and again and way too much time is devoted to spin, drama, and sensationalism instead of the real issues that affect people around the world. Politicians largely focus on the issues and offer the platitudes that will get them re-elected, ignoring many topics and perspectives that impact millions of people worldwide. These political and media failings have turned off countless Americans to important global issues.<sup>4</sup>

### **OneWorld: History and outreach**

OneWorld was launched in 1995 with the mission to use the World Wide Web to engage wide-spread audiences on international issues and causes. The co-founders, Peter Armstrong and Anuradha Vittachi, called it the first “global justice portal” on the emerging Web landscape. Its central purpose was to aggregate and highlight the content of development NGOs such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, realizing the great value of the trusted brand names and social networks of the organizations.

The two founders brought a wealth of broadcasting and multimedia production experience, as well as editorial expertise, to these nonprofit

relationships that established a professional media framework for the journalistic enterprise over the next 15 years. In identifying, selecting, annotating and contextualizing the knowledge of development NGOs, they set high expectations for the application of journalistic standards to reporting based on the news, research, opinion, public engagement, and advocacy campaigns of civil society.

In Vittachi's brief history of the origins of OneWorld, published online in September 2003, she explained that OneWorld produced the first websites for dozens of organizations, and in return, "partners agreed to share their material with the rest of the partnership and global audience at large—at no charge." She made the case that OneWorld "supported partners by raising their profile and extending their outreach," by aggregating their content and their audiences.

The original OneWorld project was based at One World Broadcasting Trust, known for its social media awards. In 1999, it was sold to a new UK-based charity, OneWorld International Foundation, to accommodate a growing global enterprise that has included centers in the Netherlands, Finland, Italy, Spain, the United States, India, Zambia, the United Kingdom, Costa Rica, Austria, Canada, South East Europe, and Indonesia. The centers are autonomous organizations with their own boards of directors, special projects, extensive organizational networks of more than 2,000 NGOs worldwide, and a wide range of funding sources, including private foundations, government development agencies, partner dues, and

individual donations. The centers operate under the OneWorld banner and with a set of common principles, standards, and agreements to share content and governance responsibilities.

OneWorld United States is a key component in the OneWorld network and supplies several different news products, including a bi-monthly online magazine, Perspectives, and a Daily Headlines service. All of OneWorld's content, including more than 100,000 articles, is fully indexed and searchable.

A 2007 survey of Daily Headlines readers revealed an even split along gender lines and indicated that 48 percent of readers are in countries other than the United States. More than a third (38 percent) of Daily Headlines readers work in the nonprofit sector and the majority (61 percent) were interested in all geographic regions. The least interesting region for Daily Headline subscribers was North America.<sup>5</sup>

The placement of OneWorld on Yahoo! News allowed OneWorld to reach out to a broader, more “mainstream” audience, which complemented OneWorld's existing demographics. A year after joining the Yahoo! News network, OneWorld conducted an online survey to collect demographic information about its new audience on Yahoo. The survey found that OneWorld News on Yahoo! readers were mostly male (66 percent) and middle-aged (41 percent were between the ages of 36 and 50). About one third (35 percent) worked in the business sector; only 12 percent of respondents worked for non-profit organizations, which marked a

departure from the mostly non-profit and academic audience of the OneWorld community.

In terms of readers' regional interests, Yahoo's mainstream audience presents OneWorld with both an opportunity and a challenge: most readers were based in North America (83 percent) and tended to be interested in the developed world (North America 67 percent and Europe 48 percent) and the Middle East (51 percent). There was a noticeable lack of interest in developing countries (Asia 33 percent, Africa, 31 percent, and Latin American and the Caribbean 28 percent). Many respondents in this survey said OneWorld provided a unique perspective that they did not get elsewhere. Most respondents noted they got their international news primarily from mainstream sources, including AP, Reuters, CNN, and the New York Times.

A lack of brand recognition of OneWorld among the respondents indicated that, through Yahoo!, OneWorld was reaching a different audience from the one that was reached through its website and Daily Headlines service. The challenge therefore was to engage that audience and expose them to new perspectives. OneWorld met that challenge by bringing content to Yahoo! that may be slightly tailored to the new audience, but it always links back to a more diverse set of stories than that to which the Yahoo! audience may have been accustomed.

