



Impact Journalism Day: a sea change in the media

Seán Dagan Wood, Positive News editor-in-chief



Take a look at the news and it can seem like some elements of the press are becoming ever more vitriolic in their fear-based narratives and political propaganda. But beneath the surface, the sands of the news media are shifting.

One of the times this is most apparent is 24 June: Impact Journalism Day. On this day every year since 2012, a growing alliance of newspapers publishes supplements dedicated to rigorous reporting on solutions to social and environmental problems.

Some 50 publications are involved this year and Positive News is proud to be one of the first magazines to have been invited to join. Across the next six pages, you can read stories we have selected from our Impact Journalism Day media partners around the world. Likewise, they have published stories written by Positive News and others.

The France-based organisers, Sparknews, want to raise awareness of potential solutions that exist to key global challenges – and to spark action. They believe that building a better world starts with changing how we talk about it through the media.

Likewise, at Positive News we believe that the media should take greater responsibility for how our attention is directed and for how the framing of stories can disempower or empower people. That doesn't mean the media

should advocate for particular solutions and it doesn't mean it should neglect its 'watchdog' function. But to genuinely serve the public interest, it should not only expose problems; it has an equal duty to rigorously expose the ways people are responding constructively to those problems.

A growing number of media professionals are acting on the realisation that this is an important and under-represented function of the news. At Positive News, we take it as a telling sign that we are receiving more enquiries than ever from undergraduate and postgraduate students researching 'constructive journalism'. A new generation of journalists is emerging, tooled up with the mindset and understanding to rebalance the media landscape.

And as Impact Journalism Day shows, editors are beginning to dip their toes deeper into the water.

Ultimately, it's the stories that matter. Whether it's an illiterate Burkinabe farmer who halted desertification thanks to a traditional farming technique; or a German doctor who turned a disability into a talent, training blind women to detect breast cancer earlier than gynecologists can – solutions exist everywhere. Perhaps just in time, a groundswell is building to give such stories the journalistic attention that they deserve.

“A new generation of journalists is emerging that will rebalance the media landscape”



IMPACT Journalism Day by Sparknews & Positive News
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An octopus fisher off the coast of Madagascar

‘Octopuses tell people good stories’

We meet the team using octopuses to win over communities in Madagascar by demonstrating cheaply and quickly the power of conservation

Tom Bawden for i

The waters off the Madagascan coast used to teem with life. But overfishing by foreign fleets, increasingly extreme weather brought about by climate change and a buildup of soil released by deforestation have severely degraded this coastal bounty – along with much of the population’s livelihood.

And without drastic action – around Madagascar and far beyond – these vastly depleted reserves will continue to diminish, with potentially catastrophic results for hundreds of millions of families around the world who rely on fishing for their food and income.

“The decline of fish stocks worldwide is a critical problem for livelihoods and food security,” says Dr Alasdair Harris, chief executive of the London-based conservation group Blue Ventures. “About 97 per cent of the world’s fish live in the developing world. These fish stocks are collapsing because of over-exploitation and with climate change, these problems are only becoming much more severe.”

Fortunately, Dr Harris has a cheap, simple and effective solution – a softly-softly approach that involves large doses of octopuses and good storytelling.

Typically, marine protected areas are imposed upon fishing communities without explaining the rationale or offering any form of compensation for a measure that leaves villagers cash-strapped in the short term. All too often, this results in standoffs between well-meaning conservationists and the communities they are trying to help.

By contrast, Dr Harris and his team work closely with often-suspicious local communities, typically using octopuses to demonstrate cheaply and quickly the power of conservation. The tentacled creatures are ideal because they grow so rapidly. Communities can quickly see the benefits of, and profit from, closing off an area to octopus-fishing for a short while to allow them to breed uninterrupted.



“**The catch is good in the days after openings. I have more money for food and for my family**”



Above, right: Velvetine says that octopus gleaning is the only source of income for her

Right, below: a Vezo mother with her child

“We’re not primarily interested in conserving octopuses. We use the octopus as the catalyst to protect the broader ecosystem. Seeing their rapid recovery allows us to start a conversation with locals who were previously totally opposed to, for instance, setting up a permanent marine reserve.”

