

INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISM, VERSION 2.0:

TABLE TALK WITH JON SAWYER '70 | By Karen Ingraham

When Jon Sawyer '70—founder and director of the nonprofit Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting—wanted to provide news coverage on the HIV/AIDS crisis in Jamaica, he didn't send a reporter. He sent a poet.

One year later, the project has won a News and Documentary Emmy award, and is the model for a new form of journalism innovated by the three-year-old Pulitzer Center—where news stories become campaigns, and old media is blended with new.

"HOPE: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica" is, according to Sawyer, "a powerful example of looking for every means possible to sustain public engagement in big, important issues." The reporting is multi-tiered, and the end result is much more than a one-off piece: printed in a newspaper or aired on TV. The campaign's centerpiece, rather, is an interactive website, www.livehopelove.com, where photography, video and original music provide the canvas for 20 poems written by Kwame Dawes, a Ghanaian-Jamaican poet and writer. Dawes—accompanied by a videographer or photographer on five separate trips to the country—interviewed dozens of people, from those infected with HIV and their families to doctors and educators, and depicted the truth of their stories through his verse.

There are more pieces to the campaign—other journalistic opportunities seized to capture a larger, more diverse audience. The Pulitzer Center, for example, attained placement of narrative works written by Dawes in *The Virginia Quarterly* and *The Washington Post* and produced two short documentaries for "Foreign Exchange," a public television program. A performance of the poems set to original music also took place at the National Black Theatre Festival this summer.

That kind of leveraging, Sawyer believes, is necessary in today's multimedia-driven society where traditional journalism has slumped in the wake of wired audiences and a contracting news industry.

DRIVING FORCES

In 2005, the Pulitzer family sold the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where Sawyer had worked for 31 years. He and other senior employees were offered a generous buyout by the new owners, and Sawyer—the paper's Washington bureau chief and a veteran of international enterprise reporting—used the opportunity for a fresh start. The direction he took was largely influenced by his reporting experiences after September 11, 2001.

"There had been a brief spike of interest in international news in the wake of 9/11," he says, "but during that post-attack period,

you also saw some of the worst manifestations of recent journalism trends: a 'herd' mentality, and general unwillingness to challenge conventional wisdom or authority. . . . It was a powerful lesson that we needed to act proactively so as to encourage multiple voices on issues of big, national import.

"The proposal I took to Emily Rauh Pulitzer and David Moore, two of the principal Pulitzer family shareholders in Pulitzer, Inc., was to create a small operation to fund enterprise-reporting projects by journalists at major regional papers. The idea was print-only and largely geared to the support of staff journalists—people like me, more or less, who might be able to leverage small travel grants into the development of expertise and a career in foreign reporting."

Sawyer's vision, and ultimately the Pulitzer Center's mission, quickly morphed into something bigger after his first reporting trip to Darfur in 2006, where he was the first journalist to embed with African Union troops. He brought a videographer with him, which resulted in a short piece for "Foreign Exchange," and a 22-minute documentary shown on Link TV, at several dozen college campuses, and at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. "For an

old print reporter who had never produced a television package, it was a powerful demonstration of the value of moving images, and how they give long legs to reporting projects that can be used to reach ever-expanding audiences," Sawyer says.

FILLING THE VOID

The organization's ability to now produce 35 in-depth projects each year is largely driven by its collaborative structure and partnerships with many freelance journalists, videographers and media outlets.

The model works something like this: Sawyer and his team identify an underreported, global news topic or issue. They then recruit journalists and provide travel support for the reporters to do field work, which includes extras like print and video blogs from the field, audio slideshows and Wikipedia entries. The Pulitzer Center then works with the journalists to place the stories in various media outlets, which in turn pay the journalists for their work.

Establishing credibility, Sawyer says, was a challenge at first: "The biggest hurdle was getting traditional news media outlets accustomed to working with an outside organization and with each other . . . to most editors, the idea of 'farming out' important international coverage was foreign." The Pulitzer Center's ability to get stories placed in venerable media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *TIME* has since made the idea more palpable.



FRED CARLSON

“Our mantra has been collaboration and multiple points of distribution, something that has gained new ground as traditional media outlets have run up against ever more constraints in resources,” Sawyer says. “We’re now partnering across the board—a recent example was the publication in *The Washington Post* of our report on Nigeria, assessing why Africa’s richest country is food-import dependent, and the broadcast that same day of a companion piece on *The News-Hour with Jim Lehrer*.”

The Center’s efforts have led to other unique partnerships and the recruitment of citizen journalists and aspiring reporters alike. On Helium.com, for example, people can participate in the Global Issues/Citizen Voices writing contests and respond to questions based on projects undertaken by the Pulitzer Center. On YouTube’s “Project: Report,” amateur journalists can enter a contest to create videos on unique news topics. The winners receive airtime on YouTube and reporting travel fellowships with the Pulitzer Center.

FUTURE AUDIENCES

Educational outreach is a critical cog in the Pulitzer Center’s mission, according to Sawyer, who believes high school and college students “are the most important, ultimate audience. They are no longer—or never were—engaged in traditional news media.” To address that, the center implemented the Global Gateway (pulitzergateway.org)—interactive Web portals that enable students not only to learn about food insecurity or climate change, for example, but also to connect with the journalists who cover those issues and to enter the dialogue by creating and posting their own videos or posing questions on the Web portals.

The Pulitzer Center’s Campus Consortium also provides a funding source for journalists to visit college and university campuses, inspiring, in part, the next generation of international reporters. Partner schools pay a fee for such visits, and that fee includes a Pulitzer campus liaison and funding for student fellowships.

On Sawyer’s docket of active projects are examinations of food insecurity, climate change, fragile states, women and children in crisis, and U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Also upcoming is a Global Gateway portal on HIV/AIDS that will feature not only the HOPE project but also “Glass Closet,” an examination of homophobia and the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. The “Glass Closet” campaign first kicks off this fall as a four-part series on the public television program *WorldFocus*.

When asked to sum up why the multifaceted Pulitzer Center model seems to work as a catalyst for serious journalism and higher education, Sawyer says: “It’s the flip side of the news industry in crisis. The same Internet that has devoured the old model has also eliminated the barriers to entry and made distribution virtually cost-free, at the same time freeing us from the old constraints of news hole space and airtime. The only limits on experimentation and innovation are our own imaginations.” ●

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