### **Support from mainstream philanthropy**

The changing media environment was not going unnoticed by American philanthropy either. In 2001, the Ford Foundation sent a significant signal to the nonprofit and media sectors with its first grant to OneWorld, for \$275,000, “to expand its civic society Internet portal.” Ford support for OneWorld has continued to the present. The winter 2003 edition of Ford Foundation Report featured OneWorld TV on its cover with the title “The Next Information Age. Reality TV the World Should Be Watching.” The introduction to the edition credited OneWorld for “demonstrating the dramatic potential for serving up extensive menus of news and commentary... a full range of perspectives and world events...new access for voices not often heard...”

Funding from the Omidyar Network and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has supplemented the Ford support. In 2005, Pierre Omidyar, co-founder of eBay, explained to Business Week magazine why his foundation chose to get involved:

We’ve done a little bottom-up media with OneWorld. I have a sense that the traditional media hasn’t been aggressive enough talking about important issues. The empowering nature of people reporting their own news, speaking out, and challenging governments and even traditional media sometimes is a very powerful thing.



President Jonathan Fanton of the MacArthur Foundation, which has made grants to OneWorld since 2004, agreed that OneWorld had a vital role to play:

Modern technology makes it possible to broaden the sources of reliable information and bring a greater diversity of voices into the public debate about such topics as human rights and environmental sustainability. In harnessing the power of new communications technologies, the OneWorld network allows thousands of organizations around the world, ranging from community groups in rural Africa to large nongovernmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch to provide alternative perspectives on pressing global social issues.

In the foundation's August 2006 News from MacArthur, Fanton said, "The spread of digital technology is dramatically changing news gathering, reporting, and broadcasting, as well as how people choose to access information," and described OneWorld as one of the "creative new efforts to make better information from diverse sources about events across the globe available to U.S. audiences."

These "creative new efforts" were a direct result of OneWorld's unique editorial policy. As articulated on its website, OneWorld seeks a "solutions-oriented approach to presenting the news," with a focus on "global issues

known to be of interest to North Americans,” and “programs showcasing successful efforts to overcome development challenges.”

This editorial policy was informed and shaped by the insights of the Global Interdependence Initiative (GII). GII was launched under the leadership of staff at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1999, and housed at the Aspen Institute, to use the tools of public opinion research, issue framing analysis, media content research, and cognitive linguistics to develop new approaches for engaging U.S. audiences in international issues. In the Who We Are introduction on its Web site, GII describes its purpose in this way, “to help broaden and deepen the American constituency for principled and effective U.S. foreign policy.” This extensive and well-funded project found that the conventional wisdom of news editors and publishers about the lack of consumer interest in international news was challenged by a strong indication of interest in international problems, such as infectious disease, labor standards, and global warming that were perceived as requiring multi-faceted and multi-lateral solutions.

### **OneWorld’s outreach and communications objectives**

Because OneWorld’s goal is to communicate global issues to an American audience, most articles are international in scope, and the writers are encouraged to show how these issues are relevant to Americans whenever possible. To that end, OneWorld has provided a combination of articles

that capitalize on “hot” topics along with those telling the “unknown” stories.

One of the most successful articles appeared in February 2006. Abid Aslam’s “Bottled Water: Nectar of the Frauds?” leapt into the international scene and generated more than half a million hits on the Yahoo! World News page in the first week alone. The article was re-posted on hundreds of blogs and other alternative news sites. In that first week, more than 2,200 Yahoo readers ranked the article with an average ranking of 4 (out of 5) stars. What’s more, the article generated tremendous discussion—900 comments to the article were posted onto the Yahoo! World News site alone. The article, drawing on the expertise of the environmental policy think tank the Earth Policy Institute (EPI), capitalized on a growing interest among the public as well as the mainstream media on the environmental effects of bottled water.

