

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE NONPROFIT WORLD

June 24, 2009

Opinion: Will Philanthropy Take Advantage of the Opportunity Afforded by Hollywood?

By Edith Asibey and David Brotherton

Following the premiere tonight of NBC's new eight-part TV drama "The Philanthropist," foundation leaders and others in the nonprofit world will have plenty to say about how the science and craft of grant making is represented to a prime-time audience. One can almost hear the groans starting now.

(Join The Chronicle to watch commentary on the show on our live blog, starting at 9:45 p.m. Eastern time.)

It's no real surprise that the show's creators have taken broad liberties in their depiction of fictional philanthropy. The American public, after all, has had little chance to learn how philanthropy works in the real world.

The show's lead character, Teddy Rist, is a "billionaire playboy-turned-vigilante philanthropist." Mr. Rist — played by the British actor James Purefoy — is an attractive, wealthy, and risk-prone businessman who, after a life-changing event, redirects his energy toward saving people in need.

He does so by taking matters into his own hands — jumping from helicopters, negotiating with drug barons and corrupt governments, and personally carrying vaccines to impoverished African villages while getting shot along the way. The action-packed sexiness and sheer adventure of it all suggests more Indiana Jones or Lara Croft than Bill and Melinda Gates.

Thanks to the protagonist's likability and frequent displays of heroism, "The Philanthropist" may very well generate new interest in, and enthusiasm for, philanthropy and its power to transform the world's ills.

But it will probably not do much to increase Americans' understanding of what private philanthropists or foundations actually do — their contributions to society, their efforts to transform social systems — much less how everyday citizens can get involved in this meaningful line of work.

Explaining all of this to the public is not "The Philanthropist's" job, of course. That responsibility is borne not by a TV show but by real-life charitable institutions themselves.

So it is regrettable that the vast majority of what gets reported about philanthropy is transactional in nature — dehumanized stories about who made grants to whom, when, and for how much. And it is reasonable to assume that these stories do little to spark the public's interest or truly raise awareness.

The simple truth of the matter is that few Americans can accurately describe what it is foundations really do.

A 2008 report from the Philanthropy Awareness Initiative revealed that even “engaged” Americans (the 12 percent of the population who serve on boards or play other leadership roles in their community) “feel uninformed about the work of philanthropy and struggle to provide examples of the impact foundations have on their communities or the issues important to them.”

Only 15 percent of survey respondents could cite an example of a foundation's impact in their community. And fewer still could give an example of a foundation's impact on an issue they care about. Those findings echoed an earlier 2003 survey by the Council on Foundations that found only 11 percent of the public could name even a single foundation.

It's in this setting that “The Philanthropist” will air. No matter what image of philanthropy the show conveys, or how entertaining it is, the American public will tune in with almost no frame of reference to make sense of it.

While several recent shows, including Oprah Winfrey's short-lived Big Give, have attempted to educate mainstream audiences about the power of strategic giving to effect societal change, few if any have managed to convey the complexity, time investment, and nuance that effective grant making truly demands.

There are glimmers of hope – and some interesting examples of how philanthropy has engaged the broadcast media to educate the public and advance program goals.

The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, for instance, has collaborated successfully with Viacom to incorporate public-health messages into many popular prime-time entertainment programs. The Council of Michigan Foundations has teamed up with Michigan Public Radio, StoryCorps, and others to create an oral history of philanthropy in that state. And the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is supporting public television's effort to cover global health stories that may otherwise be too expensive to produce – whether or not those news stories reflected favorably on the foundation's work.

Other foundations are embracing the possibilities of online media to spur citizen involvement while deepening appreciation for the practice of philanthropy. The Case Foundation recently released a report on its “America's Giving Challenge” competition, explaining that one of the campaign's objectives was to “help people from all backgrounds realize their potential to be philanthropists.”

Case's skilled Web marketing encouraged more than 71,000 people to donate online to a variety of causes, with smaller and lesser-known nonprofit groups having the greatest support and success.

Such examples notwithstanding, the fact remains that foundations need to make a more compelling public case for why their work matters, and how it is transforming lives. In an era when government resources for social services, public health, environmental protection, and so many other vital needs are evaporating, the expectations mount for private foundations to fill the gap.

Clearly, they can't do it all. But they can start by telling their story with more clarity and context.

"The Philanthropist" will probably reinforce many clichés and stereotypes about rich, courageous people saving the helpless poor in faraway lands. That much is expected. But if in doing so it challenges philanthropic organizations to be more aggressive, and artful, in telling their own stories and connecting with the American public, it may serve a more meaningful role than its creators ever intended.

Edith Asibey is the founder of Asibey Consulting, Edith Asibey is the founder of Asibey Consulting, in Brooklyn, N.Y. David Brotherton is the president of Brotherton Strategies, in Seattle.