Closing off a quarter of an octopus fishing area for just three months has been found to double their catch in that area by villages after it reopens. The elevated catch will last for around two months before returning to the previous level.

The real beauty of the scheme is that the total number of octopuses caught remains stable, as fishermen are able to step up their catch in the other three quarters of the area,” Harris says. The villagers can cordon off each area twice a year, ensuring that their fish stocks are continually being rejuvenated.

“Everybody knows how big the average octopus is and remembers the biggest octopus they ever saw. And if they start seeing an octopus that’s 10 times bigger than anything they’ve seen, just by closing part of the fishery for three months, that’s quite seismic,” says Harris.

Blue Ventures, which gets 70 per cent of its funding from donors such as the government, and the rest from diving holidays, has also used giant clams and blue swimmer crabs as ‘gateway species’ to sell conservation to suspicious communities. The group also works in East Timor, Mozambique and Indonesia on a broad range of conservation projects using the ‘catalyst’ model. But it is in Madagascar that it has made its biggest mark. The country had no marine protected areas 10 years ago, despite having a huge dependence on the ocean, says Harris.

“We used the octopus catalyst model to demonstrate to one community what could happen. It worked, and they talked to their neighbours, who also tried it, and so it spread virally around the coast,” he explains.

Velvetine, a member of the Vezo ethnic community living on the south Madagascan coast, says: “Octopus gleaning is the only way that I can earn money. A long time ago, we could also glean for sea cucumbers, but there are no more left. Before we started doing octopus reserves, we were only catching two or three octopuses in a day, and some days we wouldn’t catch any at all.

“With the reserves, we make a small sacrifice, but the catch is good in the days after openings. I have more money for food and for my family.”

The model has now been replicated hundreds of times on the Madagascan coast. As a result, more than 100 locally managed marine protected areas have been established that are much more ambitious than protecting octopus.

They include permanent marine reserves around really important areas of coral reefs, mangrove and seagrass, covering 14.5 per cent of one of Africa’s largest sea beds.

“This has happened on a budget that has been negligible at a time of government shut-down most of the time, and most of that period there’s been a military coup,” Harris says.

Last year, Blue Ventures organised an exchange scheme that saw a group of Mexicans travel to Madagascar. “They had nothing in common, no language, no culture, no reference points except they both target octopuses. The guys from Mexico saw what these people in Madagascar had achieved, it’s quite powerful stuff,” Harris says. 🗣️

All octopus images: Garth Cripps / Blue Ventures; Opposite: Recovers



Twist of fate

The O’Neill sisters did not expect the tornado that hit their town in Massachusetts – or that recovering from the disaster would change their lives

Doyle Rice for USA Today



In 2011, a pair of twisters ripped across Massachusetts, damaging the home of Morgan and Caitria O’Neill in the town of Monson, and causing the state’s first tornado-related deaths in 16 years.

“On 1 June, we weren’t disaster experts, but on 3 June of that year, we started faking it. We just started answering questions and making decisions, because someone – anyone – had to,” says Morgan.

What began as a way to help their community get back on its feet after the disaster evolved into Recovers.org, a free, easy-to-use ‘recovery-in-a-box’ website designed by the sisters to help other cities and towns organise disaster relief quickly. It can be rolled out in minutes, helping local relief organisers turn compassion into organised action, says Chris Kuryak, the project’s chief operating officer.

The website helps people manage volunteers and donations, track data about the disaster, and apply for grants and request aid through official channels such as the Salvation Army or Red Cross. It also links volunteers with victims, allowing both to alert the other of what is needed and their ability to help.

“After a disaster, there’s a flood of goodwill,” says Kuryak. “There are people who want to donate or volunteer.”

Google data suggests there is a window of about seven days to capture 50 per cent of the web searches about a disaster, explains Caitria, now a researcher at Facebook. Recovers.org helps local people respond to disasters immediately while waiting for government and other non-profit organisations to mobilise.

The organisation now hosts more than 200 Recovers.org sites for communities around the world. The software has been used for both natural and manmade disasters, from wildfires in Big Sur, California, to Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

“If we can empower communities, with the right tools after a disaster, they can become the experts,” says Morgan.