The piece clearly articulated environmental problems that affect the entire planet, specifically highlighting the personal effects felt in India and China. In addition, it went a step further by highlighting how villages in India and communities in Texas and the Great Lakes region of North America similarly suffer from the effects of water extraction, as related to increased consumption of bottled water. In this way, OneWorld took a highly popular topic, and made the connection between the global and the local, as well as the foreign and the domestic.

Another article, “Fossil Fuels Set to Become Relics, Says Research Group,” also rode the headlines and took the net by storm. It was the most viewed story on all of Yahoo! News on September 29, 2005, and it was OneWorld’s most emailed story (950 sends). The story capitalized on the growing interest in renewable energy in the country, but also drew upon the knowledge and experience of the nonprofit world, specifically Worldwatch Institute, in order to make the content relevant. That week more than 250,000 people viewed the article on Yahoo’s web site, and many more reposted and distributed the story through their own blogs and services.

In addition to blockbuster pieces that ride popular headlines, OneWorld also provides articles that present lesser known stories and the largely unheard voices behind them. For example, in November 2005, OneWorld contributed a piece to Yahoo! titled, “Shell Ordered to Stop Wasteful Poisonous ‘Gas Flaring’ in Nigeria.”

The story reported on the decision of a high court in Nigeria to force multinational oil companies to stop a practice called “gas flaring.” The article provided important context to an audience unfamiliar with the issue, and it explained how the practice affects local populations. It presented the voices and perspectives of not only the Nigerian court system, but also indigenous groups, as well as three local and international NGOs.

In December 2005, an article written by Niko Kyriakou highlighted the continuing struggle of residents of Bhopal, India, to force Dow Chemical to take responsibility for a deadly gas leak that happened 21 years ago. The

article went beyond the typical corporate responsibility piece to include points of view from local and international activists, American college students, governments, and shareholders. In addition, the piece made the connection between the Indian struggle and a Texas woman who was also battling Dow in an environmental pollution case. Pursuant to OneWorld's goals, the piece provided context, connection, and relevance.

An article that appeared in January 2006 gave American readers insight into an issue that received very little coverage in the United States—the effects of genetically modified seeds on small farmers in other parts of the world. In “‘Suicide Seeds’ Could Spell Death of Peasant Agriculture, UN Meeting Told,” OneWorld reporter Haider Rizvi called upon indigenous groups from South America as well as local and international activists to explain the issue of Terminator seeds. Perspectives from these groups were presented alongside those of governments and agribusinesses, providing an alternative perspective and much needed context.

By contributing these lesser known stories, OneWorld continues to pursue its goal of exposing American audiences to truly global issues. The effects of this were evident in the 2002 reader survey report, where more than half of respondents reported that the service had changed the way they thought about issues, and 23 percent reported taking some kind of action as a result of reading the OneWorld article. These actions included writing letters, e-mailing and calling members of Congress, taking part in campaigns, and discussing the issues with friends.

## Partnerships: a win-win situation

The relationship between Yahoo! and OneWorld has been a successful one, and the objectives of both organizations continue to be met. By 2009, the list of world news providers on Yahoo! had grown to include Agence France-Presse, Christian Science Monitor, Time, National Public Radio, McClatchy Newspapers, and BBC News Video. The continued presence of OneWorld has been a testimony to its distinctive role in the mix of these mainstream news sources. Yahoo! News Editor Sarah Wright summarized:

For over seven years, the OneWorld service has provided links to organizations that are knowledgeable and active in the areas being covered by the stories. In this way, OneWorld acts as a navigator to the non-profit landscape, which contributes to the depth of coverage, and distinguishes it from other news services.<sup>6</sup>

OneWorld continues to work towards the goal of making “voices from the village” heard. In January 2009, OneWorld began adding some of its Daily Headlines, which are largely contributed by members of OneWorld’s nonprofit network, to its Yahoo! service. But this does not mean that OneWorld simply serves as a mouthpiece for organizations on the ground. Instead its journalists and editors work with nonprofit staffs to meet the challenge of communicating the stories and knowledge with journalistic skill and integrity. The January 15, 2009, article “One Third of Kenyans

