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Social Activist Groups as Media Sources: Implications for the Practice of Translation.

My starting point in this paper is the observation that translation is always undertaken for a purpose, in some context or other. And that in the case of social activist groups the primary purpose and context is a programme of planned communication. This is true of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in general, and I will talk about NGOs as an overall category, not only about activist groups. For this reason, most of what I will say is not directly about translation, but about the context in which translation is undertaken.

It is a basic principle of communication that all planning of communications activity starts from two prior elements: a list of the organisation's stakeholders and the situation such as it is. In this paper I will concentrate on the first of these two.

Stakeholders are those groups of people who have some kind of interest in, or dependence on, the organisation in question; they may include anyone who has any kind of ongoing relationship with the organisation. When you ask communications officers of NGOs who their stakeholders are, they often hesitate over the exact details of the list; I take this to imply that 'stakeholder' is not an exact category, but an approximate one, whose usefulness is primarily pragmatic. This ambiguity applies with especial force to the relationships between NGOs and the mass media, as we shall see.

The stakeholders of NGO's fall primarily into the following categories (in no particular order):

- Volunteers/activists.
- Donors or other financial supporters such as funding agencies.
- Employees.
- Regulators.
- Beneficiaries.
- Citizens - perhaps.
- Mass media – perhaps.

The last two are marked ‘perhaps’ because by definition neither of them has a close ongoing relationship with any NGO. Nonetheless, for reasons to which I shall return it is possible to think of them as having something like a stakeholding relationship with NGOs. Additionally, ‘citizens’ and ‘media’ are linked because access to citizens is mainly achieved via the media.

Stakeholder groups have different relationships to the organisation in question: clearly volunteers/activists do not have the same relationship as those who support an organisation financially – for example, the degree of ideological commitment may be very different in the two cases. As a result of these differences, their communication needs are also different: both what they want to know and what the organisation thinks they need to know are potentially very different.

In any given context, the overall list of stakeholders needs to be interpreted in terms of which groups of stakeholders are significant for current purposes. This is commonly done in the form of a matrix of interest and power:

	Level of interest ↔		
Level of Power ↕		**Low**	**High**
	Low	*Minimal effort*	*Keep informed*
	High	*Keep satisfied*	*Key players*

Source: Johnson and Scholes (1999: 216).

Additionally, we must remember that planned communication is always expensive, and the budgets of NGOs are often less than generous. This has many implications, including thinking very carefully about what stakeholders it is most useful to communicate with under given circumstances. And especially what it is necessary to translate, since translation is expensive.

Obviously, translation enters the calculations at the point where access to some group or other of stakeholders involves a translinguistic move.

In the case of NGOs, media are likely to come under the heading of low interest/ high power, most of the time. That is to say: a large percentage of what NGOs do has little of interest for media most of the time. There are two important exceptions here:

(1) Specialist media, i.e. media whose subject is the area of activity in which the NGO is active. Clearly the editorial priorities of such specialist media are very different from the editorial priorities of general interest mass media.

(2) Organisations which have high need for publicity via the mass media; this is one of the most basic elements which distinguish NGOs one from another. I shall return to this question, since it is central to my concerns today.

I said that citizens and the media can be considered as something like stakeholders. This is for two reasons, which are linked to each other.

The first of these is the nature of reputation in the public domain. NGOs can be considered (among other things) as enterprises with a profile of some sort, in other words a reputation. How is this reputation, or this profile, built up? It consists of the nature of the activities that they perform, mediated by the flow of information about these activities into the public domain. There are NGOs that have a long term, well-established reputation which is very strong – for instance, the Red Cross. Others are little known outside specialist circles, and may prefer to remain that way; for example, housing charities. There is in the UK a housing charity which is among the largest providers of emergency housing in the country, with a large budget, whose name is virtually unknown to the public and which until recently did not appear to make much effort to augment its profile. In these two instances, the activities in question are uncontroversial: few people dispute the necessity of such activities. However, the activities of organisations such as Act-UP in the field of AIDS, or of organisations supporting one-parent families or the rights of divorced fathers inevitably enter the field of controversy, because what they do is linked to ongoing public debates about morality. Whether an organisation is involved in controversial activities or non-controversial ones, its reputation depends upon what is said about it in public. Clearly, the flow of information into the public domain via the mass media is crucial here.