“This experience changed our lives, and now we’re trying to change the experience.” 🗣️

Above: the O’Neills’ home following the tornadoes in 2011

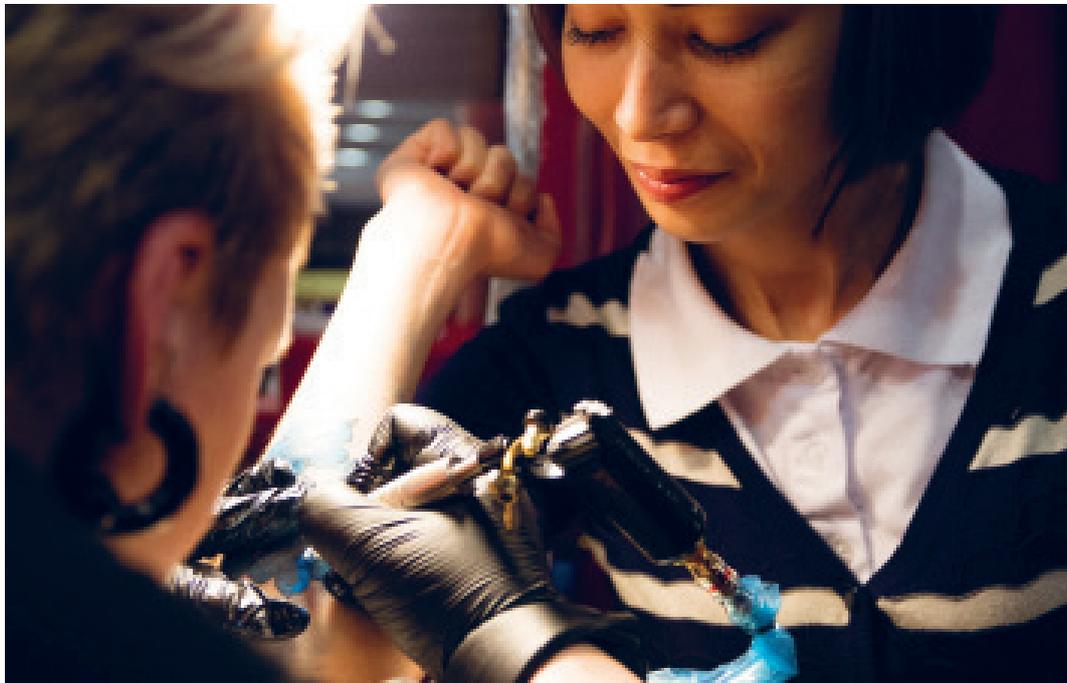




Transforming the scars

As Russia passes legislation that decriminalises some forms of domestic violence, one tattoo artist is helping survivors reclaim their bodies. It helps them believe they can start afresh, she says

Manon Masset for Le Courier de Russie



Evguenia Zakhar is not just any tattoo artist. Each week, she transforms the scars of female domestic abuse victims into art.

Inspired by the work of Brazilian tattoo artist Flavia Carvalho, who covers up the scars of abused women, Zakhar began in August 2016. Since then, she has offered the service via the Russian social network Vkontakte. She has drawn flowers on bullet wounds, used vines to cover torture marks and wrapped butterflies around stab scars.

In six months, more than 200 women have found themselves in her expert hands. Zakhar dedicates every Monday to these customers, each a victim of abuse from a violent father, husband or lover. She says her role has become like that of a psychologist, too. “To start with, it was painful to hear these stories, but little by little I learned how to listen,” she says.

“Now, I even suggest that they share their story one last time – before leaving it behind them forever once the tattoo is finished.”

Zakhar plans to travel around Russia on her motorbike with her partner Alexei in order to offer the service to abused women from other regions. She hopes the tattoos will remind her clients that “a new start is possible”.

Her commitment is perhaps all the more poignant given that Russia introduced a law in February decriminalising some forms of domestic violence. The move was condemned by many Russians, who believe it trivialises the problem.

According to the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs, 36,000 women in Russia are victims of domestic violence every year. It is estimated that a woman dies every 40 minutes there as a result of violence from their partners. ②

Allegedly beaten by her father and her husband, too, Dinara had small scars all over her body