Face Major Food Shortage,” drawing on ActionAid’s experiences in Kenya, for example, highlighted an issue that had been largely ignored by mainstream U.S. media, but was gravely serious for more than 10 million people in Kenya. “ActionAid, a group we’ve worked with for many years, was raising alarm bells, but very few here in America were hearing those bells,” said OneWorld U.S. Managing Editor Jeffrey Allen. “ActionAid has been working in Kenya for decades. They’re the experts. They can tell our readers what people in rural Kenya are experiencing much better than any bureaucrat in Nairobi could, and even better than most journalists who fly in and fly out—if they even bother to do that anymore.”<sup>7</sup>

But ActionAid’s communications officers are not journalists, which is where OneWorld’s editors stepped in, complementing ActionAid’s raw report from Kenya with context and background from Oxfam International, another aid group working in the country, as well as several development news sources, before publishing the whole package to Yahoo! News. In this way, OneWorld helped the mainstream audience in the United States better understand the situation in Kenya—and the larger issues of the global food crisis—while getting the scoop directly from the individuals on the ground that are living the story every day. The links included by OneWorld’s editors then provided the mainstream audience on Yahoo! News a direct channel to begin participating in the stories they care about by further informing themselves and supporting the organizations taking action around the world.

OneWorld's partnership with Yahoo! World News has had implications for both audiences and foreign news reporting. OneWorld has demonstrated that a news service can talk up to its audience, surprising them with how much they can know and how much others like them are doing. It has sought to engage, inform and equip its audience to be vocal and active, and in doing so has created a model for news that is solution-oriented, that explains social problems and illustrates them, and that is based on knowledge of activists and stakeholders on the ground. Through Yahoo!, OneWorld U.S. has been able to bring this model to a mainstream audience, giving a voice to the unheard and bringing new attention to their untold stories.

The partnership has also highlighted and encouraged an increasing appreciation for nonprofits as sources of news. Tremendous growth in the nonprofit-news sector, coupled with the expansion of opportunities for platforming nonprofit news on the mainstream news websites, has brought increased visibility and credibility to nonprofit news providers. OneWorld and Yahoo! were pioneers in this new environment, and their partnership is being replicated and reflected widely. The Associated Press, for example, announced on June 13, 2009 at the annual Investigative Reporters and Editors conference that it would begin distributing the work of four nonprofit news producers (Center for Public Integrity, Investigative Reporting Workshop, Center for Investigative Reporting and ProPublica) to its 1,500 member newspapers. What once was extraordinary is now accepted practice.



The news media environment is evolving quickly, and its relationship to audiences and news sources is changing as well. Mainstream media's news gathering capacity is shrinking and many new media portals are too fragmented to fill the gap. As a result, many traditionally underserved and underrepresented audiences are becoming even more invisible than ever. Given this, and OneWorld's commitment to "stories of the village," it has decided to reach out further, by partnering with New America Media (NAM), a network of several thousand ethnic media organizations in the United States. This new partnership, according to Sandy Close, founder and Executive Director of NAM, demonstrates the opportunity to create a "newsbeat that connects hyperlocal sources overseas with hyperlocal sources in this country – a global-local axis of news and communications at a time when American journalism is both shrinking dramatically and focusing heavily on hyper-local news." <sup>8</sup> ...

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*the Newseum, USA Today, NBC, and New America Media. His work has included public television documentaries and public service campaigns, including Connect for Kids with the Advertising Council and Union Yes for the AFL-CIO. He launched the US Center of OneWorld.net, created the American Film Institute's National Video Festival, and edited a series of ten media guides, "Strategic Communications for Nonprofits."*

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## Notes

1. Sarah Wright, personal communication, February 2, 2009 ↩
2. Wright 2009 ↩
3. Sebastian Zebani, personal communication, January 25, 2009 ↩
4. Michael Litz, Letter of Inquiry to Veatch Foundation (internal document), April 8, 2008 ↩

5. OneWorld.net (2007): Daily Headlines Annual Survey Results. OneWorld, July 2007. On file with author. ↩
6. Wright 2009 ↩
7. Jeffrey Allen, personal communication, February 5, 2009 ↩
8. Sandy Close, personal communication, October 26, 2009 ↩