As a result, as a general rule, NGOs recognise the importance of media relations. On the positive side, a flow of ‘good news’ about an organisation helps to build a strong profile. On the negative side, even one piece of ‘bad news’ may damage or destroy a profile. Having good ongoing relationships with mass media, because of the possibility that potentially damaging negative publicity may arise at any time, is a form of insurance against these risks. Even just being given the media space to state your own side of the case is a precious resource. Good relationships with media are a basis for damage limitation. However, maintaining good relations with media is an expensive business. Most NGO communications officers that I have asked about this say that they would like to be able to be more proactive in their media relations but are rarely able to do so, for cost reasons; and even in their reactive work, they may think carefully about cost implications before agreeing to a media request: for example, if a journalist calls up with a request for some background information to a story they are doing, providing this information may be a source of future good relations, and therefore a good investment of time; but it also means stopping doing something else which may be more urgent. Such calculations are less important for big organisations with good budgets than for small ones. Also, most NGOs do not have extensive advertising budgets – and may not have the means to pay for advertising at all. Having a big advertising budget is a potential source of influence with media, even if only in terms of contacts in media organisations; having no budget, or only a small one, means that this potential avenue for maintaining a relationship is closed.

It is for these reasons that I say that citizens and the media have something like a stakeholder relationship with NGOs. This is especially clear in the case of activist organisations. Crudely speaking, NGOs are either service providers or focal points for voluntary group activity (which is not necessarily 'activist' in the usual sense of 'campaigning for change'). The profile of service provider organisations is largely based on the nature of the services they provide in conjunction with their reputation for efficiency and probity (or lack of them). The profile of activist organisations is dependent upon them being seen to stand for something, and in particular to represent some body of opinion. Publicity about their activities is important in ways that are not necessarily true of service provider organisations, which have established fields of competence as the basis of their profile. They exist largely in terms of their capacity to organise some element of public opinion. Many organisations have elements of both types of organisation in their profile. Regardless of exactly what type of organisation they are most have some need to manage publicity about their activities.

NGOs have another feature which is especially important in this context: their dependence upon those who supply the money for their activities and those who give their time and effort to the organisations – 'donors' and 'volunteers'. These people act primarily out of ideological conviction. In order to convince them to continue their support, they need to believe that the organisation is acting in accordance with their ideas and beliefs – in this respect, they are like political parties and unlike commercial organisations, whose 'supporters' (those who consume their products) are also their beneficiaries. In the case of organisations whose field of activity is linked to controversy – for example, work in AIDS advice - there may be a potential divergence between those volunteers whose motivation is strongly ideological (say, for the sake of example, support for gay rights) and those supporters whose motives are more pragmatic (say, a belief in public health programmes). The same is potentially true of organisations operating on behalf of the victims of racism if either there are influential racist organisations locally, or there is antagonism between different ethnic groups where both are potential clients or beneficiaries of the campaigning; such antagonism potentially makes the organisation's work less effective and risks alienating support.

I have tried to give an outline of the sets of circumstances which impinge upon the communications strategies of NGOs, and especially upon activist organisations. Translation is a sub-set of the elements of communications strategies. Under what circumstances, or in what contexts, do NGOs decide to translate their output material? Clearly, the general answer is: when a communication strategy entails crossing a linguistic boundary. Two sets of circumstances are especially relevant, at least in the European context: NGOs working in a transnational context, for example Médecins sans Frontières or Save the Children; and NGOs working in a national context where stakeholders are not linguistically unified – for example, among migrant communities.

To prepare this paper I interviewed the communications officers of a small sample of French and UK NGOs. I approached organisations which I thought were at least fairly likely to need to translate materials, at least some of the time. The sample is in no way representative, both because it is so small and because I looked for organisations that were likely to need to do translation; it should be regarded as a pilot study. The questions I asked were about the extent of non-national language stakeholders, contacts with non-national language media and the organisation of the translation process.

As we have seen, the chief element in understanding translation is the list of targets of communication and the extent to which the targeting involves a translinguistic move. In the case of NGOs, the essential variables are:

(1) Is the organisation transnational in its organisation; if so, does internal communication require translation? Or can it be done in an agreed working language?

(2) If the NGO is a service organisation, is its clientele, or beneficiaries, monoglot or polyglot?

(3) Does the organisation publish material aimed at more than one linguistic group, including foreign language media?

All the transnational organisations I contacted reported using translated material for both internal and external communications. However, most of them also said that they used English as a working language. This was even true in the case of a large UK-based charity which worked in 3 ‘official’ languages and of a French-based campaigning organisation. Most of these organisations had partner organisations, or local/national branches or affiliates, which made some selection from transnationally available material and translated it as needed for local purposes. Few of the organisations prepared press releases in more than one language, at least centrally, although it was clear that affiliated organisations took responsibility for local media relations in most cases. My contacts were not sufficiently extensive to find out what happened in these cases. However, it is a priori clear that such a division of responsibility has implications where the allocation of responsibility for accuracy in translation is concerned: by definition it must be exercised by someone with the relevant translinguistic competence, and this person is more likely to be located in the affiliated organisation than in the central one. This raises the question of trust, to which I shall return.

In the case of non-transnational organisations, some undertook no translation at all, or virtually none: in these cases, the organisation had either no client groups or no target groups requiring a translinguistic move. Most of the service organisations reported translating materials for client groups, mostly because they were working with vulnerable migrant groups, or worked in partnership with such groups for specific purposes – e.g. support for single parents. Some UK organisations publish in Welsh as well as English if particular projects are funded by the Welsh Assembly, since bilingual publication is a condition of this funding (there are no monoglot Welsh speakers in the UK). Non-transnational organisations reported little or no contact with non-national language media and said that where it occurred they relied on the journalists in question for any translinguistic move.

The choice of target languages is dictated by two considerations: the natural language of the target audience; and the possibility of a vehicular language. Big transnational UK organisations commonly translated into other transnational languages such as French and Spanish, occasionally Arabic. French organisations made material available in English as a relay for translation on into other languages.

None of the organisations I approached had a centralized budget to pay for all translation activities. Some had a centralised budget for 'core' translation, in other words for translation of documents which were to be published in multiple languages as a matter of course, rather than on a selected or project-by-project basis. In most cases, translation was funded on a project-by-project basis, often in partnership with affiliated or partner organisations involved in the budget creation. The existence of a core budget facilitates continuity in the relationships involved in translinguistic moves, whereas project-by-project funding has the opposite effect.

Lastly, and most important: who does the translation?

Most of the translation undertaken was done in-house using either bilingual employees or volunteer translators recruited from an informal network of people in regular contact with the organisation. Some organisations either translated in this way *and* used professional translators recruited via agencies or only used professional translation. In terms of sheer volume of translation undertaken, it is probable that the majority was done professionally because the organisations that preferred to use professionals were the largest organisations with the largest volume of material to translate. These organisations are also the ones with the largest budgets. However, the majority of organisations did at least some of their translation work in-house. Moreover, some of the organisations that used professional translators also said that they used bilingual employees to check the accuracy of translations. If we include the translation work done by local volunteers or affiliates of transnational organisations in host localities (I was not able to check on how common this is, but several organisations said it was normal), I suspect that in-house translation would be the preferred mode of organisation for many organisations. Even those organisations that normally used professional translations made a point of saying that they tended to build up long-term relationships with particular agencies and teams of translators.

The significance of this is the question of trust. Any organisation's publications are the public face of that organisation, and it is important that the words used should accurately reflect the actions and policies of the organisation. As soon as translation enters the information chain, there is scope for misrepresentation, of course, but there is a particular complexity: who checks that the translation is accurate? Professionalism is of course a protection against inaccuracy. However, the emphasis upon in-house translation and upon trust and in-house checking indicates how central this question is.

In the context of media relations, few of the organisations put out a lot of press releases in translation; some organisations systematically did so in a limited number of transnational languages, and the big transnational organisations left a lot to the affiliated or partner organisations serving non-source language speaking parts of the globe. Clearly, if translation is left to the journalists in question, the organisation loses control of the translation process and must of necessity trust the media personnel involved. I know from other interviews that I have made that journalists prefer to use para-media personnel (fixers) as translators, rather than professional translators, as they want summary as much as in extenso translation, and need to trust the translator's journalistic sense as much as his/her bilingual competence, which they tend to take for granted (Palmer and Fontan, 2007).

My conclusion is that translation of output material is a potentially sensitive issue, especially when control over the translation process is handed over to some outside agency.

References:

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